



## **Clear**

### **Michael Wilson**

A door stands half open. From a narrow, unlit hallway, we look past it and out onto a sunlit street, with a garden or park on the opposite side. Fragmented images of passing cars and people are reflected in the two facing tiled walls, moving first one way, then the other. We hear the sounds of engines and sirens, footsteps, laughter and voices, echoing slightly in the confined interior. Some children playing outside run back and forth, bouncing a ball, shouting to each other. While it is never suggested though music, speech or change of scene, we find ourselves waiting for someone to enter or leave the building, for a story to begin or end. Perhaps it is the focus on the door, perhaps something in the pattern of light and shade, but we feel the imminence of an event.

It never happens.

In his *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley, 1979), Noel Burch describes the punctuation of Yasujiro Ozu's films, in particular his *A Woman of Tokyo* (1933), by what he terms 'pillow shots' or 'cutaway still-lives.' 'The particularity of these shots,' he writes, 'is that they suspend the diegetic flow [...] while they never contribute to the progress of the narrative proper, they often refer to a character or a set, presenting or re-presenting it out of a narrative context. Pillow shots (the term is derived from

Japanese poetry) most often achieve their uniquely de-centering effect by lingering unexpectedly on an inanimate object. 'People are perhaps known to be near, but for the moment they are not visible, and a rooftop, a street-light, laundry drying on a line, a lampshade or a tea-kettle is offered as centre of attention. The essence of the pillow shot, then, lies in the tension between the suspension of human presence and its potential return.

Nicola Atkinson.Davidson's CLOSE consists of a series of brief vignettes, of which the piece described in the opening paragraph - also called Close - is one, that owe much to Ozu's innovation. Fading from and back into white, situations (always quiet and modest, sometimes accompanied by gentle music) materialize and vanish. An atmosphere of sorts is established, but it is generally ambiguous or undramatic, sketched with some subtlety in shades of grey and blue. People do occasionally appear, but remain silent and anonymous, going about their business without addressing an audience or even acknowledging the presence of a camera. Atkinson.Davidson has adopted this mode before; tracking down a scene, setting up her equipment, pressing 'record' and walking away. Things may change or remain the same, move out of the frame or adopt a quasi-painterly stasis. In CLEAR, 2003, we watch an immigrant family working at a California house, the young daughter playing restlessly while her parents sweep the yard. Their activity remains constant throughout – there is no beginning and ending, no 'development' in the conventional sense – but our understanding of the situation, and the relationships that it implies, shifts throughout. The 'content' of the individual parts of CLOSE - brief glimpses of place, snatches of life – is pared back even further, but, haiku-like, meaning somehow prevails, and even intensifies.

The structure and pacing of CLOSE approximate those of the classic pop album (the title echoing Joy Division's Closer (1980) among several others), and sound plays an important role in its effect. Some segments actually include music; others incorporate ambient noise, field recordings, incidental atmospheres and voices. In Fly, the twanging guitar of Directorsound's Theme from Hythe Hill seems to emanate directly from the insect's twitching legs, giving the piece a lazy, summery feel where it could have been horrific. In Dry, the hypnotic, bittersweet indie pop of The Mirror Phase by Damon & Naomi with Ghosts seems to circle around a mood, while the spinning drum of the tumble-dryer recalls vinyl on a turntable, or the exponentially faster rotation of the DVD itself. Bill Wells's The Moat, used to soundtrack 15th Floor, is a hybrid construction that hovers between found sound and constructed composition, incorporating the human, the mechanical and the frankly unidentifiable, alternating between gentle environments and what sound like swathes of searing feedback. Other 'tracks' from CLOSE lean entirely on the sound that accompanied each scene as it was filmed. But since visible 'action' and narrative are suppressed, or at least not consciously manufactured, even this begins to assume an enhanced significance; sounding louder in our ears than it would at first hand.

Despite the measured stillness that characterizes much of CLOSE, and the contemplative cast of her work in general, Nicola Atkinson.Davidson is not secretive or isolated. On the contrary, she is a gregarious artist who draws strength and enjoyment from interaction and communication at every stage of the working process. Thus while CLOSE has a decidedly introspective feel, touched at moments with nostalgia or melancholy and at others with the indeterminate mood of a daydream, it resounds too with implied conversation, with the testing out of decisions on interested friends. In her 'market research' (she applies the term with an ironic chuckle, all too aware of the distance between a commercial project and the more experimental work at hand), Atkinson.Davidson reports a

distinct lack of consensus as to which segment of CLOSE is the most effective. But far from being discouraged, she chooses, characteristically, to regard this as an indicator of the project's range. This is perhaps something of an unforeseen quality, but one that, in retrospect, seems absolutely natural. While some respond to clearly defined 'events' - the slow dance of ascending aircraft in Light, for example - others pick out more contextual elements, like the city that shimmers on the horizon. Unassuming, unmanipulative, yet informed by the history of its medium, each segment of the work becomes a test of the viewer's personality, a barometer of personal reactions to visual and aural cues as relayed in the most straightforward of cinematic language. Yet what Atkinson.Davidson presents us with is not a Rorschach-like diagnostic tool; however else it may function, CLOSE, like the small scenes it images, remains quietly compelling and absolutely itself.