

# JOHN GILLIES:

## A CINEMA OF LOST IMAGES

Therese Davis

I remember the first time I saw a performance by John Gillies and the strong affect it had on me. It was the early 1980s and the location was a warehouse in Premier Lane, Kings Cross. Titled *I Like Smoking*, the performance was deceptively simple: an actor striking matches and flicking them to the ground in an automated manner. As with other performances by Gillies from this period, such as *Night Janitor*, the piece was related to process or minimalist ideas and included a sound element and expanded cinema – in this case, a hypnotic sound loop of a snatch of found dialogue and the projection of an image of fire onto the body of the actor. Like in *Night Janitor*, the projected image was visible only when it coincided with the actor's body. These early performance pieces were thought provoking experiments in the slippery relation between the image and its referent. But I can't say that I understood them as such at the time. Rather, what I remember about these pieces and early video works such as *I Need You* – two people walking through a forest in an endless loop of time and place – is their powerful sedative quality: the hypnotic rhythms of these pieces had a peculiar calming effect on my senses. But the thing is, as with other sedatives, these performances and videos had a side effect: a deep sense of sadness, a feeling of inexplicable loss. They were sensuous lessons in one of Walter Benjamin's great insights into the image, namely that the image is only ever a trace of an experience that cannot come to light, a ghost of what once was. (Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One – Way Street and Other Writings*, London, 1979)

*Techno/Dumb/Show* abounds with the ghosts of lost images and unclaimed experience. Made in collaboration with the performance group the Sydney Front, the aim of this piece was to integrate the physical and highly improvisatory process of a Sydney Front performance into the video medium. Others have written about the significance of this piece for theories of performance. What interests me is how this startling, multi-layered montage re-invigorates the facial close-up. Here, the face becomes defamiliarised as it was in the incredible sequences of metamorphosis in Eisenstein's *Strike* or the shocking beauty of the close-ups of Louise Brooks in Pabst's *Pandora's Box*. This is not to suggest that *Techno/Dumb/Show* is an attempt to reproduce soviet montage or the performance style of classic narrative cinema. Rather, it enables an intense sensation of similarity, an after-image of the spontaneous theatricality of 1920s cinema. For Benjamin, there was a structural reciprocity between the forms of shock produced by this cinema and the alienation of modernity. In a similar vein, the orchestration of faces and gestures in *Techno/Dumb/Show* are a vivid display of the dialectic of appearance and disappearance that structures our experience of media in postmodernity – the endless flux of images that produces a temporal sensation of being suspended in time, a state of after-shock.

In *My Sister's Room* John Gillies uses a single face to explore the dialectic between absence, performance and representation – grainy, super enlarged photographic stills of his late sister's face projected onto one wall of a blackened room, accompanied by a soundtrack made up of the many indistinct sounds a person makes as they move quietly about a room. On one level the face in *My Sister's Room* activates the kind of physiognomic scrutiny invited by all films: a compulsion to search the face for signs of a unique character, a mirror of the soul. This viewing position is, however, undermined by a persistent flickering on the screen. The slight movements of the frame generated by the hand held camera technique reveal that this is a work of re-photography: an image of an image. In this moment of revelation our perception coincides with the filmmaker's. Taking us beyond concepts of character and identity, *My Sister's Room* allows us to feel something of the intense longing to reverse the powers of death, to re-activate the dead. In the same instant, it exposes the cruel nature of the camera's pretense to satisfy this desire. Film cannot re-present what is absent. Its images are only ever a trace of what was. And to see this, as we are forced to do in *My Sister's Room*, is to understand in the most profound and devastating way that the dead exist only as an image.

In recent video works and installations the lost images of cinematic history and Gillies' own past have been exorcised to make way for the ghosts of colonial history. *Armada* is one of his most elaborate and large scale installations to date. This evocative piece was staged in Salvador, Bahia, a once thriving colonial shipping port in Brazil. The installation served as a public anti-heroic monument to shared histories. It involved the projection of original video sequences onto a sail/screen of a boat in the harbour. These images are the culmination of Gillies' exploration of resonances between the electronic image and pre-industrial art forms, such as stone-masonry and weaving. Combined with a minimalist soundscape of emblematic sounds of colonialism – trains, bells, the creaking ropes of sailing ships – the images of *Armada* evoke lost images from the colonial past, common to many parts of the world. The aim was to spark associations between the past and present by allowing us to see the past as an impression in the surfaces of the buildings that surround the port, to experience the past as a eerie force or undercurrent in everyday forms of exchange.

The notion of historic undercurrents is further developed in *The Mary Stuart Tapes*, made in collaboration with performer Clare Grant and based on a re-translation of Schiller's text *Maria Stuart*. Here, the aim is to visually and sonically resurrect the text/body of Mary Stuart as a powerful anachronism. The use of contemporary Sydney as the site for this resurrection is of crucial importance, for as Gillies explains: 'Australia is the inheritor of the British idea of the state. Within this idea, Mary Stuart is a buried potentiality, a force trapped within.' (Unpublished interview with John Gillies, February 12, 2004) This idea of Stuart as a hidden force in the contemporary state that threatens to breakthrough is expressed in Grant's compelling performance of Stuart as a marginalised figure fated to endlessly wander the crowded streets of the contemporary metropolis without recognition. There and not there .

Historical consciousness of Australia's British and European inheritance is also of concern in Gillies' 2004 film *Divide*. Prompted by the deep social divides of the late 1990s resulting from the federal government's divisive rhetoric on race relations and refugees, this visually stunning black and white film re-views the influence of Christian rhetoric in discourses and images of colonial settler culture. It is also the latest development in a cinematic project deeply connected to the physical tradition of Sydney performance culture. By drawing on this specific mode of performance the film inserts a new set of non-indigenous figures to iconic Australian landscapes. These ambiguous figures are open to interpretation and not dependent on notions of character or identification. And, like so many others in this cinema of lost images, the images of *Divide* are what John Gillies describes as unreasonable ghosts – an uncanny presence that shocks us in to seeing beyond the politically limiting confines of reason and relevance, beyond conformist thinking about how we structure film and its images.

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