

DEPARTURE ON ARRIVAL

DEPARTURE ON ARRIVAL - 16mm FILM - B/W - 21 min.40 sec. - 1996 - BARBARA METER.

Barbara Meter's new film Departure on Arrival draws the viewer into a world which is both historically specific and powerfully emotive. The film gives a strong sense of a European life, possibly though not necessarily Jewish, lived in the middle and latter parts of the present century, with references further back: to Imperial Germany and to the succeeding inter-war period. In accord with the film-maker's background, the Europe of the film is German and Eastern, rather than French or Mediterranean.

The film beguiles the viewer with black-and-white images and fragments of sound from a wide variety of sources: footage from train stations and domestic interiors, old photographs, swirling masses of grain, the imprint of what looks like fur on the surface of the film, and glimpses of text; an indistinguishable moment from a conversation, the sound of footsteps, snatches from popular music of Eastern Europe and from works in the Western classical tradition. The film-maker's method is one of assembly, of juxtaposition, repetition and recombination. This is overwhelmingly a first-person film, with subjectivity represented by most of the means available to the artist film-maker. At the same time it is an object of contemplation, which offers opportunities for examining and reexamining the images and sounds assembled for the connections which are made and the themes which are established. Through this assemblage of images and sounds the multitudinous ways in which an individual life is tied into the world are brought together; the film is a self portrait using material generated over a long period of time, which is transformed through refilming the footage and through the process of editing.

The elements that make up the film are put together in ways which produce a strong sense of melancholy, which at times distills itself into moments of pure atmosphere, contributing to the film's elegiac, and in places transcendent, mood. We see a tree swimming in an atmosphere which is at once fog and film grain, and there follows a tiny fragment of a dog running against a background of waves, strongly lit: the juxtaposition of the two moments giving, as so often in this film, a sense of the range of experience contained within a life. In superimposition, a train recently arrived within the cavern of a station shares the screen with a mass of walking figures, passing the camera in midshot, who are softly focussed and spectral, yet solid, at the same moment. Photographs of members of the film-maker's family, those both long-dead and those closer to her both in time and in emotional bond, are animated, almost brought back to life by the hand-held camerawork, so that at times the viewer is uncertain whether he is seeing a photograph filmed or a shot from a film.

We glimpse a quotation from Goethe: 'Über alle Gipfel ist Ruh' ('Over all the hilltops there is quiet') and, in the film as in the poem, we are reminded that death awaits all of us. Almost all those whose portraits are seen within the film are now dead. Departure on Arrival develops overwhelming senses both of transience and loss, and of the personal and specific nature of what is lost. This makes the film a testimony, an act of remembrance, as it assembles and builds with that which has survived: film, photographs, recorded music and sound. While it is a testimony and a summation of the film-maker's life to the present time, the film is not concerned only with the past. Indeed the viewer is often transfixed by the sheer presentness of some of the images: the tree and the fog mentioned above, or the unique combination of the light in a city square, the presences of a passer-by in front of the camera and of the film-maker behind it. And there

are suggestions of descent, the survival and continuity of families, in the juxtaposition of old family photographs with those which are older, and with more recent film footage. Alongside these are moments of striking intimacy, as when the film-maker observes the hands of a friend or relative during a meal, in very big close-up.

Throughout the film the optical printer is used in ways which unify and transform the material, so that the film is as varied in texture as the life it evokes. We are never allowed to forget that the transmission of light is at the heart of film-making. People and places are revealed, and sometimes also obscured in washes of light, and dissolves are used at times to reveal the dead behind the living in a way that only a photographic moving-image medium can achieve.

Alongside the sense of transience and loss there is a strong sense of travel in both direct and indirect senses within the film: we see the film-maker's feet, filmed by herself, walking through the film, at various points; a pair of silhouetted figures, walking on a hilly horizon, disappear in a burst of light only to reappear later in the same landscape but at a greater distance; and we see both the modern city and suggestions of peasant life in Eastern Europe, a reminder of how far Europe has come in the present century. Means of travel are also present throughout the film: aeroplanes, ocean liners, trains.

Essential to this film is its use of music, or rather musics, and sound. Its mood is half-created by the use of music and by contrasts between kinds of music and between music and sound. Thus we hear old recordings of a string serenade and a fragment from an Italian opera, as well as a Bach prelude played on the piano, this last then mixing to a steel band at the end in a striking conjuncture.

The recordings often make reference to a particular period (pre-LP) through the style of the performances and through the recording quality. We also hear various kinds of popular music: the sounds of people singing and dancing, suggesting village events or rituals, and a tiny fragment of accordion-playing.

These act as further references to, and evocations of, the world spanned by the life of the film-maker. Sound is used in ways which turn the surrounding silence into an entity in its own right: where there is no sound we feel the silence. The fragments of sound used are often short, at times extended. The combination of image-fragments with sound, often transferred at a subdued level, is a striking testimony to the briefest space of time, in the most concise way. The soundtrack inflects and counterpoints the images, giving clues as to how they are to be seen, focussing the sadness, disturbing or offering comfort by turns. At the same time it adds a strand of musical reference to the film's self-portrait.

Departure on Arrival is a film that repays multiple viewings, which can elucidate its shifting atmospheres and manifold connections. Meter achieves a materiality in this film which is central to the way in which it deals with transience. She allows us to feel both the uniqueness of a life, its particular memories and referents, and to appreciate at the same time the way most kinds of experience are held, either more or less widely, and with infinite variation, in common. It is both moving and - in the context of the present, when so much time-based work is so unadventurous in terms both of its language and of its feel- refreshing.