

The Otolith Group: Part I: A Long Time Time Between Suns.....

Gasworks London February 15 to April 5.....

Gasworks is located between the Oval cricket ground and an old, industrial gasworks. These two flanking architectural structures, one a monument to colonial leisure, the other a future vestige of a fossil-fuelled utopia, conjure a suggestive introduction to the current exhibition by the Otolith group – artists Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun.

Inside the gallery, two films – *Otolith*, 2003, and *Otolith 2*, 2007 – are screened sequentially on separate white walls. The space between contains a kind of kitchen-table think-tank. Designed by Will Holder this environment accommodates discussions and workshops that are a vital part of the group's working process. The films are billed as 'approaching questions of archive and futurity'. Archive here is not to be misunderstood as a postmodern culture of appropriation, like a science-fiction version of Bouvard and Pecuchet's absurd accumulating and cataloguing. On the contrary, some of the workshop notes evidence a highly politicised approach. One in particular shows the front cover of

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave.

Written by Himself, 1845. The influence and inspiration of Douglas's life runs through these films as a constant presence that surfaces periodically.

The Otolith group has described the approach to archival film of their mentors, the Black Audio Film Collective, in particular its montage method, as 'removed from the authority of documentary' via intimate, speculative fiction towards a politicised poetics. The archive was not treated as 'archaeology of media'. Rather, the BAFC is described as having acted like 'midwives handling an archival fragment as tenderly as if it were a premature infant'.

Sagar and Eshun have continued to develop the intimate form of the speculative film/essay, de-emphasising issues of identity in this post black art form that reflects upon universal themes of alternative futures. *Otolith*, 2003, opens with an explanatory text of its title: it is a bone and hair structure in the inner ear that registers balance. In a fictional future the earth is no longer habitable due to the effects of perpetual war. Human beings have mutated such that the otolith structure has become adapted to living outside the earth's gravity. The female protagonist of the film, Sagar's fictional future offspring Dr. Usha Abederan Sagar, conducts research from Star City into film archives of 20th-century

history on earth. Footage of Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova – a ‘good communist’ – appears to be the embodiment of misplaced utopian aspiration. There is a sense of irony in the prolonged scene where a Stalin-era sculpture is silhouetted against radiant light. The visual tone is indicative of the era’s ‘New Soviet Man’: a human being adapted to the latest technologies, selflessly devoted to the collective good. These aspirations are jubilantly expressed in Tereshkova’s confident gait – ‘more heroic than Jackie Kennedy’ – yet are ironically reflected in *Otolith*’s new, evolved human species.

Otolith 2, 2007, forms a dialectical response to themes of weightlessness and Darwinian mutation. In this second movie, a partial fiction located in the near future, the emphasis is on gravity. A memorable close-up shot of two smoking chimneystacks that intimate an inhabited shack, widens out into a vast and startling panoramic view of Mumbai’s mega-slums. Douglas’s descriptions of the dehumanising effects of slavery are recalled in the allusion to a future fictional ‘era of human capital’ where impoverished human beings may become trading chips. In response, people of this slum-crucible ‘develop new ways of being human’.

Despite the generally pushy didactic accent of the films there follows, like a reprieve, some deeply absorbing footage of artisans

working. Crafts of pottery, embroidery, leatherwork and filmmaking point to the survival of the slum inhabitants beyond the grip of a factory system. Some degree of humanity is implied in their, in Marxist terms, un-alienated labour. The films underscore the difficulty of proposing a critique using the means of a culture whose control is linked to image saturation. The Otolith group rightly depicts Mumbai's artisans absorbed in aesthetic forms capable of resistance.

A further interpretation of our understanding of cities of the future is presented in scenes of the utopian city of Chandigarh. Sagar describes Le Corbusier's shaded design as an arrogant exercise in 'mastery over the sun'. This phrase recalls the Russian futurist play, *Victory over the Sun*, in which technological control is a supreme goal. Annette Michelson has noted that film is a 'solar phenomenon', however Otolith's approach remains collaborative rather than victorious. By the same token, Le Corbusier's *Bries-soleil* (sun-shade) will continue to be ecologically significant well into the future.

Part II: A Long Time Between Suns will be shown at The Showroom's new space, London in June.

Stephen Lee is a sculptor and a writer.