



ART IN THE MAKING

Correction Please; or, How We Got into Pictures

+ intro by film historian, Ian Christie

In these two films by Noël Burch, the processes of image making are interrogated and playfully subverted through a range of inventive and elusive narrative devices. In *Correction Please* attention is drawn to the way early cinema developed its own mode of language. Then, in *Impersonation*, a documentary exploration of the 1980s British art scene is viewed through the prism of a seemingly missing British artist.

In partnership with the Essay Film Festival.

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‘Correction Please’: a contemporary review

Correction Please is a consciously unselfcontained work. This is manifest not only in the title (which carries the implicit question, what is being corrected?), but also in the film’s relationship to Burch’s continuing theoretical writings. In fact, he has already ‘amplified’ the film-text with an accompanying written one, designed to ‘clarify incidental obscurities for teachers and other users’ (a collection of notes supplied as a booklet with the film, and also printed in *Afterimage*, No. 8/9). But this open-ended quality is most obvious in the structure of the film itself, which disrupts a straightforward development of beginning, middle and end (very much in that order) with a series of provocative inserts designed to question the ‘innocence’ of that development.

The narrative concerns the mission on which young Williamson is sent by his chief, Hepworth, to deliver a letter to the latter’s arch-enemy, the Countess Skladanowsky. The Countess, in the mansion where she lives with her sinister maid and voyeuristic father, reads the letter and hypnotises the messenger. This series of events is staged (with overlaps and repetition) in five separate sequences which allude, through their formal attributes, to what Burch describes as ‘the mature primitive years (c. 1905), Griffith’s middle period at Biograph (c. 1910), the more mature films which Reginald Barker made for Thomas Ince (c. 1915), Fritz Lang’s *Mabuse* dyptich (1922) – a crucial moment in the elaboration of the visual and symbolic structures of the Cinema Institution – and, finally, the era of “canned theatre”, insofar as it is that of so many films made between 1929 and today’.

The point of tracing this ‘development’ is not the usual one of celebrating a supposed organic, natural growth from primitivism to sophisticated maturity. Williamson, the spectator’s surrogate within the narrative as such, gradually becomes the victim not just of the Countess but of an ‘interiorisation of the picture as an *environment*, centred around the spectator’s illusory self’. Factors which gradually emerge as the story unfolds, such as ‘linear perspective, camera ubiquity, camera movement, eyeline matching’, contribute to this interiorisation which consequently ‘became inscribed in the social reality of the Institution’. Williamson, the ‘pioneer’, is reduced, in the words of the Countess, to ‘a very susceptible subject’ or, as her father more bluntly describes him, a ‘stupid bourgeois pig’.

This dramatisation of the way 'cinema language', as it has come to be understood, has evolved into a regime to which the spectator becomes subject, the 'Institutional Mode of Representation' (Burch's phrase) is, of (polemic) necessity, highly didactic, as well as being staged in a pointedly seductive manner. But the corrective lesson is deliberately made problematic by the material with which it is interwoven, a number of films from the period 1900-1906 which, in the use Burch makes of them, raise more questions about the Institution than his film could possibly answer.

Sometimes the 'jokes' are both neat and productive. For example, *Gay Shoe Clerk* provides, with its 'literal' illustration of 'The Dissecting Eye: Fetishistic Version' (a Buñuelian close-up of a woman's shoe being fitted), an image which contradicts the legend recounted earlier on the soundtrack (Griffith as inventor of the close-up) not only chronologically but ideologically. The same legend posits Griffith versus the front office (creativity versus capital); but Burch shifts the significance of this fragment of film 'grammar' into a psychoanalytic context inexplicable in those terms.

Similarly, *A Picture for the Rogues Gallery*, in which a grimacing, crying woman gradually comes into bizarre close-up, 'framed' by the Law and its gaze (a police photographer), succinctly encapsulates the eye /object relation as 'a violent intimacy'. But not all the examples are this successful. The pieces of bodies falling from the sky at the climax of *Explosion of a Motor Car* may be an example of 'The Dissecting Eye: Primal Version', but to describe the film as 'an *acting out* of the infantile fantasies of aggression... rippings and tearings' seems arbitrarily reductive. Burch's thesis that cinema in the days of pre-editing gave a 'delirious impetus (to the) theme of the "divided body"' may be sound, but this single example does not *usefully* support it since he does not follow up the gesture.

The problem is duplicated with *The Bride Retires*, in which an on-screen male voyeur watches his young wife undress, acting out 'a structure of desire which will ultimately come to be "hidden" (repressed?) in the "language" of the close-up, the lascivious pan, etc.'. The difficulty of the conceptual leap, from a single example to an understanding of the Institution at work, is more serious here since the idea of this structure of desire vitally informs the narrative of *Williamson and the Countess*, a model of Hollywood /Mosfilm constructed in order to be rejected.

What *Correction Please* convincingly articulates is the way in which a spectator is taken over by the centring process; what it less convincingly demonstrates is the psychoanalytic significance of that take-over. And in turn, what (almost) remains implicit is the sense of what lies beyond this area. This is hinted at by *The Ingenious Soubrette*, in which pictures are hung by a character crawling up a wall, in defiance of rules of perspective. The caption here is 'The Unimaginable Angle', i.e. that which will disappear as the Institution becomes entrenched. The 'unimaginable' is only one step away from a kind of radical nostalgia which emerges in Burch's suggestion of the 'effort' required to read films 'made prior to "the Griffith Revolution"'. This 'primitive' cinema has become a field of exploration for theorists/filmmakers interested in ways of seeing outside the dominant mode (Burch links Lumière and Warhol; Ken Jacobs refilms *Tom, Tom the Piper's Son*). It is from this position that Burch speaks, a fact unacknowledged by his film. Which perhaps explains why *Correction Please* says more about *Wavelength* than it does about *Vertigo*, a crucial fact to be borne in mind by 'teachers and other users'.

Steve Jenkins, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1981

Impersonation. Apropos the Disappearance of Reginald Pepper

The film endeavours to piece together the story of the disappearance of contemporary English 'primitive' artist, Reginald Pepper, after doubts had been raised as to the authenticity of his paintings. Testimony comes from the critic Guy Brett, gallery owners Eric Lister and Andras Kalman and the professional artist Joanna Carrington who acted as his agent.

Ian Christie is a film historian, curator, broadcaster and filmmaker. Ian has researched and published on several prominent aspects of film history, including Eisenstein and Russian cinema, Michael Powell, and Martin Scorsese, to name a few. Ian has worked at the BFI in various capacities, and has worked on a variety of exhibitions including *Film as Film* (Hayward, 1979), *Eisenstein: His Life and Art* (MoMA Oxford, 1988) and *Twilight of the Tsars* (Hayward, 1991). He also contributes regularly to radio and television programmes on cinema.

CORRECTION, PLEASE OR HOW WE GOT INTO PICTURES

Director: Noël Burch

Production Company: Arts Council of Great Britain

Producer: Margaret Williams

Assistant Director: Nick Burton

Script: Noël Burch

Photography: Les Young

Assistant Photographer: David Beven

Stills Photography: Martine Loubet

Models: Bruce Macadie

Graphics: Sally Beardsley

Editor: Brand Thumim

Art Director: Phoebe De Gaye

Assistant Designer: Jamie Leonard

Painter: Malvern Hostick

Costumes: Phoebe De Gaye

Dress Maker: Anya Scott

Make-up: Bernie Browne

Music: John Buller

Musician (Piano/Organ): Susan Bradshaw

Sound Recording: Roger Johnson

Sound Re-recording: Colin Martin

Cast

Sue Lloyd (*Countess Skladanowsky*)

Jeff Rawle (*her victim, Williamson*)

Lea Brodie (*her maid*)

Jimmy Gardner (*her father*)

Alex McCrindle (*her enemy, Hepworth*)

James Leahy (*Hepworth's old friend, an Indian civil servant*)

Christopher Mason (*Haggar, Hepworth's chauffeur*)

UK 1979

50 mins

IMPERSONATION. APROPOS THE DISAPPEARANCE OF REGINALD PEPPER

Directors: Noël Burch, Christopher Mason

Production Companies: Arbor Films, Arts Council of Ireland

Sponsor: Arts Council of Great Britain

Producer: Fizz Oliver

Photography: Erika Stevenson

Editor: Jo Ann Kaplan

Cast

David Barry

Gillian Martell

Muriel Barker

Jonathan Kydd

David Berry

UK 1984

55 mins

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Art in the Making: Correction Please; or, How we got into Pictures + intro by film historian, Ian Christie + Impersonation. Apropos the Disappearance of Reginald Pepper

Mon 3 Apr 18:20

Woman with a Movie Camera: Take This Waltz

Thu 13 Apr 18:15

The Man Without Desire + intro by Josephine Botting, BFI Curator

Sun 16 Apr 15:10

Seniors: Ragtime + intro

Mon 17 Apr 14:00

African Odysseys: Executive Order + intro and Q&A with director, Lázaro Ramos (work permitting)

Sat 22 Apr 14:00

Relaxed Screening: Deep End + intro and discussion

Mon 24 Apr 18:00

Experimenta Mixtape S02E02

Mon 24 Apr 18:15

Intimate Relations + intro by Vic Pratt, BFI Video Publishing

Tue 25 Apr 18:20

Filmmaking for Artists: Advanced Filmmaking Workshop

Sun 2 Apr 10:30-16:30

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