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Last Year at Mansfield: William E. Jones's *Tearoom*

By Jim Supanick

William E. Jones, *Tearoom*, *Camera Surveillance*, Mansfield 1962, gay rights, sodomy laws, *Last Year at Marienbad*, Highway Safety Foundation

'In this sealed, stifling world, men and things alike seem victims of some spell, as in the kind of dreams where one feels guided by some fatal inevitability, where it would be as futile as to try to change the slightest detail as to run away' (Alain Robbe-Grillet, in the introduction to *Last Year at Marienbad's* published script)

Shortly after the U.S. release of *Last Year at Marienbad*, another tale of 'fatal inevitability' was committed to film, one to which Robbe-Grillet's statement just as readily applied, and it achieved—if wholly by accident—similarly disorienting effects. For filmmaker William E. Jones, the chance discovery of that film was a revelation. Produced by the Mansfield Police Department and later premiering in an Ohio courtroom, it was the result of a three-week stakeout of a public rest-

room during the summer of 1962, leading to the conviction of some 38 men (many others were filmed, but eluded positive identification) arrested on charges of sodomy. After its first run as trial evidence, the footage found second life as an instructional film that circulated within the law enforcement community under the title of *Camera Surveillance*.

After obtaining a visually degraded version of *Camera Surveillance*, Jones produced a video called *Mansfield 1962*, re-edited from that material and stripped of chroma and voiceover. Dissatisfied with reception of this initial work, he sought out the 16mm color camera original to craft a new video more in keeping with his vision. Just as fortuitously, he found a high quality digital transfer from extant material first shown in the courtroom, and from that came *Tearoom*.

Not so much made as reclaimed, *Tearoom* has been referred to by Jones himself as a 'found object'. Based on the reticence of townspeople he tried to interview, we might assume that many there would prefer it remain lost. Mansfield is just an hour's drive from Jones's hometown of Massillon, and the fact that the sting operation occurred so close to home, just months before Jones was born, has led him to wonder whether it 'left a mark on my upbringing and cast a pall on what there was

of gay life in the region.' Having grown up at the same time in a town quite close to Massillon, I would go a step further and say that the arrests were just a portent, the first in a series of shockwaves to shake an area whose bedrock values of the straight and narrow were conflated with health, happiness, and prosperity. Nowhere did homosexuality factor into the equation, so is it any wonder then that the restroom in question was located below a public park, literally underground?

In his first and best-known film, *Massillon*, Jones recounted, with explicit detail, his own sexual initiation in the men's room of a highway rest stop, along with the pain of growing up gay in an Ohio town where denial—if not outright silence—ruled the day. While its citizens lived with the devastating consequences of a collapsing industrial base throughout the 1970s and 1980s, many immersed themselves in the comforting distraction offered by the perennial championship contention of their beloved high school football team. From the very start, *Massillon* launched a deadpan counteroffensive that defined the work to follow. With his exhaustive research into sodomy laws' historical origins, Jones would return again to a concern for the ways in which state and institutional powers police sexuality. Were that his only concern, the work would have been unremittingly grim but striking out against hopelessness, Jones developed a poetics of the scorned and discarded, discovering moments of redemption within the cultural interstices of forgotten porn stars, Smiths tribute bands, and architecture and signage of the southern California vernacular.

With *Tearoom*, Jones assembled a publication to accompany the video's inclusion in the 2008 Whitney Biennial in which, along with his own essays, he has drawn on law enforcement journals, local newspapers, and the writings of others connected to the case. While providing an exhaustive social and legal context and much-needed backstory to the work, Jones made a bold gesture by keeping the materials separate, implicitly questioning whether such highly charged images might be looked at (if only for a moment) without further explanation, without so much as a soundtrack. Eschewing the more conventional strategies of treating footage as subordinate visual evidence within a standard voiced-over form, he also, by extension, asks more fundamen-

tal questions about how seeing and knowing might exist independently of one another.

Jones also avoids a simple tit-for-tat with *Camera Surveillance*, which he described as 'as illiterate and hateful a text as I have ever heard committed to film...', and which insisted on a direct causal link between these restroom liaisons and the horrible sex murders of two young girls earlier that year. The teenage boy who was later apprehended mentioned the restroom action while confessing to his crimes, so law enforcement officials, untroubled by their faulty assumptions, sought ready scapegoats amidst the sexual adventurers below Mansfield's Central Park. Video surveillance, however ubiquitous now, was still technically several years away, and the cost of film prohibitive. Stepping in as 'concerned citizens', a Mansfield-based organization named the Highway Safety Foundation (whose shadowy history is documented in Bret Wood's *Hell's Highway: The True Story of Highway Safety Films*) lent a 16mm camera and donated film stock to the Police Department's sting operation.

As in any other film, 'blocking' and 'art direction' had to be taken into account. Some measures were simple, like installing brighter bulbs and painting walls a lighter grey to heighten visibility of potential subjects within the dank, windowless interior. More complex, though, was the question of the material's admissibility as legal evidence, and for this, the camera positioning had to capture activity in the 'common area' but still obscure the 'private' zones within the door-less toilet stalls. Above all else, camera concealment was crucial; this was made possible through a tricked-out paper towel dispenser complete with two-way mirror. This was mounted on a door behind which a policeman with camera could hide (repeatedly, under certain lighting conditions, a faint reflection can be detected of the cameraman himself superimposed upon the action being filmed.) All this is neatly demonstrated in *Tearoom*'s opening sequence (the scene originally appeared at the end of the original footage, and is the only re-sequencing made to that film), clearly intended in both instances as visual explication, but also doubling in Jones's video as a conscious link to other self-reflexive moments of 'full disclosure' throughout the history of film, seen in *Out of the Inkwell* (1919-1927), *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), *Hellzapoppin'* (1941), *Tout va bien* (1972).

Even with the Highway Safety Foundation's assistance, police were parsimonious, shooting just a single 100-foot roll per day; the sheer expense of 16mm stock and processing was apparently a greater cost factor than having policemen stationed there full time to monitor activity and film incriminating behavior. Consequently, the shots themselves are fleeting, and bear the constant mark of human facture. Unlike contemporary motion-activated or time-lapse surveillance systems, choices had to be made to shoot at certain times and to stop at others. Movement itself is idiosyncratic, perhaps revealing of unconscious desires; this is most apparent when, in the midst of one encounter, a rapid head-to-toe camera tilt is repeated that, while surely involuntary, suggests an erotic identification with the scene unfolding before us.

What stands as editing was done in-camera, the only assembly being the joining of 'daily rushes' to the preceding day's in succession, separated by a second or two of leader. That, along with the subjects' movements and partial concealment, created a whole range of peculiar effects resulting from the inevitable narrative gaps, and no way to track their duration. Are we witnessing feats of priapic endurance and nearly instant regeneration? Is it a few short minutes, or several days before certain men return again? It's difficult (though not always impossible) to determine these things, but at times we're just as lost—given such minimal cues—as we might be wandering *Marienbad's* baroque corridors. The video alone raises more questions than it answers; the men are, to return to the words of Robbe-Grillet, '...characters who had no past, no links among themselves except those they created by their own gestures and voices, their own presence, their own imagination.'

It's clear that these two works are different in ways too numerous to list here; what's striking, though, is the way in which Robbe-Grillet's insistence on 'characters who had no past, no links among themselves...' aligns with the strategy taken in the gathering and assembly of footage that later became *Tearoom*. The spatial confinement not only served its singular purpose as criminal evidence, but it also prevented jurors from perceiving its subjects—one after the other—as anything other than deviant sexual beings.



Both works utilize radical form (whether consciously crafted or not) in depicting desire in a state of suspension; with *Tearoom*, this statement may seem absurd, but only if we identify the term 'desire' with the sex act itself. Nothing 'suspended' there; on the contrary, sex is had in all its varieties (unlike in other works of Jones's, where the act is never shown.) Instead desire, at least as I see it, resides more truly in the longing to live the same life outside that restroom as the one lived inside.

The faces and body language of *Tearoom* spell danger, a desire overshadowed by fear; unable to lose themselves in the moment, their eyes are fixed on a door never shown, but whose presence we cannot help but feel. One would be hard-put to name another instance where off-screen space contains such unbearable tension, charged as it is with the constant threat of discovery. We are light-years away from later same-sex encounters described in Samuel Delany's book *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), or the writings of David Wojnarowicz; while by no means free of danger, these later accounts of the piers, movie houses, and clubs these writers frequented begin to coalesce as spaces of community and relative safety.

Fashion's claim to serious cultural significance—too often laughable—gains traction with Jones's video, and if *Scorpio Rising*—shot by Kenneth Anger that very same summer—gave us 'Thanatos in chrome, black leather, and bursting jeans', *Tearoom* is striking for the handjobs, blowjobs, stand-up intercourse, and reacharounds performed awkwardly by men whose most remarkable quality is their plainness. A humble procession of Sears high-waisted slacks, BanLon shirts, summer hats, and cigarettes dangling from lips, there is no trace whatsoever of a familiar gay iconography. If particular details of dress within these respective tribes are of interest today, it is how

they may or may not have (and to what degree) broadcast difference to the rest of society. What self does one present outside that door? Flaming creature, unafraid of consequences? Lost in self-hatred, fearful of discovery? Plumage, camouflage, or something in between? In Mansfield, as in most other places, the decade ahead would offer discretion as the only viable option.

The 38 men convicted of sodomy found themselves ensnared by the state's Ascherman Act, which ordered all felons deemed a danger to society to be institutionalized for a potentially indefinite period; all were required to serve the minimum sentence, even those judged by medical professionals to be 'cured' prior to that time. Treatment then involved a number of now-discredited methods, including electroshock and various other aversion therapy techniques, and drugs with severe known side effects. It wasn't until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association struck homosexuality from its list of mental disorders; until that moment, the psychiatric profession had essentially lent its tacit endorsement to these laws and practices.

After the arrests, the restroom below Mansfield's Central Park was closed to the public and, in a gesture more superstitious than practical, filled in with dirt. Artist Robert Smithson, who himself was toying with homofantastical imagery in a series of drawings at this time (quite likely inspired by Anger's films), might have appreciated this architectural interment for how it anticipated his own *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) at nearby Kent State University, as well as his proposal that same year for an underground screening room adjacent to his *Spiral Jetty* (1969-70).

The Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield, where a number of the convicted men were incarcerated, is now closed; in recent years it has served as both a museum and as a scenic location for projects like *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and a Marilyn Manson fashion spread for *Details* magazine. In an effort to restore the prison to its 'original state', there are also overnight fundraising 'ghost hunts' held, where, for a \$50 fee, visitors go to witness and document evidence of the prison's spirit inhabitants. It's intriguing to imagine—in the spirit of Robert Smithson and in advancement of its Preservation Society's educational mission—a screening of *Tearoom* inside the abandoned confines of the Reformatory as acknowledge-

ment of an event that helped haunt it. For the moment, though, we'll have to make do with ostensibly neutral venues like the Whitney.

To their curators' credit, daily screenings were arranged there for each work, unlike in Biennials past. However, film and video too often suffer within gallery settings when treated as an installation but not intended as one. A constant annoyance in viewing work from beginning to end are the casual drifters-through; *Tearoom*, however, was an interesting exception to this, as its lack of conventional narrative or formal development allows one to consider in situ the doubling that takes place between, on the one hand, the voyeuristic nature inherent to its production, and the parallel (but by no means identical) dynamic there amongst the viewing audience. My own attention—echoing the men onscreen—was divided between onscreen action and the comings and goings of viewers at the room's periphery. This effect was surely unintentional, but nevertheless intensified by the number of children accompanied by parents wandering in (despite signs at the entrance warning of explicit sexual content, the only such labels in the exhibition), and then startled by the images onscreen.

The power of *Tearoom*, though, is not simply intrinsic to the material, the result of narrative intrigue, or in the radicality of how Jones (and the Mansfield police) had disrupted the basic terms of spectatorship and identification laid out by Metz, Baudry, Mulvey, et al, years before. It lies instead within the tensions between those elements, effected by a few simple gestures that reverse the source material's function from the weapon it was originally intended to be.

Readers can learn more about *Tearoom* and the work of William E. Jones at <http://www.williamejones.com/>. •

Contributor details

Jim Supanick makes video and writes about the moving image and the visual arts. He has contributed to such publications as *Film Comment*, *Millennium Film Journal*, *Cineaste*, *The Wire*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and others.