



COUGHS & CODES

OUR EXPECTATIONS OF CINEMA ARE AS CONDITIONED AS ANY ASPECT OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE. **A-SOMA** DISCUSSES ANTI-REALISM AND THE DECLINE OF THE IMAGINATION

IN 1896 AN AUDIENCE for the first screening of Lumière's film, *Arrivée d'un Train en Gare à La Ciotat*, ran screaming from the theatre. They were escaping from a train steaming straight for them. Their first introduction to the silver screen was overshadowed by the apparent imminence of this locomotive. They had a lot to learn. Thus begins the myth of cinema. But that's another story...

The dot, dot, dot of ellipsis (used above), is a device indicating that we are being left to fill in the gap, to infer. Both literature and film language

are filled with ellipses which are not necessarily sign posted. Without them the story of a character's life would take a lifetime. Where and how these elliptical choices are made is a major factor in guiding and maintaining our interest in any form of narrative. Ellipsis is the fruit of editing. What is put in and what left out forms a code, which conveys not only an edited story, but also clues to its author's conscience and values. These gaps are his unwitting fingerprints. Mine are all over this article – look forensically between the words and you will sense something of who I am. Use your imagination.

My affinity is with the ethos of counter-cinema, which opposes the mainstream and offers an alternative. Unlike Hollywood, its effect is to stimulate critical faculties rather than dull them, to appeal to the contemplative in us and to involve our intelligence. Its history is rooted back to the years preceding the First World War. Then, a nascent European film culture was exploring the potential of the moving image to take us into new visual and indeed intellectual realms. The devastation of that war crippled a potentially diverse movement, leaving the ground open to American commercial interests that saw in cinema the potential for a new dollar squirting



milch-cow. Under the aegis of DW Griffiths, Hollywood regimented mainstream film practice. It formulated a comprehensive visual system, able to capture people's attention and direct their thoughts – a lexicon of procedures for tapping into a subliminal consensus. It became known as IMR film language – the Institutional Mode of Representation. Designed to conceal its own artifice it promotes the viewer's suspension of disbelief. The insidious globalisation of this method is a result of mass conditioning. It specifically trains us to identify our point of view with that of the camera lens and to passively sponge up vicarious experience. Today, almost a century later, the fallout from that innovation permeates society. We are now long inside the epoch of entertainment, where even serious news information requires the saccharin of spinning graphics and pulsing beats to qualify for public broadcast. Question this.

Although a story is a narrative, a narrative is not necessarily a story. It can simply be a trajectory of connections – a dictionary, website, or exercise regime. However, due to the easy appeal of the story, formal and structural possibilities of (western) mainstream film have been largely subservient to the dictates of the traditional three-act drama. Stories hold our interest through the interplay of familiarity and innovation. And the more populist forms reward us with emotional titillation whilst implicitly affirming the dominant hegemony: the compulsion for wealth, status and visible success. The fashion for conformity. Big Brother wants you to keep smiling.

In contrast to the ectoplasm of corporate entertainment and its 'independent' imitators, there is a lineage of serious filmmaking that is motivated by authentic personal vision. This tradition, not driven by routine consensual values, explores an alternative language to the IMR (or classic) style. Its unfamiliar grammar intentionally subverts preconceptions. This

effect distances us from the screen and invites conscious participation. In short, it makes us work a bit. Its impact may occur retrospectively as later we sift for meaning through the conundrum which was the film's world. Reflections of that puzzle may be glimpsed in the enigma of our own lives. The effect is psychological. In so far as not pandering to received notions of representation, it is 'anti-realist'. A palette of devices, which work via analogy, inference and non-linear time and space, afford possibilities for other ways of seeing the world. This is the ethos behind my short film *Coughs & Codes*. It underpins my perennial theme:

There is no escape. Reality is the ineffable fact. About it, humans are palpably deluded. Inside it, our delicate minds must spend a lifetime negotiating routes around potential insanity.

The narrative: Somewhere at sometime, in a world governed by an obscure religious order, the High Priest believes that a strange coughing epidemic infecting society is a form of extra-terrestrial communication. Mekos Doubla, the Temple's master code-breaker is assigned to decipher its cryptic message. His private scepticism is shaken following an incident which leaves him with a bandaged head.

Coughs & Codes is an arch refraction of consensus reality. A dark other-worldly myth dissected by an elliptical style designed to involve your imagination. Its comic-grotesque represents the timeless quest to unmask reality. Naturally any pursuit to that vanishing point must fail. But it's the journey that counts. We are moving through dark times. Defend Your Mind.

Coughs & Codes plays Raindance on Xxx XXXXXXXXX

As well as making films, A-Soma has released two albums of words and music. He also performs with The Crass Collective. Please visit www.soma.org.uk for further information