

WAX: or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees

David Blair, 85 mins, 1991.

Richard Wright, December 2005.

Entry for "TimeOut's 1000 Films to Change Your Life", p 101.



My reverie was disturbed by the sound of a telephone ringing in the cave. It was the dead wife of Zoltan Abbassid. She was calling from the moon.

Back in the early nineties a new kind of film making briefly emerged called 'electronic cinema'. At that time many of us were trying to figure out how we could use computer animation for something a little bit more interesting than all the flying logos and excruciating 'sexy robots' that were about. Then in 1991 along came David Blair's "WAX" and blew us all out of the water. Using the simplest of means – a one person cast, old archive footage and cheap, low resolution computer graphics (animated by Blair's wife Florence Ormezzano and the now famous media theorist Lev Manovich), Blair showed how you could construct a hallucinatory narrative that tied together the Gulf War, flight simulators, psychic research and bee keeping.

Despite this dense stream of references, Blair gave the film just enough coherence to make you think you had discovered its true meaning every time you watch it. At its most literal level you could describe it as being about a man called Jacob "Hive" Maker (played by Blair) who suffers a mental breakdown caused by his guilt from working on missile flight simulators. But this description hardly conveys the film's sense of mounting technological apocalypse. At the moment my own favourite interpretation is that Jacob's military simulators have also started to simulate the souls of the victims that they have 'killed' and that these ghosts are now seeking vengeance. But most importantly for me, it was Blair's technique of using computer animation to make stylistic references from everything from military simulators to biblical hieroglyphics that made me realise that the seductive quality of digital special effects actually has an artistic history that can be traced back hundreds of years. When Jason White and I came to work on our short film "Heliocentrum" (1995) we felt just a little less mad for deciding to make our animation of Louis XIV's palace of Versailles as "a cross between a political documentary and a Seventeenth Century rave video".

As well as its artistic achievements, "WAX" was also one of the first feature length films to be made by a single independent artist. Financed by a series of tiny arts grants, Blair built it up over six years until it was finally finished with the help of German TV station ZDF. Released through arts festivals and small theatres in the US it gradually attracted an underground cult following until in 1993 it became the first film to be streamed over the internet and the first to be versioned as a web site (still available at <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/wax>).

Nowadays it feels like digital animation has retreated back to either making whimsical 3D cartoons, tasteful music videos or building monsters for Hollywood summer blockbusters. With few recent exceptions like Richard Linklater's "Waking Life" or the Butler Brothers "Workgroup Alpha" series, digital film makers looking for new inspiration could do a lot worse than to take a look at this earlier experimental period when 'electronic cinema' was still up for grabs.

