

On Scanning Vision

From an interview with Lianne McLarty, published in *Spiral*, 1984.

SEQ CHAPTER \h \r 1 **McLarty:** Your films, and especially films such as *1857, The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, and *Illuminated Texts*, elicit an emotional response that, for some reason or another, people can't deal with. Strong feelings are provoked by a screen that bombards the viewer with four images at one time in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, or by the conflict created by the tension between wanting to read the text that we see and wanting to listen to the text on the soundtrack of *1857*. In *Illuminated Texts*, we have the same sort of thing: the image, a text over the image, and a soundtrack that sometimes muffles the voice-over narration. I find the experience of these films disconcerting - in fact, an emotional drain. But it must be said the experience is a highly charged one. One is required to respond to your work on an intellectual and on an emotional level at the same time.

Elder: The dominant cinema constructs a viewer who feels in control. It usually employs a narrative that operates by first eliciting and then satisfying a desire; that desire can be the desire to see or to learn or to possess. People in the audience are presented with a scene that, for some reason, they find intriguing and want to learn more about; they want to see the heroine who piqued their interest. The narrator will satisfy that desire by providing us with a close-up. This process of arousing then satisfying desire can proceed on an intellectual level too - at least on the level of desire for knowledge; films can elicit the desire to know what, for example, motivated a certain incident, or who it was who performed a certain action and, after arousing that desire, can then satisfy it. That the film satisfies the viewer's demands makes the viewer feel that he is in control. Furthermore, that viewer is safely positioned outside the narrative - he looks in upon it but never really enters into it - and yet, at the same time, he feels he actually regulates the flow of information that it provides. So he is both inviolate and powerful.

Now this image of the viewer is consistent with the liberal, technological view of the individual as autonomous, private, with a being that is God-given, natural, and whose parts are wholly harmonious with one another. The viewer of *1857, The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, or of *Illuminated Texts* is a viewer whose various parts are not congruent with one another. His intellectual faculties are controlled by different events than are his sensory faculties, his auditory faculties by different events than are his visual faculties. The viewer of my films is constructed partly by language, partly by visual images, partly by what he hears; his various parts are not congruent with one another. Such a fractured viewer feels he has lost control and is threatened by this loss. In such a condition, one experiences two reactions of which, though they trouble our viewer, he is, nevertheless, unaware. What psychoanalysis terms secondary process thinking involves making distinctions between fantasy and reality; between what is now, what was before, and what will be after; between foreground and background; between one element within the spatial field and another.

Now it is demonstrable that people who are psychotically regressed make these distinctions in unorthodox ways or fail to make them at all; they represent space to themselves differently than most people of our culture do, for example. It is likewise demonstrable that people from different cultures have differing mental representations of space. These findings, among others, have led me to conclude that the spatial system founded on Western "Renaissance" perspective is highly arbitrary; there is nothing "scientific" or "natural" in the so-called naturalistic, perspectival system that we've

inherited from the Renaissance. It's just one among many systems of spatial representation - all of them quite arbitrary - and is no more true to the world than any other system. We pretend that it's a scientific system of representations that describes the world as it really is, justifying our belief by noting that such scientific devices as lenses and cameras obscura and pinholes produce similar images and that the structure of such images can be expressed in terms derived from Cartesian geometry. I believe that if you were to examine the spatial field of a "regressive perception," you would discover that its spatial field contains objects which are not sorted into background objects, mid-ground objects, and foreground objects; which are not distinguished as being important or unimportant; in which all objects have an equal claim for attention; in which there is no focusing that selects objects and places them at the center of attention and relegates other objects to the periphery. A perception of this sort is not an organized gestalt; it is, rather, a perception created by scanning a number of elements, giving all an equal weight. I believe this is what an infant's perceptual field is like. Through the use of structures which contain a number of elements and give none of them priority, I have, in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom, 1857 (Fool's Gold), Illuminated Texts and Lamentations* tried to evoke such a "scanning perception." To use language reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari, this schizophrenizes the spectator/auditor/reader and induces in him (to use appropriate mechanistic terminology) experiences for which no means of representation can be found. This, by the way, is why I reject arguments that Michael Cartmell has raised about the nature of my work. I don't think the appropriate model to use in analysing my work is that of paranoia; the structures of my films operate by evoking schizoid responses. I must admit, though, he did have some interesting things to say - but that's off the topic. The spectator/auditor/reader of the films I just mentioned is invited to attend to sounds and images that are not arranged into background/foreground relationships, for the various elements all have an equal weight. The perception elicited resembles "primary process perception."

McLarty: I think that has a lot to do with the feeling a viewer of your work has that these structures are highly arbitrary and that you, the maker, are in complete control. The opening of *Illuminated Texts* I find particularly interesting in this regard; it depicts you and your assistant, that is, the filmmaker and his assistant. Thus it articulates an allusion to the process of filmmaking. To take the idea to another level, it depicts a teacher and a student - there's an element of self-reference to that. Finally, there's the reference to your control over the action; the film won't begin until you give the go-ahead, by clapping your hands. When you get up to answer the door, the camera just goes astray and crashes into things. The implication is that without your physical presence, the creative process "goes off the rails." It needs you, and without your presence, becomes destructive rather than creative. Too, a high degree of control over your image-material is evident in *1857*. Likewise, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* foregrounds the notion of the construction of imagery by using multiple images.

Elder: Nearly everyone has pointed out that the three films you have just mentioned are apocalyptic films. And they really are consistent with the traditional view of apocalypse as the denial of the world around us and the accession to the realm of the imagination. Now this denial of the ordinary reality and the accession to the realm of the imaginary the Romantics saw as fundamental to the creative process. So, agreeing with what you say, I find these aspects of my films so distressingly traditional. My ideal film, however, would be one in which imagination plays no part at all; it would be a film made solely by

nature herself. I have tried to find strategies that would afford the opportunity for such films to come into being, but I always end up meddling in the process.