

Robert Nelson / Jessie Stead Inhale the Microcosm

Sunday, February 17, 2008, 7:30 pm — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

First prize winner at the 2007 Ann Arbor Film Festival, Jessie Stead's "structuralist road movie" *Foggy Mountains Breakdown More Than Non-Foggy Mountains* explores the magical mundanity of byway wandering (as well as the pleasures and absurdities of cinematic structuralism) with an endlessly mutating parade of Super-8 travelogue, abstract direct animation, transient poetics, and version after version of the Flatt & Scruggs bluegrass classic. Described by Ed Halter as "a strange brew of visual semi-sequiturs and relentless editorial logic," *Foggy Mountains...* receives its West Coast premiere tonight alongside Robert Nelson's long-rumored and virtually unscreened 1997 masterpiece *Hauling Toto Big* (also an Ann Arbor honoree). Decades in the making, *Hauling...* is *Foggy...*'s perfect complement, colliding a sprawling and unruly reality—complete with crazed carnies and rundown ranch hands—with Nelson's own idiosyncratic brand of home-brew formalism. (Steve Polta)

Foggy Mountains Break Down More than Non-Foggy Mountains (2006); digital video, color, sound, 59 minutes, from the maker

"Jessie Stead's hour-long *Foggy Mountains Breakdown More Than Non-Foggy Mountains* at first feels like a loosey-goosey travelogue-cum-art-diary, but then it reveals more hardcore structuralist pattern-making as the picture proceeds. Each section contains different iterations of the same elements, presented in a repeated order: an image of a (literally) burnt CD surrounded by golden-blond hair, a distorted voiceover, frenetic Super-8 footage shot on global journeys, hand-painted blotches animated over one of numerous renditions of "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" (a 1940s hillbilly fiddlin' tune best remembered from Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*), finally concluding with a scrolling-text coda writ with tangled poetics ("Sounds are painted memories of speed, intoxicated politely. Like movie stars in general. A copy of what worked the first time") before the cycle reboots anew. *Foggy's* a strange brew of visual semi-sequiturs and relentless editorial logic, at times resembling an even-lower-rent Jem Cohen, or perhaps Jon Moritsugu doing a Hollis Frampton cover—a welcome bit of wild shag for a scene that too often feels safely formalist. (Ed Halter, "Lincoln Center South: The NYFF walks its avant-garde picture palace to Anthology Film Archives," *The Village Voice*, October 9, 2007. www.villagevoice.com/film/0741,halter,78000,20.html)

Jessie Stead's 2007 "structuralist road movie" *Foggy Mountains Breakdown More Than Non-Foggy Mountains* is a [...] collision between stream-of-unravelling-consciousness on-screen text ("I used to know how to make a pinecone out of pre-cum"); animation perhaps depicting microbes; up-close 'n' blurry 8mm travel footage; eccentric audio musings ("What if I never find the world stage? ...I'm not afraid of undetected love"); myriad found elements, and myriad versions of the classic 1949 Flatt and Scruggs bluegrass tune "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" that range from trad to all-MIDI. More formalist avant-garde than [Robert] Nelson's opus [*Hauling Toto Big*], it does have its quirky credentials in order. (Dennis Harvey, "Rep Picks: Jessie Stead/Robert Nelson: Inhale the Microcosm," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, February 13, 2008. www.sfbg.com/entry.php?entry_id=5647&catid=85&l=1)

Hauling Toto Big (1997) by Robert Nelson; 16mm, b&w, sound, 43 minutes, print from the Academy Film Archive

“These days Nelson maintains a studio in San Francisco and at his home on a mountain north of Ukiah. His output has slowed in recent years—his “latest,” 1997’s *Hauling Toto Big*, includes thanks for an NEA finishing grant awarded in 1982! It also thanks the I Ching for “advice and counsel” and is based on a hoary poem by Robert Service, once known as “the Canadian Kipling.” Service’s death-in-the-frozen-Yukon epic “Cremation of Sam McGee” is the kind of verse whose tempo goes da-DA-da-DA-da-DA-da-DA (e.g., “The furnace roared / The flame tips soared / And danced a furious jig”). But *Hauling Toto Big* skitters and hiccups like an audiovisual beatbox with a mind of its own. This raffishly beautiful, obtuse, very funny featurette doesn’t really “follow” the poem’s story line—well, sometimes it vaguely does. But it also features an old cowpoke trying to get his Brahma Bull named Baloney (cuz “he’s just a little hunk a baloney”) to smile for the camera; a hypnotist lulling us into preparation to watch “a very fine film”; a little man pushing credits and intertitles around the screen; and a carny barker who introduces both one practitioner of “lowdown Transylvanian voodoo black magic [to] put the whammy on you” and two Girlie Show shimmy-shakers about whom he can only say, “By golly lookee, lookee, lookee!”

Images go streaky, go staticky, jump around the frame, superimpose themselves on one another; the soundtrack is an equally intricate (and funny) pastiche. Standing 43 minutes tall in ye olden b&w 16mm, *Hauling Toto Big* is vintage prankster experimentalism that’ll put the whammy on ya for sure. (Dennis Harvey, “Coming to Fruition: Film Arts Rolls Out Robert Nelson’s Vintage Prankster Experimentalism,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 3, 2003. www.sfbg.com/37/07/art_film_totobig.html)