

SYNOPTIQUE

An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies



EDITION 8
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SYNOPTIQUE :: The Journal of Film and Film Studies

This is a journal about film and its communities. It was founded in late 2003 by Masters students at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. These two online journals are a part of *Synoptique's* immediate community:



Nouvelles vues sur le cinéma québécois
edited by Bruno Cornéliier presents its summer-autumn 2004 edition on *Sexe, sexualité et nationalité*



OFFSCREEN unveils a new look this month, designed and built by *Synoptique* CTO P-A Despatis D. This edition features an article on Susan Sontag's criticism by *Synoptique* Senior Editor Colin Burnett.

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If you have questions, or would like to submit material to *Synoptique* please e-mail Shawna Plischke.

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About Synoptique:

We've been thinking about life and art and the education that links them. And the critic who sets the bait for the artist to rise to. And the artist inarticulate about his or her own work. The scholar lost in abstraction. The moviegoer re-circulating glib opinions. The filmmaker railing against bad films. The bad films. Film Studies—a name for an academic discipline—is already a self-reflexive past time. Let's extend Film Studies to include an entire range of activity related to film, of which our academic procedures are an important part, but not the only part, and in no way hermetic. It is our intention to make sensible to those looking that there are connections here—historical, personal, coincidental—and that these connections account for a film community, and it is only with the frame of a film community that we can think about film. And its education.

We wanted to create an online resource of student work at Concordia. For students at Concordia. To give expression to the intellectual character of M.A. Film Studies at this University by publishing what was rapidly becoming a lost history of ideas. Students work here for two years, take classes, write theses, go on their way, leave faint traces, might never take a stand or apportion an opinion. We wanted to discover what tradition we had inherited, what debates we were continuing, which debates we weren't inventing. But what began as a way to provide a continuity of ideas between years for Concordia M.A. Film Studies students, has been expanded to recognize the play of influence and the fluidity of thought as it accounts for a discourse that links our classrooms to Montreal, and Montreal to the world. So that we might recognize again these ideas if we should pass them by. So that we might see what we missed or took for granted when we thought they were ours.

To publish—to publish self-reflexively—work related to the theme of a University course, for example, to publish again on an old familiar topic, is not simply to revisit one more time New German Cinema or Canadian Documentary. It is to admit to one more defining characteristic of the ideas now in circulation. The good ideas and the bad. It is to think about those ideas now in play. It is to reveal historical tenor. As our online archive of such themes develops—as more is published from the active thinking communities in Concordia, Montreal, and the world—these ideas will cease to be clearly delimited, and will instead be reworked and re-imagined across all sorts of social and intellectual scapes. And it is in the acts of meeting these ideas again that we become responsive to the synoptic character of the intellectual games we play. Those lines of thought should be teased out. Film Studies, like any intellectual discipline, is reconsidered every moment. It is, by itself, an object of detailed study. We are endeavouring to make it our object of study. There are practical considerations when taking on such an investigation: a responsive world to discover and find place in.

We want to establish a context. We want to make sensible a context within which these ideas won't be lost, where they can be found, breached, and their physiognomies compared. So this task becomes once removed from archaeology. This is commentary on chains of insights, some familiar, some decaying, some life altering, some devastating. On a lifetime of education. Not a series of explicit investigations—not just that—but a resource where ideas influence ideas through clandestine channels. Ideas influence life and lives influence idea. It shows the chemical palettes where colours in proximity do not just mix to create new shades but are reactive, explosive, transformative: are not in service of any single picture, but are the spectacular elements of a long-standing community long-standing in flux. The professors, the experts, the professionals, the thinkers that have made decisions to teach certain things and in certain ways, the students that chose to follow leads, reject others, see some films and not others, read some books but not others, find their way, realize all of the myriad ways that their taste and sensibility has developed...this is education. This long process of education. We've been thinking about the polyphony of educations in these communities. The desire to get better. How art and life make sense.

en français:

Nous avons réfléchi à la vie, à l'art et à l'éducation qui les lie. À l'artiste ne sachant pas s'exprimer sur son propre travail, mordant à l'appât tendu par le critique. Au chercheur perdu dans l'abstrait, au cinéophile retransmettant des opinions trop faciles. Au cinéaste s'en prenant aux mauvais films. Aux mauvais films. Les études cinématographiques – désignation d'une discipline académique – est déjà un passe-temps auto réflexif. Étendons sa définition pour y inclure un éventail complet d'activités reliées au cinéma, dont nos méthodes académiques constituent une partie importante, mais pas la seule et ce, en aucune manière hermétique. Notre intention est de faire prendre conscience à nos lecteurs du fait qu'il existe des liens historiques, personnels et fortuits. Ces liens justifient une communauté de cinéphiles et c'est uniquement à l'intérieur du cadre de celle-ci que nous pouvons réfléchir sur le cinéma. Sur son apprentissage.

Nous avons voulu créer une ressource en ligne du travail étudiant à Concordia, pour les étudiants de Concordia. Pour laisser s'exprimer le caractère intellectuel des études cinématographiques au niveau de la maîtrise, en publiant ce qui devenait rapidement une histoire perdue des idées. Les étudiants travaillent au département depuis deux ans, suivent des cours, rédigent des mémoires, poursuivent leur chemin, mais laissent des traces minimes, ils pourraient même ne jamais prendre position ou partager une opinion. Nous avons voulu découvrir de quelle tradition nous avons hérité, quels débats nous poursuivons, quelles discussions ne venaient pas de nous. Mais ce qui semblait annoncer une manière d'assurer une continuité d'idées à travers les ans s'est étendu jusqu'à une reconnaissance du jeu d'influence et de la fluidité d'une pensée telle, qu'elle justifiait un discours liant nos classes à Montréal, et Montréal à l'univers. De sorte que nous puissions reconnaître encore ces idées, si nous devions les transmettre. De sorte que nous voyions ce que nous avions manqué ou pris pour acquis, lorsque nous pensions que ces idées étaient nôtres.

Publier – publier avec auto-réflexivité – un travail relié au thème d'un cours universitaire ou s'exprimer encore une fois sur un vieux sujet familier, ne consiste pas simplement à revisiter une fois de plus le nouveau cinéma allemand ou le documentaire canadien; c'est admettre une caractéristique définitoire de plus aux idées déjà en circulation. Les mauvaises idées et les bonnes. C'est penser aux idées présentement à l'œuvre. C'est révéler la teneur historique. Attendu que nos archives en ligne sur de tels thèmes se développent – proportionnellement aux nouvelles publications des communautés pensantes de l'Université de Concordia, de l'Université de Montréal et de partout dans le monde –, ces idées cesseront d'être clairement délimitées et seront plutôt retravaillées et réimaginées à travers toutes sortes de champs d'études sociales et intellectuelles. C'est dans le but de rencontrer à nouveau ces idées que nous devenons réceptifs au caractère synoptique des joutes intellectuelles auxquelles nous jouons. Ces lignes de pensées doivent être démêlées. Comme n'importe quelle discipline intellectuelle, les études cinématographiques se doivent d'être constamment reconsidérées. Elles forment l'objet d'une étude détaillée sur laquelle nous aspirons à travailler. Des considérations d'ordre pratique se posent afin d'entreprendre de telles études : elles résident dans un univers réceptif à découvrir et dans lequel nous cherchons notre place.

Nous désirons établir un contexte. Nous désirons créer un contexte judicieux où ces idées ne seront pas perdues, où nous pourrions les trouver, où elles pourront être transgressées et leurs physiognomies comparées. De sorte qu'un jour cette tâche puisse s'évader du domaine de l'archéologie. Faire du commentaire sur des enchaînements d'idées, certaines familières ou en déclin, d'autres qui bouleversent la vie ou sont dévastatrices. Faire du commentaire sur une éducation qui s'étend à la vie entière. Non pas une série d'enquêtes explicites, mais une ressource où les idées influencent les idées à travers des canaux clandestins, où les idées influencent la vie et les vies influencent les idées. De là, faire naître des palettes de couleurs qui ne font pas seulement se mélanger pour créer de nouveaux tons, mais qui réagissent entre elles : explosions et transformations. Elles ne sont au service d'aucune image particulière, mais constituent les éléments spectaculaires d'une vieille communauté en constante évolution. Les professeurs, les experts, les professionnels et les penseurs qui ont pris la décision d'enseigner certaines choses d'une certaine façon. Les étudiants qui ont choisi de suivre ou de rejeter des exemples, de visionner ou de fermer les yeux sur certains films, de lire ou de ne pas lire certains livres, trouvent leur chemin, réalisent une myriade de manières dont leurs goûts et leur sensibilité se nourrissent... c'est en partie cela l'éducation. Le long processus de l'éducation. Nous avons réfléchi sur la polyphonie des différentes éducations dans ces communautés. Le désir d'être mieux. Comment l'art et la vie font sens.

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Underground Film, Into the Light

Two Sides of the Projected Image in American Art, 1945-1975

by **Brett Kashmere**



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You may be wondering, sometimes, why we keep making little movies, underground movies, why are we talking about Home Movies, and you hope, sometimes, that this all will change soon. Wait, you say, until they begin making big movies. But we say, No, there is a misunderstanding here. We are making real movies. What we are doing comes from the deeper needs inside a man's soul. Man has wasted himself outside himself, man has disappeared in his projections. We want to bring him down, into his small room, to bring him home.

-JONAS MEKAS [1]

Most of my films accept the traditional theatre situation. Audience here, screen there. It makes concentration and contemplation possible. We're two sided and we fold... My work is classical in the sense that it involves a definite directing of one's attention. The single rectangle can contain a lot.

-MICHAEL SNOW [2]

[I]n the closed space of cinema there is no circulation, no movement, and no exchange. In the darkness, spectators sink into their seats as though slipping into bed... This model is broken apart by the folding of the dark space of cinema into the white cube of the gallery.

-CHRISSE ILES [3]

Prior to 1945, there was little consideration of film within the collection, exhibition, dissemination and scholarship of American art. Subsumed inside the realm of popular entertainment, cinema was shunned by academia, overlooked or outright ignored by art galleries and museums, and rendered absent in the pages of art publications. J. Ronald Green points out that

in 1935, when The Museum of Modern Art made the decision, not just to archive films, but to distribute them non-theatrically, there were no film societies, no university courses in media, no non-theatrical distributors, no American Film Institute, no media arts centers... and there were no independent media artists manifest in our culture. [4]

During the 1940s, studio directors like John Ford, Howard Hawks, Preston Sturges, and Alfred Hitchcock had yet to be pronounced *auteurs* by the French critics at *Cahiers du cinéma*, while European émigrés such as Oskar Fischinger, Douglas Sirk, Otto Preminger and Billy Wilder were still seeking a toehold in America's motion picture industry. Up until the end of Hollywood's Golden Age in the mid-40s, experimental films were either categorized as an extension of previous artistic practices, such as the Kandinsky-like visual abstraction of John and James Whitney, Fischinger and Hans Richter, or marginalized as "home movies." As Jan-Christopher Horak notes, "In the earliest phases the American avant-garde movement cannot be separated from a history of amateur films." [5]

Initially "amateur" film experimentalists functioned as artisans outside both the industrial setting and the artistic community. For years they worked in relative isolation before uniting along the lines of two parallel movements. The West Coast underground cinema, formally and spiritually inspired by San Francisco's literary community, developed in the late-40s. The New American Cinema, a multidisciplinary group of New York-based artists, organized around issues of cooperation, exhibition and distribution in the late-50s. The commercial success of New American films such as SHADOWS (John Cassavetes, 1958) and PULL MY DAISSY (Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, 1958) at the end of the '50s, as well as Andy Warhol's CHELSEA GIRLS in 1966, provided American independent cinema with a measure of art world respect. From the fractured, experimental narratives of the New American Cinema, to the cinema vérité movement in documentary film, to the first person films of Jonas Mekas, Marie Menken, Stan Brakhage, Bruce Baillie and others, a framework was developed for the consideration of film as an art form. This structure took a tangible shape in the mid-60s, when galleries and museums such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and art magazines such as *Artforum* in Los Angeles began to devote attention and resources to the interpretation, dissemination and presentation of experimental film.

Beneath the Underground:

Origins of the American Avant-Garde Cinema

The filmmaker, film organizer and avant-garde polemicist Maya Deren was one of the first in America to position experimental film as an "amateur" alternative to Hollywood, with its cumbersome technology and labor practices. [6] She argued that only by circumventing the professional world of trained specialists, careful divisions of labour and financial motivations could a filmmaker fully realize the medium's potential. [7] Her work also served as an aesthetic bridge between European Surrealism and American avant-garde cinema. MESHS OF THE AFTERNOON (1943), co-directed with her husband, the Czech documentary filmmaker Alexander Hammid, set the form for early films by Sidney Peterson, Curtis Harrington, Ian Hugo, Kenneth Anger and Stan Brakhage.

By developing an impressive array of strategies and techniques for affecting a personal/poetic cinema (including fluid handheld camera movements, unpredictable editing rhythms, superimposition, and the use of abstract imagery), Deren, Brakhage and other avant-garde pioneers severed cinema from its industrial ties by conceptualizing the filmmaker as an individual artist. Foremost among Brakhage's innovations was the development of the first person camera, illustrated in films such as DAYBREAK AND WHITEYE (1957), ANTICIPATION OF THE NIGHT and WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING (1959). In contrast to the psychodrama, a mode that dominated early American avant-garde cinema, this technique positioned the filmmaker as a conscious subjective presence. Brakhage was also a leading contributor to the development of direct (camera-less) cinema; besides painting on 16mm, 35mm and 70mm film stocks, he "scratched, dyed, baked, and otherwise directly intervened on the "sovereignty" of the photographic." [8] In MOTHLIGHT (1963) he etched the frame's threshold entirely by attaching moth wings, leaves and crystals to strips of clear film. His hand-painted films have subsequently extended this line of approach in multiple directions.

The appearance and projected scale of Brakhage's hand-painted films share formal qualities (all-over topology, rapid brushstroke, indeterminate depth) with Action Paintings. This analogue did not go unnoticed by the filmmaker or his critics. As James Peterson notes, since the earliest comparisons in 1961, "scarcely anyone writing about Brakhage's work can avoid linking it to Abstract Expressionism." [9] Moreover, the comparison provided an interpretive schema for his films that was free of literary associations, allowing Brakhage an entry into visual art discourses, and by extension, art world authenticity. [10]

This connection with Abstract Expressionism was also tied to his larger project of separating visual perception from descriptive language. David Sterritt points out that, "Brakhage seeks immersion in... mystery via strategies he has developed... for baffling the intellect and cultivating a "knowledge foreign to language." [11] Brakhage explains his was

strongly drawn to the Abstract Expressionists—Pollock, Rothko, Kline—because of their interior vision... To me, they were all engaged in making icons of inner picturisation, literally mapping modes of non-verbal, non-symbolic, non-numerical thought. So I got interested in consciously and unconsciously attempting to represent this. [12]

Juxtaposing a frame from THIGH LINE LYRE TRIANGULAR (1961) with a reproduction of Willem de Kooning's "Woman with a Green and Beige Background" (1966), P. Adams Stiney illustrates the material relationship between Brakhage's flat, hand-painted surface and the compressed visual field of Abstract Expressionist painting. [13] In "Pioneer of the Abstract Expressionist Film," Charles Bouttenhouse establishes a parallel between Brakhage's erratic hand-held camera movements and Pollock's loose, gestural brush stroke. [14] Kerry Brougher likewise notes that "Brakhage's hand-held, roving camerawork dissolves the grounded, fixed camera of Hollywood productions, making the camera a fluid, mobile eye more directly related to that of the painter of abstraction." [15] The desire to deconstruct and transcend Hollywood forms and conventions such as illusionistic shooting and editing styles, deep focus and naturalistic acting, coupled with the influx of European artists, writers and filmmakers around the time of World War II, catalyzed American independent cinema at mid-century.

Well-known on the West Coast for his collage sculptures before turning to film assemblage, Bruce Conner emerged in the '60s as a major avant-garde filmmaker. His films A MOVIE (1958), COSMIC RAY (1961), and REPORT (1963-67)—a deconstruction of John F. Kennedy's assassination and an unpacking of the Kennedy myth—was a pivotal moment in the emergence and explosive expansion of the post-Maya Deren underground film movement. A MOVIE is the initial of found materials culled from various sources including war documentaries, nude films, old westerns and disaster footage, assembled in a rapid collage to Respighi's *Pines of Rome*. It premiered in 1958 on the opening night of Conner's second show of assemblage sculptures at the East/West Gallery in Fillmore, California. The fact that A MOVIE was included in a sculptural exhibition is significant, because at the time art museums and galleries did not commonly screen films. In 1958 this novel use of public art space played a major role in the fusion of art and film audiences that would determine the future success of underground cinema.

The artist-run gallery became an important site for multidisciplinary crossovers during the '50s and '60s and its continued vitality remains one of the most significant Beat legacies. Many of the Beat movement's seminal events took place in artist-run spaces. The 6 Gallery in San Francisco was the site of Ginsberg's famous first reading of "Howl" in 1955. Ginsberg was joined that night by the poets Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Philip Lamantia, Robert Lowell and Kenneth Rexroth; Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were among those in attendance. Ferus, a West Coast gallery co-founded by the critic Walter Hopps and the artist Ed Kienholz in Los Angeles in 1957, exhibited multidisciplinary artists such as Conner, Warhol, Walter Berman and Ed Ruscha. The same year New York's Brata Gallery and Circle in the Square hosted the first jazz/poetry performances organized by Kerouac and the musician David Amram.

From the Shadows:

The Rise of a New American Cinema

Conner was characteristic of the West Coast art/film synergy, wit, and sensibility that developed in the late-50s and early-60s. At the same time, Jonas Mekas was emerging as a representative figure of the East Coast avant-garde film community. In addition to pioneering a unique style of longer-form diary filmmaking, he founded and co-edited *Film Culture*, the first American journal dedicated solely to the coverage of independent cinema; spearheaded the Film-makers' Co-operative, the Film-makers' Cinematheque and Anthology Film Archives in New York; wrote a regular column, "Movie Journal" for the New York arts weekly, *The Village Voice*; and likely co-authored the term "New American Cinema" in 1960. [16]

An auxiliary development of the American avant-garde cinema, the New American Cinema Group included twenty-three independent filmmakers brought together by Mekas and Lewis Allen. Their manifesto emphasized personal expression, the rejection of censorship and the abolishment of the Budget myth" (Mekas et al. 81-82). Rather than a cohesive collective, the New American Cinema was a diffuse band of New York-based filmmakers, photographers, painters, dancers, actors, and artists. The lasting quality of its members' films—including Cassavetes' SHADOWS, Frank and Leslie's PULL MY DAISSY, Lionel Rogosin's COME BACK, AFRICA (1959), and Shirley Clarke's THE CONNECTION (1960), an adaptation of Jack Gelber's controversial 1958 Living Theatre production—demonstrate the strength and diversity of American independent filmmaking at the end of the 1950s.

The film critic Ken Kelman identifies two necessities underlying the New American Cinema. The first, he writes, "is an aesthetic need, born of the exhaustion of film form by mid-century." The second is, simply and most importantly, "the need for freedom in an increasingly restrictive world." [17] These comments support Mekas' belief that what America really needed, apropos Hollywood and European art cinema, were "less perfect but more free films." [18] The pursuit of artistic and financial freedom that united independent filmmakers in the '50s finds an echo within the frustrations and motivations that sparked several process-based art movements and musical advancements (including free jazz) a decade later.

The Filmmaker as Artist:

Cinema Enters the Museum

Following the more freewheeling artist-led initiatives of the late-50s and early-60s, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Whitney Museum of American Art and Minneapolis' Walker Art Center were among the first American museums to introduce film into their regular programming. As mentioned above, the MoMA started collecting and distributing "archival" films in the mid-30s, but didn't begin exhibiting films as art until the 1960s. In 1970 the Whitney staged New York's first major exhibit of video art and launched a New American Filmmakers Series, devoted to independent, non-commercial cinema. Meanwhile, the American Federation of Artists' traveling exhibition, *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema*, first held at the MoMA in May 1976, crystallized film's place in American art museums. As the catalogue states, the exhibition was developed "out of a desire to increase understanding of the art of the film, and particularly that branch of filmmaking that is concerned with the use of the medium as a vehicle for personal expression." [19]

With the integration of cinema into fine arts institutions in the United States, the distinction between conventional, modernist categories of "art" and "film" began to collapse and new hybrid genres were created, manifested in the artist film and video art. [20] Beginning in the 1960s artists working in traditional disciplines such as painting, photography, sculpture and dance started to make their first audio-visual works, including Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Carolee Schneemann, Hollis Frampton, Dan Graham, Paul Sharits, Yvonne Rainer and others. As a result the late-60s and early-70s saw an increased dematerialization of the art object, de-emphasizing the importance of the medium in art making. [21] Informed by Conceptual Art, Minimalism, Earth Art and other ephemeral art movements, the accent shifted from the self-contained object to process, practice, performance and language. This trend can be considered as a reaction against "the prescriptive modernist purism of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, on the one hand, and the commodification of the art object on the other." [22] Due to factors inherent to the medium, film emerged as a perfect vehicle for realizing this project. Mechanically reproducible and therefore less marketable as a commodity, film is also difficult to project in the home because of its material fragility and expensive, specialized technological apparatus. Uniquely, film can also contain numerous art forms at once, such as painting, sculpture, performance, music and photography.

These elements can be seen at play in '60s structural film, [23] a sub-category of avant-garde cinema that rigorously tested the limits and possibilities of film's irreducible elements (i.e. light, time, space, rhythm, colour, flicker, camera movement). The genre developed, in part, as an alternative mode of practice to the first-person, "thumbprint" films of Brakhage, Baillie, Menken, Mekas and others. Based on the principles of Conceptual Art, structural film is exemptified by the medium-specificity of Michael Snow's WAVELENGTH (1967), the flicker films of Paul Sharits and Tony Conrad, and the ontological reduction of Warhol's EMPIRE (1965), an 8-hour index of the Empire State Building as it passes from morning into night.

After a rich period of production, structural film reached a crisis point at the end of the '70s, similar to the one which faced Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s; that is, once you've reduced a medium down to its purest elements, to its zero degree, what else can be done? Endless experimentation became a creative cul-de-sac perpetuated by avant-garde notions of progress. As a result, several artists turned the moment of projection into a live performance, signalling the beginnings of installation art.

The Other "Other" Cinema: [24]

Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977

A recent exhibition that situates the historical intersection of visual arts and cinema at the point of installation is *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977*, held at the Whitney Museum from October 18, 2001 to January 6, 2002. [25] Curated by Chrissie Iles, *Into the Light* claims itself as the first exhibition to explore the history of projected installations. Featuring one work each by nineteen different artists including such megawatt stars as Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, Andy Warhol and Yoko Ono, the exhibition delineates a period of American art when the gallery space was being transformed by Minimal and Conceptual Art into a perceptual field. The exhibition reflects the Whitney's ongoing commitment to the scholarly reassessment of critical moments in the history of American art, cutting together video art pieces (by Ono, Gary Hill, William Anastasi, Beryl Korot), dance and photography (Simone Forti), multi-screen films (Warhol, Snow, Sharits, Nauman, Dan Graham), film sculpture (Robert Whitman, Anthony McCall), audio art (Keith Sonnier), photography (Mary Lucier), performance (Jean Jonas) and other multidisciplinary projected image and sound works (Peter Campus, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Morris, Acconci).

Upon entering *Into the Light*, the first piece most visitors would see was Robert Whitman's SHOWER (1964), one of four film sculptures that he produced from 1963-64. Whitman was also one of the earliest practitioners in multimedia Happenings, incorporating Super-8 film projections into his three-dimensional film environment. The looped sequence has an ambiguous duration; although it insinuates suspense, suggesting Hitchcock's PSYCHO (1960), the film lacks both development and closure. Andy Warhol's LUPE (1965), one of the artist's first double screen films, similarly thwarts narrative expectations. According to Warhol's distribution instructions, LUPE can either be shown on one screen at 72 minutes, or on two screens at 36 minutes. By constructing a film that can be exhibited in multiple ways, Warhol disrupts narrative logic. The film is ostensibly a record of the last hours before Hollywood starlet Lupa Veloc's suicide, but without action or drama. The characters perform a series of domestic banalities and clichés of mainstream fictional films. By creating structures built on uncertain and/or shifting durations without climax, both SHOWER and LUPE can be considered deconstructions of narrative film language.

Conversely, many of the pieces in *Into the Light* attempted to deconstruct the cinematic experience by screening film's unique and irreducible properties and operations. By foregrounding projector, light beam, screen and shutter, Snow's TWO SIDES TO EVERY STORY (1974), McCall's LINE DESCRIBING A CONE (1973) and Sharits' SHUTTER INTERFACE (1975) tempt projectory viewers with their demystifying treatment of light, time and space. In TWO SIDES TO EVERY STORY, a woman performing various activities is filmed from both sides. Each film is projected onto opposite sides of a metal screen located in the centre of the room, requiring the viewer to circumnavigate the screen in order to perceive the whole piece. LINE DESCRIBING A CONE is a 30-minute film that sculpts the projector's beam into a three dimensional cone with the aid of space-visualizing fog. Because of its ephemeral facility, LINE DESCRIBING A CONE entices audience participation and exchange. Viewers can hardly resist reaching, stepping or leaping through what appears to be a solid cone, thereby entering into others' personal experience of the piece. SHUTTER INTERFACE is one of many multi-screen "locational" film installations that Sharits produced in the 1970s. The two-screen version presented at the Whitney (a four screen version also exists) projects two overlapping film loops that cycle through various colour permutations, creating a percussive composition.

Two of show's simplest yet most sublime pieces, Yoko Ono's SKY TV (1966) and William Anastasi's FREE WILL (1968), demonstrate video's impact on the shifting engagement between the audience and the space of the gallery. SKY TV, Ono's only video work, places a closed-circuit camera on the museum's roof, which transmits a live feed of the sky onto a television monitor placed within the exhibition space. In FREE WILL, a camera on top of a monitor is trained at the right-angled corner between the floor and the wall, whose black and white image is relayed onto the monitor screen. Imitating surveillance mechanisms (to humorous and/or contemplative effect), both video sculptures draw attention to aspects of the museum that are rarely observed—the sky above and a corner below, respectively. Through video technology these works negotiate new relationships between art object (SKY TV exists as a set of instructions), spectator, and public space, while anticipating the more current experiments in virtual reality.

All of the above works subvert passive spectatorship and bring to light the hidden play of seduction, twin elements of the classical movie picture apparatus, by shattering narrative illusion and suspense and/or by accentuating the machinery of representation. Rather than films or videos in themselves, they function as reflections on the projected image, drawing cinema's one-sided, author-spectator relationship into question. In these pieces, the idea of cinema—the cinematic—supplants cinema proper.

Conclusion

After years of struggle for respect and acceptance American independent filmmakers finally gained artistic status in the 1950s and '60s. In Sheldon Renan's words, the result was newfound "freedom to make complex films, intricate films, films close to life or made of dreams, films like poems and films like paintings. This is what the underground is all about." [26] From the late-60s to the late-70s, the territory paved by the Underground cinema and its more over-ground auxiliary, the New American cinema, provided carte blanche for visual artists looking to circumvent medium-specificity and the commodification of art.

Into the Light investigates this flip side of avant-garde film's purest approach. Only after cinema gained artistic status did painters, sculptors and other artists working in traditional mediums begin to produce time-based audiovisual works on a wide scale. While some artists like Michael Snow, Paul Sharits and Hollis Frampton took up a structural film practice, making films to be screened in theatres, others began to present projected images within a nexus of performance, Happenings and installation art. As a result of this multidisciplinary approach, the projected image has transformed the way we look at contemporary art. This has also altered the economic structure of artistic production, exhibition and art collecting.

In the context of '60s and '70s commercially unviable, process-based art forms such as Earth Art, Performance Art, Minimalism and Conceptual Art, the development of installation art over the past three decades can be read as a strategy for re-entry into the commercial art world. This re-commodification of art created a starting point for the meta-cinematic27 work of contemporary visual artists such as Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas, Matthew Barney, Mark Lewis, Pierre Huyghe, Sam Taylor-Wood, Pipilotti Rist and others. Addressing recent developments in contemporary art, Chris Darcon argues that film and video installation "are perfect examples of the strategies of imitation inherent in the way young artists from all over the world produce art in general."28 However, while commercial artists such as Barney, Gordon and Rist benefit from the public's unquenchable desire for cinematic signifiers and pop culture references, the future of film as a medium and not just a visual referent seems precarious. Projection of 16mm film is disappearing from festivals and university campuses, museums are exhibiting flicker films on DVD, and independent distributors are functioning like archives. After a rich period of crossover and interaction through the '60s and '70s, the divisions between experimental film and projected installation have become more entrenched than ever before. Rather than two sides, we can now perceive two parallel worlds of the moving image.

Notes

¹ Jonas Mekas, "Where Are We – the Underground?", *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1976), p. 20.

² Michael Snow on *La Région Centrale* (transcribed and edited from a conversation with Charlotte Townsend, Halifax, December 1970), *Film Culture* 52 (Spring 1971): 62-63.

³ Chrissie Iles, "Between the Still and Moving Image," *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001), p. 33.

⁴ J. Ronald Green, "The Media Arts in Transition," *The Media Arts in Transition*, ed. Bill Horrigan (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1983), p. 6.

⁵ Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p. 18.

⁶ The role of amateurism in the development of a specialized art cinema goes back much further than this. In the 1920s Dada and surrealist filmmakers such as Rene Clair, Man Ray and Luis Bunuel were already exhibiting disdain for conventional aesthetic tradition. See, for example, Clair's ENTR'ACTE (1924), Man Ray's L'ETOILE DE MER (1927) and Bunuel and Salvador Dali's UN CHIEN ANDALOU (1928). There is also evidence of an avant-garde cinema prior to 1945. See Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema*; see also Bruce and Amanda Posner, *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1893-1941* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 2001).

⁷ See Maya Deren, "Amateur vs. Professional," *Film Culture* 39 (Winter 1965): 45-46.

⁸ Paul Arthur, "Qualities of Light: Stan Brakhage and the Continuing Pursuit of Vision," *Film Comment* 31, no. 5 (1995): 70.

⁹ James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 61.

¹⁰ The enterprise eventually worked. He received a Rockefeller Fellowship in 1967, his first Museum of Modern Art retrospective in 1971, and in January 1973 *Artforum* devoted an entire issue to Brakhage and the Soviet filmmaker Sergej Eisenstein.

¹¹ David Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved: The Beats, the '50s, and Film* (Carbondale: Illinois University Press, 1998), p. 135.

¹² Stan Brakhage quoted in Suranjan Ganguly, "All that is Light: Brakhage at 60," *Sight and Sound* 3, no. 10 (1993): 21.

¹³ P. Adams Stiney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 152.

¹⁴ See Chaires Bouttenhouse, "Pioneer of the Abstract Expressionist Film," *Filmwise* 1 (1962): 26-27.

¹⁵ Kerry Brougher, "Hall of Mirrors," *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles and New York: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), p. 90.

¹⁶ See "The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group," rpt. *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Stiney (New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 81-82.

¹⁷ Ken Kelman, "Anticipations of the Light," *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1967), pp. 3-24.

¹⁸ Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Collier, 1972), p. 1.

¹⁹ Willard Van Dyke, "Preface," *A History of the American Avant Garde Cinema*, ed. Marilyn Singer (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1976), p. 9.

²⁰ Although it falls outside the range of this essay, it's important to note that video art emerged in the late 1960s with the development of Sony's Portapak, the first camera-recorder combination priced at a level accessible to individuals and independent organizations.

²¹ See Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

²² Jonathan Walley, "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film," *October* 103 (Winter 2003): 25.

²³ P. Adams Stiney is credited with coining the term, "structural film." He defined it as "a cinema of the structure in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primary impression of the film." See Stiney, "Structural Film," *Film Culture Reader* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 326. Originally published in *Film Culture* 47 (Summer 1969).

²⁴ Bruce Jenkins uses the term "the other cinema" to delineate certain American avant-garde film of the '60s. See his essay in *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*, ed. Russell Ferguson, (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), pp. 188-215. The French theoreticians Raymond Bellour and Jacques Ranciere speak of "un autre cinéma" to describe cinematic installation art. See Ranciere, "L'autre cinéma," *Cahiers du cinéma* 552 (December 2000).

²⁵ For more on the ideas and issues that unite this exhibition, see Chrissie Iles, with an essay by Thomas Zimmer, *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001); Robert Morris, "Solocisms of Sight: Specular Speculations," *October* 103 (Winter 2003): 31-41; Anthony McCall, "Lines for Describing a Cone and Related Films," *October* 103 (Winter 2003): 42-62; Vito Acconci, "Other Voices for a Second Sight," *October* 103 (Winter 2003): 63-103; "Paul Sharits," *Film Culture* 65-66 (1978): 1-133. Cf. Genevieve Yue, "The Last Picture Show: Film and Video Installation in the Late '60s and Early '70s," *Senses of Cinema*, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/28/last_picture_show_installation_60s_70s.html; Malcolm Turvey, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/28/round_table.

²⁶ Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: Dutton, 1967), p. 18.

²⁷ While "meta-cinema" implies cinematic work that comments upon itself as cinema the film scholar Thomas Elsaesser also describes it as "a cinema that sits on top of the cinema "as we know it," and at the same time is underpinned by the cinema "as we have known it." See Elsaesser, "Introduction: Harun Farocki," *Senses of Cinema*, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/21/farocki_intro. Elsaesser's conception is an intriguing analogy for the current transitional state of cinema as it vacillates between analog and digital forms.

²⁸ Chris Darcon, "Gleaning the Future from the Gallery Floor," *Senses of Cinema*, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/28/gleaning_the_future.html

For further information, consult:
Further Reading on Brakhage by Brett Kashmere
Jason Woloski's review of *By Brakhage: An Anthology*

Brett Kashmere is a Montreal-based filmmaker, writer and curator specializing in North American avant-garde film, video art, and experimental documentary. He recently organized the expanded cinema installation and DVD-format catalog, "Industry/Industry: Overseas recents/Recent works" by Richard Kerr. His MA thesis, entitled "Freedom of Expression: John Coltrane, Stan Brakhage and the American Avant-Garde, 1957-67," can be found in the Concordia University libraries. For additional information visit: <http://www.arttechbar.org>

http://articles.synoptique.ca/kashmere_underground/



The images above are links to other articles.



Canadian Experimental Cinema since the 1990s

Retro-Vision and Trans-Vision

by **Gerda Johanna Cammaer**



A discussion of the treatment of time and space in 90s experimental cinema coupled with a consideration of globalization and its relationship to televisual media. This sets the stage for an analysis of the way experimental cinema users dead time and visual plasticity to challenge the concept of a window on the world and a hysteria for the present.

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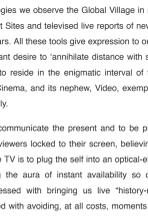
Introduction

"They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
between stars-on-stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home,
to scare myself with my own desert places"
— Robert Frost, "Desert Places" in *Further Range*, 1936

Since the end of the last century, globalization has begun to show severe alienating effects. The national interest yields to the international and the local to the global. Citizens of this mass mediated society assume the status of cultural immigrants, as they learn to suspend the inclination to define themselves in terms of geographical locales, which to this point has been an important part of our sense of belonging. In a culture obsessed with speed and where every invention is aimed at killing time, increased access to remote places erodes the notion of distance. While the new expanded possibilities for rapid travel in the physical world may or may not affect our sense of location, in the two-dimensional universe of visual mass media, especially television and the internet, we boost this concept of growing proximity directly on our homes and minds. Instead of physically traveling by car, boat or plane, many of us travel at home by letting our fingers do the walking and our brains do the flying. It has been observed that:

television effectively seizes instantaneity as the mark of 'presence', while dislocating the bonds of place which once held this matrix together. But, because tele-presence is a function of pure speed without necessary relation to place, the increasing reliance on television as a means of cultural and political integration rapidly generates new social tensions. This is evident in the instability of traditional sites of political and social interaction (room, home, street, city) as well as the growing uncertainty of the borders of cultural belonging (national territory, linguistic unity, ethnic homogeneity). This is not to posit this transformation as a cause for despair, but to insist on thinking its epochal implications. (McQuire, 251-152) [2]

Moving Image Artists, who are also media specialists, contribute to such thinking. Their work contrasts and rethames the traditional "window on the world" as first and foremost a medium shaped by an industry – a flatland with only two dimensions and a limited spatio-temporal perspective, both in form and content. [3]



Gunilla Josephson, *Happy House* (2000)

By definition, experimental film bypasses the traditional narrative structures and techniques of the mainstream cinema; it explores unconventional modes of visual and emotional experience and alternative themes—often taboo ones. Much of the work produced in the 1990s, in a solipsistic reflex against alienation, tells personal stories (see list of selected films and videos below). Perhaps this narrowing of thematic scope reflects disillusionment with the broad socio-political themes of the 1980s, the concentration of the media, and the erosion of localized sovereignties by transnational capital. This important redefinition of space coincided with the count-down to the turn of the century, a historical marker that always inspires people to reassess priorities.

More than a century since the invention of cinema, people seem so accustomed to screen images that questions about its effects on our perception of reality, time and space have unjustly faded. In comparison with other technologies that have been credited with killing time and space, from the telegraph to the railway with space travel, moving images have profoundly affected our perceptions of self and culture. This justifies, I think, the media artist's urge to challenge and expose the authority of values such as linearity, continuity and homogeneity. These values rule mainstream film and television and teach us to give up our sense of reality, which is not necessarily continuous. It is by valuing ambiguity and contradiction that we resist the pressure to congratulate the emperor on his new clothes. With the American dream next door, this poses a special challenge for Canadian experimental film artists: to be rigorous in the quest to understand the terms of this new world order and its enforcement through images.

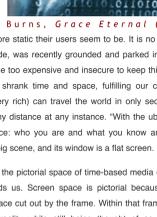
Tele-Vision and Retro-Vision

Thanks to recent computer technologies we observe the Global Village in real-time though our various windows onto today's world: Webcam Internet Sites and televised live reports of news, sports, survivors on an island and idols who compete to be the next stars. All these tools give expression to our culture of haste, our obsession with the present moment, and the constant desire to annihilate distance with speed, to overcome absence with the limitless body of technology (and) to reside in the enigmatic interval of the absolute instant (McQuire, 251). Television, challenging its mother, Cinema, and its nephew, Video, exemplifies this preoccupation with the now and our culture of the im...media...tely.

Television is ruled by the need to communicate the present and to be present at all times, a requirement so addictive that everywhere it keeps viewers locked to their screen, believing that they are experiencing "reality" and "live" history. To switch on the TV is to plug the self into an optical-electronic field of immediacy, a zone of accelerated perceptions generating the aura of instant availability so crucial in defining the world 'today' (McQuire, 251). Television is obsessed with bringing us live "history-making-events" in a constant linear sequence, as much as it is obsessed with avoiding, at all costs, moments of "dead time". This is what McQuire describes as the ever-present undercurrent of television: "a profound dis-ease when confronted by the stare of empty time" (256).

An extension of television's (encoded) obligation to keep us up-to-date on an hourly basis and a strong antidote against empty time was the magical extension of time at the turn of the twentieth century. Television transformed the instant between 12:00:00 PM on 31 December 1999 and 01:00:00 AM on 1 January 2000 into a 24-hour "experience of a life-time". It broadcast a journey across all of the time zones of the Global Village, allowing us to zap together from east to west, celebrating, to the exclusion of all other times, our western conception of time as a linear series of moments. We blithely repressed both the heterogeneity of time and diverse experiences of time. [4] We ignored the paradox of time that we have been struggling with since Aristotle – that time is always now, yet the "now" cannot be grasped. We took part in a spectacle of a culture that has completely lost track of time in search of an obsolete present which constantly disappears in the binary bits of over-dissected seconds dispersed over high-speed information highways.

Yet these instant gratifications of our need to be present, have NOT satisfied our fundamental need to understand time and space. They have only CHANGED our spatio-temporal perspective, allowing technological imperatives, acceleration and proximity, to predominate. Scott McQuire describes this as "the total spectacle of objects and events in a global milieu where relevance is defined by the gullotine of the instant" (257). Globalized citizens may find it useful to consider here the principle "survival of the fittest" in Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) has morphed into "survival of the Quickest" in the struggle against obsolescence. The powers who decide what is relevant are those who control the speediest tools. Scott McQuire states that "the fundamental problem of 'tele-presence' is precisely what produces its seductive power: it leaves no time for the other, for the openness of time, for the memory of what resists being shown – what is not seen or shown on television... passes unacknowledged" (257). And exactly here lies a tremendous opportunity for experimental film and video in our fast-paced "global" world: to remember that which resists being seen or shown.



Jean Theberge, *Traverse* (1999)

This remembering entails redefining concepts such as home, nation, community and identity in combination with values to which they have always been systematically opposed: strangeness, difference, dispersion. It means foregrounding what is most vigorously repressed in western thought and by its most influential representative, television – the heterogeneity of time and identity which resists the necessity to BE PRESENT. Photography, film and video images do not share the tele-visual insistence on presentness. They are used as aids to memory, tools to make present what is absent, to create dreams (utopia) and to bring back what has been lost (nostalgia). Images have become our memories. Especially for the generation who grew up with television, home-movies and Kodak-moments, memory has become a matter of visual representations. At the same time we have gradually lost our blind trust in cameras as perfect memory-machines. We have learned about the mutability of every image's truth: "A photograph is only a negation, and with the passage of time its meanings come unstuck. It drifts away into soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of interpretation" (Sontag, 71).

In this age of mass reproduction of mechanically produced images, we have also learned that it is as dangerous to remember as it is to forget. Scott McQuire describes how "The good memory posited as essential to 'healthy' identity so easily slides towards a memory which is too good and therefore 'unhealthy' – fixated, brooding, obsessive. Once again, memory finds itself subject to a double injunction: the need for a stable memory to prevent radical loss of identity must be balanced against the risk of memory becoming wedded to an unchanging past, a memory condemned to repeat the fiction of unidentified identity, whether the referent is personal or collective ('self', 'nation', 'people')" (167 – 168). Here again, experimental film and video offer compelling incentives to remember, to expose a changing past, and to remind us of the limits of remembering. They reveal memory as creation by showing different kinds of memory, such as the memories of those who have no voice in mainstream media, and the memory of memory.

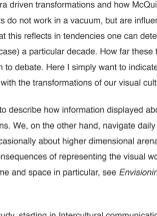
To introduce a term, it offers "RETRO-vision" in counterpoint to "TELE-vision". Television means the distribution of images over long distances instantly, without the "loss" of time. Television is obsessed with bringing us live "history-making-events" in a constant linear sequence, avoiding at all costs moments of "dead" time. [5] Retro-vision however works backward and inwardly to collect and arrange images, to bring them closer, to bring them back, boldly losing, gaining and even "taking" time. The retro-vision of art films shows life in a slower-paced, different frame – re-incarnated, alive but not "live", and without fear of "dead" time.

Retro-vision is also introspective. The approach of the millennium, which fueled a new anxiety, the so-called millennium dread, and globalization reinforced the need to focus on the personal, and to affirm both history and identity. The experimental works of the 1990s reflect these changes. They are autobiographical, self-referential and often not "chrono-logical" but with a different logic. They reflect the changing times using various time changes (in shooting and editing) and other idiosyncratic techniques.

It is the striking stylization (or anti-naturalism) of experimental film that announces its expressive and discursive aims. These films draw attention to the physical fact of the medium: the fragility of film stock, the fluctuations in the electromagnetic signal, the pixels; Super-8 and 8mm film, home video, found footage, still photos and other inexpensive formats are all mixed in. Their anachronistic, archival appearance reinforces themes of time and memory. Alongside our speedy amnesiac culture, experimental films and videos write, re-write and pre-write plots and stories which make us conscious of the puzzling workings of time and memory. They produce these effects by freezing, repeating, compressing or extending events, by mimicking the editing processes of human memory (in manual, optical, and digital manipulations of the image), by showing us the rapid aging of images (in scratches, dust, faded colors, grain and overexposures), and above all by re-digitizing, splicing and re-splicing the material that is constantly cut away by television's "gullotine of the instant" and working according to Mae West's axiom: "Anything worth doing, is worth doing slowly".

Trans-Mission and Trans-Vision

The dreams and nightmares made by broadcast television possess an uncanny ability to merge with our life stories. As viewers of television news we may experience ourselves as part of an integrated audience regardless of our political stance toward the issues reported. The endlessly repeated spectacle of the collapse of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 united viewers as witnesses to an unprecedented event, in a phantom "public sphere". Yet recognizing that this space hardly represents a forum for debate or action, and constantly bombarded by messages of terror, many "global" citizens returned to the sure and the secure, cocooning themselves in their homes, clinging to the everyday and the familiar.



Neil Burns, *Gloucester* (1998)

The faster media become, the more static their users seem to be. It is no coincidence that the once glamorous symbol of modernity, the Concorde, was recently grounded and parked in a museum. After the September 11 attack on New York, it has become too expensive and insecure to keep this exquisite supersonic airplane in the air, even though it miraculously shrank time and space, fulfilling our culture's most profound desire. Now, however, we (and not just the very rich) can travel the world in only seconds with the click of a mouse or a remote control. We can bridge any distance at any distance. "With the ubiquity of the screen, identity loses its once elementary reliance on place: who you are and where you are less a function of where you are" (McQuire 253). The world is one big scene, and its window is a flat screen.

The term "screen space" denotes the pictorial space of time-based media (film and video) as distinguished from the physical space that surrounds us. Screen space is pictorial because its two dimensionality and visible discontinuity from surrounding space cut out by the frame. Within that frame, and largely because of it, film can generate a credible illusion of reality while still being thought of as a picture, a "moving picture". This schizophrenic characteristic of moving images has long been the topic of debate between film theorists. [6] Rudolf Arnheim (*Film as Art* 1957) has argued that because film works without depth (hence the choice to call it a flatland) and because sizes and shapes are distorted in proportion and perspective, the spectator's attention is drawn to the formal elements of the images as an artificial composition. (Many abstract films play on this.)

But this stance overlooks the mise-en-scène of screen space and its service to realism. The two dimensional composition within the film frame, represents a three-dimensional space in which the action occurs, and that is where our attention goes, guided by depth cues that sustain the illusion of deep space. Time-based mainstream media urge us to look through film to see the story, rather than at it to analyze its visual construction. Hence the realistic qualities of film. Add to the plasticity of screen space the magic of editing and Hollywood's other standards of realism, and we get a visual construction of the world, continuous in time and space, that appears to be realistic no matter how improbable the story.

Experimental films reclaim screen space by demonstrating its specific properties and by exhibiting anti-realistic poetics. They also solicit radical ways of looking. Many of the Canadian experimental films of the 1990s that I have seen, offer an innovative frame on the image-world, one that distances us from screen space and forces us to look beyond, one that forces us to be the agents of a critical gaze. That is what I call TRANS-VISION. Experimental films in the 1990s carry on what Sean Cubitt calls "a philosophical exploration of relationships: unpacking and reworking the technologies through which individuals relate or fail to relate to one another, unpacking the relationships between one mode of technological relationship and another, and between each of them and the wider world" (205). Through this process, artists question the frames to which we have become so acculturated; mainstream cinema and television broadcasts, and the screening of a reality of which they are both the center and the driving force. [7] Anything left out of their view is there to be recovered by artists: both the off-screen space and the workings of the on-screen space of a fast expanding media universe that is a limited universe, a "flatland".

Experimental work contrasts with the pervasive aesthetic of (re)ally-television with its flattening effect on our culture and so-called open window on the world. Film and video artists use various techniques to reclaim screen space by demonstrating its specific properties. Similar to the discussion above with regards to retro-vision, it is significant that many trailblazers evoke the reconstructive processes of human memory and imagination by means of blurs, flashes, cuts, and freeze-frames, offering strong anti-realistic, poetic images and narratives. In a similar way, experimental films reclaim the screen for telling personal stories with a special attention to the difference. Media artists recognize that despite mass media's recent attempts to include more people in the scene (e.g. American Idol, Canadian Idol, Survivor, Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire, talk-shows and the like), the mainstream frame still leaves a tremendous world off-screen. "As the relation of relationships, the TV in particular has become a standard, relating to a global mean, and reducing as much as possible the use of the media as a terrain of struggle" (Cubitt, 204). Experimental work can transcend this limited frame by exposing what is left behind or off to the side. This makes for provocative work with unsettling close-ups and moving images.

Another common strategy of artists at a time when the home is constantly being redefined as a secure site in which to consume images of remote origin is to work against this notion by transforming the "home" into a strange or insecure place. While global citizens and their media now concentrate (self-protectively) more on the common place, this has long since been the typical terrain of art films and videos. Instead of portraying the home as a protected window on the world, they gladly relinquish it and strip it of its safety blanket, exposing "home" as a place of struggle: they make it explode with questions of identity, and implode under the weight of uncertainty. In these films the notion that "there is no place like home" obtains a haunting resonance. While many TV trailers and reportages are still about "I have been places and seen things", the new hegemony of modern media in the home inspires art work that illustrates another famous expression by Mae West: "I have been things and seen places".

Conclusion

I didn't go to the moon,
I went much further,
For time is the largest distance
Between two places.
— Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945)

Artists have the power and imagination to reframe reality and to present a critical worldview, to puzzle together a different scene with a different time and space, to make us travel farther than the moon. Like us, they are constantly challenged to reinvent themselves in the face of a fast changing media-scape. "Recent developments in video cameras and satellite technology have once again put flesh on the bones of the old promise of a sight machine which allows us all to see anything anywhere anytime. In this bold guise contemporary television offers us a meta-medium or master discourse: the frame which is not itself framed" (McQuire, 243-244). It is my belief that experimental films and videos do just that, to frame what is not itself framed, including the screen frame itself.

Experimental films in general, but Canadian experimental films especially, sketch out different places and foreground diversity. Experimental films map out different spaces and show alternative conceptions of screen space: discontinuous and fissured, what I called TRANS-VISION. For me, these art films do not show a flatland, but a bold space with many dimensions and many variables. They create flexible screens overflowing with imagination and technical mastery, or a refreshing simplicity, as an antidote against the uniformity of the flashy mainstream presenting us a streamlined global world.

Globalization and the redefinition of space in general coincided with the countdown to the end of the century. Both tendencies inspired experimental film artists to refocus on the personal and to affirm history and identity. I called this RETRO-VISION, an umbrella word for a collection of films that are autobiographical, self-referential, often non "chrono-logical" and clearly work against the pressure to keep up with the fleeing present. They reflexively open up the medium by soliciting alternative modes of visual and emotional experience.

"Given the hysteria of the now which directs so many forces in the contemporary world, one of the most radical changes imaginable would undoubtedly be a collective deceleration in which the pressure of time is released. Marx once described revolutions as 'the locomotives of world history'. Walter Benjamin's speculative response seems apt: "Perhaps it is totally different. That perhaps revolutions are the reaching of humanity traveling in this train for the emergency brake." (McQuire, 258) It is my belief that alternative media such as experimental films and video offer us indicators and reflections that will help us find the emergency brake.

CFMDC: <http://www.cfmdc.org>

V-Tape: <http://www.vtape.org>

Videography: <http://www.videography.gc.ca>

The Art Gallery: <http://www.mcvau.ca>

Notes

¹ This text is reworked version of two essays I wrote as guest curator for the Art Gallery of the Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax) as collaborator of the *Le Fosseur 100 Têtes* collective. The respective catalogues *Changing Times*, *Time Changes* (2002) and *Placing Spaces*, *Spacing Places* (2003), which also contain a detailed description of all the works shows, are available at ABC Books (Montreal). The respective lists of films and videos selected for the series and the main inspiration for this essay are listed in the film/Videography below. Note that the distinction between film and video is less and less pertinent (many titles qualified as 'video' are obviously shot on film and transferred to video to reduce costs for the work) and hence I do not systematically make a difference, unless called for in the case of a specific work. Please also note that in the meantime distributor Cinema Libre no longer exists.

² For this text I rely heavily on the book *Visions of Modernity* (1998) by Scott McQuire, which explores the relationship between technology, society and identity that underpins contemporary 'media culture', in particular part 3 of the book dealing with "The New Plasticity of Space and Time" (181 – 259). My interest in this work is fed by its compelling account of camera driven transformations and how McQuire couples these to larger cultural debates. It is, in my view, one of the few books that artists do not work in a vacuum, but are influenced and inspired by the larger culture, consciously or not, and that this reflects in tendencies one can detect when looking at a large body of work by different artists (in this case) a particular decade. How far these tendencies extend in the whole history of experimental film is open to debate. Here I simply want to indicate certain shifts in style and content in artists' work that stand to contrast with the transformations of our visual culture at large.

³ The term "flatland" is often used to describe how information displayed about the world is caught in the two-dimensionality of paper and screens. We, on the other hand, navigate daily through a perceptual world of three spatial dimensions and reason occasionally about higher dimensional arenas with mathematical ease. For a more detailed discussion of the consequences of representing the visual world of experience on flat surfaces in general, and for the narrative of time and space in particular, see *Envisioning Information* (1990) by Edward R. Tufte.

⁴ Time is been my main topic of verbal, starting in intercultural communication with a thesis on Time in Africa and specializing in time as non-verbal communication. A book that had a major impact about my thinking about time is Edward T. Hall's *The Dance of Life, The Other Dimension of Time* (1983), especially his distinction between formal and informal time, and between time perception and time experience. For a more scientific eye-opener about the illusion of time, I recommend Julian Barbour's *The End of Time* (1999). With regards to time in film, Andrei Tarkovsky's films and his book *Sculpting in Time* (1986) had a major influence on my work, as did the films of Chris Marker.

⁵ Dead Time is a very quiet moment, a moment of silence and inactivity. In artistic cinema, it is something directors have to avoid out of fear to lose the spectator's attention. In art cinema dead time is often used as a tool to create tension and/or to make (let) the viewer reflect on things.

⁶ The "realist" controversy in film theory is lengthy and complex. For theorist such as Sigfried Kracauer and André Bazin the cinema's power lies in its ability to represent a recognizable reality. In *What is Cinema?* Bazin emphasizes the importance of deep focus and stresses that this brings the spectator in closer relation with the image than with reality. In later essays he states that there is only one reality that cannot be denied, cinema – the reality of space, and that this is the main distinction between film and theatre (see Monaco, 408).

⁷ Sean Cubitt describes how the emerging global culture of electronic media (he includes new media and virtual reality) is shaping communications and creativity for the foreseeable future (the book was published in 1993). He also calls for an "electronic ecology" (pp. 190-209) where he places video at the center of a global platform to question and discuss how people make sense of themselves, their world, and the new mediation. He rightfully questions the power of such an ecological model of humanity, since it remains exclusionary. Hence I agree with Cubitt's reservations concerning the fragile media ecology on a global scale, but I also believe that in a media saturated environment, experimental film and video represent the germ of hope at "the bottom of the Pandora's box of the 1990s" (Cubitt, 207).

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Filmo/Videography - Changing Times, Time Changes

Program 1: Time has no image

- MOTIVE 1999 Gunilla Josephson (video) (V-TAPE): 3min50
- READING CANADA BACKWARD 1995 Stephanie Topping (16 mm) CFMDC: 12min
- THAT'S TOO MUCH! 1996 Raphaela Montaloz Ortiz (video) (V-TAPE): 4min16
- TIME PASSES/LE TEMPS PASSE 1998 Nelson Nelson Henriks (video) (V-TAPE): 6min30
- TIME HAS NO IMAGE 1991 Doug Porter (video) (V-TAPE): 8min24
- GRACE ETERNAL 1998 Jennifer Burns (16 mm) (CFMDC): 4min20
- PHOTOCOPIER 1997 Nellie Lam (video) (V-TAPE): 4min
- BUS 1998 Naha Uppal (16 mm) (CFMDC): 10min
- DAILY NO. 7 2001 Ho Tam (video) (V-TAPE): 3min
- TEMPA INCERTAIN 1993 Paul Landon (video) (Videography): 20min
- LOCAL KNOWLEDGE 1992 David Rimmer (16 mm): 33min
- OZONE 1999 Peter Ghemling (video): 5min

Program 2: Going Back Home

- THE DOLLHOUSE DIARIES 1999 Rae Staasson (video) (V-TAPE): 7min11
- MOOSE JAW 1992 Rick Hancock (16 mm) (CFMDC): 55min

Special Focus: Louise Bourque

- JUST WORDS 1991 Louise Bourque (16 mm) (Cinema Libre): 10min
- THE PEOPLE IN THE HOUSE 1994 Louise Bourque (16 mm) (Cinema Libre): 22min
- IMPRINT 1997 Louise Bourque (16 mm) (Cinema Libre): 14min
- FIGURES 1999 Louise Bourque (16 mm) (Cinema Libre): 2min50
- GOING BACK HOME 2000 Louise Bourque (35 mm) (Cinema Libre): 30sec

Program 3: Like a Dream that Vanishes

- FILM MUET / SILENT MOVIE 1994 Freda Guttmann (video) (V-TAPE): 9min20
- MY MEMORIES OF ME 2001 Ho Tam (video) (V-TAPE): 3min
- MOTHERS OF ME 1999 Alexandra Grimanis (16 mm) (V-TAPE): 15min
- PASSING THROUGH 1998 Karen Sandros (video) (V-TAPE): 12min
- ENLIGHTENED NONSENSE 2000 Deirdre Logue (video) (V-TAPE): 22min
- JACK 2000 Mike Hoolboom (16 mm) (CFMDC): 15min
- LIKE A DREAM THAT VANISHES 1999 Barbara Sternberg (16 mm) (CFMDC): 40min

Filmo/Videography - Placing Spaces, Spacing Places

Program 1: Shooting at Home: Sight Seeing, Open Houses and "Living" Rooms

- FLOATING HOUSE 2002 Paulette Phillips (video) (V-TAPE): 5min
- AUTOBIOGRAPHY 1994 Denise Day (video) (V-TAPE): 4min47
- C'EST J'OUR/JOUR HUI QU' 1999 Manon Labrecque (Videography): 17min50
- YOU ARE IN THE MAZE OF TWISTY LITTLE PASSAGES, ALL DIFFERENT! 2002 Daniel Cockburn (video) (V-TAPE): 9min11
- HAPPY HOUSE: THE ID, THE KID AND THE LITTLE RED FIREMAN, A CLEAN SWEEP 2001 Gunilla Josephson (video) (V-TAPE): 18min
- LIVING ROOM 2000 Michael Snow (16 mm) (CFMDC): 21min
- SIGHT UNDER CONSTRUCTION 2001 John Kneller (16 mm) (CFMDC): 35min

Program 2: Traveling Shots: Explorations in Screen Space

- JAPAN: KESSE LIFE SINGLE TAKE 2001 Ian Towles (16 mm) (CFMDC): 5min
- LAS ESCALERAS 1999 Paul Landon (video) (Videography): 8min30
- PETROPOULS 2001 Michael Yacovlevsky (video) (Cinema Libre): 16min
- NEW YORK COUNTERPOINT 2002 Barbara Sternberg (video) (V-TAPE): 28min
- TRAVERSÉE 1999 Jean Théberge (16 mm) (Cinema Libre): 9min20
- TRANSFRED 2001 Jason Britski (16 mm): 2min
- CHIMERA 1995 Philip Hoffman (16 mm) (CFMDC): 6min
- TRANSJEU/LE 2000 E. Avenel and M. F. Garudon (video) (Videography): 22min

Program 3: Moving Images and Intimate Spaces

- WINDOW/FENÊTRE 1997 Nelson Henriks (video) (Videography): 3min
- YOU-ARCHITECTURAL 1991 Kika Thome (video) (V-TAPE): 11min
- THE VIEW NEVER CHANGES 1996 John Price (16 mm) (CFMDC): 6min
- LIVE TO TELL 2002 Benny Nemerovski Ramsay (video) (V-TAPE): 6 min
- THE INTENTION OF A LANDSCAPE 1998 Serge Cardinal (16 mm) (Cinema Libre): 30min
- JE CHANGERAIS D'AVIS 2000 Benny Nemerovski Ramsay (video) (V-TAPE): 4min

Special Focus: Nikki Forrest

- STATIC 1995 Nikki Forrest (video) (V-TAPE): 7min
- SHIFT 1999 Nikki Forrest (video) (V-TAPE): 3min
- STRAWAIGH/ERRANCE 1999 (video) (V-TAPE): 9min
- 00:00:15:00 2002 Nikki Forrest (video) (V-TAPE): 4 min
- DRIFT 2002 Nikki Forrest (video) (V-TAPE): 24min



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Mike Hoolboom and The Invisible Man: Gallery Review

The Iconic Canadian Filmmaker's First-Ever Solo Public Gallery Show

by **Jon Davies**



[SYNOPTIQUE \[HOME\]](#)

14 Mar 2005
1587 words

Written by :
Jon Davies

Editor:
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Mike Hoolboom's *The Invisible Man* at the Art Gallery of York University is a conceptually tight show that rewards multiple viewings and the patience of spectators who remain seated throughout the projections. The three Hoolboom pieces on display demand to be seen from beginning to end as they are nothing less than philosophical treatises on the twin worlds of reality and images, the image-world given the short-hand designation of *The Movies*.

During an evening dubbed "Mike Hoolboom: ALIVE" at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto, Hoolboom conversed with Art Gallery of York University curator Philip Monk, screened a few of his recent short films and videos, and spoke in his severely mannered form of verbal diarrhea. Anyone familiar with Hoolboom's voice-over narrations – which often teeter precariously between insightful, illuminating observation and overly-pretentious earnestness – might find it noteworthy that his public speaking is equally idiosyncratic: It is a flurry of dramatic fits and starts, nervous interjections and florid theatricality. He is always performing, his "real" opinions, beliefs and insights couched in glazes of metaphor, dry wit, irony and confusion. All this to say that up there on stage, Hoolboom delivered a manifesto, a complaint on behalf of artists that he implored us all never to rectify, for ranting on this subject is the artist's life-blood. He launched into a clever, no-holds-barred deconstruction of the roles of "curator" and "programmer." With tongue pressed firmly in cheek, he effectively analyzed how film and video artists are exploited first by the gatekeepers of theatrical exhibition and now, increasingly, by the guardians of the white cube.



Mike Hoolboom, portrait

The show *The Invisible Man* at the AGYU was Hoolboom's first solo public gallery show in a career lasting twenty-five years that has placed him in the pantheon of Canadian experimental film greats. *The Invisible Man* is a conceptually tight show that rewards multiple viewings and the patience of spectators who remain seated throughout the projections. The three Hoolboom pieces on display demand to be seen from beginning to end (which is of course possible, but not encouraged, by being looped) as they are nothing less than philosophical treatises on the twin worlds of reality and images, the image-world given the short-hand designation of *The Movies*.

IN THE FUTURE, a short amuse-gueule in the gallery's entrance, is both a premonition of what is to come and of what now seems to be Hoolboom's primary interest: the impact of cinema on our psyches and life-worlds. This investigation can be found resonating throughout his work, which takes on other major themes such as the body, memory and history. In a few short minutes, it neatly sums up the questions posed by the show, and uses the evocative, careful juxtaposition of clips culled from narrative films and other sources and original footage to illustrate – either directly or obliquely – Hoolboom's elegiac text, which I will reprint in its entirety:

In the future
Each moment
Will be photographed
Doubled
Our bodies will grow transparent
We will enter each other
Like walking through a door
Until at last
We come to the end
Of the picture world
A world
Where we are also pictures
Our movies and photographs
Will they help us understand
Our last place?
Teach us
How to die?

For Hoolboom, the movies are an immensely powerful and influential force in the way that we interpret our own lives and the very fibre of the world surrounding us. And no one is more attuned to the image-world than Hoolboom, who mock-solemnly describes in *IMITATION OF LIFE* how he was a child engineered to have his entire body be an opening – an orifice to absorb the world's representations – by his father, a mad scientist (this accompanies a scene of Rotwang's lab from Lang's *METROPOLIS*). To approach these work you have to be willing to accept a high degree of polemic: Hitler will be compared to a movie star, our society will be dubbed "the children of Fritz Lang and Microsoft," life and death will be writ large on the silver screen. For Hoolboom, a Person with AIDS, the stakes are immensely high: in a talk at the Art Gallery of Windsor he claimed that the reason so many people are dying of AIDS right now is that they are not part of *The Movie*, they are left out of the realm of representation and consequently might as well not exist. These films can be read as eulogies, and with Hoolboom's romantic temperament, they have a much more lyrical beauty, visual grace and – dare I say it: poetry – than one finds in most other works of essayistic media deconstruction.

In the sublime *IMITATION OF LIFE* – a rich title if there ever was one – Hoolboom's voice-over, spoken here in at least three voices, is subordinated to the narrating role of the written text, which also carries the argument of *IN THE FUTURE*. (Both of these are parts of the feature length anthology *IMITATIONS OF LIFE* from 2003.)

IMITATION OF LIFE begins with a literal representation of the title, a montage of images of human conception, the beginning of a human life mediated through cinematography. These shots herald a haunting evocation of a wide range of compelling – if not exactly fresh – ideas about the cinema and the image-world in general and their effects on consciousness: that the cinema – especially Hollywood – is doing the work that dreams once served; that any imagining of the future from the "species" of film called science-fiction is more accurately a representation of our contemporary society (and that recognizing our already existing dystopia will always be postponed to the future); how we are always engineering a world based on our images of the selves we like to consume and consequently become. Hoolboom suggests that the movies are trapped in an endless cycle, doomed to repeat the same stories over and over again, mourning but never learning, masking the "endless cruelty" that we are capable of meting out on real bodies. This world of fantasies, of lost possibilities and imagined but impossible outcomes, is the only thing that stands between us and "our desire to destroy everything." We can infer that Hoolboom's work is not necessarily an attempt at new stories – his work stays in the domain of recognizable, even conventional forms – but to provide a space of reflection and meditation in the gaps between the images, in their reconstruction in different "fringe" narratives. This is weighty stuff, and the dream-like piece is accompanied by a suitably droning, haunting soundtrack.

The eponymous video installation in the central chamber of the gallery, made especially for this exhibition, begins with a humorous, Dorian Gray-esque conceit that results in a quintessentially Hoolboom double-take. His own, adult male voice claims that we was born an old man and went through life losing wrinkles, getting younger, devolving. Hoolboom is in a curious kind of dialogue with a younger man who claims to be Hoolboom's "writer," repeatedly emphasizing that he wrote the script of Hoolboom's life, that he controls his actions. This writer is the creator of the cinema, the image world. Here the movies are a superficially benevolent but ultimately violently prescriptive medium that initiates us into the world: teaching language, teaching vision, teaching values. We are all born into a script that has already been written for us, and our agency is largely illusory. This piece has more original footage than the others, with time-lapse images of the passing of light in interiors and the shifting of tide water in a harbour. Through these images of light and flow Hoolboom sought to craft a "birth to and as film." The logical end point for this figure born old and getting younger each year is to become invisible, to merge completely with the image world, losing identity within the "ocean of personalities" on offer, and so we are given a montage of scenes from different invisible man films. Through what superficially appear to be kitschy special effects and the low genre of the monster movie, Hoolboom is able to express the total dissolution of spectator/citizen – or is it artist? – into the media to the point that subjectivity is completely wiped out. We all move further and further from awareness, the violence of the image world eroding the awareness and sensitivities we had at birth, represented by Hoolboom as an elderly, weathered figure losing their understanding of the real world as they go through a life scripted by another, the act of "forgetting mistaken for happiness." The most startling moment comes from the seamless insertion of an invisible man's footprints in the snow into some iconic shots of Kane's childhood home in winter from Welles's *CITIZEN KANE*. Overall, however, this piece lacks the same power of the other projections, which could be due to its slightly lazy over-reliance on clips of young 1950's British lad Bud from Terence Davies's *THE LONG DAY CLOSES*, itself a transcendent masterpiece of movies-as-life.

Facing this projection is a silent techno-monolith: three monitors depicting, from top to bottom, a series of leisurely strolling people captured against the background of a luminous blue sky, superimposed images of underwater footage (a motif in *THE INVISIBLE MAN*), medical and science footage (which mirrors the opening shots in *IMITATION OF LIFE*) and others, and, at the bottom, a construction crew at night working on train tracks, illuminated only by the sparks of their equipment and some car headlights against a pitch black sky.

This is perhaps the least successful aspect of the exhibit as textless, voiceless sculptural installation is not really Hoolboom's forte, not to say that he succeeds more with language than with images, but that this monolith seems to insist on a level of importance and meaning that its content does not adequately deliver. It does not contribute nearly as much as the films do, and seems like a concession to the idea of doing something specifically for a gallery setting, when in reality, the works on display would communicate just as effectively in a theatre.

For more information on Hoolboom and access to streaming video of selected works, visit the [The Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art](#).

Jon Davies studied cinema at York and Concordia universities and is now a film and visual arts writer living in Toronto.

http://articles.synoptique.ca/davies_hoolboom/

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With Hoolboom

Animals That Make Pictures: An Interview about *Public Lighting*

by **Tomá Tetiva and Petra Veselá**



An interview with Canadian experimental filmmaker Mike Hoolboom about his recent work *Public Lighting* and related issues, conducted in October 2004 in the Czech Republic

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Written by :
 Tomá Tetiva and Petra Veselá

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Tomá Tetiva: You use many pictures in your movies. How do you choose pictures from the archives – is it rationale choice or intuition?

Mike Hoolboom: I think it's a question of attention. You draw your attention to one part of the image world, or one aspect of the world around you, and events begin to gather around that point. This point could have something to do with sexuality, for instance, and lead you to meeting people who are searching with their bodies. It could provoke coincidences, like when Kenneth Anger was editing his biker movie *SCORPIO RISING*. There was a knock on the door and when he opened it a delivery man was waiting with a package. He signed for it, though it was clearly at the wrong place, and found that he had been given a life of Christ, which he promptly and very usefully deployed in his own film. This is how the harnessing of attention works. Is this rational or intuitive? I think it's a question of necessity. What is required for the artist is to take the next step.

The first three chapters of *Public Lighting* feature portraits of cities and individuals at the same time. Each of these cities were gathered in different ways. In the portrait of composer Philip Glass called *GLASS*, I divided the movie up into five movements, each of which was fixed in a Manhattan location (Central Park, Brooklyn Bridge, subway). The movie begins with photographs, frozen moments, and then jumps into motion. It begins with immigrant life in a series of tenement freezes, and slowly moves out (a radial movement) but also upwards (the city builds and grows).

TT: What about the scenes of Madonna in *HEY MADONNA*? Has she seen the movie? Why did you put it there?

MH: I don't think she's seen it, though it played yesterday in London. While I'm hardly in a position to ask for her pictures, I feel that they surround me, I don't need to find them. When I look out they are already there, looking back at me. They're already my pictures, part of how I imagine the world (like the tree which grows in front of my building, the newspaper boxes perched on the corner). But as someone who sees pictures, I feel this seeing arrives with some responsibility, not simply to digest, but to pose a question. Why these pictures? How do they work? How are they working on me? How else might they work? The globalization of pictures insists that images and sounds arrive in a one-way flow, they come from the place which has money and fills in the holes between a word and its meaning, or a sound and its feeling. Sometimes it's nice to reverse the flow and talk back.

I resettle these well known pictures, writing over them in an act of audio-visual graffiti, shortening, tightening, setting them into different relations, especially connected to AIDS and death. Her dancers are all young and gay (well, maybe one isn't gay) and the threat of AIDS for them is very real. After seeing a very personal text scroll about AIDS, when we encounter the brief montage of a young dancer who appears in a series of quick fade-outs, I think it's difficult not to read this as a premonition of his death, that he is making his last stand here. The mainstream, in other words the globalized entertainment industry, has plucked a moment from a fringe subculture (in this instance voguing) and turned it to its own ends. I'm following a similar momentum, extending this gesture, turning this turn, but towards a very different end. I'm not trying to replace the future with commodity fetishes. I'm offering a place to think about pictures, a new frame in which these pictures can be seen.

TT: What do you think about poetry? I see poetry in your movies. Do you like this principle and why did you choose to making movies, not writing?



from PUBLIC LIGHTING

MH: My heart (a fist wrapped in blood says *CLOSER*) remains with the Canadian poet Anne Carson. Unlike my relation to movies where I see many different things, I am content to read Carson over and again. There is a line from *Beauty of the Husband* which continues to haunt me, and appears in the prelude of *PUBLIC LIGHTING*: "Every wound gives off its own light." Isn't this cinema? Isn't each movie a silver wound issuing pictures, and don't we arrive at the theatre hoping for a glimpse inside this body?

TT: I can see lyrics in your movies which are like poetry.

MH: The impulse might be the same. Not the story which occasions a feeling, but the story of the feeling. If exposition were set in traditional story frames, characters would be required, the necessity of the next because. Resolutions would be adopted, conclusions arrived at. In poetry one is allowed the documentary luxury of exploring a moment, and releasing it from the burden of connection with every other moment. Jean Perret was telling me yesterday about two kinds of memory, the souvenir and the mémoire. The souvenir is the past as it appears in stories, the past which is already a story. The mémoire emerges in places like psychoanalysis, or the cinema, a convulsive, eruptive memory which appears as a fragment, a raw bundle. Jean insists that documentary cinema keep a place for these mémoires, that the task of a movie isn't simply to bundle its audience through to the end, but to stake these fragments out and let them stand there, as raw and undigested fragments if necessary. These unstoried moments might be akin to the poetry you're after.

Petra Veselá: Is it what you are looking for in your movies, to reveal these fragments?

MH: Not just a perfect movie, but a perfect audience. I offer a view on pictures, but try to conjure a place where the audience can make own associations. My movies resist absolute closure, hopefully allowing you to dream your own pictures. The aim is not to have my pictures obliterate yours, but to allow both to move together, in a duet. To grant a place for this mystery, for the large place that is you sitting beside me, and you and you. To grant a place so this mystery can circulate, not in order to reveal itself and be known (my movies aren't detective stories: "let's get to the bottom of this") but to co-exist in our independent singularities.

In a traditional movie they talk about suspending disbelief, forgetting yourself, leaving your concerns behind. This is contrary to the cinema I'm interested in, or the life I'm interested in. The cinema is also life, not an escape from it. Sometimes the pictures I make are a little too full, there's too much to see, and I fully expect people will wander off into their own thoughts, or move alongside (watching themselves watching), not always "following" the picture. For a movie to work, it's not necessary to be forever following.

TT: Do you write a screenplay before shooting?

MH: *PUBLIC LIGHTING*'s opening movement is a portrait of my friend Esma who lives in Amsterdam. We explored the city together, hanging out and sharing our lives. This is how the movie developed, a day at a time, a sentence at a time. Amsterdam is a show city, built for tourists, but there are many areas where visitors never arrive, places she hadn't been for a while. We managed to retrace her loops and familiars (inevitable isn't it?) but also to extend them. Each day I made notes of where we'd been and what was shot (very little in each place, often no more than a brief shot, a minute or less), and I forayed out on my own and made some suggestions, though mostly it was a question of being led. I was the visitor in this movie. In the movie (this chapter is calling *Writing*) she speaks as a writer, which she is, and as someone particularly interested in formal qualities (the shape of language, or in the words of the movie "the six types of personality:" people as shapes.) I tried to shoot through glass and plastic and through light, trying to find these shapes, this body and embodiment. This city portrait is always inhabited, always being framed by the body which encounters it, whether with a camera or not.

A note about the six different kinds of personality: There are a limited number of elements in the world, yet taken in combination they produce a fantastic variety of substances. What I want to offer is a construction zone where these models are appraised, examined, pulled apart, stuffed with pictures then put back into the arena (the frame) for review. How do I look? How do I look at what I am looking at? And in the cinema there is also this question: how do we look? How do we say "we"? At what point exactly does the image on the screen, the life up there on the screen, in the dark, become our life? Us, together.

Is it really possible to say the words, "I love you" for the first time? How many people have said them before? Are they my words or yours? Or our words? At the moment of my most intense singularity, when I am expressing myself, my own desire most fully, I am also saying "We." "I love you." "We love you."

I think we are complicated animals. Animals that make pictures.

TT: How did you like *Kiarostami*'s *FIVE* which we watched yesterday [at the festival]? You probably know this kind of movie via Andy Warhol's work in the sixties, but was it a real movie, joke movie or cult movie? I'm still not sure that I like these long, slow shots – wasn't it finally too static?

Mike Hoolboom: I'm still digesting. *FIVE* arrives from minimal art, trying to clean the room of our attentions, to take away the noise of dramatic expectation and even character, so that we might notice some small moment. To notice a small moment can sometimes be a great victory. What's so risky about Kiarostami's film is that he asks so much from his viewers, his movie is radically incomplete, he sends his child out into the world without arms, and only half a face. The simplest thing to do as an audience is refuse. "No, sorry, this won't do at all. This is no movie, and no child." As an artist he wants to meet us half-way, he doesn't want to fill the screen, but to present instead a place where an image and spectator might meet. Many will take this as provocation. He offers a small picture, a little bit of sound, and then he asks us to fill in the rest. This is a great risk, and as we saw by the response of the many who walked out, it doesn't work for those who retain the expectations of theatre.

For myself I felt the pernicious accompaniment of small questions, moments of yesterday and the day before, the small anxieties which take the place of thought. I am watching them rise up because the movie isn't "taking me away." Instead, the movie allows a place where I can see the noise I create, and understand that it is exactly to escape this noise (which at other times I like to call myself) that I go to the movies. There is a word we use for this experience: boredom.

I felt the two opening shots (of five) in Kiarostami's *FIVE* were unnecessary, but that the last couple were terrific. Once again in the judge's chair, hiding behind "I like" and "I want." The final shot (nearly twenty minutes long) draws the audience (those who are left) into the movie in a very physical way. Both screen and theatre are black, and we are surrounded by the sound, as we would be "in life." We are offered a chance to listen to the frogs singing to one another, and the birds alighting, and the rain storm which clears this chatter, and their return, and then daybreak. (It is also my long night, my day break, Kiarostami offers me only five shots but there is already a journey, a wandering and homecoming, in a word, transcendence.) How much image or life do you need? How much life do we give up when we see a picture (and when do we stop seeing them?) Hard questions from a hard film.

TT: Do you like punk?

MH: Once upon a time. Now I like spare music, I don't need so many notes, I prefer to hear the same refrains for a long time, like William Basinski, or the Australian guitarist Oren Ambarchi or the German pop reworker Stephan Mathieu or the Canadian laptopper Tim Hecker. Punk used to provide a place for my anger, now I get angry without accompaniment.

Just before coming here to Jihlava I caught a suite of concerts from the Touch label in Amsterdam. The headliner was Christian Fennesz, whose *Endless Summer* (Mego, 2001) remains a breakthrough marriage of sweet melodic and glitch electronica. But the night we saw him he was completely out of sorts. He always chose the wrong loop, he picked up the guitar which caused great anticipation (so many of these folks sit numbly by their Apple) but his playing was pedestrian, leading nowhere in particular. But even so there were strains and hints of that sweet sound he is so fine at producing. What he was expressing, in a deeply personal way, was a direct transmission of his feeling as he stood there before us. It wasn't a perfect day and he wasn't going to dress it up for the concert. Heaven doesn't happen on the clock, it occurs sometimes, in between moments, maybe when you're least expecting it. And so these sweet sounds remained as distant memory, a ghost image, haunting the present, the place between us. The concert was a brilliant demonstration of failure. Live in every sense.

TT: Political issues?

MH: It's a deep concern of course, exaggerated through traveling. To see certain moments of American culture repeated wherever I go is distressing. Everywhere the cinema is occupied, so the Czech cinema is a minority in the Czech Republic, the Canadian cinema is a minority in Canada. As Jean Perret said in the closing ceremony, this festival in Jihlava represents a resistance to corporate looking, it creates a different sense of time, a time of reflection between people. And inside this time a different kind of subject may be born.

PUBLIC LIGHTING shows the lives of individuals but not in any direct, expository mode. To change how we say something means that what we say might also be changed. The mainstream offers us not only certain formalized structures of storytelling (ways to imagine our lives) but certain kinds of lives, again and again.

I'm still looking for way to struggle against the empire. A way to say no. My movies, this festival, are both small gestures, hardly able to effect enormous change. There are many questions I have about small. What is a small thing, and how are these small ideas transmitted? In our speaking today, for instance, can we produce pictures with our words that can take root alongside other people's pictures? Isn't this already a hope, not a utopian beginning, a perfect world, but a hope in the grimy, empire filled world of death that we are actually living in?

It's not only about saying "no." It's also about falling in love. When we fall in love we say "yes." I think this can also be a political act. Though not necessarily, it depends, falling in love can be like saying the word God, just the prelude for murder. But it can also mean something else: a rare and beautiful kindness, a new empathy, invented between two people (but why two? Does love come in pairs? Why not five or nine?).

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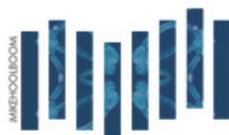
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By Hoolboom

Notes on Two Movies by Dirk De Bruyn

by [Mike Hoolboom](#)



Canadian filmmaker *Mike Hoolboom* remarks on two works by a friend and colleague *Dirk De Bruyn*, an accomplished Australian artist and filmmaker.

TRAUM A DREAM (1994, 16mm)

As soon as TRAUM A DREAM begins I relax a little knowing it's Dirk De Bruyn. There is no mistaking it. As soon as the first few frames flicker by it's like picking up the thread of a conversation left hanging a month ago, a year ago, how many years ago now. The way we express our interiority is manifold, a gesture of the hands, the amount we drink (or don't, so much of who we are lies in what we don't allow ourselves to do), but also here in this frame-by-frame rhythm. I feel Dirk in his choice of colours, the bursting, blooming colour fields applied by hand, part of a hundred sketches laid onto emulsion (where nothing will fix it in memory, where it will operate as part of a flow, a field of meanings, a play of meanings), a dance of colour meets me when I watch this again and it's like hearing him breathe a story beside me, it's him, his Dirk-ness is all bound up in this knowing.

He came from a place that reveled in form and shape, in the pure beauty (can anything be pure anymore?) of light striking emulsion, a cinema of Richters and Ruttmans they used to call "absolute" before we knew better. "Absolute" was another utopia we had to set aside to make room for the lives we were actually living. Dirk never used his movies to shrink himself from the world, to cover himself over with the absolute so that life couldn't touch him. On the contrary: his movies, and TRAUM A DREAM in particular, are all about touch.



from TRAUM A DREAM

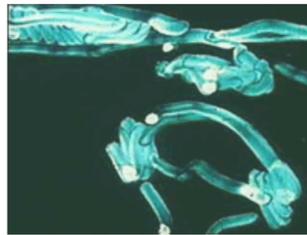
The way his colours arrive rat-ta-tat-tat – one replacing another in a great heave and rush – tells me something about his joy and excitement in expression ("It's you! You're here!") but also carries with it a sadness because it's not lasting, is it? It's rushing on by and never will again, not this way. If it's human it doesn't last – that's part of the song Dirk sings here.

This little ragged bumpy ride of a movie reminds me of Frida Khalo's paintings, and the way John Berger described them, as if she was painting on her own skin: "Eyes you remember only if you shut your own." And especially this: "But the will to share pain is shareable. And from that inevitably inadequate sharing comes a resistance."

This body is wounded, torn and damaged, and he is trying to bind the wound with these pictures. These pictureless pictures. This colour. But he can't help showing the wound as well. He returns to it over and over, but it's not altogether distinct, or clear. It is, above all, not a story which can be told and revisited – instead, it is a mound of sensation, a blinding hurt. This is as much as he can show us, it hurts him to get this far and it's not enough. He knows it's not enough too. At the end of the movie the jumble of signifiers, the torn scraps of language, have congealed in order to form a new poetry. This is what he dares to do: he shows the confusion in its most raw state, before there are sentences, when the mouth can only groan or sigh, when there are colours, not even shapes, not even something that distinct – that's how deep the wound goes. He shows us this world inside the body, where the pain began, and shows how he moves through it, shuffling the parts, cycling and recycling, whispering into his own ear, urging himself not to get stuck there, to emerge, and at last, in a few winning strokes at the end of the film's interminable six minute stretch he arrives at a memory of childhood which he's not allowed to reveal. Especially not to himself. Never that. On the soundtrack Dirk's voice whispers, "He began to remember what had been taken before you, a secret from before, before he knew himself."

ROTE MOVIE (2002, Digital Video)

I remember seeing ROTE MOVIE while Dirk was working on it, while it was a collection of strips hanging limply from the walls. There was hope in the room, and these hopes were being taped together piece by piece. And when it was finished, somehow, we were in a van heading for Ann Arbor and watched it on the State Theatre's impossibly large screen and were thrilled. The private thing, the small thing you rub between your fingers to light your way, sparks up to become us for a moment, our story. And now a decade on I'm watching it again on television so I can write some of these words, but it doesn't belong here. "There is not a place for everyone on television after all" – this is what Dirk's movie is telling me. There are some feelings which can't be televised.



from ROTE MOVIE

It's handmade for one thing, scratched and marked and rough (how did he get it to look so rough?). It's like shaking hands with someone who stumps in telephone polls for a living. And somehow this roughness is married to the cine-projector – they are relying on one another. It's no use trying to imagine it as a video, on television, because it's invisible here, I can't make out a thing. Only when it lights up onscreen does it appear at all, and then it's all I want to see. Why is that?

I think there are some lives, some feelings, which are made possible by chemical analogue cinema. Dirk's ROTE MOVIE, for instance, is a modernist text about nostalgia (the wounds of returning), but something is missing (his family) and so his restless journeying, shown via hand-drawn rotoscope as his sketched out car ventures along the highway, leads him only further afield. On the soundtrack, Dirk's familiar voice whispers inner monologue and conscience. He told me later he had copped this from the Canadian filmmakers who were interminably yakking through their own movies, who used their movies as a pretext for chit-chat, but here it appears every bit his own. These longings and hopes are part of another time. There are still I-wish-you-were-here's. There are still regrets, of course. But not these regrets. Not this family. This is a body born in the light of this time, part of a machine which is already in its last moments now, relishing its final, fatal bloom in rote movies like this one, an elegy for elegies. Another last picture show.

New lives will have to be invented for the computer. New kinds of loss.

One day someone will be forced (out of heartbreak or distress) to look back, and they will find this movie which will be able to speak to them about the way people used to fall in love, the way family used to appear, the way someone got their whole body up into a machine and projected it across a public, from behind their backs, so the light was picking them up along the way, projecting them all up onto a screen where it was our story again. One day this will be our story again.

Mike Hoolboom is an artist working in film and video. He lives and works in Toronto. He is the author of two books: "Plague Years" (1998) and "Fringe Film in Canada" (2001), and has edited books on two filmmakers along with various publications. He is a founding member of the "Pleasure Dome" screening collective, and has worked as the artistic director of the "Images Festival" and the experimental film officer at "Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre". He has exhibited his work in major festivals including Berlin, Rotterdam, Locarno and Nyon. He has enjoyed retrospectives in eight European cities.

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Arthur Lipsett: Lost and Found

by [Amelia Does](#)



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14 Mar 2005
1029 words

Written by :
Amelia Does

Editor:
Michael Baker

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Amelia Does joins the long-overdue assessment of one of Canada's most important, dynamic and underrepresented artists – experimental filmmaker Arthur Lipsett – by re-introducing us to the man and his work.

Arthur Lipsett's films have been screened and admired for decades but there is very little published about the man or his films. In Canadian film schools and universities, his work is studied but there is a lack of literature or analysis with which to supplement screenings. In our academy's neglect of paying Lipsett his dues we have missed out on celebrating a true genius and unique film artist who we should be proud to call our own. 2006 will be the twentieth anniversary of Lipsett's passing and there will likely be at least two documentary films about the artist released for broadcast and festival exhibition. With this growing increase in the awareness of Lipsett's name and films, it would seem now is the time to assess and seriously engage with the work of one of Canada's most important and dynamic artists.

Lost Lipsett

What kind of an artist was Lipsett?

What is Lipsett's place in art history, film history, and Canadian history?

Why have scholars ignored Lipsett's work? Have they ignored it?

"Lost and Found" because Lipsett – in so many ways, both in life and in death – has fallen through the cracks. He is often marginalized, underrepresented and unclassified. Lipsett was employed by the National Film Board of Canada for thirteen years and his films were screened by the Board, in art houses, and schools all over Canada and the world. However, the experimental quality of much of his work makes them difficult to understand in the conventional sense and it becomes equally difficult to appreciate the artist who made them. It is difficult to sum up in words what a Lipsett film is *like*: the viewing experience is almost a spiritual one. Lipsett once said "If I could say it in words I wouldn't be making films." [1] But by speaking to those who knew and worked with Lipsett we can situate the artist first in his own life and times, and then in the broader history of visual art and film.

In 1970, Arthur Lipsett was asked to leave the NFB. Institutional histories of the NFB suggest it was difficult for others to communicate with the artist. Although he was productive, his filmmaking became too personal for many of his colleagues to relate. Many of these individuals have since stepped forward to say they feel the NFB was wrong to push Lipsett away. He represented the NFB at film festivals and was frequently asked to speak at universities and art colleges in Canada and the United States. While the NFB is not to be blamed for Lipsett's quick downfall after his departure, his life nonetheless became unmanageable in the years immediately following his exit. He tried to find work as a filmmaker in Toronto, briefly moved to Victoria, and ended up back in Montreal for the last, rather unhappy, decade of his life. Lipsett committed suicide in 1986; he told his psychiatrist at the time that he "had no creative ideas left, so dying would be a good thing." [2]

And so we have Lipsett, who Donald Brittain called the only genius he ever worked with [3], an Oscar-nominated found footage filmmaker whose films are as fresh and striking now as they were forty years ago. In graduate thesis, Michael Dancsok asks why film scholars ignored Lipsett? He posits that perhaps one reason is that the films straddle the documentary and the avant-garde. Perhaps the complexity and ambiguity of the works is another reason.

Lipsett was schooled in visual art prior to his hiring at the Montreal NFB in the mid-1950s. He was the favourite student of former Group of Seven painter, Arthur Lismer. Under Lismer's tutelage, Lipsett developed into an accomplished sculptor and collagist. His affinity for the three-dimensional later translated in a unique ways to the flattened plane of film. A closer look at N-ZONE from 1970, or his own writings and film proposals [4], provides insight into the ways Lipsett sought to configure a film language comprised of shapes, experiences, and three-dimensional landscapes. He bravely explored his medium. Like the American Abstract Expressionists who transformed painting and exposed the canvas as a flat surface, Lipsett used the frame and screen as a canvas on which he presented collages of alternating, moving images that seem to rotate into the viewing environment of the audience.

Lipsett was educated about avant-garde film, art history, and the early collage artists like Kurt Schwitters. He was particularly influenced by Joseph Cornell's ROSE HOBART (1936) and Bruce Connor's A MOVIE (1958). Lipsett used his own photographs, along with the contents of the waste bins of the NFB as his sculpting materials. Like the German visual artist Joseph Beuys he attempted to use garbage materials to create a new experience for his film audience. He attempted to carry the viewer to a spiritual place. In Lipsett's collage you see a *becoming*, a desire to re-arrange and to transcend.

The Great Artist

So how do we make the argument that Arthur Lipsett is one of experimental cinema's most significant figures? Quite simply, Lipsett's use and re-invention of film language was often revolutionary. Though he remains critically unattended and popularly obscured, he did win several significant awards in his lifetime and the admiration of many luminary filmmakers, specifically Stanley Kubrick, George Lucas and Walter Murch. Lipsett succeeded in turning film on its head, taking new image and sound-image relationships – perhaps often arbitrary ones – to create a deeply personal and dynamic form of expression. He explored metaphysical aspects of the medium, occasionally beginning with refuse and producing profound experience comprised of light and sound.

Lipsett, in his films, proposals and writings, contributed greatly to the exploration of new forms of film language that clearly impacted the era within which he produced much of his work. Furthermore, the energy and technique illustrated in his films is found throughout contemporary visual media practice. Building upon Conner's ideas for found footage collage and his own investigation of sound collage, Lipsett's films achieved an emotional depth and dynamism that may leave the viewer confused and speechless, but never indifferent. We must now hope that we have the suitable perspective with which a proper and penetrating examination and analysis of Lipsett's work and contribution to cinema can begin.

Notes

¹ The narrator of this film quotes Arthur Lipsett in TWO FILMS BY LIPSETT (Donald Rennick , National Film Board of Canada, 1967)

² Dancsok, Michael. "Transcending the Documentary: The Films of Arthur Lipsett", Diss. Concordia University, 1998.

³ From interview with Donald Brittain in BRITAIN ON BRITAIN - PROGRAM 8: KING OF THE HILL, TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE (National Film Board of Canada, 1999)

⁴ Dancsok, Michael. "Notes and Proposals," Canadian Journal of Film Studies 7 (Spring 1998): 47-62.

Amelia Does, a graduate of the Film Studies program at the University of Western Ontario, is a writer and filmmaker who is currently involved with the Arthur Lipsett Project, a collection of written material, a web portal and a documentary film (directed by Martin Lavut / produced by Dennis Mohr) focusing on the filmmaker's work.

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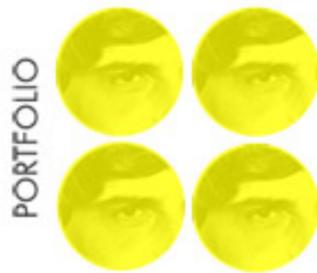


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21-87

A Multimedia Analysis
by [Adam Rosadiuk](#)



Arthur Lipsett, writing on his own film:

21-87 could be described as a fragmented shock-state which the spectator must grapple with, continuously counter-check and question...21-87 is an extreme statement of anxiety by a young filmmaker who considers the film as “transitional”; that is—this film can also be viewed as an arrested moment in the work of an artist, caught in the act of departure from surface reality in the search of an expression on film of heightened [sic] inner states which could transned [sic] experiences of the known world. This desire for transcendancy [sic] can be seen in 21-87. [1]

21-87 exemplifies a form of highly compact cinema that manages to be compressed without being impenetrably dense. My argument for Lipsett’s work is that it tends towards the mnemonic. By ‘mnemonic’ I mean not only that the film makes acrobatic use of our memory, but that the film is designed — and I want to emphasize the word *design* — to be held completely within the head. Not all films can give themselves over to memory so completely. There is something in the opening image of 21-87, a human skull, that cues us to this possibility. The feeling of transcendence Lipsett was after, I’d argue, lies in the pressure, played out over our faces, between the movie in our heads pushing out, and the shock of the image on the screen pushing in. This is a remarkable and hypnotic film. A mnemonic jewel where light is fractured, scattered, but can be held easily in the hand. It’s a movie that should be memorized like a poem.

Note: This project is delayed, but is still in production. Our hope is to present a comprehensive multimedia breakdown of Lipsett’s film in an effort to do our part to help correct the dearth of Lipsett scholarship. You may wish to click on the sidebar to the left to join our mailing list and receive an e-mail update when this project goes online. In the meantime, please enjoy the rest of the edition, and feel free to leave us a note about Lipsett, this project, this edition, or anything else about *Synoptique* you wish to comment on or question. Please use the “Contact Form” link on the sidebar to the left of this text.

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14 Mar 2005

500 words

Written by :
Adam Rosadiuk

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¹ Arthur Lipsett, “Notes and Proposals” (Canadian Journal of Film Studies, 7.1 Spring 1998) 50.

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EXPRMNTL 3 / Knokke-le-Zoute 1963

Flaming Creatures, Raving Features

by **Gerda Johanna Cammaer**

A discussion of Flaming Creatures' exhibition and reception at EXPRMNTL 3 / Knokke-le-Zoute 1963. An effort is also made to sort out the conflict between the competing roles of key figures in the controversy.

The Miraculous One was Raging and Flaming. Those are the Standards for Art.
-Jack Smith, on his idol Lola Montez

Dark-cellar-films in a ghost town [1]

On Christmas day 1963, EXPRMNTL 3 opens its doors. It is the third version of what started as a showcase for experimental film in 1949 as part of a larger international film festival followed by a second more specific experimental film festival in 1958 as part of the World Exhibition in Brussels. In 1963, film lovers, filmmakers, artists, intellectuals, journalists and visitors got together in the Casino de Knokke-le-Zoute for the first true version of EXPRMNTL 3. There were about 500 people in total. They attended the film screenings, concerts, exhibitions, theatre plays, lectures, debates, and everything else that made EXPRMNTL 3 an (adventive taking over the local casino for one week, but extending far beyond it and for long afterwards: 'EXPRMNTL 3 fut un véritable traitement de choc, un magnifique lavage du cerveau, la révélation d'une impressionnante variété d'écritures personnelles qui nous étaient jusque-là inconnues et que l'on découvrait avec passion' (Lethem, 1990: 156).

EXPRMNTL was founded and organized by Jacques Ledoux, who was, at the time, conservator of the Belgian National Film Archive (also known as the Cinémathèque) in Brussels. It is in a class of its own as both a film festival and a cultural manifestation. Or in the words of Simon Hartog: 'If the new Cinema has a European crib, it is Knokke. If it has a mage it is Jacques Ledoux, the festival director' (Hartog, 1969: 24). EXPRMNTL showed, promoted and debated experimental cinema as it was never done before, and would never happen after.

What other festival aspires to so much significance? Cannes and Venice are producer's fairs, dedicated to superficiality and determined by politics. New York and London present more "legitimized" festivals, but their orientation as showcases of other festivals classes them outside of the priestly gatherings that the European spectacles are; they are cram sessions to catch up on the commercial cinema rather than festivals in the vulgar sense. Knokke-le-Zoute on the other hand, stands as the sole gathering of international avant-garde film-makers. (Adams Sitney, 1968: 7).

From its first edition in 1949 to its reversion in 1974, the five editions of this festival were its main meeting place: for experimental filmmakers from the entire world, and there is still no similar events dedicated to this specific 'genre' in film. [3] (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 6; Storck, 1990: 159) In 1963, the festival took place during the week between Christmas and New Year in the Casino of the bourgeois Belgian seaside town Knokke-Le-Zoute, a drafty rainy place with grim grey skies that plunge into an even grayer North Sea. Jonas Mekas, cynically opened a column about Knokke with a comment on the gloomy character of the place: 'I was told that the Vikings avoided Knokke-le-Zoute, a lonely and desolate place to be caught in. I don't remember if I saw the sun during the week. I stayed there. In any case, I am not sure about it' (Mekas, 1964: 111). Henri Storck, a Belgian documentary filmmaker who was also involved with the Belgian Royal Film Archive at the time, explains the reasons for the move to Knokke after the 1958 edition:

Parce qu'on y avait commencé le grand festival en 1947, et que le directeur du casino voulait des événements culturels dans son établissement. Lorsque les recettes des jeux sont déversées à l'organisation de concerts ou des expositions, cela permet certains allègements de taxes. Knokke-le-Zoute est une plage de grand luxe pour les gens aisés et il était très heureux de pouvoir faire de la publicité pour son casino en hiver. Les hôtels étaient disponibles et Ledoux avait un gros budget pour bien loger ces invités. (Storck, 1990: 159)

In short, the casino director seized the opportunity to attract the bourgeoisie to Knokke during the depressing winter season; motivated by tax benefits and free publicity, he happily lent his upper class establishment to an underground spectacle. He got publicity all right!

Flames over Knokke and in its dark cellars

A posteriori, EXPRMNTL 3 is generally considered a tri-ou festival, an event that was still searching for its true calling and shape. Yet it takes on mythic proportions because of the historic, intercontinental confrontation between the American Underground and The French New Wave, two movements competing for and debating the meaning of 'experimental film': Jean-Luc Godard and Jonas Mekas inflamed the discussion over the economic and creative criteria for define experimental film as a genre. But the most explosive topic to arise from the 1963 festival was definitely the film **FLAMING CREATURES** (Jack Smith, 1963). This film and the scandal it caused in Knokke-le-Zoute are still part of its celebrity today, and the film has contributed to the festival's fame (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 19 and 32).

Jack Smith (1920-1989) is a central figure of the American Underground. He plays in some 'classics' of the American Underground and he made about 20 films himself. Flaming Creatures, is a film best known for its many problems with authorities. The film could not pass New York City censorship requirements. In 1964 the police shot down the Gramercy where it was shown, and when Mekas found another venue, detectives turned up to interrupt the screening and seize the film. Mekas was prosecuted and convicted for showing the work (Bordwell and Thompson: 591). Hence Thompson and Bordwell (1994) simply label it 'the most notorious underground movie'. They explain:

In about forty minutes, transvestites, naked men and women, and other 'Flaming Creatures' enact a rape and an orgy. Shot in a jerky, awkward style and harshly overexposed, FLAMING CREATURES created the underground's roughest scandal. After the first screening, the theatre management cancelled all underground shows. FLAMING CREATURES could not pass New York City censorship requirements, so it was screened free at the Gramercy Arts Theatre while donations were solicited. At the 1963 Knokke-le-Zoute festival, the film was denied screening, but Mekas seized the projection booth and ran the film until authorities cut the power. (Thompson & Bordwell, 1994: 591)

What exactly happened in Knokke is actually a more elaborate and cheeky story described with varying details in most of the reports about EXPRMNTL. The common had to do with the daring content of the film. But FLAMING CREATURES, although overtly sexual in content, is not a pornographic work. It is more a contestation of Hollywood aesthetics and, as most critics agree, it convincingly breaks a number of taboos:

Smith was raised on Hollywood kitsch, and the imagery of the 1940s movie monsters, and especially his patron saint Maria Montez – to whom he built an altar and prayed... After a screening of one of her films, he told a friend: 'The Miraculous One was raging and flaming. There are the standards for art.' Smith's own standards for an art film (relation Montez and the whole ethos of film) Orientalis, low-budget intrigues, and what he called 'universal' comic-strip throngs and cardboard sets' into Dionysian revels that were both wild camp and subtle polemic: in upsetting an overflowing apple cart of norms: heterosexuality, narrative, social and sexual and aesthetic repressions. Morris, <http://www.brightlightfilm.com>

FLAMING CREATURES revolts against the sentimental and sexual hypocrisy of Hollywood as Jack Smith saw it: FLAMING CREATURES deliberately manifests what he finds illicit in Marie Montez's and Von Sternberg's films, and through the interference of a plot. When he brings to the fore what has been latent in those films – visual texture, androgynous sexual presence, exotic locations – and at the same time totally discards what holds these films together (elaborate narratives), he utterly transforms his sources and uncovers a mythic center from which they had been closed off. (Adams Sitney, 1979: 353)

As such the film is also a perfect example of Pop-art:

Pop art lets in wonderful and new mixtures of attitude, which would before have seemed contradictions. Thus FLAMING CREATURES is a brilliant spoof on sex and at the same time full of the lyricism of erotic impulse. Simply in a visual sense, too, it is full of contradictions. Very studied visual effects (lacy textures, falling flowers, tableaux) are introduced into disorganized, clearly improvised scenes in which bodies, some shapely and convincingly feminine and other scary and hairy, tumble, dance, make love. (Sontag, 1964: 238)

Nevertheless the film did make some critics uncomfortable at the time. Paul Davay in Beaux Arts, who called FLAMING CREATURES earlier 'un film manifeste' et 'une protestation provocatrice' admits that:

your ma part, je regrette un peu que cet ouvrage ait été avec obstination pour l'exhibition pédérastique en y joignant une note de vulgarité, d'autant plus que Smith n'a pas le talent de Genet. Cependant, ce qui confère à cette entreprise scabreuse sur ton incontestablement artistique c'est le lyrisme baroque dans l'emploi de la caméra et un climat sonore rigoureusement irréalisable.'

He continues on a more personal note:

'Bien sur, provocation pour provocation, je préfère celles des surrealistes selon Breton, axes sur la sexualité féminine. Je n'ai pas l'humour de Cocteau, ni celle de Julien Green, je m'en excuse. Mais, je ne me permettrait pas de juger du trépanement de certaines, même si mes préférences vont ailleurs. (Beaux Arts 1964.)

Jacques Ledoux had discovered FLAMING CREATURES when visiting New York to preview work for EXPRMNTL3, and was deeply touched by it to Brussels, where it stunned the jury and was unanimously selected for the festival. But once programmed, the film raised legal problems for the organizers as it shows the actor's sex organs excessively. At the time (in Belgium) this was enough ground to raise complaints of obscenity and prohibit (future) screenings of the work. Although just a hypothetical problem at this early stage, it would pose a major problem for Pierre Vermeulen, then director of the National Belgian Film Archive and thus co-director of the festival, who in 1963 was also the national Minister of Justice (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 28). In the end, without invoking an 'official' embargo but fearing a possible scandal and far reaching consequences for the Royal Film Archive, its director and the festival, the selection jury decides that FLAMING CREATURES will not be presented to the public. The projection of this film was just too risky, even for an underground festival. In the festival program it reads:

'During its final deliberation, the selection jury decided to state explicitly that the majority of its members recognized the aesthetic and experimental qualities of the film FLAMING CREATURES by Jack Smith (USA, 1963) but had to ascertain unambiguously that the showing of it was impossible in regards to Belgian laws' (Festival Program EXPRMNTL 3).

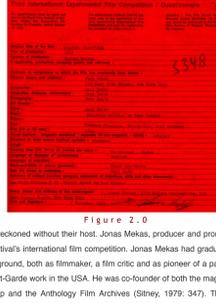


Figure 2.0

Clearly the organizers reckoned without their host, Jonas Mekas, producer and promoter of the film, was also a jury member for the festival's international film competition. Jonas Mekas had gradually become a central figure of the American Underground, both as filmmaker, a film critic and as pioneer of a parallel network for production and distribution of Avant-Garde work in the USA. He was co-founder of both the magazine Film Culture, the New York Film-Maker's Coop and the Anthology Film Archives (Sitney, 1979: 347). That is how he met Jacques Ledoux who invited Jonas Mekas to be a jury member for the international competition (not of the selection jury), which is questionable as the competition included several works of his 'film pool', and because Mekas himself encouraged various people to send their films to Knokke. Mekas was delighted with the selection of FLAMING CREATURES, and the subsequent withdrawal made him furious. The before mentioned text of the official program didn't reassure Mekas who, as soon as he arrives in Knokke, sets everything in motion to preserve and present the banned film.

Jonas Mekas' main argument was that the festival regulations did not mention any legal restrictions, 'only artistic ones, and that once a film was selected it had to participate in the competition. He addressed his fellow jurors, one of that point had no idea what he had happened, and announced his resignation from the jury. He insisted his colleagues on the international jury do the same. In support of his argument he presented them letters from other filmmakers of the American Underground (Brakhage, Breer, Markopoulos, Vanderbeek and Anger) who gave him written permission to withdraw their films if FLAMING CREATURES was not shown (see annex). (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 29) Mekas' actions didn't fail to have an effect. Nervous that the competition jury might indeed step down, the festival organizers tentatively asked the selection committee to replace them.

But the replacements were not needed. Mekas' fellow jury members decided to stay on the job. However, they did issue a statement expressing their opposition to the interdiction of FLAMING CREATURES. Interesting enough, it was also a statement against the pressure from the film's defenders. Moreover, they recommended that the other films participate in the competition and suggested that in the event that they won an award, they refuse it out of protest. In the end, neither Stan Vanderbeek (Pix Bèll Téléphone, 2000 US\$) nor Gregory Markopolos (Pix Baron Lambert, 2000 US\$) actually gave up their films. (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 28 ; EXPRMNTL 3 Festival Documents)

After this preliminary uproar around FLAMING CREATURES, a bigger tumult happened during the festival itself. This saga was recounted in detail by one of its main actors, Jonas Mekas. Once home, he published his version of the riotous events in the Village Voice:

I went to the Third International Experimental Film Exposition as one of the jury members. By now most of you know what happened: that I had to reject the jurorship, that I had to take a stand against censorship. Last week's report in the Voice, although fragmentary, covered some occurrences at Knokke. I myself am not sure about what really happened but I would like to try the least. It was different, dispirited, sad, desperate work. It did differ things to each of us. And there will be conflicting reports about it for years to come, about the Flames over Knokke-le-Zoute; about how we smuggled FLAMING CREATURES into the projection room in the old of DOG STAR MAN, about our screenings in the hotel cellar amidst dusty old furniture, cushions, old newspapers; about how, on New Year's night, we stormed the Crystal Room and took over the projector, how the lights were cut-off, and how I ran to the switchboard room, trying to push off the house detective, holding the door, trying to force the fingers of the bully who was holding the switch.

'People, do you want to see the film?' Barbara Rubin shouted from the projector platform, fighting like a brave general.
'Yes' answered the people.

It is too confusing what went on after that. Much pushing and shouting as the switch changed hands between me and the cop. It was about this time that the Minister of Justice arrived. The riot was getting more and more out of hand. The Minister made an attempt to explain the Belgian law. But then if we asked if there was such a law forbidding the showing of films, he said there was no such law. "Then fuck you", shouted Barbara to the Minister of Justice of Belgium.

We made another attempt to project FLAMING CREATURES right on his face, but the light was cut off again. Later I was told that the Minister of Justice in his speech gave his word that the Belgian laws on this matter will be changed. (...)

Our reactions (by "ou" I mean Barbara Rubin, Paul Adams Sitney and myself) at Knokke-le-Zoute were motivated by our feelings against the suppression of any film or any aesthetic expression. During our press conference, as well as at other occasions, we made it clear that we were not fighting for this particular film, but for the principle of free expression. (...) If Knokke left any lasting impression on me, it is the realization of the dishonesty of artistic "freedom" that is related to clubs, societies, membership groups. That includes the Love and Kisses to Censors Film Society. Some Belgians told me: "we thought that there was no censorship in Belgium. Now, after Knokke, we know that there is." (Mekas, 1964: 111-112).

Questions of censorship and freedom of expression are central to a genre that often deals with taboos, and it will remain an issue for Knokke. FLAMING CREATURES was a major test case for Belgian law (and mentality), but ultimately, with all the improvised screenings in Mekas' hotel room or in dirty basement of the hotel (see above) and with lots of ad hoc press conferences, FLAMING CREATURES became the 'most discussed and most often shown film of the festival' (Broughall, 1964: 14). With all the fuss, everybody was curious and wanted to see the film. Mekas, Sitney and Rubin out decided d'explorer le scandale et c'est une réussite. Ledoux lui-même semble enchanté par la tournure que prennent les événements' (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 30).

Flaming and Raving Creatures

All in all FLAMING CREATURES became an ambassador for the festival (and vice-versa). The film attracted the attention of the public to a kind of cinema and to a kind of festival that was 'different' to any the least. It was different in a formal sense, but also different in content. For Stephen Dwooskin the festival was as such one of the most important stimuli for the spread of independent film in Europe (Dwooskin, 1985: 61). And Garcia Bardon points out, that the whole event also inspired the growth of many non-traditional screenings afterwards (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 32). The improvised screenings of FLAMING CREATURES at EXPRMNTL3 were precursors to the growing underground movement which soon exploited all kinds of (non traditional) locations to screen films: bars, university class rooms, private homes, church basements etc. as Jonas Mekas had already begun in the US. P. Adams Sitney in a conversation with Annette Michelson about EXPRMNTL 5, explains that this actually had the adverse effect on the festival and contributed to its decline. 'In the seven years that have passed since the last competition, the situation of the American filmmaker has changed. The development of the filmmaker's Cooperative has expanded distribution. Then too, many filmmakers have followed the poets and painters into the universities. Film education is beginning to absorb their work into a canon, so that Knokke no longer represents that unique opportunity for the American, not simply to show his films, but to make them known to an international audience.' (Sitney, 1975: 65-66). The first and foremost effect of the tumult caused by FLAMING CREATURES? Though, was actually a major boost for the festival: the next edition in 1967 attracts many more participants, all made curious by the scandal of 1963.

It is worth noting that the story of FLAMING CREATURES at EXPRMNTL3 exists in conflicting (and thus complex and confusing) versions because both Pierre Vermeulen and Jonas Mekas played double roles. As the Minister of Justice at the time, it was official for Pierre Vermeulen and as his role as director of the Royal Film Archive and as co-director of the festival and as film festival, and that is how he became the main target of Jonas Mekas (see the text from his movie Knokke-le-Zoute). In a way they answered back to Mekas' action for 'free films'. Commenting on the bad weather in Knokke, one writer for Les Cahiers du Cinéma is as wonder about the festival as about its setting. He writes that besides never seeing the sea through the casino windows because of the mist, he also didn't see much enlightening on the big screen: 'à part de ou ça, ce reste fu du tout venant. Niluttes' sur routines, on finissait par s'enthousiasmer sur un plan ici, se parte ou là, ou quelques mesures de nulittes' (Weyerings, 1964: 50). Raymond Borde in Poësis (1964) add: 'le salopage était encoire comme la marque du génie' and the films he describes as 'épiphonèmes d'enfant gâté, du Godard encoire plus gamin, plus pérorant'. About Stan Brakhage he writes that he is a clown, who wildly moves his camera around: 'son mépris total pour le maître de cinéaste lui assure l'audience des amateurs "beats". L'appareil se dandine, l'objectif est ouvert, captant n'importe quoi, et cela donne un film' (cited in Garcia Bardon, 2002: 22).

Strangely enough, the regular press likes the selection of works and reacts completely different and more understanding. La Libre Belgique (a major Belgian News Paper) states: 'Une oeuvre expérimentale réussie ne doit pas nécessairement répondre aux critères classiques de la réussite esthétique' (Jean Colette). Courting the harsh comments of the French on Stan Brakhage's work, this journal finds that he definitely confirms his talent and his for every aspect of his work. About WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING he just claims that this is without doubt his best work, that is: 'filmmant fidèlement – et en ce sens ce serait déjà un parfait cameraman' (LJC 4/5 January). This writer does not survive all films that he considers experiments, but nevertheless he seems to have a good take on what is going to hurl the teeth of them.

Xavier Garcia Bardon explains the violent reactions and the specialized press should be discovered' (2002:20). But then contrast between a regular newspaper and the specialized press should have become apparent. The reaction of the Belgian newspaper and the French magazines by this new more radical sensibilities, especially as it is the French Nouvelle Vague which is most under fire by this new more radical film movement. Eliot Stein who writes for Sight and Sound confirms this suspicion at the occasion of the next edition of EXPRMNTL:

Bq. 'Parisian journalists covering Knokke were patrolling in the extreme (in France it is standard practice to treat Belgium as a sort of cultural poor relation), but although this was not a vintage year for Knokke, the breath of free expression enjoyed there would be unthinkable anywhere in Gaullist France, publicly or privately, and least of all, as is in this case, with government sponsorship' (Stein, 1968: 72 and 73)

Overall the festival did get a lot of attention from the local and international press, and most journalists seem to acknowledge its importance as a cultural event. There is also unanimous praise for two future 'classics' of the genre: Kenneth Anger's SCORPIO RISING (1963) and THWICK A MAN (1963) by Gregory Markopoulos. The last also received an award, why SCORPIO RISING didn't, remains a mystery, especially as both the public and the press liked it so much. Eliot Stein in the Financial Times: Kenneth Anger's SCORPIO RISING, (...) was the most passionately discussed film of Eisenstein's IVAN THE TERRIBLE, And thus Mekas rightfully sighs: 'how SCORPIO RISING missed the prize, nobody knows. One of those strange mistakes that juries commit. Together with TWICE A MAN and WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING, SCORPIO was the festival's most discussed, and best received film' (Mekas, 1964:114).

SCORPIO RISING is also a good work of the fact that, in addition to the formalist radicalism, the American underground was produced work with radical content (as issue that will become a hot topic during EXPRMNTL 5 in 1967: 'dans le tribunal SCORPIO RISING, des scènes caquies réalisées par la fascination homosexuelle de Kenneth Anger pour le meurtre et un certain comportement fasciste. Devant ce film au propos efficace, baigné d'un érotisme sombre, la presse est dithyrambique' (natics see mine. Garcia Bardon, 2002: 21). It is worth noting here that SCORPIO RISING, TWICE A MAN and FLAMING CREATURES are all three now recognized as the artistic expressions the homosexual movement's coming of age (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 21, footnote 12). Its representatives were very present and welcome at EXPRMNTL 3, which thus after all, was a festival truly celebrating all kinds of ruptures with conformity, despite its oppressive environment of depressing grey skies and catholic doom.

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To end, many of the awarded films didn't stand the test of time as well as SCORPIO or FLAMING CREATURES did. The prizes at EXPRMNTL 3 were an obvious compromise between conflicting concepts of experimental film. As these debates show how EXPRMNTL 3 was a major meeting place, where experimental film was discussed and defined, what opinions clashed, and offered kind of headings people were ingested. Maybe the best scene in the story, for both Jack Smith and for the history of experimental film in 1963, is its surprise happy ending: FLAMING CREATURES received a unique, symbolic award at Knokke-le-Zoute, which further strengthened its reputation as the most notorious underground film ever: 'Le Prix Spécial du Film Mauds.' (EXPRMNTL 3, Official Program).

Figures

Figure 1.0: Original poster design, by Pierre Alechinsky (from Expmnt. Festival hors normes. Knokke 1963, 1967, 1974, Revue Belge du Cinéma, 43 (Décembre 2002).)

Figure 2.0: Smith's application to compete in the festival (from Expmnt. Festival hors normes. Knokke 1963, 1967, 1974, Revue Belge du Cinéma, 43 (Décembre 2002).)

Notes

¹ For this title I have been inspired by the words of Werner Neufuss about the Experimental Film Festival that Ledoux called it himself from everywhere and the 'ghosts started to dance' (cited in Garcia Bardon, 2002: 6) and the even greater appraisal from Lewis Jacobs in Film Culture at the occasion of the second edition: 'It has been kind of dark-cellar in nearly every country of the world, until called into the daylight of open recognition on the 27th of April 1968'. I owe a great deal to Xavier Garcia Bardon, who has written, as far as I know, the only complete history of EXPRMNTL in 1999 as his M. A. Thesis in History at the Catholic University of Louvain. His work was later published as a special issue of the Revue du Cinéma Belge in 2002, an important source of information for anyone interested in this event: GARCIA BARDON, Xavier. Expmnt. Festival hors normes. Knokke 1963, 1967, 1974, Revue Belge du Cinéma, 43, décembre 2002, 680.

² Since its third edition the International Experimental Film Festival of Knokke-le-Zoute is titled EXPRMNTL, a letter word that already appeared on the official program in 1958. The organizers chose to drop the vowels of the word 'experimental' because it thus can be deciphered in French, Dutch, German, Spanish and English without confusion.

³ I am conscious of the debates about whether experimental film can be considered a genre, but to keep this as how most of the critics of EXPRMNTL write about the films presented at the festival, I decided to keep the term for now. For an in depth discussion of this issue, and a definition of several 'sub-genres' see a. o. SMALL, Edward. Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as Major Genre. Carbondale & Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press.

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In the Audience: One Man's Cinema, Another Man's Confession

An Anecdote about a Cell Phone, a Stan Brakhage Screening, Extra-Cinematic Sound and Experimental Cinema
 by **Brian Crane**



Several years ago, Stan Brakhage came to Montréal to screen a series of his films and give a few talks. He was thoughtful and spoke well about both his own movies and those of others. Most importantly, he was generous in his responses to questions posed by young filmmakers and budding scholars.

This last was most on display when he was taken to task by an audience member for not adopting Mac's iMovie in his own filmmaking practice. Despite being referred to as "you old guys" and asked if "he had even heard of the iMac," Brakhage took the time to discuss the value of new video technologies and then discussed the factors leading him to continue to work with film. His response fell, unfortunately, on at least one set of deaf ears: the student who asked the question had pulled her swim goggles back down over her eyes and returned to her knitting as soon as he began to speak. Brakhage acted like he didn't notice, and I was charmed.

Sitting in Brakhage's lecture I was reminded of how much in an experimental film depends upon the constructive tension between a perception of identifiable authorial intentions and an awareness that these intentions exist only as traces. They cannot be ignored, but they control nothing. At times, they are embedded in the film itself: Jack Smith's voice-over in *FLAMING CREATURES*, Kenneth Anger's ambivalent responses to the sailors in *FIREWORKS*. At others, they're implicit in the extremity of the experiment: Snow's zoom in *WAVELENGTH*, Baldwin's miming of authorial voice in *TRIBULATIONS 99*. The filmmaker's presence and simultaneous absence in these films work like the magnetic field of their meaning: they exert influence, organize insights, and, when resisted spark electricity. This is a key pleasure of the avant-garde with no analogue even in the authored art film.

I experienced the jolt of this field during the second night of screenings Brakhage organized at the Cinémathèque Québécoise, a program that concluded with *THE ACT OF SEEING WITH ONE'S OWN EYES*. After showing a series of shorter films, Brakhage introduced the morgue piece, talked about what had driven him to make it, how it fit into his work at the time, and invited people who felt uncomfortable or overwhelmed to leave at any point. The theatre went dark, the film started rolling, and the audience watched nervously and silently . . . silently, that is, until a cell-phone began to ring.

Only after the third ring did I realize that the sound was coming from my brand-new and first-ever cell phone. Hidden away in a coat pocket under my seat, it was letting me know that a call I was expecting (but had forgotten) had finally arrived. Embarrassed, I decided to play it cool. Voice mail picked up soon enough and a film-appropriate silence once again settled over the theatre. Unfortunately, my brand-new phone battery was exhausted from its brief work, and the phone, programmed to give me a helpful warning signal whenever the battery began to run low, began to beep at regular 15 second intervals.

At this point, I was trapped. I had bluffed my way through the initial call, but now I had a decision to make: do the right thing for everyone else (turn off the phone) or save face. I decided to wait it out. And so, my phone marked time for the last twenty odd minutes of the autopsy film with the steady beat of its death-chirps.

Oddly enough Brakhage had spoken about my cell phone in his introduction. Or at least, he had spoken about the relationship between sound, silence and the cinema. Silence, he said, is never silent. If I don't put a soundtrack on my films, he said, this allows the film to exist in the sound-space of the room. He mentioned John Cage. He talked about the rhythmic sound of a running projector and its connection to the visual rhythm of his images. Then he told us to move when we were uncomfortable, to cough when we needed to, that sound was not a disruption during a screening.

I'm sure, however, that Brakhage would have liked to throw me and my cell phone in a lake. But there was electricity in that room. And in my viewing: at the time because of anxiety, but later from the strange tension between Brakhage's comments and the unexpected appearance of my phone noise. Would my phone have been out of place at a performance of John Cage's 4:33? Isn't in fact, that piece's 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence precisely about the unique quality of individual spaces and their peculiar "silences"? How then could my phone be out of place in a screening situated by Brakhage precisely in terms of Cage's experiments with environmental sound?

Friends in the theatre had figured out that the phone was mine, and I was horrified when they called me on it later; so without Brakhage's introduction, I would have probably tried to forget the whole experience. But his comments transformed my embarrassment into a question: why was the ring tone out of place? I wouldn't want to push this idea too far. I'm still persuaded that my phone was an aberration. And I'm sure that my neighbours agreed. But I'm also unsure. What counts as legitimate environmental sound when the filmmaker's practice—and discussion of that practice—explicitly embraces the unexpected?

That's the magnetic field of the author; that's the electricity it can produce, and its tough to get outside the avant-garde.

Brian Crane is currently a PhD student at Université de Montréal.

COMMENTS:

On dit souvent qu'une oeuvre n'appartient plus à son auteur à partir du moment où il la publie, la distribue, la présente, etc. N'importe quel cinéophile admettra que la valeur d'une oeuvre n'est pas toujours en relation avec la valeur de son auteur, la valeur que son auteur a bien voulu lui apporter et la valeur qu'un public lui donne. C'est que l'oeuvre a sa vie propre, en fait. Lorsqu'elle est terminée, elle se détache des circonstances de sa production et en devient, à mon humble avis, indépendante. Mais je refuse de croire qu'elle est indépendante de toutes les circonstances. Je crois que ce que les cinématographes n'ignorent depuis des années est l'espace non-seulement hors-champs, mais hors-cinéma. Et l'étude d'un film dépend presque entièrement de cet espace, de ces circonstances, dans lesquelles un film est projeté. Le film est un message. Ce message est orphelin, mais il trouve ses parents chez les spectateurs: voir un film, c'est l'interpréter, le réaliser à nouveau, le lire avec ses propres yeux, se l'approprier. Mais cette "adoption" est intimement liée à quantité de facteurs. "Blonde Venus" n'a pas le même impact sur moi si je le vois dans une salle de classe, le dos droit, papier et crayons à la main, et si je le vois chez moi, presque endormi sur un divan beaucoup trop tard dans la nuit. Ma réception, mon "adoption" d'un film dépend en majeure partie des circonstances de sa projection. Allons plus loin. Je me rappelle bien avoir vu "Le Sacrifice" de Tarkovski, dans une chambre close, à la fin de la session dernière, alors que ma colocataire était dans la pièce d'à côté, "Vertigo". Quel menteur je serais de nier l'influence de Bernard Hermann (bien sûr, les appartements mal insonorisés de Montréal) sur ma réception du "Sacrifice"! Les images lentes et hypnotisantes de Tarkovski, les bords de mer, les arbres morts, les maisons en flammes, emballées par la musique envoûtante, onirique, et inquiétante d'Hermann. Et si, lorsque fini, le film n'appartient plus à Tarkovski, comment pourrait-il blâmer ma colocataire de chercher son film avec "Vertigo"? Qui serait-il pour me blâmer, moi, d'apprécier cette nouvelle version? La sonnerie de cellulaire fait évidemment violence aux spectateurs qui ne veulent pas que leur "adoption" soit tragiquement transformée. Mais, soyons honnêtes, l'espace extra-cinématique, puisque c'est ainsi qu'il faut l'appeler, a toujours existé, depuis aussi longtemps que le cinéma existe, et même s'il est parfois assez silencieux et discret pour être oublié, c'est pas la bande, inconsciemment peut-être, qu'il modifie notre réception d'un film. Le cri de cellulaire n'en est que l'éloquente démonstration. Je suis content de voir que cette réalité du cinéma, qui ne mérite plus d'être niée, trouve enfin une voix. Je suis amusé de constater que cette voix met un bip aux quinze secondes. Je suis persuadé que tous les membres de l'assistance à cette projection n'ont probablement plus exactement la même relation avec l'oeuvre de Brakhage, qu'ils le reconnaissent ou non. Ainsi, même si l'auteur du film demeure Stan Brakhage, il n'est qu'un parmi tant d'autres, dont le propriétaire de cellulaire, lorsque vient le temps de lister les auteurs de cette particulière projection du film. Ne me reste plus qu'à abandonner l'étude des films (notion morte dans l'oeuf, impossible, fausse et hypocrite de toutes façons) pour maintenant me consacrer à l'étude de l'expérience des films. Je vous remercie au passage pour ce mot: "extra-cinématique". Je le découvre à peine. Mais l'aime déjà!

By maxim robin on 2005 03 26

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Reviews of and responses to contemporary & canonical experimental cinema



<p>SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]</p> <p>14 Mar 2005 1441 words</p> <p>Written by : Regular Contributors</p> <p>Editor: Michael Baker</p>
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STRONG-PUBLIC LIGHTING (Mike Hoolboom, 2004)

Like most of his feature-length work since the late 1990s, Mike Hoolboom's PUBLIC LIGHTING is a compilation of shorter pieces, this time seven in total. It is particularly coherent in the interrelationship of its themes – the nature of photography, the creation of images, memory and actuality – though diverse in its formal and aesthetic tendencies. Two of its component parts – “Army” and “Tradition” – are some of the strongest works Hoolboom has ever produced during his accomplished 20-plus years as Canada’s pre-eminent experimental media-maker. Of course, one of the evening’s highlights was Hoolboom’s own elusive introduction, which set the stage for an evening of contemplation and introspection.

-James Missen

STRONG-ME AND YOU AND EVERYONE WE KNOW (Miranda July, 2005)

With ME AND YOU AND EVERYONE WE KNOW, Miranda July – the influential feminist performer turned multi-media artist – successfully translates her singular vision, humor and skill into her first feature-length film. MYEYWK picks up on an essentially July theme: people trying to connect to one another emotionally and physically, and weaves it through several interlocking narratives centering around the awkward romance between a struggling performance artist (July) and a recently divorced shoe salesman (John Hawkes). As in her previous experimental videos and performances, July eschews a coherent, linear narrative in favor of a stream of interconnected moments – tender, infuriated, intimate dispatches from the slipstream of everyday life. Also in line with her earlier work is her ability to elevate the ordinary to the spectacular. Here, the ostensibly mundane lives of precocious teenagers, professionals, and even perverts, are made heroic. July’s first foray into feature film is like a primer for those unfamiliar with the artist’s unique voice. In doing so, it simultaneously sets the stage and raises the audience count for many more projects to come.

-Lauren Cornell



from EMPEROR TOMATO KETCHUP

STRONG-EMPEROR TOMATO KETCHUP (Shuji Terayama, 1970)

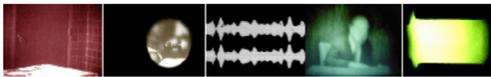
...and what about a fascist nation-state overthrown by a small army of inhumane, sexually mature, adolescent revolutionaries? Pre-teen hustlers drag the beaten body of a senior citizen down a dusty street while a ten-year old boy – our hero with a tickle fetish – waits to be fellated by a middle-aged housewife and an aged granny. Straddling the line between acute political commentary and full-blown surrealism, EMPEROR TOMATO KETCHUP is at once a scattershot, Benny Hill wank-job and the most cutting artistic expression too few will ever bear witness to. Terayama says “Take your pick” and somehow manages to make his position completely ambiguous.

-Michael Baker

STRONG-WATER AND POWER (Pat O'Neill, 1989)

A conceptual wonder for anyone with an interest in Los Angeles history, this collage of ten years worth of time-lapse photography, animation, music, archival film footage, and dialogue utilizes optical printing techniques considered technologically advanced at the time of the film’s original release. O’Neill captures the aesthetic of the Los Angeles landscape by juxtaposing images of the desert and mountains of the Owens Valley – the original source of LA’s fresh water supply following the drying of the Los Angeles River – with a bustling city of cars, skyscrapers, houses, engineers, musicians, artists and celluloid, and tales of colonization and desire. Though it deals with the concrete matter that any resident or scholar of Los Angeles will easily be able to recognize and take to heart, this portrait of LA remains abstract enough to provoke interpretation from any audience.

-Lisa Fotteringham



from PARALLAX

STRONG-PARALLAX (Alex MacKenzie, 2004)

PARALLAX is a stereoscopic projection of found black and white film footage, re-purposed and manipulated through optical printing, set to a phantom electronic score. Combining technical dexterity and improvised image interference with turntable precision and timing, MacKenzie coaxes twin analytic projectors through a wide-ranging repertoire of optical whimsy, including coloured gels, hand-masking, variable speeds, superimposition, flicker and single framing. Foregrounding the projectionist (played by himself) as a visible actor, the film-event has a uniquely performative gesture, tempting and sustaining antique machines on the edge of failure. The outcome: An ephemeral highwire track through the cinematic unconscious and an elegy to 16mm’s passing future. Amid the increasingly commodified, rhythmically challenged, digital age of projected images, MacKenzie exhibits genuine commitment to film’s outmoded apparatus, material fragility and musical cadence. PARALLAX is cinema to be played (with); it requires a different kind of engagement, in which the viewer becomes actively aware of celluloid’s fragile, fleeting magic.

-Brett Kashmere

STRONG-MAYHEM (Abigail Child, 1987)

A film about the spectatorial relationship to film, MAYHEM constructs a spectacle of bodies: bodies on film, bodies referencing film, the marking of the body itself by the cinematic corpus. All the imagery pours forth, dislocating any single, developing narrative, making no strand isolatable. Instead we see the invocation of an urban space in which all these stories are bumping up against each other, as the filmic bodies bump up next to each other, in an erotics of urban modernity. The orgiastic quality of the text is as much cinematic as sexual. This erotics is one in which past and present, the city, cinema, desire and violence, and the gendered body are conflated. Our libidinal territory has been mapped by filmic representation; film is wish-fulfillment, a flickering stage set with our dreams: dreams shaped and reified by these celluloid visions. The body dwells in cinema as it dwells within the city.

-Jodi Ramer

STRONG-FOLLOWED BY... / SUR LES TRACES DE... (Presented by Available Light Screening Collective and Curated by Nicole Gingras)

Montreal’s Nicole Gingras made her third appearance as guest curator for Available Light with an eclectic program of 14 recent Canadian videos – which was perhaps two or three works too long. The evening, split in two parts, was preceded by an extensive bilingual Q+A with audience members on fiction, fable, and varying modes of address in contemporary video. Strong performative pieces included Erica Eyres’ THE HUNTERS GUIDE TO BEREAVEMENT (2002) and Thirza Cuthand’s ANHEDONIA (2001) and worked well alongside Jeremy Drummond’s conceptual SUBURBAN DISCIPLINE (2002). Other works seemed better suited for gallery installation (Adad Hannah’s DINNER IN FLORIDA, 2002) or the animation festival circuit (Victoria Prince’s CLAY GIRL, 2002).

-James Missen

STRONG-EROS AND WONDER (Bruce Elder, 2003)

EROS and (Oh I do)... WONDER!

Long shot of a room, static camera; naked woman on an armchair, legs pulled up, folded in, her arms as protection; a dressed man walks in, makes the woman put both feet down, sit with her legs and arms open, spreading her nakedness, exposing her vulnerability; satisfied, he walks out.

This ONE shot so stands out from the form and content of the film itself – and my reading of it – that I cannot wash away its deranging imprint on my otherwise fond memories of this film.

Bruce, for the feminist experimental-film-crusaders out there, please explain!

-Gerda Cammaer



from PDX_01

STRONG-PDX_01 (Nomlg, 2003)

PDX_01 is a journey along the thin rails that divide realism from abstraction and on into the nether regions of holistic experience that refuse delineations between the two. The subjective spatiality of audiovisual perception becomes a blank canvas: what we perceive as being empty and void is in fact what fills our perceptual environment. And when the lines dissolve and darkness takes hold, our only refuge is a lonely screen emerging from the mist, reminding us that all journeys are little more than smoke and mirrors if we don’t remember all the points along the way.

-Randolph Jordan

STRONG-OPUS PIA #1 (Takagi Masakatsu, 2002)

When we say there’s a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, there’s an understanding that it will never be found. The magic lies in the potential realized by the convergence of opposites that OPUS PIA #1 reveals: rays of golden sunlight refracting through drops of falling rain. And this revelation works through the framework of sound/image relationships striving for a synthesis that highlights the power of fluidity between things ordinarily understood to be separate and unrelated. This is alchemy, and the result is pure gold.

-Randolph Jordan

STRONG-THE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE WORKING (Live performance by Phill Niblock, 06 February 2005 at Latvian House, Toronto)

Pleasure Dome’s Tom Taylor began the night by relaying Phill Niblock’s message to the 100-ish folks in attendance that his audio-visual performance would be close to two hours in length (!). Unfortunately, many in attendance seemed to take that as a cue to make an eventual early evening exit, as the crowd had thinned significantly once the house lights hit our eyes. Nevertheless, those who stayed endured (in a good sense) – three huge screens spectacularized a succession of images of workers in the underdeveloped world; four massive speakers spit out Niblock’s signature tones and groans – a seductive, intricate assault on the senses. “Dense” would be an understatement.

-James Missen

STRONG-LA REGION CENTRALE (Michael Snow, 1971)

The shadow of the camera mount captivates me the most: fleeting glimpses of that which makes the film possible. But when I recognize that I occupy the position of the mounting, I realize that the glimpses I crave are those of myself. This craving is literally realized by the afterimages of the introductory Xs, moving as my eyes move across the first minute of each section of the film. This is an unparalleled reflexive strategy that serves to embed me within the film rather than cultivating a reflective distance. Indexicality has never been stronger than here, and this is what makes the film’s climactic slip into abstraction all the more potent.

-Randolph Jordan

STRONG-MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON (Maya Deren, 1943)

"I had a dream last night. You were inside the house. You were calling my name. I couldn't find you. Then there you were, lying in bed. It wasn't you. It looked like you, but it wasn't."

-Fred Madison, LOST HIGHWAY

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Dr. Vornoff's Corner

The avant-garde meets the grindhouse

by **Dr. Eric Vornoff**

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SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]

14 Mar 2005

1000 words

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"Since I wrote about grindhouse films, these professional beatniks accused me of making the world a worse place. Jonas Mekas, for one, was livid that I'd once left (Sleazoid Express) flyers at a screening of CHELSEA GIRLS at his Anthology Film Archives. To Mekas cohort Ken Jacobs, I was an example of everything that was evil and wrong with movies and the world in general. On the other hand, Ken Anger loved it." [1]

The above quotation from the introduction of Bill Landis and Michelle Clifford's *Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour Through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square* typifies the relationship that the American avant-garde had with the exploitation film industry of the 1960s and 70s. The avant-garde was divided between those who hated the cheap sleazy films made by the sexploitors and the filmmakers whose films were akin to the films of the grindhouses. [2] Although it is generally understood that these two cinemas are at odds with each other, the avant-garde and the sexploitation industry actually share a common space on the margins of the American cinema – a space that thrives upon artistic self-expression and relies upon representations of sexuality to create controversy, address social taboos, and entice audiences.

If we consider the American film industry as a spectrum with Hollywood in the centre, then, historically, sexploitation has occupied a position far off to one side of that spectrum with the avant-garde off to the other. Recent scholarship has proposed that the distance between the high culture of the avant-garde and the low culture of the sexploitation industry is, perhaps, no distance at all. It is as if the linear spectrum of American cinema had its ends bent in towards the centre; joining the two poles and leaving Hollywood as the point off in the distance. For Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider, this cinematic correlation of the arty and the sleazy constitutes what they call American "underground cinema." They describe this cinema as a vibrant domain that defies the broad classifications of mainstream cinema. They contend that the underground film scene is a space where the art-house stands shoulder to shoulder with spectacle-based atrocity, and where experimentation is a regular feature of exploitation. Moreover, by collapsing many of the standard dichotomies that continue to plague mainstream cinema, the underground cinema remains a realm where maverick directors, producers, and production personnel are able to express offbeat forms of creativity, ranging from the artistic to the absurd. [3] In other words, the American underground becomes a space for cinemas that challenge the banality of the mainstream cinema, whether through artistry and experimentation, or spectacle and atrocity. Therefore, according to Mendik and Schneider, the avant-garde and the sexploitation industry come together to form the "underground cinema" through their mutual antithesis to the mainstream and their allowance for individual cinematic expression. For some, it may seem like a bold claim to lump together the personal expression of an avant-garde filmmaker and the questionable aesthetic tactics of a sexploitation director; nonetheless, certain similarities are undeniable.

For the avant-garde, the idea of cinematic artistry is inherent and unchallenged; names like Brakhage, Anger, and Warhol are revered in high culture. However, low culture sexploitation cinema is not without its experimenters and unique forms of cinematic artistry. [4] The American avant-garde has had numerous scholarly and critical examinations, but the sexploitation industry is only now coming under a critical eye. For many years, the films of the sexploitation industry have been relegated to the wasteland referred to as "Bad" film. While this notion is unquestionably pejorative, it also provides a starting point for critical discussion. For example, *Village Voice* film critic J. Hoberman declares that the best bad films are personal, even obsessive works. Some guy (or gal) had a story to tell and he (or she) was going to punch it across by whatever impoverished means were at hand. There is in fact but a short distance between high art and trash, and trash that contains the element of craziness is by this very quality nearer to art. A supremely bad movie, an anti-masterpiece, projects a stupidity as awesome as genius. Hoberman's work by and large seeks to bring the distant ends of the cinematic spectrum together: stupidity and genius, ineptitude and artistry, come together in the margins of cinema. [5]

However, the notion of "Bad" film is misguided, for the films that are relegated to this category are seldom bad. Instead, the cinema at the low end of the cultural macrocosm works on its own aesthetic strategies – strategies that are specifically designed to challenge the mainstream. Yet, this is nothing new; the disruptive qualities of low culture cinema have received recognition in the past. As Surrealist Ado Kyrrou (in)famously declared:

I loathe aristocrats and aristocracies (of class or otherwise). They can keep their Bressons and their Cocteaus. The cinematic, modern marvelous is popular, and the best and most exciting films are, beginning with Méliès and Fantômas, the film shown in local fleaapits, films which seem to have no place in the history of cinema. [6]

To update his words, the realm of low culture cinema, in this case the sexploitation film, can be a point of convergence for artistry, albeit a different form of artistry. For the surrealists, popular cinema was a locus for iconoclasm: a cinema that used transgression to challenge the strictures of taste and the socially acceptable. Kyrrou further states that popular cinema is one where sadism, revolt, eroticism, religion, and melodrama conspire to form a series of problematically linked scenes dependent on the commonplace. For Kyrrou, popular cinema is raised by its rigor to the level of pure involuntary poetry. Furthermore, the absence of scenario, construction, and mise-en-scène bring us some unforgettable images. [7] Hence, popular cinema, even at its lowest depths, can and should be seen as a place where challenges, transgressions, and experimentation become poetic and artistic.

This notion that "Bad," popular, or low films bring a unique artistic expression to the screen is further reinforced in the introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films*. Editors V. Vale and Andrea Juno state that the "low-brow" realm of low budget filmmaking is a site of unfettered creativity. Often, the films are eccentric – even extreme – presentations by individuals freely expressing their imaginations; individuals who, throughout the filmmaking process, improvise creative solutions to problems either by circumstance or budget restrictions. [8] Therefore, outside the restrictions of mainstream cinema, a filmmaker can explore his or her own cinematic desires such as experimentation with lighting, location, editing, and other techniques. Granted sometimes these attempts have not been fully realised, often due to limitations in budget, time and personnel. However, there are moments within the films of the sexploitation industry, which contain not only spectacle and atrocity, but also visual poetry and artistry.

Moreover, the level of free expression and unfettered creativity of the low culture exploitation film is analogous with the avant-garde's attitude to their own experimentation. In a 1961 *Village Voice* article, Jonas Mekas stated:

Oh, the helplessness of the professionals, and the creative joy of the independent film artist, roaming the streets of New York, free, with his 16mm camera, on the Bower, in Harlem, in Times Square, and in Lower East Side apartments—the new American film poet, not giving a damn about Hollywood, art, critics, or anybody. [9]

Undoubtedly, Mekas was referring to filmmakers such as Ken Jacobs, George and Mike Kuchar, and Andy Warhol. Each of these filmmakers found personal inspiration and artistic expression roaming the streets of New York. However, the sentiment expressed by Mekas could easily be applied to many sexploitation filmmakers also working in New York. Filmmakers such as Joseph P. Mawra, John Maddox, and Roberta and Michael Findlay equally benefited from the poetic backdrop of New York City employing either a verité approach or an expressionistic style. But it should be stressed that the artistic designs of the avant-garde and the sexploitation industry were not the exact same things. The strategies, techniques, and styles employed by the avant-garde do not find direct translation into the sexploitation industry, rather the two cinemas should be seen as both employing distinct artistic techniques and experiments that are equal in their contrapositioning to the mainstream styles of decidedly more middle-of-the-road cinemas.

In addition to sharing artistic depictions of urban life, the avant-garde and the sexploitors also shared their ability to shock audiences. And, nothing was more shocking than the human body. Filmmakers of the early to mid Sixties were still living under the spectre of censorship that suppressed any subversive, disagreeable, or sexual imagery. [10] Such restrictions forbade mainstream cinema from depicting nudity, sexual acts and other acts deemed obscene. However, the censorship laws had no power in the underground and filmmakers were happy to play loose and free with sex. As Vale and Juno stated, the low culture film industry often presented unpopular – even radical – views addressing social, political, racial or sexual inequities, hypocrisy in religion or government; or, they assaulted taboos related to sexuality, violence, and other mores. [11] These challenges to social, political, racial and sexual inequities were not exclusive to low art; they were also clarions for the avant-garde. Together, the avant-garde and the sexploitation industry challenged the acceptable levels of sexual representation and frequently came under attack for their representations of nudity, sex acts (simulated and actual), sexuality (straight, gay, and lesbian), and sexual violence.



Jack Smith's **FLAMING CREATURES**

Within the avant-garde, it was unavoidable that the experimentation of filmmakers would eventually lead to the depiction of images of human sexuality. The direct anti-moralistic approach to sexuality by filmmakers like Anger, Curtis Harrington, and Brakhage made it inevitable that sexual acts would ultimately become a natural part of the subject matter. [12] Sex, sexuality, and sexual intercourse began to permeate the film work of the avant-garde: the sexual flautings of Anger's *Leather Boy* collaboration **SCORPIO RISING** (1963), and Jack Smith's transvestite orgy **FLAMING CREATURES** (1963); the verbal intercourse of Warhol's **CHELSEA GIRLS** (1965-67); the actual intercourse of Warhol's **FUCK** (1969) and Brakhage's **LOVEMAKING** (1969). The avant-garde was beginning to fill with writhing bodies, but it was far from an erotic experience.

The avant-garde filmmakers who were experimenting with sexuality were doing so in a purposefully non-erotic fashion. Sexuality was often impressionistic, consciously part of the art form. [13] For example, in **CHELSEA GIRLS** the nudity and sexuality that led to its popularity with audiences is almost invariably arbitrary and unfulfilled. The nudity is made even less erotic as Warhol's concern with camera movement and editing increased, typified by violent zoom shots and flash-frame jump-cuts in picture and soundtrack. [14] The avant-garde filmmakers toyed with sexual tensions by employing cinematic strategies to denude the eroticism of spoken and depicted sexual scenes like Warhol's zooms and jumps, or Anger's disturbing montages of bikers, Christ, and Brando. However, these elements of cinematic artistry did not completely detract from the box office appeal held by any depiction of sexuality.

In the 1960s, some of the more explicit and accessible underground films, particularly Anger's **SCORPIO RISING** and Warhol's **MY HUSTLER** (part of **CHELSEA GIRLS**), crossed over into the commercial sexploitation arena by playing Times Square adult houses. [15] During this time of strict censorship laws, any film that hinted at naked bodies and sex acts could be conscripted into the grindhouse theatres of Times Square. Although the avant-garde filmmakers were seeking social commentaries on sexuality, the sheer fact that there was nudity could bring an avant-garde film into the grindhouses. Conversely, the films of the sexploitation industry relied upon the spectacle of the human body to generate box office revenue. However, the films produced were seldom purely erotic. Rather, these films portrayed sex as fetishistic and sadistic fantasies; unforgettable sexual images that contained a covert social critique of mid-sixties sexual repression. This was a critique that went virtually unnoticed by the moral watchdogs protected by the seedy and sleazy bastions of the grindhouses. For example, Andy Milligan's film **VAPOURS** (1962), a homosexual odyssey set in the St. Marks Baths, was able to elude obscenity charges because of its grindhouse exhibitions unlike Smith's **FLAMING CREATURES** which was left vulnerable to an obscenity bust. A situation, according to Milligan, that would leave the filmmaker vulnerable while furthering Mekas's agenda and fame. [16] The urban grindhouses became a safe haven to exhibit critical and controversial films. For the sexploitors this was day-to-day business, but for the avant-garde it provided protection from antagonistic agendas and attracted new audiences.

It is here with the depiction of the human body, the sexual body, that the avant-garde and the sexploitation industry find their greatest affinity. As Michael J. Bowen comments:

Both [s]exploitation and avant-garde cinemas are generally credited with an ability to shock, a concept now associated importantly with the cinema in its 'primitive' form – spectacular, non-narrative, focused around the body. [S]exploitation films would normally seem to shock audiences by recourse to the obscene – through the representation of things that are visible but which are usually proscribed from emerging into sight. The cinematic avant-garde, on the other hand, seems to shock audiences by manipulating visual experience itself, by playing with tolerances of vision in such a way that the act of seeing becomes a shocking aberrant phenomenon. [17]

Although artistically the mutual representation of sexuality found in avant-garde and sexploitation films differ greatly, it is their strategy of sexual representation as shock and social critique which sets them apart from the mainstream and creates their interconnection in the underground. Moreover, as Bowen notes, it was the shocking representation of sex that brought recognition to the underground. Quoting from a contemporary commentary: "leaving aside a large proportion of underground films which aren't concerned with sex at all, it's fair to say that the most commercially successful underground artists have been those who feature sex prominently in their works." [18] Hence, when critically examining either the avant-garde or the sexploitation industry, it is important to keep in mind that the two, although not directly related, do contain some cinematic approximations.

Notes

¹ Landis, Bill and Michelle Clifford. *Sleazoid Express: A Mind Twisting Tour through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square*. New York: Fireside, 2002. p. xiv

² The Grindhouse was an urban theatre that initially catered to low budget genre films, like Westerns, horrors, and murder mysteries. But by the 1960s, the grindhouses exhibited sexploitation films, including *Nudie Cutsy*, *Roughies*, *Kinkies*, and *Ghoulies*; as well as *Kung Fu* films, *Race Hate* films, *Rough Trade* films, and *Sundry* other ultra-violent fare.

³ Mendik, Xavier and Steven Jay Schneider, eds. *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002. p.2.

⁴ Of all the filmmakers who have worked in the sexploitation industry, the one who has recently received the most critical and scholarly interest is Doris Wiseman. See: Bowen, Michael J. "Doris Wiseman meets the Avant-garde." *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*. eds. Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002; Gorfinkel, Elena. "The Body as Apparatus: Chasty Morgan takes on the Academy." *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and Its Critics*. eds. Xavier Mendik and Graeme Harper. Guildford, Surrey: Fab Press, 2000; Bowen, Michael. "The Many Bodies of Doris Wiseman." *Wide Angle* 19.3, 1997; and Sensomick, Christopher J. "Doris Wiseman." *Senses of Cinema: Great Directors*. <http://www.sensesofcinema.com>.

⁵ Hoberman, J. "Bad Movies." *Vulgar Modernism: Writings on Movies and Other Media*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991, p11. In Hoberman's article he specifically focuses on the works of Edward D. Wood Jr. and Oscar Micheaux.

⁶ Kyrrou, Ado. "The Marvelous is Popular." *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema*. ed. Paul Hammond. London: British Film Institute, 1978, p 68.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 70.

⁸ Vale V. and Andrea Juno. "Introduction." *Incredibly Strange Films*. eds V. Vale and Andrea Juno. San Francisco: V/Search Publications, 1986, p.5.

⁹ Quoted in Schwartz, David. "Visions of New York: Films of the 1960s Underground.". *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*. p. 201.

¹⁰ Censorship laws were gradually enforced from the early 1920s until 1934 when the Hays Office began integrated into the Hollywood system. In the mid-1960s the Hays Office came to an end, and the ratings system that we are familiar with today came into effect.

¹¹ Vale and Juno, p. 5

¹² Curtis, David. *Experimental Cinema: A Fifty-Year Evolution*. New York: Delta Books 1971, p. 176.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 176.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.179.

¹⁵ Landis and Clifford, p 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.50-51.

¹⁷ Bowen, Michael J. "Doris Wiseman meets the Avant-garde." *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*. p.109-110.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.110.

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