

Peter Mettler's Scissere

Scissere is a film of the sort that many resent – it demands as much as it is willing to give. And what it is willing to give is nothing less than a heightened awareness of all that we can see and hear in the world around us; a heightened awareness of ourselves, or others, and of how we cope or fail to cope in a world of increasing complexity and alienation.

This is a film of strange beauty and extraordinary power, a film that challenges our curious, near-instinctive bias towards films in which image and sound serve rather than shape those great gods of narrative convention: Plot, Dialogue and Characterization.

Although some of us – both filmgoers and critics – like to think we are open-minded and unfettered by convention, the truth emerges whenever a filmmaker attempts to explore the innate visual/aural language of film beyond established norms of narrative structure. He or she is singled out as exceptional, audacious, presumptuous, self-indulgent, or quite simply “ignorant of the basic narrative demands of film” and of the fundamentals of film convention to which audiences instinctively respond. The evaluation depends on just how far the conventions are being pushed.

We tolerate artists' creativity as long as they don't go *too* far, or better still, if they remain within the realm of “experimental,” supposedly non-commercial, non-mainstream film and video. But our backs go up, sometimes ever so subtly, should they dare stray into the “mainstream” feature film territory. Joyce Wieland's *The Far Shore*, Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, *Barry Lyndon*, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, and Steven Lisberger's recent *Tron* are but a few feature films cited by some critics as flawed, and by others as failures because their extraordinarily expressive images (and sounds) were not supported by equally defined and compelling stories and characterizations, or because their images and stories reiterated rather than complemented one another, thereby lessening the impact of both.

Thankfully, Peter Mettler, writer-director-cinematographer-editor of *Scissere* does not have the common sense to give up on us. In *Scissere*, Mettler offers us an experience of sound and image that at times is so pure and so potent as to seem without form or control. Yet there is a form, a very deliberate structure, so subtle at times as to appear non-existent. It is a structure that stops just short of the conventional narrative, yet is always there to give shape, force and direction to both image and sound, enhancing their potency, their complexity, their multiplicity of meaning, and allowing them freedom to exist independently within a structure that does not force an external, arbitrary interpretation.

With *Scissere*, Mettler boldly wades into the breach with a film one suspects is already being labelled “an experimental feature film.” But are we open enough to see and appreciate what Mettler is really doing and achieving? I hope so, since it is clear that Mettler respects us and trusts our ability to do so.



● One of the subway people: a heroin addict (Sandy MacFadyen) in *Scissere*

Scissere opens with a breathtaking 20-minute collage of image and sound. The more technically accurate film term “montage” cannot do justice to this passage in which Mettler not only reacquaints us with the astonishing plasticity of the photographic image and the language of film, but also immerses us in a visual experience akin to that of listening to music, an experience with a power and meaning that bypass reason, enter straight and untranslated into our consciousness, and stay there, echoing, illuminating, beyond word and thought.

Like a free-fall from a vanished plane, we find ourselves suddenly and irrevocably falling, rushing headlong through a breathing flowing mass of natural images – of sky and clouds, leaves, trees, forests, lakes and water. Especially water: in droplets, ripples, circles, lines and quivering star-like points of light. And as all these images slide by, shapeless human voices drone and chant in unison, comfortingly, warmly, reverently, in musical tones that flow with the changing images.

It is a visual and aural *tour de force* that is far from being a purposeless celebration of film technique. For when the natural images evolve into unexpected abstractions and then re-emerge in their original form, we are left with the old forms newly perceived. Sky and clouds and forest, lakes, leaves, trees and waters are astonishingly new to us again because of Mettler's gentle onslaught of sensual, tactile, ever-changing close-ups, and unhurried vertical and horizontal pans that cut and dissolve one into another as the camera glides over images near and distant, images that change from black and white into colour, into black and white splashed with delicate colour tinting, and into colour splashed with black and white.

The images and sounds slowly subside in intensity, shaping themselves into stark images of an unnatural, sterile, desperately lonely hospital environment. The comforting sound of human rhythms are now displaced by a soft, indefinable roar permeated with muffled voices, gasps and cries of anguish. We begin to realize that our heightened sensitivities are now and have been at one with the film's central figure: a young man named Scissere (Greg Krantz) who is on the threshold of re-entering the “real world” after a stay in a mental institution. We have, in fact, entered the mind and being of this young man, something of which we need not be fully aware until the film's concluding moments.

Rather than telling us to “open your minds, see as he feels, hear as he hears, feel as he feels,” Mettler, from frame one, puts us directly inside the mind of this man, makes us become Scissere, a person whose senses are acutely open, defenseless, and unselective, and whose perceptions are vividly coloured by detail and imagination. In this respect it resembles the silent film classic, *The*

Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, but with a caring twist and less of an interest in the psychotic distortions of madness, than in the illustration of the need for a greater awareness of ourselves and of each other, and for a deeper, warmer sense of humanity in an increasingly difficult world. Mettler could not have achieved such goals more effectively had he offered us a documentary or docu-drama of Scissere's case history. We learn more of the essentials of his existence (and ours) as a result of Mettler's judiciously chosen experiential approach.

Scissere prepares to leave the questionable sanctuary of the institution. His anguish becomes ours as he walks down the hallway to the front door. It is an anguish made agonizingly concrete by Mettler's stunning manipulation of image: Scissere's walking body moves - freezes - moves - freezes - moves - freezes - moves, each forward movement leaving a blurring, living streak in its wake. In this manner, Scissere is shown moving through his environment, his image responding to the task of walking through insubstantial air as if it were pressing, struggling through a substance far more palpable and unyielding.

We see what Scissere must feel as he moves towards an inevitable, unknowable future out in the world that had contributed to his placement behind hospital walls. We have before us a visual, sensual metaphor of his internal state – every nerve-ending taut and bare, every fibre of his being acutely aware of every particle of the environment that exists around him, every sound, every sight, as he moves forward to the door that leads from a sterile world into one that can only seem strange and threatening to the vulnerable mind.

The film is never silent. Under all the changing sounds of everyday life there is a constant rushing or roaring in our ears, like the aural equivalent of a continual life force, the quality of the roar changing with each change in environment. As the rhythmic human music had given way to the soft cry-ridden roar of the hospital, so does the hospital sound give way to the louder more insistent sound of the city: a nerve-jarring, multi-engined roar that changes in intensity but never ceases.

We catch a glimpse of Scissere in an underground subway station, people coursing by him as he stands watching, and we find ourselves entering the lives of three individuals (and one dependent) with whom we spend the balance of the film. Thanks to the talents of Mettler and his cast, these people are as real, as detailed, as complex, and as haunting (and haunted) as any we encounter in our own daily lives.

We watch them live in their own particular segment of the same world, reacting to life in their own distinct ways. A young mother (Natalie Olanick) spends the day on her own, searching for some meaning in the crazy-quilt of

city life and city people. Her young child – loving, dependent and powerless – has been left in the care of another woman and sadly, is not a part of its own mother's search. A white-coated scientist (Anthony Downes), immersed in a world of systematized calculations and observations, discovers a new species of moth – the possible culmination of his life search. A young drug addict (Sandy MacFadyen) steals a fur to finance a drug buy, “shoots up” and then plays his electric guitar with feverish intensity until oblivion sets in some 60 seconds later, and he is left alone and lost in his search.

As the film draws to a close, the paths of these four characters cross in the subway station where Scissere stands, watching. And now we realize that we have never left the mind of Scissere. Scissere had looked at the passing people and, like looking at his reflection in a multi-image mirror, had seen himself in terms of these people, and shaped the unseen details of their lives in terms of his own life, his own fears, his own memories of a mother's fleeting warmth and a child left behind (Scissere as a child?), of a young man lost in drugs and desolation (a feared future or the remembered cause for Scissere's hospitalization?), of a white-coated world of structured observation and scientific study (the comfortless world of the institution and an outside world of increasing alienation and dehumanization).

It is left for us to decipher, because this is not a story film but an experience. Shaped, yes, but an experience created with enough imagery, sound and time for us to become as sensitive, as engulfed, as aware and as imaginative as Scissere, so that when the film ends, we carry all of this into our own worlds, applying it to what we see, whom we meet, and how we cope with our own lives.

Some viewers may find 90 minutes of intense sensual stimulation and abstraction too challenging and too exhausting to be able to make much sense of it as it unfolds at its own pace. Indeed, perhaps because of its unique visual and aural intensity, the film could and should be tightened by a few minutes to give greater clarity and impact to this revelation in the subway, the key that brings together all that we have experienced, the important moment that is almost lost in the prolonged tension of our search.

Nevertheless, Peter Mettler deserves considerable attention and respect for having created what is, in fact, an internal documentary, a particularly vivid view of the human mind and the human experience from the *inside*. It is to be hoped that Mettler will continue to follow the path he has opened with *Scissere*, his first feature, and that he will continue to explore the near-limitless possibilities of what he and film and we the audience can achieve as an active, working triumvirate, aware of convention but unfettered by it.

Laurinda Hart ●

SCISSERE d. Peter Mettler p. Ron Repke Peter Mettler exec. p. Alfred Mettler sc./d.o.p. Peter Mettler asst. d. Mitch Harrison ed. Peter Mettler lighting Jens Sturup. Steven Deme asst. d. Henry Jesionka. Bruce McDonald. Marsh Birchard add. sd. Peter Mettler. Bruno Degazio post-p. asst. Bruce McDonald. Joey Hardin p.c. Collaborative Effort Productions Lp. Greg Krantz. Natalie Olanick. Sandy MacFadyen. Anthony Downes running time 90 min., colour b&w. 16mm. Produced with the support of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. Film House Group and OAC.