

Nice Biscotts and More

New Films by Luther Price

Sunday, November 9, 2007 — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

The films of Luther Price (*Sodom, Clown, Bottle Can...*) are among the most intense and visceral in all of cinema, frequently immersing viewers in smothering domestic nightmares and presenting teetering monuments to entropy and decay, locating abject horror in the mundane, beauty in the horrific. His recent work, based largely on repetitive assemblies of scavenged 16mm strips, replete with his trademark techniques of material distress and physical violation, continues Price's obsessional exploration of identity, sexuality and the extremes of bodily experience. (Steve Polta)

"From a pile of thirteen identical film prints that document the dangers and perceptions of old people, Price creates a film of gripping, repetitive incantations. A mournful, dissolving jewel set in bruised magenta sends out votive glints of dying light. A lone bird chirps and branches obscure our vision. Working from a stack of abandoned multiple film prints (nearly identical and thirteen in number), Luther Price makes reiterative loops that underline futility, echo hope, and mark every camera movement with the vain promise of a fresh outcome and inevitable predestination." (Mark McElhatten, writing on *Same Day Nice Biscotts*, International Film Festival Rotterdam 2006)

Dipping Sause (2005); 16mm, b&w, sound, 10 minutes, from the maker

Same Day Nice Biscotts (2005); 16mm, color, sound, 5 minutes, from the maker

The Biscuit Day (2007); 16mm color, sound, 12 minutes, from the maker

Nice Biscotts #1 (2005); 16mm, color, sound, 10 minutes, from the maker

Nice Biscotts #2 (2005); 16mm, color, sound, 10 minutes, from the maker

Nice Baskets (2006); 16mm, color, sound, from the maker

Turbulent Blue (2006); 16mm, color, sound, 10 minutes, from the maker

Silk (2006); 16mm, b&w, sound, 7 minutes, from the maker

The Mongrel Sister (2007); 16mm, color, sound, 7 minutes, from the maker

Fancy (2006); 16mm, color, sound, from the maker

"...a likely candidate for celluloid's Omega Man is Luther Price. Just as [Lewis] Klahr has adopted the cutout animation style and bent it to his own idiosyncratic needs, Price has virtually reinvented the found-footage idiom. Price's approach is difficult to describe; he produces dense, often terrifying filmworks that turn both the material he appropriates and much of the history of found-footage cinema inside out. Most film-collagists attempt, in some form or another, to create new, integral contexts for the images they recycle, be they personal reverie (Cornell's *Rose Hobart*), social criticism (the films of Bruce Conner), rhythmic invention (Abigail Child and Julie Murray), or media jamming (Craig Baldwin). Price, in a sense, does the same thing, but in reverse. His films usually refuse to cohere, seeming to resist the clear meanings or interpretive semiosis that recognizable imagery seemingly should enable. But more than this, the physical filmstrip as Price assembles it frequently appears to be on the verge of snapping apart into its component parts, as though their coalescence into 'a Luther Price film' were some sort of momentary aberrant clusterfuck of dirty celluloid.

"In some ways this may be the case. Early work by Price, including lengthy Super-8 films and some documented performances, seemed to entail film-objects that came apart and went back together (sometimes) in radically different configurations, picking up where Jack Smith left off in terms of ephemera and gonzo queer aggression. But even the 'solid' films bear traces of hard living—rough splices, deep gashes, the chug and thwap of soundtracks carved deep into the optical strip. The first Price film I saw, 1989's *Sodom*, exemplified this attitude and the visceral shocks it can provide far in excess of content alone. Although the film incorporates a fairly wide variety of imagery, all of it subsumed in darkness and a generally menacing, unnatural firelight, its primary refrain consists of a row of naked men sitting on the floor of an undefined dungeon-space and autofellating, a single leg thrown behind their own heads as they form some sort of perverse chorus line, a dark fantasy of the sort Gaspar Noé would have liked to achieve in the opening scenes of *Irreversible* but perhaps lacked the imagination. But even on the level of the filmstrip, Price perforates the celluloid colon with puncture wounds, cracked frames, and compressed and even interpenetrating image fragments. *Sodom* the object, then, is both dirty and delicate, and its run through a

projector is liable to leave some shit on both partners. Far less shocking on the surface but actually even more diffuse and dilapidated as a piece of projectable film, 1994's *[r]un* is a Super-8 study of a bird on a wire, twitching and sputtering beneath scratches, crumbling emulsion, and a washed-out gray that flattens space to an almost absurd degree, the film image hanging there like a rained-on pencil drawing from another century left in the elements to fend for itself. Against this dominant aesthetic, Price inserts jagged, thrusting bits of suburban landscape, crisscrossed telephone wires against a hollowed-out sky, and other bits and pieces that threaten to form a tentative mise-en-scène but instead simply push the slightest compositional elements—thin lines, scotch-taped patches, blotchy areas—around the frame like smoke.

“Price has been prolific in recent years, working mostly in 16mm. According to those far more immersed in his work than I, his current work mode frequently entails assembling multiple copies of a given reel of found-footage material and composing several different films from that same image group. Having seen only one configuration-film of his [...], I can't compare. But hearing this doesn't surprise me, since Price's recent work even in a single arrangement evinces a compulsive de-structuring of images and sounds, a tendency toward separation and coagulation in which groups of frames form single textural units while being kept apart from traditional montage forms which would coax parsed meanings from the blur. Last year's *Turbulent Blue* [sic] is a throbbing formal study in midnight blue and shadow black, as well as the staging of an embattled tension between total abstraction and recognizable content. Price takes bits of a Charles Bronson film, with its exploding buildings and cat-and-mouse shoot-'em-ups, and carves out certain formal and graphic commonplaces of the action/cop-drama idiom—a lurking, bald-headed white man striking medium-range, gun-toting poses against an icy environment filled with the alienated dread of architectural modernism—here, as if cutting out the middleman, done up in blueprint blue. Price frequently presents the images upside down but consistently segments them horizontally, resulting in a stuttered frame divided into thirds, these fraught masculinized spaces reduced to interpenetrating surfaces. In fact, *Turbulent Blue* clarified for me a possible connection between Price's work and that of another found-footage obsessivist, Michele Smith. What she does to mass media images horizontally and temporally, Price does vertically and spatially.

“Price's film [...], *The Mongrel Sister*, moves in an altogether new direction while retaining a sense that the mere act of putting one image against another can generate a veritable vortex of doom. More so than in the earlier works of Price's I've seen, *The Mongrel Sister* makes use of the straight cut, the most basic form of cinematic decoupage. There are small hiccups of black leader, of chunky splices keeping the images separate, but still, in theory, *The Mongrel Sister's* straightforward construction should at least gesture toward a greater coherence. In fact, it is the most inexplicable Price film I've seen yet, a warped filmstrip from a combination science and health lesson in which the object is to invade the students' nightmares as a means of social control. Price gives us close-up shots of a bright green tree frog, intercut with a nervous looking young woman of what appears to be the 1970s, the two species hovering in mutual mistrust. As with earlier Price films, *The Mongrel Sister* seems like it could snap apart in the projector gate, but in this case the consequences are unclear. Would the young woman feel liberated from a gawking irrational presence? Or would both she and frog, faded culture and dead-eyed nature, crumble and fall to the floor in a heap of emulsion and dust? To paraphrase Godard, *The Mongrel Sister* is, like most of Luther Price's work, a film adrift in the cosmos, its hermetic yet visceral evocation of emotional turmoil bordering on psychosis. That's one menacing frog. After a single viewing, I barely recall the specifics of Price's film, only a set of flashes and jangled nerves, and this seems to be by design. Even in the mind, his films insist on coming apart at the seams. (Michael Sicinsky, “NYFF. Views. 4.” *Greencine Daily*, November 3, 2007: daily.greencine.com/archives/004851.html)

“She is a woman. She is afraid of frogs. K-zupzupzup. The frog stares. The film stares back at us through the frog. Back to her. A '70s room in beige. The pond in the rain. A blunt ugly splice maybe sealed with spit. She looks away. Thapthapthap. Glistening green. Too much rouge, bruised by light on the left cheek. Zukzukzukupfft. Hairspray and yellowing walls on overexposed stock. The humming against the sound head. Tape through the gate or just some crud on the image. It licks its eyeball. The dirt particles sting the projector beam. Clackclackbdumdumffft. The lily pad ducks under the surface. Again she turns away. Exposed, warts and all. In the near future, perhaps 'a Luther Price film' will consist of getting a speck of dust in your eye in some dark alley. Late at night. Far from home. That's a compliment.” (Michael Sicinsky, writing on *The Mongrel Sister*. www.academichack.net/Views2007.htm)

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