

self-referentiality and allusionism, which is its 'station identification signal', its 'phatic' contact, as Jakobson would say, with the distracted viewer.

The Futur as Double Agent

This is why there is probably no going back for the art cinema either: it too confronts the television spectator rather than the novel reader, and what is more, it is mainly funded by TV. In the debates around counter-cinemas, it now appears that television was underestimated as the cultural and economic force against which Hollywood, the art cinema and the avant-garde had to define themselves. While Hollywood did so by re-appearing inside the television 'apparatus' as its chief supplier of product and one of its major attractions (the recycling of 'movie classics' and the start of a whole new film culture), the avant-garde on the whole was unable to mount an effective response to television. The art cinema found it possible to secure participation in the production side of television, as prestige programme makers nationally, and international 'auteurs', double agents so to speak who, though under contract to RAI, Channel 4, Antenne Deux or WDR, could upgrade their television co-productions via film festivals to the status of art cinema.

The International Market

If the relation between television and the cinema has become one of symbiosis, then it is clear that the balance of forces between Hollywood and European independent, art or avant-garde cinema cannot be represented as pure opposition either. Films are commodities like any other: while the Hollywood product dominates most countries' domestic markets, as well as leading internationally, each national cinema is both national and international, though possibly at different ends of the market. Nationally, it participates in the popular or literary culture at large (the New German Cinema's predilection for filmed literature, the intellectual cult status of French film directors, the veneration of Fellini or Antonioni as 'artists' and sacred monsters). Internationally, national cinemas used to have a generic function: a French, Italian or a Swedish film set definite horizons of expectations for the general audience—a prerequisite for marketing purposes.

From the perspective of Hollywood, on the other hand, it makes little difference whether one is talking about the Italian cinema or the Australian cinema, the French cinema or the Welsh cinema: none of them is a serious competitor for America's domestic output, but each national cinema is a 'market' for American films, with Hollywood practices and norms having major repercussions on the national production sector. In most countries, this has led to different forms of protectionism, bringing into play state intervention and government legislation, but usually to very little avail, especially since the different national cinemas, however equal they seem before Hollywood, are of course emphatically

unequal among themselves and locked into yet another form of competition when they enter an international market. Identification with the big Other and rivalry among each other are two sides of the same coin, and competition with Hollywood has often meant reproducing the American model of production as well as its narrative conventions.

The Spider's Stratagem or the Kiss of the Spider Woman?

The literature (and, in a wider sense, the visual imagination) of Latin American authors seems to have become increasingly attractive to European film-makers, wherever they feel in competition with America over the truth of the image and no longer able to envisage a terrain not colonised by

television. One of the reasons may be the fact that here is a literary culture which has always been closer to spectacle and the carnival as political, and yet has a very precise historical experience of 'colonisation', but also of appropriating it in a vernacular idiom. Rosi's adaptation of Márquez may be a collage of clichés, but they are hardly folkloristic: if the clichés are having a ball, it is because they are accompanied by strong feelings, clear outlines, bold colours, simple motifs, archaic spaces. The distance is not in a critical irony, or a political allegory, but in a literalism that offers no distance. This, as in the case of Resnais, may leave the sophisticated spectator with the task of trying to become naive, as with certain feminist avant-garde works: Pina Bausch's dance theatre, for instance, or some of Chantal Akerman's films, where it is not the romantic or sentimental cliché that speaks the truth, but its repetition: obstinate, desperate, utopian. ■

Living on the Edge

Great Britain, 1987

Director: Michael Grigsby

Dist.—BFI. p.c.—Central Independent Television. exec. p.—Roger James. p.—John Furse. devised by—John Furse, Michael Grigsby. ph.—Ivan Strasburg. In colour. addit. ph.—Tom McDougal. asst. ph.—Mark Strasburg. ed.—Julian Ware. songs—"Smack City", "Just Right" by and performed by Chris Sumner. addit. m. performed by—Jack Payne and his BBC Orchestra, Herman's Hermits, The Beatles, The Taverner Choir, Thunderclap Newman, Mike Oldfield, Ambrose and His Orchestra, Penguin Café Orchestra, Gerry Rafferty, Norwich Cathedral Choir, Pink Floyd, Drum Theatre, The Cocteau Twins. m. consultants—Tony Howard. titles design—Stuart Kettle. sd. ed.—Marie Kent. sd. rec.—Mike McDuffie. sd. re-rec.—Tony Anscombe. consultants—Archie Tait. p. assistant—Julia Kennedy. research—Catherine Bailey, (consultant) Sara Tibbetts, (film) Janet Rayner. with—Frank Rolfe, Mary Rolfe, Alison Rolfe, Stacey Rolfe, Tess Casey, Joanne Casey, Helen Casey, T.J. Casey, Teresa Skyrme, Dave Skyrme, Deneice Smith, Alan Smith, Chris Sumner, Kenny Murray, Gary Phinn, Paul Mosson, Paul McElhinney, Charlie Best, John Waddington, Frank Tunstall, Jack Jones, Walter Evans, Maldwyn Kinsey, Bob May. 3,096 ft. 86 mins. (16 mm.).

In a kaleidoscopic vision of Britain in the 80s, *Living on the Edge* offers portraits of those who have been in various ways dispossessed by recent developments, intercut with other material—extracts from old films, advertisements, clips from newsreels—to build up an account of the way in which people's lives have been changed since the 30s. These various interpolations are themselves overlaid with examples of the popular music of the time. The main contemporary 'characters' are the Rolfes from Devon, a farming family who have been forced into bankruptcy by the recent international crisis of over-production in agriculture; the Casey family on the Ford housing estate in Birkenhead, with its history of massive unemployment, drug abuse and reliance on the black economy; the Skyrme and Smith families in the South Wales coalfields, still working but shaken by the coal dispute and worried about the future contraction of the industry. These are joined intermittently by a chorus of other individuals, including a group of young unemployed Glaswegians who are eventually forced to London to find work, a trio of World War II veterans, and a home-grown musician from the Ford estate.

Living on the Edge is a remarkably successful, and intensely moving, fusion of two different visions. On the one hand, it is clearly a continuation of Mike Grigsby's quite remarkably consistent oeuvre, which has allowed the exploited, the forgotten, the

taken-for-granted, the voiceless, to speak at some length and in their own words. The families and individuals whom we meet in *Living on the Edge* are all, in their different ways, near relations to the farm workers in *Working the Land*, the trawlermen in *Deckie Learner* and *A Life Apart*, the miners in *A Life Underground* and, for that matter, the black families in *Deep South*, the Eskimos in *The People's Land* and the Indian workers in *Before the Monsoon*. On the other hand, it also relates to a long-term project undertaken by John Furse, the film's producer and co-deviser (and previously the researcher on *A Life Apart*), entitled *The Struggle for the Land*, which he wrote (though never actually filmed) while working in the independent sector. In this he attempted to analyse what he terms the "selling of reality", utilising a collage form to discuss the historical forces at work in moulding people's everyday experience.

There are a number of principles governing the present film's extremely complex, but nevertheless admirably clear, collage structure. One of these is temporal: by means of extracts from old films, newsreels, advertisements and radio programmes, the film moves from the 30s to the 80s, suggesting by means of association and allusion some of the forces which have gone into the making of the present. Another is spatial: the film ranges far and wide across Britain for its cast of representative 'characters'. A fruitful narrative opposition between the rural



Below the divide: Frank & Stacey Rolfe.

and the urban (in a manner highly reminiscent of Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*) also supplies an implicit organising principle.

This structure allows the film-makers not only to move freely in time and space but also to explore ideas in a richly associative and allusive fashion. Above all, in an essentially visual and cinematic fashion. An extract from *Victoria the Great* (1937), for example, leads on—via a contemporary discussion about the 30s—to a consideration of the poverty behind the flag-waving and from thence to a meditation on contemporary imperialism, and Britain's changed world role, by means of a shot of an American Air Force base in Britain. Or from the bankrupt farmer Frank Rolfe standing in his farmyard, the victim of economic circumstances beyond his control, to the "Can't Wait" French Connection clothes advertisement, an overt celebration of instant gratification and rampant consumerism which, taken together, eloquently illustrate the various divides—moral, economic, geographical, ideological—which now characterise our society so sharply.

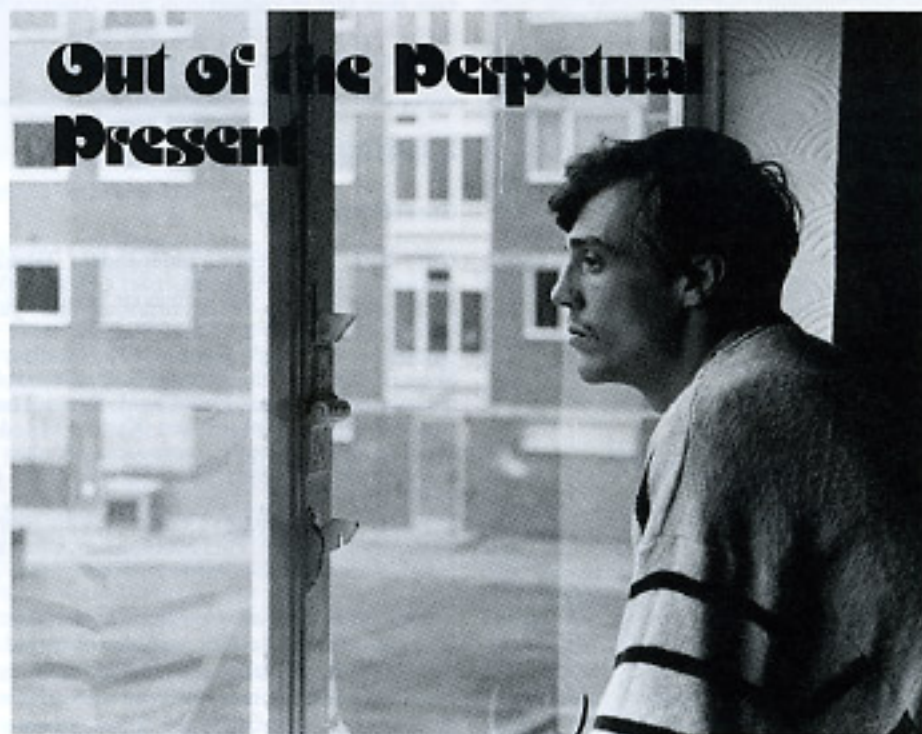
Similarly, talk of the 30s is matched by footage of the recent Jarrow March; an extract from *The Archers* makes one think of fictional representations of farming life as opposed to the real-life situation of the Rolfes; shots from a speeding express train are counterpointed by bleak shots of rusting steam engines which are not simply a reference back to Grigsby's first film, *Enginemans*, but also a reminder of the human and economic consequences of British Rail's modernisation plans; shots of politicians past and present reinforce one of the character's observation about the same people always being in power, and so on. Perhaps the most poignant parts of the film have to do with the betrayal of various post-war ideals. For example, the scene from *Dawn Guard* (1941) in which Bernard Miles talks of how, after the war, things cannot be allowed to go back to the way they were in the 30s (followed on the soundtrack by the song "Happy Days Are Here Again") leads on to a discussion among some of the present-day 'characters' of how the Second World War was a time of growing political enlightenment among working-class people in Britain. This helps to displace the

populist, Ealing-ish 'memory' of the war as a time of national cohesion, and to replace it with one of the war as a time of political change and consciousness-raising (cf. Angus Calder's *The People's War*) which was to result in the Labour landslide of 1945.

In terms of its remarkable style and structure, *Living on the Edge* irresistibly recalls Humphrey Jennings, and most of all *A Diary for Timothy* (1945). The tone is very different from Jennings' rather patronising and imposed commentaries, but the film's pessimistic and bleak colouring does recall moments in Jennings' less well-known later works, such as *Dim Little Island* and *Family Portrait*, titles which, along with *A Defeated People*, could serve equally well here. The

closing lines of *Diary* asked of the infant Timothy: "Are you going to have greed for money or power ousting decency from the world as they have in the past? Or are you going to make the world a different place—you and all the other babies?" To which *Living on the Edge* offers a not at all comforting answer: the abiding memory is of Frank Rolfe staring out the window at his lost land, a young man alone in his room singing a song about 'smack city', the remark that "in the 30s people had principles, now they've got mortgages and cars", and the heartbreaking scene in which the elder Rolfe daughter reads her brother's poem "The Death of a Farm".

JULIAN PETLEY



Chris Summer in 'Living on the Edge'.

Julian Petley talks to Mike Grigsby and John Furse about a documentary method for recovering memory and crossing boundaries.

It is clear from your filmography that by normal television standards you spend a great deal of time on each individual project. What is your working method?

MG: I like to work in communities. I like to go and sit in a small town or a village for six to eight months and get to know the people on a friendly basis, as a human being rather than as a film-maker. They get to know me and they get to know my crew and we make the film on that sort of basis. And then I involve the people in the editing. When we have put it together finally, I take the film back to the community and show it on their territory rather than them coming to me. They can then actually debate with me, criticise me. And I think this is the only way to do it.

Looking at, and listening to, your films one is immediately struck by the length of the

shots, and also the absence of commentary. What are your reasons for this approach?

MG: As far as commentary goes, I think television has a tendency to swamp many of its films with voice-over and reporters' questions, with the result that one is never allowed to feel, one is unable to breathe, and one is being led all the time as an audience. It is important that one really tries to let people be what they are, and to come across in the way they want to come across. As far as the length of the shots is concerned, I think that we tend today to be hung up on this whole mythology of long shots, close-ups, mid-shots, reverse shots, twitching hands, twitching faces, and so on. What I try to do is to find the frame which will allow one just to watch and absorb what is going on without us having to interfere with the people, with the subject one is making the film about.

I think it is very important to see the context in which people live and work, because without a context how can one understand how people function? So there are very few cuts in my films. I like the subject to come through without me having to juxtapose hundreds of shots to make a point. We usually just shoot the scene from one angle and keep very still. I never work with lights, only by available light. I want to subjugate the crew and all the technology to the people. We just melt into the background, and people are therefore less self-conscious.

That said, *Living on the Edge* contains many more cuts than your previous films. Does this signal a new development for you?

MG: Yes, the film is in the form of a collage, and the structure is quite impressionistic. At the same time, it was much more scripted than my previous films, in that we were proceeding from a much more highly structured working base. This all had to do with the subject matter. I felt that British society in the 80s was becoming increasingly isolated and fragmented and that the form of the film should reflect that fragmentation. However, if that was to work in a comprehensible way, one that left no doubt in the minds of the audience about what we were trying to say, then I knew we had to be extremely clear in our own heads before we started shooting about what exactly we were attempting to achieve. We needed a firm structure to work from and to serve as a guide.

JF: The danger with a collage structure is that audiences don't know where they're going. We certainly didn't want to make a film for the cinematic intelligentsia, so it was important to have a fairly straightforward narrative structure which takes you from the pre-war years through to the present, tracing a change in popular feeling and in the popular view of what is happening. If you like, it is a visual version of oral history; it counterpoints people remembering their own 'unofficial' version of history, in their own words, with the 'official', traditional view portrayed in newsreels, old films, and so on.

Although *Living on the Edge* may look rather different from your other films, the concerns are in many ways the same. Your subject is again the betrayed, the dispossessed, those routinely denied a voice by the mainstream media.

MG: Yes, although perhaps on a larger scale than before. Right from the start, I wanted to make a film about the betrayal of the post-war dream. For all its impressionistic structure, there is a sense in which *Living on the Edge* is more direct than some of my other films, and perhaps that is because I personally feel a very deep sense of betrayal. Not just on behalf of my generation, but also for my parents' generation and the young generation too. I feel especially angry on behalf of the kids who grew up in the 60s, like the Scottish lads in the film, who were promised that life would be wonderful. Right through the class structure, there is a deep sense of unease, cynicism, isolation and betrayal—betrayal of the ideals of the

compassionate, caring society that was promised in 1945 when everyone dreamed of a real change and a new era.

JF: When Mike and I first began discussing the film in 1985, we hadn't actually met since 1973, when I was the researcher on *A Life Apart*. In the intervening period, I'd been working in the independent sector in the South-West and had become very interested in the colonisation of ordinary people's lives, not only by economic forces such as tourism and agri-business but also by the mass media. I was interested in the way in which people construct history, including their own history, not simply on the basis of their own experience, but through the media too, through the versions of reality which TV and newspapers sell every day. So when Mike began to talk about how the media increasingly bring about a loss of historical memory, a state of perpetual present, I became very interested.

I had thought for a long time about the removal of people's roots, of which the removal of memory is an important aspect. Once you lose your roots in the past you also lose the ability to work on the future creatively, an ability which is anyway seriously impaired by the whole nuclear threat. The apathy this creates makes ideal conditions for authoritarianism and, in the last analysis, fascism, to occur. And indeed, what came out of our initial research was the tremendous disillusionment with, and loss of faith in, the conventional institutions, even the institution of thought. And everywhere inertia, apathy and fragmentation.

Even without knowing your admiration for Humphrey Jennings, it would be hard not to see his influence on the style of *Living on the Edge*.

MG: What impresses me most about Jennings is his impressionism, the juxtaposition of images and sounds, the montage of ideas. We've forgotten how to make exciting documentaries that really engage people. I get very depressed watching television documentaries because I think they've fallen into very traditional, preconceived, predictable formats. The imagery is used as wallpaper or filler, and the commentary totally dominates the images: it is the journalistic influence, and it's getting heavier and heavier. Documentary needs a kick up the backside, it needs to communicate to people with the excitement that you find in the films of Jennings. I feel we've lost the art of engaging with people. There is an idea that documentary as a form is boring, and that is reflected in the way that television companies schedule them late at night.

Living on the Edge paints a terrifyingly bleak picture of contemporary Britain

without really offering any solutions. Do you think this lays you open to the charge of defeatism?

MG: I think it would be extraordinarily arrogant of us to try to impose solutions. The film creates a dimension, a space for people in the audience to think things through in their own terms and draw their own conclusions. It sets up a series of reverberations and associations, but people must produce the answers themselves, outside the film. If the film is perceived as an honest and disturbing account of what the underbelly of Britain is going through at the moment, and provides a platform for debate and discussion, then I would be very satisfied. But although the film's structure leaves you space to think things out, at the same time it should leave little doubt in the minds of the audience that we as film-makers feel it is time to take a strong stand and not to back off or duck out. The film may be impressionistic but it is not diffuse or unclear.

JF: The test in many ways for the film is whether it can create a space in which people of quite different political persuasions can actually find a common ground for debate. What we were interested in were the historical processes at work in the people's everyday lives, and to get at that you've got to go beyond the mask of conventional political discourse to the feelings that lie behind politics. If the film can cross boundaries and make people identify their own everyday experience with the experience of people in the film who are quite possibly from very different backgrounds, and of quite different political persuasions, then it will have achieved something. The people we chose for our film—and we 'cast' it very carefully and went through hundreds of possible 'characters'—do convey the authentic voice of their own experience: they have an *undeniability* that simply cannot be rejected.

Living on the Edge is an immensely visual film, but it also says a great deal more than the most heavily 'commentated' documentary. How do you achieve this?

MG: One of the key things was to try to find the simple image that would express a very complex thought process. We wanted simple images which people could relate to and draw on from their own experience. But to get those very simple images, and sounds, one actually has to go through a complex process of questioning what one is doing and why one is doing it. I think that many film-makers on the left have lost the ability to communicate with audiences. The language of the filmic left has become almost too pure, the debates so abstruse that we've forgotten about the broad mass of what is actually going on in this land, and forgotten how to communicate across the party political divides. ■

3 hommes et un couffin (3 Men and a Cradle)

France, 1985

Director: Coline Serreau

Cert—PG. dist—UKFD (20th Century Fox). p.c—Flach Film/Soprofilm/TF1 Films. p—Jean-François Lepetit. p. sup—Henri Vart. p. manager—Jacques Attia. ass. d—Graziella Molinaro, Dominique Chaillot Talmon, Pierre de Rivière. sc—Coline Serreau. ph—Jean-Yves