

‘Stalking the image: Margaret Tait and Intimate Filmmaking Practices’

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Margaret Tait and intimate filmmaking in Scotland

Sarah Neely

I used to lie in wait to see the clover open
Or close,
But never saw it.
I was too impatient,
Or the movement is too subtle,
Imperceptible
And more than momentary.

Margaret Tait, 'Now', *origins and elements* (Edinburgh: Margaret Tait, 1959), pp. 22-24.

Margaret Tait's artistic concerns with the detail of the everyday share much in common with general conceptions of feminist filmmaking practices, where self-expression is identified as an anecdote to the oversimplified representations of women in mainstream cinema. As Pam Cook explains, the 'emphasis on the personal, the intimate and the domestic, has always been important to the Women's Movement and the personal diary form, for instance, has always been a means of self-expression for women to whom other avenues were closed.'¹ While Tait maintained she was filming what was around her rather than attempting any type of autobiographical work, the body of her work, including film poems, portraits, and hand-painted films, are frequently praised for their ability to capture the 'authenticity' of experience.

David Curtis describes Tait as 'Britain's Marie Menken', the two filmmakers' work sharing 'a clarity of vision and a simplicity – almost naiveté – of technique: shots held "too long"; hand-held camera not always perfectly still or level; frequent and abrupt in-camera edits, and a fondness for simple, intimate subject matter.'² But like Menken, or other comparable filmmakers such as Gunvor Nelson or Chick Strand, whose daring efforts of experimentation Robin Blaetz points out were historically

¹ Pam Cook, 'The point of self-expression in avant-garde film', John Caughie (ed), *Theories of Authorship*, pp. 271-281: 272.

² David Curtis, 'Britain's Oldest Experimentalist...Margaret Tait', *Vertigo*, no. 9, 1999, pp. 62-63: 62.

misinterpreted as amateurish,³ Tait's work has been marginalised at various points in time, across a number of contexts.

When Tait returned to Scotland in the early 1950s, eager to work after completing her studies at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, Scottish film culture was slow to acknowledge the filmmaker whose focus on smaller subjects failed to register within the general aims of the Films of Scotland committee. Tait approached John Grierson on a number of occasions. In 1954, she invited him to her Rose Street Film festival, an event held annually to run alongside the Edinburgh Festival. Although Grierson was appreciative of her films at the festival, nothing ever came of it.⁴ Correspondence between Grierson and Tait reveals Tait's pragmatic intentions. Her main reasons for approaching him are to seek assistance with financing and distribution, not to confirm her artistic practices. When Grierson suggested that *Orquil Burn*, a film that takes the meandering path of a burn in her native Orkney as the basis for its structure, could be reworked into a 'brief abstract film of burn patterns', Tait remained committed to her initial ideas for the material, writing that Grierson's suggestion for the film 'might be very pretty, but it would not by my view of *Orquil Burn*, and I think it will be more satisfying in the end to retain the form I intended for it.'⁵

Recent feminist film scholarship continues the important project of recovering lost film histories, but urgency also exists for addressing the reasons for their oversight in the first place. As Lauren Rabinovitz discusses in relation to the future of feminist film studies, more is required:

The radical politics of lost-and-found scholarship lies not in merely correcting a record that swept away women's contributions but in refashioning film theory and historiography. It develops a women's history that teaches the centrality of intimate, personal and sexual issues, as well as of the spheres of the everyday that embrace subjects with lesser cultural status.⁶

Although it is generally argued that from the 1970s onwards, feminist film studies was divided by two conflicting concerns, one with 'immediate documentation' and the

³ Robin Blaetz, 'Rescuing the fragmentary evidence of Women's experimental film' *Camera Obscura* 63, vol. 21, no. 3, 2006, pp. 153-156: 154.

⁴ For a more detailed account of the relationship between Tait and Grierson see Sarah Neely, 'Contemporary Scottish Cinema', Neil Blain and David Hutchison (eds.) *Scottish Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 151-165.

⁵ Margaret Tait to John Grierson, 14 Feb 1956, Grierson Archive, University of Stirling, G6/39/12.

⁶ Lauren Rabinovitz, 'The future of feminism and film history', *Camera Obscura* 61, vol. 21, no. 1, 2006, pp. 39-44: 42.

other with 'apparatus',⁷ or crudely summarised as the historical and the theoretical, Rabinovitz argues the need for both, that it is not enough to fill in the gaps in history.

In the case of Margaret Tait, while the posthumous restoration of many of her films, and an international touring exhibition, accompanied by a DVD and book-length study of the filmmaker's work⁸, are all promising indications that her significant artistic contributions are now recognised, it does not mean that a similar scenario will not play out again. With hindsight, praise is easy to give. Most of Tait's work was self-funded, enabled by her work as a GP. In all aspects of her filmmaking practices, she was meticulous in her organisation and planning. On more than one occasion, the Scottish Film Archive commented on how their restoration of her films was greatly aided by the instructions provided by the copious and detailed notes Tait kept. Tait was also thorough in her approach to funding. Numerous applications were made to a variety of funding bodies, but she was only successful on a couple of occasions. Only two of over thirty films that she produced were made with award money.⁹ The funding bodies that rejected applications to fund Tait's work, in general, tended to focus their response on Tait's idiosyncratic form and style, often pointing out specific ways in which her personal vision diverged from accepted professional practices. With hindsight, while it is easy to admire the experimental style that developed throughout Tait's work, it seems highly probable that if Tait were just starting out today, the obstacles and responses to her work that she faced in 1950s Scotland would not be that different. Although debates around representation have moved progressively away from uniform notions of Scotland to the more inclusive and diverse 'Scotlands', there remains a tendency on behalf of funding bodies to favour projects that to some extent engage with the bigger issues of national identity. Ultimately, as Tait's experience proves, this means that avant-garde works that don't engage with identity at all or, important feminist discourses relating to the domestic or the personal, become essentially invisible. The recent financial investment in Tait's films is clearly a positive step forward, but because of its archival nature, it is difficult to persuasively argue that the interest is far beyond that of cultural artefact.

⁷ Teresa De Lauretis, 'Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics in Feminist Theory' in Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch (eds.), *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 140-161: 141.

⁸ Benjamin Cook and Peter Todd (eds.) *Subjects and Sequences: Margaret Tait Reader* (London: Lux, 2004).

⁹ The Scottish Arts Council's 'filmmaker as artist' competition in 1974 financed *Colour Poems* and The Orkney Education committee financed *The Drift Back* in 1956 to be shown on their rural film circuit.

Throughout her lifetime, Tait's films generated most interest outwith Scotland. In the 1970s, her work was screened at a number of avant-garde and independent film festivals and screenings in England. Tait's refusal to conform to accepted filmmaking practices meant her work was rejected in funding applications, but celebrated by practitioners. The fact that someone had been making films independently since the 1950s, in Edinburgh and later Orkney, without support and without compromising their unique vision or style was central to their praise.

David Curtis talks about *Portrait of Ga* (1952), the first film Tait made after returning from Rome, as the first film of hers bearing what he refers to as her 'authentic imprint'.¹⁰ The film of Tait's mother, the Ga of the film's title, was, as with most of Tait's films, made with the 16mm bolex camera that she purchased while a student in Rome. 16mm is frequently associated with intimate filmmaking, and although a few of her films were shot using a tripod - such as *Rose Street* (1956) - most of her films, this one included, make use of the free-floating capabilities of handheld. The camera follows the filmmaker's mother, wandering, sometimes dancing, on the hillside outside a croft. Decentred framing inhibits the privileging of any one focal point, while the camera's tendency to linger on details such as Ga unwrapping a boiled sweet, imbues the diminutive gesture with an importance generally linked to feelings of intimacy and familiarity. Tait captures similar moments of intimacy in her film portrait of Hugh MacDiarmid made in 1964. The film depicts the more playful gestures of the writer. MacDiarmid teetering along an Edinburgh curb like a tightrope or, mischievously skipping stones into the sea, are images that a more formal depiction might choose to overlook or subordinate. Tait, who described her technique of 'breathing' with the camera and liked to use Lorca's phrase 'stalking the image' in reference to her own practices¹¹, allows the camera time to explore. As her poem, 'Now', opening this essay articulates, she is preoccupied with catching the 'momentary', the 'subtle' gestures. Like the barely perceptible opening of the clover, Tait's breathing with the camera, or stalking of the image, aims to give pause to the image, allowing for - as is the case with both of these portrait films - a glimpse of the real person.

Perhaps disappointingly from a sociologist's perspective, Ga doesn't speak.

¹⁰ David Curtis, 'Britain's Oldest Experimentalist...Margaret Tait', *Vertigo*, no. 9, 1999, pp. 62-63: 63.

¹¹ Tamara Krikorian, "On the mountain" and "Land Makar": Landscape and townscape in Margaret Tait's work', *The Undercut Reader*, pp. 103-105: 103.

Instead the subject is limited to the image that is framed by the story provided by the filmmaker's monologue, depicting her impressions of and relationship to the subject. The voice-over is intimate and personal, distinguishing it from traditional modes of documentary and clarifying its intentions as a subjective rather than objective account. In other respects, Tait's inclusion of a voice-over at all sets it apart from the sort of documentary seen as vital for the feminist movement in its ability to represent 'real women'¹² In one exception, *Land Makar* (1981), Tait's portrait of Mary Graham Sinclair, a neighbouring crofter who Tait admired as a 'poet of the land' – the title's literal translation – there is no commentary. Instead, the soundtrack is largely comprised of conversations between Tait and Sinclair. More in tune with the agenda to represent 'real women' in an open and objective manner, Tamara Krikorian describes the difficulty of understanding much of the Orcadian language, but praises the exchanges between Tait and Sinclair for giving the film 'its absolute authenticity'¹³ Although in this film Tait insisted on allowing the words of her subject to tell the story, the majority of Tait's films foreground her own voice, her own personal reflections, and occasionally her poetry.

Even in relation to the image, where she remains largely unseen, you are acutely aware of her presence. For instance, in *Ga* there are obvious moments of interaction between subject and filmmaker; smiles are shared as words are exchanged, although the spectator is not privy to them. These types of exchanges occur in a number of her films, often because the subjects are friends and family with whom she is familiar with. In *Place of Work* (1976), a film surveying Tait's family home in Kirkwall, a postman arrives, sees he is interrupting Tait's filming, then shies away from the camera. In this instance, the soundtrack has been mixed and edited to produce the effect that it has been recorded live, a technique Noël Burch commends for giving you the 'perfectly full sense of *being there*'.¹⁴ Tait is heard on the soundtrack encouraging him to come in, and get involved in the activity. He is clearly self-conscious and reluctant.

Characteristic of Tait's work, Tait only appears in the film from behind the camera: materializing in mirrors, other reflective surfaces, or cast in shadowy form by rays of light. Although the film is essentially dealing with the intimate details of her daily life,

¹² Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, second edition, (London: Verso, 1994).

¹³ Tamara Krikorian, 'Margaret Tait', David Curtis (ed.), *A Dictionary of British Film and Video Artists* (Luton: University of Luton and The Arts Council of England), pp. 190-1: 191.

¹⁴ Noël Burch, 'Narrative/Diegesis—Thresholds, Limits', *Screen*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1982, pp. 16-33: 31.

its central concern lies in its close exploration of Tait's relationship to the physical space. The camera navigates through the everyday landscape in a way that belies her own familiarity with it, but there are no attempts to contextualise any of what we see with autobiographical detail.

David Curtis, remarked that 'it was her transparent technique that struck a chord with the English "materialists"; she revealed, rather than concealed, the means of production; she worked, like them, at an artisanal level.'¹⁵ Although Tait's work is concerned with the material possibilities of film, the decision to bring herself into the film seems more of a natural part of storytelling rather than politically informed. The conviction with which Tait expresses the resonances within her own personal perspective and the general integrity of her filmmaking practices, illustrated by her correspondence with Grierson, underlies much of the praise describing her work as 'authentic'. As her husband, writer, Alex Pirie explains:

Unlike so much that is called experimental and avant-garde, her films are not mere exercises in perception. Her film images are accessible (a thistle is invariably a thistle). They are of the everyday, and, at one level, a presentation of things as they are. But in their framing, in their rhythmical patterning, in their duration, these images offer a vision of the mystery and ambiguity inherent in so-called common objects.'¹⁶

The 'aura of authenticity' accompanying the everyday has generated a great degree of cultural currency in recent times; Tracey Emin's unmade bed, or 'My bed' (1997) was met with cynicism but was greatly successful in its ability to question the value of authenticity in relation to mundane, if not somewhat taboo, aspects of the everyday.¹⁷ But where Emin's work structures itself in the mode of the confessional, 'foregrounding and exploiting the autobiographical',¹⁸ in Tait's work the autobiographical content comes as a consequence of filming what is around her. While her voice might imply authorship in her films, she is never fully seen. The films might be self-referential, but they are never fully autobiographical.

¹⁵ Curtis, 'Britain's Oldest Experimentalist...Margaret Tait', 1999, p. 63.

¹⁶ Alex Pirie, 'Margaret Tait: Indications, Influences, Outcomes', *Poem Film Film Poem*, No. 6, 2000, pp. 1-12: 3.

¹⁷ Julie Watson and Sidonie Smith, 'Introduction: Mapping Women's Self-Representation at Visual/Textual Interfaces' in Watson and Smith (eds) *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 1- 46.

¹⁸ Watson and Smith, 'Introduction, 2002, p. 3.

Tait had two biographical television programmes made about her during her lifetime: one for BBC Scotland's Spectrum series in 1979 and the other a Channel Four profile in 1983, neither of which she was happy with. To her, the programmes seemed more concerned with her than the films themselves. She was similarly dismayed in 1992 with the release of her first and only feature film, *Blue Black Permanent* when more was written about her age than the actual film, *The Scottish Sun* printing the headline 'Mags, 73, in Blue movie!'¹⁹ The film itself is an interesting example of Tait's treatment of autobiographical material. The narrative unfolds across two separate times and places, both the past and present of Orkney and Edinburgh. Intricate flashbacks weave together the narratives of Barbara, a photographer who is haunted by the early death and suspected suicide of her mother, and Greta, her poetess mother. The life of the photographer, the poet, and Andrew, an artist and friend of both, all reflect various aspects of Tait's own work and life. As Michael Romer suggests, the film 'allows her to create her own descendants, and recreate herself. Barbara reproduces some of Greta's characteristics, and hence some of Margaret's.'²⁰ But ultimately, the device allows for a displacement of the self as object, she is there, but not wholly identifiable. The effect avoids a reductive biographical portrait, but on a social level, it makes an interesting statement and the collective and shared or inherited experiences.²¹

It wasn't until after her death, that Tait's husband transferred the large collection of film cans from Tait's studio in Orkney to Scottish Screen Archive's offices in Glasgow. Although the archive contacted Tait about the preservation of her films during her lifetime, she wasn't interested. Nor was she interested when two women filmmakers from Glasgow Film and Video workshop contacted her about making a film portrait of her. Her response was that too many of those had been made about her already and that what they should really be do is make portraits of each other.²² For Tait, film was about the present rather than preservation. Like poetry, as the closing verse of her poem 'Now' illustrates, you have to keep doing it, it is a process.

The thing about poetry is you have to keep doing it.

¹⁹ 'Mags, 73, in Blue movie!', *Scottish Sun*, 4 June 1992.

²⁰ Michael Romer, 'Poetry in *Blue Black Permanent*: Three footnotes to Margaret Tait's film', *Cencrastus*, no. 82, 2006, pp. 8-13: 12.

²¹ Ian Goode, 'Scottish cinema and Scottish imaginings: *Blue Black Permanent* and *Stella Does Tricks*' in *Screen* 46:2, 2005, pp.235-239.

²² Margaret Tait Collection, The Orkney Archive, Kirkwall, D97/40.

People have to keep making it.
The old stuff is no use
Once it's old.
It comes out of the instant
And lasts for an instant.
 Take it now
 Quickly
 Without water.
There!

 Tomorrow there'll be something else.