

Jack Chambers' *The Hart of London*

Thursday, September 27, 2018 — Artists' Television Access

New Beginnings Fall 2018 presents *The Hart of London*, Canadian painter/poet/filmmaker Jack Chambers' cinematic magnum opus, presented in its first Bay Area screening in nearly two decades. Spinning outward from scenes of generational life in the semi-rural community of London, Ontario, *The Hart of London* interweaves striking—and at times disturbing—scenes of birth, death and religious ritual with extensive regional newsreel footage and lyrical abstraction to present a complex and deeply conflicted allegory of a fallen humanity spiritually at odds with the natural world. (Steve Polta)

The Hart of London (1970) by Jack Chambers; film, color, sound, 80 minutes, print from the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre

[*The Hart of London*] represents the apogee of the work that he had pursued throughout the 1960s, with an eye to death gained in his Spanish conversion [to Roman Catholicism; Chambers lived in Spain c. 1953–61], and in its use of film time and sequence, with its calculated editing and visible roughness. Chambers had known terror in Spain, embodied in the predators that stalked the suffering Picasso-like figures of his paintings of the late 1950s. They were the specters of illness, poverty and indifference. Such beasts gave form to the stalking menace of modern convenience and complacency that Chambers had seen first in provincial London's resigned imitation of life. In the mid-1960s, he spoke out against the grave effects of chemical warfare in Vietnam and the inhuman practices of the American armed forces. In an act of environmental morality, he confronted the compromises dealt to the land by sophisticated agricultural practices and aspirations toward technological mastery. These moral stances would become urgent as he assumed his role as a father...His overarching concern was with the denigration of life and of perception, and the aim of *The Hart of London* was not merely to illustrate suffering, but to redeem perception through new and old myths. It joined a haunting vision of his life, his perceptions and his rituals, to an anonymous, unconscious record of his hometown, a stage for paradise and inferno.

[...]On January 20, 1968, the *London Free Press*' Bill Webster announced in his column that Jack Chambers was making a new film. His headline announced, "Underground film on London planned." This film would be about life in London, Ontario, and through Webster's column, Chambers was placing a call for snapshots from Londoners, "of any vintage and any quality." In a follow-up column, Webster gave the address for submissions, adding that Chambers would "make his film directly from the material he receives and title it, *Heart of London*." Chambers repeated this request on local television and radio. He also achieved access to "all the TV footage shot by the local station since it went into operation" fifteen years earlier, in 1954. Chambers travelled to Madrid, Orense, La Touza, Sevilla, Huelva and La Antilla, in September and October of 1968, shooting footage for what would become *The Hart of London*. The homophonic title had, as Bill Webster had

indicated in spelling it 'heart', implications that this work would reach the irreducible core of the city, and drew the parallel of architecture as metaphor for interior being, as in St. Teresa of Ávila's seven mansions of the soul. The hart of the title was the city's heart, its central organ and life essence, and it was also a literal hart, a deer which, as the film begins, wanders into the city, becomes trapped, disoriented, ensnared by suburban fences, and is consequently captured by hunters, placed in a metal holding fence and killed. All of this action, from the deer's terrified galloping on the outskirts of the woods to its execution, was captured by television cameras and would be integrated by Chambers into his film, as its prelude, the declaration of a theme.

[...]The term hart was already antique when Chambers began his film, replaced widely by the terms deer and stag. His choice of this word, and of the deer as icon, is not limited to homophonic punning, but rather drew from his knowledge of the deer's symbolism in medieval Christianity. In the medieval hunt, the hart was a prized game, and by pursuit of it, hunters participated in an allegory for Christ's ordeals. The process of the hunt was elaborate and ritualized: an expert huntsman would track the hart and identify its lay. A party would then assemble, and dogs would be positioned along a path to serve as relays. When the quarry was sighted, a chase would begin, and finally, when the hart could run no longer, the leader of the hunt would make the kill. The hart's carcass would be subject to 'unmaking,' a dissection ritual. For its agony, the hart became a symbol of Christ, an allegory that was reinforced in Christian mythology. For example, the Christian martyr Saint Eustace was said to have undergone conversion after seeing a crucifix suspended from the antlers of a hart. People of the middle ages believed that the hart could live for hundreds of years, and that a mature one could therefore be several hundred years old, the beast host to the wisdom of witness. In their superstition, medieval folk also believed that a bone in the middle of its heart prevented the hart from dying of fear. The imagined hart, for its age and endurance, was a symbol of immortality. Choosing a modern-day slaughter of the hart as his central metaphor, Jack Chambers would embark on a work of environmental, moral, spiritual inquiry into the dread character of the present.

[...]As he was in the midst of making the film, Chambers learned that he had terminal leukemia. In the ensuing decade he would fight it, and survive far longer than had been expected. Our knowledge of this might lead to the conclusion that the work itself was formed by his diagnosis, that its grieving and angry confrontation with mortality and its lamentation of the sins of man and of modernity result from his awareness of his own mortality. (Stephen Broomer: *Codes for North—Foundation of the Canadian Avant-Garde Film*: www.stephenbroomer.com/blog/2017/12/10/codes-for-north-hart)

— — —

New Beginnings is a recurring curatorial endeavor oriented to the presentation of historic works of international artist-made cinema in the contemporary context. This seasonal series intends to open space for new cinematic encounters, revive interest in forgotten (or not forgotten) classics, to problematize canons through the unearthing of unsung cinematic oddities, to provide fresh insights to well-known works, and to offer opportunities for guest curatorial input and experiment. Please send hot tips and suggestions to sfc@sfcinematheque.org.