

Ersatz, Thoughts and Agony: An Explanation By David Garrett

"35 minutes of personal weird" - so Ersatz, Thoughts and Agony bills itself. What we actually have here is a fairly cogent explication of Bob Lennon's aesthetic - an explication so plain that it may be seen and understood, by the interested viewer, as a succession of expressionistic "statements" which seem to anticipate becoming an outright manifesto.

Primary to any understanding of Lennon's work is knowledge of the distinction he draws between "interest" and "indifference" and the dynamism which is, for him, inherent in both of these terms. Interest is the ultimate positive principle, and is closely associated with the idea of work. However, work, for Lennon, does not necessarily lead to either "meaning" or "redemption," much less reward - on the contrary, it is labor without thought of any reward beyond that of creation itself, and is executed in a nearly palpable atmosphere of highly idiosyncratic and instinctual - yet undeniably rational - creative integrity. We may, for practical purposes, think of this as art. Lennon himself, we may fairly deduce, prefers the open-ended adjective ersatz (imitation, substitute - contra "art," artifice, artificiality).

Indifference is the other, negative principle. It is Nature as portrayed in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness": not apathetic submission, but the lively, evil criminality of willful ignorance and the horror of its manifestation through the facet of mankind in the forms of degradation and deformation of the human spirit, political opportunism and capitalist exploitation, and the profoundly alienating results of simple social betrayal.

The first short film in this series of 12, Warped, establishes not only the fact of Lennon's atheism and its practicality, but also his rejection of clean, contrived abstract thought, and his unnerving substitution of experience (wisdom) in its place, as a higher value. Scenes of apocalyptic disaster are laid out before us, for our consideration; toward its end, we may note the obvious parallel between the fate of the feckless turtle and the beast on the beach, at the conclusion of La Dolce Vita - but in this case we aren't left with any redeeming sense of mystical comprehension. We find in the cave nothing more than harrowing reflections of the mindless jaws of the turtle - no more than the bewildered, vibrating, genuine fear of an overwhelming intimidation, an inscrutable, malevolent inevitability, and a gut-level consciousness of already manifested doom.

The second chapter, Fractured, is a comic portrayal of the powerlessness of the artist in the face of indifference. After initially charming the viewer with its apparently crippling self-consciousness, the true subject of the short - its audience - is revealed. Lennon's motives are iconoclastic, but by no means anti-social: it's almost as if he were more aware of your presence than he is of his own; he is certainly more concerned with engaging in some homely, obscure sense of fraternity than he is in simple self-expression. This is as evident in his comfortable, nearly guileless laughter as it is in the brutish yet friendly head-butting at the end of this short, which belies the poignancy of his good faith and his trust in his brother.

The third offering in this series, Chants, eerie as it is cheap, seems on reflection to illustrate a Kantian denial of any "perceived" absolute, and Kant's declaration of the ultimately unknowable nature of the "thing-in-itself" - and yet the piece finally suggests at its end a reversion to its origin as a facet of Schopenhauer's "will-to-live," as seen in the body of the thirsty kitty-cat. Mentions of death here are specious, raised by Lennon only in order to mock the relevance of philosophical profundity as it relates to life, as it is lived.

Trouble, at once the most political of this set and the most despairing, is the shortest of these twelve short films. It is, more than anything else, like a slap in the face. Dostoevsky, Marx, Frederick Douglass - the faces of these men, and of other men like them, can be found in the floating, ghostly apparition of smeared birdshit on the window of that car.

Pulse, an intentionally juvenile, Mad magazine-style spoof of the contraindications of some non-existent (analgesic?) product, describes the various symptoms of indifference, as they may manifest themselves, in parody. Indifference actually has only three simple stages: and the first stage is not boredom, as one might suppose. Impatience comes first, and is followed by irritation, which eventually leads to anger. (This anger never, however, matures into rage, which may be considered to be a special subset of ersatz.)

Bob Lennon is an extremely spiteful atheist, and Lowlands may be taken at face value. However, he is also an artist (and, perhaps more significantly, an itinerant musician) who strives to keep his ego in check - and this by any and all means. "Talent" is no more than a commodity, on his books: only work has real value. Lowlands may easily be interpreted as a fantastic showdown between Lennon and his ego. The dark messiah says, "Now you see me as I really am!" We will hear these words again - without irony, self-delusion, or actual articulation - in the last of these twelve short films.

Upright is a disarmingly patient and unexpectedly generous meditation on indifference, presented in the form of a parable. Paternal though its tone may be, it is actually a benediction being spoken just prior to an act of extreme - yet morally justified - violence.

Cooler serves to demonstrate, in cautionary exhibition, the ineducable nature of one who has allowed himself to become completely and irremediably corrupted by indifference. Not dissimilar to temporarily wearing a blindfold in order to simulate blindness, we see what logic looks like to one who has indulged in the decadent luxury of indifference to such an extent that he has entered, for all intents and purposes, into eternal damnation, and cannot be brought back into the brotherhood of man by any words spoken by anyone, under any circumstances. Indifference will kill the marrow in a man's bones; once this has occurred, he will be dying from the inside out for the rest of his life, and that is all there is to it. Here is what the offer of friendship sounds like to him, when he hears it come out of the mouths of people who are still alive.

The ninth film, Hard, must be more literally viewed than any of these films, because there is no phenomenological undercurrent at all here. Occult symbols are presented to you in all their glory, but not in order to inspire you. They are being exposed to you in order to kill them. "This is your blank slate," Lennon tells his audience, echoing the evangelical motives of the two previous pieces, but now this gesture is one demanded by a moral imperative, and is made in full awareness of its meaninglessness and its impotence, and its symbolic nature. The best film in this project from a strictly plastic and affective point of view, Hard's spin of the camera is made in full conscious sympathy with modernism's throw of dice, and the raw documentary quality of spectacle here, as we witness the evaporation of meaning when it is exposed to air, compels us to acknowledge it as legitimate sacrifice, in the earliest, prime, sub-primitive sense of that molested word.

Tenth in this half-hour year of films, Sarong, may be Lennon's most autobiographical effort. After having spent several years in chrysalis, his faculties are now perfectly developed, and yet he is stepping for the first time into the cinematic arena. "Kindly step back; get out of the fucking way," he seems to be saying. "I know exactly what I'm doing, and what is about to happen to some random fool."

Based on the privately distributed pornographic video by the same name, the eleventh and penultimate of these episodes, Badass, yanks us up off of our blessed assurances and back into the real world of strategically placed holes. Who cut the cheese? That ugly mofo we just saw in Sarong, no doubt!

And now, in the final number of this serial, Kulisse, we are treated to a faux time-elapse sequence of Lennon's pacing thoughts as he re-visits his efforts over the past year, in his own version of the Garden of Gethemene. "Who is with me?" he wonders, but this is a thought he offers to the ether, not a prayer. And then he understands: the fatal cancer of indifference has taken up residence not only in the heart of the world - an event for which he was, heroically, prepared - but also in the rotten hearts of those he had considered to be his closest associates. Demoralized to such an extent that he is now willing to let you go burn in hell, we witness, at the end of the film - and the end of the project - what may be referred to as The Transfiguration of Bob Lennon, as he enters into the fullness of ersatz.