

2008

Interview with Aryan Kaganof, publisher of Kagablog online blog.

aryan kaganof: at the beginning of the film the young recruits are singing a song. what is this song? what do the words mean?

paul emmanuel : the song was being sung by some of the recruits as they were "marching" away from the head shaving rooms. not all the recruits were singing, some didn't know how or didn't want to. i wanted the film to be in the nonverbal genre. this song and the chatter that occurs in the shaving room are the only "words" in the film. there is no narrator or contextualisation beyond the visual. it is not important to know where we are or what is being said. what's important is what is there, what we experience.

ak: i presume that the young men are real recruits, not "actors", that the film is not "staged". i presume this because of the numerous instances where the various young men look directly into the camera. what is the significance of your choice as an artist to leave these direct gazes in the finished product?

pe: the documentary footage was captured at third south african infantry battalion, kimberley (3sai). the presence of the camera in a "live" situation like this is a very powerful entity, which can have quite serious implications for the observer. the camera can have a very dominating, quite "imperialistic" effect on the relationship between us and whoever is being filmed, which can be problematic sometimes. it can depict the subject as some kind of "other". i wanted to play with that a bit. i wanted to ask: what and who exactly is "the other" in this situation? we are very much the "outsider" here, we are the observer, verging on voyeur.

we are outside the "system". i know a little about being outside the system. it is also interesting to know that in order to get permission for doing the filming on this site, we only had to get permission from the officer in command of the military base, not the permission of each individual recruit. in this particular situation, each human being literally becomes state property. you are "owned" by something or someone else, and today, when conscription no longer applies, the young men surrender themselves consciously and with no apparent resistance. i left the camera gazes in because i feel that by looking at us, sometimes shy and smiling, sometimes defiant, talks about all this – about our relationship with these men. close but removed ... intimate but alien.

ak: the time lapse sequences provide a very powerful visual counterpoint to the shaving scenes. what were your intentions with these sequences?

pe: the military head shaving environment is a liminal one – an in-between space. a space where a man is in the process of leaving one identity behind, and taking on a new one. for a few moments, as the hair of his youth falls to the ground, he is undefined, identity-less. he sits in a chair in a noisy room in a strange place with pieces of long hair hanging next to shaven scalp looking ridiculous and unformed. as with all transitions, there is this strange stage in the process when we are on the threshold, with one foot in one world, and the

other in another. during these fleeting moments, who are we? what are we? we are no-one, we could be anyone, what are the possibilities?

who or what will i be when this is over? where will i go? and so on. it is no wonder that in many cultures, young men and women are removed from society during the liminal phases of transition, to avoid the influence of potentially harmful outside forces. transition is a place of subtle change. you cannot even see it most times, but a head shaving is a visible, potentially poetic depiction of this change. photographers have been drawn to documenting these moments in the military for ages, i found many photographs of military head shaving at the military archives in pretoria some dating back to the first world war.

i wanted to link these tiny transient moments happening in a closed, claustrophobic environment with something larger than us, to link this limited experience with something eternal. i have been working with landscapes for many years in a lot of my previous work. landscapes can be places of openness and very exposing. as one walks through a vast empty landscape of the karoo or the free state for example, you may see yourself as something small and insignificant against the larger whole. the time lapse allows one to see the movement of the sun and earth, the rapid movements of water in a lake or dam and the effects of the wind whipping through washing hanging on a washing line in a new way. an entire day is reduced to a few seconds. we suddenly see the movement and change in things which previously seemed still and unchanging. it is possible to see most things as being in a constant state of transition.

i also found the ambiguity of certain landscapes appealing. the water of the gariep dam is a brown ochre colour and at certain times of the day looks almost like moving sand dunes. again that strange ambiguity, both one thing and also another.

ak: your film reminded me of the work of the british artist steve mcqueen. are you au fait with his oeuvre? if so, was he an influence? are there any other artists who have had an impact on how you have chosen to use the film medium in a fine art context?

pe: film is an entirely new medium for me, my background is printmaking and photography. i can honestly say that this work has it's birthplace in a dream i had in 2000 which gave rise to a series of images called "vault of breath", which depicts a flute or recorder spinning in the wind overlooking the vast emptiness of the gariep dam. a lot of my previous work uses images of clothes hanging on washing lines in landscapes. for me, clothing on a line is a powerful metaphor for the absence of the body. the military head shaving idea came to me one morning while i was thinking of documenting moments of change as a drawing, scratched into photographic paper, which spoke to me very strongly of holding on or clinging to certain moments. film seemed to me the way to speak about letting go, the poignancy of these fleeting moments. this is how the idea of making the film originally came about and where the imagery comes from.

i had already written the first treatment when i met mathew kramer, who told me of a film "baraka" by ron fricke, which was shot in 70 mm film., which also combines documentary footage of human activity with landscape imagery.

ak: wilbert schubel's sound design has an extremely defining impact on how one watches the images. could you talk a bit about your relationship with the sound designer, how the image-sound axis developed.

pe: i met wilbert after the edit was completed. it was wonderful to show someone the film who responded to the images so strongly. i had a wad of notes for a sound designer on where i wanted the sound to go, which i held back and didn't even show wilbert once we had had our first meeting. i just threw them in the bin. i just let him talk for hours on what the images said to him. it was truly a wonderful experience. so much of what he said and how he responded was how i wanted my audience to feel. wilbert had already had a lot of experience working with artists like william kentridge and so i knew he would be someone who would respond to images which are more open to interpretation. a series of intense discussions followed and i remember waking up one morning at 3 am and phoning him (a little later) to tell him i woke to the sounds of the train station and that the train station was the everyday liminal space which epitomizes so much of what 3 sai is about. a place of hellos and goodbyes.

bustling activity, confusion. a place where life comes to you and leaves you, where you are very close to others, yet can be utterly removed. through the "sound-scaping", i wanted to bring the far off place of head shaving closer to us. i loved the way wilbert uses these sounds as a way of moving us in and out of the "reality" of the documentary footage and the "dreamscape" of the landscapes and intimate close-ups.

ak: in the museum brochure you sent me you state that the work "poses questions around perceptions of masculinity..." what, for example, are some of these questions?

pe: questions around this theme, like finding meaning, depend on you, the viewer. what defines who and what we are today? how much of how i see myself and how i see other men, is constructed by society and what society expects of me? how much of me is really me? what does it mean to be a man? how do we see other men, and why? how do we see ourselves? are they the same things that defined us in the apartheid era in south africa? where do i fit in?

ak: editor and producer matthew kramer spoke about the "epic quality" of the film and i think that the installation of washing lines with hundreds (thousands???) of vests (t-shirts) hanging out to dry definitely has an epic feel. could you talk at length about this section of the work, what the visual signifies or symbolises?

pe: i called the installation "the lightweights". i liked the idea of the lightweight as "someone of little or no political consequence" and "someone who cannot hold their drink". "lightweight" is also a term used in the clothing industry to describe items of light weight like cotton fabrics. the t shirt is also often used in the military context as "fatigues" or sleep wear. i enjoyed the idea of combining individuality with loss of that individuality in a huge collective or system. there were 1 000 t shirts in the installation. the surface area is almost an entire hectare of land.