

REVIEW ESSAY

Beach Party Animal

Marisa Zanotti

Beach Party Animal (2011). Dir. Liz Aggiss and Joe Murray. Music by Alan Boorman. UK: Commissioned by South East Dance, 20 minutes. Film.

In 2008 Liz Aggiss directed a film entitled *Diva*, which suggested that her diva persona was being laid to rest in funereal scenes. Two years later, her return to the screen couldn't have been more different from the heightened realities of the screenworks that characterized her work in the early 2000s. Further, from the woman who once said "every dancefilm has a shorter dancefilm inside it screaming to get out," came a 20-minute screenwork, a daring proposition indeed.¹

In *Beach Party Animal*, Liz Aggiss once again collaborates with Joe Murray in a joint directorial role and brings aspects of her recent performance practice to her filmmaking in what she calls a "choreomontary." This film could be also sited in a tradition of poetic subjective documentary where, as Chantal Akerman maintains, the border between fiction and truth is blurred.² Aggiss calls her performers "guerilla performers" and she has explored guerilla tactics in her recent live practice. In filmmaking, guerilla tactics have a history of being associated with low budget work³ and can be used to enable a film to be made outside of a studio system, to affect performances in locations and perhaps of locations.

Brighton, the location for this film, is traditionally a place for escape; in the summer, waves of Londoners tumble through the barriers of Brighton station before finally washing up on the seafront. The seafront seems haunted by ghosts of films gone past, from the expressionist 1930s gangsterism of *Brighton Rock*,⁴ to *Quadrophenia's* love song, to Mod culture⁵ and Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa*,⁶ where on Brighton Pier Bob Hoskins and Cathy Tyson play out a remarkable scene of emotional decimation as the pier carouses around them.

In *Beach Party Animal*, Aggiss and Murray consider English seafront culture in scenes that are not epic or perhaps even filmic but most definitely screenic; the Brighton seafront becomes a kind of slightly trashy holodeck. This is the seafront as the set for whatever kind of screen moment you want to star in: for "rollerdisco guy" it will always be LA in the 1980s; "a bunch of lads" perform a kind of "Britain's Beachfront Shame" scene of "on the lash" for camera; "virtuosic yoga girl" pretzels herself impossibly; and for the crowds on the beach "fat man in a thong getting covered with ice-cream" is just another tourist, albeit beamed in from the Benny Hill⁷ shows of the 1970s.

The work opens with Parry's *Jerusalem*; the suffragette's hymn has often functioned as a signifier of Englishness.⁸ Jes Butterworth used it to great effect in the 2009 play of the same name that looks at the English underclass in rural England. *Jerusalem* is often associated with pastorage; it's an odd choice for a seaside movie, but here Aggiss and Murray play



Beach Party Animal (2011). Dir. Liz Aggiss and Joe Murray. UK: Commissioned by South East Dance. Photography by Matthew Andrews.

on its epic grandeur with a full orchestral choral rendition, contrasted by their depiction of the small activities where people create their heaven. Whilst the sound score frames vignettes as comical, some scenarios seem more barbed: the young mother, so caught up in her own dance under headphones that she is oblivious to the cries of her child, or the nudist in the sea, railing impotently against some imaginary foe. There's a loneliness to these figures who dance like no one's watching in flat brilliant light. Weirdly for Brighton seafront, we don't see a single gay couple; thinking about it, however, it does seem sometimes that heterosexuals never really go beyond the spaces in-between two piers that are map points of reference for *Beach Party Animal*, and crammed into these spaces, a day in Brighton is pressed out, gathering intensity as the day lengthens. Choices about color and light are key in Aggiss and Murray's language: we see the beach as an early morning lunar landscape, color saturated shots of the nighttime beach, a gold bomber jacket glitters, an intense purple towel against green moss. There is a hyperreality to the grade, particularly in the later shots, that speaks to the hallucinogenic qualities of light.

As the film progresses, the spatial and corporeal grammar of the work finally produces a liminal space, and it is in here that we find the strangest and perhaps most powerful scenes in the film. At the centre of a carousel of dreamy hobby horses there is a man who, like an octopus, seems to survey us with one blinking eye. Later, a mollusk turns into a little girl. At dusk, the air is thick with barbecue smoke. Here is where the film truly begins to create its own image language, through a kind of reverse heat haze that produces, in the neon shimmer mirages of men pissing against the sea wall, the tinkling sound of yacht masts. Most poignantly, two silvery, sheathed, drunk mermaids—one pole dancing in a paddling pool, the other collapsed, arse to the air on the tiles of a Victorian bandstand. This is an extraordinary vision, both beautiful in golden intensity and quite grotesque. There's a melancholy to these good-time girls and we might feel that it is not because they are so extraordinarily drunk, but rather their sadness is that they can't drink anymore; the approaching dawn means the end of a good night and a very good time. What is particularly sweet about this vignette is that there is no hint of judgment of these women and their drinking, which is refreshing in a culture that just loves hysteria about women and drink. What we are seeing is an equivalent of the celebratory male buddy drinking scene as they stagger home arm in arm.

Mitch Rose has written that landscape is "*a marker—the material means by which culture appears in time and space*."⁹ For Aggiss and Murray this holds true: these "material means" are gestures and actions arising from the landscape. Thus movement both acts as a frame for the physical landscape and then by virtue of directorial choices movement *becomes* the landscape. The behaviors that mark this culture are bodily behaviors; alongside the actions described previously, we see a lot of running and strolling, but sometimes people aren't going anywhere and bodies recline in rest, in sleep, or in surrender to sun or alcohol. There's a unique quality to each image of repose. There's a body that seems to have been turned to a camouflage setting to create the same pale colors as the stones underneath it and of course skin that's been roasted pink. This is an edit which speaks about land and body merging in the changing rhythms of a day to night cycle, and the choice of a 20-minute duration allows for Aggiss and Murray to take time with images when they need it.

By tactically introducing performers to the landscape, Aggiss and Murray's strategy is a gentle disruption, less of an outright insurrection and more a celebration of acceptance

of otherness. They are interested not in staging dance on the seafront but rather in the performance of the seafront as a gestural site. This a language that renders the seafront as a corporeality and in doing so invites us to consider ideas about landscape, location and performance, culture and behavior.

Notes

1. Screendance minutes are calculated differently, so Aggiss and Murray's film in screendance terms could be thought of as four hours long.
2. As Akerman said, "Anyway, I don't really believe in the difference between documentary and fiction ("An interview with Chantal Akerman").
3. Although of course the marks of guerilla tactics are often used to add guerilla values to commodified moving image work—for example in advertising or music video—or to delineate a character in a narrative as holding these values.
4. The film was remade in 2010 by Rowan Joffe in a kind of weird mash-up of Quadrophenia where the action of the 1930s is moved to the Mod era.
5. See *Quadrophenia*.
6. See *Mona Lisa*.
7. A mystifyingly (to me) popular English television comedian.
8. Recently, David Cameron, with the ignorance that only a public school education can buy, attempted to claim it as an English sporting anthem; this is excellent news for the rest of us given Blake's sentiments that heaven can be found here on earth outside of church, state and the institutions of government.
9. Rose, "Dreams of presence," n.p.

References

Dercon, Chris. "An interview with Chantal Akerman about too much and not enough cinema." *Contour* (2005). <http://www.contour2005.be/UK/ca.htm>.

Rose, Mitch. "Dreams of presence: a theory of culture and landscape." University of Hull. Book proposal. http://www.lostgeographer.com/images/pdfs/Dreams_of_presence.pdf

Media

Beach Party Animal (2011). Dir. Liz Aggiss and Joe Murray. 20:00 min. UK: Commissioned by South East Dance. Film.

Brighton Rock (1947). Dir. John Boulting. Prod. Roy Boulting. 92:00 min. UK: Charter Films. Film.

Mona Lisa (1986). Dir. Neil Jordan. Prod. Steven Wooley. 104:00 min. UK: Handmade Films. Film.

Quadrophenia (1979). Dir. Franc Roddam. Prod. Roy Baird. 117:00 min. UK: The Who Films. Film.