

Heartache, Interrupted: The Cinema of Michael Robinson

BY HENRIETTE HULDISCH

With three small films made over a period of three years – *you don't bring me flowers* (2005), *And We All Shine On* (2006), and *The General Returns from One Place to Another* (2007) – Michael Robinson, now 27, earned considerable acclaim in the rarefied world of avant-garde filmmaking. His works have travelled the international circuit of experimental showcases from New York to San Francisco, Rotterdam and London, and yet the films and videos (like that of many of his contemporaries) do not necessarily sit comfortably with that designation. Robinson's works typically are a combination of original and found footage that cuts across the ill-defined boundaries of 'video art' and 'experimental film.' He culls from lowly sitcoms, blockbuster action movies and video games alike, draws on various avant-garde techniques such as the pop cultural appropriation pioneered by Bruce Conner or the 'structural' cinema of Ernie Gehr, and mines an emotional range akin to poetic narratives like those of Wong Kar-wai. In their media-literacy and non-judgmental approach to images, Robinson's films and videos are perhaps also indicative of a generation: keenly aware of the material differences between media (such as 16mm film and analogue video) and specificity of genre, in his work their hierarchies are malleable and the boundaries between them porous.

As categorical terms both 'avant-garde' and 'experimental' are something of a misnomer, describing many films that are not necessarily at the forefront of innovation or an experiment in the true sense of the word, instead having developed into a kind of genre with its own set of codes and conventions, however varied and contradictory those may be. This is definitively not intended to diminish their importance; rather, perhaps recognising the form as a major genre (or, perhaps even better, genres) might be a way to situate the immense contribution single-person filmmakers working in largely non-narrative modes have made to cinema as a whole. For the purpose of this essay, however, it may provide one approach to characterise Michael Robinson's films, which, like any number of directors working in narrative media, take the limitations and rules of the genre as

enabling elements, leveraging convention with just enough unorthodoxy to energize the general form. In this way, Robinson manages to have his cake and eat it too: his films and videos explore, as he states, “the dangers of mediation,” pointing to the sources of media-contrived desire and nostalgia while also appreciating the genuine emotional power and (sometimes unlikely) lyricism exerted by moving images high as well as low.

His first work to garner attention, *you don't bring me flowers*, consists almost entirely of double-page spreads from 1960s and 70s National Geographic issues. Filmed on 16mm film, like most of his earlier works, it is for the most part silent until at the end the succession of dissolving images – media-manufactured wanderlust – are replaced by rolling waves and bursts of white accompanied by a distorted Frank Sinatra song [CK]. Presenting nature as a series of tourist destinations in methodical succession, with the seam clearly visible in the centre of the frame, Robinson not only comments on the camera's romantic gaze put in the service of lifestyle and marketing but also, I would argue, on the implication of photographic images and cultural memory itself. The images are several times removed from the original – photographed, printed, and filmed – and their faded tones announce the magazines' datedness; the use of 16mm film only underscoring the insta-nostalgia. Like other small-gauge stock, the medium is increasingly identified with the not-too-distant past itself: within the context of feature films, for example, its use usually signals personal memory. Moreover, our 'actual' recollections tend to structure themselves according to the photographic record of the time, so that Kodachrome movies, slides, and family photos faded to orange become interchangeable with the memory of sites, people, and events from the '60s and '70s. In Robinson's parade of yesterday's dream vacations, the artist calls attention to their commercial contrivance – what he calls their “obsolete romanticism currently peddled to propagate entitlement and individualism” – while also conceding to their seductive beauty and genuine psychological resonance.

Made subsequently, Robinson's elegiac *The General Returns from One Place to Another* similarly invokes codes of nostalgic cinephilia although in an elusive, quasi-narrative mode. Named after an obscure Frank O'Hara play, the eleven-minute film opens with a shot of a mysterious woman near a stream in the mountains. The crispness of the footage suggests that the sequence is staged but the vintage hair, makeup, and clothing place it in the past—which it in fact is, having been taken from an '80s vintage 16mm film bought on eBay. The image gently jitters and moves in and out of focus as the woman gazes into the distance. Interspersed with this are a series of exterior and interior shots, pans of closely-framed flowers and leaves, and out-of-focus images of Christmas lights, amongst others, while subtitles taken from O'Hara's dialogue provide silent reflections on beauty and transience. Later the woman reappears, this time accompanied by a man, apparently being startled by a sound. In the absence of a reverse shot, her expression is unreadable, pos-

sibly frightened, to unsettling and oddly moving effect, reminiscent of watching someone else's old family movie and sensing without knowing its attendant heartache. In the end a rendition of The Hollies' 1974 hit *All I Need Is the Air That I Breathe* introduces a nearly over-the-top musical finale, treading the line of sincerity and sentimentality to bittersweet and wistful effect. In its series of enigmatic elements that hint at a story but never resolve, the film leaves a feeling of intense but diffuse longing. As Robinson states, "I consider my films as taking the surface of various things... and forcing these surfaces into proximity with one another so as to create some kind of some new resonance between them. In a sense, none of my films are 'about' the different elements they contain, but are more concerned with the distance and movement between sources, and with how to forge a narrative arc out of essentially non-narrative materials."

If *The General Returns...* uses sequences that are typically associated with lyrical films coming out of the avant-garde tradition, *And We All Shine On* signified Robinson's branching-out into a radically expanded vocabulary. The artist has commented on the fact that much experimental film exists in "an established comfort zone of materials suitable for appropriation [such as] home movies, classical Hollywood, educational filmstrips... and [make] much less use of anything with origins beyond the '70s..." Drawing on wildly incongruous sources, *And We All Shine On* would seem to take the tack of outright collision, and yet Robinson creates a series of relationships that are as baffling as they are poignant. Beginning and ending with a sequence of hard-to-discern images of trees swaying in the wind at night, the middle part leaves any trace of poetic landscape photography behind, consisting of an extended shot of pixilated images lifted from an old Sega video game. Awkwardly rolling trees, pyramids, flying warriors and more play alongside a karaoke version of *Nothing Compares 2 U*, a track made for what is typically intoxicated bar entertainment. Without Sinéad O'Connor's heartrending rendition of the lyrics, the music is more melancholy than anguished, giving the film an emotional tenor tinged with sadness, albeit one that is wary and a bit absurd. *And We All Shine On* audaciously opens up the aforementioned comfort zone, functioning much like karaoke itself: a potentially mortifying pastime that tends to give free rein to bottled-up feelings.

Robinson changes direction somewhat in two more recent videos that confront middlebrow television product straight on. In the five-minute *Hold Me Now* (2008) the often-ingratiating nostalgia of the long-running drama *Little House on the Prairie* takes a free fall in an unsettling sequence of agony metamorphosing into *Exorcist*-like bodily possession. Made for the PDX Film Festival's 'Karaoke Throwdown' and thus featuring another instrumental track of the Thompson Twins' eponymous song, the longing lyrics absurdly subtitle a slowed-down passage of Melissa Sue Anderson's character rising upon waking, shaking in convulsions, and smashing a bedroom window with her hands (all while her

husband tries in vain to hold her). Like *Light Is Waiting* (2007), which renders a downright colonialist episode from the 1980s sitcom *Full House* as psychedelic acid trip, the piece flirts with a mode of critically deconstructing television, not so much aiming to expose the mass media's mechanisms of manipulation (the agenda of much 80s video art), but rather to unleash its psychotic undercurrents. In *Light Is Waiting*, Robinson additionally plays on what might be called *Full House*'s extra-diegetic meanings, that is, the fact that former cast members such as the Olsen twins or John Stamos are now probably better known through their tabloid presence than their acting credentials. This episode of the show revolves around a holiday trip to Hawaii with stunningly exoticized trimmings, including 'natives' that appear to be straight out of a nineteenth-century side show. In Robinson's version, the material is manipulated through intense flicker and strobe-like effects, superimpositions, and Rorschach-like mirroring, culminating in the episode's ludicrous dance around a tribal fire presented as a nightmarishly warped version of prime-time family fun. If the video presents a hilarious, doomed dance of celebrity and mindless entertainment, it is still relatively kind in the face of his material's blundering ridiculousness. "I'm not necessarily mocking *Full House*," Robinson notes, "I am underlining its problems and letting it speak for itself. My other recent films are less interested in antagonising their source materials so much as reconfiguring them, harnessing them as psychological or emotional triggers within broader compositions."

Victory Over the Sun from 2007 continues the suggestive recombination of own footage, appropriated mass media, and pop music while verging onto darker territory. Shot on 16mm, the film opens with a series of scenes from the Seattle, New York, and Montreal World's Fairs in 1962, 1964, and 1967 respectively. Architectural structures erected for the fairs are glimpsed largely through or obscured by trees and foliage, presenting the future of the relatively recent past as akin to, say, Mayan ruins, and likewise being slowly taken over by nature. Robinson's film (like much recent work in contemporary art) takes an interest in what were perhaps the last moments of utopian optimism in the industrialised west in the 1960s. The depiction of the abandoned sites is matter-of-fact, as if recognising the impossibility of recapturing an unfettered belief in science-driven progress, but there is also something a little sad about the forlorn monuments. Captured in static views almost completely devoid of people, these markers of a modernist faith in progress are made part of an ancient continuum of human aspiration. In the middle sequence of the film, mid-century futurism is replaced by 1980s mass-market sci-fi. Robinson intersperses brief sequences of wormhole space travel and space ships from *Captain Power*, an animated 'interactive' game on VHS cassettes produced to accompany an action figure toy line, suggesting that 19th-century spectacle, which begat the World's Fair, finds its ultimate conclusion in fully-integrated marketing. Further complicating matters, part of the

barely understandable incantations on the soundtrack are from Ayn Rand's 1938 novella *Anthem*, her dystopian vision of a society that has abandoned individuality. Throwing the quiet scenes of nature fully into relief, the chanting lends the film an altogether darker, apocalyptic tone. Faith in progress and a collective ideal might be dead or misguided, Robinson seems to be saying, just when the piece ends with the grand symphonic instrumentation of Guns 'n Roses' *November Rain*. Concluding with the epic rock ballad, Robinson throws in a measure of comic relief that tugs heartstrings and teeters of the brink of ludicrousness, and thus injects a dose of humour that saves the dark sentiment from folding into despondency.

All Through the Night (2008) is also a darkly funny mashup although it works in a more fantastic register. In this video, with four minutes Robinson's shortest piece, the emotional cue is set in the beginning with another pop anthem, Cyndi Lauper's titular track, lyrics included this time. The work combines scenes from a 1950s Soviet version of *The Snow Queen* and footage from the 2004 feature *The Day After Tomorrow*. In completely different idioms, both films tackle grand themes: the Roland Emmerich blockbuster revolves around the impending end of the world brought upon by environmental disaster and the adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale recounts the archetypal story of love's triumph over evil. In Robinson's film, scenes from the former are manipulated in digital editing to become an almost unrecognisable, darkly wavering, prismatic cityscape, alternating with animation snippets of a little girl and boy in struggle with the villainous queen. *All Through the Night* contains no original footage and no nature photography, thus composing a completely interior, psychological landscape reminiscent of a dream that is sweet and ominous at the same time. In that sense it is emblematic of Robinson's approach as a whole, combining far-flung imagery that doesn't cohere in any conventional narrative or stylistic way but creates its own, oneiric logic.

In a discussion of Robinson's work, Michael Sicinski has described his films as answering to a set of broad problems faced by experimental cinema: "[How] is it possible to harness filmic effects in order to produce feelings of dread, longing, or even spontaneous release without veering into ridiculousness or self-importance? How can we accept the failure... of the grand designs of modernity and still operate on a plane of sincerity, commitment, and belief?" Robinson's films indeed do not shy away from invoking the 'big' themes – longing, love, loss, failure, doom – but do so by enlisting the services of a range of television shows, movies, or pop songs whose lighter connotations serve to preempt the inherent danger of pomposity or preposterousness. However, these pop culture products are in fact our contemporary vehicles by which the grand themes and archetypal stories are told, however simplistic, opportunistic, or plain bad some (and by no means all) of them may be. Robinson's collaged films thus do double duty: while pointing to the

mechanisms of mediation and manufactured sentiment, he unlocks the power popular images exercise over our psychological and emotional makeup, reconfiguring them in a way that is funny but not ironic, sincere but not naïve, heartfelt but not sentimental.

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