

# TANGLED UP

by Greg Egan

Soft lights and air-conditioning in the editing room. All the light panels on all the benches are switched on. No shadows. I'm running a shot back and forth, back and forth, trying to remember when it was taken, trying to remember taking it, trying to remember. I have no idea what time it is outside. In here there is no time at all, except for the time you find by counting up frames. The little wheels on the frame counter spin with a tiny whirring noise, from 000259 down to 000000 and then back up again, as I wind the shot back and forth. I think vaguely about the new electronic frame counters with no sprockets, with tiny lasers and microprocessors to count the perforations as they stream on by. My shooting records are garbled, jumbled, meaningless to me ; I don't even recognise the handwriting. Five hundred spools sit in a box near by, and I suppose they belong to me. It's very hard to tell.

A long time ago there was a conversation, unless I dreamed it or saw it in a film. Ed and I decide that our next films will refer to each other, as a means of extending their effects on the audience. Both are to be fragmented, disjointed, surrealistic, disorienting. In my film, the carload of people who are followed about by the camera will pass by a drive-in, where Ed's film will be glimpsed : they will circle the drive-in, trying to decide whether to go in or not ; then they will drive away. In Ed's film, the housewife who eats her kitchen will wander about the house, the television running all the time ; and she will flick her remote control unit as she wanders. My film will briefly appear on her television, but she will be in the bedroom at the time, vacuuming the mirror, and she will flick to another station before she wanders into the lounge room. This is simple enough. What will make it all more difficult is the portions of each other's films we will show : for as the car circles the drive-in the housewife will be in the bedroom ; and her television will show the car circling the drive-in, which will be showing her television showing the drive-in, and so on.

'And so on,' I said to Ed.

'And so on,' he agreed.

This may sound impossible, but it's not; for the actual regression would be only finite, taken to perhaps ten or twenty stages until the images are so minute as to be invisible. Ed and I decided to keep the television screen and the drive-in screen to three-quarters of the frame size, so that the twentieth

image would be three-quarters to the twentieth power (about one three-hundredth) of the frame size; and three-quarters of that twentieth image would be empty blackness but nobody would notice. We decided that twenty images would be the most we could afford.

When I think of this conversation I remember the blueness of the sky and the smell of the grass, so it must have taken place sometime, somewhere. I think of another conversation, with someone else (I'm not sure who) trying to justify this idea (I'm not sure how) and arguing angrily (I'm not sure why). I can't remember any of the words. I can only remember some of the words from the conversation with Ed.

I remember sitting in the shade on the river bank with the distant noise of the actors as they ate (distant because my eyes were closed) their evening meal before the night's shooting. Perhaps I don't remember the river bank from the same night as the drive-in ; for there were many evenings in the shade, everything in shade with the sun behind the trees. I remember opening my eyes and squinting against the sun reflected off a distant glassy skyscraper, and moving my head up and down, watching the patch of orange fire climb up and down the building, too lazy to shift myself to the left or right and get rid of the glare entirely.

Round and round the drive-in we went, trying to get shots right. The film really showing there was soft-focus hard-core porn, and the cast were easily distracted. We could have done it all much later, when the drive-in was closed ; but having an image on the screen would make it easier to identify the image's position during the matting process. Strictly we were breaching copyright just by filming the porn film, but it would be blotted-out and replaced by Ed's television shot (appropriately deformed to match the varying obliqueness of the screen); so nobody would ever know.

I remember coming around from behind the screen and seeing Ed's television on the screen; and on it I saw the drive-in screen, with the car's rear vision mirror in the foreground, one of the actors glimpsed in the mirror smiling, as it said in the script, and Ed's television on the screen, and so on.

'And so on,' I said to Ed.

'And so on,' he agreed.

I remember looking from the screen down to the rear vision mirror and seeing the actor smiling, and thinking: I can see the mirror too. I can see Robert smiling. I must be in the car. Thinking about it now, I realise that perhaps I

was not in the car. Perhaps I was in my screening room at home; and I walked around the screen there; and came across the projected image of the shot, months later, after all the special printing operations had been done; and I looked one image too deep, saw the filmed drive-in screen (thinking it was the real one), and looked down and saw the filmed rear vision mirror (thinking it was there to touch). It's very hard to tell.

I feel sure that at one time I knew exactly what had happened, and why, but that doesn't help me now ; for I remember only that I knew, not what I knew.

I remember yelling at someone, a tall girl in black jeans, who kept giggling half-way through a shot, take after take.

'Why are you in this film ?' I'd ask her.

'Well, I saw it,' she'd giggle.

'What's that supposed to mean ?'

'I saw it.'

'Saw the ad ?'

'I saw a film on the plane called Burning Desire and while she did it in the wardrobe they panned around the room and it was on her TV, and I was in it.' She said that with great pride, as if she had already achieved some great success. 'I was in it.'

'Are you going to stop giggling ?'

'Well I'll have to eventually, won't I? I didn't when I saw it.'

'Take thirty-five.'

I remember standing in the darkness, standing by the car, looking over across empty asphalt and seeing a camera set up, one man peering through the finder and panning slowly, and I could feel my face slip on to the frame on one side, and slip off on the other side. I walked angrily up to him and grabbed him by the back of his shirt, pulled him away from the camera.

'Look I don't know how many times I've told you not to touch the equipment; it's not a toy, you know!'

He pushed me to the ground, folded the tripod, and just walked off. I never

really saw his face, but even as I was standing, picking the gravel out of my palms, I saw the dark shape of the camera protruding from the back seat window of the car. The actors standing by the car laughed mockingly when I returned, so I didn't say anything at all, or ask any questions. Sometimes I don't know what

they're thinking; I'm just worried about how they look, what they look as though they're thinking; that's all that matters on the screen

The little numbers spin past the window, and the tiny whirring noise stops and starts. I think vaguely that this is not at all good for the film, even if it is just a workprint, and I really ought to stop. Instead I just slow down. The shot in the viewer shows the editing room. I can see myself seated at this bench, turning the handle of the rewind, peering down at the viewer, which is, reasonably enough, showing exactly the same shot as the real viewer in front of me. I do not feel too peculiar, because it is such a simple, familiar, innocent sort of shot. As I turn the handle of the rewind, I cause my image in the viewer to do the same; I cause all my many images in the many viewers to do the same. I am tempted to say that my image in the viewer turning the handle of his viewer causes my image in his viewer to turn the handle of his viewer, but that is absurd, because all the images are together there, on the one piece of film; there is only an interesting, involuted pattern there, no actions, no causes and effects. Only I can turn a real handle; all the others just mimic me, less real even than reflections.

And yet.

It's very hard not to look into the viewer as if it were a stairwell, a deep square shaft with a kind of square spiral staircase around it. I feel I could put my hand into the shaft and feel the texture of each level, feel the sharp corners of the stairs. Perhaps because it's such an enchanting and dazzling pattern my eyes are a little strained by it; and, much as a cube will reverse itself in your mind, from inner surface to outer surface and back again, the illusory solidness shifts and slides, right angles reverse their directions, and I can easily imagine each level having, at least temporarily, enough pitch as you walk around it to bring you down to the next one. When it all stands still this is wrong; the levels are quite separate and inaccessible; but when they shift and slide there seems to be room for a thin man to slip between two briefly parted edges.

The feeling is growing stronger as those hundreds of handles turn. I think vaguely, stupidly, about conservation of energy; I think there must be other

people to turn those other handles; I'm surely not doing all the work but that's absurd: no other handles are really moving, no matter how it looks.

I remember standing in the foyer of the processing laboratory, my face turning red, glancing now and then at the receptionist who is embarrassed too. The accounts manager comes out from the warren of corridors.

'Look, I'm sure I never put that much film in on Monday.' Tangled Up 79

'It was all together, you know. All the cans were in one big pile, and here, on the slip with your name, on the work slip it says two thousand feet. Do you deny that you filled out this slip? Do you think we forged it and then processed an extra fifteen hundred feet from out of thin air just to get money out of you?'

'No, of course I don't. But I honestly can't remember even shooting that much on the weekend. Can I have a look at it first, maybe somehow somebody else's order got put in with mine.'

'Be my guest.'

On their beautiful, motorised, immaculate viewer I looked at the start of each reel of workprint. Every shot was familiar as I looked at it (so much I remember); but I cannot now say just what any shot portrayed. I knew as I watched that I had taken every shot myself, however impossible that was. I thought vaguely about looking at my purchasing records, looking at receipts for film stock. I apologised and promised to pay for it all before the end of the month.

I'm not sure which month that was, or if I did, in fact, manage to pay.

I remember adding up the footage of processed and unprocessed stock, adding up the footage on the big white Kodak delivery docket, and reaching the very same figure; but I don't remember whether it was more, the same, or less than what it should have been, what I thought it had been.

And I recall looking into the lens and smiling; but I don't know where or when. It can't have been that night when I yelled at that cameraman, because I remember the reflections of the sun in the lens, the whole series of spurious purple images, which moved as I moved my head. I want to unravel all of these memories and put them in their proper places; I want to cut them out and splice them together in a nice, orderly linear flow; but they won't allow it; they just keep surfacing at random, changing in their relationships with each

other and with the present, as I sit here turning the handles. I wonder whether perhaps we filmed at the drive-in twice, once when the porn film was showing, and then much later, after the matting had been done, with the footage for Ed's film showing on the big drive-in screen. I don't know why we should have done that; but it still seems possible, although I have no memory of talking to the manager, of hiring the drive-in. Perhaps we did just that, ten or twenty times, as a cheaper way of getting the effect than laboratory processes. We would film first with an empty screen, then give that to Ed to show on his TV and film his shot, which he would give to us to project on to the drive-in screen while we once again drove around, while Robert once again smiled into the rear view mirror, while I once again looked down to see him do so ; and the film wt. took we would give to Ed to show on his TV and film his shot, and so on.

'And so on,' I said to Ed.

'And so on,' he agreed.

I wonder if that is what happened. It's very hard to tell.

As I sit here I feel sure that Ed and I have achieved the disorienting effect which we both felt was so important to our films. I realise that editing will be very difficult, the way these fragments refuse to stay in any fixed relationship; but it is just that mood of sliding moments which we wanted to capture.

I feel I ought to move on from this particular shot; I ought to put it aside and make a start elsewhere; but it is so hypnotic and soothing to sit here winding it along first one way, and then the other. There is only one thing that puzzles me, really deeply, for all the rest can be put down to the way it feels to sit in this room and shuffle fragments of time so easily. It is this: there are two spools mounted, one on each side of the viewer, and either spool can be turned by the geared handle of the rewind on which it is mounted. To drive the film one way, one turns the handle of the rewind on the right of the viewer. To drive the film the other way one turns the handle of the rewind on the left of the viewer. All this is plain and simple enough.

Now imagine a film of a man winding the film forwards by turning the handle on the right. Played forwards it will look natural and normal, of course; but played backwards it will look a little strange, for by turning the right hand spool backwards the man will seem to force the film back through the viewer and around the left hand spool, which will spin magically at just the right rate and smoothly accept all the film as it leaves the viewer. It seems very clear to

me that this ought not happen to a man really turning the right hand spool backwards; and that, instead, the film ought to refuse to pass back into the viewer, and ought to form large untidy loops about the right hand spool.

I peer down into the square stair well of the viewer, and each hand I see remains firmly fixed to the right hand handle regardless of the motion of the film, and I mean this without exception ; even at my own level, right above the stair well, I do not remove my hand from the right hand handle regardless of whether I am winding the film forwards or backwards. This puzzles me much more than all the other strange things : my scattered memories, the jumbled records, the huge box of unexplained spools of unexplained film. I am quite at a loss to decide what to do with the unexplained film, unsure whether I should start the film with it, end the film with it, spread it out a little in each scene, or just cut it out entirely.

Also, I have a burning desire to turn my head and look up from the viewer; but I'm prevented from doing this by an irrational fear that, if I do so, my image in the viewer, all my images in the viewer, will all do the same. This would certainly be very disorienting, but I'm not sure that I'm quite ready for it.

Also, I'm not able to predict confidently what I should see when looking up away from the viewer. This bothers me equally. I think probably I'll have to stay with this shot for the time being, just for something to look at, because it does not prevent me from drifting in my mind back to my many strange and disquieting memories, trying to piece them together, winding back and forth, back and forth, trying to remember, if I can, just what really did happen.