

Mark Aerial Waller

Mark Aerial Waller makes films and videos that reference cinema, providing both an interpretation and interruption of its history. With recourse to technological and narrative mechanisms, Waller stretches, reiterates and at times perverts the mainstream vocabulary of structure and dramatic staging. He selects very particular cameras, stock, transfer processes and camera shots through which to approach narrative time-based work with a painterly, self-referential touch.

In 2001 an event titled *The Sun Set* was hosted by London's artist-run space 1,000,000mph, in which Mark Waller screened the soap opera *Sunset Beach* for 15 hours non-stop.

Sunset Beach's (1997) fantastical turns made it one of the most innovative soap operas in American TV history. What made the programme truly original was its supernatural themes and heavily mythological dramaturgy. These featured superheroes, cursed jewels and a twist ending where the main protagonist wakes up realising the entire three years of the programme were only a dream. Epic time spans spread moments over weeks; by referencing other TV shows in sequences that showed, for instance, actors dressed as *Charlie's Angels*, it satirized itself and the genre.

These characteristics can be found in Waller's iconoclastic and witty practice. This is focused on video productions that stage poetic stories grounded on the concept of "surreality", in an attempt to invent new models of intellectual bricolage and time shift. Waller's work supersedes cinematic representation, conventional narratives and formal techniques. It explores arcane gateways between reality and fiction, transfigures the distinction between past, present and future, and eradicates any opposition between low and high culture.

Prior to *The Sun Set*, Waller invited fellow artists and writers to watch an hour-long episode of the series and write a text in response to either the structure or motifs of the soap, then collected in an accompanying booklet laid out like (soap) opera notes. Calling on a collective of loving friends or sun worshippers, whether through collaborative production or public gatherings, 'members' of *The Sun Set* were unaware of their integral part in *The Wayward Canon*. This was a screening platform for the re-evaluation of forgotten TV series, populist filmic genres or individual movies produced commercially with modest budgets, like *Sunset Beach*, or withdrawn from distribution, as in the unfortunate case of Dennis Hopper's tripped out western *The Last Movie* (1971). As an 'itinerant micro-salon' incorporating live performance and social collective experience, *The Wayward Canon* is, to this date, the complementary activity of Waller's artwork. It revisits an extensive range of anti-canonical cinematic forms and styles. Its aim is to stimulate a more critical understanding of productions that, having disrespected the conventions of their own genres, have been historically misinterpreted or kept into the shadows.

Generally speaking, Waller's videos are characterised by a nonlinear treatment of loose fictional narratives that involve awkward dialogues, nonsensical scenarios, or traditional storytelling turned into psychological time travelogues.

Time dilations, or slippages, are at the core of storylines whose fourth dimension is transfigured by means of insertions and a variety of experiments that break away from technical formats and cinematic rules. One example is *Midwatch* (1999-2001) whose plot is set in 1954, and evolves around the night shift of a mutineer and a canteen cook working on an English battleship returning from the first British atomic bomb tests in the Pacific Ocean. Throughout the entire duration of the video, the two protagonists – the Caterer being a 'gater' who has travelled from the glorious era of Admiral Lord Nelson's fleet – quarrel due to their inability to reconcile their own understanding of the notion of conquest. For the cook this is a matter of expansionist geographical imperialism and, for the mutineer, a merely military victory.

But the aspect that makes this video truly outstanding is the fact it was filmed in total darkness with an infrared camera, a level of blindness that affected both the artist and the actors and determined the formal aesthetics and acting style of the video. The artist was led by the actors' voices who, because of the conditions, talked over each other, progressively imploding within an egotistical mental trip.

An elimination of natural time cycles distinguishes *Glow Boys* (1998-99), the artist's first work, a video about the life of contract workers displacing from one nuclear reactor to another. Mr Fantastic and this 'new breed' of 'creators' who give life to objects from traffic lights to clothes, inhabit places in which day and night are a-temporal, and even death does not seem to disrupt the normal routine of activities. But the work to best reconcile 'chrono argonautism' is certainly *Superpower – Dakar Chapter* (2004), a sci-fi-horror video which takes place in the modernist cityscape of Senegal's capital city. Played by three famous Senegalese soap opera actors, it describes three stars of the Orion constellation.

Anthropomorphised as human beings named after stars of this astronomical belt, they prepare to 'run interference' on an extraterrestrial particle causing temporal disturbances on Earth. The story is based on real astrophysical information arguing that anything we see on Earth has travelled thousand light years across space to reach us, consequently determining that what we see is a window into the past and, therefore, that the three characters have slipped in and out of multiple time streams.

Watching Waller's videos one perceives the influence of the last century's avant-garde art and cinematic experiments, from Surrealist collage to filmmaking making use of deconstructed narrative structure, all examples that have suggested possibilities for symbolism and the visionary.

His videos are vehicles that take elected groups on a journey across different times and spaces, superimposing and juxtaposing incompatible contexts and frequently employing found footage to introduce the stories. This is the case with *Midwatch* and *Superpower* which present excerpts from, respectively, Charles Freund's film *The Cruel Sea* (1953) and *Star Hustler*, an internet show that provides insight into the constellation of Orion the Hunter and light travel in general.

Reversion of the Beast Folk (2004) well illustrates these procedures, clearly indebted to Surrealist techniques. The story is cyclically sandwiched between a preface and an epilogue that shows the same footage of an amateur video appropriated from an online Lamborghini fan club. Rather than focusing on the racing car speeding up on the motorway, it is the roaring sound of its powerful engine, rumbling like an animal, that stands out. The scene is abruptly interrupted by a quiet natural landscape in which two women clothed in primitive costumes (one of which wearing a fur skin like a shaman) walk from the distance, accompanied by Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto* (1811). Failing to evolve into proper humans (and embrace modernity), they discover a man in a cave who, hiding behind a mask, escapes elusively. In a confrontation of sexes, the man, whose nature, be it divine or human, is impossible to assess because of the presence of a mask, is dragged out of the cave. During his slaughter with an axe, the older woman angrily concludes: '[...] And the world is evil!', an exclamation that makes us question whether he refused to copulate with the two beastly females. The car sprints away again, this time escorted by Brazilian Umbanda music that, linked to the rituals of the Goddess of sex, may be indicating that the male was tamed.

Waller's extrapolations from a vast range of sources are not exclusive to video but also include a use of audio.

Shot once more in night vision, *Sons of Temperance* (2000) evolves around three agents in search of lost recordings. Stored in secret devices on invisible frequencies, they can be retrieved and interpreted as the voices of primordial civilisations that were saved in the grooves generated in the process of crafting ancient ceramics. To complement the

narrative, the background noises throughout the entire video are played backwards, manifesting Waller's interest in experimenting through the medium of sound.

This reveals how, on a structural level, Waller's practice is, like that of Maya Deren, anagrammatical. All elements co-exist in a network of reciprocally influencing relations: whether through the alternation of colour to black & white, the separation of images from sounds, the repetition of dialogues over new sections of video, or actors pausing between performing times.

Literary quotations typically surface in titles, some of which, like *Reversion of the Beast Folk* and *Midwatch*, reference, respectively, the cult sci-fiction novels *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) by H.G. Wells and John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957). *White Stags* (2001) instead is an adaptation of the ancient Roman myth of Diana and Actaeon in which the goddess Diana transforms her apprentice into a stag so that he can't reveal he had seen her bathing naked. Reinterpreting Actaeon's voyeurism in Ovid's original myth, Waller sets his video in an open-air swimming pool, where Diana prompts Daggers to chase white stags beyond the limits of the immediate bathing surroundings. The theme of vision - Diana's binoculars are in fact metaphors of her ultravision - doesn't only concern the protagonists, but also engages the spectator, who is forced to look at the moving images as if through a glass lens.

Sight is again one of the motifs of Waller's latest work, *The Flipside of Darkness - Part II* (2008): 'The sight you praised to see for many years,' Oreste reminds his sister Electra.

Shot in the park and a control room of Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Science, this work takes inspiration from the post Trojan war play *The Orestia* by the ancient Greek tragedian Aeschylus, even though the title is this time a wordplay on Ursula K Le Guin's feminist sci-fiction novel *The left hand of darkness* (1969).

The account loosely follows the Greek legend, with Orestes returning from exile and, in collaboration with Electra, preparing to avenge their father's murder by killing their mother Clytaemnestra. Here Waller reflects beautifully the emotional conflict among these personalities by creating a sequence in which the anatomy of their faces and opulent architectural interiors are deformed prismatically, as if secret interests are hidden away beyond hundreds of forms, announcing an imminent change of scenario determined by a different order.

This video demonstrates the artist's remarkable ability to mix multiple sources and to visualise the functioning of myth at its deepest psychological level. He continues to question, as he did in *Sons of Temperance*, how ancient ideas are transported into the present, and how complex notions can endure across centuries and reappear in contemporary culture.

Waller defies conventional screening formats, integrating sculptural objects and live performances for an experience of cinema defined in spatial and situational terms.

One which can induce retinal and tranced pleasure to seduce the dozing hypnotised zombie or encourage a critically-active public. When *Reversion of the Beast Folk* was shown at London's T1+2 Artspace in 2004, the screen was anticipated by an artificial cave made of foam which occupied the exhibition space, whilst red neon lights synched in with the end of the video to flood the space as well as the spectator's vision.

The psychic effect deriving from this arrangement was developed a step further for a screening of the same work at the Ciné Lumière at London's Institut-Français. This time Waller placed large stadium lights out of a large window located on the side of the seating auditorium, onto which he projected a blinding shaft of intense pink light that dazzled the audience. Whether external or internal, whether showing up before, during and even at the end of the works, Waller's interruptions question why auditoriums, as places for social conviviality midway between the real and cinematic world, haven't

previously exploited their power to gather people together, acquiring the same role as projection screens. Waller's interruptions interrogate how the viewers state of disembodiment in the dark leads to a suspension of their own self-consciousness, an inquiry initiated by artists and avant-garde architects alike in the 1920s.

This concern with spectatorial agency is central in Waller's overall practice, as it considers the psychological ramifications of the act of watching a film, sharpening the focus onto the institutionally-framed and social rituals established inside a physical environment. When the viewers come to watch his videos or take part in his salons, they unconsciously become the material of the works, having to respond to them through a range of emotions that go from amusement (*The Wayward Canon*) and hesitation (*Reversion of the Beast Folk*) to outright alarm (*La Société des Amis de Judex II*).

At Tate Modern in 2007, Waller went as far as driving a sense of fear into the seated audience with his counter-cinematic staging of *La Société des Amis de Judex II*.

Described as 'a fearless investigation of the confluence of pop and surrealism, via 1960s TV series *Batman* and Louis Feuillade's legendary silent cinema serial *Fantômas*'. This work opened with a rare interview between the post-Surrealist and proto-New Wave filmmaker Georges Franju, Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre, co-writers of the 1911 book from which *Fantômas* takes its inspiration. Their popular French feature film *Judex* (1963) continued the fortunes of Feuillade's thriller films *Fantômas* (1913-14). Franju inserted a certain nostalgia for a time of anarchic iconoclasm, although the costumes, acting performances and mises-en-scène evoke an almost 1960s *Batman*-esque feel. Possibly inspired by this, Waller included a passage from *Batman*'s first-season episode *Smack in the Middle* (1966) that showed *The Riddler* smuggling laughing gas through air ducts to steal some jewels from a Moldavian Mammoth. At the end of this sequence, with an élan repeating *Riddler*'s wicked act, Waller also filled the auditorium with smoke, provoking a few instants of panic. From the dense mass of smoke a couple of characters in disguise emerged, standing between the projector and the screen which continued running silently. The former wore a mask and read Guillaume Apollinaire's 'poisonous' poem *Les Conchiques* (1907); the latter, dressed in a white fencing outfit and balaclava, recited the poem *Pandora's Ark, Dream Key Zodiac* about a contrived projection apparatus.

In the artist's view, these intrusions are agents dividing the space and time of film viewing, they remind the public that the fluidity of gas is like that of celluloid, at the threshold between physical object and reproduced reality.

All of Waller's practice requires viewers to be alert interpreters, able to respond, evaluate, judge, transform and be transformed.

Through multiple types of sensory elements and devices – music, smoke, light –, spectators are forced to think about how they get implicated and destabilised.

Spectatorship is shaped into a psychological event that places the decentralized subject back inside the social situation.

When the last scene of *Reversion of the Beast Folk* at Ciné Lumière overlapped spots and streaks of colour onto the amplifying volume of the Umbanda music, rays of pink light shined on inside the auditorium. Waller's public sat puzzled, unable to understand whether the video had ended, uncertain of whether they should remain seated or if they should leave. On this basis, Waller's oeuvre cannot be categorised simply as 'video installation'. By considering the whole cinema-situation, it treats the auditorium as the interior of the human head. It defines a new modality of viewing that switches from sunset to darkness, from the domesticated sun glowing from inside the projector machine to the night of the spectres that dream and pray for the moment 'where it will all end.'

Diana Baldon, May 2008

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