

Paracinema, Flicker and 3D. Interview with Ken Jacobs (by François Bovier and Adeena Mey)

Décadrages: There is a close interplay between your filmic work and a reflection on the construction of historical (and ideological) modes of representation. In a way, we could speak of a fruitful tension between conceptual ideas and performative gestures, involving the body. You coined the term “paracinema” to describe your performances with the Nervous System. Could you explain why you used the term "paracinema", and be more specific about its relationship to expanded cinema? And is it possible to determine which comes first, performance or conceptual stand, film practice or “apparatus theory”?

Ken Jacobs: My work had been sidelined in Gene Youngblood's "Expanded Cinema" but that wasn't in my thoughts when I wished to signify an essential difference with what I was doing and traditional cinema. Normally the cinematic gesture was complete before it got to the projector, the work was "in the can". But the projector -or more than one- would now be the site of creation for The Nervous System and eventually The Nervous Magic Lantern. What had been filmed would be expanded on in performance in ways unforesee-able either in life or on the film-set, and -actually- at my machines until I saw onscreen the effects in movement and in depth illusion coming from the particular instance of arrangement at that moment: of the two projector beams and how they met and commingled onscreen, of the particular placement of the projectors in relation to each other. The screen image suggested physical changes that I could make to effect things and surprise myself; no matter how much rehearsal, at that moment I would be happily blundering into the unknown, feeling my way.

All of it unforesee-able in the visual experience of viewers; if we were going to the movies to reflect on life this would be a hopeless departure from the familiar. But the ongoing adventure we, Flo and myself, invited people to would be an immediate one, happening to the viewer while attending to the screen there and then.

I spoke of paracinema to signify a change in procedure from the expected. Parallel to standard procedures, another way. This in turn implied other rewards than the expected ones for watching and in my case entirely sensory ones (including a toying with physical balance!). As a working artist I am anti-conceptual, something okay and probably necessary for the study of art but in no way fit to replace it, just as a primer on sex is a poor substitute for sex. Museum and gallery going these days offers too many sex manuals.

To get what I offer, one has to be ready to shove off into the unexpected and to adapt to the impossible. Our senses are on automatic. They can be wondrously misinformed. As long as we recognize the fact of misinformation there are other planets to visit right here and now with cinema-art as the ticket.

Modesty! above all in what we think we know.

D: You just mentioned a sensory mode of vision that toys with physical balance, which might imply a sense of disorientation. Could you expand on this? What effects are intended and what are those resulting from your performances? And could you illustrate precisely these processes in the context of your *Nervous System* and *Nervous Magic Lantern* pieces?

KJ: Will get back to it but to begin; Jesus or rather the Jesus business didn't push the cross on folks out of nowhere; it's inherent to the mind to seek and determine the vertical-horizontal. Fact is the historical crucifix was more like a swastika, no? Movement, excitement, is always a matter of risking balance. Cezanne the tongue-tied made exciting pictures by tipping verticals in distinction to his upright borders or picture frames. The pictures embody this tension. I've wanted to *get off it*, upright squaresdom, to make works that operate in time -like music- to only settle into balance at the end. Hard, looking through the camera, not to immediately compose and then have to shove from one pictorial static point to the next. Movie stories create suspense keeping audiences off-balance with slowly answered questions. Not enough, not cinema but only photoplay.

D: To get back to your performances with the *Nervous System* and the *Nervous Magic Lantern*, could you tell us more precisely about your work with photoplay, chronophotography and early cinema? Against the Jesus business, what is the function of the flicker in creating imbalance, within the work and in the viewer?

KJ: The flicker... is something, in my experience, discovered by Alfons Schilling of Vienna, living nearby in Manhattan in the 'Seventies and the one other person I knew doing interesting work in 3D. We traded discoveries and sometimes equipment. I had been inducing depth in early 2D imagery via a shuttle mechanism I'd contrived that alternated (very slowly changing) views of adjacent frames in an identical pair of film-prints. The fascination with beginning-cinema had begun with TOM, TOM, THE PIPER'S SON towards the end of the Sixties. It led to the even earlier period when capturing of life-movement had been the interest and before story prevailed. I felt myself one of the guys, the inventors, with the difference that my interest had shifted to the brain itself and its capacity for being wonderfully mistaken. Alfons, working with stereo color slides, was attempting to get my depth effects via alternation (without spectacles) with a simpler device, the spinning shutter, set before a 3D slide projector. The flicker slipped in! And unimaginable depth events commenced to happen. He enjoined me to make use of this earliest of shutter designs and my work with film advanced. The shuttle had created rather flat figures in deep space but now one saw (and moved and reshaped) rounded, voluptuous figures. I did one work called SCHILLING in honor of the gift and then got working on XCXHXEXRXXIXESSX from a silent French stag film.

The flicker *melds* frames. The tick-tock is gone and a single 3-dimensional scene in movement comes into being, ongoing for as long as one wishes; meaning, moving in whatever direction the projectionist chooses for as long as desired, a sustained going without necessarily going anywhere. Try that in real life. How the two pictures were overlapped onscreen, differences in size, perhaps in verticality, created wonders. It was an alternate development of early picturing-of-life to the advent of the movies.

Alfons was pissed at the response to my work with the spinning shutter, not that it really amounted to much of anything -it was still a desolate experience with the entire subject of 3D ("stupid 3D") off the table, and forbade me from further use of it, or tried to. It was too late. I have since patented the black interval for digital use and have made many digital work employing the technique.

D: How are your interest in being mistaken through the workings of the brain and its effects on the body related? On the one hand, we could almost speak of mental imagery, at least subjective images; on the other, the shock of the flicker amounts to vertigo, even epilepsy. Could you comment on that relationship or opposition?

KJ: We, Flo and myself, some we know, have become friends of flicker. Phil Solomon spoke of the difficulty of adjusting to non-flickering cinema and it does look terribly limp. If one fails to pick up on the story, nothing could be more boring than the inactive surface of standard cinema. I make films that I'm interested in and I have no experience of vertigo or epilepsy. There are indeed brains that can't take it, and I lost one fine student by failing to give warning. The artist must, however, proceed by her/his own experience and music exists despite there being deaf people.

Hitchcock/suspense, but only within the realm of story. "What will happen next" is not my favorite aspect of cinema -while the present escapes us or can't be gone through fast enough. We seem to be unable to get enough of *The End*. I want suspense viscerally. It is the state of tension as we approach or pull away from balance. Sustained balance is dead balance, we need and we admire balance put at risk. It's hard to admire someone rooted to the ground, although working in stereo I find myself getting more empathetic to trees with their different relationship to time.

My cinema suffers from constant balance, perhaps because I come out of painting and not music, where one can toy with pursuing the tonic. I can't look through a camera without achieving a balanced frame, so my new work is doing something about that. I sort-of can imagine a cinematic work achieving its balance in time, the first frame eventually shored up by the last, and I can also say to hell with balance. It's been a bugaboo making for a lot of boredom. Unless subject matter is reduced to light/no-light, noise/no-noise as in Kubelka, the only semblance of order to be achieved is the familiar, that which seems familiar that is, less LSD.

As for mistakes in perception, they can be fun, and can teach us modesty as regards knowledge of *The Truth Of Things*. Religion is bullshit, philosophy falls short. Simple luck in being born with a constitution that can take a steady diet of bewilderment gets us through.