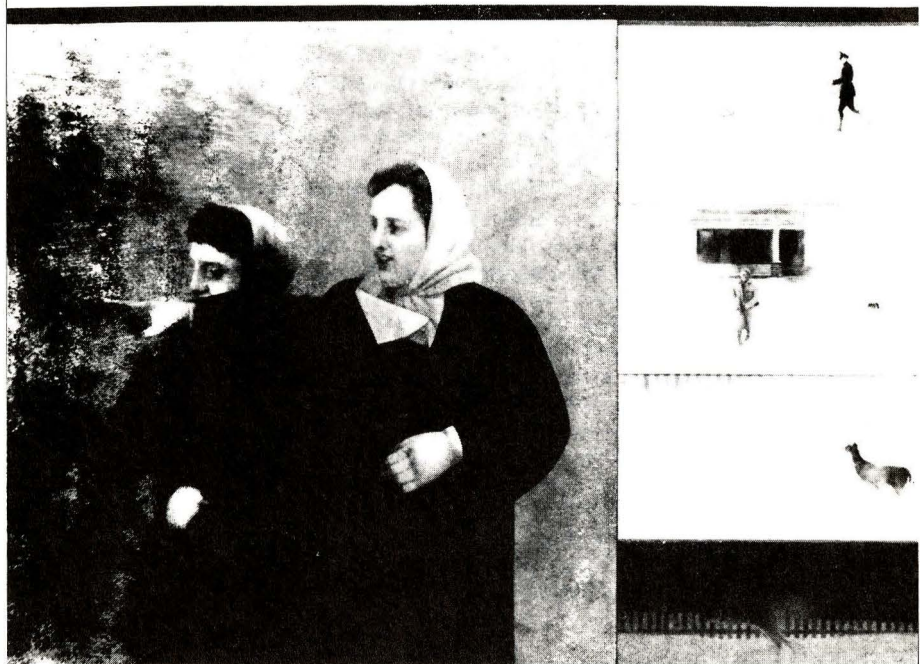


Avis Lang / THE HART OF LONDON



The Hart of London is Chambers' major film to date, structured with the aim of effecting a profound emotional and perceptual transformation in the viewer and rendering him newly capable of participating in the mystery of totally ordinary life in a world where "Everything is being, everywhere there is being and nothing but being,"¹ a world where "there is not a human word, not a gesture, even one which is the outcome of habit or absent-mindedness, which has not some meaning."² It is a world of earth, air, fire, and water, and there is so very much water. It swirls and envelops and covers and gives life and gives disaster and recedes and flows unceasingly, water inside us and water everywhere around us, the waterfalls and the brooks and the deep pools and the vessels of tears and the lazy ponds and the slow quiet streams. Blood and water and spit and shit. The sense of life flows everywhere in fluids of all kinds. The leaking shit of a newborn child is intercut with the spurting blood of a dying lamb. Endless transformation, proliferation, evolution, and flux. Clusters of maple keys in mid-season freshness, not ready to drop or ready to generate, are juxtaposed with the very young Diego. At the beginning is a capture-by-killing of a wild hart that had entrapped itself in the back lanes of London; the initial sense is that the nature of man is against nature. But the film ends in a type of unambitious yet loving and respectful union with nature, in the personae of Chambers' young sons Diego and John hesitantly feeding the deer in a children's zoo. The last frames are given over to another kind of union, the continuity of the elements above and beyond the activity of humankind. The camera pans down the peaceful Thames, again and again, and each time it arches into the high clouds, from earth to air through water. Between the beginning and the end are hundreds of human and natural events, sensations, and images, reflecting the billions of experiences that living things undergo on their way through the world.

The Hart of London is a very difficult eighty minutes long (others of its type are far longer); much of it is exhausting, disorienting, and nerve-wracking, verging at moments on the unbearable. There is extensive use of montage, of repeated cutting back and forth, of in-and-out focussing, and of two-staged superimposition of otherwise identical positive and negative footage, proceeding in opposite directions and occasionally lapsed by a few moments.³ Much of the footage is old newsreel film from the archives of CFPL in London, newsreels being an unparalleled source for images of the human tragicomedy. One rapidfire, almost indecipherable section in the first reel is simply scores of common snapshots that Chambers had solicited through an ad in the London Free Press;⁴ there are faces and faces, gestures and events. Most of the remainder, perhaps half the film, was taken by Chambers himself, ranging from sheep heaving with death on the tables of the slaughterhouse in Chinchon to his two sons feeding nuts to the deer. There is realism and autobiography in the parts, universality in the whole.



The film opens on the hart leaping through open fields, but soon images of hunters, guns, policemen, ropes, and death take over. There is a loud unpleasant periodic sound like the noise of distant shelling; actually it is the crash of breaking waves. We are soon barraged with hundreds and hundreds of images that flash by so quickly and are so unreadable that they seem at times like momentary compositional arrangements of white and grey patches, lacking both intent and content and very nearly devoid of form. What can be identified is always rather ordinary yet important: a hotel, a wedding. Gradually things slow down, images get steadier and quite recognizable, there are more shades of grey. A new sound enters, water flowing with a reassuring gurgle; images become events, occupying time and space. Scenes of factory buildings and assembly lines pass before us, then give way to a dormant maple whose keys lie in the surrounding snow, Olga and the children in the winter out-of-doors, horses plowing, flooded fields. Again the film changes pace, and we are jarred out of our easy perceptions, now by a painfully swift passage through trees. The reel ends in the pruning of branches, with tight close-ups on their lopped and vulnerable ends.

The overall character of the first reel is one of fragmentation, disorientation, and vacillation. A large part of it is intentionally an onslaught of visual chaos, because there is nothing else that can bring a sophisticated eye to the point of desperately craving to see something, anything, a perfectly ordinary bit of the world, just one simple, recognizable, lasting, perfectly focussed entity—which in this case is a timeless, placeless image of life's renewal: a man sowing seeds as he walks barefoot through a muddy furrow behind his two ploughhorses. This is the way Chambers describes his motivation for the structure:

In a way there's almost two kinds of consciousness, isn't there? When you're looking at the first part of the film, I remember when I was looking at it I was feeling that this was dragging on and I became very conscious of the time that I was in while I was sitting here looking up there. And later on when the images became concrete and started to awake another sense, let's say with the help of what I was seeing, I began to experience things of my own through what I was seeing, so that you get another time sense that you're in—your mental time sense, your whole machinery time sense—as well as the time sense of just watching the thing for an hour and twenty minutes... When the images start to congeal, like pulling the cart, then you're prepared for something. You're prepared to really see things. And all that latticework in the front was a preparation to do that, to make the eye think, For God's sake let me look at something. And then you give them something to look at. And that's when you have the best opportunity of really penetrating because the eye will open for you, of course the eye of the mind...⁵

The second reel begins with a flood of barely-processed sensory input. An eye flutters open and then there are feet, hands, mouths, and bodies, exploring and experiencing. A crashing sound underscores the confusion. The next major segment is pivotal: a birth set against a death. They are thresholds comparable only to each other, and it is the one that makes the other real.⁶ If generation is a central theme,⁷ it is nowhere more unmistakably embodied than in the forceps birth of a baby boy that is intercut with vivid colour footage of a bloody expiring sheep. The child emerges with bloated, engorged testicles and an erect penis, and the camera that is held by the man with two sons of his own pans over the remarkable sight again and again, filled with confidence in the endless and ubiquitous perpetuation of life. The Christian links between lamb and infant are unavoidable; soon after the birth/death, there is also a sort of ontogenetic link established at the level of the foetus.

Having been born, all things live in the world, and the world is what Chambers now gives us, just as he did in the first reel, but then perception was hardly possible because we saw through a glass darkly and knew but in part. To say simply that the film is about generation and gestation, or about birth, growth, and death, or about perception, or about the cycles of nature and the human condition, is somehow to negate the extremely pointed quality in the next section of the utter specificity, the utter particularity of the events, that roots the structuralist complexity in a completely non-elitist universe. A teenage boy goes for a swim in the Thames in the dead of winter, while a policeman who was notified beforehand stands by ready with a life-preserver and a paddy wagon. A woman rummages around her still-cold early spring garden for a barely-formed violet to tuck in a buttonhole of her styleless coat. A man with confused and frightened brown eyes climbs out of a mine cave-in while many arms embrace him back into the world of the living. A complacently charitable businessman presents a lively little bird in a cage to a sadly retarded young boy as part of a Christmas-gifts-for-unfortunates campaign. And so on and on.

Just preceding the final two sequences of the rather puzzled little boys feeding the rather oblivious little deer and the view down the Thames and up the sky, we watch Chambers mow his front lawn. There is hardly a clearer method than this kind of positioning of letting it be known that what follows is virtually a manifesto of his scale of values and philosophical stance. Furthermore, the "home-movie" technical quality of the filming of the final two episodes, the fact that they are in rather crude colour, and the accompanying sound track of cautionary parental whisperings set them off even more from the rest of the film. Almost everything else is black-and-white, except most of the sheep footage, and there are no human voices. Chambers is summing up by saying what untold numbers of less visibly gifted people have been saying in small voices and without fanfare for centuries: that he is just a man, that his children are the most important thing in his life, and that the world is a miracle. His own comments on the effect of the film as a whole, made several hours after he'd seen it for only the second time, make a similar although more general point:⁸

If you take a thing in a progression, you know, and sort of intuitively work your way through it, mould the thing and have it happen again and again

in various ways, it means a lot more at the end of it than if it was shortened up and said in two sequences, as this compared to this. Meanwhile you've gone through an experience of your own self, and you've gone through the experience of something being resolved *in you* because of what you're looking at, as well as what you're looking at seems to be resolving itself too. What I felt today is that there are certain resolutions that take place in you that you're not altogether conscious of, but certain resolutions about life and about life and about things. I found that I was almost saying to myself, Yeah, things really are good and things really are unique, things really are full of wonder the way they are.

Altogether *The Hart of London* is one of Chambers' masterpieces; it is not a narrative unfolding at a suitable aesthetic distance but a metamorphic process that one undergoes, that even the artist finds himself undergoing in the presence of what he has made.

NOTES

- ¹ Teilhard de Chardin, "The Mass on the World" in *Hymn of the Universe*, Collins Fontana Books, p. 21. See next note.
- ² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "What is Phenomenology?" in Alden Fisher, ed., *The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty*, Harcourt, Brace, & World, pp. 39-40. I purposely cite Merleau-Ponty and Chardin, because in my first meetings with Chambers in the fall of 1972, he mentioned them again and again as recommended reading for understanding his own point of view.
- ³ Taped conversation between Jack Chambers and Avis Rosenberg, October 19, 1972. "That's why you would never see anything . . . nothing would catch up to itself."
- ⁴ I would like to thank Goldie Rans for initially mentioning this to me. Chambers responds to a question about this in a letter to me of July 27, 1973: "Yes, I solicited fotos from Londoners of anything and received a couple of thousand, all of which I filmed and used in the rapid-fire section of images in Reel No. 1." There are marvellous implications here of the acceptance of randomness and chance, of the equivalence of all information, of the usable meaningfulness of all fragments of experience, etc.
- ⁵ Tape, October 19, 1972.
- ⁶ Ibid. "The baby's born and . . . you stay with the birth. The only other thing you can go to is the death, because it's the only other thing you can compare it with . . . You see, they're both on the threshold of a new experience or a new life. Because it seems to me that just because we die here, nothing's gonna stop . . . It's a perpetual thing, just like energy." And elsewhere in the same tape: "... When the kid is born, you know . . . You've got the lamb dying in colour. Well it's almost like the colour takes the time position forward to another dimension. Like you go forward to you might almost call it a dimension of having lived, as opposed to having just been born, and this again is the preparation for another gestation. And this is a look at the passage into that other sleep, you know."
- ⁷ Ibid. Chambers' own one-word summary: "It's generation, that's the whole thing."
- ⁸ Ibid.

NOTE: This article is taken from "The Hart of London" published first under the name of Avis Lang Rosenberg in *Criterion*, 1974. Missing here are the two introductory paragraphs that provide a general background for Chambers and his films.—A.R.