



Image: Fake News (Guardian February 2006) by Joe Magee

## Demolition and Decay in Bristol City Centre

- The films of Joe Magee



It's February 2006, and though derelict since 1989, Bristol's Tollgate House is once again crawling with life. Literally. Hidden beneath huge blank sheets, the 18-story building is being

demolished from the inside, but it's the movement on the outside that's significant. Using the sheets as a giant projection screen, Tollgate House is slowly overrun by hundreds of luminous maggots writhing over and around each other in front of a black background. The film, *Stabilizers*, was commissioned by Bristol's Blackout Arts cooperative and is the work of filmmaker and artist, Joe Magee.

"I liked the notion of a dead building," says Magee, "good for nothing but systematic decomposition. The process of small organisms eating away at larger ones is, in some ways, a process of stabilization." Hence the title of the seven-minute short projected in a loop as the people of Bristol (themselves an added dimension to the piece that Magee had not previously considered) pass by on the streets below. Some passers-by watch with more interest

than others but none can fail to notice the installation. Magee is sometimes bothered that short films have such a limited audience so he places importance on having his work seen and engaged with. "The *Stabilizers* project literally took film onto the streets," he notes.

With his static art, inspired by the visual language of commerce (typography, advertising, the graphic arts etc.), Magee has often found a wide audience. Since leaving the London College of Printing in Graphic Design, he worked as an illustrator for various clients including *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*. It was only in 1998 that he branched into filmmaking and animation. Having achieved his goals as an illustrator, Magee wanted to avoid taking the natural step into advertising. "I'm comfortable working commercially,"

he says, "but needed the challenge of non-commercial projects."

*Rabbit Show*, a 19-second frame-by-frame animation made using Photoshop, came to define an exhibition of his digital images at Watershed in Bristol. The looping piece, which portrayed endlessly reproducing and mutating rabbits, began Magee's fascination with the moving image and began also a constant thematic thread that runs through many of his short films, *Stabilizers* included. As well as *Rabbit Show* and *Stabilizers*, many of Magee's other short films (*Jesusplex*, *Hypnomart*, *Blackbird Has Spoken*, etc.) have included images repeated many times over in various patterns and manipulated by digital effects. Repetition and uncanny manipulation are particular hallmarks of Magee's visual style. Think of Banksy's art then imagine it dancing to a sparse ambient soundscape. That begins to describe the aesthetics of Magee's films.

The implied message of Magee's art is yet another running theme and no less important. Although refusing to be drawn on the underlying meaning of *Stabilizers*, Magee acknowledges the suggestion that the maggots may be a reference to the building corporation developing Tollgate House. Much of his other work, whether still or moving images, draws attention to the seedier aspects of modern life. *Hypnomart*, for example, is a lurid indictment of consumer culture and his Knowle West

Trilogy, *Gearhead* (winner of a UK Film Council best film award), *Fruit Loop* and *Clot*, pull no punches in the depiction of addiction on a Bristol housing estate. But, according to Magee, "a history of working for newspapers and making direct comment on politics carries an association regardless of whether there is any such intent." This is no bad thing, he admits. Having embedded contentious and hidden political statements in much of his past work, he has observed an unexpected and pleasing tendency for people to scrutinize his current projects even more carefully.

**"I liked the notion of a dead building, good for nothing but systematic decomposition."**

Retaining control over the potential messages of his work is something Magee feels strongly about. He acknowledges the power that faceless financiers have over the content of the high-budget films they bankroll, but is worried that the UK Film Council often has a similar influence over the filmmakers who receive their grants. When scrutinizing the contract of a Film Council grant to make a short film based on a script he had written, Magee realised he would be signing away more than he was prepared to. "Despite there only being a nominal fee for writing and directing," he says, "I was expected to sign away 'all

rights, in all media, in perpetuity, and in the Universe'." The Film Council would also have rights to a final cut. "Should [the Film Council] be nurturing a generation of filmmakers who don't feel that they can fully express themselves, uncensored, in a ten-minute short," he asks, "and shouldn't [the film-maker] own that work afterwards?" Magee dropped the project rather than continue under such terms.

Having produced images for his ideal clients, had his films shown at more than 40 festivals internationally and having had one such film projected onto the giant husk of a building in the heart of Bristol, what does Magee envision for the future? First and foremost an artist, he says he looks continually to expand his repertoire in all media. Ultimately, though, he is drawn to the seductive process of making films. "Each stage has something which excites me," he says. Perhaps a feature film, then? "I would not be averse to it," he replies, "but it would need to be a direct extension of my approach and ideas." If his short films are anything to go by, we can expect a brutally candid, stark and challenging work that refuses to be ignored. Like a hundred glowing maggots crawling over the surface of a condemned building, the vivid and gruesome veneer of Magee's work draws attention to the grim reality lying just beneath the surface.

Aaron Callow

## Independent Films

### Stabilizers

Joe Magee 2006  
www.periphery.co.uk



To understand art context is all important. What are we to make of *Stabilizers*' regressive depiction of a fly's life-cycle without knowing also that it was made for projection onto the surface of a condemned building?

Maggots carry connotations of death and decay, yet the tens and hundreds on display in Magee's seven-minute film glow with bright neon shades of blue and green. They move with staccato flickers rather than skin-crawling squirms and they do so against a perfect black background. They are almost beautiful. This is not a vision of maggots with which we are familiar.

When small creatures eat away at larger ones it is a process of stabilization, says Magee. The long-abandoned husk of

Bristol's Tollgate House is "eaten away" to make space for redevelopment. Similarly, from the dissolution of carrion maggots generate new life. To see beauty in this process is uncommon but through *Stabilizers*, Magee challenges us to consider relationships between destruction and new life.

Aaron Callow

### Off the Beaten Track

Leo Bridle  
www.leobridlefilms.co.uk

This two-minute film by Leo Bridle begins with a young man setting out on a bike ride. After cycling listlessly around the paths of a town park he takes a detour down an unmapped wooded lane. At this point the film transforms from live action to cut-out animation and the rattle of



wheels is replaced by traditional folk music. We see the boy ride through a jungle of dancing skeletons, then rise up to the clouds and plummet into sea, before being sucked into a pipe, which spits him back into reality. This experimental short is both eccentric and whimsical, evoking a fantasy world similar to the childlike wonderlands of Michel Gondry's early work. Bridle is a skilled animator with a sharp sense of timing and a firm grasp on mood and texture. *Off the Beaten Track* is a popular feature on several websites and has toured with numerous film festivals.

Kelly Cowley



## Independent Films

### The Banker

Hattie Dalton 2005  
[www.memoryboxfilms.co.uk](http://www.memoryboxfilms.co.uk)

The biological clock is ticking for a worker in a sperm bank, but he's right on time! This sick comedy works on all the unspoken fears surrounding test-tube

conception and the jokes pour forth about the men who donate and the women who receive. In between the two is this weird little guy, your stereotypical labcoat-bespectacled-geek who may well be populating the world in a way the world did not expect. So maybe he can't woo his nerdy workmate, but his plans and imagination keep him going.

The film is horrifically jovial and keeps a

knife-point balance between the sterile and scary laboratory, the impressive visuals showing its heavy doors and wipe-clean surfaces, contrasting the weak-willed characters that inhabit it. The pace and clever repetition of sequences allude to the truth but keep the suspense going throughout. The result is a deep disgusted laugh to go with stunning cinematography.

*Julia Worely*



### Tea Total

Lucy Izzard 2005  
[www.bbc.co.uk/dna/filmnetwork/A7789431](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/filmnetwork/A7789431)

A quirky animated investigation into the eccentric British addiction to a good old cuppa, Lucy Izzard's line-drawing tea-stained illustrations accompany rather British interview

snippets with the sound of tea-spoons chiming and stirring in the background. In a tiny amount of time they discuss the mixed history of English tea, with anecdotes and opinions. The simple beverage is important socially and is steeped in tradition, bringing people together to chinwag and philosophise through centuries. Some very British colloquials

are set to a stream of developing and metamorphosing images, cute characters and surreal scenarios taking on the personas of tea-room goers and reminding me a little of Nick Park's *Creature Comforts*.

A delightful little pick-me-up for the day – nothing too profound or silly – just a simple thought for your tea break.

*Julia Worely*

## Between The City And The Sea

Joey Barnes  
www.violentviolet.co.uk

*Between The City And The Sea* is, essentially, a beautifully-shot visual poem. There is no dialogue and no real action to speak of, but still a strong sense of meaning and story, despite the extremely short length of the piece, which runs to approximately 5 minutes! It's a study of loss and broken relationship, told retrospectively with a keenly-felt nostalgia. There is no dialogue, but the situation is narrated in subtitles, which gives a wholly interior feeling to the piece that is dreamy and engaging and intimate; as the audience is invited to read the private thoughts of

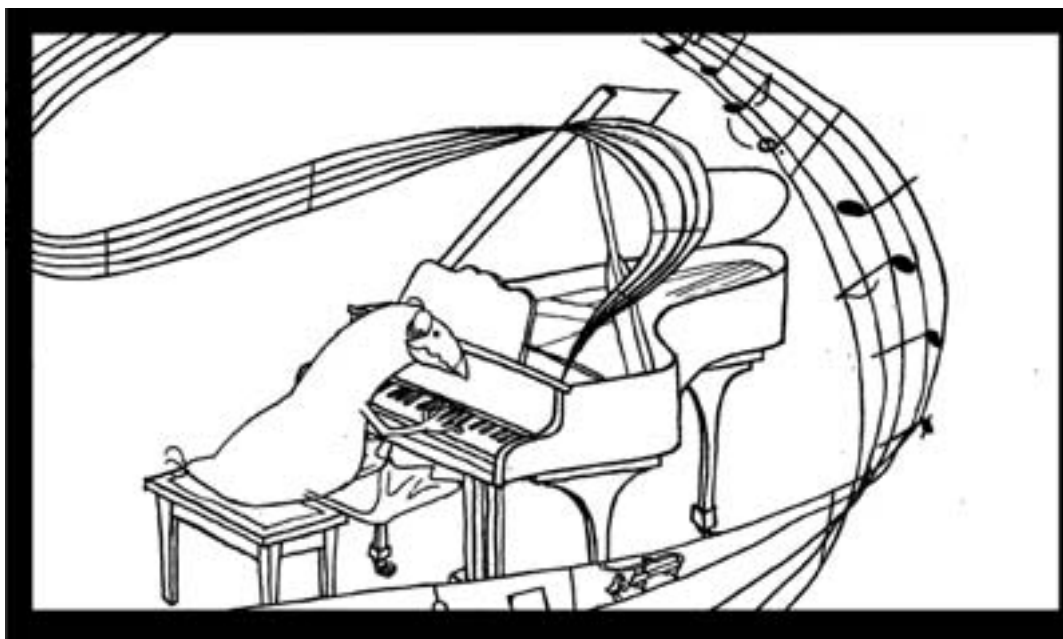


the girl focussed in the frames. For something so short, and narrated with such simplicity, *Between The City And The Sea* carries a tremendous amount of atmosphere and seems to have

a good deal to say, and says it with poise and poignancy.

Fiona Ferguson

**“A small black-and-white bird crawls through your earlobe, checks into a cheap hotel in your brain, bashes away at its piano and you hum away.”**



## Headache Hotel

Karen Cheung 2006  
www.karencheung.co.uk

Ever wonder why you have a certain song in your head? I've lost count of the number of times I've mind-sung my way through entire albums during work shifts - but the wondering is over. Karen Cheung has the

answer: a small black-and-white bird crawls through your earlobe, checks into a cheap hotel in your brain, bashes away at its piano and you hum away.

But this amusing 2-minute animation is also artistically pleasing, as well as psychologically pondering. The sheets of music that seep from the piano aptly fade into the rooms of Mind Hotel - and we can see

the protesting heckles of the other “guests” - a barking dog, a banana-drumming monkey and two chirping birds - who are simply adding backing sounds to the tune played by the bird.

Unfortunately, the bird is booted out of the hotel and thus from the ear of its human host. “I've just 'ad this awful tune in my 'ead,” the man says.

Steve Clarkson

## Sometimes

John Burns  
www.bigredbutton.tv

This animated music video from Big Red Button is a contemporary retelling of the Frankenstein story. A scientist awakens a monster to the trance beats of *Sometimes* by Mr. Do and slowly conditions him with electric shocks and tranquilizing darts against his habit of maiming rabbits. The monster goes on to win fame and riches, only to become a corrupted womaniser and drug fiend. After a term in prison, he finishes up like any other jaded human being, seeking release with a night on the dance floor. This cartoon is detailed and rapidly paced with an aesthetic style comparable to the ghoulish surrealism of David Firth's cult internet series *Salad Fingers*. The tune has a dreamy rhythm with enough variation to keep it fresh. The use of a child's voice repeating “Sometimes I feel happy” (among other allusions to emotional states) nicely reflects the simple yet sensitive mindset of the monster hero.

Kelly Cowley  
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