

On *De Profundis*

Lawrence Brose's films, and *De Profundis* (1997) in particular, represent an intersection of two subhistories of critical cinema, usually understood as distinct from one another: the history of working directly on the filmstrip and the history of what has come to be called "Queer cinema." Using the filmstrip as a base for painting and for other manipulations has a long history that includes Man Ray's "rayogram" technique (laying objects on an unexposed strip of film and then exposing it to light, so that the objects make a direct imprint on the filmstrip); Len Lye's coordination of painted imagery and music; Harry Smith's early "batiked" animations in which colors were layered onto the filmstrip using "Come Clean Gum Dots" and Vaseline; Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963), in which moth wings, blades of grass, and tiny flowers were collaged along the filmstrip, which was then printed; and *Fuses* (1967), in which Carolee Schneemann used a variety of techniques—painting and scratching on top of photographed imagery, exposing the filmstrip to various natural processes—to express the emotional and spiritual dimensions of her sex life with James Tenney.

In recent decades a good many filmmakers have worked with these and related techniques, in some cases because of their fascination with them, and often because working directly on the filmstrip has become a less expensive way of making film art than shooting and developing photographic imagery. During his final years, when his finances were particularly stressed, Stan Brakhage returned to painting on film and produced dozens of films. And generations of younger makers have found new ways, and have revived old ones, of producing direct imagery: David Gatten unrolled unexposed film into a crab trap, threw the trap into the South Carolina surf, and allowed the ocean to inscribe imagery

onto the filmstrip (*What the Water Said*, Nos. 1–3, 1997–98); for *Flight* (1996), Greta Snider used hand processing and the rayogram technique to evoke her relationship with her deceased father; for the epic *Regarding Penelope's Wake* (2002), Michelle Smith used what she has described as "frame-by-frame collage/montage/hand-painted/ripped/cut/etched found footage" (program notes for the film's premiere at the 2002 New York Film Festival); and Brose used a painstaking process of hand processing to alter a variety of photographed and found imagery—old home movies, early gay pornography, and his own documentation of a Radical Fairy gathering in Tennessee and of several drag performances—to create his first long film (sixty-five minutes).

Unlike nearly all the filmmakers who have used the techniques just described, however, Brose has used the formal manipulations of his imagery as a means to an overtly political end: a new sense of gay rights that does not involve the suppression of "queerness." Brose's exploration of hand processing creates an always changing, frequently gorgeous cinematic ground within which he can consider the implications of Oscar Wilde's aphorisms ("The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it"; "I'd rather have fifty unnatural vices than one unnatural virtue"); his prison letter, "De Profundis," and his dandyism, for radical gays and for more conventional communities. The resulting experience is something of a phantasmagoria of image and sound that, on one level, "queers" the history of film as visual music (Oscar Fischinger, Len Lye, Norman McLaren, et al.) and, on another level, formalizes—cinematically *materializes*—the widespread fascination among gay men with drag, a fascination that has a history that both transcends film history and has regularly contributed to it. The critical cinema has produced a considerable number of landmark explorations of drag, including Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (in various versions since the mid-1950s), and John Waters's *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), and *Female Trouble* (1974), to name just a few. Like these earlier films, *De Profundis* confronts cinematic convention by combining an aggressive awareness of gay desire and some of its radical manifestations in a repressive society, with an unusual approach to generating imagery—a combination that creates considerable challenges for viewers.

I spoke with Brose in Utica, New York, in November 1999; we refined the interview on-line.

*MacDonald:* Last night, when you were talking at Hamilton College about the personal background of *De Profundis*, the catastrophe of that period of your life—your business going under; your previous boyfriend and current boyfriend both dealing with AIDS—I thought of one of Winslow Homer's great paintings, *Lifeline* [1884]: making *De Profundis* must have been a lifeline for you.

*Brose:* What's interesting is that I didn't work directly on the film (I had done research and other back-burner stuff) until I had severed *everything*, until my partner and I had split up, and my former lover had passed away. Then I thought, "I've got to take control of my life—this is about *me* now." I moved back to Buffalo from Rochester, found a studio right below the gallery here [Brose is executive director of the Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Art (CEPA) Gallery in Buffalo], and went to work. The energy and focus it took to make *De Profundis* were provided by all those experiences that I was now moving away from. It was a violent closure, psychically. I remember telling my therapist that I had two choices: to get pushed off the bridge or jump. I decided to jump. I did wind up landing on my feet, and *De Profundis* was a big part of that.

Making the film was an important, almost alchemical, experience in my life. Before, I was pushing myself; now, I was compelled. The film *had* to be made, and it needed to be its *own* journey, its *own* immersion in experience. And in the end, the experience of the film, of *viewing* it, is an immersion experience also. The conditions surrounding the making of the film helped to shape its intensity, its visual and sonic concentration.

*MacDonald:* What was your goal for the project, insofar as Wilde was concerned?

*Brose:* There were so many things going on simultaneously with the film, including my anger with the gay community. My research on Wilde showed me that all the biographies looked at the "De Profundis" letter, which Wilde wrote when he was imprisoned, as this defining moment of maturity in Wilde's writing. I thought, "No, that's not where maturity exists, at all. In fact, his language becomes imprisoned within the prison letter."

I wanted to refocus on the other aspects of Wilde—especially his idea of transgressive aesthetics. It took a long time for me to find the right scholarship. It was really Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's book, *Epistemology of the Closet* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992], and then Jonathan Dollimore's *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], which took Wilde's writing apart and set up a whole series of ways of looking at it, that helped me the most.

At the time, I was full of anger about what was happening in 1993—at the Washington March, for example—and the way in which gay radicalism was being consolidated and silenced for political expedience, to help get laws changed. I'm certainly not against reforming the law. What I am against is the way that the gay voices that get heard are *not* representative of the majority of the gay community. They're mostly the voices of white, middle-class men who are so scared of losing what they have available to them—privilege, of course, and access to money and power—just because of this minor "flaw" in their lives. In 1993 the gay community *should have been* consolidated around the idea of universal health care, so that *everyone* could benefit, and around the idea of defin-

ing family and domestic partnership not just as the traditional idea of a couple but in recognition that families exist in various forms. There were, and are, many things that need attention.

So I had a lot of personal anger. People sometimes sense it in *De Profundis*, though I don't know if it comes across in general in the film.

*MacDonald:* It's not *only* anger, though, which is why it's an interesting film.

*Brose:* Definitely.

I'm beginning to work on a new film, *Crossing*. I have an idea of the ideological arena in which I want the film to function, but I can't force things into that. I do believe in being informed about social critique and visual culture, about ideology, but ideology needs to be buried in the work; it should be something that holds the work up—the fact that you *have* a position—but it shouldn't be the driving *surface* of the work. We've all seen work where the maker seems to say, "*Here's* my philosophy; now I'm gonna cram it down your throat!" I think you have to be much more subversive than that. There are openly polemical works that are effective, but not many.

*MacDonald:* *De Profundis* is made up of a variety of kinds of materials, most of which I don't recognize. Could you talk about what you used and where it came from?

*Brose:* There's "documentary footage," home movies, and vintage gay porn. I documented the May Day ritual at a Radical Fairy gathering, an annual event in Short Mountain, Tennessee. The trick there was not only to get permission to film but to find a way of making people comfortable with me, so that I wasn't just a detached intruder, documenting something. The Fairies have had some problems with people who have gone to Short Mountain to film. I was fortunate to have close friends who are Fairies. But even so, it took a while. In the end, I made two trips, over a two-year period—to get to the point where everyone was okay with my filming.

*MacDonald:* How long did you stay?

*Brose:* A week at a time, twice, around the time of the May Day celebration, which is what you see in the footage. The first time I went, I did shoot, but it felt awkward, and some footage didn't come out. It was a mess. Going back the second time, I could tell that people already had a sense that they could trust me, which meant I could trust myself.

There are also the performances that I set up for the film and shot: Mark Miller in the leather harness; Agnes de Garron in drag, on the Promenade in Brooklyn, and in trench coat and fedora.

*MacDonald:* Looking just like William Burroughs.

*Brose:* Yes, amazing.

*MacDonald:* You also use found home-movie footage.

*Brose:* Right—16mm home movies from the twenties and thirties.

*MacDonald:* And the porn material.

*Brose:* Some of that I was able to get from a couple of videos of the history of gay porn. I also got old, 8mm porn at shops in New York that deal in vintage material. I was interested in the idea that for the community of gay men making it and then seeing it, early gay porn was a kind of home-movie experience.

*MacDonald:* What's the image with the swimmer?

*Brose:* The swimmer is stolen from a John Ford film—*The Hurricane* [1937]—where someone (I think it's Jon Hall, but I'm not sure) dives off a ship. Everything in *De Profundis* is appropriated, but this is really a stolen image—and I love the fact that I stole it. I shot it off the television monitor.

*MacDonald:* Did the structure of *De Profundis*—there's a prelude, and a main central section, surrounded by two sections of equal length (each exactly one half the length of the center section)—precede your generation of the material?

*Brose:* This film comes out of *Film for Music for Film*, a series of films where the musical composition comes first, so I that I begin with something rock-solid that I don't touch. I become a slave to it, as opposed to the usual way in which music and sound in general are used to support film imagery.

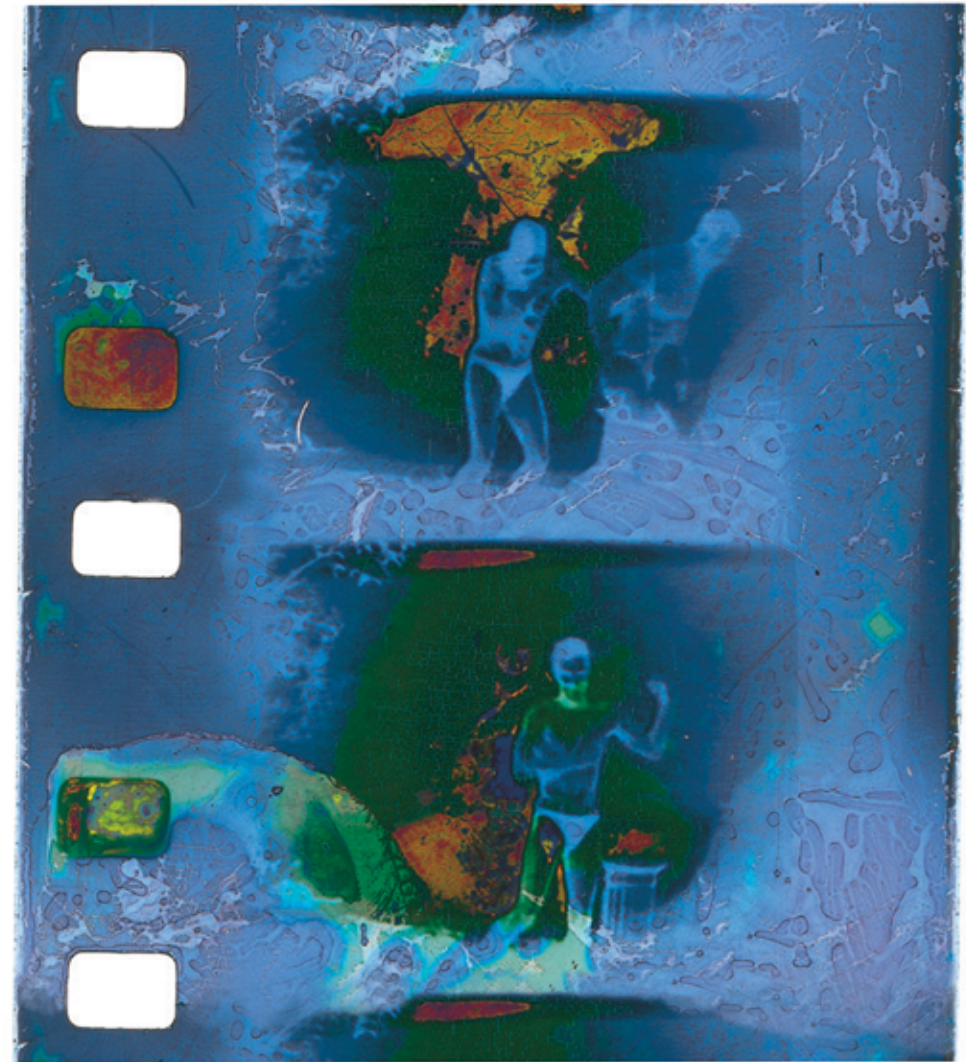
What I'm doing there is not new, obviously; animators do it all the time: Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye, for example. So there *is* that tradition. Of course, working that way is a real pain in the ass, too. I am coming to appreciate it, but I hated doing it for *De Profundis*. Of course, now that I'm making a film where I've given myself total freedom, I find myself longing for the anchor that music provides. So it cuts both ways.

My film started with the musical composition *De Profundis* [1991] (Oscar Wilde's prison letter set to music for vocalizing pianist, composed and performed by the American Frederic Rzewski) and my decision to work *against* it, in a sense, by creating these other sections to surround it. I also used images and scenes that undermine or provide an alternative to the romantic existentialism of the text.

The prelude and the first part, with the loops of the nineteen Wilde aphorisms, was edited in two days. I was *burning* through it, and it was brilliant. I went back and made a couple slight revisions, and it was done.

*MacDonald:* But you had worked for a long time on the material you edited so quickly, right?

*Brose:* I usually don't talk about my process all that much, but, yes, by the time I'm editing, all of the material has been optically printed, processed, colored, and hand manipulated, which takes a long time. I had two rooms: the small loft that I was living in, which had the optical printer; and a "chemical room," like a big darkroom, where I could do all the processing. In some cases I did a whole series of variations on one roll, then hand processed it, then cut it up into its individual shots; in other cases, I'd do the cutting first and then treat the sequence in a variety of ways. In the finished film, even when a shot looks like something you've seen before, it's unique by virtue of all the individual alterations that I've made on it.



Frame enlargements from Lawrence Brose's *De Profundis* (1997). Courtesy Lawrence Brose.

When I get to the point of assembling a film, I'll hang shots on clotheslines in groups. I sit in the middle of the room where I can turn around and pick out what I need, in terms of length, color, texture, printing ratio, direction of movement, etcetera. If I can't find exactly what I want, something that works, I'll go back to the optical printer and redo shots, to get them to where I want them to be.

My background is in a very formalist, modernist tradition of experimental film. I'm interested in retaining elements of that tradition, but retaining them as

a way of dealing with new material. What formal film is *about* has really changed for me. This idea of melding these different worlds—the world of very traditional experimental approaches and the world of queer theory (and other ideologies I want to explore)—is what interests me.

*MacDonald:* I want to come back to ideology in a moment, but I want to pursue your formal means a bit further. Because you work with the material, stage by stage, the formal process *for you* becomes part of the natural growth of the film, but people who are looking at a finished work often have no idea about the process that went into making what they're seeing, so they can't really conceptualize how the ideology is embodied in that material.

What are the processes that you use?

*Brose:* For the most part, they're fairly traditional extended and alternative photochemical processes. Before I began *De Profundis*, I had never processed even a still photograph, so I had to learn about processing, and then experiment and make it my own. What I've always done is learn the rules and then learn what I can do to break them. In a sense, this whole film is about breaking the rules.

*MacDonald:* Did your history as a piano restorer, which was work that required absolutely precise dealing with a material object, feed into this learning process?

*Brose:* Well, I hadn't thought of it like that. Going into piano restoration, which began with piano *tuning*, actually came out of a long period of learning meditation—this is back in the early seventies—which gave me patience and the ability to focus. Studying piano tuning is incredibly painful. You have to relearn how to hear. It takes so much time. And when you work, you're dealing with 285 strings that are interrelated, and, of course, the piano is imperfect, so you're constantly working not only to get it in tune but to set it, so that when it's played, it doesn't suddenly go back out of tune. More than anything, that work taught me to be exacting.

*De Profundis* is very exact—there's not a frame that's not accounted for. These are not sloppy processes. On the other hand, one of the things I detest is the charts and other instructions for using optical printers "correctly." I *don't* want to be given all of the possible "correct" options. Obviously you need to have information if you want to be able to get precisely what you want on the optical printer, but I just want to begin with the basic information. I don't want to be tied down by my training. Give me a filter range that's practical for this kind of film stock, and I'll experiment.

When I was studying piano tuning, I was also teaching blind students; and, of course, I come from my own experience of being blinded as a child and then gaining sight back only in one eye. Among other things, this means I don't have to squint when I'm looking through the camera. [*Laughter.*] My one-eyed sight limits me in one way—I live in a flat world—but it's also opened up certain opportunities. I learned from my experiences as a student and a teacher that there are two kinds of teachers: the teachers who want to

make things as difficult for you as possible, to show you just how much work *they've* been through; and the other teachers, who want to demystify things. I need and want to be the second kind.

*MacDonald:* Where did you study film?

*Brose:* I studied film production at Media Study/Buffalo and at the Center for Media Study at SUNY-Buffalo from 1979 to 1983; I also studied independently with Shellie Fleming, Carl Brown, Zack Stiglicz, and Derek Jarman.

*MacDonald:* Talk a little more about the specific processes you use.

*Brose:* In the hand-processed material, I used 7378 (replaced by 3378), a high-contrast black-and-white film stock normally used for optical tracks. I used it because it gave me a lot of high-contrast material I could work with, and because it's cheap (twenty-four hundred feet for about one hundred thirty dollars). It has a low ASA, but not as low as print stock, so you can actually shoot with it. I did up to twenty-four steps in colorizing the material used in *De Profundis*. The first thing was to bleach it, which requires a lot of care. Then I used Berg color toners, which are made in Buffalo. I went to the company and asked for product support, and they gave it to me. I'm not sure they're going to give it to me again, now that they've seen the film! But for *De Profundis* I had unlimited access to their chemicals, cases of them; I used probably five or six thousand dollars' worth of chemicals.

I'd bleach a shot or a sequence, then use one color, then go back to the bleach, then to another color, and so on. I kept going back and forth between the bleach and the colors. Sometimes I worked by hand directly on the footage, but at other times, I let the image and the emulsion determine what got colorized and how. I learned to control that process very precisely. Near the end of the first part, when you hear the aphorism "I saw then at once that what is said of a man is nothing. The point is who said it," you have these high-contrast, blown-out images of the guys on the boat; their image is almost clear, but everything around the image is colorized. There the coloring refers to the aphorism: you have this empty shell of an image that is visible because of what's around it, what's "said about it."

*MacDonald:* This example leads right into talking about the way in which ideology is embodied by the film. Generally, the Hollywood goal is to make perfect images to reflect the perfect-looking people, in this perfect story, perfectly embodying their roles; the assumption is that identity is quite simple and singular. It strikes me that since *De Profundis* is about the *complexity* of identity—and means to function as an antidote to the Hollywood assumption—it makes perfect sense that we're seeing many layers of representation, and that we're usually deciphering an image *through* all these layers—as if identity is a mask. You don't give up identity as a concept—we see some of the same images over and over and get to know the various facets of the "personality" of the film—but we can never see any one of these facets in a simple, obvious way. Personality is seen as a complex nexus of many layers.

*Brose:* Wilde talks about masks in another way, of course, but I'm playing with the idea formally: the image is embedded in the process and the material; the image *is* a mask, but so is the material it's embedded in. The formal elements are constantly at work supporting the text and the ideology, but not always in obvious ways. Someone at Hamilton College last night asked, "Isn't this just too much for a viewer to see?" And my answer was, "No, it's just enough, but you need to see the film again and again." And that *is* a problem with this kind of work; we know that historically. There's rarely an opportunity for repeated viewings, even if someone were willing to go to them. *De Profundis* is usually a one-night gig.

But it was important for me to put all those elements into it, because there *are* a few people who see films multiple times, and because I think (I hope) that it all adds to that first viewing experience, even if you don't feel you're totally getting it.

*MacDonald:* The political content of the film is balanced by the formal beauty of your work on the filmstrip. It would be easy to see this film as just eye candy.

*Brose:* Oh, yeah. It's just too beautiful for its own good! Which has often been said about me! [Laughter.]

That's also what was said about Wilde and about the whole idea of the dandy. In this case, the film material is where the dandy resides, and yet at the same time, it's a very complex dandy. That was one of the initial issues I had to resolve early on in the process—where to locate the dandy in my film a hundred years later. Well, it became apparent that I didn't want to represent that "character" in a figurative way, yet I needed to have it present throughout the film.

*MacDonald:* Coming from where I come from, the length of *De Profundis* is not a problem; the film is about an hour long, and I've paid incredible amounts of money over the years to see junk films that are usually two, or two and a half, hours long. Most moviegoers accept two hours as the duration of a conventional film, regardless of the quality of the work. That *De Profundis* requires tremendous energy for its sixty-five minutes is an implicit polemic, a way of saying, "This is important to think about."

Also, the labor-intensive process you use to make a film is implicitly a way of paying your dues so that you can demand sixty-five minutes from the viewer. I often show students Taka Imura's *I to 60 Seconds* [1973], which asks that viewers spend increasing lengths of time in a darkened theater looking at nothing except numbers scratched into the celluloid that indicate how long each of the previous durations of darkness was. Students get furious, not only because of the radical confrontation of their expectations about the pace of imagery/sound in a film but because the process of *making* the film seems too easy to deserve a half hour of the viewers' time. It feels unfair to them.

You're almost puritan in the amount of work you require of yourself in order to demand the sixty-five minutes of viewing time. You "imprison" *yourself* as

a laborer, and your film is "hard labor" for the viewer—a metaphor for Wilde being in prison and doing hard labor?

*Brose:* You don't know how many times during the making of *De Profundis* I would go to the movies and say, "God, on some level this is so easy!" (I know it *isn't* easy for commercial directors to get the shots they need or to run a huge production), and, "What I wouldn't give for a thirty-second shot!" It takes me at least a week to get thirty seconds of film I can use. The optical printer alone is so time-consuming.

So, no, in that sense I don't think sixty-five minutes is too much to ask of people; it *is* equitable. It's also true that a lot of works *don't* need much of your time as a viewer. In galleries sometimes I do find myself walking to a work and saying, "OK, I got it," and moving on quickly, even when I like the work. At other times I spend a lot of time with a piece. But film is a time-based medium, and I *do* try not to overstay my welcome—though some people might question that!

*MacDonald:* Last week my class and I were talking about film as a form of self-imposed imprisonment (we had looked at Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* [1962]), where you're in this room and you "can't" leave until the film is over. On some level your film echoes that: the middle section is the long section; it's surrounded by two sections that, together, last the same amount of time. It's structured like a building with two symmetrical wings and an entryway.

*Brose:* Structurally, Wilde's imprisonment—represented by the middle section—gets held together by the other two sections, which are like parentheses. I'm "imprisoning" what I see as the mistaken understanding of the "De Profundis" letter within two other dimensions of Wilde's life that I think *are* radical and exemplary: his aphorisms (his transgressive aesthetics) and his involvement in drag (queerness). The third part begins with the aphorism "A little bit of sincerity is a dangerous thing; a great deal is absolutely fatal!" which I use as Wilde critiquing Wilde (the prison letter).

*MacDonald:* The material reality of the two sections is very parallel—in fact there are moments where I wonder if I'm seeing exactly the same material, though it slowly grows clear that that's not the case. The soundtrack *is* fundamentally different: looped aphorisms in the first section, and, in the final section, a layering of several ongoing conversations.

*Brose:* There are six tracks in that final section. Ideally I would have created a kind of surround sound, where you would have all these tracks coming from different architectural points in the theater, and the viewer would be sitting in the middle of all these opposing views—but that can't happen in film, and certainly not in 16mm. I *did* try to create a different kind of sonic space, and a sense of overload that would reflect our time and that earlier one. The arguments that were going on between Wilde and Gide, and between Wilde and the Victorian society that convicted him, are still going on. But a hundred years later,

we've come to a position where, partly because of what happened around Wilde, we can have voices and even the beginnings of a language with which we can begin to discuss things. Yet language fails us. Both sides of the political debate are using the same language to their own ends. I wish that the gay political agenda would have a better understanding of that and as firm a grasp of the fluidity and power of language as Wilde had—then I *would* feel represented.

The last part of the film is a different kind of experience from the first; three people are being interviewed: Agnes de Garron, Tom Chomont, and Kenny Cooper. I used them as a parallel to the “rent boys” [male prostitutes] who at Wilde's trial were brought in to help convict Wilde, even though they weren't necessarily trying to do that.

In the first part you have all of the visual imagery going by and these sound loops; and in the last part, you see *visual* loops—five sections of loops—but the soundtrack moves right along.

*MacDonald:* Dare I argue a Christian parallel: the first section with the aphorisms is your “gospel” according to Wilde; the second part is the imprisonment and crucifixion of Wilde for his “gospel”; and in the final section, there are apostles: men who, partly because of Wilde's leadership, have found their own voice and lead their own gay lives.

*Brose:* That's brilliant! One of the things I always forget to talk about in relation to Wilde is that even in prison, when he converted to Catholicism, he saw himself as crucified and as Christlike, not as a Christian repenting. It's another form of Wilde's dandyism, another performance: now he's the embodiment of Christ. This is not to say that he isn't really broken down because of the imprisonment, and because of what was going on outside: his family was taken from him, and he was bled financially to bankruptcy. He witnessed the systematic destruction of everything he had built.

But, yeah, it is a heroic story, and we're still living it and learning from it in many ways. I think the third part is about the heroism of the people who make the *other* choice—the choice *not* to repent, *not* to look at themselves as “normal” except for this “flaw”; it's about people who have found alternatives to “heterosexuality” and all the other social contracts that we can be forced into. People can say that the Fairies are just a bunch of hippies or whatever, but what I think is important is the struggle for alternatives, and the empowerment that comes from actually celebrating your difference. Their lives *are* a high point of resistance. That's something that I think is getting buried in the gay movement, and I'm afraid that some of these voices will get silenced into oblivion.

*MacDonald:* Your film is also a kind of compendium of the representation of gays in experimental film. For me the three early landmarks are Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'amour* [1952]; the whole saga of Kenneth Anger's films, from *Fireworks* [1947] on; and Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* [1963].

*Brose:* Jack Smith had a strong influence on this film.

*MacDonald:* But in a way your film includes all three—it's a prison film like Genet's; it's openly, extravagantly beautiful like Anger's films are; and it documents various forms of defiance reminiscent of Smith.

*Brose:* It's interesting how things influence and how they influence for different reasons. Those are three historical gay makers who were very out about their sexuality *in their work*, but not always outside the work. I remember reading an interview with Anger in *Body Politic* where he was asked, “Are you gay?” And he goes, “My god, I'm the most non-gay person I know; I'm not gay at all, I'm a manic-depressive.” I do love the pageantry of Anger. But Smith comes along and gives us a different kind of pageant and of cinematic representation; and he doesn't deny himself.

What constitutes a Queer film, or a Queer object or whatever? If queerness is defiance, then I can defy even what *we're* supposed to show in film, how *gays* are “supposed to” represent themselves. The idea of an imperfect, fragmented image is as Queer as anything: it's about things being complex, unstable, indefinable.

*MacDonald:* You're implicitly destabilizing the nature of identity *and*, literally, destabilizing the nature of a material process that is almost always used to reconfirm the idea of a stable identity.

*Brose:* Right.

*MacDonald:* Is Agnes de Garron a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence?

*Brose:* Agnes was one of the founding members of the Sisters, who created this holy order, with vows and everything. One of the Sisters, Mish—short for Sister Missionary Delight—lives at Short Mountain. There are all kinds of wonderful names. In Toronto there's Sister Opiate of the Masses.

Agnes is no longer active as a Sister.

*MacDonald:* How did he end up in the film?

*Brose:* Through my friends, Keith/Kesha and Kenny Cooper; I did most of the Brooklyn shooting in their loft. They're friends with Agnes, so that was my introduction to him, and to the Faeries. They also introduced me to Mark Miller Aleksandra, another performer in the film, who is also a Queer Witch; and I met Leon Ko, the young Asian man who is the Lord Alfred Douglas figure near the end, through my John Cage portrait project, the *IMUSICIRCUS* performance in NYC (for the Guggenheim Museum). He and Alva Rogers (who was in *Daughters of the Dust*, 1992) performed Amnon Wolman's *Marilyns 93/in Cage* [1993], she as a black Marilyn Monroe and he as a Japanese S and M leather boy. Leon is a big pop star in Japan.

*MacDonald:* Tom Chomont's work is also about deconstructing identity. Had you known him for a while?

*Brose:* I've known Tom for a long time, since just after he returned from Amsterdam. His work was always amazing, and I was influenced by it, especially his hand processing.



Frame enlargements from Brose's *De Profundis* (1997). Courtesy Lawrence Brose.

What's interesting in this film, and where it's different from Tom's work, is that it isn't so much a personal film. Well, it *is* a personal film, but from a different position. I think that's why some people get a little angry with me about my use of the home movies: I have no personal investment in that material. My other works *are* very personal, but in *De Profundis* I wanted to come out and address the world.

*MacDonald:* You mentioned last night that you emptied the Eastman House Auditorium with this film. I know you've shown it a lot. What were the best screenings of *De Profundis*? Was the Eastman House the worst?

*Brose:* The Eastman House was a singular, but not entirely bad, experience. I had finished *De Profundis* just a week prior to premiering it there. So you emerge out of the madness of the darkroom with this film you've looked at only by yourself, and as the film is showing, you look around at people leaving in droves, actually fleeing the auditorium, and say, "What have I done!?" [Laughter.]

On some levels the Eastman House screening was a defining moment for my "presentation style." I thought, "The *only* thing we can do here is some good stand-up comedy," so after the screening, I just got up in front and said, "Well, I didn't *clear* the house, did I?" It eased the audience into having more fun in the question-answer period; those Q and As are often so grim. I had a great time with the people who were left.

The *worst* experience was at Buffalo State College, where they only had a rear-screen projection setup and tiny speakers, and couldn't really shut the lights off—horrible. And I've had everything in between. Hallwalls in Buffalo is still an incredible space for this kind of film; their new cinema is a black box, all screen at one end, and there's a decent sound system. *De Profundis* looked fantastic at Hamilton College, too; and the Millennium screening was great: we had a full house, as a result of a lot of marketing. Steven Kent, who's connected to the Mix Festival, helped market the film in New York, and we got good coverage in the gay press, the *Village Voice* and the gay sex magazines.

*MacDonald:* One of the most vital dimensions of avant-garde film right now seems to be Queer cinema and the gay community's support of it.

*Brose:* Yet, at the same time, I couldn't get *De Profundis* screened at the LA Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Festival, in Chicago or Toronto . . . The gay and lesbian film festivals are *extremely* conservative.

*MacDonald:* Formally, you mean?

*Brose:* Formally. *De Profundis* wasn't a leather jacket love story; it didn't have a Hollywood screen kiss—so it couldn't be shown. *Stupid* movies are celebrated in the gay community—films that are just funny and easy, and affirm what people want to see as romantic images of their own lives on screen. On the whole, gay people are not any more creative or interesting, as a film audience, than most straight people—probably less.

*MacDonald:* Many of them do have the confidence as spectators to let their impatience be known or to leave!

*Brose:* Yes, I'm going to go have a *drink* somewhere! [Laughter.]

I've screened *De Profundis* at over sixty venues. I am finding that there are a lot of young, gay people interested in making more inventive films, because it fits more closely with their position in relationship to their own queerness.

The fact that you can make something in film or video without having to raise a million dollars still seems liberating. You *can* make films that are about your own labor, and you can make something important with a home-video recorder. A lot of bad stuff gets made, but I'm interested even in the failures, as people try to enunciate their positions and give some sort of voice to what they believe. It bodes well for the aliveness of the medium.

*MacDonald:* You're defiant as a gay filmmaker, but you're also defiant of that defiance: you're a gay *experimental* filmmaker.

*Brose:* Oh, absolutely.

I was outside the Millennium standing near this gay man who had the time wrong and had shown up an hour early. We got talking, and he said, "Well, you know, I've read the stuff on your film in the *Voice* and in the gay press, and I'm very intrigued. I've been very unhappy with things I've seen at the gay festivals. I think I'm just tired of narrative. It's time for me to look for other things. I can't wait to see this." So, after the screening, I see him trying to sneak out, and I grab him, and say, "So, how did you find it?" He paused and said, "Well, quite frankly, about halfway through, I found myself craving narrative."

[*Laughter.*]

I said, "Well, you made it halfway through. That's a good start."