

Margaret Tait (1918-99): A Woman is Speaking (paper in process)

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Since her death in 1999, a number of Margaret Tait's short films have been restored by Scottish Screen Archives (Todd & Cook, 204:101) and screened to great acclaim at Edinburgh Film Festival (2004) and Tate Modern's Retrospective (2009). Ryan Shand indicates that Margaret Tait was 'not so much forgotten as never discovered by Scottish critics' (2007:107) or others despite her high-standing in the avant-garde circles in which she moved. Sarah Neely's research shows how Tait's applications for funding and her ambition to reach wider audiences was thwarted partly because of the prevailing insouciance towards women and partly because Tait refused to alter her films to suit committees, film boards or international markets which would taper her work to suit the prevailing formats. Tait's insistence on creative control, underpinned by the professionalism indicated by the production notes, cans of film, funding and exhibition proposals found in her studio, indicates someone with a desire to 'speak' as an independent filmmaker communicating with

... audiences who are there at the time ... more for the sake of reverberation than for the sake of record. (Todd & Cook 2004:92)

In this paper I would like to discuss ways in which Margaret Tait, Filmmaker, artist, GP & poet can be seen to 'speak' through and with film as a plastic medium. Contemporary re-evaluation of 'vernacular' has validated local dialects as languages, which articulate specific experiential awarenesses. In the same way, Tait's creative use of the vernacular of film – its syntax, grammar and editing – can be seen to create informed independent film-poems, portraits and visionary observations, which transcend the limiting contexts of the amateur, the local, and the 'woman' filmmaker which once restricted her.

Butler (2002) Blaetz, (2007) Rabinowitz, (2003) (Korsmeyer, 2004) variously argue that the domestic spaces women occupied during Tait's time were integral to their film's form and content. Fragmentation, documentary and the experimental were the means by which women filmmakers could articulate and explore their differing subjectivity, history and experience. But their films were largely negated by the received wisdom that only certain discerning male filmmakers filmed with the mastery and control necessary for the authentication of subjectivity and/or artistic observation. Thus, canon-forming bodies dismissed the perceived formal discrepancy of women's

films as 'amateur' or the inept use of equipment and marginalised them and their makers from cultural production. However, as with the prevailing interest in dialect and dissipated texts, together with the expansion of archival and research methodologies, the visual immediacy of many lost and hidden films are now being recognised as the visual articulation of distinctive knowledges and ways of seeing the world. Sandra Harding argues that

Knowledge is socially situated – knowledge is based on experience, and different situations result in different knowledges. (2004: 7-8)

which require the differing uses of languages and an understanding of the contexts within which the presenter / filmmaker speaks.

Prefiguring the prevailing interest in fe/male subjectivity and the importance of 'the local' to identity and self-knowledge, Tait's short films perceptively weave locality, family and politics from spaces, which Bachelard called 'felicitous'. (1964:xxxii). These are poignant spaces closely associated with the 'feminine' 'the domestic' and memories of cherished 'corners of the world' (1964:4), which, for Tait, were Edinburgh and her beloved Orkneys. Here she filmed her family, friends and neighbours adjusting to circumstances they could neither contribute to nor control. While training at the Film School in Rome (self-funded 1950-52), she noted that the Italian Neo Realist's focus on ordinary people as actors and the significance of a particular place, linked with her own desire to make

...the sort of film that arises out of your own country ... reverberates back to the people in it, who belong to that place too... and how they felt about things ... (Todd & Cook, 2004:94)

Her films while thought provoking in their specificity as Scottish, also reverberate beyond the documentation of a specific time, place and culture, demonstrating that subjectivity and recognition are not bound to geographic or any limitation. Through heterogeneous sources and editorial disjunctions Tait's films work as meditative vehicles, which extend the particular to general levels of response too.

One of Tait's earliest films, *A Portrait of Ga* (1952, 4.27 mins colour sound 16mm), is a documentary-style film portrait of Tait's Orcadian mother in domestic settings, smoking, un-wrapping a sweet, gardening, drinking tea, moving her hand to the

rhythms of a non-diegetic Scottish pipe, defying the voyeuristic gaze, the confines of the film-frame and the conformity of old age. Poignancy resides in the close-ups - indexical signs of time passing, white hair, knotted hands, wrinkled face. At one point Ga runs towards a faint rainbow in a dark sky- this and shadows evoke the inevitability of time passing for her and thus the transience of time for us all. Montage editing contrasts the rhythms of predictable cycles of nature with the contingency and inconsistency of Ga herself - giving the film the texture of an asymmetric patchwork. Long shots film Ga as part of the landscape and at one with the cycles of nature. It reminds me of Alice Walker's 'in search of my mother's garden I found my own.' (1983:243). In this sense, it is also a study of the continuity between wo/men extending back to Ga's mother and a quiet reference to those whose ancient traces still mark the landscape - and forward to her grandchildren via Tait's mediating Orcadian voice-off. The subdued natural palette compounds the sense of belonging, fitting, connectedness, and a sense of continuity dependent on those who live in the land - in sharp contrast with post war discourses on boundaries and national coherence.

The analogy with patchwork relates to the haptic surface of the film, coaxing the viewer to 'contemplate the image itself rather than being pulled into its narrative'. (Marks, 2000:163) Non-diegetic indigenous sounds and dialect enrich the film's materiality adding a heightened sense of 'place' and possible 'transformation' and what dialectically lies 'in between' the spaces the film offers.

Tait 's method of laying down the sound after editing the images, enabled her to integrate the visual and aural indexes on a single track, so each is finely tuned by her specific sense of poetry, place, self and others. The poetic and conscientious crafting of her own dialectic voice-off and the subtle responsive gazes between herself and her subjects, is a means by which she inscribes herself and her speaking voice among the subjects of her films.

The inclusion of herself as embedded in self-conscious and inclusive filmmaking, links with what Hamid Naficy calls 'performative' - a method for authorial self-inscription by exilic filmmakers. Alison Butler refers to the relevance of this for women saying that

The purpose of self-inscription is not the construction of a coherent Subject position for the author, but the construction of a viable speaking position

which, nonetheless, mirrors and enacts the author's experience and embodiment as multiple and fragmented (2002:61)

Naficy emphasizes that the 'accented' filmmaker - one who works with a double consciousness within performative practice, because their position to the mainstream, is 'presumed to be more prone to the tensions of marginality and difference' (2001:11). S/he not only speaks as an author but also as a conscious subject, who, through their films, perform certain aspects of individual and collective identity - the performance contains the layered polyvalent communication.

Tait seems aware of this. She further inscribes herself physically in many of her films by capturing her performance as filmmaker on mirrored surfaces, less overt is the measured placing of titles which are gestural and often home-made, and the carefully selected traditional songs, poetry, and local sounds which mix with her own voice as prompter or orator. These strategies variously link her two-fold exilic subject position as part of a distinctly Scottish community and culture outside British/mainstream discourses and as a female filmmaker outside dominant subject positions.

In *Into the Vortex* Britta Sjogren elaborates on the importance of the literal 'voice' for women in film, making clear the distinction between the voice-over as a synchronised disembodied device for unifying meaning prevalent in more didactic documentary/experimental films – and the voice-off as indicative of a conscious intelligence outside the film frame. Sjorgren argues that the particularity of the female voice-off can be perceived as a conscious textual strategy in which the female voice is perceived as not disembodied, nor a critique of the dominant voice-of-God model nor a voice which as female can be reclaimed by patriarchal fantasy. Rather the voice-off is one which indicates an intelligence and a presence – both inside the film's diegesis as resonant, and outside the film as a physical and intelligent female presence. (2006:52).

Sjorgren's particular study is of the female voice-off in 1940's melodramas, but her method can usefully apply to my reading of Tait's work because as she argues - the specificity of the female voice-off

... allows for the introduction of heterogeneous and seemingly incompatible perspectives ... that ... do not necessarily cancel each other out in their contradictoriness (2006:15)

Further, she argues, the female voice-off

‘ ... may be construed as evocative of difference that is not sexually or gender determined ... that allows for simultaneous consciousness of a self and other in a way that does not yet imply dissolution for the Subject (2006 63-4).

This dissolution of gender determinism but not subjectivity (ie a speaking voice among other/s) can be seen in *Hugh MacDiarmid: A Portrait* (1964, 9 mins b & w 16mm) Here, Tait can be seen to have selected MacDiarmid as a consensus with her own politics and creative aesthetic, ie for his ‘Intellectual inquiry, national disposition and formal experimentation’. (Neely and Riach, 2009:4)

By invoking this leading light in C20th Scottish modernism reading his own poetry in his own felicitous spaces – she / they are evoking unconscious knowledges experienced through locality and the vernacular, deep and forgotten awarenesses obscured by corporate processes such as dominant language-use and film reception.

Tait films MacDiarmid as a non-typical signifier of masculine mastery, at home among his collection of books and modernist artworks, writing, walking, drinking, talking. Indigenous sounds and voices contrast with a diegetic BBC radio report. Such reverberations would be recognised by an exilic/accented audience as possibly subversive and cohesive. Using mostly close and medium shots, Tait’s camera - like eye-movements or drawing in charcoal – haptically move across the surface of the screen uniting the viewer, the filmmaker and the poet in a confined space. Tait thus draws attention to the closeness of the community in which the poet lives and for whom / with whom he / she / they speak. The black and white film stock carries the signifiers of the poet’s exilic voice and her affinity with his marginalised position as a leading Scottish Modernist poet, thinker and writer in a British Culture.

Tait (and other poets and artists) appropriated Modernism’s avant-garde formalism specifically to challenge accepted wisdom on developing post-war meta-narratives - including realism - whose stability and coherence relied on the co-dependence between the sign and its referent and the synchronization of sound and image. But Tait films the same content in ways that loosen them from any such ideological stasis. Her indexical signs become celluloid traces of their referent’s existence,

specifically edited to confront stability and offer instead visual / aural pleasure and free interpretation.

Her eclectic and creative approach, was rejected by the influential John Grierson (Neely 2009, 2008a) whose role in mobilizing small film production was pivotal throughout Britain. In post war Britain, Bill Nichols explains, Grierson's hegemonic and continuing hold over avant-garde film

. . . harnessed ... [its] potential ... to the specific needs of the nation state as his government sponsors had demanded – and sided with the civilizing elite. [He] championed.... a documentary film practice that persuaded more than informed, guided more than observed (Nichols, 2001:600)

Tait's audiences are not enunciated into a stable moral whole - sharing a uniform experience. Her mobile camera, patchwork editing and non-synchronous sound, induce multi-sensory glances rather than controlling gazes. (Bryson, 1983) There is no reality prior to filming. Problems are neither presented nor resolved. Endings and beginnings are ambiguous. Signs and signifiers, aural and visual, have equal and democratic weight in a dialectic relationship – which paralleled the very society the avant-garde envisaged at this time.

Accepting, in part, her marginalisation, Tait concentrated her energy on developing films 'on the level of poetry' (Todd & Cook, 2004:81) and this is where her language and poetic voice evolved.

In conclusion to develop this point, I want to refer to the first of these 'film-poems' *Where I Am Is Here* (1964, 20min b/w 16mm/video). Filmed in Edinburgh where she was living and spent her boarding school days, she divides the 20 min time/sound duration into 7 parts, indicated by seemingly abstract inter-titles, demarcations that the film sometimes travels across. This film is a poetic collage of sound, image, themes, colour, inter-titles, animation, stop-motion, stills, drawing, speech, repetition, mirroring – taking the viewer beyond a townscape into un/conscious unexpected places offering the viewer new notions of multi-sensory, intellectual visual pleasure and a reconsideration of the term location.

Devoid of didactics, Tait embeds this film-poem with a wealth of knowledge, creativity and politics inviting if they've a mind – but not coercing - audiences into the film's 'reverberations'. Like all her films, it requires more than one viewing. Its precursors –

such as the 'city symphony' and abstract films of Walter Rutman, Hans Richter and Dziga Vertov - used creative montage-editing to explore the possibilities of film to make the invisible, visible. Lukacs (1938) privileged the authorial voice of the (abstract) artist who unmasked the wide-ranging and pervasive laws, which govern and so uncover the range of observable relationships and contexts that exist in a capitalist society.

Where I Am Is Here is part of Tait's 'authorial' artist's voice and does present the contexts by which we subjects operate. But, her innovative use of film pushes 'the-montage-as-linkage' model of film's abstraction of visible or objective reality further into a dialectic, multi-sensory form of realism, which is timeless and meditative, challenging and paradoxical. By incorporating her visual / aural collages with the plasticity of, time, place, politics, memory and history Tait pushes the limitless possibilities of the materiality of film into what Gene Youngblood describes as a synaesthetic film. He argues that,

[A] although composed of discrete elements it is conceived and edited as one continuous perceptual experience. A synaesthetic film is, in effect, one image continually transforming into other images: metamorphosis. (1970:86)

He also uses the term syncretism to describe the combination of many different forms into a whole form (1970: 84) and so his term 'synaesthetic syncretism' replaces montage in films such as Tait's and places them firmly within the realms of the poetic. She said of this film

'... my aim was to construct a film with its own logic, its own correspondences within itself, its own echoes and rhymes and comparisons, all through close exploration of the everyday, the commonplace, in the city, Edinburgh, where I stayed at the time...'. *Scottish Screen Archive* on <http://ssa.nls.uk/film.cfm?fid=3703> [Accessed November 2011]

In this and all her films, Tait I feel reveals that we are all part of where we come from, affected by circumstance in a time span, which is not linear. Further, that despite the seeming limitations of a hand held super 8, lack of funding and isolation from mainstream support, she has left us a legacy of heartfelt insight, inspiration and pleasure.

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