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DVD Video Reviews

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Bodysong (2002)

Extraordinary wordless collage film of great power

Bodysong (2002)

Written & Directed: Simon Pummell

Studio: Film 4 (UK)/Eclectic DVD Distribution

Video: 4:3 color and B&W

Audio: Dolby Digital 5.1, DD 2.0

No Regional Coding

Extras: Jonny Greenwood (Radiohead) interview on composing the score, Short films by Simon Pummell with his own introductions

Length: 78 minutes

Rating: ****

Bodysong is in the category of those thoughtful narration/dialog-less artistic features such as Koyaanisqatsi, Chronos and Baraka. But completely different. Instead of being specially shot in often amazing widescreen images it uses mostly stock footage, home movies and often rather poor quality B&W material. But since it spans a century of cinema it's understandable some of the footage would look dated. The impact of the editing of the various moving images and their being presented next to other moving images which then relate to them illustrates some of Eisenstein's theories about film editing to the hilt. The final result is hard-hitting, compelling and extraordinary in every way. One observer said the filmmaker's last name was very appropriate, because after seeing his film you may feel pummelled. The director wants the viewer to be moved but not necessarily to feel good at the end of the film.

The very poetic collage of thousands of moving images from around the world and going back to Edison is basically the story of human life on earth. It is divided into several categories: Love, Sex, Violence, Death, Dreams. In comments by Pummell in the extras it appears that this - his first feature - developed out of filming his own child's birth. (Back when I was dabbling in experimental films, it seemed every other filmmaker I knew was making birthing films.) He secured other footage of births,

including a quite amazing record of a birth in water used in Bodysong. One sequence which blew me away was closeups of the faces of not-yet-born inside the womb using 4D Ultrasound technology; they look like wizened old men's faces. Microscopy of blood cells, sperm, cells multiplying etc. are also presented. Eventually Pummell moved on from people being born to people eating, people worshipping, people playing, people growing up, people dying, and people senselessly killing each other. The film carries no rating, and that's a good thing, for it has some pretty graphic scenes.

Jonny Greenwood of Radiohead created an ambient, often dissonant background of sounds to accompany Bodysong, and is interviewed in the extras. He probably got into this sort of thing via Radiohead's DVD of a couple years ago, *The Most Gigantic Lying Mouth of All Time*. But their 24 short films in that one were intended to match up with the already-recorded soundtracks, and with Bodysong Greenwood was working in reverse fashion from that. The weirdness quotient of both some of the images and some of the sounds are however similar between the two DVDs. Bodysong has been shown successfully at many international film festivals and won awards at the British Independent Film Festival and elsewhere.

It is not only a film but also a website which is not just a promotional tool for the feature but an informational databank. This ameliorates some of the frustration during viewing of the film when you are thinking "What was *that* I just saw briefly?" At www.bodysong.com you can view a series of dozens of flying stills - one for each scene in the film - coming at you from infinity. You select what part of the film they come from by sliding your cursor along a timeline. When you seek more information on a particular scene you click on the image and a page comes up with details on that one scene. For example the scene on the water pool birthing described the process promulgated by a French doctor, which has been so far used by only six couples in the U.S. The mother is encouraged to catch the baby as it comes out (without involvement of medical personnel) and it spends a couple minutes entirely under water - "between two worlds" - before it is brought out for its first breath. (The mother is also encouraged to *sing* during the water birth - good vibrations for the baby you see.) If one took the time to go thru all the images that you wonder about on first viewing and read the descriptions, the second viewing of Bodysong would be a 100% deeper experience. (But you may want to hit the Mute button on your keyboard to turn off the eventually grating ambient sounds.)

- John Sunier

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