

## Responses to a survey from *Millennium Film Journal*

1) The five works of cinema, listed in no particular order, that have most influenced my own practice

- 1) Michael Snow's *Rameau's Nephew*.
- 2) Stan Brakhage's *Murder Psalm*
- 3) Andrew Noren's *Huge Pupils*
- 4) Bruce Conner's *A Movie*
- 5) Ed Emshwiller's *Relativity*.

Three other films that fundamentally changed how I think about film are Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (and indeed all of Bresson's films), Jean-Luc Godard's *Wind from the East*, and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler - ein Film aus Deutschland*.

The five films I believe have had the greatest impact on the development of experimental film in general:

- 1) Marie Menken's *Glimpse of a Garden* and *Go! Go! Go!*
- 2) Stan Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night*.
- 3) Gregory Markopoulos' *Gammelion*
- 4) Michael Snow's *Wavelength*
- 5) Hollis Frampton's *Magellan Series*.

2) The work that, given the ideal combination of opportunity and resources, I would most want to make:

A synchronized three-screen work, presenting, on the left panel, medical imagery (surgery and internal organs), on the middle panel, a couple making love, and on the right panel, a combination of galactic images and body images – a little like Jim Davis' remarkable film, *Death and Transfiguration*.

3) The aesthetic and social aspect I most regret about the current state of experimental cinema is the willingness of the majority of image-makers over the past two or three decades to lend additional strength to those forces whose collusion is required to sustain the hegemonist power of modernity. The evident sign of this willingness has been the embrace of forms which invite discursive understanding. This has remade "art" into the mirror image of advertising – a phenomenon from which even the so-called "vanguard art" has not been immune. Indeed this conversion has become especially apparent in that "vanguard art" which has its grounds in the concept of transgression.

More generally, I find dismaying that makers seem less concerned with discovering the power of the force-fields created as elements are juxtaposed with one another than in offering amelioratist messages. Few take any appreciable interest in the dynamics of the apprehensive act that subtends all aesthetic experience – an act that, although it is not simply sensuous perception, does not have as its first stage a phase involving a conceptual translation of the work of art but depends, rather, on an immersion in the immanent movement of the work, in the play of tension that arises out of the interaction in the various elements that constitute the work. Too many, in my view, attempt to understand artworks by subsuming them under pre-formulated concepts, and not through the reflective ideas that emerge out of the immediate experience of the exact configuration of elements in the work – or out of as immediate as possible an experience of the work's exact configuration. Few appreciate that the coherence of meaning in a

work arises from the exact constellation of the work's details, and is experienced by tracing the precise configuration of the work's material elements. Attention to the particular details that compose any work can provide spectators with the energies and the means — even with the words and images, if they are conceived as vehicles of particular energies — to keep moving from one detail to another, from one element to the next, from one aspect of the form to the next. This sort of attention, which strives to be, as much as possible, unregulated by any principle or law outside the work itself has become widely unpopular. The vogue for understanding a particular work through preformulated principles has taught people that the first phase of understanding a work of art is to translate it to concepts, and in the translation much of the raw power of the sensuous particulars is eliminated. This translation has contributed to reducing experience to its nadir.

4) Each year I spend about \$Can 30 000 (about \$US 20 000) of my income from teaching on filmmaking, and, depending how broke I am after paying my filmmaking bills, maybe \$Can 5 000 on associated travel. Some years, perhaps one in four, I receive a grant from one source or another for filmmaking, and that year I spend perhaps another \$Can 15 000 on filmmaking. From this work, I receive about \$Can 2 000 in income. It's a tough go, but I consider myself very fortunate.

5) The following exhibition spaces I believe have done the most to foster and nurture the experimental film. They are listed in no particular order

- 1) Anthology Film Archives (New York City)
- 2) Museum of Modern Art, New York City.
- 3) Kino Arsenal (Berlin)
- 4) Innis Film Society / The Art Gallery of Ontario / Cinematheque Ontario
- 5) San Francisco Cinematheque
- 6) Millennium Film Workshop (New York)
- 7) Lightcone (Paris)

Leaving aside such seminal figures as Maya Deren, the critics, curators and administrators who, in my opinion, have done the most to foster and nurture the avant-garde cinema (listed in no particular order) are: P. Adams Sitney, Jonas Mekas, Robert A. Haller, Steve Anker, Jim Shedden and Susan Oxtoby, Fred Camper, Paul Arthur, Edith Kramer, Alf Bold and Ulrich and Erika Gregor (*Stationen der Modern im Film* would alone recommend Gregor for consideration), Larry Kardish and Jetta Jensen, Bruce Posner, Yann Beauvais, Jean-Michel Bouhors.

6) I agree that the experimental cinema has been a remarkably vigorous artistic practice. I would argue, to be sure, that the first seven decades of the twentieth century witnessed a renaissance — a flowering of the arts the like of which had not been seen, in the West at least, since the Quattrocento — and that this renaissance was geographically more wide-spread and involved a larger number of artists than the Italian Renaissance. Furthermore, I would argue that the avant-garde film had a place of special importance in this wondrous flowering of the arts: for many of the most adventurous artists, the cinema itself represented an ideal, to the conditions of which the other arts might aspire.

It would be tempting folly to attempt to encapsulate in a single principle the extraordinary importance to twentieth century arts and culture of the wide-ranging endeavour in which we are engaged. Nevertheless, I shall risk appearing absurd, and make the attempt: Modernity has attempted to consolidate and to extend the domain of its hegemony by reducing experiencing experience to a single mode, that of discursive reason. That same process has diminished,

indeed all but eliminated, our sense of the sacred, and so made humans even more needy. It has fallen to the arts to cleave to those faculties that modernity has rendered vestigial – to cleave to the faculties that modernity has disenfranchised – to make a place for the holy, a place to which the departed gods might return. It has fallen to the arts to remember, however vaguely and imprecisely, that which has been lost in this era in which the dispensations of Be-ing occur within the mode of the technological. The arts preserve the memory of another mode of thinking and of being, a mode of consciousness outside the domain of discursive reason.

I have attempted to trace in my writings an especially potent form for liberating non-discursive thought. This form depends upon the energy that is transmitted between elements when one concrete particular is set alongside another. The constation of concrete particulars is what is involved in the paratactical form of construction that Ezra Pound helped to make central to twentieth-century poetry. In *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* Pound himself described the method as “a form of super-position,” in which one particular is on top of another. This form of thinking is animated by experiencing the charge that passes between the elements in the particular constellation. It is attentive to details of the configuration of elements, for it understands that elements, in their interaction, are not inert but pass charges between them. This form is what Ejzenstejn and Vertov analyzed as montage. It is what Theodor Adorno commented on when he discussed “*exacte Phantasie*,” what Walter Benjamin commented on as a constellation: “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. They do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena, and in no way can the latter be criteria with which to judge the existence of ideas . . . [here] phenomena determine the scope and content of the concepts which encompass them, by their existence, by what they have in common, and by their differences,” Benjamin wrote in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*. It is what the surrealists explored through the accolation of incongruous elements that characterizes so many of their works.

The idea of a form of unity in which the function of concepts is to group phenomena together, but not to regulate them, seems to me signal – it might even be an antidote to the poison of post-modernist claims about the unreality of nature. Perhaps it has the capacity to set aright, after two thousand years, the inverted relation between Concept and particular, between Intellect and reality, between Abstraction and the material form that Plato’s philosophy made normative in Western philosophy. Unlike a totality, a configuration of this sort is not constituted as a conceptual unity. The particular is grasped not as a mere instantiation of some universal essence; rather thought itself becomes a configuration of ineluctably specific concepts. By stubbornly cleaving to the details of the particular, we persuade the phenomenal sphere to yield up its truth, and the everyday becomes estranged and thereby ever more remarkable.

This is what I advocated in “The Cinema We Need” when I asserted we need a cinema of experiences, not a cinema of ideas – a cinema that would use concepts as laws that govern images. This receptive and responsive consciousness, a consciousness that arises out of the accolation of concrete particulars, is a form of thinking that the avant-garde cinema has done much to develop. It is in the cinema’s nature to engender a response through mustering a phalanx of particulars, and its having nurtured this mode of consciousness is, to my view, that cinema’s greatest glory. For this form of awareness had an important role in stimulating the artistic renaissance that the first seventy years of our century witnessed.

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