

## *Ossian & the Hare: An Experiment in Poetry and the Alchemy of Film*

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### **Abstract**

*[Ossian & the Hare](#)<sup>1</sup> is an experimental film-essay combination intended to work like two sides of the same coin. The 20 minute long film is designed to be more experiential than narrative driven, moving us through various spaces and atmospheres as if in a kind of dreamscape. In pointing up some of the thinking and ideas that are embedded in the film, the text provides a framework situating the film within a film-as-artwork context. It outlines many of the influences that contribute both to visual style and content, offering more depth to the overall experience of viewing the film.*

*Keywords: Experimental films; Mythology; Liminality in motion pictures; Poetry in motion pictures*



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<sup>1</sup> *Ossian & the Hare* is available online at [http://loopheadstudio.com/ossian/online/ossian\\_and\\_the\\_hare.html](http://loopheadstudio.com/ossian/online/ossian_and_the_hare.html)

"All the instants we have experienced are other worlds, for they are not the one we are in now..."<sup>2</sup>

Julian Barbour

Throughout its history, most filmmaking has been focused on narrative and the representation of 'reality' (akin in form perhaps to the novel and fiction writing). Other approaches have been taken by filmmakers such as Maya Deren, a pioneer of film-as-art in the 1940s. Interested in a more psychological, symbolic or ritualistic representation of reality, Deren, with a background in poetry, was interested in "the credibility of the un-real... the manifestation of the unknown in the known, in discovering the laws of unknown forces which com-pulse the universe."<sup>3</sup> Her films explored trance-like states and surreal imagery, and she argued for film to be recognized as an art form in its own right, separate from the narrative style of mainstream cinema. She stated that she was "content if on those rare occasions whose truth can be stated only by poetry, that you will perhaps recall an image, or even only the aura of my films".<sup>4</sup> *Ossian & the Hare* (2015) shares many of Deren's interests and aspires towards developing its own kind of personal film poetry.

As a film, *Ossian & the Hare* (2015) is not focused on narrative or plot, but on atmosphere and symbolic meaning. It attempts to re-create a dream-state, a progression through different spaces that can be understood to be happening as much in the mind as in any 'real' world. (The choice of film as a medium was made because of its capacity to mimic the state of dreaming). The film itself is based on a fragment of Irish folklore. As with a musician playing traditional tunes in order to maintain connections between past, present and future, this rendering of an old story-fragment is similarly interested in issues of interpretation, signification and transmission. The title is stylistically 'factual', as is often the case with folktales, indicating a preference for minimal, non-psychological explanation; the framework is left open and meaning is not prescribed. Leaving interpretation open can make for uncomfortable viewing. Not everyone wants to be placed in the confusing position of not being sure what, if anything, is 'going on'. But such is the film's intention, to bring the viewer through a strange unexplained journey that comes from a mythical or by-gone era. We are placed into a gritty, black and white world that is intensely focused on the texture of each passing moment. The images flicker, demonstrating their fragile and transient nature; the image is here and not here; scratchy and aged, an emissary from another era. Flickering (a feature of old film footage) is also reminiscent of firelight and starlight, energy constantly in flux or transformation. Like starlight, (which takes so long to reach the earth that by the time the light hits us, the star itself may have long since ceased to exist), this fragment is a trace, the imprint of a mind-set whose thinking is now gone. (This flickering also continues into the underworld of the beach which glistens with golden sparkles emanating from sunlight reflected on water; another incarnation of starlight). Within the vernacular tradition there is often a desire to pass on old stories and folktales despite the lack of obvious relevance to our own contemporary world. Perhaps it is because of a nagging sense that there may be something of significance in them (even if the significance is just poetics, metaphor or use of imaginative thinking).

<sup>2</sup> Penelope J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Veve E. Clark, *The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works*, ed. Hollis Melton, Vol 1/Part 1 & 2 (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1988), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Maya Derren and Alexander Hammid, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hs6vYjwEIy4>.



The fragment of folklore that this film is based on describes an experience that is not plausible in our rational thinking world but follows the basic pattern of an archetypal shamanic vision-journey. On a hallucinogenic trip, the shaman might encounter a 'totem animal' that may (or may not) reveal some important insight. The film takes this as its form or structure, presenting the fragment almost as an artifact of sorts, leaving us to figure out whether there is anything of significance being communicated, however obliquely. This projection of a dream-language into our rational, material world is partly a kind of enchantment, but is also done in the spirit of its (imagined) original intention, for the potential to meaningfully shift consciousness. In the shamanistic tradition of the vision-journey, after a psychological and/or physical ordeal, a revelation of the inter-connectedness of all life often occurs. Perhaps the significance of myth and archetype lies as much in its structure as in its content, in maintaining awareness of this doorway into the subconscious mind. Theatre director Peter Brook talked of 'never being able to see all of the invisible, so after straining towards it, we have to face defeat, drop down to earth, then start again', and of 'rediscovering that a holy theatre is still what we need, but where do we look for it? In the clouds or on the ground?'<sup>5</sup> A combination of both, of feet in mud and imagination in flight, is something that poet Ted Hughes uses to great effect, blurring the line between real and imaginary.<sup>6</sup> This film attempts a similar type of surreal experience, obscuring the point of departure into a dream-world.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 1968), 72.

<sup>6</sup> Nick Gammage, ed., *The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes* (Faber & Faber Ltd, 1999), 9.



The shots are slow and long, pulling us along a thread of spatial continuity. The slow ‘contemplative’ shot is something that director Bela Tarr uses extensively in his work, a technique described by his cameraman as ‘the thinking image’. In his films, the camera moves as if part of a thought process, regarding the characters with great intensity and following them unobtrusively as they move through their worlds. Tarr himself is not so much interested in stories, which he feels “mislead people into thinking that something has happened. Nothing really happens as we flee from one condition to another. All that remains is time itself; the years, days, hours, minutes and seconds”.<sup>7</sup> *Ossian & the Hare* (2015) shares (in its own small way) an affinity with Tarr’s approach; a sense of distance from the protagonist, the perspective of ‘nature’ or ‘time’ as the observer, and the striving for a certain kind of ambiguity between the real and the symbolic.

The story-fragment itself comes out of a (Celtic) fascination with surreal imagery, liminality, crossing thresholds into other dimensions and a questioning of our human-animal identity. The protagonists are hunter and hare. We follow the hunter chasing its quarry; we climb underground to find a 'beautiful woman sitting on a throne bleeding from a wound in her leg'. What are we to make of this image? On a basic level it is a poetic way of acknowledging (and empathizing with) a beautiful creature in the sorrowful moment of its death at our own hand. The rich and multifarious associations that the hare has as an icon throughout history also allows for readings on a symbolic level.<sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup>The hare, a cipher for existence itself, is confronting us with an age-old dilemma - survival at what cost - are we, unwittingly or otherwise, destroying ourselves? In that way the film can be read as a somewhat troubled meditation on existence.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Ebert, “Werckmeister Harmonies Movie Review (2000) | Roger Ebert,” 2007, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/werckmeister-harmonies-2000>.

<sup>8</sup> The hare has a wide range of symbolic associations including a cypher for existence, anarchic wildness, mysteriousness, uncanniness, vitality, promiscuity, fertility, quintessential victimhood, resurrection, and was even considered by Jung to ‘run’ all roads to and from the collective unconscious.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Carnell, *Hare* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 50–89.



Alchemy, the magical power of transmuting a common substance, usually of little value, into a substance of great value, is being evoked here. All aspects of the film are a part of this alchemical experiment (an experiment in 'transfiguration' where the divine is made visible in the revelation of animal and human as one, and of an understanding that ultimately our fate is tied up with the fate of all life on this planet). A recording of a screeching hare was analyzed and used as the basis for melodic structure (and is itself embedded in the soundtrack in very elongated form). Even the wind (which is tuned to particular notes) has the presence of a character or consciousness, a conduit between sky and earth. All of the elements are communicating on an emotional level. Sounds, usually considered 'noise', such as loud crackle, resonant frequencies and feedback, suggest an energy force on the brink of chaos. Paradoxically this layer of odd and seemingly out-of-place sounds constitutes the most straightforward representation of 'real' reality in the film. Electromagnetic energy is hitting our planet from all sides, causing huge electrical storms in the upper stratosphere. We are not aware of this constant electrical activity, but if it was audible, this might in fact be what our world actually sounds like. In the reverb of these VLF recordings<sup>10</sup> we can hear the membrane around our planet, the skin between our habitable 'earthly' world and the vast unknown that is outer space. These sounds make audible a threshold that challenges our comprehension, a modern day edge of the unknown. This electricity is energy in its natural raw state. The scale of it is deeply unsettling. In hearing these sounds, we are somehow looking down on the earth from above; looking in at this ancient dream through a haze of time-less-ness. The materiality of this crackling is hard to determine, at times sounding wet, dry, like fire, rain, or strange birds and insects (slowed down, these sounds become massive rolls of thunder and lightning). This electricity charges the film, creating an unstable atmosphere that permeates everything. Something fundamental resonates and disturbs in the combination of blood, electricity and water, the smell and taste of iron. Electricity, as the very spark of life, becomes the most basic element to which everything is eventually reduced or returned. Electricity is so entwined in our world as to be almost invisible to us (sounds of distortion and feedback are used for emotional effect and are part of our contemporary musical vocabulary). At the end of the film, music (played on electric mandolin) whittles

<sup>10</sup> VLF = Very Low Frequency (Electro-Magnetic Spectrum) Recordings made at weather-watch stations around the globe

down to the sound of electrical feedback as we pass through the eye and merge with the random sounds of electro-magnetic energy in outer space; the final screech of the dying hare is heard as electricity. Like Janus, the pagan god of transition, with one face looking into the past and another looking into the future, we straddle the ancient and modern mind.



*Ossian & the Hare* (2015) aspires to a combination of sound and image that works on the level of poetic effect. As with the structure of much poetry, it is the very last line (or image) that throws the whole shape of the poem into relief. Here, the very last image is of the dead hare and the hunter's feet approaching (the very last frame is in fact a white flash of electricity). We feel exhausted by the journey; it is hard to remember where we even started. At what point did we enter the dream... if the hunter walks over to the dead hare at the end, did the rest of the imagery just exist in our head? Did his conscience create it? Did the hare manifest it? Did Nature herself conjure up all the images? We move on a fractal journey from the stratosphere to the physical realm and into the internal space of the mind. We are left with the feeling of having been brought to (contemplate) an image, the meaning of which we must decipher for ourselves. It is a bleak, dark and sorrowful dream-vision that the film portrays. Ted Hughes, a poet known for his own dark use of animal imagery and mythic reference, wrote about:

The inner world, separated from the outer world is a place of demons. The outer world, separated from the inner world, is a place of meaningless objects... The faculty that makes the human being out of these two worlds is called divine... It can be called religious or visionary. More essentially, it is the imagination which embraces both outer and inner worlds in a creative spirit.<sup>11</sup>

*Ossian & the Hare* (2015) is an experimental film in search of such a faculty.

<sup>11</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 151.



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