

“The Silicon Dream”: Breaking Glass on the Small Screen by Spencer Keralis

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP DURING THE 1980S IN RURAL WYOMING, a place where art-house cinema remains nearly non-existent, television offered the only outlet available for seeing independent or indeed many mainstream movies. One program in particular presented a glimpse of post-modern popular culture that I could not have accessed otherwise, showcasing a dizzying array of music videos, cult films, and cut-and-paste video montage. Night Flight ran Friday and Saturday nights on the USA network from 1981 to 1988, starting at eleven o'clock and repeating into the wee hours. For those of us without MTV—then as now a cable-only offering—Night Flight provided our first introduction to alternative artists like **Kate Bush**, **Cabaret Voltaire**, **Siouxsie and the Banshees**, **Danielle Dax**, and **The Cure**, and featured films that never played in our local theaters: *Ladies and Gentlemen*, *The Fabulous Stains*, *Liquid Sky*, and *La Planète Sauvage*, among many others.

—for JMB

One film I vividly remember watching on sleepless sleep-overs was Brian Gibson's **BREAKING GLASS**. Seeing this film on Night Flight was something of a watershed in my formative years, on a par, say, with seeing the **B-52s** on Saturday Night Live in 1980, or hearing **Eurythmics'** "Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)" for the first time on the car radio in a rainy IHOP parking lot in San Francisco in the winter of 1982. While it would be hyperbolic if not simply inaccurate to suggest that the film or its soundtrack saved my life (that would be later, and the credit goes to **The Smiths'** "The Queen is Dead"), it certainly changed me in ways I didn't fully understand at the time.

Released in 1980, *Breaking Glass* is a No Wave *A Star is Born* set against a backdrop of Thatcherite repression and despair. Pop music is exposed as complicit with the status quo—on the BBC, the music following the increasingly bleak news is introduced with the platitude, "And now, for a welcome change of mood...", and vapid tunes rule the airwaves. Hazel O'Connor plays Kate, an idealistic young



singer trying to find a creative space for herself somewhere between the increasing racism and violence of punk and the slick excesses of New Wave. In a sort of soft manifesto that encapsulates both the films cyborg aesthetic and essential pessimism, Kate declares:

"Nice people knuckle under, don't they? Like programs, computer programs. ... I don't like the way life is for the majority of us. I daresay I can't change it, but I can certainly write about it."

With the help of Danny (Phil Daniels, fresh from his turn as Jimmy in *Quadrophenia*), a chart-fixer for Overlord Records, she assembles a band of musical misfits including a junkie sax player (played with a bleary gravitas by Jonathan Pryce). The band, Breaking Glass, begin to flog her quirky, robotic songs at a series of glamourless gigs in dive pubs for audiences of hostile skinheads, who are often goaded to violence by Kate's socially conscious lyrics. The story is a familiar one: eventually the band catches on, Danny gets squeezed out as Kate's manager and lover by a corporate-friendly impresario/lothario, and Kate spirals downward on a mixture of anti-anxiety pills and amphetamine injections after being traumatized by witnessing a fan's death when a neo-Nazi demonstration collides with a record company-organized 'Rock Against 1984' rally.

We know the end is near when her name replaces the band's on promo posters, and a bland announcer on the BBC intones:

"The government confirmed today that it will be instituting measures to give the police increased powers to combat civil unrest. A welcome change of mood will be provided by Kate and Breaking Glass in their climactic gig at the Rainbow tonight. Kate is rumoured to be developing a new style..."

Forcibly drugged and mummified in a Tron-inspired glow-in-the-dark get-up, Kate flees the stage after the anemic number 'Eighth Day', returning in a hallucinatory fugue to the underground train car where the film began. Featuring cameos by Richard Griffiths as a studio engineer, and Jim Broadbent as a striking station porter, the film's supporting cast is a Who's Who of other now-familiar faces from British TV and movies. The leaden, self-conscious seriousness of the film is only broken up by O'Connor's impassioned performances of her original songs, both of which (performance and songs) received BAFTA award nominations. Her presence in the film is erratic, magnetic, and curiously compelling.

I suspect that much of the political context may have been edited out when *Breaking Glass* appeared on American television, for to my fourteen-year-old self, none of the politics came through; though I should confess that it wasn't for politics that my friends and I were staying up all night watching TV. Had we been tuned into that aspect of the film we might have found some things roughly in common with our own experience. Central Wyoming underwent, during the late 1970s, a mineral boom with the demand for domestic oil and uranium boosting employment and wages. For a region formerly dependent on farming and ranching (both of which would be killed



off in the next decade or so by the rise of agribusiness), this was a welcome infusion of money and energy into the economic and cultural lives of a few small rural towns. In my hometown, the local community college built a theater, downtown got a bit of a facelift, and there was a sense of the rosily bland optimism that made Reagan popular. (My family, where he was held in utter contempt, was an exception. My grandfather, a former rancher, swore bitterly whenever Reagan and Bush I appeared on television, reviling both as "goddamned Republicans," but never elaborating, as though the reasons for his scorn were self-evident. Politics have always been more about passion than analysis in my family.) By 1984, the boom of the previous decade was busting as the uranium mines were sold off and shut down; and with Big Oil finding it more profitable to import its product than to drill in the U.S., wells were capped by the hundreds. Massive layoffs followed. Many families, including my own, found themselves in dire straits, struggling to make ends meet. Perhaps this grim outlook, of which I at the time was only dimly aware, lent some urgency to our desire for the late-night escapism Night Flight provided.

But all that is hindsight. For me and my friends, there was something deliciously furtive about watching those movies and videos late at night. In the nocturnal space between Hunter Safety class and Saturday morning soccer games we danced in our underpants, mimicking O'Connor's robotic movements and singing along, "Oh Big Brother's got no heart / When I get my chance I'm gonna kick him in the arse", among sleeping bags spread on the cement floor in the unfinished basement with the TV the only illumination. The lateness of the hour contributed something illicit to the experience, and Night Flight catered to this sense of the forbidden, with segments that featured video clips such as David Bowie's 'China Girl', 'Sex (I'm A ...)' by L.A. glam-pop act Berlin, and Duran Duran's notorious 'Girls on Film' that had been banned from MTV. Video montages interspersed 1950s and 60s PSAs with clips from music videos, playing the hip, swinging "now" of the 80s off a stuffy, puritanical "then," both of which were largely imaginary. These montages demonstrated, rather than any political subtext, a Lyotardean sense of play in their juxtaposition of the popular cultures of two eras of Americana dependent on television to communicate and mediate their social and cultural agendas. Inspired by these montages, we attempted to make our own video art using our home VCRs; sitting for hours in front of the TV, fingers on the record button to get clips, then stringing together multiple VCRs with coax to piece them together.

More importantly, the films provided role models for youthful experimentation and gender play. Along with Breaking Glass, most provocative and perhaps most genuinely transgressive of the showcase films was Slava Tsukerman's 1982 Liquid Sky, with its gender-queer, junkies vs. aliens, New Wave nightmarescape. Hazel O'Connor, Annie Lennox, and Liquid Sky's Anne Carlisle sparked our imaginations, and my friends and I began costuming ourselves in ways that to us seemed radical. We ditched our cowboy shirts, jeans

and boots, t-shirts and Nikes for parachute pants, tight girls' jackets, and knock-off Creepers from the new mall in Casper. Annie Lennox was a safer role model for gender-bending than Boy George or Pete Burns (since, after all, she was bending it in our direction), inspiring me to affect an orange crewcut, a stripe of gold eye shadow clandestinely applied on the way to school, and one of my grandfather's old suits from the 50s. I thought I was the height of cool, a notion of which I was disabused when my family moved to California in '86, and my attempts at radical chic were exposed, by more sophisticated urban adolescent cognoscenti, as mere poserism.

Watching Breaking Glass now, the final scene in which Kate is confronted in the Underground by a mob of fans/clones all sporting her characteristic helmet of white-blonde hair and black cat suits, I'm made for a moment painfully self-conscious of my own youthful passion for imitation. But in a social and cultural vacuum, which Wyoming certainly seemed to be at the time, my friends and I took what we could get and tried to make it our own. Night Flight provided us with a space to explore music and movies, and to experiment with identities that were outside the bounds of what our hometown had to offer. After eleven every Friday and Saturday night we could put aside our target rifles and soccer balls and play at being pop stars.



