

NEWSPAPER
2ND CLASS P.O. ENTRY
USPS 656-960
02371

VARIETY

\$3.50
\$43.95/E2.75
FF32/DW7
SA10/L6000

THE INTERNATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY ■ NOV. 2, 1992

WAX, OR THE DISCOVERY OF TELEVISION AMONG THE BEES (COLOR/B&W)

A Jasmine T. Films release. Produced, directed, written by David Blair. Camera (color, B&W), Mark Kaplan; editor, Florence Ormezzano; music and sound, Beo Morales, Brooks Williamson. Reviewed on videocassette, N.Y. Running time: 85 MIN.
Jacob Maker David Blair
Melissa Maker Meg Savlov
Allelee Zillah Florence Ormezzano
James (Hive) Maker . . William Burroughs
Father Bessarion Himself
Dr. Clyde Tombaugh Himself

In welding film to video, "Wax" provides an appropriate look for a visionary science fiction film, and while rejection of both conventional dialogue format and look will restrict exhibition to very specialized locales, pic has the potential to command a dedicated following.

"Wax" blends an avant-garde sensibility with mystical sci-fi and, save for one instance of synchronous sound (from the real scientist who discovered Pluto), depends totally on off-screen narration. The plot moves through all kinds of bizarre turns, from excavations of the Tower of Babel to spirits of the future dead inhabiting the bodies of bees that implant a special form of television inside the head of the protagonist. There is enough mumbo-jumbo in the sprawling narrative to make the theories of Erich von Daniken sound like models of sound scientific deduction.

Fortunately, filmmaker David Blair's script and distinctive voice keep the narration's cacophony of associations fluid and almost mesmerizing as it lurches from semi-parody to surreal poetry. (Not inappropriately, William Burroughs has a cameo.)

Pic's visuals draw from old stock footage, location video and computer animation to evoke its world of the mind. There is also a sort of creative letter-boxing technique where Blair splits the screen in various ways with black spaces. Like much else in the film, this is done in adroit and expressive ways.

— Fred Lombardi

The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, AUGUST 21, 1992

Review/Film

Atoms to Bees in Alternative Realities

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

David Blair's "Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees" is so obsessed with looking and sounding like nothing that has come before that it defies the conventional wisdom that movies should be clear and well focused. Set in the vicinity of Alamogordo, N.M., with some of its more striking scenes filmed in the Carlsbad Caverns, the movie reimagine the world as it might be perceived through the blurred eyesight of a bee.

That world is a surreal video dreamscape in which visual phenomena are continually metamorphosing in ways that used to be described as psychedelic. In scenes shot in the New Mexico desert, the landscape unfolds like a shivering mirage, with the images of faces and mountains curling and dissolving like pictures on a flag in the wind. A bomb-sight grid becomes a honeycomb that becomes a map of the brain. The letters of a riddle float in the air and rearrange themselves into another slogan that seems to answer the first riddle. "Wax" goes so far as to imagine an alternative alphabet used to communicate by the spirits of the dead.

The story of "Wax," which opens today at the Papp Public Theater, is almost impossible to describe. It is narrated by a character named Jacob Maker (Mr. Blair), who designs gunsight displays at a flight-simulation factory in New Mexico. Jacob also keeps a hive of very unusual bees that were taken to Europe from Mesopotamia by his grandfather between the wars. Through the film maker's witty use of archival material, Jacob's family history in the 20th century is told as a sort of pseudo-documentary on the development of photography and its relation to the occult.

Maintaining a dispassionate, scientific tone, Jacob methodically expands this family history into a fantastic story of time travel, reincarnation and communion with the dead that conflates science fiction, biblical myth and entomology into a convoluted fable. The tale, among other things, is a multi-generational family saga as it might be imagined by a cyberpunk novelist. It flashes all the way back to the story of Cain and

Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees

Written, produced and directed by David Blair; director of photography, Mark Kaplan; edited by Florence Ormezzano; music by Beo Morales and Brooks Williams; released by Jasmine T. Films. At Papp Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, Manhattan. Running time: 85 minutes. This film has no rating.

Jacob Maker David Blair
Melissa Maker Meg Savlov
Allele Zillah Florence Ormezzano
James (Hive) Maker William Burroughs

Abel and the Tower of Babel and forward to the narrator's own death, birth and rebirth in an act violence.

It all begins when Jacob starts experiencing an eerie communication with his bees. Before long, he begins suffering mysterious blackouts. During one, the bees drill a hole in the side of his head and insert a television whose supernatural images begin controlling his movements.

Propelled on a journey into the desert, he visits the site where the first nuclear bomb was tested, and eventually he ventures below the earth into a radiant underworld where the bees are preparing new bodies for the dead. Ultimately he is instructed to commit a murder in Iraq.

The character of Jacob involves a visual double-entendre. As he wanders about the desert in a beekeeping outfit that looks virtually indistinguishable from a space suit, he suggests a refugee from "2001: A Space Odyssey." That film is one of many to which "Wax" pays homage, although it looks a lot more like a movie by Jim Jarmusch than one by Stanley Kubrick. With its shifting, alternative realities, "Wax" might also be described as an electronic video answer to "Total Recall" with the weirdness multiplied exponentially.

What should help make the film a cult favorite is the intricate design of Mr. Blair's story. Eccentric as it is, the fable has a rigorous interior logic that puzzle aficionados should enjoy deciphering. Beyond that, "Wax" reverberates with implications about the relationship between video and the modern world.

There is a sense in which we have all had televisions implanted in our heads. And those sets broadcast television's version of reality. Who really knows what those endless reruns are doing to us?

The Boston Globe

FRIDAY, APRIL 2, 1993

WAX: A technically accomplished, dizzy head trip

WAX OR THE DISCOVERY OF TELEVISION AMONG THE BEES

Directed and written by: *David Blair*

Starring: *Blair, Meg Savlov*

At: *Harvard Film Archive, 24 Quincy St., Cambridge, through Apr. 14*

Not rated

By *Betsy Sherman*
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

David Blair's piece of technomagic wizardry, "WAX or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees,"

Movie Review

is at once a challenging, dense science fiction parable and a dizzy head trip. The video feature (which will be shown on film at Harvard Film Archive) weds camera-shot footage, later manipulated through a computer, with computer animation and a synthesizer soundtrack.

The purposely tangled narrative, in which seeming non sequiturs find their relevance later on, starts off like a documentary, with a narrator telling the story of beekeeper James (Hive) Maker (played by a photo of William Burroughs and some old stock footage of beekeepers at work), who in the early part of the century thought that the dead could be made visible to the living through cinematography. His half-sister, Ella Spiralum, tried to commune with the dead through the telephone. Ella married beekeeper Zoltan Abbassid, who discovered a species of bees in Mesopotamia which he brought to England.

Suddenly the narrator reveals himself to be the grandson of Maker, Jacob Maker, and the rest of the movie is about Jacob's strange transformation. Jacob - played by Blair himself in a white beekeeper's suit, often with the helmet on - lives in

Alamogordo, N.M., and works on weapons-systems flight simulators. His wife is also a technician, working on the space shuttle project. Jacob inherited his grandfather's bees; he loves to watch them. He starts to have blackouts when he's with the bees: They insert a crystal in his head (so he tells us) and through bee television he finds out that they are in contact with the spirits of the dead, who live in a secret world underneath New Mexico. The bees transport Jacob to Garden of Eden, Kan., (a real place, with concrete trees and Biblical figures) inside the simulator landscapes where he comes to understand the missile's point of view, to the Trinity site where the first atom bomb was detonated, and to the cave where the bees carry out the work of the dead (shot in Carlsbad Cavern). His mission, which involves a revenge killing, carries him to the Gulf War in Iraq.

Blair's script juxtaposes the naive, sometimes ridiculous, but touching hopes that people had for technology at the beginning of the 20th century with the disillusionment at the end of the century, pivoting on the day in 1945 - Jacob's birthday - when the first atom bomb exploded. But the technology that went into the making of "Wax" is dazzling. Its astounding number of images are fluidly edited, and Jacob's troubled

psyche is reflected in the bending and twisting of images. Even with the New Mexico vistas, the feeling is claustrophobic and tense.

Some filmic antecedents to Blair's cyberpunk extravaganza would be Chris Marker's "La Jetee," the cryptic films of Peter Greenaway and "2001: A Space Odyssey." There's some wry humor, especially in the concept of the bees as mediums. The music, filled with ambient sounds and appropriate buzzing, is by Beo Morales and Brooks Williams. Obviously, "Wax" isn't for everyone. It takes some concentration (or else total abandonment to sight and sound), and Blair's voice (he narrates throughout the whole film) is monotonous. But "Wax" stands out as one of the boldest examples of cinema as dream.

Sci-fi extravaganza made by one man on a computer

By Betsy Sherman
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

In the 1950s, a French film critic came up with the *auteur* theory, declaring movie directors to be authors with distinctive personal visions. And it's true that even in this collaborative art form, directors from D. W. Griffith to John Ford to Tim Burton have put their individual stamps on their projects. Those working in low-budget, independent films have even more freedom to use film as a means of personal expression.

But with his science-fiction extravaganza "WAX or the discovery of television among the bees," David Blair claims an authorship that few previous filmmakers could: His 85-minute video piece was largely assembled via computer and electronic media, so there are few fingerprints on the project other than his own.

The 36-year-old Wayland native made "Wax" over a six-year period. Since its completion in 1991, Blair has been working full-time on getting his movie seen, self-distributing "Wax" to repertory theaters and film festivals (it won the Grand Prize at the sixth Montbeliard Film and Television Festival, the largest video festival in Europe). Locally, it opens Friday at the Harvard Film Archive, for a run through April 14.

On the phone from New York City - where he lives with his wife, Florence Ormezzano, who did much of the computer-graphics work on

Blair's movie won the Grand Prize at the sixth Montbeliard Film and Television Festival, the largest video festival in Europe.

"Wax" - Blair allows that he's "not real sound-bite-ish" but attempts to explain for the lay person the innovations inherent in what he calls "electronic cinema."

"This is an independent, feature-length piece that was made in a hypermedia context," says Blair. "Hypermedia is like desktop video. Just the same way that you can prepare and publish on the desktop, you can do most filmmaking processes on the desktop. The system that I used for editing was computer-based, sort of like word-processing for pictures."

He likens the importance of these new techniques to the revolution effected by portable, 16mm, synchronous-sound filmmaking in the 1960s. "You'll have lots of single-author films with just as complicated and refined a technique as you would find in a large film. People tend to trivialize it, to think it's happening on a computer so it's just for corporate presentations, or it's just going to be little experimental movies. But it's a very broad-band change."

"Wax," which Blair describes as somewhere between postmodern literature and cyperpunk, concerns the outer and especially inner journeys of Jacob Maker. Jacob is the grandson of James (Hive) Maker, a beekeeper who, at the beginning of the century, tried to capture the souls of the dead on film. Jacob, who designs gunsights for the army in Alamo-gordo, N.M., has inherited his grandfather's Mesopotamian bees. Uneasy with the implications of his work, he becomes absorbed with the bees and then discovers that they are agents of the dead. On his bee-directed mission, he travels to the Garden of Eden, in Kansas; to Trinity Site, where the first atomic bomb was detonated; and to the bees' lair in Carlsbad Caverns. Finally, he is sent on a murderous mission to Mesopotamia, now Iraq, during the Gulf War.

Wildly unconventional

Even for science fiction, "Wax" is wildly unconventional. To Jacob's first-person narration is matched a stream of images, weaving scenes of Jacob (Blair himself narrates and appears as Jacob, wearing a white beekeeper's suit) with archival film footage and still photographs as well as computer graphics and animation. Via the computer, real and fantasy landscapes are split, multiplied, twisted and rolled into tubes, to an eerie soundtrack of noises and music.

Blair lists among his influences the writers Thomas Pynchon (especially "Gravity's Rainbow") and Salman Rushdie and the audio-friendly comedy troupe Firesign Theater. He used the image of the bees and their honeycombs to pull together such disparate concerns as the occult, the Christian-apocalyptic subtext of the Reagan years and the progression of modern warfare toward emotionally detached video games.

"The film has a superstructure of a straight-ahead narrative, but at the same time there's more," says Blair. "It's sort of like a Mel Brooks movie except it's not a comedy. In a Mel Brooks movie, almost every moment is a time for a pun. In this movie, every moment is a type of pun, between picture and word, or between what you're hearing and what went before. And the bees were just the gigantic punning mechanism that holds the whole film together."

Blair is a self-taught video artist with a background in English literature. "Wax" began as a three-minute image-processed narrative, then grew into a more ambitious piece. With the help of grants - the major backer was the German television channel ZDF - Blair was able to devote himself to the project full-time, putting in 60-80-hour weeks from 1985 to 1991 at work stations that ranged from an Amiga personal computer to more sophisticated image-processors to which he was granted access. With a production crew, he shot footage in New Mexico and Kansas. The material was ultimately fed into a Montage nonlinear editing system, which allowed Blair to change, rearrange and refine his eclectic narrative.

Last month, Blair showed "Wax" at the MIT Media Lab, and checked out the brave new world of artificial intelligence. The interactive processes under development in Cambridge left Blair eager for the day when he can have these new tools under his fingertips: "To think that you can get a machine to mechanize your associative processes for you, and then you select what the machine gives you, is a pretty strange and amazing idea."

NEW YORK POST

NEW YORK POST WEEKEND/MOVIES FRIDAY, AUGUST 21, 1992

Living in a dream whirl

WAX, or the discovery of television among the bees

★★★

A film written and directed by David Blair. Running time: 85 minutes. Unrated. At the Public, 425 Lafayette St.

FILM review

By JERRY TALLMER

ALL my life since childhood I have believed, often have written, that movies are dreams, dreams movies. Now a young fellow named David Blair comes in with a movie that's so much like so many parts of so many of my own dreams — and yours, too, I bet — that it's scary. Also, in its crazy way, it's kind of wonderful.

Actually, this "Wax, or the discovery of television among the bees," opening today at the Public, is not a movie per se. It's "electronic cinema," an 85-minute omelette of motion picture, video, and whirling, blossoming geometric computer graphics.

I'm not a sci-fi fan — rather the opposite — but "Wax" isn't truly sci-fi; it just pretends to be. What it is is another kind of omelette: of history and poetry and legend and current and ancient events, all stirred together with concern — basic and banal, if you will — over man's propensity to extinguish himself, and the planet.

I could not, if I had this entire newspaper to do it in, reduce the "plot" of the film intelligibly, but you must start with the idea — as I think Mr. Blair might have — that a beekeeper's white protective suit and headgear look mightily like the suits and helmets worn by people in nuclear plants, combat pilots of the jet age, and astronauts walking the moon.

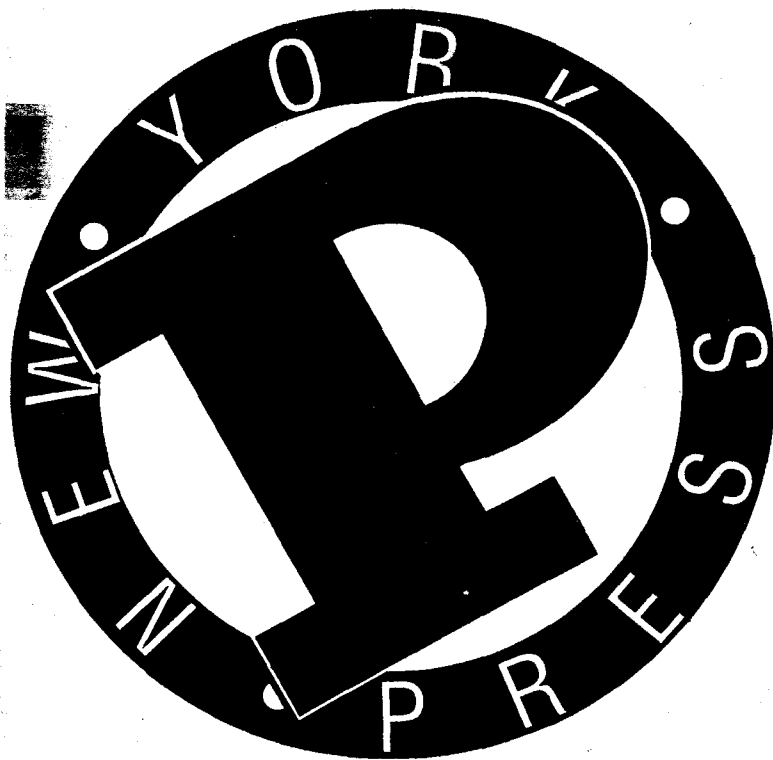
Given that basic interchangeable image, all else follows. Our hero, after a fashion, is Jacob "Hive" Maker, an aircraft gun-sight designer who puts in his days at a flight simulator chasing targets through an X of cross hairs; at home, he's a beekeeper. Jacob's grandfather before him, back there in Garden of Eden, Kan., was also a beekeeper — as well as a Supernatural Spiritualist Cinematographer who hoped to photograph evidence of life after death. Grandson Jacob was born in Garden of Eden on July 16, 1945, the day the A-bomb was first tested out in the desert at Alamogordo, N. M.

One day, hands deep amid the swarms in his back yard, Jacob hears the bees talking — the bees who will presently drill a hole in his head through which they insert a mirrored crystal TV that travels back and forth in time and space. And with Jacob and the bees, we travel too: to actual sites like the Trinity pylon where the sky lit up that day in '45 like a thousand suns, to White Sands, an Air Force bomb range, the Carlsbad Caverns, to Ypres battlefield in World War I, and to a hundred imaginary places.

We also travel — in past and present time — to Mesopotamia, where the bees came from, and where this story begins and ends, as Jacob — protesting: "I wasn't a killer, I was a beekeeper" — finds that the X in his gun sights is also the mark of Cain on his forehead.

If I'm not much for sci-fi I also generally have minimal interest in "special effects." This picture, however, uses a host of simple special effects and dozens of others not so simple — a landscape rolled up like a tube, for instance, then unrolling and floating through air like a winged magazine, or vice versa — more ingeniously than a hundred huge-budget smash-crash blockbusters. It took 36-year-old David Blair — much aided by Florence Ormezzano at the computer — six years to complete the job.

Mesopotamia today is Iraq. It is here — indeed at Basra — that Cain confirms his X a bit anti-climactically with the destruction of a single Iraqi tank. Of course George Bush may render this a little less anti-climactic any day now.



.....
Wax is an inspired and delirious rewrite of modern history in startling video pyrotechnics.

Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees

DIRECTED BY
DAVID BLAIR

.....

August 19-25, 1992

BY MICHAEL ATKINSON

What a Buzz. An inspired, maddening, nuclear-powered bughouse rant, David Blair's kaleidoscopic SF video feature *Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees* belongs to the same post-atomic tradition of hallucinatory cultural discourse that runs from Thomas Pynchon to the Epcot Center to the *Weekly World News*, gobbling up everything in between like a siege of driverants. High-tech Dada—what Blair himself calls “independenelectronic cinema”—*Wax* (showing at the Public Theater, Thurs., Aug. 21 through Aug. 27) has the genuine flavor of inmate dementia, while effortlessly conjoining its loopy hero's unsummarizable spiritual journey with the quite palpable realities of modern warfare.

Wax is only nominally a linear narrative. Held together by a deadpan narration, the furious current of electronic imagery, computer animation, found archival footage, video warping, and fresh tape shot on location at Trinity Site during Air Force bombing maneuvers frequently threatens to explode from the constrictions of story and fly off in every direction. Since its world premiere on German tv in 1991, *Wax* has been referenced to nearly every postmod landmark available, including M.C. Escher, cyberpunk, David Lynch, Rimbaud, A.E. Van Vogt, *2001*, Peter Greenaway, MTV, Samuel Beckett, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Most frequently cited are J.G. Ballard and William S. Burroughs, whose narrative function/form experiments and field trips through the post-industrial scrap heap are obvious ancestors to Blair's extravagant visual hyperbole (though he never sinks so low as to allude). Working six years on-and-off,

from grant to grant, to finish his project, Blair comes off as a twister of unorganized ideas, arcane obsessions, and crazed totemic visuals; forcefully conceived and realized, *Wax* is a one-man show of free-associative pyrotechnics.

My own analogues would include Philip Jose Farmer, Kenneth Anger (specifically, *Lucifer Rising*), the electronic abstractions of Jordan Belson and Scott Bartlett, Jay Cantor's novel *Krazy Kat*, virtual reality, Jungian archetypes, *Tribulation 99*, and the paranoid cosmologies of longtime amphetamine junkies. All of which can seem to deny *Wax* its real-world relevance—chiefly, as a critique of the Gulf War.

As evocative of its antecedents as it is, *Wax* is still an aggressively private work. It's often hermetic beyond patience; Blair's techno-delirium nearly makes an implicit wager with the viewer to make narrative or even thematic sense out of the last half hour. Told in first person, it's the story of one Jacob Maker, the son of famous paranormal cinematographer and beekeeper James Maker, from whom Jacob has inherited hives full of rare “Mesopotamian” (read: Iraqi) bees which, we soon see, converse with the dead, traffic in alternate realities and literally implant a crystal-shaped tv monitor in Jacob's head. Add to this Jacob's guilt about his work for the Army on designing computerized targeting systems, and you have a launch pad from which *Wax* takes off in a dozen directions at once.

The plot-arc, if that's what it is, follows Jacob's metaphysical journey through the world of the super-bees and into other realms of consciousness, climaxing, as does Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, within the mind of a falling bomb—this time, though, the bomb is targeted for Iraq.

Wax covers its ground with absurdist logic bridges and a New Age democracy, touching on the Manhattan Project, inner-earth theory, entomology, the Old Testament, post-Nintendo technology hatred, time travel, reincarnation, UFOs, the transmutation of souls, ghost photography and more. Once Jacob enters the Land of the Dead, Blair employs a battery of computer effects that simultaneously bests and updates *2001*'s Stargate sequence; Jacob's bee-keeper's bonnet resembles Kubrick's space suits as much as it does the uniform of toxic waste workers.

The space travel here is strictly inner, though, and the film's form is a valiant stab at pictorializing dream-states. For all its recklessness, *Wax* has the druggy rhythm of radioactive, Bible-drenched delirium tremens. Along with its other ambitions, it also endeavors to demarcate brand new territory for visual narrative. Rather, it's a shrewd adoption of many established experimental video tropes in the service of a psychotic rewrite of modern history. It may not change our visual culture, but *Wax* is a startling, ballsy trip, one that runs around in your head like a ricocheting bullet for weeks.



December 30, 1992-January 5, 1993 Vol. 5, No. 53

New York's Free Weekly Newspaper

FILM

As for my 1992 10 Best list, two self-evident conclusions can be reached regarding the year-in-film: independents ruled, and the year in general fairly sucked, with a small fistful of remarkable movies offsetting a veritable cinematic landfill. Best-of-year lists can, if nothing else, aid the reader in grokking the reviewer's angle on the field; mine is mostly comprised of movies that didn't try to sell me a used car.

Unlike most reviewers, I'm a die-hard qualitativist—I believe any movie can be judged against any other. My list is therefore in strict order of preference:

1. *Unforgiven*.
2. *The Player*.
3. *Laws of Gravity*.
4. *Tetsuo (Iron Man)*.
5. *Zentropa*.
6. *Reservoir Dogs*.
7. *Bad Lieutenant*.
8. *Proof*.
9. *The Match Factory Girl*.
10. *Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees*.

Honorable mentions: *Swoon*, *Brother's Keeper*, *Deep Cover*, *One False Move*, *Bob Roberts*, *Alien 3* and every blessed episode of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.

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The Washington Post

FRIDAY, JULY 2, 1993

Reviews

'Wax': It's One Honey Of a Trip

By Richard Harrington
Washington Post Staff Writer

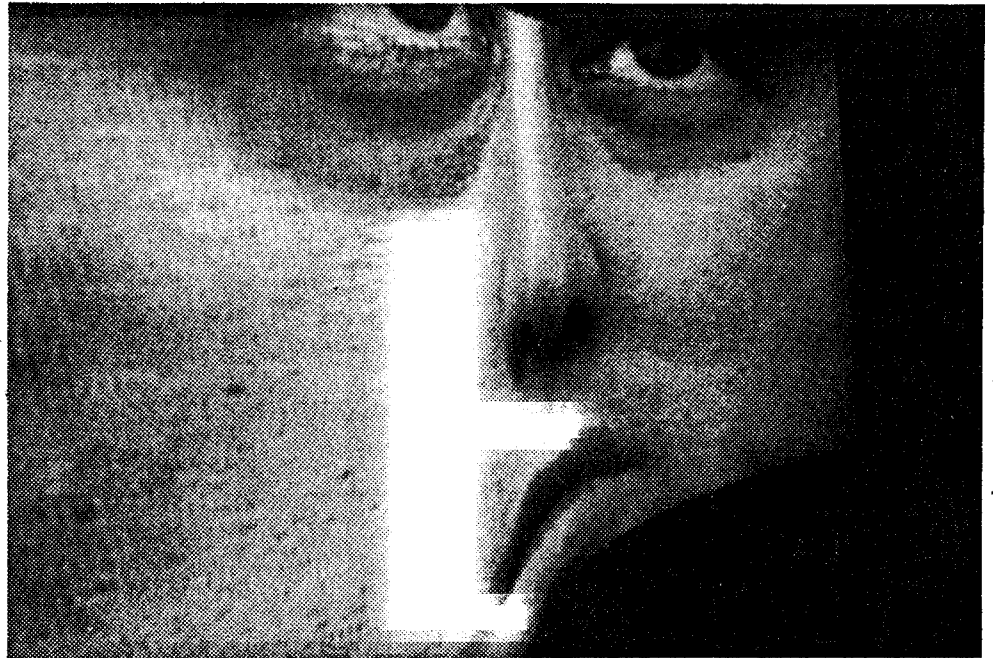
Neither moviegoing nor television-watching is likely to prepare you for "Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees," David Blair's 85-minute excursion into what he calls "independent electronic cinema." It is virtual surreality, the equivalent of white-water rafting through history, space, time, manifest destiny, the occult, militarism, photography, apiaries and caverns of the dead.

Not to mention the plight of semi-intelligent weapons escaping Earth to find life elsewhere.

Its nonlinear plot defies summary, so it's perhaps best to just go with the flow. And "Wax" does flow; metamorphosis is constant. Electronically altered panoramas ripple like images on ruffled waters, or wave like a flag in muggy wind, or flutter like sheets reflected in a fun-house mirror.

It's not flashback time, though; it's more of a flash-forward, a shape of things to come. Done in what Blair calls a "hypermedia context"—the film was edited on a desktop computer, allowing the integration of archival film, location video and computer-generated animation—it is a book with moving pictures, making Blair both author and *auteur*.

Blair, who guides us through events in a droll, dispassionate tone, plays the protagonist, Jacob Maker, who designs gun sight displays at a flight simulation lab at Alamo-gordo, N.M. At home, Jacob keeps Mesopotamian bees he inherited from his grandfather James (a cameo by William Burroughs). You suspect that this will be-



From "Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees," David Blair's mind-bending film.

come an amazing journey when Jacob provides footage of familial history that includes James Maker's attempts to photograph the decaying radiation of souls at the moment of death, and half sister Ella Spiralum's attempts to reach the dead via telephone.

This communicative preoccupation shows up in Jacob's life when he starts blacking out at his apiary, at which point the bees drill a hole in his head and insert a bee TV, a mirrored crystal whose images inform his movements and actions while effecting a startling passage: "Space and time opened like an elevator . . . I began to travel." This Jacob does in a white beekeeper's suit that resembles both a classic space exploration suit and a more practical waste disposal outfit. He looks like the man who fell from Earth.

Jacob is somewhat prepared for his travels; at work, he's become uncomfortably attuned to the ghosts inside the machines, noting that "I could feel the weapons . . . and the targets. I could feel that there were souls." As for the bees, they prove to be a channel for the dead of both past and future, as well as guides for Jacob on a journey to his pre-destiny.

He goes back to his birthplace in Garden of Eden, Kan. He travels to the Trinity Site, where the first nuclear bomb was exploded on the day he was busy being born. He becomes a smart bomb, landing on an Iraqi tank during Desert Storm. He discovers the lost language of Cain. Things become increasingly stranger in a strange Land of the Dead, a cavernous underworld where past and future meld and where the bees are preparing new bodies for the deceased.

Since I still haven't figured out what was happening, much less what it all meant, I'll leave it here, noting that like any good ride, psychic or physical, "Wax" gets even woollier as it races to its conclusion.

Made over six years and through multiple grants, "Wax" reflects a singular vision that defies the limitations of the film's budget. There are some subtly astonishing effects that trump the eye and mind. Blair's recitation can sometimes be numbing, the narrative occasionally facile (though more often cyberpunkishly poetic). But "Wax" overflows with risk-taking. This is a first step, and a bold one.

Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees, at the Biograph, is unrated.

'Wax' Buzzes Bees, Bombs and TV

MOVIES

By Bill Stamets

Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees" chronicles a spell-binding search for the proverbial Big Picture by Jacob Maker, who designs gunsights for U.S. military flight simulators, "making sure everything is as real as possible."

Escorted by an extraordinary swarm of bees inherited from his grandfather (played in a cameo by writer William Burroughs), Jacob Maker resolves his on-the-job guilt and a deep-rooted mystery in his family tree. His convoluted quest includes bees, bombs, ghosts, UFOs, psychic cameras, soul-transmitting telephones, and two Iraqi soldiers caught in the crosshairs of history. They never knew what hit them, a sensation certain to be shared by moviegoers expecting easy-going escapism.

"Wax" belongs on that upper shelf of science fiction where the genre segues into cyberpunk. Director David Blair, who plays Jacob Maker, identifies with the more rarefied styles of Thomas Pynchon and Salman Rushdie. As a video artist, Blair brings a versatility with computer graphics to his first feature film, which he calls a new format of "electronic cinema."

WAX, OR THE DISCOVERY OF TELEVISION AMONG THE BEES

★ ★ ★ ★

Jacob Maker

David Blair

Produced, directed and written by David Blair. Running time: 85 minutes. No MPAA rating. Opening today at the Music Box.

Florence Ormessano's reality-warping special effects are in synch with the virtual reality mise-en-scene.

Narrated in steady-state tones, the first-person script reports the fantastic plot tangents with surreal aplomb. Traveling through space and time, the narrator shuttles between the living and the dead, ancient Mesopotamia and contemporary Iraq, and he ultimately mutates into a woman doing genetic research.

"Wax" recalls an archetype found in the novels of Hesse, Kafka, Castaneda and Vonnegut. Jacob Maker is a pilgrim guided out of his mind to new worlds—not a surprising side effect after a swarm of bees implant a crystal television set in his cortex. One of the movies they show him, outfitted in his otherworldly beekeeper suit, stars him as Fat Boy, the A-bomb detonated on his birthday, July 16, 1945. Next he is reincarnated as a hieroglyphic X-shape, like a bomb-sight. On its spokes are impaled the souls of Iraqi soldiers killed by U.S. air strikes near Basra in 1991.

"Wax" is a moral fable of a 20th-century specialist in visualizing death who undergoes a psychic meltdown. Jacob Maker may be ahead of the curve as a viewer, but "Wax" warns against the fall-out of TV wars and reality via video. In David Blair's entrancing labyrinth of parallels, Maker's synapses fuse with overpowering circuits, and the bees kept the remote control.

The Player	★ ★ ★ ★
Rain Without Thunder	★
A River Runs Through It	★ ★ ★ ½
Scent of a Woman	★ ★ ★ ½
Sommersby	★ ★
The Temp	★ ★
Toys	★ ★ ½
Trespass	★ ★ ½
Under Siege	★ ★ ★
Unforgiven	★ ★ ★ ★
Untamed Heart	★ ★ ★
Used People	★ ★
The Vanishing	★
Volere Volare	★ ★
Wax, or Discovery Of Television . . .	★ ★ ★ ★

REVIEWS

'Wax'-ing Visually PoeTech

*** **WAX, OR THE DISCOVERY OF TELEVISION AMONG THE BEES.** (U) An adventurous, dizzying exploration of experimental film and video techniques that isn't afraid to be funny, too. Written and directed by and starring David Blair. A one-week engagement at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., Manhattan.

By John Anderson

STAFF WRITER

IT'S A PARADOX of sorts: With the increased capabilities of electronic cinema, filmmakers can bring to the screen a more perfectly personal vision. At the same time, with so much electronic magic at his or her disposal, the less a filmmaker has to rely on a common visual vocabulary. And the results can be perfectly obscure.

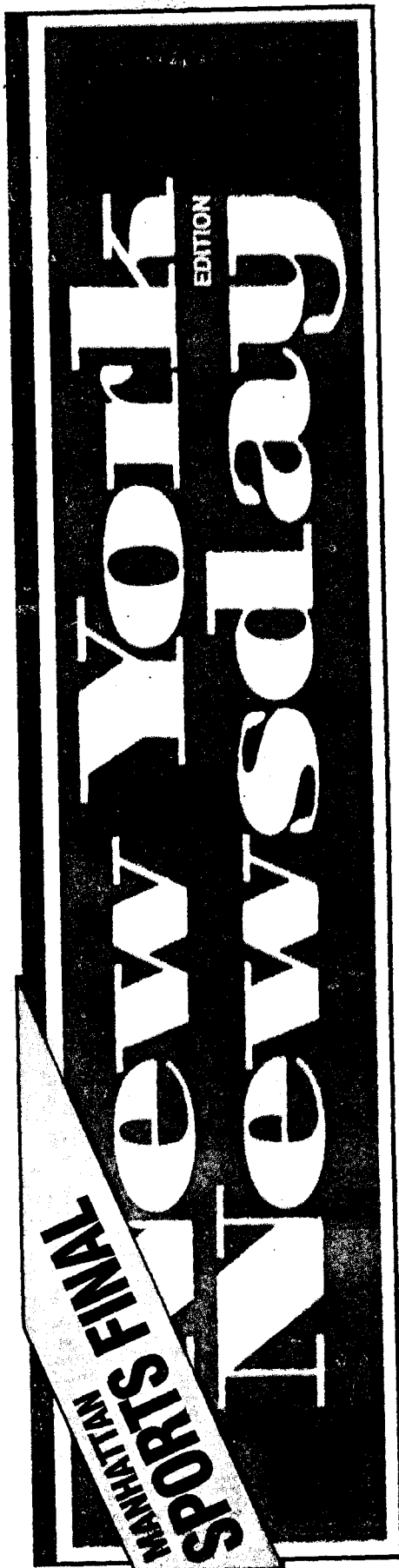
It's obvious that filmmaker David Blair is fascinated — no, infatuated — with the possibilities of the new technology, but in "Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees" (which is one off-putting title) he never seems to lose himself in it. While availing himself of a smorgasbord of visuals — archival footage, time-lapse photography, film, video, computer graphics — and drawing on influences that range from experimental video artist Naim June Paik to James Joyce, Blair has created a film about film that takes a cerebral route to a visceral response.

The story, as it is, begins in 1914 Antarctica, where James (Hive) Maker, beekeeper and a member of the Supernormal Film Society, is trying to photograph the spirits of the dead by capturing on film the decaying radiation of their souls. (In assigning such power to the camera, Blair pokes a little fun at himself.) The narrative — which is always serving the visuals, rather than vice versa — flashes forward to Alamogordo, N.M., in the '80s, where Jacob Maker, grandson of James, is working on weapons systems for the Army and keeping his grandfather's Mesopotamian bees. These bees plant a television in Jacob's head and through it reveal to him the dead of the future, and an Otherworld through which he passes to the future and meets the person he is destined to kill. The story is a vehicle for Blair's visual sense of adventure.

His use of sound is crucial to the overall effect of "Wax." Where and when does the sound of a bee's humming become the sound of a violin string singing, or the hiss of summer heat frying the New Mexico landscape, or the scream of a human voice? And where does the mind stop reading film and begin simply experiencing it for what it is? Blair's playful and provocative "Wax" not only asks the question, it gives you some answers. / **H**

*** (Unrated) **WAX, OR THE DISCOVERY OF TELEVISION AMONG THE BEES.** An adventurous, dizzying exploration of experimental film and video techniques that isn't afraid to be funny, too. Written and directed by and starring David Blair. Film at the Public.

FRIDAY, AUG. 21, 1992 • MANHATTAN • 35 CENTS



WAX

the village

August 25, 1992 • Vol. XXXVII No. 34 • The Weekly Newspaper of New York • \$1.00

WAX, or the discovery of television among the bees

Directed, produced, and written by David Blair

Hailed by literati on the sci-fi/cyberpunk continuum as "authentically peculiar, like something from the network vaults of an alternate universe" (William Gibson) and "the future direction of sci-fi film, if not film itself" (Brooks Landon), David Blair's *WAX, or the discovery of television among the bees* (The Public Theater, August 21 through 27) interfaces a first-person narrative told cheapo-noir voiceover-style with visuals produced via state-of-the-art electronic editing and image processing. Blair combines real and simulated archival footage, video shot on location at Alamogordo, Trinity Site, and Carlsbad Caverns, and computer-generated imagery to suggest a lysergically elastic space/time. Imagine if *2001's* "Jupiter and Beyond" sequence were miniaturized, accelerated, extended to 85 minutes, and if Dave Bowman had been afflicted with logorrhea.

WAX's protagonist, Jacob Maker, designs military gunsight displays at a flight simulation factory. He becomes obsessed with the rare Mesopotamian bees he inherited from his grandfather James Hive-Maker, a member of the Supernormal Film Society who may or may not have murdered Zoltan Abbassid, his rival and Siamese twin. Among other things, the bees tell Jacob that they are the dead of the future and that "vengeance was their life." Entering their world, Jacob travels in time and space, making beelines from White Sands in 1945 where he becomes Fat Man, "the loneliest of bombs," to Iraq in 1991. He dies and is born again as "the X-shape, a floating gun sight and the mark of Cain" that explodes on top of a tank killing two Iraqi soldiers. After his death, he discovers the planet of television and investigates the mystery of his origins and the origins of language in a Tower-of-Babel/Garden-of-Eden/hive-of-weapons beneath the desert where past and future intersect.

Jacob's paranoia (his image of himself as a vessel of military aggression) is a metaphor for Blair's

knowledge that the electronic artist's studio is equipped with scaled-down spin-offs of Pentagon playtoys. Transcending visual pyrotechnics, this paradox gives *WAX* a double cutting edge.

In his white beekeeper's coverall that looks suspiciously like an antiradiation suit, Maker/Blair might have wandered out of a Hollywood sci-fi flick—specifically Gordon Douglas's 1954 *Them*

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"If you're in the mood for a unique fusion of *First Men in the Moon* and *Eraserhead*, *Forbidden Planet* and *Down By Law*, then get *WAXed!*"

— Paul Di Filippo

"... like no other film you've ever seen."

— Brooks Landon, *CINEFANTASTIQUE*

"If you've been waiting to explore modern Hades through state-of-the-art video technology, *WAX*... is the film for you."

— EYE OPENER



or the Discovery of
Television Among the Bees

A film by David Blair

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'Wax' storms the subconscious

THE JAPAN TIMES • SATURDAY, JUNE 26, 1993

By GIOVANNI FAZIO

My apartment filled with a thick cloud of menacingly buzzing bees.

Armed with a can of Raid I set off to do chemical battle with the hive. Finding a hexagonal hole in the ground, I entered a cave with dripping honeycomb stalactites. Musicians bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Fab Four played humming electric

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drone music. As I drew near enough to make out the letters on the bass drum I gasped in horror — it was the Bee-Tolls! A fuzzy, quivering, bug-eyed wasp with Lennon spectacles rasped "Let It Bee."

Then, fortunately, I woke up. There is no doubt in my mind that director David Blair's debut experimental film "Wax, or, the discovery of television among the bees," was responsible. "Wax" is a film so intensely dreamlike and surreal that spillover into your subconscious seems unavoidable.

Posing as a B-level science fiction film, "Wax" is actually a dense, paranoid and totally over-the-top Book of the Dead for the cyberpunk circuit. Using the "fold-in" techniques of experimental author William S. Burroughs (who has a cameo in the film), Blair has crammed enough ideas for 10 films into 85 mind-blowing minutes. Watching "Wax" is like looking into opposing mirrors, triggering an infinite series of receding images.

In town for interviews and attempts to access Japan's high visual technology for his next project, Blair discussed the two levels his film operates on:

"On a simple level you have

the inevitable feeling of watching a bad science-fiction film, but the meanings are multiplying, the film is going much faster than itself, on a certain level. You know where you are, but you don't know how you got there, and you don't know where you're going."

On the simple level, "Wax" is the story of Jacob Maker (played by Blair), a smart-bomb target display designer for the Pentagon, based in Alamogordo, New Mexico. (Culties take note: Alamogordo is renowned for Trinity Site, birthplace of the atomic bomb, and a number of sensational UFO sightings.)

Jacob is also a bee-keeper, working with a strange breed of "Mesopotamian" bees that he inherited from his grandfather, James "Hive" Maker (Burroughs). James was a member of the Supernormal Film Society, a group devoted to capturing dead souls on film.

It turns out that the bees and the dead are connected, and soon poor Jacob's mind is invaded by voices from the hive. He begins to enter alternate realities, particularly the world of the "future dead." Soon the bees reveal to Jacob his destiny, which involves his death and rebirth as a weapon.

This alone stands as a fairly mind-bending trip, but to completely blow all your circuits, Blair has also woven in the language of Cain, interspecies communication, Desert Storm, flying saucers, conspiracy theories, time travel, karma and the "Eye of God." This cross-fertilization of ideas lends itself to free-associative thinking, and no two viewers will have the same experience.

Depending on the mindset you bring to this film, there are a multitude of concepts to play with. Try these on for size: the TV screen manipulating its viewer; the ever more abstract relationship between scientists and the killing their weapons produce; the infinite loop of karmic revenge set in motion by Cain's killing of Abel and the moral confusion created by all the above.

Conceptually and technically, "Wax" is uniquely radical. Blair's strange, dreamlike structure, a self-contained hallucination with its own inner logic, puts it in very elite company: think of Buñuel's "L'Age d'Or," Maya Deren's "Meshes of the Afternoon" or David Lynch's "Eraserhead." Blair describes viewing "Wax" as "an extremely dense experience. You'd like to be able to analyze the experience you're having, like with a psychedelic, but things are happening too fast and too present-time for you to take them in."

On the technical side, "Wax" is being billed as the first work of independent electronic cinema. Strapped for money, Blair shot in the cheaper medium of video. This also accorded him several advantages: He could afford to shoot 50 hours of location material and also incorporate a number of new video-based technologies.

Blair says he enjoyed the freedom of being able to try various mixes of each sequence before making a final cut: "It leads to an improvised filmmaking where the piece isn't finished until it plays."

When Jacob Maker finally loses touch with reality due to a crystal implanted in his head by the bees (or so he

thinks), the film blasts off completely with a mind-bending storm of computer-generated visual effects. What's truly striking is the use of these innovative technological applications in support of an equally fantastic narrative, a combination that has garnered it a reputation as a cyberpunk classic.

Bizarre is what you want when you're in the cyberdelic avant-garde, but it is *not* a good thing when you're dealing with the U.S. Department of Defense. Blair must be an even better diplomat than director, since he managed to wangle Pentagon approval for location shots in restricted areas such as the White Sands missile range. Blair describes the problems he faced with military screening of his script:

"It was during the Iran-Iraq War, and Iraq was the putative ally of the U.S. The trailer had the protagonist volunteer for research where he was shrunk down to bee-size and shipped to a hive beneath Basra, Iraq, where there were these TV bees that had luminescent fronts and were sending bee-UFOs out to New Mexico."

Obviously sensing the grave repercussions that this would have on national security, the military suggested that Blair change the location of the Garden of Eden hive from Basra to Carlisbad Caverns. In view of the subsequent war and U.S. bombing of Baghdad, this suppression of the bee-UFO information should provide plenty of fodder for conspiracy theorists.

Now this bee-UFO business may sound insane, but not when one recalls the frequent UFO sightings and supposed UFO crash-landing and cover-up at — you guessed it — White Sands and Alamogordo. When asked how seriously he takes all his UFO mythology, Blair grins and says, "They're something you weren't supposed to think about when you were a kid."

"They're just too weird."