MICHAEL ROBINSON

Since picking up a camera at the age of eleven to shoot a "Poltergeist remake/drag-show," experimental film maker Michael Robinson has drawn deep from the well of pop culture. By transfiguring the clichéd, the corny and the overly familiar, Robinson creates short films that beguile and engross. Full House, Little House on the Prairie, Sega Genesis, V.C. Andrews, Stevie Nicks, The Thompson Twins, Christian morality films, self-hypnosis videos, Guns N' Roses – nothing is sacred (or profane) in Robinson's hands.

Full House
scene from
Light is Waiting

Recently, esteemed journal Film Comment voted 28-year-old Robinson #10 on their list of the top 50 avant-garde film makers, alongside the likes of Stan Brakhage and Nathaniel Dorsky. Wheel caught up with him on his recent visit to London for a series of screenings including tank.tv at the tate modern, and an evening with the director hosted by close-up at the Bethnal Green Working Men's Club.

Michael Robinson at Bethnal Green Working Men's Club

What do you think of the labels "experimental" and "avant-garde" film maker? Experimental is a pretty weird term, so is avant-garde. In general I like things to be accessible enough so it's not only understood as part of the trajectory of some specific, long tiny history of experimental film. Although my films do reference particular movements in that history - especially structural and landscape films, which are like the math rock of film in the 60s and 70s.

But I also want to bring in my own experiences, and I did watch a ton of TV and played a ton of video games while growing up so that's shaped my experience of the world pretty significantly. When I'm putting films together I can still trace some of what I'm getting off on back to being a chubby ten-year-old playing Mario Brothers.

I also watched Twin Peaks as it first aired when I was about eleven. It scared me to hell but it also opened up what I wanted out of cinema and art. I'm still pretty influenced and amazed by David Lynch, that's a long-standing relationship.

So your films are like the missing link between Super Mario and Twin Peaks. Yeah like the warp whistle. You could get that at the

beginning of Mario 3 with a secret move. I used to find the weird narratives worked into video games really moving. Just the narrative of video games in general I would get attached to because you spend so much time with them, you're forced to identify with these blocky, blob characters that make noise when they jump.

There's definitely a lot of pop culture in your films. How do you avoid slipping into nostalgia or irony when including such elements? I make an attempt not to let anything feel too ironic. Ultimately the stuff I'm drawing on or the potentially hokey stuff I'm generating myself are things I still feel have their own power. Especially with music, I'm not trying to just poke fun or have a "hey remember this song?" kind of moment. It's more about letting the surface connotations of things hover around and communicate to each other, and hopefully communicate something new to an audience.

Your films veer between being funny, genuinely unsettling and poignant. There's this constant shifting between humour and something darker. It's the balance between trauma and humour that I find interesting because they're ultimately not always different states. Like the canned, creepy sentiment of something like [American sitcom] Full House or the melodrama of Little House on the Prairie are both about being overwhelmed in some way. TV melodrama is kept at the same elevated pitch as canned laughter or stupid jokes.

I try to create a space between overly romantic sentiment and an apocalyptic terror that's often achieved though screwing around with things from the past, giving them an evil spell presence in some way. Like in If there Be Thorns or The General Returns From One Place to Another, where the image is ultimately gentle relative to what's going on with the sound. There's a tug between these two elements and it puts up for question whether

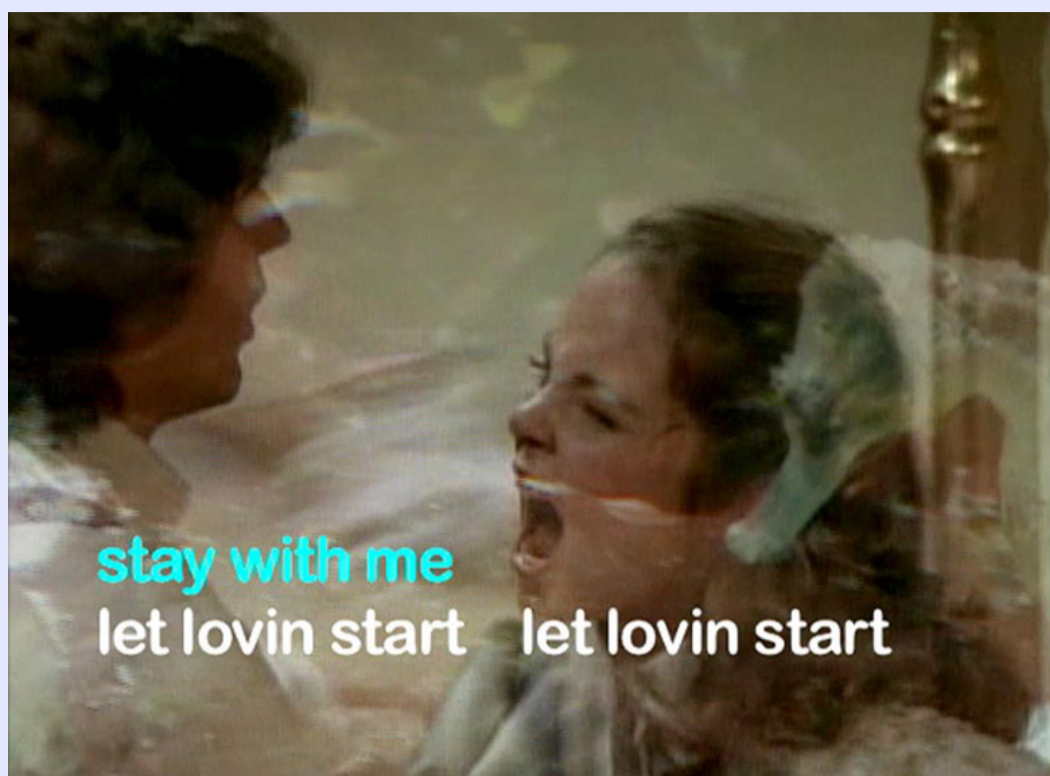## //I TRY TO CREATE A SPACE BETWEEN OVERLY ROMANTIC SENTIMENT AND APOCALYPTIC TERROR//

the more beautiful, serene stuff is trustworthy.

It feels like the narratives you weave are more about mood than any of the specific elements that they're comprised of. I don't think the subjects are necessarily bound to the things that you see. Ultimately it's about the atmosphere in that the films are about our experience of watching things.

Still from Hold Me Now *featuring* Little House on the Prairie

Often the elements are not quite at peace with each other and I let them be a little unstable, or oscillate between claustrophobia and this 'overwhelmingness'. The more emotionally overwhelmed a viewer is, the happier I am. If I can really scare the audience or really break their heart, that's what I ultimately want to do.

Where do you find your found things? The TV shows are pulled from DVDs. A lot of it comes from thrift store VHS tapes, like in Victory Over the Sun, all the flying-through-space blinky stuff is from a self-hypnosis VHS tape I found at a Salvation Army, and the other layer of that film is from a VHS I had growing up called Captain Power – which let you play laser tag with the screen. For a while I collected whatever 16mm prints sounded interesting, from Ebay mostly. And I'll explore YouTube for things although I wouldn't use actual YouTube footage because it's so degraded.

Intricate sound design is a major element in your films. How crucial is this to the process? I think sound is definitely the guiding force in cinema. It tells you what to do, what to think about, how to deal with the image. You don't have to have an image during sound or vice versa, but I feel like sound is always the narrator even if it's

totally ambient. It gives you instructions on how to watch the film.

Particularly working with an oblique cinema that's at the edge of making any kind of narrative sense, sound is all the more important in terms of telling the audience what to feel and what to do with the collage of images.
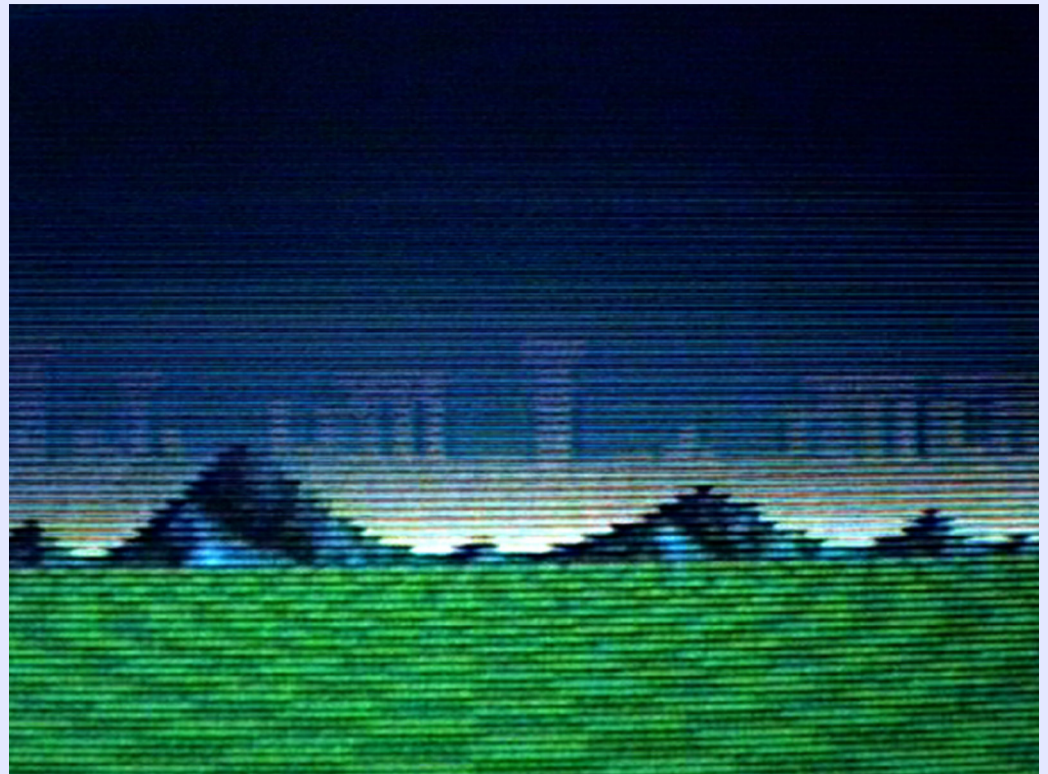
You use a lot of pop music including karaoke or instrumental versions of songs like 'November Rain' in Victory Over the Sun and 'Nothing Compares 2 U' in And We All Shine On. How did you come to use these types of songs? Over the past five years the inclusion of pop music has been a central motif in my films. I don't really know exactly how that happened, only the more I did it, the more I felt it was getting to the heart of what I wanted to do. The music is meant to affect you with how familiar and potentially cringe-worthy a lot of it is, while also hitting you right in the heart. I'm interested in these songs' artifice and their undeniable power.

Your most recent film, If There Be Thorns, gets its title from a sensational 80s trash novel by VC Andrews—usually sold with an embossed cover—that was popular amongst pre-teen girls. How did this come to inspire you? I'd found a copy of If There be Thorns in a used bookstore in Chicago and I loved the cover and the title. My sister had read all those books growing up but I hadn't thought of pulling anything from the story until I started to edit the picture and realised everything I'd collected fell under this umbrella of incest/purgatory. I was a little surprised at how uninteresting the writing was, though the incest kept my fascination, just to see how it played out ostensibly to a reading audience of twelve-year-old girls.

And how did you come to use the Fleetwood Mac song 'Storms' in the sound design for If There Be Thorns? I was listening to a ton of Stevie Nicks and Fleetwood Mac so it was in my head while I was editing. I found Stevie's persona and the teenage mysticism she embodies was along the same lines as the teenage mysticism that VC Andrews was conjuring. Also a lot of her songs are about tortured, impossible love affairs and her witchiness felt like a right fit.

Still from If There Be Thorns

What are you working on now? It's a project dealing with problematic versions of ancient Egypt, so both Hollywood versions of Cleopatra, the Michael Jackson video for 'Remember the Time', and this Dutch Cleopatra-based ice skating programme like Stars on Ice. People wearing super-glitzy Egyptian garb, dancing to 'Walk Like an Egyptian' and 'She Drives me Crazy'. It's terrible and it's serious.

Watch some of Michael Robinson's films
www.poisonberries.net