

Reading silence: a performance with film and light

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Reading silence: a performance with film and light
Kayla Parker, 28 May 2013

Textually Active II

Tuesday 28 May 2013, 6pm > 9pm, the lounge, The Plymouth Athaneum

Textually Active is an evening of provocation and speculation on 'art - text - space' that includes performances, readings, and interactive artefacts by Kim Charnley, Naomi Cristofoli, Sally Hall, Mark Leahy, Kayla Parker, Maddy Pethick, and Pylon Press, all taking place in the wonderful surroundings of the Lounge at the historic Plymouth Athenaeum.

Textually Active is about providing a critical space for debate and performative practices in Plymouth and the South West of England. It is curated and run by Driftingspace, a collaborative art practice held between Jason Hirons and Sally Hall.

Reading silence: a performance with film and light

Projections of absence and presence, the dreams and memories of my mother, an usherette, and her mother, a seamstress, in the silent space between.

Thanks: Stuart Moore

Duration: 15 minutes

TALK

Introduction

I'm going to talk for four to five minutes, and then show two versions a film I made in 1994: the first is slowed down to a quarter speed, and lasts for just over eight minutes, this is followed by the film at its 'normal' speed, 25 frames per second, which runs for just over two minutes.¹

I want to thank Jason and Sally, aka *Driftingspace*, for inviting me to be part of this event. My only visit to the Athaneum before *Textually Active* was 20 years ago, to see a film with a friend Ann Hedley Hunt, who was a writer and a kind of mother figure to me, and who has since died.

The film she invited me to see with her was *Awakenings*.² It's a film directed by Penny Marshall, based on Dr Oliver Sack's book³ about people who've been in a vegetative state for 40 years, after they were infected in childhood by *encephalitis lethargica* – an extreme slowing down of the brain.⁴ Max von Sydow, playing an eminent neurologist, refers to the patients as "children that just fell asleep". However, the neurologist Dr Sayer, played by Robin Williams, believes that they are still alive inside, and the film is about his attempts to wake them up again.

So, tonight I wanted to do something about cinema, memory, time, and childhood.

As Yet Unseen

I was around three and a half to four years old before I can recall any memories of substance, which are my first experiences of cinema in the Abderdare Rex in South

Wales, where my mother worked as an usherette. When Bid my maternal grandmother came to stay with us, she took me to see *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. I remember sitting in the warm darkness of the cinema, the seat material prickling the backs of my legs, and the beam of my mother's torch moving to and fro as she walked up and down the aisle.

My grandmother, the seamstress - she was an expert at cutting cloth to a pattern and making clothes, my mum as an usherette, and now me as a film-maker and occasional projectionist... I wanted to show you a film I made nearly 20 years ago called *As Yet Unseen* that brings together these things.

SLIDE As Yet Unseen – Kayla as a baby in pram

This is a photograph taken of me by my mum.

In the photo I'm 7 months old. We're staying with Bid and Jack, my mother's parents, at their council house in Middlesbrough. We've just come back from the corner shop, where my mum's bought some Vim⁵ - for you youngsters, that's a scouring powder used for cleaning sinks and stoves, kitchen tiles and utensils. In the original photo the container of Vim is in the pram with me. I'm bundled up in a home-knitted wooly hat, scarf and cardigan because we're up in north Yorkshire, it's January, and it's cold. According to my mum, I still have the dark red hair I was born with, as I didn't go blonde until I was 10 months.

My mother says this is the first time I looked directly into the camera when she took a photo of me. And when I, as I am now, look at this image, it's like I'm looking into a mirror. Our eyes meet. I feel connected, as if my baby self is looking directly at me across time.

It's one of a selection of family photos I used to make the film, which evolved from the combined dreams and memories of my mother and myself. It's a personal view of the daughter-mother relationship, set in a room poised on the threshold of birth or death. The room is at first blank, colourless; we enter through the window like an intruder or ghost.

The room becomes literally a 'living room' as elements within it come to life, and memories of early childhood are activated and set in motion.

Material history

The film itself originated on 16mm colour negative film, and my frame-by-frame animation was shot by Stuart Moore with a Beaulieu camera in a life-size stage set, constructed in the L-shaped studio upstairs in the Batter Street annexe at Plymouth Arts Centre. The set is designed by me and made by my brother Miles, who was an art student at University of the West of England at the time and did this as a work placement for his BA course, Art in Social Context.

The stop-frame animation filming took place over period of a couple of weeks. The exposed rolls of film were sent off to London on the train to be processed at Filmatic laboratory, and a positive print made from each roll was sent back to Plymouth.

I edited the film myself on a 16mm Steenbeck, a flatbed film editing table. Once the soundtrack was mixed and transferred to 16mm magnetic tape, an internegative and then screening prints were made by Filmatic. The film was shown first at the National Film Theatre at the *Art into Film* event for the retrospective exhibition of RB Kitaj paintings at the Tate gallery in 1994.⁶

At the end of the last century, one of the screening prints was telecine-ed⁷ and transferred to BetaSP video, and this was digitized in the twenty first century to make a digital video file.

So, the film has gone through several transformations and journeys to be here at the Athaneum. Digital technology allows me to present the film this evening with the images and the sound slowed down, but its material origins are still evident in the softness and grain of the image, and the flecks of dirt and minute scratches on the emulsion surface.

Soundscape

To make the soundtrack, I made field recordings with Stuart Moore using a directional microphone. We recorded young children playing in Victoria Park - covertly, they weren't aware that we were recording them - including a girl saying, "You can't get me, I'm in safety," kids flying a kite on Central Park, and me playing a home-made bottle xylophone and other instruments, winding up a clock, and so on. I engineered the sound design at a postproduction studio in London with dubbing mixer Paul Roberts.⁸

Making history

Now, my infancy and very early childhood is an unknown place to me.

Recent research in Canada has suggested that infantile amnesia - the absence of long-term memory events from early childhood - is caused by the rapid neuron growth in the hippocampus, a region of the brain known to be important for learning and remembering, which leaves no room for memories.⁹

In an attempt to recover some residue of memory, I looked through family photographs and quizzed my mother for her stories of the images. And asked her to keep a dream diary. She kept a small, spiralbound notebook under her pillow, and when she woke, she scribbled down notes of what she had been dreaming.

At the time, she was teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Cambridge. A decade or so earlier, she'd moved from the wilds of British Columbia, where she worked as a nurse, when Bid, her mother, got Alzheimer's.¹⁰ My mum arranged for my grandmother to be looked after in a small care home run by a Polish couple, and Bid was content listening to Polish broadcasts on the radio, despite only ever

speaking English. Although, of course she had forgotten how to speak, could not follow the rhythm and flow of conversation, and only gave one word answers to questions.

Sitting in bed, she smiled when I stroked her hand, her thoughts drained out when she wasn't looking, slipped away when we weren't listening. Her mind was elsewhere, lost in silence.

When I was making *As Yet Unseen*, I asked my mum if she could remember any of Bid's dreams. My grandmother had dreamt as a child of a cinema and film projections within a fireplace, and she experienced this dream repeatedly during her life. From this, the idea of the hearth, the fireplace, as a maternal place for dreaming and memory became the centre of the film, around which the 'action' took place.

The decorative tiles that animate around the fireplace and the wallpaper painting are based on the patterns on my mother's dresses when I was a small child. The sequences of 35mm slides back-projected onto the fireplace itself originate from our old family snapshots.

PLAY FILM

As Yet Unseen

1. slowed to 25%, 8 min 47 sec, then black
 2. film at normal speed 25fps, 2 min 15 sec
- total: 11 min 03 seconds

ENDS 15 minutes

Notes

¹ Both versions of the film *As Yet Unseen* are available to view on the Sundog Media Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/67496087>

² The 1990 film featured Robert De Niro as Leonard Lowe, a post-encephalitis patient whose catatonic trance state is relieved by the drug L-dopa. Lowe, who is cared for by his mother, awakes, but has no memory of the intervening 30 years that he has 'lost'.

³ Oliver Sacks (1973; revised edition 1990) *Awakenings*. New York, NY: Vintage Books. More about the book on Sacks' website: <http://www.oliversacks.com/books/awakenings/>

⁴ An interesting article on the exploration of medical ethics in the film: María Isabel Jiménez Serranía (2007) 'Awakenings (1990): The epidemic of children who fell asleep' *Journal of Medicine and Movies: a journal of bio-health education* 3.3 (2007). Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca. pp. 102 - 112. Available: http://campus.usal.es/~revistamedicinacine/Vol_3/3.3/ing.3.3.pdf/despertares_ing.pdf

⁵ One of the first products created by William Lever, produced at Port Sunlight near Liverpool and first marketed in 1904. Nowadays the Unilever company owns the Vim brand, which is marketed globally under the Cif range of cleaning products:

<http://www.unilever.com/brands-in-action/detail/Cif/292034/?WT.contenttype=view%20brands>

⁶ There was a 22 page 'Art into Film' supplement with the June 1994 issue of *Sight and Sound* magazine. The *Art into Film* event on 18 June 1994 at NFT explored "some of the many conversations that have taken place between art and film". I presented four films: *Night Sounding* (1993), *Cage of Fame* (1992), *Canntaireachd* (1992), and *As Yet Unseen* (1994). The day event was introduced by Peter Wollen, and the other artists were Stan Brakhage, David Anderson, and Mario Cavalli; programme details are here:

http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/films/films/films/night_sounding_art_into_film.html

⁷ The name of the process for copying cin  film images to video tape (or, more commonly nowadays, converting directly to digital video file). Telecine is also the name of the machine that does the film to video conversion. Deluxe Digital London, based in Soho, provides a high quality telecine service:

<http://www.deluxedigital.co.uk/home/digital-film-restoration/grading-restoration.aspx>

⁸ When making films, it's customary practice to include an audio 'pip' on the soundtrack that synchs with the visual number 3 frame on the countdown leader. For *As Yet Unseen*, Paul and I chose the sound of a baby's little fart from a recording made while it was breastfeeding. The same baby's snuffly suckling sound begins the film.

⁹ 'Neuron growth in children 'leaves no room for memories'' *BBC News: Health* [website] 25 May 2013. Available: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-22639040>

¹⁰ For more info: articles on Alzheimer's published on *The Guardian* website: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/alzheimers>