

Laura Bartlett Gallery

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Kiss kiss? Bang bang? Elizabeth McAlpine's Adventures in Cinema Sarah Wood, *Vertigo Magazine*, 2007

If someone told you tomorrow you would lose your consciousness forever, how would you feel? Perhaps that you might as well be dead. And yet if your fate were commuted instead to losing your mind, then your prospects, though not very palatable, would seem less gloomy. Your consciousness and your mind, therefore cannot be the same thing.² - Susan Greenfield

Watching Elizabeth McAlpine's intrepid experiments with cinema I'm struck by how clearly she knows the distinction between consciousness and mind. It is not an easy distinction to make. McAlpine marks it by looking at the way consciousness and the mind communicate, and particularly how cinema intervenes in this process. Take, for instance, her 2005 installation *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, a giant widescreen projection that samples a series of explosions and embraces from mainstream cinema on a giant grid of blackness. The cinematic moments burst into life in real-time then disappear with a seeming randomness, the product of fixity in their own inexplicable narrative.

On a basic level *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* points up the twin drives that fuel human behaviour and which cinema so expertly exploits: sex and death. It points up the orgasmic quality of violence, it points up gendered narrative, it talks about cinematic framing, it is very modern. More than this: it shows, in its sudden dashes of light and meaning across the darkness of the screen, the way our synapses process this information. At its best, this piece acts to represent visually our own cognition process - our own neurological understanding of the piece.

The language of cinema works to suppress consciousness in order to control the mind and provoke the imagination. This is not an easy thing to see but McAlpine is an investigator into the way moving image, particularly the language of mainstream cinema, works. She is an unearther of process. By subjecting conventional film process itself to a new process of her own making she reveals intent. Take for instance, *The Film Footage Missed By A Viewer Through Blinking While Watching The Feature Film 'Don't Look Now'*² (2003). The film does what it says. It plays you 7 mins of the film *Don't Look Now* made up entirely from the moments when her experimental viewer blinked and broke the connection between the eye and the image. This is only part of the story. The re-edit's clarity - even if you haven't seen the original film you could come away from McAlpine's re-edit with a pretty clear idea of what happens and how the film works - reveals a hidden process: that blinking, far from being an interruption to conscious understanding, is in fact the moment of cognition, the moment when the mind gets to process the information it's received and understands it - the moment conscious understanding is gifted to the mind.

For her latest exhibition at Exeter's Specex Gallery, McAlpine has created a new piece - Californian Sunset. Edited together from apparently empty 35mm film frames she recycles them into a glorious glowing colour sequence pointing up the subtlety of the things we lose when we watch a film at 24 fps, the moments beyond cognition. It is complete visual pleasure. It's enough by itself; but McAlpine pushes the piece further, playing it as part of an installation with a monitor in the foreground of the projection, which disrupts the eyeline with a loop of 1500 climatic white-out moments of cinematic explosions. She also retains the soundtrack of the explosions: a white noise, an impossible distraction from the trippiness of the colourwash beyond. The pieces played together again question consciousness, ask about how much the mind can process, how interference plays with the mind and, most important, how the attraction to the smooth and the colourful is in direct opposition to the antagonism of the violent.

It tells us a lot about consciousness and also conscience. The piece inevitably pulls you back into the real world. It suggests, in its titling, an opposition in our experience of the world through the dominance of American culture. On one hand there's the attraction of a childlike pacification; on the other there's the TV-scale distraction of an endless loop of CNN-framed violence. The experience is binary but also something we can't compute. This piece sits, calmly ironic, like the finale of Thomas Pynchon's glorious 1973 anti-war novel Gravity's Rainbow. There, an audience sings along to a bouncing ball on a cinema screen while overhead a missile is completing its final arc toward a direct hit on the theatre. In the novel the avoidance of understanding equals death.

There is something of this same questioning of discrepancy in McAlpine's installation. In dispensing with narrative she appeals directly to consciousness, challenging the contradictions in the stimulus we receive from the same source, questioning which source attracts. Just as in her sculpture of a plaster gramophone player and record (the record can be played - but the player might self-destruct in the playing) we are handed a choice, and the choice is refreshingly mind-expanding, a return to urgent consciousness in an age which encourages a much more numbed response.

- Sarah Wood

Sarah Wood is an independent film maker and film programmer