

By Hoolboom Notes on Two Movies by Dirk De Bruyn

Mike Hoolboom

Canadian filmmaker Mike Hoolboom remarks on two works by a friend and colleague Dirk De Bruyn, an accomplished Australian artist and filmmaker.

Traum A Dream (1994, 16mm)

As soon as *Traum A Dream* begins I relax a little knowing it's Dirk De Bruyn. There is no mistaking it. As soon as the first few frames flicker by it's like picking up the thread of a conversation left hanging a month ago, a year ago, how many years ago now. The way we express our interiority is manifold, a gesture of the hands, the amount we drink (or don't, so much of who we are lies in what we don't allow ourselves to do), but also here in this frame-by-frame rhythm. I feel Dirk in his choice of colours, the bursting, blooming colour fields applied by hand, part of a hundred sketches laid onto emulsion (where nothing will fix it in memory, where it will operate as part of a flow, a field of meanings, a play of meanings), a dance of colour meets me when I watch this again and it's like hearing him breathe a story beside me, it's him, his Dirk-ness is all bound up in this knowing.

He came from a place that reveled in form and shape, in the pure beauty (can anything be pure anymore?) of light striking emulsion, a cinema of Richters and Ruttmans they used to call "absolute" before we knew better. "Absolute" was another utopia we had to set aside to make room for the lives we were actually living. Dirk never used his movies to shrink himself from the world, to cover himself over with the absolute so that

life couldn't touch him. On the contrary: his movies, and *Traum A Dream* in particular, are all about touch.

The way his colours arrive rat-ta-tat-tat – one replacing another in a great heave and rush – tells me something about his joy and excitement in expression ("It's you! You're here!") but also carries with it a sadness because it's not lasting, is it? It's rushing on by and never will again, not this way. If it's human it doesn't last – that's part of the song Dirk sings here.

This little ragged bumpy ride of a movie reminds me of Frida Khalo's paintings, and the way John Berger described them, as if she was painting on her own skin: "Eyes you remember only if you shut your own." And especially this: "But the will to share pain is shareable. And from that inevitably inadequate sharing comes a resistance."

This body is wounded, torn and damaged, and he is trying to bind the wound with these pictures. These pictureless pictures. This colour. But he can't help showing the wound as well. He returns to it over and over, but it's not altogether distinct, or clear. It is, above all, not a story which can be told and revisited – instead, it is a mound of sensation, a blinding hurt. This is as much as he can show us, it hurts him to get this far and it's not enough. He knows it's not enough too. At the end of the movie the jumble of signifiers, the torn scraps of language, have congealed in order to form a new poetry. This is what he dares to do: he shows the confusion in its most raw state, before there are sentences, when the mouth can only groan or sigh, when there are colours, not even shapes, not even

something that distinct – that’s how deep the wound goes. He shows us this world inside the body, where the pain began, and shows how he moves through it, shuffling the parts, cycling and recycling, whispering into his own ear, urging himself not to get stuck there, to emerge, and at last, in a few winning strokes at the end of the film’s interminable six minute stretch he arrives at a memory of childhood which he’s not allowed to reveal. Especially not to himself. Never that. On the soundtrack Dirk’s voice whispers, “He began to remember what had been taken before you, a secret from before, before he knew himself.”

Rote Movie (2002, Digital Video)

I remember seeing *Rote Movie* while Dirk was working on it, while it was a collection of strips hanging limply from the walls. There was hope in the room, and these hopes were being taped together piece by piece. And when it was finished, somehow, we were in a van heading for Ann Arbor and watched it on the State Theatre’s impossibly large screen and were thrilled. The private thing, the small thing you rub between your fingers to light your way, sparks up to become us for a moment, our story. And now a decade on I’m watching it again on television so I can write some of these words, but it doesn’t belong here. “There is not a place for everyone on television after all” – this is what Dirk’s movie is telling me. There are some feelings which can’t be televised.

It’s handmade for one thing, scratched and marked and rough (how did he get it to look so rough?). It’s like shaking hands with someone who stumps in telephone polls for a living. And somehow this roughness is married to the cine-projector – they are relying on one another. It’s no use trying to imagine it as a video, on television, because it’s invisible here, I can’t make out a thing. Only when it lights up onscreen does it appear at all, and then it’s all I want to see. Why is that?

I think there are some lives, some feelings, which are made possible by chemical analogue cinema. Dirk’s *Rote Movie*, for instance, is a modernist text about nostalgia (the wounds of returning), but something is missing (his family) and so his restless journeying, shown via hand-drawn rotoscope as his sketched out car ventures along the highway, leads him only further afield. On the soundtrack, Dirk’s familiar voice whispers inner monologue and conscience. He told me later he had copped this from the Canadian filmmakers who were interminably yakking through their own movies, who used their movies as a pretext for chit-chat, but here it

appears every bit his own. These longings and hopes are part of another time. There are still I-wish-you-were-here’s. There are still regrets, of course. But not these regrets. Not this family. This is a body born in the light of this time, part of a machine which is already in its last moments now, relishing its final, fatal bloom in rote movies like this one, an elegy for elegies. Another last picture show.

New lives will have to be invented for the computer. New kinds of loss.

One day someone will be forced (out of heartbreak or distress) to look back, and they will find this movie which will be able to speak to them about the way people used to fall in love, the way family used to appear, the way someone got their whole body up into a machine and projected it across a public, from behind their backs, so the light was picking them up along the way, projecting them all up onto a screen where it was our story again. One day this will be our story again.

Mike Hoolboom is an artist working in film and video. He lives and works in Toronto. He is the author of two books: „Plague Years“ (1998) and „Fringe Film in Canada“ (2001), and has edited books on two filmmakers along with various publications. He is a founding member of the „Pleasure Dome“ screening collective, and has worked as the artistic director of the „Images Festival“ and the experimental film officer at „Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre“. He has exhibited his work in major festivals including Berlin, Rotterdam, Locarno and Nyon. He has enjoyed retrospectives in eight European cities.