

THE VIDEOTAPES OF TONY OURSLER

By John Minkowsky

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Since their first public exhibition in 1978, Tony Oursler’s surreal narrative videotapes have garnered substantial critical acclaim, as well as a few outraged reactions. Their overt themes of chance and fated brutality, aberrant sexual behavior and socio-political corruption, along with their primitive intensity and critical stance toward the mass media, have made these works particularly attractive to an artworld nourished by the fashions of post-punk pseudo-nihilism. Such superficial associations with the new wave figurative movement notwithstanding, Oursler’s tapes evidence the deeper concerns of a social critic and a neo-Romantic.

Actually, Oursler wears many hats. He is also a satirist and black humorist, a commentator on popular media forms, a narrative experimentalist, and a moralist of sorts. In each of the odd scenarios he has created, from his first improvised soap opera parodies to his more expansive explorations of late, Oursler has played all of these roles. Armed at times with little more than miniature sets and props, he has created a coherent universe parallel to our own and reflective of it, but also one of extreme actions and emotions, of occasional ecstasy and frequent damnation. Here is a universe over which lords puppetmaster Oursler, spinning forth contemporary fairy tales wrought of our deepest primal fears and passions: Welcome to his world.

Following a brief period of formal art training at Rockland Community College in upstate New York, Oursler arrived at the California Institute of the Arts with a good deal of “classical art baggage,” an outlook he describes as “conservative,” and a strong interest in the Surrealist paintings of Salvador Dali. Early on in California, Oursler became aware that the methodology of traditional art education was passé, and that more personalized, idiosyncratic approaches to contemporary artmaking and media were the dominant trend.

“So I got some equipment and started fooling around and thought I’d make a sardonic T.V. show. And it’s funny ... but all the basics for what I’m pretty much still doing now were involved in that (first) tape.”

That first tape, *Joe, Joe’s Woman and Joe’s Transsexual Brother* (1976), is a largely improvised, stream-of-consciousness tale of deviant sexuality, rape, violent death, mutilation and vengeful murder, acted out with G.I. Joe and Barbie dolls. While putting his limited array of toy props through their paces and narrating the extemporaneous, sensationalistic plotline, Oursler serves up his ironic formula for good T.V. entertainment: Sex, violence, and “plenty of action” among two-dimensional stereotyped characters “you can really look up to.”

Oursler’s second tape, *The Life of Phillis* (1977), is his other satire on pop-cultural violence, and his other direct critique of mass media exploitation. Poor protagonist Phillis is the quintessential victim (as well as the avenging perpetrator) of unspeakable acts, a hyperbolic archetype for a plethora of unfortunates who populate the fantasy worlds of the television soap opera and supermarket tabloid.

A comic bloodbath with sociological overtones, *The Life of Phillis* includes among its tawdry themes child prostitution, necrophilia, hideous mutilations, religious visions and attempts to create a secret Aryan master race by artificial insemination. Despite their numerous flaws – especially their erratic pacing and overlength – both *Joe...* and *Phillis* evidence Oursler’s fresh imaginative vision and his natural penchant for spinning outrageous yarns.

Phillis is also important for its employment of evocative hand-painted sets as storytelling devices. Much of the charm of Oursler’s tapes can be traced to these original tableaux, each of which attempts to reduce complex actions and emotions to their simplest means of visual representation. A clenched hand in descent, followed by a splatter of black paint, more than adequately conjures up the image of a violent murder, even as it mocks the conventions of suspenseful cinematic montage. Moreover, this “honing down of

symbolism,” in the artist’s own words, imparts a comic element to the representation of otherwise horrific, forbidden events.

Yet despite his oftentimes sophisticated methods of depiction and the salaciousness of his subject matter, Oursler’s crude but highly-emotive expressionist renderings evoke the primitive style and energy of children’s art. Like a naïf engaged in the fundamentally playful act of storytelling, and quick to find imaginative solutions to problems of visualization that might otherwise impede the progress of an improvised narrative, Oursler calls upon his own and other viewers’ abilities to willingly suspend disbelief. The juxtaposition of overstated violence, as characterized by the lurid topics mentioned, against understated representational modes common to childlike play, is, of course, at the heart of Oursler’s comic vision. In the best traditions of black comedy and social satire, he creates a world parallel to our own in which the horrific is heightened yet made palatable by an advanced level of visual abstraction and an infusion of fierce humor and an infusion of fierce humor.

Before completing his undergraduate degree at CalArts in 1979, Oursler created four more tapes: *Diamond (Head)*, *Life, Good Things and Bad Things* and *Rosey Finger of Dawn*.

Diamond (Head) (1978-79) tells the episodic story of the diamond-shaped She, her courtship with the triangular He, the birth of the fetus-shaped Good Son, and their collective bourgeois passions, desires and fears. A further continuation of the soap opera parodies of *Joe...* and *Phyllis*, *Diamond (Head)* eschews specific reference to mass media genres while extending Oursler’s experimentation with archetypal character representation and with more open narrative forms (which prevision, in many respects, the radical picaresque structures employed in *The Weak Bullet* and *The Loner*). As an overt critique of consumerism and the superficiality inherent in middle-class capitalist values, *Diamond (Head)* is matched only by the artist’s more recent tape, *Son of Oil*.

Both *Life* (1979) and *Good Things and Bad Things* (1979) are actually collections of brief sketches created in the aftermath of *Phyllis* as a conscious departure from that earlier tape's distended narrative format. *Life* is a series of short vignettes that are thematically linked in their depictions of contemporary, mutually-destructive relationships and which, along with the five selections comprising *Good Things and Bad Things*, represent the artist's first explicit articulation of a dualistic worldview. The interdependence of good things and bad things – a dialectical system of opposing yet complementary forces fundamental to human consciousness – is a central omnipresent theme in all of Oursler's work, and one which receives its most sophisticated treatment in the haunting, hallucinatory *Grand Mal*.

Nearly all of the short pieces in both “anthologies” are worthy of attention, but perhaps the most compelling are “Crazy Head” and “Till Ye Know Me” (which open and close *Life* and *Good Things and Bad Things* respectively). Both are revelatory portraits wherein crude mask-like visages manifest the characters' aberrant personality traits or “dangerous thoughts” in a manner once again reminiscent of children's art. The viewer may be tempted to see in these fragmentary works the prototypes for one of Oursler's most developed characters, The Loner, or even mocking self-portraits of the artist as a young sociopath.

Each of these early student works by Oursler was instrumental in defining the artist's fundamental method (the use of stylized sets and props in explorations of the narrative mode), his choice of subject matter (the mythology of pop culture/mass media) and his philosophical perspective (an intuitive reworking of the dialectics of Romanticism). In order to realize his final project at CalArts, Oursler was given short-term access to color video equipment and a loft space that enabled the construction of large-scale sets for full-figure costumed performers. The plot of the resultant work, *Rosey Finger of Dawn* (1979), is as disturbing as it is simple: The protagonist, a provincial woman played by the artist in drag, is traversing the borderline that separates country from city (that is, nature from civilization, or innocence from experience) when she is accosted by a man in black

who robs her, rapes her, and stabs her to death. As a moral tag to this sad story, an unexplained “phantom shot” is fired, killing the aggressor as well.

In many regards an experiment, *Rosey Finger* is not without its noteworthy elements, including the thematic use of color motifs to differentiate between the evil, dangerous urban setting and its benevolent rural counterpart, or the sideways construction of the set and placement of the camera to exaggerate an already-grotesque interaction between the assailant and victim. But as a result of the use of real actors, an element of naturalism seems to intrude too strongly upon the graphic representation of this unsavory scenario, and thus *Rosey Finger* remains Oursler’s most discomfiting and problematic work.

The “phantom shot” with which *Rosey Finger of Dawn* concludes might have inspired the eponymous star of *The Weak Bullet* (1980), Oursler’s first mature and wholly successful work. Describing the adventures of a wanton bullet as it wends its violent way among a decade of discrete, diverse narrative situations, *The Weak Bullet* is, by Oursler’s own definition, a folkish – yet very contemporary – “shaggy dog story.” The artist adopts a picaresque format because it is largely non-climactic in a traditional sense, is infinitely expandable, and is able to incorporate virtually all manner of imaginative concepts while maintaining, in its meandering fashion, a semblance of narrative coherence. And as the sole ligament connecting the various vignettes of which the tape is comprised, *The Weak Bullet* is an ideal protagonist; defined by its wayward motion, it propels the tale through an assortment of environments and situations.

As its very name implies, the unconventional character of *The Weak Bullet* proves a complex and provocative symbolic entity. An insentient projectile trailing the narrative thread, it may seem, at times, a lethal engine of fate while in other instances appearing to be little more than a chance passerby or passive observer. Certainly most of the bullet’s encounters result in scenes of emasculation, both literal and figurative, yet it may serve as an agent of good as well as bad things, as a generative as well as a destructive phallic force. Exemplary of the bullet’s dual function is the final scene (a sequence inspired, according to the artist, by a piece of Civil War apocrypha reported in the *National*

Enquirer) wherein the bullet, fertile with sperm from its previous castrated victim, impregnates a neighboring woman who later gives birth to a little “so-and-so.” Thus, as the tradition of Comedy mandates, *The Weak Bullet* concludes on a festive (if ironic, and rather bizarre) note of miraculous birth and regeneration.

Oursler also gave his next tape, *The Loner* (1980), an improbable happy ending. “There is a little bit of The Loner in everybody,” Oursler has said in describing his most sympathetic lead character, a shape-shifting humanoid who is overwhelmed by autoerotic obsessions, adolescent self-loathing, social paranoia and the general stuff of life, and whose emblem is the aborted fetus. Oursler manages to create in his viewers a peculiar understanding of and empathy with this abandoned, undesirable misfit – this complex of complexes – by focusing upon seminal moments in the hero’s psychosexual development and upon his emotional fixations and fantasies.

An early scene, which describes The Loner’s conception and birth, becomes the primal source for his most frequent obsessions: He “knew he was a mistake,” we are told, the accidental result of the intermingling of a couple (of hands) while “praying for angels.” At the moment of his birth, his eggshell body is crushed by its progenitors; thus the stillborn Loner’s impotence is given both physical and spiritual significance. The self-hatred of his protracted adolescence seemingly knows no bounds and, as befits his incomplete status, The Loner is a multiform patchwork depicted in turn by an egg, a fetal wad of pallid chewing gum, a water-filled contraceptive, a malformed spider-like wraith and an albino cockroach. Explaining the unlikely conclusion to the tape, in which The Loner envisions his own wedding and future “wonderful life,” Oursler has remarked that it represents “a classic happy ending ... but then again, there’s a sardonic reference in that he might just actually be hallucinating it...” In The Loner’s world, fantasy and fact contribute equally to the construction of a self-reinforcing sense of reality; in Oursler’s next tape, *Grand Mal* (1981), the very distinction between hallucination and reality may be nominal at best.

In late 1981, Tony Oursler presented a lecture at New York's Museum of Modern Art entitled, "The More You Take Away From It, The Bigger It Gets." This riddle of a title refers to a hole, and describes The Loner, whose deepening isolation serves only to amplify his most distinctive feature. The title also implies vaster physical and spiritual voids, the subjects of *Grand Mal*.

A *grand mal* is, by dictionary definition, "an attack of epilepsy in which there are severe convulsions and loss of consciousness." By Oursler's definition, it is an extreme state of consciousness in which all of an individual's sensations, emotions, beliefs and memories are "suffered" simultaneously, in a mass (for the profane) and a glut (for the sanctimonious) of misfired neurons. "So the tape," Oursler has said, "was inspired by the thought... 'What would happen is a young Catholic had a *grand mal*?'"

Grand Mal is an extraordinary attempt to render a synchronic and wholistic experience – the passage of one's entire life before one's eyes at the moment of death – in a temporal mode and medium. Appropriate to the hallucinatory mindscape it depicts, *Grand Mal* might best be described as a cluster of fragmented, obsessive images and themes, or a delirious web of visions which ponder the significance of life, speculate about death and the hereafter, and consider the roles of religion, science and other oftentimes irreconcilable but nevertheless coexistent systems of belief and thought.

The differentiation between and interdependence of Life and Death, Heaven and Hell, and material experience and metaphysical faith are among the central motifs of *Grand Mal*, as suits both Oursler's general preoccupation with oppositional systems and his envisioned protagonist's moribund concerns. The internal landscape of *Grand Mal* – a jarring collage of spurious biblical parables, bizarre moralistic fables, pseudo-scientific 'explanations' and other tableaux which range from the banal to the marvelous – is dotted with recurrent images which vary in significance from scene to scene. The worm, as one example, serves as a symbol of death and corruption (an intestinal parasite, the snake in the Garden of Eden) as well as that of procreative functions and life-affirming values (the vermiform shapes of sperm, worm broods as microcosms of human societies).

In many ways, *Grand Mal* is Tony Oursler's masterwork to date, the synthesis and culmination of a progression of concerns and techniques embodied in his entire oeuvre. Oursler's attraction to more and more open narrative forms – or complex structures which allow for the incorporation of diverse materials related thematically if not by plot – finds a potent model in the *grand mal* as structural device. As central metaphor, the *grand mal* is more than simply another lurid topic for the artist to parody or exploit; rather, it represents *the* pivotal moment for reflecting upon and taking account of one's actions and beliefs – an apocalyptic setting both brutal and poignant. And finally, in its incessant juxtaposition of good things and bad things to evoke the full fabric of human existence, *Grand Mal* is the quintessential statement of Oursler's dualistic philosophy and a negation of either/or exclusivity. The tone of *Grand Mal* suggests an ex-Catholic's simultaneous cynicism and awe, and implies that the interweaving of all such contradictions and oppositions is fundamental to human experience and the shaping of consciousness.

Son of Oil and *EVOL*, Oursler's most recent tapes, mark new directions in his work. Both tapes make extensive use, for the first time since *Rosey Finger of Dawn*, of costumed performers on large-scale sets, and both also evidence an unprecedented level of sophistication in the use of multilayered sound and dense allusive texts. More important, however, are the artist's thematic ambitions for these works. While still relying on his expressionist painting style and his innate, unnerving brilliance with vulgar poetic metaphor, Oursler has, with *Son of Oil* and *EVOL*, added to his plenitude of parodies, bizarre portraits, shaggy dog stories and extended hallucinations a pair of imaginative socio-cultural pseudo-histories that have especial relevance within a contemporary milieu. Both of these works speculate upon broad conspiratorial forces that enslave us by creating and manipulating our economic systems, our sexual identities and, above all else, our common cultural myths.

Son of Oil, Oursler's most overtly political tape, itself begins with a modern myth of the coming of a new messiah whose doctrines promote power and profit at any cost. Laden

with references to horror films and conspiracy theories, *Son of Oil* posits the gasoline pump as the new emblem for humankind – “a race,” note belligerent outer space visitors, “that keeps its penis in a holster” – and describes a world in which all human values, including love, ethics, morality, even life itself, are subservient to the quest for wealth and control symbolized by that profiteer-as-savior, the offspring of Oil.

The tape begins with the birth of the Son of Oil from the poison pool and He is, of course, a monster – the first of several fantastic manifestations of a dark heart depicted throughout the tape. While a human figure apes King Kong – an intrusive primeval force amidst the skyscrapers, airplanes and Barbie-doll heroines of Western civilization – the narration provides a pun-laden materialist parody of the coming of the new redeemer: A son/sun bringing light to the world (petrochemical, naturally) as well as proof of life after death (in the transmutation of animal matter into fossil fuel). Monstrous couplings figure prominently into a number of subsequent scenes: A mad scientist, as one example, mixes an oily love potion to attract a female mummy, and their marriage of the modern and the ancient, of science and religion, of West and East, is ultimately a business merger. Conspiracy theories, political assassinations and genocide are all treated in Oursler’s multifaceted exposition of the struggle for global gain and authority.

A mock history of the decline of civilization is the focus of the latter part of *Son of Oil*. Society is described as a “finely-tuned machine” that operates for “the benefit of all,” but it is also seen as a system which encourages dissolution and waste even as it forges on, like a dynamo, with no discernible moral center. In a final and memorably chilling sequence, the gas station and cemetery are fused in a single set, the tombstones merging into pumps, and blackness – the color of oil and death – predominates. The owner of the station, who lubricates squeaky coffin hinges, “knows what’s going on ... but he’s not going to breathe a word” because he’s aware, “they have special ways of shutting up a squealer.” In the artist’s pessimistic vision, everyone is implicated in the making of this unctuous, odious world.

Adopting a similar format of thematic collage, *EVOL* explores the cultural myths by which sexual impulses – and, by extension, affection, pleasure and procreation of the species – are controlled by powerful but ambiguous forces. The distorted mirror-image of love that the title evokes is tracked, in rough chronology, from birth to death, from an initial awareness of biological functions (“the birds and the bees”) to a final triumph over physical mortality (by way of organ transplantation). Explicit references to fantastic plots again abound, and include: the legend of Perfumed Lake, which transforms the physiological fact of fertilization into romantic tragedy; a Love Drug which transposes love and death in the users’ minds; and the Immaculate Conception, which miraculously transcends natural process altogether. Oursler’s ability to cluster oddly-reverberant strains of visual art and verbal imagery around a central grand theme is nowhere more apparent than in this work, and pedestrian double entendres, exotic prophecies of genetic engineering, and culturally-biased equations of sexuality with the animalistic urges of so-called primitives all figure prominently into the strange brew that is *EVOL*.

Oursler’s deconstruction of pop-cultural myths about sex in *EVOL* is a far cry from his first T.V. parodies of less than a decade ago. Still in his formative stages as an artist (or so one might assume, as he is not yet 30 years old), Oursler has nevertheless been responsible for one of the most original and compelling bodies of work in all of video art. As we await his next dissection and reconfiguration of some newly-discovered aspect of the good things and bad things that populate our world, Oursler’s above-mentioned accomplishments should provide us ample food for thought.

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Author’s note: All above quotes, when not taken from the texts of the tapes themselves, are excerpted from an extensive, unpublished interview between the author and Tony Oursler that took place in New York City in the spring of 1982.

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