

ILLUMINATED



Michael Maziere reviews films and videos produced under the open submission scheme funded by C4 and the Arts Council.

In 1987 a unique collaboration between the Arts Council and C4 resulted in the creation of ten £4500 awards for the production of 11 minute pilots towards the series 'Ghosts in the Machine II'. The fact that the selection was done from an open submission by a special panel (video artist Kate Elwes, Sankofa film-maker Martina Attile, 'Ghost's' producer John Wyver and critic Michael O'Pray) is commendable as over 430 entries were received. The pilots had to be completed within 4 months, last 11 minutes and four out of ten would be selected to be developed for broadcast on C4. As it's turned out, the final four will be screened in their present condition and not developed into full blown features.

This initial, tentative funding experiment by television of 'film and video art' pleased both the producers (cheap television) and the artists (a

sizeable sum compared to most Arts Council film and video awards). The ten resulting pieces screened in February at the National Film Theatre and hopefully to be toured by the Arts Council provide a useful insight into current practice in experimental film and video art.

The first piece entitled *The Hidden Wisdom* by Patricia Diaz and Michelle McIntosh was the most conventionally made; a reflective and metaphorical piece, it weaved myth and documentary forms to explore the 'unseen dimensions, *wisdoms* of black woman.' The film takes us from a mythical moment to the 'reality' of the present through a series of looks, gestures and symbols expressive of the historical and cultural legacies of black women.

A woman stands at what seems to be the edge of a continent, looking out at the sea; she performs a series of

ritualised actions (she throws a lance, tills the land, looks at her reflection in a pool ...) and intercut with these images are documentary images of black women working (cleaning, talking, looking into a mirror ...). We are presented with the divide between myth and reality, coming together here as cultural heritage, an integral part of black woman's identity. Although the film did not appear to be experimental in the formal sense, it was striking in its editing and lyrical in its use of look and gesture. Its aescetic camerawork and precise cutting gave it a strong visual impact with the interweaving and layering of meanings expressing different positions and asking new questions.

Waterwork by Tony Hill was a film shot in a swimming pool with the help of an underwater camera playing with '... orientation, weightlessness and particularly the surface itself ...' The element of water has extreme imagistic qualities in film and this work taps in on these; the quality of the surface, the translucent colour quality all contribute to the beauty of the images. We see a bather performing a series of acts: swimming, spinning, blowing bubbles, a conversation is

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even attempted between two swimmers with the sound becoming a strange, haunting echo. Yet, half way through it seems a case of 'what shall we do next?' The idea seems to have run its course and the exercise takes on a quaint, near scientific, aspect. Feet look 'weird' when the image doubles them up as the camera rises to the surface, bubbles form novel patterns when they rise to the surface etc. Unfortunately *Waterwork* becomes predictable and the magic of the initial images is lost.

Uranium Hex by Sandra Lahire deals with uranium mining in Canada focusing particularly on the women's work and the destruction of the environment; the film uses a kaleidoscopic array of experimental techniques such as superimposition, refilming, changes of speed, pace and an elaborate layering of sounds where 'atmos' recording mixes with voices, music. The constantly shifting images provide instances with extremely filmic qualities: the image of a man digging out uranium is superimposed over a woman's back while brash sounds of machinery are heard and a woman speaks, "... it was like being under an X-ray machine day and night". The film proposes a number of visual instances operating on different levels but never gelling together, the layers of images and sounds are disruptive, breaking up the surface, giving the piece a textural complexity. 'No one is allowed to film the inside of the crushing mill, but I am working on acid-coloured printing and video-performance techniques, treating voices and fields of industrial sounds as well as making local speech come to the foreground of the composition.' The recurring image of the filmmaker (looking into the frame as if by the light of her headlamp) gives testimony to the images of mine shafts, drilling marks, X-ray of chests with lung cancer, confronting the viewer's own look, his/her perception of these images.

Questions around the visual pleasure of this aesthetic collage, as to the beauty of the images are endemic in any appraisal of its political aim. What is certain is that the aggressive control and the subjective address create a self reflective tension, engaging and disturbing the viewer.

Jean Matthee's *The Descent of the Seductress* addresses, particularly, notions of identification, phantasy and image, by refilming and treating images of Marilyn Monroe. Her

previous film *Neon Queen* unmasked the pictorial embalming that cinema operates on women's bodies, by reworking a short sequence from Sirk's *Written in the Wind* with Dorothy Lamour. *The Descent of the Seductress* goes further by locating the very *place* of fetish, a look, a gesture, a movement, and through transformation plucking it from its participation in the patriarchal, narrative and cinematic order. The refilmed and reworked footage in *The Descent of the Seductress* is mostly closeups of faces broken down through repetition and difference; the image varies, recurs, is slowed down, meticulously and gradually fragmented. The manipulations: superimposition, reframing repetition, change of illumination, density and colour do not decorate the image but rather confirm the solipsism of its initial construction and the impossibility to relate to it. The film also uses other strategies: a voice-over spoken in a conflicting discourse of paradox, futility and subterfuge. The image of faces, mouth, eyes become morbid colourful masks of the silence, of the unspoken heightened by the intermittent soprano, producing a scream of absence.

The Descent of the Seductress deals with image and desire in direct material terms, that is, by questioning and transforming the image itself, by a labour upon the image and not by a distanced and ineffectual discourse outside. The structure of spectatorship, the imagistic representation are dealt with in critical terms, not from a safe 'deconstructive' but engaged in the fractured processes of representation. In the film we are attesting the conflicts and conditions present in the images; they are not descriptive or prescriptive but disturbing testaments of the mutilation and silencing of women in/by/through cinema.

The Man in the Crowd by George Snow was something else altogether! Based on the Edgar Allan Poe short story, it attempted to take us through a nightmare journey through the city, following the manic and lonesome 'Man in the Crowd'. Riddled with slick video effects and daft computer animation, this wacky piece was uninspired and tiresome. George Snow informs us in the flysheet "I have rejected film and see video and electronics as the new narrative media; as separate from the cinema as the theatre is from the Punch and Judy show!" *The Man in the Crowd* looks like ID magazine with the voice

of a Heineken ad. Bring back Punch and Judy - all is forgotten!

Valtos or the Veil by Patrick Keiller a journey through the British landscape as through the eyes of the protagonist and through an intermittent voice-over. Having followed (Patrick's past films) this imaginary narrator/character from the desolation of 'Stonebridge Park', the 30's suburbia of 'Noorwood' and his nostalgic vagrancies through Euro in *The End*, I was in no way surprised to find him eventually locked up in an asylum across the way from Sellafield!

The film is beautifully shot in crisp black and white and takes us through melancholic travels to Blackpool, Sellafield and Scotland; we are guided and misled by the voice-over the ironic and existential memories and thoughts of a weary German traveller. This fictional autobiography with its subjective images reminiscent of pre-war Britain did not, unfortunately, have the hidden drama and imaginary potential of his previous film *The End*; a languid feeling seems to take over as one failed to empathise with the literary meanderings.

Paul Graham's video *Troubled Land* was derivative of his striking photographic essay and deals with death in Northern Ireland in a radical, effective and emotional way. We are not given cliched images of journalism which with their fictional drama make us good to feel bad, but rather a visual testimony to the tense, conflicting and threatening reality of a moment in Northern Ireland. What seems an inoffensive landscape soon changes when a helicopter is heard overhead and (as the camera pulls back) we see the unionist colours painted on a wall. The shot continues to reveal an army outpost, a British flag, while tracking shots of new graves and republican and unionist coloured kerbstones recur, testifying to the reality of conflict and death in Northern Ireland.

We are caught up and surrounded by the traces, marks and signs of the troubles, of British occupation, played in an unexpected, difficult position not as a voyeuristic onlooker but as a potential subject of the existing situation. The video, shot on VHS of poor quality compared with the book, nevertheless this video has a resonant and disturbing effect, a rare and effective presentation of the Northern Irish situation.