

Dirt (2024)

AntBit

Among the many verbal riffs in [David Finkelstein](#)’s latest animated experiment **Dirt** is a disquisition on bats, and on their use of echolocation to map out spaces in the dark with their ‘sound pictures’ – and indeed a recurring visual motif in the film is a pair of batwings monstrously decorated with large ears. This, in a way, is also a figure for the film’s ideal viewer, having to engage in acts of synaesthesia to navigate the film’s rich yet often obscure cornucopia of sights and sounds. For like bats, or like the rattlensnake mentioned later which feels its environment with flickering tongue, we must use our full sensorium to synthesise the multiple seeds of meaning which Finkelstein and his co-conspirator [Ian W. Hill](#) scatter throughout their work.

Finkelstein and Hill typically appear, semi-rotoscoped, at the bottom of the screen, sometimes individually, sometimes together, as they present their improvised word clouds in stylised, staccato snatches, like beat poets or stuttering schizophasics. This discourse in turn inspires Finkelstein’s wildly figurative 3D animations, while musical interludes, variously classical, electronic, jazz and rock (Finkelstein is also the composer), engender more abstract visual patternings on screen, dancing and pulsing to the rhythms.

The theme, barely buried in the title, is the ground beneath our feet, which the pair uses as a springboard for ideas as disparate as crops and colonialism, hygiene and hierophancy, detritus and death – but in keeping with the extemporaneous nature of their performances, neither feels bound to stick too long to any fixed subject, and their dialectic is free-flowing.



That said, there can also be found here some ironic critique of the very logorrheic form that these two have adopted. In a reflexive moment, Finkelstein expresses anxiety about the ‘powder keg’ consequences of carelessly saying ‘something slightly off-colour’; while elsewhere, Hill whispers to Finkelstein about the excess of voices (“there are so many, and you don’t need to listen to all of them... not all of them will help you”). Here, words have their precision and place, and occasionally, just occasionally, they matter. Indeed, they are the matter – and from them, new, aberrant ideas can grow.

This odd couple keep shifting in their self-representation – now comedy double act, now cultic gurus, now fireside cowboys, now snakeoil salesmen, now fascistic demagogues, now fugitive pirates – as they offer their talking cure for an incomprehensible world, here disassembled and reassembled into kaleidoscopic audiovisual art. It is an alchemic process of conjuring one thing from another – ashes to ashes, dust to dust – and as you are taken along this strange nexus of concepts that ramify and reecho in the dark, you will feel like a creature of the night, flapping and dreaming to an insistent lullaby.



It goes without saying that **Dirt** is in no way a conventional film. There is no narrative as such, nor characters – unless our Protean narrators count. Yet there is progression and shape – a shape which shifts and warps and veers off in multiple directions, allowing us to lose ourselves to its often overwhelming stimuli. Perhaps Hill summarises the experience of viewing it best as, surrounded by swirling images of pills and seeds, he babbles in panic, “There were just ideas from every side that were bouncing off my head, and some of them were able to penetrate and some of them weren’t able to penetrate, and I was trying to open myself to the right ideas that were coming in – and maybe keep out the wrong ones – but I couldn’t move fast enough. There were just so many ideas coming from so many sides”, before he concludes: “I just decided to stand there and let all of them in. Let all of them in. And if I let all of them in, maybe I’d win.”

Maybe – because if you surrender to the manic maximalism of this symphonic, psychedelic cinema, you will be transported beyond yourself to a place where everything (past ghosts, repressed history, buried treasure, the ashes of a friend) has been returned and reduced to the earth, yet where dirt itself has been revalorised as not just resting ground for the dead, but as fertile medium for future growth.

strap: David Finkelstein & Ian W. Hill’s experimental animated feature riffs free-associately on the material that is the source and endpoint of life

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