

GFF 2011: Holes Where The Heart Is

Posted by Jac Mantle, Thu 24 Feb 2011

Winner of the inaugural Margaret Tait Award 2010, **Torsten Lauschmann** invites **Jac Mantle** to his studio for an insight into his forthcoming screening at Glasgow Film Festival 2011. Words: **Jac Mantle**

With less than a month to go before the premiere and only screening of his site-specific commission at Glasgow Film Festival, Torsten Lauschmann is deep in the making process. *At the Heart of Everything a Row of Holes* is a continuation of his interest in the origins of modern technologies. It began, he says, as a logical progression from making video projections that are more like paintings than traditional rectangular, single-screen films, to using a massive £30,000 projector with a moving head – “it looks like something from a *Terminator* film” – that will make use of the whole auditorium at Glasgow Film Theatre.

At the centre of the film is the self-playing piano – the late nineteenth century innovation that, for writer William Gaddis, American novelist and essayist, epitomised all that was evil about the rapid mechanisation of society. After a lifelong obsession he eventually published a book, which Lauschmann shows to me now. “It’s about how you don’t have to learn to play the piano. You can just buy a piano roll that’s playing perfectly – that kind of instant gratification,” he explains of Gaddis’ theory. “He wrote it the year before he died, so it’s like he’s losing his mind within it, which I quite like. He is a bit of a grumpy old man.”

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There will be a player piano in the GFT along with the projection, the keys playing to coincide with what's happening on the screen. An untrained but enthusiastic pianist – the artist's seven year-old son – may also perform for the film, "if he's up for it." Lauschmann has been down to the GFT and marked out the areas and architectural features that he wants to project onto.

"It's going to be interesting to see how it works because it's such a formal environment. If you do it in a gallery, people have less rigid expectations about what's going to happen. It's funny, when you enter the cinema the lights go off and the curtains open, and that signals the beginning." In fact, the interior, design, and warmth have already signalled the start of the cinematic experience, an effect that Lauschmann wants to extend in a soundscape. "Maybe when you enter the cinema, there's already sound playing," he muses. "Maybe it continues at the end, and you leave while it's still on."

Known for work that exists in different forms and on multiple platforms, screening the film at Glasgow Film Festival is hardly a prospect to unnerve Lauschmann. But how strongly do the audience figure in his thoughts when he's making work? "I usually don't think about the audience, really. Not in an obvious kind of way. I guess I'm the audience. I dunno if I'm a good audience; I have a short attention span." He reflects on this. "That's probably quite a good thing."

Perhaps the art audience in general has a short attention span, I suggest. "It gets shorter all the time!" He laughs. "What I said about the sound and walking into the cinema, it is quite a selfish thing because I want to work out for myself, how does it feel? And I hope that somebody else will say, 'oh yeah, what does that do?' Obviously, on a subconscious level, you do think about what something can mean."

Maybe it's the grasp of a work that has only a few weeks before airing, but Lauschmann seems to be constantly probing, thinking about what things might mean. He passes me a DVD that inspires him, *First Contact*, about 1930s explorers trekking to Papua New Guinea to look for gold. In his favourite scene, a native tribesman sports a Kellogg's Shredded Wheat packet left by the visitors on his head as a symbol of power. "Suddenly the meaning is totally lost and reversed," he explains. "It's an illusion that you can fix meaning. Discourse is only possible if you limit it through language and culture, but art doesn't really work that way... It doesn't let you off the hook from making meaningful work, though. It just says you can only do what you feel is right in this particular moment, and hope that it resonates – now, or later, or at all."