

Portrait of the Artist as a Dust Wrangler

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'Without the images of drama, adventure, comedy, natural and artificial events imprinted on motion picture film there would be no cinema: there would be nothing to make history out of: filmology would have nowhere to go. In its place would be either still images (photography) or fleeting ones (electronics). The point is confirmed by video: a civilization that is prey to the nightmare of its visual memory has no further need of cinema. For cinema is the art of destroying moving images.'

Paolo Cherchi Usai 'The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age'

In April 1996 Adam Chodzko placed a classified advertisement in the London listings paper 'Loot' that ran: 'Film Dust from 'Walkabout', 'The Railway Children', 'Logan's Run', photo of Jenny Agutter, unsigned, also glass eyeballs, any offers.' What could one possibly offer in exchange for a treasure such as 'film dust'? And where could such dust have been gathered? From the locations of the films themselves? From the decayed matter of the films' celluloid reels? From cinemas where the films were once projected through the 'glass eyeball' of the lens? Or was it a residue of 'stardust' extracted from the heavenly form of Jenny Agutter that Chodzko wanted to shift? I've dutifully checked film credits ever since seeing Chodzko's advertisement but, among all the 'Gaffers' and 'Best Boys', I've yet to come across a credit for 'Dust Wrangler'.

Chodzko's 'dust wrangling' activities continue. In the overlooked corners of cinema's past he has unearthed and reanimated extras from films as disparate as Pasolini's 'Salò', Ken Russell's 'The Devils' and Fellini's 'City of Women'. Such reanimation yielded its own

splendid serendipity in the case of Chodzko's *Reunion: 'Salò'*. When he advertised in Italy for the actors who played the degraded and murdered children in Pier Paolo Pasolini's 'Salò or 120 Days of Sodom' (1975), the only member of the original cast to come forward was a woman who had declined to act out her own death during the shoot (Chodzko had to find 'doubles' to play the missing extras). Less a version of the 'remake' popular among some artists vis-a-vis classic films, Chodzko's approach saw cinema as providing both a 'vanishing point' (into which the extras disappear) and a 'horizon' of possible events (precisely, to locate such extras and restore them to life). That's to say, cinema has provided Chodzko with both the material and the method by which to pursue his artistic project (one that cannot be defined solely by its interest in film and the moving image, it should be said). Because cinema, even when remembered (especially when remembered), provides an instant community between two people who remember the same film. Any divergence of individual memories or disagreements over favourite moments simply enhances this communion. Chodzko has set about exploring the possibility of producing work from just such a shared set of references. Sometimes that memory is very specific, almost canonical (if more than a little 'cursed'), as in the case of 'Salò'. But it needn't be so to function effectively. In *A Place for 'The End'* Chodzko asked eight local people to each select locations around Birmingham that could serve as settings for the final frame of an imaginary film. At each site a generic ending was filmed showing these 'locations people' leaving the shot and 'entering' the backgrounds of the places they had chosen. The resulting images were dictated by these participants, as is often the case with



Reunion; Salò | 1998



A Place for *The End* | 1999

Chodzko's work. *A Place for 'The End'* was also about the act of 'framing'. How to 'frame' a commonplace local vista to give it the sense of dramatic finality and nearly mythical resonance that the final shot of a film should ideally possess? How to make the off-screen space pregnant with event? And how to 'frame' under the thoroughly internalised influence of cinema's wide-screen rectangle? From this procedure came a psycho-geographical mapping of Birmingham according not so much to cinema's image-repertoire as to its edges. Again, the sense of 'vanishing-points' and 'event-horizons' were strongly present in the video and photographic installation that the project generated.

Chodzko is not alone in his fascination with the cinema. Since the early 1990s it has become evident that *cinema has been the key medium of reference for many contemporary artists*. The pace and range of this art-film engagement has become so intense and widespread that it's possible, even at this early stage, to identify some emerging tendencies. For example, at the Tate International Conference 'Moving Image as Art: Time-Based Media in the Gallery' held in London in June 2001, the American curator William Horrigan asked the question: 'At what point did we stop referring to 'video-art'?' The answer being, when 'video-art' started to look like 'cinema'; when it started to be shown in darkened rooms, sometimes equipped with seats, and was projected at the scale of a cinema screen rather than a television monitor. What Horrigan referred to as the 'dominance of projection' seemed to indicate a generational divide between those involved in single-screen monitor-based video and those working with the possibilities of projection which digital technologies

enable. Another contributor to the Tate event, David Hall, a pioneer of artists' video in the UK and credited with the introduction of the term 'time-based media', made the distinction clear. In 1970s video-art, the audience were seen as 'collaborators' in the work whose presence was required to 'complete' it. With projected video, the audience become observers of a quasi-cinematic 'spectacle'. The implication here is an old one: that the 'spectacle' that comes with the scale of such projection renders the viewer 'passive'.

There's little doubt, however, that the now widespread availability of digital projection technology has played a major part in the rise of the quasi-cinematic 'spectacle' in gallery spaces. Two features immediately follow, both of which are treated in Chodzko's most recent piece, *Plan for a Spell*: 1) the possibility of an almost endless looping of images that comes with digital data storage capacities; 2) the possibility for multiple screen projections. So, the spatial considerations of scale are attended simultaneously by considerations of time, with the possibility of an 'impossible' duration, an 'eternal' temporality, in which projection might take place. Both of these elements – scale and duration, space and time – provide ways to examine the staging of the projection-event as it occurs in the gallery environment. Multiple projection maximises the quality of 'spectacle' while stretching and fragmenting the temporal frame across several fields simultaneously. A kind of 'montage in three dimensions' takes place. This form of projection event, even with its many variations, has become a commonplace presence in the gallery. But to define what sets *Plan for a Spell* apart from this orthodoxy requires first that we examine how Chodzko presents his images.

And what images they are. To these metropolitan eyes, Chodzko has assembled a compendium of rural arcana: tar barrelling from Devon, the Burry Man from Scotland, and from Cumbria a host of sequences including wicker weaving, wind turbines, a demolition derby, pyres of cattle cadavers (slaughtered during the foot and mouth outbreak) and a huge scrum of men that lurches, scatters and regroups as it careers up hill and down dale. These images have the unemphatic force of documentary material. The framing is generally unassertive, keyed to motion, action and significant detail. This material, not quite 'raw', is not yet 'shaped'. And that's where the projection-event that Chodzko has developed for *Plan for a Spell* comes in. The sequences rewind at random in single-screen projection, as though the hand of some invisible editor is worrying them into new combinations. Some images mutate from within. A camera pans across a wooded horizon that it reads like an audio line, a verdant radio-dial. The sound is strange: a plucked string, a resonating glissando mixed with noises that might be heard coming from the radio in the room above. Sound, only occasionally illustrating the image, often seems to come from another space unconnected to the images themselves. The work is making itself as we watch. The elements here are radically separate; on the vertical level of image and sound as well as on the horizontal level of montage, of the sequences themselves. Nothing gells into any kind of recognisable continuity. This work is radically out of synch with itself.

A further feature compounds this impression: the subtitles that run beneath the clusters of images. In cinema, subtitles usually signify translation, the presence of a foreign language. Here they signify differently. The

subtitled commentary has a rhetorical function relative to the images. That's to say, it makes them provisional. The subtitles refer to 'structures' and 'patterns' visible in the filmed sequences. It insists on the generational power of 'movement' and 'collisions' within and between such sequences, and highlights the desire to identify meaning as both 'made' and 'unmade' in the same mo(ve)ment. From the collisions of cars in the demolition derby footage, or the surging and scattering movements of the scrumming bodies, it becomes clear that, as well as being documents, these images are also declarations of the work's process. Like Godard's famous shots of the cosmos in a coffee-cup from *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (1966), they are the image and its analysis at the same time. Like Godard, Chodzko wants to 'show' and 'show himself showing'. Consider the register of the subtitling, its hesitancy of tone, its tentativeness in identifying an image as 'this thing' or 'that fact'. Observe how the subtitles will say, at one moment, 'So, this is nothing, I'm sure,' only to instantly qualify this statement by adding 'but that's probably why it's important.' What we can identify here, and throughout the subtitling, is the rhetorical device of deferred narration. The object of Chodzko's narrative is to ask 'when' and 'where' to start speaking about the images, and not yet (not ever?) to speak of what the images are, to describe them. It is a rhetoric that is at least one step removed from that upon which it comments, that has not yet found a language it trusts to fit, to 'complete' and to 'fix' the images. I am able to identify two of the rhetorical figures that Chodzko employs in *Plan*. One of these is called 'merismus', the dividing of a whole into its parts. The other is 'enumeratio', the division of a subject into its adjuncts, a cause into its effects.



Plan for a Spell | 2001

SUBTITLES

[33 - 36 secs] So, some kind of structure is being made,
[36 - 38 secs] although I suppose it doesn't yet look
[38 - 41 secs] like it's becoming anything in particular.
[55 - 58 secs] It's good though just to look for a pattern.

[30 - 32 secs] This must be included because
[32 - 35 secs] there is something hard and unstable about it.
[35 - 38 secs] And fragile too.

[40 - 42 secs] Maybe not in the movement
[42 - 44 secs] which seems so blocked
[44 - 47 secs] and interrupted by these collisions
[49 - 52 secs] but there is something...
[56 - 58 secs] So, what next?

[9 - 12 secs] This is better,
[12 - 14 secs] now we're getting somewhere.

[18 - 21 secs] I don't know how to begin to describe this one
[21 - 24 secs] because, this is all preparation,
[24 - 26 secs] a kind of dressing,
[26 - 29 secs] at the same time making and unmaking.
[35 - 38 secs] But it seems very different now.
[38 - 42 secs] Something has shifted.

[5 - 7 secs] So, this is nothing, I'm sure,
[7 - 9 secs] but that's probably why it's important
[9 - 12 secs] to leave it in.

[15 - 18 secs] These are props.
[18 - 21 secs] I mean, both that they took part in a fiction
[21 - 24 secs] but also supported a structure in that fiction.
[24 - 28 secs] So, now they act as links between us
[28 - 31 secs] and a story about what we could be.
[57 - 59 secs] Ok... let's move on.

[5 - 8 secs] Maybe this is a good place to start from
[8 - 11 secs] I mean, the energy needed for this system to work
[11 - 14 secs] is directly generated by these movements.
[45 - 48 secs] This motion is really good.

[10 - 13 secs] So, I can see there must be
[13 - 16 secs] something special about this too.
[28 - 31 secs] Is it too chaotic?
[31 - 34 secs] Now that everything seems out of alignment?
[48 - 51 secs] I guess it may all be much simpler than it appears.

[1 - 2 secs] In comes another.
[4 - 7 secs] This immediately feels darker,
[7 - 9 secs] but it might be placed exactly here
[9 - 12 secs] for balance.
[15 - 17 secs] It seems naff calling it a 'spell'
[17 - 19 secs] but let's be sure of something at least;

[19 - 22 secs] the programming of this is using magic
[22 - 24 secs] (again, sounds a bit dodgy)
[24 - 26 secs] but when the spell encoded within it
[26 - 28 secs] reaches the right combination
[28 - 31 secs] you'll feel different;
[31 - 34 secs] distinctly clearer for an instant.

[36 - 38 secs] I'm not sure in what way exactly,
[38 - 40 secs] probably the effect is pretty subtle;
[40 - 43 secs] maybe like a pressure lifting.

[45 - 48 secs] But it's somewhere in the transitions,
[48 - 51 secs] in how things coincide and assemble.
[54 - 56 secs] Everything is running randomly, so
[56 - 58 secs] at some point, I've no idea when,
[58 - 60 secs] the right configuration is reached.

[14 - 16 secs] So, not this bit. Not yet.
[16 - 19 secs] we'll reach it soon though, I think,
[19 - 21 secs] the thing that needs including.

[29 - 31 secs] Not what you see here
[31 - 34 secs] but only what is viewed from this point
[34 - 37 secs] exactly here;
[41 - 42 secs] (sometimes it's very specific).

[6 - 9 secs] This is quite nice
[9 - 12 secs] but I'm not sure how it relates at the moment.

[15 - 18 secs] OK, the sound generated right here must also
[18 - 21 secs] be a vital part of making it work.

[54 - 57 secs] Maybe you're noticing some changes by now,
[57 - 60 secs] I guess it depends what comes next.

[1 - 3 secs] So this next?
[3 - 5 secs] But maybe this is not so important.

[15 - 17 secs] What we're looking for here is a shift that
[17 - 20 secs] happens when there is a change in the light,
[20 - 23 secs] when a shadow passes across us.

[27 - 30 secs] But there's something else too.

[33 - 36 secs] Soon, you'll see the same movement
[36 - 39 secs] shared by two people simultaneously.

[42 - 45 secs] Actually, that's not so amazing in itself
[45 - 47 secs] but it echoes something elsewhere.

[52 - 55 secs] About 10 minutes ago,
[55 - 58 secs] didn't it feel better?

[5 - 7 secs] So, now it has to find somewhere else
[7 - 10 secs] to try other combinations.
[10 - 12 secs] It might have reached the right sequence
[12 - 14 secs] already, it's kind of difficult to tell
[14 - 17 secs] when it can't stop making itself.

[20 - 23 secs] Maybe it needs more time...
[23 - 25 secs] or maybe some distance.
[25 - 27 secs] I mean, for the spell to work
[27 - 30 secs] it might be better to forget about it.

What is unusual about *Plan for a Spell* is the layered attention given to montage at the lateral level. It's not montage as weaving together but as separation. Hence the term 'montage' which I use to invoke a tradition of deconstructive editing that goes all the way back to Eisenstein and Vertov, that extends through the work of Godard and Marker and that is always associated with the 'other cinema' that has existed fitfully alongside its narrative counterpart. It seems entirely fitting that *Plan for a Spell* should take on this feature of film-making. The canonical example of what André Bazin described as 'lateral' editing is Chris Marker's 1958 film 'Lettre de Sibérie'. Marker presents a set of images shot in what was then the Soviet Republic of Yakutsk. Firstly, the commentary informs us that the images are of 'a modern city... comfortable buses... happy Soviet workers.' Secondly, we are told Yakutsk is 'a dusky city of sombre repute' in which 'the potentates of the regime flaunt [their] insolent luxury' and where the workers are 'hunched over like slaves.' Finally, the same images represent 'modern houses gradually replacing the sombre old quarters' where the workers 'apply themselves to beautifying their city, which is in need of it.' From Soviet propaganda to anti-Soviet misinformation via an equally misleading 'neutrality' of tone, each commentary contradicts the other while the images obdurately remain the same, neither confirming nor denying the truth of Marker's comically competing voice-overs.

It seems fitting to use Marker as an example because he (like Godard, but to a slightly more limited extent) is one of the few undisputed modernist masters who has worked with multimedia formats (electronic images and CD Rom) as well with installations. *Plan for a Spell*

announces the possibility of revitalising, in another context, the technique of 'lateral montage'. This opens the gallery-projection to interpretation via cinema history while avoiding it being seen as a purely 'spectacular' and quasi-'cinematic' projection-event. In the very process of 'separating the elements', film and art join hands again.

When Chodzko invented the craft of 'dust wrangling' he can only have guessed at how many others were out there among the film-going public, shoring up and restoring in the archives and film museums, rummaging among Super-8 reels at car-boot sales, digging deep into bins of gash-tape. But he may well have remarked on the new wave of dust-wranglers who were at work in the gallery, fashioning cinematic forms of their own from the same dust that Chodzko once offered for sale.