

REVIEWS



Mario Pfeifer, *A Formal Film in Nine Episodes, Prologue & Epilogue*, 2010, still from a color film in 35 mm transferred to HD video, 50 minutes.

Mario Pfeifer

KOW BERLIN

To describe Mario Pfeifer's *A Formal Film in Nine Episodes, Prologue & Epilogue*, 2010, in a formal manner, as the work's title suggests we should, one would have to say that it involves slow-paced action, sweeping camera movements, a diversity of real-world sounds, frequent swatches of vivid blues, and intermittent yellows. Shot in 35 mm on location in Mumbai, the footage has been transferred to digital video. In this, Pfeifer's first solo gallery exhibition, four screens presented the work's ten short sequences—not eleven, as the title might indicate—which, with their consistent styling, recurring characters, and landscapes both urban and rural, construct a patchwork narrative relating obliquely to India today.

However striking these films are, visually and sonically, one may ask why their maker, who was born in 1981 in Dresden and now lives in Berlin, was drawn to film in India. The inclusion in the back gallery space of the seven episodes of Louis Malle's TV miniseries *L'Inde fantôme* (Phantom India, 1969) suggests an answer to the question: Both works represent attempts to consider natives' experiences in a place drastically foreign to the films' makers. In his work, Malle attempted an in-depth view of postcolonial India, focusing on radical political developments and the social strife that afflicted many in the still caste-structured society, even as he delighted in traditional rural life. Although Pfeifer does not attempt to chronicle contemporary social conditions with any rigor, certain of these realities also appear in his

piecemeal, fictional scenes. When a woman from the lower class appears in one episode, for instance, she begs for money from characters offscreen. Social divides are also apparent in a scene set in an ice factory, in which large blocks of ice pass from a room where men operate machinery through a wall partition to a room where well-dressed people—perhaps merchants—chat and laugh.

Another episode follows fishermen who come across a man on the riverside and call out to offer him work. He is the film's male protagonist, to whom we are first introduced in a barbershop, where he has his hair shaved completely off—in the practice of tonsure, following the death of his father, we later understand. Elsewhere, he meets a woman at a jewelry stand. We recognize the pair when, in a later episode, the two discuss the henna tattoo that we have already seen her receive. Through their interactions on a trip together to visit a temple, we learn slightly more about their individual histories.

The stilted speech of the two protagonists is typical of this fiction, which is rather unconvincing overall; it is hardly surprising, since they are first-time actors, and their scenes were each shot in one take. Pfeifer's intentional circumvention of the suspension of disbelief could be considered to parallel his inability to accurately represent a reality that is intrinsically foreign to him, no matter how specific or how general he makes its treatment. Thus the film's banal narrative is not valuable for its craft, either: It is used merely as a means to include select details from life and to support formal experiments.

Pfeifer's work takes up all of the traditional constructs of filmmaking so as to support their primary purpose: form as a site of sublimation. It is a curious project with compelling results. Only certain concrete elements, such as the tonsure and the tattoo, create what little narrative continuity exists between these sequences. They also constitute the film's links to Indian customs and society. But it's still mainly the more formal elements, such as the vivid palette and, at times, the multiple sound tracks playing simultaneously, that manage to immerse us in this rich, composite installation.

—John Beeson