

Interactive Storytelling

A pioneering work of high-tech video art, The Erl King incorporates the viewer into a fragmented narrative of abandonment, sexuality and death.

BY REGINA CORNWELL

Sitting beneath a pair of video monitors at the Whitney during a recent screening of Grahame Weinbren and Roberta Friedman's *The Erl King*, I felt for the first time the full onus of the term "interactive video." To an unnerving degree, I was responsible for what any given group of viewers might see, since, with each touch of my fingers to the small computer touch-screen before me, I was able to direct the images and sounds of *The Erl King* itself, thus interfering with the flow of the narrative and causing changes in its meaning. While the more casual (i.e., non-participatory) viewers stood about the two larger monitors observing my efforts, I felt oddly vulnerable, and many of the images that I selected only added to my discomfort.

The first image—and the only invariable one in the sequence—was also the strongest and most frequently repeated component of the dreamlike video: a woman singing a romantic song in German and accompanied by a pianist in formal dress is shown amidst a roomful of luscious ferns while—inexplicably—chickens move about in stacks of wire cages nearby. Before I could fully take in this enigmatic scene, a box appeared in the lower right portion of the screen. By touching this box, I could consistently summon up shots of a car across which had been scrawled a line of poetry. By pressing a zone along the top of the small screen, I was meanwhile able to call up (though not unfailingly) a landscape view. Further selections brought a rapid succession of images which slowly began to produce various connections and themes. There was a chair in a room that seemed strangely familiar; a man mourning beside the bier of a young boy; a percussionist; more text; a narrator telling folktales; a disembodied head on a shelf.

Only gradually could I sense the fractured logic of the narrative structure, and I felt uneasy once again, as if I were responsible for the video's macabre, yet enticing images. I began to recognize the recurrent props from the sitting room of Anna Freud—her overstuffed chair, the fussy Victorian night table, the cloying wallpaper. These appeared when jokes from Sigmund Freud's research were recited. Suddenly a Lacanian psychoanalyst would appear, discussing Freud, while behind him a new set was being constructed. Dark, frightening, dreamlike imagery—car crashes, winding staircases, an ominous lake—formed a counterpoint to the shots of benign landscapes, both real and imaginary. Then the image of the singer would return, followed by images of chickens being killed, plucked



Elizabeth Arnold singing in Grahame Weinbren and Roberta Friedman's interactive video *The Erl King*, 1986.

and cooked in sequences that persistently broke into what had begun to seem to be the video's larger narrative.

Directed by Weinbren and produced by Friedman, *The Erl King* is one of the first interactive art videos, and certainly the most ambitious. Five years in the making, it was first shown in provisional form at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; the finished piece premiered at the inaugural exhibition of Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art in December 1986, before reaching the Whitney Biennial this past spring.¹ Weinbren and Friedman describe their project as "an experimental musical for the '80s... an avant-garde musical, built around sounds by Schubert, trombonists James Fulkerson and Jim Staley, ZEV on percussion, 14 Karat Soul, and a classical Scottish bagpipe work." This upbeat description, which reads like the promo for a new rock video, contrasts sharply with my own rather ominous feelings about the work, feelings which derive from both the fragmented structure of the images and the rich texture of its historical allusions.

The source of *The Erl King* is Goethe's poem, *Der Erlkönig*, which was set to music by Franz Schubert in 1815. In this early 19th-century *Lied*,

a young boy futilely attempts to convince his father that the Erl King, an evil supernatural creature, is trying to seduce him away with baits of beauty, sex and luxury. When the father finally responds, it is too late. The child is dead.

Goethe based his *Erlkönig* on northern European myths and folktales. Many of the fantasy images conjured by Weinbren and Friedman—a disembodied hand picking flowers, Narcissus-like reflections in the lake, the Erl King's nymphlike daughters frolicking in the forest—derive from this verdant symbolism. Moreover, the form of the oral tradition, the everchanging versions of an ancient folktale, the layering of disparate images and sounds, the inconsistency of narrative time and setting, and the delicate interweave of past and present all create an appropriate analogue to the high-tech format of the interactive video.

In adapting these traditional storytelling techniques to a contemporary context, Weinbren and Friedman make frequent reference to the life and work of Sigmund Freud. The narrator, who appears and reappears to recount the tale of the Erl King, sits in a room that is strikingly reminiscent of Freud's study, surrounded by books and archeological artifacts. There he recalls "The Burning Child," a dream cited, but never adequately analyzed, by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In many ways similar to the Goethe poem, "The Burning Child" concerns a man whose son has died and lies in wake. The father, asleep in an adjoining room, dreams that his son is at his bedside whispering, "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" He immediately awakens to discover that while the old man assigned to sit in vigil with the child's body was dozing, a tall candle fell over, burning the dead child's arm and clothing. Besides its remarkable prognostication, "The Burning Child" dream shares with *Der Erlkönig* an encoded dramatization of the ambivalences of the father-son relationship, characterized by signs of absence, mistrust and guilt, and fears of abandonment, sexuality and death.

These themes are echoed in the musical structure of the video. Although the music centers around the Schubert *Lied*, sung in the video by soprano Elizabeth Arnold, the New Wave percussionist ZEV provides a dissonant interpretation of the Goethe poem through his violent, abrasive and primal performance. And while the improvisational trombonists and the bagpipers weave their music through the folktales, it is the a cappella group 14 Karat Soul who provide the