



TRACEY MOFFATT

IMA/ASIALINK

INTRODUCTION

BY

MICHAEL SNELLING

'An Australian friend encouraged me to do a Sri Lankan reading of *Night Cries*. What would a Sri Lankan reading be? Wrong question, you can't know what it is until you do it, because a reading is in part deciphering and in part invention in the sense of making connections.'¹

— Laleen Jayamanne, 1992

¹ Laleen Jayamanne, 'Love me tender, love me true, never let me go—A Sri Lankan reading of Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries*', in: Sneja Gunew, Anna Yeatman, (eds), *Feminism and the politics of difference*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1993, p. 73

One of the most striking characteristics of Tracey Moffatt's practice is the multiplicity of readings and uncertainty of resolution that the work provokes. In her photography she manages to suggest both the familiar and the singular by using elements of the documentary with the constructed, the still single image with the series, a kind of jump cut narrative that forfeits closure and a refusal to nominate a single meaning for the work. In her films and videos, except for *Heaven*, she introduces the obvious artifice of the stage, and a deliberate framing more akin to a series of moving stills than a conventional film. By frequently citing inspirations as diverse as Pasolini, American Roller Derby, surfies dropping their daks, Japanese and Australian cinema and her own subconscious, she provides clues to her own intentions.

Moffatt has a love of, and pays homage to, an eclectic collection of styles that she combines with a desire to experiment by mixing and matching language and convention. There is an invigorating casual challenge in her interweaving of film, photography and stage that brings much energy to the over exploited and sometimes slightly exhausted media of film and photography. The dynamism of European and American documentary photography in the 40s, 50s and 60s, and the beautiful gritty black and white Italian films of the sixties are recognisable in the look and feel of *Scarred for Life* and *Up in the Sky*.

In this documentary tradition there lies a certain active subservience, a willingness, in theory at least, to sink into the background, to watch with clarity. The photographer takes a directorial up-front role when working in non-documentary capacities, such as commercial or fashion photography. Tracey Moffatt works in the manner of a film or theatre director constructing realities that look like documents but which she often refers to as fantasies.

In *Something More* the lush artifice, saturated colour and metallic sheen of cibachrome counterpoints black and white images that combine in a story of thwarted aspirations and

failed dreams. The most straightforward reading of the series of nine images is of a young beautiful woman seeking to break away from her rural setting to reach the big city and in the attempt meeting violence and an ignominious end sprawled face down and violated across the thin white line of her highway to freedom. While this is familiar territory as far as a story goes, Moffatt brings her own slant to the scenario. Race, class and gender all complicate the predictability of the narrative. When combined with the structural device of providing only snippets of the story, *Something More* moves from predictable misfortune to miserable desolation.

Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy tills similar soil in a bigger paddock, this time built around the love/hate relationship of an ailing aging mother and frustrated carer daughter. The main elements include a white mother and a black daughter, a *mise en scène* that reminds one of an Albert Namatjira/Robert Wilson painted set and a pendulous emotional balance that gently exposes the ambivalent commitments of parent child relations. There is no spoken word between the two protagonists, instead a soundscape that provides a backbeat to the unfolding drama. However it is the inescapably ironic presence of the sweetly toned country singer Jimmy Little, who first sings his hit song *Royal Telephone*, and then silently mimes *Love Me Tender*, that undermines the already fragile cliché of the story line. When one adds to the mix the forced adoption practices of Australian government assimilation policy, the mother/daughter melodrama turns tragic.

beDevil is a 90-minute film containing three, for want of a better description, ghost stories. All are designed to suggest the proscenium and, as with *Night Cries*, often filmed with the still image lurking at the beginning or end of the moving camera. *beDevil* is even more ambiguous than the earlier work. It clearly positions the three small vignettes of communities as micro-stories within a larger narrative of ethnicity, gender, place and spiritual and cultural beliefs.

The series *Laudanum* is set in a claustrophobic English Victorian interior, apparently drawing its inspiration from a *mélange* of trashy fiction, German expressionist film, erotic and vampiric literature and a pictorial style of photography. Two women, a white mistress and an Asian maid, enact some sort of story that, while suggesting all the influences cited above, manages to suggest much more than it discloses. What are these two up to? Is this a simple story of colonial/class repression? Are the women lovers or is there a nonconsensual violence being perpetrated by the mistress upon the maid? All that and more.

There is an ever-increasing truckload of writing about Moffatt's work. Much of it seeks to penetrate the ambiguity of her scenarios. In doing so this writing explores a raft of possibilities this title cannot accommodate including the positioning of indigenous Australians as protagonists and the blend of realism and fantasy. There is a particular relationship to the 'place' of Australia that is represented in most of her work (*Pet Thang* and *Guapa* are two exceptions, located in the ether of the studio).

The complexity of conception is, for me, one of the great pleasures in engaging with Moffatt's work. By working with the potent mix of gender, class, race and colonialism, with a broad palette of influences from popular culture to high art, presented through the most popular media of the 20th century, and always depicted against expectation, she manages to build an ongoing tension that repays repeated engagement.

SPECIFIC CLIMATES

BY

RÉGIS DURAND

Whether filmic or photographic, each of Tracey Moffatt's images is carefully constructed. None of them presents itself as a 'reproduction of reality'; on the contrary, they are produced by meticulous artistry in the studio or in artificial decors, after a preparatory phase of drawing and the creation of a veritable storyboard, as well as a casting process and a technical study.

Many artists work in this way today—among the more well-known, one may think of Jeff Wall or Cindy Sherman (with a somewhat more intimate, artisanal character for the latter's productions). What is particular in Tracey Moffatt's work, among other things, is her way of not only shifting from film to photography or from photography to film, but continually crisscrossing the two. In fact, one must consider that for her they form but a single practice, modulated from one project to the next. This modulation is not a simple alternance, for each of the two practices exercises considerable pressure on the other: cinema upsetting photography's character as an image closed in on itself: photography cutting against the grain of cinema's 'natural' temporality and production of narrative. One can see that this back-and-forth movement is a dual way of approaching a heterogeneous and unstable contemporary reality, a reality that feeds on the inexhaustible flux of images conveyed and recycled by the world's televisions, and also on individual memories and fantasies. Identifiable references emerge from all this, specific climates if you will, whether geographic, social or psychic. In other words, Tracey Moffatt's work appears as a surprising mix of the indeterminate and the brutally precise, the timeless and the contemporary. The result is a taut, sometimes disturbing body of work. The following remarks aim to bring out some of its points of tension and to identify a few of their implications.

OPEN IMAGES, CLOSED IMAGES

It is sometimes said that photography is a 'closed' image, more closed in any case than painting, to the extent that its link to the referent remains strong, even when it is enigmatic. And how much more closed than cinema, among whose particularities is that of 'opening universes' by introducing time into the images.¹ In Tracey Moffatt's work, the fixed image and the filmic image ceaselessly tend toward each other. The fixed image seems to be a 'freeze frame' plucked from the unfolding of a film—an impression reinforced by the fact that it never exists in an isolated state, but always within a group, a series, which seems to point

1 For this point see Jean Louis Schefer, *Du monde et du mouvement des images*, Cahiers du cinéma, Collection Essais, Paris, 1997

toward a possible narrative content, or at least an intention, an energy turned in that direction. A sketchy content, to be sure, but powerfully present, to the point of creating the feeling that the fixed images belong to some vanished film. As to the films themselves, their diegetic energy sometimes seems to be carried forward by the sound as much as the images, which are on the verge of freezing into 'tableaux'.

However, these two contrary movements should not be cause for illusion: each of the genres retains its own dynamic and its inherent laws. The themes and decors may be closely related, but they nonetheless remain separated by the mode of realisation; the random, fragmented reading of the photographs, the irreversible temporal constraint of the films. From this point of view, one may consider the photographic works as having a more open character than the films, to the extent that they leave a greater share of invention to the spectator.

STYLES AND CLIMATES OF IMAGES

Tracey Moffatt's images, as we have mentioned, often have an enigmatic character. In the photographic series in particular, what is at stake is not always immediately perceptible. In *Something More*, for example, there seems to be an attempt to tell a 'story', but due to the framing and the blurring of certain images it remains sketchy and uncertain. In *Pet Thang*, the juxtaposition of the woman's body and the toy plays on the dreamlike, fantasmatic character of the associations: a block of images, not an organised, orientated sequence. In the series *Guapa*, on the contrary, each image of these women engaged in roller-skate elimination trials seems to be excerpted from a continuum—a competition, a 'film' of the events—to which we do not have access. Similarly, in *Up in the Sky*, each shot refers to so many possible stories; something has happened, or is about to happen.

Now, when there is an enigma of meaning, when the scene is not immediately convertible and remains unresolved, two elements spring to the foreground of our reading: the materiality of what is shown, its referent in the world; and the style or styles. In Tracey Moffatt's work, the referential content is at once present and absent. Absent, because these images are clearly fabricated and do not claim to reflect any exterior reality. But present, because they nonetheless evoke certain precise situations: a geography, for example, the Australian outback in *Up in the Sky* and *Night Cries*; or sporting competitions, as in *Guapa*. But their true referent is Imaginary. It is our memory of other images that have reached us from cinema, television, photography albums, or—not the least important source—from dreams and their hybrid productions. Thus it is a matter of mediatised 'reality', deformed and 'fictionalised'—a reality thoroughly worked over by narrative and iconographic styles (the aesthetic of late neorealist film, that of Pasolini in *Accatone*, for example, or a certain form of exotic romance in vogue in the 50s and 60s). In fact, the referent and the style(s) are one in the work of Tracey Moffatt.

'THE TERROR OF UNCERTAIN SIGNS'

In a well-known passage, Roland Barthes produced a remarkable condensation of the question of meaning and its reading, as it could be formulated in an epoch which sought to describe the plurality of the 'open work' and the spectator's role as 'producer'; 'Every image is polysemous; it implies, subjacent to its signifiers, a 'floating chain' of signifieds of which the reader can select some and ignore the rest. Polysemy gives rise to a questioning of meaning, and this questioning always appears as a dysfunction ... Hence, in every society a

2 Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the image' in *The responsibility of forms*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1985, p. 28, (translated from the French by Richard Howard)

certain number of techniques are developed in order to fix the floating chain of signifieds, to combat the terror of uncertain signs, the linguistic message is one of these techniques.'²

Tracey Moffatt's images are, as we have seen, deliberately polysemeous, and it is precisely this 'floating chain' of signifiers that constitutes their strangeness and wealth. Indeed, one of the characteristics of today's art, which distinguishes it from the popular iconographic sources upon which it so often draws (film, television, advertising etc.), is to increase this indeterminacy, against the attempts at reduction and fixation imposed by the social demand. In Tracey Moffatt's work the 'terror of uncertain signs' plays not only on the register of narrative or semantic indeterminacy, but also on the diffuse sentiment of a parallel world, outside social and moral norms. This is the 'Gothic' side of her work, the disquieting atmospheres and the decors, the obscure impression of menacing forces. The film *beDevil* is composed of three 'ghost stories'; and in the recent photographic series *Laudanum*, reveries or visions supposedly produced by the tincture of opium that gives the series its name are blended with a vague ambience of 'colonial decadence', in whose depths bloom all sorts of fantasies. The decors which are an essential element of the 'Gothic' in both its literary and filmic versions, are always carefully calculated to evoke a particular atmosphere, but one that is vague enough to leave room for all individual projections. The 'uncanniness' that reigns in these works thus stems primarily from the fact that the signs float in a dimension which is close to that of dreams or waking reverie. And when text intervenes as an integral part of the works, for example in *Scarred for Life*, it is not in order to 'fix' anything at all, but to divert the caption from its rational function of anchoring—the function which Barthes, following Benjamin and Brecht, was thinking of in the remarks quoted above, and which the photographic doxa long held to be indispensable for the comprehension of the image. In Tracey Moffatt's work the caption only appears as such in *Scarred for Life*, where it serves to turn childhood scenes into traumatic memories. Far from fixing the meaning, this text-image mix gives rise to blocks charged with narrative and psychic energy (as in Freud's famous text, 'A child is being beaten').

In the other series, to the contrary, the text is seemingly anterior, underlying the final work. It exists as a scenario in a broad sense, that is, not only as a storyboard, but also as a universe of reference, a general 'climate'. Thus, the text, while not present in the work as such, acts as a shifter of memories and allusions. *Laudanum*, for example, refers to an imaginary which one might qualify as 'Victorian Erotic'. Towards the middle of Queen Victoria's reign in England, the rigid social and moral conventions, which had not evolved at the same rate as the real social transformations, enforced an extremely strong repression of everything explicitly sexual, producing an equally powerful return of the repressed, notably in the form of an abundant erotic literature. This is also the close of a period of great colonial expansion, which fed all kinds of fantasies, mingling the desire for adventure, the myth of 'savagery' and racial difference, the fascination for the master-slave relation and so on. Thus one realises that numerous subtexts are present in this series, not the least of which is the evocation of the postcolonial situation (Australia, in this case), which many contemporary artists have explored.

HOW AUSTRALIAN IS IT?

In *How German is it—Wie Deutsch ist es* (1979), Walter Abish realises an indirect portrait of contemporary Germany by placing himself at once inside and outside the society, via characters, situations, manners of speaking, and allusions to the past, which he scrutinises with the detachment of an entomologist. Like most artists of her generation, Tracey Moffatt

feels the greatest mistrust towards the reductive character of national identity, particularly where her own work is concerned. As we know, contemporary art is international, even if this postulate cannot help but raise many questions, particularly when it seems to perfectly match the discourse of economic globalisation. Tracey Moffatt, who now lives in New York, has taken certain distances from her country of origin, and understandably resists biographical interpretations of her work, with their unavoidable limitations.

This question of origins is nonetheless very present in her art, not as an explanatory principle that would effectively be reductive, but as one of the powerful energies that runs through it. First of all there is the literal question of origin, a delicate question if ever there was. Of Aboriginal birth before being confided to adoptive white parents, Tracey Moffatt is originally from the country, by opposition to those who colonised it. And this theme runs throughout her work in various forms, in the ambivalence of situations mixing scorn, resentment and guilt, where repression and explosions of emotion alternate. Because this question of origins forms part of her history, Tracey Moffatt is capable of another gaze upon herself, and capable of using that gaze as a vehicle and a metaphor for all kinds of questions. As an Australian, she knows how to use the extremely powerful stock of images that only such a country can produce—the solitude of the outback, the beauty and boredom of the desert, the mix of poverty and intensity that isolation produces in human relations, the almost experimental novelty of a country at once highly ancient and very new, with an extraordinary blend of races and cultures. Thus the origin is clearly irreducible to biographical facts. It is a personal myth, a fable that everyone ceaselessly writes and rewrites. It is this desire for origin, this inexhaustible source of fantasies and fictions, that ultimately matters, more than the actual origin.

DEVOURING TIME

Fictions 'clothe' our fantasies, distracting our attention from all that is too raw and brutal in them. One of Tracey Moffatt's strengths is to let us perceive something of these harsher energies, behind a very sophisticated construction. One of the most remarkable things in her work is the condensation between the various temporal strata brought into play by memories, dreams and fantasies, between which she shifts back and forth with no respect for chronology. The work is anachronous, floating between memories of different times and natures; memories of lived experience, whether physical or cultural (memories of places, films and music which have meant something to her); collective memories which overdetermine social relations in any given situation; imaginary memories of invented or appropriated identities. Why is it that this universe with its floating chronology, bearing rather few contemporary markers, is nonetheless perceived as absolutely contemporary, and not as a series of period pieces? It is because it matches movements that run through contemporary reality; the more-or-less distanced or ironic returns to older attitudes and aesthetics, an apparent confusion that is governed in reality by precise scenarios where atopia and anachronism alternate with violent reterritorialisation. By their frank artificiality, by the blend of fiction and uncoded indications, her works point up the different components of a fluctuating contemporary reality, which itself in a sense exists nowhere, if not in our continual attempts at its (re)construction. Here, the fully controlled scenarios and production techniques guarantee the creation of a truth-effect that few ethnographic-type documentaries are able to produce (for they are uneasy before the ineluctable necessity of a reflection on the laws of the medium, of the kind the great documentarists have always engaged in).

When Tracey Moffatt says that her subject is the staging of an 'urban Aboriginal culture', she defines a field of investigation, but also creates a very rich metaphor of the contemporary situation—a world of wandering and relocation, a world of hybridity and crossing signals, a floating world with so many images and stereotypes that it seems unreal, even while it is charged with very real and sometimes violent experiences. The figure of the 'Aboriginal', fascinating and hated when seen as the bearer of a knowledge of origins, is in its turn taken up into this great drift, becoming a symbol of the confused struggles with which we are now confronted.

IMAGES IN A CERTAIN ORDER ARRANGED

I have spoken of enigma. But the enigma implies something hidden, in Tracey Moffatt's work, as indeed in many supposedly enigmatic situations or representations, one must nonetheless accept the idea that everything is there, visible. Where, there? In the individual images, in the relations between them (in the series), but also in the readings we give of them. Before these images what we discover is not so much of the order of meaning, as of a somewhat hallucinated perception of several parallel times and universes. In the films, the narration (or at least a certain continuity) facilitates the illusion and momentary belief in these fragments of a 'fictive reality'. Because they are discontinuous, the photographic series render belief more difficult. But this very discontinuity constantly stimulates our curiosity. Identification and projection come relatively little into play; rather, there is the perception that something has taken form (or is about to take form), before which we are relatively ill-assured, conscious of this uncertainty and of the moment in which we experience it, the present time which slips away. It is the reverse, if you like, of what Roland Barthes and others after him saw in photography: not the image of something that has been, haloed with a wealth of temporal layers, but a surface cold like a mirror, referring whoever looks at it back to the historical present. This present, by definition, destroys and reconstitutes itself ceaselessly, even while we inquire into that which is there before us. And it is also of this fragile mobility that Tracey Moffatt speaks.