By Amy Taubin

The Passing
The Exploding Valentine

Some of the Images in Bill Viola’s The Passing burst out of the darkness, shimmer, and fade as radiant and ephemeral as shooting stars. Others coalesce before our eyes, emerging like ghosts from a field of electronic noise. On a video screen, noise looks something like film grain—it’s what you see in the absence of a signal strong enough to override it. For Viola, noise is the stuff that subtends representation, the ground of both video and consciousness.

Awesomely beautiful, The Passing is proof that as a visual medium, video is not inferior to painting or film. For the first time in the 25-year history of video art, it isn’t necessary to make either allowances for or a virtue of the crudeness of the image. It’s not incidental, however, that The Passing is entirely produced in black and white. At its best, color video is about as subtle as acrylics, though far more difficult to control.

Viola is one of two world-class video artists, the other being Nam June Paik. If the populist Paik brought TV into the modern art museum, Viola extended the aesthetics of modernist art to the TV screen. Although his confrontational video installations have, until now, overshadowed his videotapes, at least a half-dozen of the latter—for example, Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat) and Anthem—are among the most compelling works of the ’70s and ’80s.

Like most of the pieces Viola has produced since 1973, The Passing is an autobiographical in-
vestigation of consciousness. During the four years in which he shot and edited the tape, his two children were born, his mother died, and he himself turned 40. At the midpoint of his life, he found himself not in Dante’s “dark wood,” but under water, drowning, struggling for air and light. The central image of the piece is of a man (Viola) lying in bed, tossing between sleep and waking, his eyes open but looking inward. Like avant-garde “trance films,” The Passing breaks down the boundaries between the self and the external world, between the imagination and materiality. In that sense, it owes a great deal to the work of Stan Brakhage. Viola, however, defines the mind/body/inside/outside relationships very differently from Brakhage. If the unstable imagery of The Passing represents the terrorist threat of imagination and memory—the stuff that’s overwhelming yet can’t be grasped—the slow, slightly labored breathing that dominates the soundtrack is an index of the rhythms of the body through which consciousness is mediated.

Video technology allows Viola to revive an exhausted avant-garde form and push it further than anyone has before. It’s the dematerialized characteristic of the medium—the fact that it involves the transmission of electronic signals rather than the production of an object—that makes it so suitable for the exploration of psychic processes. In video editing, moreover, every frame can be not only obsessed over, but tinkered with, memory and desire mixing to create pictures unavailable to the naked eye.

There are less than a half-dozen images in The Passing that Freud would have considered heimlich. Indeed they could have come out of anyone’s home movies: a child running on the beach, the child posed with his grandparents, a pan across a mantel place covered with photos. There are two other images that are no less direct although slightly more studied: a close-up of the wet, crinkled face of a newborn and another of the parchment-skinned grandmother, white lace framing her head, lying in her casket. These moments serve both as our entry into the piece and as respite for the protagonist (Viola) from his terrifying subjectivity, his way of coming up for air. The Passing isn’t structured as a narrative, but, posed between birth and death, it raises the question basic to all narrative: Where has one come from and where is one going?

UncERTaining images expressive of inner-eye vision, Viola also follows the imperative of the Russian formalists: that art is about “making strange.” The Passing restores to the landscape of the Southwest the inherent surrealism that Hollywood turned into cliché. A starkly triangular mountain and its reflection in the water below (the Salton Sea) form an abstract black diamond shape against a gray ground, as stunning as a Richard Serra drawing. A crumbling adobe building with the graffiti scrawl “It stinks in there” next to its cave-like entry suggests unspeakable horrors, not all of them contemporary. The archaeology of a desert is a metaphor for that of the mind.

Just as memorable are the multilayered fantasy images. A carefully arranged table lit by a single lamp is engulfed by water. No rain, but a river vertically expended falls from the ceiling and then is sucked back up out of the picture. In terms of video engineering, it’s not a difficult image to produce: its magic is precisely its rabbit-in-the-hat simplicity.

The Passing suggests that the self resolves its terrors by plunging deeper within. The final image is of Viola asleep and floating under water.

The Passing plays at the Museum of Modern Art on February 14 at 3 and 6:30 and February 18 at 6:00. Viola will introduce both shows on the 14th. A word of caution however: the tape will be screened on a video projector system, which is guaranteed to blur its detail and diffuse its intensity.
Information (1973) color sound 30 minutes

Information is the manifestation of an aberant electronic non-signal passing through the video switcher in a normal color TV studio and being retrieved at various points along its path. It is the result of a technical mistake made while working in the studio late one night. The output of a videotape recorder was accidentally routed through the studio switcher and back into its own input. When the record button was pressed the machine tried to record itself. This caused electronic perturbations which effected everything else in the studio. Color appeared where it shouldn't have been; there was sound where there was no audio connected; every button punched on the video switcher had a different effect. After this error was realized and traced back, it became possible to sit at the switcher as if it were a musical instrument and learn to 'play' this non-signal. Once the basic parameters were understood, a second videotape recorder was used to record the result. Information is that tape.

(Produced at the Synapse Video Center, Syracuse University.)
BILL VIOLA  Biographical Information  Revised October 1991

1951  Born, New York.
1960  Captain of the "TV Squad", 5th grade, P.S. 20, Queens, New York
1973  Graduated, BFA, Experimental Studios, College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, New York
1973-80  Studies/performs with composer David Tudor and new music group "Rainforest" (later called "Composers Inside Electronics")
1974-76  Technical director in charge of production, Art/Tapes/22 Video Studio, Florence, Italy
1976-80  Artist-in-residence, WNET Thirteen Television Laboratory, New York
1976  Travels to Solomon Islands, South Pacific to record traditional music and dance, and document Moro cult movement
1977  Travels to Solo City, Java, Indonesia to record traditional performing arts with composer/ethnomusicologist Alex Dea
1979  Travels to Sahara desert, Tunisia to videotape mirages
1980-81  Lives in Japan. Studies traditional culture and video technology
1981  Artist-in-residence, Atsugi Laboratories, Sony Corporation, Japan
1982  Travels to Ladakh in Himalayas, northern India to observe religious art and ritual in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries
1983  Instructor, advanced video, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA
1984  Artist-in-residence, San Diego Zoo, CA
1984  Travels to Fiji, South Pacific to document fire walking ceremony of the South Indian community in Suva
1987  Travels throughout Southwest U.S. to study ancient Native American archeological sites and rock art

Selected One-Person Exhibitions

1974  "Bill Viola: Video and Sound Installations," The Kitchen Center, New York (four installations)
1975  "Rain - Three Interlocking Systems," Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY (installation, videotapes)
1977  "Bill Viola," The Kitchen Center, New York (installation, videotapes)
1980  Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, CA (videotapes)
1981  "Bill Viola," Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada, (videotapes)
1983 "Bill Viola," ARC, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France (two installations, videotapes)
1985 "Summer 1985," Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, nine individual exhibitions (two installations, videotapes)
1985 "Bill Viola," Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden (installation, videotapes)
1988 "Bill Viola: Survey of a Decade," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas (two installations, videotapes)
1989 "Bill Viola: The City of Man", Brockton Art Museum/ Fuller Memorial, Brockton, MA. (installation)
1989 "Bill Viola: Installations and Videotapes," The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Canada. (two installations, videotapes)
1989 "Bill Viola," Fukui Prefectural Museum of Art, Fukui City, Japan, part of The 3rd Fukui International Video Biennale. (Five installations)
1990 "Bill Viola: The Sleep of Reason", Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Jouy-en-Josas, France. (two installations, videotape)
1990 "Bill Viola: He Weeps for You," LA BOX, Ecole National des Beaux Arts, Bourges, France (installation, videotapes)

Selected Group Exhibitions

1972 "St. Jude Invitational Exhibition," De Saisset Art Gallery and Museum, Santa Clara, CA (videotape)
1974 "Projekt '74," Kunstverein, Cologne, West Germany (videotape)
1975-77 "La Biennale de Paris," ARC, Musée D'Art Moderne de la Ville De Paris, France (videotape)
1975-87 "Biennial Exhibition" (all), Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (videotapes, installation in 1985)
1976 "Beyond the Artist's Hand: Explorations of Change," Art Gallery, California State University, Long Beach, CA (installation)
1977 "Documenta 6", Friedericianum, Kassel, West Germany (installation, videotapes)
1978 "International Open Encounter on Video, Tokyo '78," Japan (performance)
1979 "Everson Video Review," Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY (videotape)
1981 "International Video Art Festival," Theme Pavillion, Portopia '81, Kobe, Japan (videotape)
1982 "60'80 attitudes/concepts/images," Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (videotapes)
1982 "National Video Festival," American Film Institute, Los Angeles, CA (installation)
1983 "Video As Attitude", Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, NM. (installation)
1984 "The Luminous Image", Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (installation)
1985 "Currents" Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (installation)
1986 La Biennale di Venezia, Italy (installation)
1986 "Où Va la Video?" La Chartreuse, Villeneuve-lez-Avignon, France (two installations, videotapes)
1987 "L'époque, la mode, la morale, la passion. Aspects de l'art d'aujourd'hui," Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France (videotape)
1989 "Einleuchten," Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, West Germany. (Installation)
1990 "LIFE-SIZE - A Sense of the Real in Recent Art," The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. (installation)
1990 "Passages de l'image," Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. (installation)
1990 "Bienal de la Imagen en Movimento," Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain. (installation)
1991 "Metropolis," Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, Germany. (installation)
1991 "Opening Exhibition," Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany (installation)

Selected Fellowships/Awards

1980 Japan/U.S. Creative Arts Fellowship (National Endowment for the Arts; Japan/U.S. Friendship Commission; Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Japan)
1982 Rockefeller Foundation, Video Artist Fellowship.
1983/89 National Endowment for the Arts, Visual Artist Fellowship, Video
1984 Polaroid Video Art Award for outstanding achievement.
1985 J.S. Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, Fellowship, Video
1987 Maya Deren Award, American Film Institute
1989 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Award
1991 Rockefeller Foundation Intercultural Film/Video Fellowship

Selected Prizes for Videotapes

Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat). (1979)
1980 Grand Prize, Portopia International Video Art Festival, Kobe, Japan.
1982 Jury Prize, U.S. Film and Video Festival, Park City, Utah.

Hatsu-Yume (First Dream). (1981)
1983 Grand Prize U.S. Film and Video Festival, Park City, Utah.
1983 Jury Prize, Video Culture/Canada, Toronto.

Anthem (1983)
1984 Grand Prize, Video Art, Video Culture/Canada, Toronto.
1984 First Prize, Video Art, Athens Film/Video Festival, Ohio.

I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like (1986)
1987 First Prize, "Videoart," 8 Festival International D'Art Video, Locarno, Lago Maggiore, Switzerland.
The first major exhibition of the photographic legacy of Lee Miller (1907-1977) opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., on February 11, 1989. Sponsored and coordinated by the California International Arts Foundation, Lee Miller Photographer was curated by Jane Livingston, Associate Director and Chief Curator of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and includes 96 images, many of which have never been published or exhibited.

If Lee Miller is watching from some other dimension, I am sure there is a wry smile on her lips. Man Ray once declared she could make more work for other people than anyone else he knew, and this talent has continued to make itself felt with undiminished strength. Since her death in 1977, people have been working continuously, printing her legacy of some 40,000 negatives, collating, cataloguing, and filing them in the Lee Miller Archive. There is still enough work to keep everyone busy for several years to come.

For those of us who have worked intimately with it, Lee’s photographic estate has given more than the opportunity to enjoy fine material of historic importance. Lee speaks to us all through her work and life. It is often more instructive to study a person’s defeats than his or her successes, and there is a

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been there - birth, death, desire, love - there are millions of births every day - it's a miracle, and it happens every day. Miracles are around us all the time. You can get enlightenment walking down the street - it depends on your state as an individual. For me the main function in art is encouraging self-awareness, giving someone the space and situation to have an insight.

ST: It seems that video came along at just the right time for you. You were doing work with David Tudor, performance-related, electronic music, but obviously you're visually oriented.

BV: Well, I went to art school to study painting, and I flunked. I failed painting. I always knew since I was little I was going to be an artist - that wasn't the question. Working with Tudor was great, working with sound, with found objects, and creating an environment where each of these objects resonated and gave off a different sound. It taught me that sound and time could be considered physical materials which can be manipulated, broken down, built up, squeezed or stretched.

ST: Also, the found objects resonating with their own noises - it's like the object is speaking what it is. That's a very consistent approach in your work.

BV: I guess that's because I want to know what it is. Everything has something to teach you, so I will go and look at something as long as I can, and not speak, and hopefully, let it speak. I don't take anything for granted.

ST: You use the tools of television, which in this culture is the most banal thing around, to articulate profound inner processes. How do you articulate the interior world, using pictures of the exterior world?

BV: Because it's the same thing. The exterior world is the interior world. In Islam, the Sufis call it a "veil" - there are 70,000 veils separating you from Allah, they say. You can think of it sometimes as a brick wall; other times, it's transparent. But the outer world and the inner world are complementary reflections of the same thing. The idea of the sacred and the profane is not intrinsic to any particular objects or images. Any image can be a vehicle of transmission between the two worlds.

That's what the piece "Anthem" is about. When I first moved to Southern California, I felt that it was as far away from the spiritual as anything I could think of. But I felt my initial reaction was simplistic, so I tried to find the mythic or inner elements of which this is a reflection. I used shots of the Long Beach harbor, and the oil refineries in San Pedro, very familiar things. Everything has multiple dimensions to it.

It's like the installation The City of Man, which I just did at the Brockton Art Museum in Massachusetts. It's about this world, this day - now. Most of my work has been about the other world, in the language of the other world, making a statement about this world by negation, by the fact that the common elements of this world are not there. My installations envelop you in physical metaphors for inner experiences. The City of Man is the rational, human side, as opposed to St. Augustine's City of God.

The piece is a triptych, based on the proportions of Renaissance triptychs, with three channels of rear-projected video projected onto the panels. The center panel is a meeting in City Hall with a group of people at a big table, discussing something you can't quite hear, for a half-hour in real time. The left panel shows these new housing clusters on the hills in Diamond Bar in Riverside County, and the freeway, and a snow-covered mountain in the background. The light slowly changes for a half-hour. The far-right panel is an old factory burning at night, flames leaping into the air out of the windows. The feeling is one of perpetual, continuous time.

ST: Is it safe to call you a romantic? You named your kid "Blake," after all!

BV: That was after Blake Carrington!

ST: Oh, of course, you're referencing popular culture!

BV: I'm ok in the art world, now, right? Well, am I a romantic? I don't know, there are a lot of things about the romantic tradition that I identify with, but there are aspects of it that I think are dangerous. Even though some of my images may look like that, the Romantics' engagement of landscape is on a very different level. The tradition of landscape in the East, the Eastern concept of the person's place in the universe, makes a lot more sense to me.

I've felt that the landscape is the raw material of the psyche. The majority of human habitation has been as hunter-gatherers; as "civilized" human beings we're a recent phenomenon. Therefore, if you agree with people like Carl Jung, that there is an archeology of mind, and that the mind is built upon many layers of past experience, then it stands to reason that there is a deeper, very strong connection with the landscape. Most of the images that have fallen on human retinas throughout history have been nature, wilderness, rather than the interiors of cities and towns.

The reflection of all those years as hunter-gatherers, in awe of the overwhelming power of nature, is what confronts you.