

Favourite Moments of Film Sound

Incessant and Inescapable Torment

By Martin Shingler

I remember seeing John Maybury's *Love is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon* at the time of its initial UK release, at the end of 1998, lured to the cinema by the fine performances of acting luminaries Derek Jacobi and Tilda Swinton, as well as the spectacle of Daniel Craig in and out of his underpants. I was intrigued to discover more about one of Britain's most fascinating artists, the creator of compelling angst-ridden paintings, a man addicted to the delights of sado-masochism, the demon drink and rough trade. Reviews indicated that all of these would be well represented in this film, with its focus on the seven year relationship of Bacon (Jacobi) and his butch East-End bad-boy lover George Dyer (Craig), much of it set at the very heart of Soho's demi-monde in the infamous Colony Club, run by larger-than-life lesbian Muriel Belcher (Swinton). Reviews promised an extraordinary visual feast emulating many of Bacon's most famous works. Consequently, I was ready to be astounded by what I saw on the screen. I was, it's true; but the big surprise was the film's mind-bending soundtrack. Its "in yer face" (or "in yer ear") Foley made a huge impact, while Ryuichi Sakamoto's score was disturbing and hypnotic. Together with Sound Designer Paul Davies,

Sound Recordist Ken Lee and Foley Editor Bernard O'Reilly, Sakamoto created an astonishing soundtrack, providing an aural counterpoint to the film's impressive imagery. The fractured, obscured and frequently distorted images were accompanied by crystal-clear sounds, close-miked and highly resonant. A cigarette lighter performed a minor explosion and the first drag produced a sustained crackle as the fag-tip glowed red, culminating with the exhaled smoke emitted with a roar. Elsewhere Sakamoto's score heralded disturbing, mysterious and unfathomable sounds, mixed with low-level industrial and electronic noise, with the occasional intimation of animal cries. Droning and clanging sounds made for an air of menace, meditative but unsettling: an ambience of anxiety.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the film's climactic scene, Dyer's long-awaited suicide. Melding two discrete scenes of action, a Parisian hotel room and the Grand Palais, the soundtrack creates a third space, bizarre and mysterious, that could either be the inside of Dyer's disturbed, drunken and drugged mind or the sound of Bacon's pictorial universe. While Bacon attends the private view of his exhibition, his lover/muse is left alone at the hotel to drink and drug himself into oblivion. Beginning in a realistic mode, the soundtrack soon becomes much more expressionist. Images of Dyer glugging down pills with booze are accompanied by sounds from the Grand Palais. As the sounds of the museum infiltrate the hotel room, a strange sound emerges like an unnatural wind, rising in volume and pitch to become a squealing roar as Dyer staggers towards the bathroom to vomit. Clanging gongs accompany his distorted reflection standing

over the toilet, while notes of a piano glisten over the sound of vomiting alongside the ongoing noise of rushing air, deep bass drones and metallic crashes, beautifully overlaid at one point by the exquisite patter of tiny pills landing upon the tiled bathroom floor. Random notes of a piano close the scene where Dyer's broad pale back is transformed into an aesthetic composition that approaches abstraction but remains rooted in a horrible reality. The strange airy noises, like unintelligible ghostly voices of tormented spirits, swirl and then fade as the image dissolves into a stylish Parisian restaurant where Bacon is being fêted. This is a soundtrack designed to make your head swim, to unsettle and alarm, sustaining a low-level sense of menace and anxiety rather than punctuate the vivid contrasts of pleasure and pain: the soundtrack of an incessant and inescapable torment.

Bio:

Martin Shingler is Senior Lecturer in *Radio & Film Studies* at the University of Sunderland (UK) having spent fifteen years lecturing on film and media courses at Staffordshire University (UK). He has specialist expertise in melodrama and the woman's film, screen acting, the star system, film sound, radio drama and comedy. He is the co-author of two books, *On Air: Methods and Meanings of Radio*, with Cindy Wieringa, (Arnold, 1998) and *Melodrama: Genre, Style & Sensibility*, with John Mercer (Wallflower Press, 2004). He has also published a number of essays on the Hollywood film star Bette Davis, which appear in the books *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences*, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (BFI, 2001) and *Screen Acting*, eds. Alan Lovell and Peter Kramer, (Routledge 1999), and in the journals *Screen*, the *Journal of American Studies*, the *Journal of Film & Video* and *Theatre Annual*.