



Some kind of lunatic reincarnation

by Philomena Epps

Diviner

1 A person who practices divination: soothsayer

Divination

1 The art or practice that seeks to foresee or foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge usually by the interpretation of omens or by the aid of supernatural powers
2 Unusual insight: intuitive perception

2 A person who divines the location of water or minerals, by using a special stick (called a divining rod)

The title of Frances Scott’s film – *Diviner* (2017) – is borrowed from the short documentary ‘Diviner Water in Luppitt’, made in 1976, and now housed in the South West Film and Television Archive (SWFTA) in Plymouth. The TV reporter John Doyle interviews a water diviner who has successfully located water at Kinghead Farm in Lupitt near Honiton in Devon. The image of the diviner as an emblem of searching – and a collision of the past, present, and future – operates as the central nexus to Scott’s film, which traces alternative trajectories and incidental relationships between disparate voices, broadcasts, and sounds, all scored from the recordings based in the archive. Previously existing as a television station, SWFTA now accommodates moving image material related to the region, from news and weather reports, to science education or nature films, and production footage from cinema releases.

After the film’s opening sequence – the only part shot in 2017 – in which we see the telecine process (the transfer of analogue film to a digital format), SWFTA becomes a sentient being. There is a conjuring of collective bodies, a multiple voice, and a splintered self. A conduit for narrative, the archive is “recalcitrantly material, fragmentary rather than fungible ... found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private.”¹ The polyphonic, transmitted images are configured into a fragmented script, a forecast, and a prophecy. The aural and visual converse with one another, searching for answers, for interpretation. We see a shrouded crystal ball, and the wrinkled lines of expectant palms enlarged by handheld mirrors. *What exactly are you looking for?*²

The film is broken into a series of chapters and cut montages, favouring gaps, substitutes, pauses, and breaks. Temporality is skewed. Linearity is eschewed in favour of the cyclical, with recurrent images and symbols. Resistance is periodic. The demonstrations against education funding cuts feel contemporary, complete with the emblematic, timeless image of protest: the homemade banner. A bittersweet reminder that history is always bound to repeat itself. *I don’t want to make Britain great, I don’t want to make any country great, because Britain, let’s face it, is a very small island in the middle of a very big pond.*³ Layered over images of the luminous red sun, the deep breathing and number counting of the water diviner in Lupitt becomes a sporadic clock. The visceral nature of the cosmos and planetary cycles are intertwined with the tangibility of film leaders, and the ticking countdowns to TV ident sequences. It rains, or snow falls. Purple flowers bloom

and open at high speed. A Catherine Wheel firework spins and sparks, an effervescent spiral.

On location, relinquished from the studio, the landscape and geography of the South West become an appropriated set. Narratives exist within narratives. A place evokes another place. ‘Far from the Madding Crowd’ (1967) and ‘Dracula’ (1979) might exist in the moment of their production, but they inadvertently cite their original – 1874 and 1897, respectively – into existence, through the nature of adaptation. *We’re trying to make a picture that’s romantic and will scare you at the same time.*⁴ We see beyond the screen, behind the scenes. In a metonymic twist, the façade is ruptured; directors and actors comment on their characters, and special effects are exposed as an artificial construction. Barbara Hepworth’s remarks about eternal form, the ability to create mass or manipulate shape through the sculptural medium, mirror the construction of filmmaking itself. In the mode of Gertrude Stein, a film is a film is a film.

The motif of lunar cycles and reincarnation – of beginnings and endings, past lives and future beings – chimes with elements of the film that explore corporeal transcendence and mythical eclecticism. Individuals recount their experiences of UFO sightings and alien life. The camera pans to a copy of Ruth E. St. Leger-Gordon’s occult study ‘The Witchcraft and Folklore in Dartmoor,’ published on New Year’s Day in 1972. There is an element of paganism, an embrace of New Age cultic practices, druids, and soothsayers. The sun sets at Stonehenge. Later, we see revellers dancing in a circle beside the Pyramid Stage at Glastonbury Festival, conceived in 1971 by

theatre designer Bill Harkin to specifically resemble “a diamond transmitting pure vibrations into the night.”⁵ The apex of the pyramid as a symbol of positive energy and harmony, connected to the stars and sun. *They arouse deep within us and beyond our senses a resonance, a sort of sounding board that begins to vibrate, an indefinable trace of the absolute, which lies in the depth of our being.*⁶ Ted Hughes in the pub, drunk on champagne after being announced as poet laureate, waxes lyrical about the spiritual unity of the tribe. We see individuals or groups lost in prayer, their eyes closed or hands outstretched, the notion of ceremony, coming together as a community in a moment of solace.

Interweaved throughout are scenes of natural disaster, forest fires, and a peripheral sense of tragedy. Trees are felled. The earth is dug. An owl listlessly devours a mouse, the tail poking through the beak. The audio narrative from wildlife programmes acts as an uncanny seer. *The only way to stay alive is to save energy. One solution is to hibernate, another is migration, but for many, it is a case of sticking it out.*⁷ The planets continue to orbit the sun. Two foxes circle each other, the mating ritual. A violent attempt is made to restrain a horse, but it breaks free, galloping wildly across the land, dragging the rope and fence away with it. A metaphor, perhaps. The final scene, the discovery of a beached whale in the thick silt of the Tamar Estuary, functions as a double image, the complicated duality of existence. The whale has symbolic associations with compassion, creativity, the knowledge of both life and death, while a beached whale traditionally suggests ill tidings, a negative omen, and something precious or special unable to be saved. Time will tell.

Philomena Epps is an independent writer and art critic living in London. She is also the founding editor and publisher of *Orlando*.

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Frances Scott, *Diviner* (2017)

22 minutes, 53 seconds. Single channel film, 16mm film and betacam video transferred to digital, colour, dual mono

Diviner (2017) is a film created for the Peninsula Arts Film Commission, a partnership between Peninsula Arts at Plymouth University, the South West Film and Television Archive and The Box, Plymouth.

Frances Scott is an artist working with moving image, presented through screenings, installations, events and publications. Her work considers material that exists around the periphery of the cinematic production and its apparatus, proposing that a film might be composed of its metonymic fragments.

abyme.org.uk

Camera and edit — Frances Scott
Sound design and mix — Chu-Li Shewring
Telecine — James Gibbs, SWFTA
All archival material from South West Film and Television Archive
Technician at The Bower — John Brown

The Bower is a collaborative project between Louisa Bailey and Joyce Cronin. We organise exhibitions and events and produce books with artists and writers by Publication Studio London on site. In 2017 we ran a successful crowd funding campaign to transform the derelict toilet block in Brunswick Park, Camberwell for this purpose. In addition to the toilet block, we also took on the old park keeper’s hut, enabling us to provide a cafe facility for the park. Since finding the toilet building in 2016, we have been working tirelessly on fundraising, planning permission and negotiations with Southwark Council. In January 2018, we began the extensive building work required to renovate the buildings. Measuring just 15m², The Bower is a small but ambitious project. Our artistic programme responds to the context of this unique property and its locality and is driven by our interest in sociopolitical and feminist practice.

Special thanks to Friends of Brunswick Park and all who supported and donated to our crowdfunder.

thebower.org.uk



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ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

FRANCES SCOTT
Diviner

21 June–22 July 2018
Opening 20 June 2018, 6–8pm

In conversation event with Frances Scott,
Chu-Li Shewring and Karen Di Franco
Tuesday 17 July 2018

Brunswick Park
Camberwell, SE5

1 Hal Foster, ‘An Archival Impulse,’ in October, Issue 110, The MIT Press, Fall 2004, p 5
2 *Diviner*, 2018
3 *Diviner*, 2018
4 *Diviner*, 2018
5 Pyramid Stage, Glastonbury Festival <http://www.glastonburyfestivals.co.uk/areas/pyramid-stage/>
6 *Diviner*, 2018
7 *Diviner*, 2018