

ANDREW STONES *Bothered (Black Rod)***review**

Crowd Control

Andrew Stones

Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow, 6 May - 7 June 1997

ON ENTERING Street Level, conscious of hope in the air following the general election, it was remarkable to see 'Bothered (Black Rod)', which made direct reference to the symbolic opening of parliament.

I was confronted by an array of black and white video monitors, the type used to display images from surveillance cameras, positioned above head height. The screens peer down at the viewer from both sides of the gallery, like an audience. On each is displayed an identical image of the Queen's face, only her eyes and forehead showing. The Monarch looks out through her glasses, as when reading the customary speech at the beginning of each session of parliament.

Like a gunshot, the silence is punctuated by the hollow ring of Black Rod on the doors of parliament. At precisely this moment, the multiple images of the Queen's face look slightly askance, a sideways glance giving expression to the unease that this sound generates in the head of State.

Multiple readings of this work are possible: however I prefer to deal with the artist's inferred critique of the institution of governmental power. The martial spectacle of the opening of parliament, with the MP's advancing side by side in ranks like a military brigade, is evoked by even such minimal fragments. Concentrating on this ritual, the piece reminds the viewer of the symbolic nature of the handover of power in Parliament. The opening of the House of Commons itself symbolises the hierarchy that places limits on the power of the Commons. Black Rod, the usher of the ancient Order of the Garter, represents the Lords or nobility and the Crown, and by implication the military through the Knighthood. His presence is a reminder of the struggle in the executive between the Commons and the State. Given the loaded significance of the imagery, Stones manages to be subtle. Possibly he is attempting to express the ambiguous relationship between the three elements of the medieval institution of Parliament: Crown, Lords and Commons.

The position of the viewer in relation to the piece is also open to question: images of the Queen are reproduced through the mechanisms of surveillance, but the Monarch stares unblinkingly back, distracted only by Black Rod. The method of replication - black and white television - refers to the first mass television spectacle, the Coronation 44 years ago. Back then, the live broadcast was said to herald the arrival of the new Elizabethan age, echoing the beginnings of English imperialism and conquest at a time when the empire was collapsing. The authority of the Crown extended and reinforced its dominion through myriad television receivers in its subjects' living rooms. The use of a recorded video image, looped through a closed circuit, seems to mimic the changed relationship between Crown and parliament since that time: the supposed democratic power of the people still in thrall to the spectacle of monarchy, yet critically monitoring, watching for any slip in the mask.

Situated in the second gallery space, 'The Nature of Their Joy' seems to share an approach with the first work: that of scrutiny of a face, trying to unlock the emotional significance of an ambiguous expression. At either end of the gallery are two large-scale transparencies, mounted on light boxes, the images follow a con-

cave curved plane, like the surface of a lens.

Superimposed titles inform the viewer that these are images of crowds celebrating in London at the outbreak, and cessation of the first world war respectively. The photographs have been manipulated, the artist framing certain faces from the crowd, picking them out from the mass in the picture field.

I found myself going back and forth between the two, trying to discern any differences in the expressions on people's faces. A fruitless task: there are differences between individual faces, but these are diluted by the crowd, and by the granular distortions of the enlarged images. The artist is exploring the difficulty of interpreting media, in this case the photographic document.

To the right, on plinths ranged along the gallery space, is a series of cases housing portable microfiche readers. They are connected by a loop of transparent plastic tubing, which passes through the projection beams intended to illuminate microfilm. Clear fluid from a large bell jar in the centre of this strange apparatus is pumped around the loop. On closer inspection, the jar is seen to contain tiny negatives. Carried by the current, faces are seen fleetingly, magnified on the small screens. They trace paths across the screens in turn, like figures passing a window, never quite making a clear, still image.

A label on the jar announces 'images in solution'. As the pieces of film are washed, rub against each other and the pipes, they literally begin to disintegrate. Symbolically linking the two polar opposites, war and peace: with an arcane, obsolete apparatus allowing the viewer to inspect and magnify image fragments. The use of mechanisms that simulate scientific processes of observation, analysis and evaluation posit the masses as data. The behaviour of crowds, and of society, the process of history itself as a fluid dynamic, particles in movement.

The soundtrack that accompanies this installation was constructed from two recorded loops, rainwater on a roof and a football crowd. Both are slowed down, mixed together to form a wave like roar. A melancholic ambience fills the space, articulating a sense of loss, of inevitable change and decay. The artist has described this piece as an attempt to express society's loss of control to the machine. The mechanised slaughter of the war replaced humans and horses, allowing the fighting to continue much longer, beyond human limits. He points to the use of redundant technologies such as the 'Commuter II' microfiche readers, replaced by laptop computers almost as soon as they were manufactured, as evidence that this process continues to accelerate. Images, people, societies, are transformed into just so much information.

Despite their apparent simplicity, these are complex, multi-layered works. They act like catalysts for thought - the viewer making links between the images, sounds, materials, and apparatus. As such it would be easy to criticise the artist for leaving meaning too 'open to interpretation', but Stones has focused on a narrow range of imagery, successfully directing the viewer gently towards certain conclusions. Stones is questioning the authority and veracity of the media and image making itself, the impossibility of a fixed meaning in art or science.

It is genuinely refreshing to see an artist working through political issues, yet not succumbing to glib posturing, or single issue tub thumping. It has been some time since I have experienced works by an artist this rigorous in intellect, and conveying a powerful yet subtle political critique.

Chris Byrne