Syncretism and Metamorphosis: Montage as Collage

The harmonic opposites of synaesthetic cinema are apprehended through syncretistic vision, which Anton Ehrenzweig has characterized as: "The child's capacity to comprehend a total structure rather than analyzing single elements... he does not differentiate the identity of a shape by watching its details one by one, but goes straight for the whole."[9] Syncretism is the combination of many different forms into one whole form. Persian tapestries and tile domes are syncretistic. Mandalas are syncretistic. Nature is syncretistic. The majority of filmgoers, conditioned by a lifetime of conventional narrative cinema, make little sense of synaesthetic cinema because their natural syncretistic faculty has suffered entropy and atrophy.

Buckminster Fuller: "All universities have been progressively organized for ever-finer specialization. Society assumes that specialization is natural, inevitable and desirable. Yet in observing a little child we find it is interested in everything and spontaneously apprehends, comprehends and coordinates an ever-expanding inventory of experience."[10]

It has been demonstrated that all species of life on earth that have become extinct were doomed through overspecialization, whether anatomical, biological, or geological. Therefore conventional narrative cinema, in which the filmmaker plays policeman guiding our eyes here and there in the picture plane, might be described as "specialized vision," which tends to decay our ability to comprehend the more complex and diffuse visual field of living reality.

The general impression that syncretism, and therefore synaesthetic cinema, is empty of detail or content is an illusion: "… it is highly sensitive to the smallest of cues and proves more efficient in identify-

[9] Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1967), p. 9.
[10] Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 13.
Press, 1967), p. 9.

ing individual objects. It impresses us as empty, vague and generalized only because the narrowly-focused surface consciousness cannot grasp its wider more comprehensive structure. Its precise, concrete content has become inaccessible and 'unconscious."[11]

Synaesthetic cinema provides access to syncretistic content through the inarticulate conscious. Similarly, it contradicts the teachings of Gestalt psychology, according to which we must make an *either/or* choice: we can choose either to see the "significant" figure or the "insignificant" ground. But when the "content" of the message is the relationship between its parts, and when structure and content are synonymous, all elements are equally significant. Ehrenzweig has suggested that syncretism is "Gestalt-free perception," and indeed this must be the case if one expects any visual "meaning" from synaesthetic cinema.

Paul Klee, whose syncretistic paintings closely resemble certain works of synaesthetic cinema, spoke of the *endotopic* (inside) and *exotopic* (outside) areas of a picture plane, stressing their equal importance in the overall experience.[12] Synaesthetic cinema, primarily through superimposition, fuses the endotopic and exotopic by reducing depth-of-field to a total field of nonfocused multiplicity. Moreover, it subsumes the conventional sense of time by interconnecting and interpenetrating the temporal dimension with images that exist outside of time. The "action" of Dog *Star Man,* for example, could be an entire life-span or merely a split second in the inarticulate conscious of Stan Brakhage. I stress "action" as commonly understood in the cinema because synaesthetic syncretism replaces montage with collage and, as André Bazin has observed, "montage is the dramatic analysis of action." Bazin was perceptive enough to realize that "only an increased realism of the image can support the abstraction of montage."[13]

Synaesthetic cinema subsumes Eisenstein's theory of montage-as-collision and Pudovkin's view of montage-as-linkage. It demonstrates that they were certainly correct but didn't follow their own observations to their logical conclusions. They were restricted by the con-

[11] Ehrenzweig, *op. cit.,* pp. 19, 20.
[12] Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye* (London: Lund Humphries, 1961).
[13] André Bazin, *What Is Cinema*? trans. Hugh Gray (Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1967), p. 39.

sciousness of their times. Synaesthetic cinema transcends the notion of reality. It doesn't "chop the world into little fragments," an effect Bazin attributed to montage, because it's not concerned with the objective world in the first place. The new filmmaker is showing us his feelings. Montage is indeed an abstraction of objective reality; that's why, until recently, Warhol did not cut his films at all. But synaesthetic syncretism is the only mode in which the manifestations of one's consciousness can be approximated without distortion.

There's no conflict in harmonic opposites. Nor is there anything that might be called linkage. There is only a space-time continuum, a mosaic simultaneity. Although composed of discrete elements it is conceived and edited as one continuous perceptual experience. A synaesthetic film is, in effect, one image continually transforming into other images: metamorphosis. It is the one unifying force in all of synaesthetic cinema. The notion of universal unity and cosmic simultaneity is a logical result of the psychological effects of the global communications network.

If montage is the dramatic analysis of action, a film without classic montage thus avoids at least the structural element of drama inherent within the medium. All that remains to avoid drama entirely is to exclude dramatic (i.e., theatrical) content by making content and structure the same. Warhol's films are not dramatic, and neither are films at the extreme opposite end of the spectrum, synaesthesia. The classical tension of montage is dissolved through overlapping superimposition. For example: we have shots A, B. and C. First we see A, then B is superimposed over it to produce AB. Then A fades as C fades in. There's a brief transitional period in which we're seeing ABC simultaneously, and finally we're looking only at BC. But no sooner has this evolved than B begins to fade as D appears, and so on.

This is a physical, structural equivalent of the Hopi "present manifested" and "present manifesting" space-time continuum. It's the only style of cinema that directly corresponds to the theory of general relativity, a concept that has completely transformed all aspects of contemporary existence except traditional Hollywood cinema. The effects of metamorphosis described above become more apparent if shots A, B. and C happen to be of the same image but from slightly

different perspectives, or with varied inflections of tone and color. It is through this process that a synaesthetic film becomes, in effect, one image constantly manifesting.

And finally we're forced to admit that the pure art of cinema exists almost exclusively in the use of superimposition. In traditional cinema, superimposition usually gives the impression of two movies occurring at once in the same frame with their attendant psychological and physiological connotations coexisting separately. In synaesthetic cinema they are one total image in metamorphosis. This does not imply that we must relinquish what Eisenstein called "intellectual montage." In fact, the conflict-juxtaposition of intellectual effects is increased when they occur within the same image. Fiction, legend, parable, myth, traditionally have been employed to make comprehensible the paradoxes of that field of nonfocused multiplicity that is life. Synaesthetic cinema, whose very structure is paradox, makes paradox a language in itself, discovering the order (legend) hidden within it.

Stan Brakhage: *Dog Star Man*

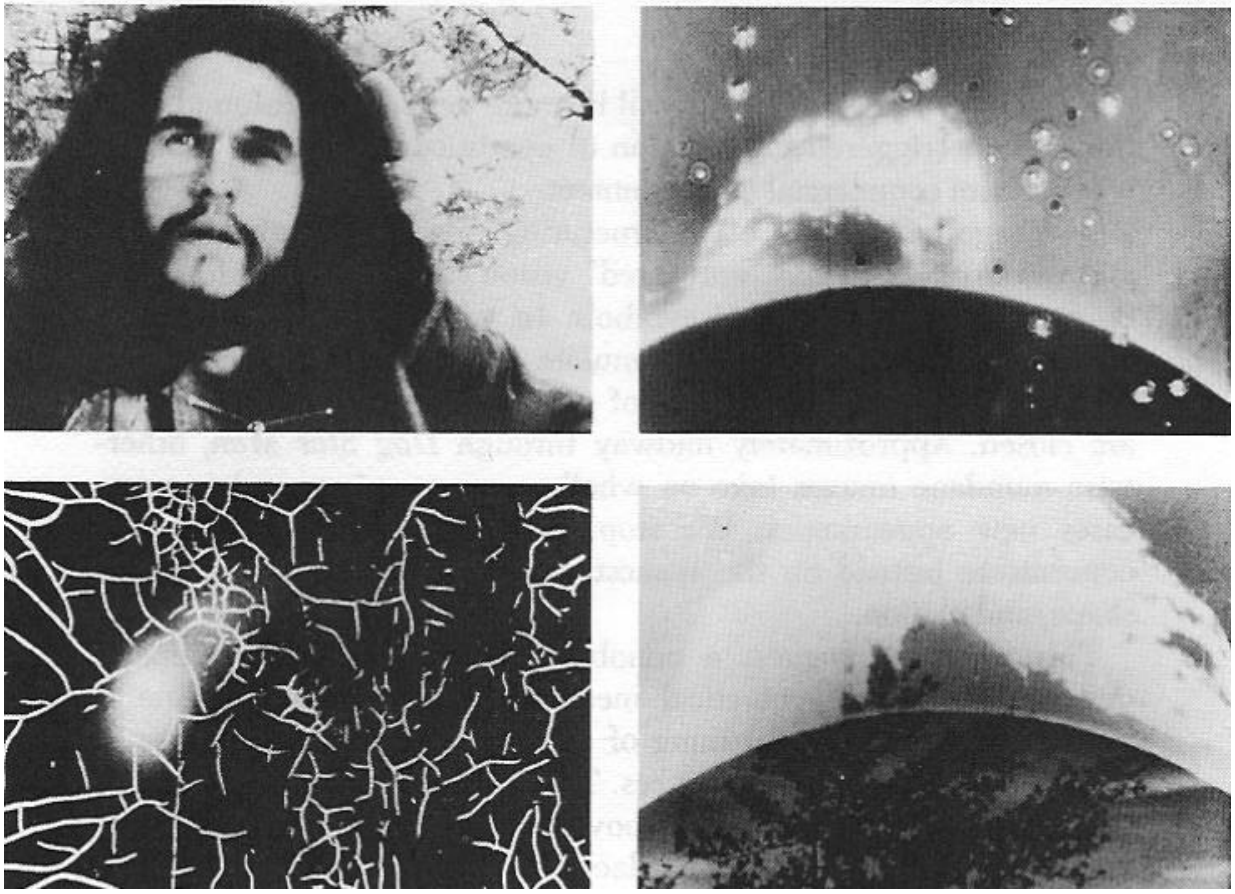
Dog Star Man is a silent, seventy-eight-minute film divided into *Prelude* and *Parts One* through *Four.* It was shot in 1959-60 and edited during the next four years. *Prelude is* an extremely fast collage of multiple-level superimpositions and compounded images that emerge from a blurry diaphanous haze and slowly take form, only to be obscured by other images and countermotions. We begin to discern specific objects, patterns, and finally a motif or theme: the elements of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water; a childbirth; a man climbing a mountain with his dog; the moon; the sun throwing off huge solar prominences; lovemaking; photomicrography of blood vessels; a beating heart; a forest; clouds; the faces of a man and a woman; and literally thousands of other images to appear in the rest of the film.

These images exist essentially autonomously and are superimposed or compounded not for "dramatic" effect but rather as a kind of matrix for psychic exercise on the part of the viewers. For example, over an expanding solar prominence we might see Brakhage's leonine face or a line of snow-covered fir trees in the mountains of Colorado. We are not asked to interpret or find "meaning" in these

combinations, though vastly rich experiences are possible. When the images emerge from a hazy blur, for example, we are not asked to interpret this as the creation of life or some similar dramatic notion, but rather as a perceptual experience for its own sake, in addition to the contextual relationship of this image to the rest of the film, or what Eisenstein indicated by the term "intellectual montage."

Whereas *Prelude is* a rapid barrage of multiple overlays, *Part One* is superimposed sparingly, concentrating on interface relationships between individual shots. However, every effort is made to subdue any effect that might be considered montage. The shots fade in and out very slowly, often fading into a color such as red or green. The fragments of *Prelude* fall into place and an overwhelming sense of oceanic consciousness evolves. We begin to realize that Brakhage is attempting to express the totality of consciousness, the reality continuum of the living present. As his solitary figure climbs the snow-covered mountain, we see images of man's world from the microspectrum of the bloodstream to the macrospectrum of the sun, moon, and universe. Both time and space are subsumed in the wholeness of the experience. Superimposition is not used as an economical substitute for "parallel montage"—indicating simultaneous but spatially separate events—for spatio-temporal dimensions do not exist in the consciousness. Brakhage is merely presenting us with images orchestrated in such a way that a new reality arises out of them.

When we see the sun superimposed over a lovemaking scene, it's not an invitation to interpret a meaning such as cosmic regeneration or the smallness of man in the universe, but rather as an occasion to experience our own involuntary and inarticulate associations. The images are not symbolic, as in *The Seventh Seal,* or artfully composed as in *Last Year at Marienbad.* Brakhage does not manipulate us emotionally, saying: "Now I want you to feel suspense" or "Now I want you to laugh" or "Now is the time to be fearful." This is the ploy of the commercial entertainer: an arrogant degradation of cinema, using film as a tool for cheap sensationalism. This is not to say that spatio-temporal experiences, or suspense, humor, or any emotion cannot be found in synaesthetic cinema. Quite the contrary: because we're dealing with our own personal associations, emotion is



Stan Brakhage: *Dog* Star *Man.* 1959-64. 16 mm. Color, black and white. 78 min. "The totality of consciousness, the reality continuum of the living present."

guaranteed. And it will be more genuinely profound than the formula-triggered gratification of conditioned response that we receive from commercial entertainment.

Brakhage has spoken of "restructuring" vision through his films, and often refers to the "untutored" vision of the child before he's taught to think and see in symbols. In what he calls "closed-eye vision," Brakhage attempts to simulate, by painting and scratching on film, the flashes and patterns of color we perceive when our eyes are closed. Approximately midway through *Dog Star Man,* otherwise mundane images take on wholly new meanings and in some cases new appearances. We stop mentally labeling images and concentrate instead on the synaesthetic/kinaesthetic flow of color, shape, and motion.

This is not to suggest a nonobjective experience. The images develop their own syntactical meaning and a "narrative" line is perceived, though the meaning of any given image may change in the context of different sequences. This constitutes a creative use of the language itself, over and above any particular "content" conveyed by that language. (Wallace Stevens: "A new meaning is equivalent to a new word.") The effect of synaesthetic cinema is to break the hold that the medium has over us, to make us perceive it objectively. Art is utter folly unless it frees us from the need of art as an experience separate from the ordinary.

Wittgenstein has described art as a game whose rules are made up as the game is in process. The exact meaning of words (images) becomes known only in the context of each new statement.[14] E. H. Gombrich, on the other hand, demonstrates that objective realism also is a game, but one whose schema is established prior to its use and is never altered. Artists and society thus learn to read the schema as though it were objective reality. But since the language itself is not used creatively, the viewer is seduced beyond form into an abstract content with an illusion of being externally objective.[15] Thus the viewer is captive under the hold, or spell, of the medium and is not free to analyze the process of experience.

[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1963).
[15] E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion,* The Bollingen Series XXXV (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1960).

Brakhage expressed this concept with respect to his own work: "Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which must know each object encountered in life through a new adventure of perception. Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and gradations of color. Imagine a world before the beginning was the word."[16]

[16] Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision," ed. P. Adams Sitney,*Film Culture* (Fall, 1963).

Synaesthetics and Kinaesthetics: The Way of All Experience

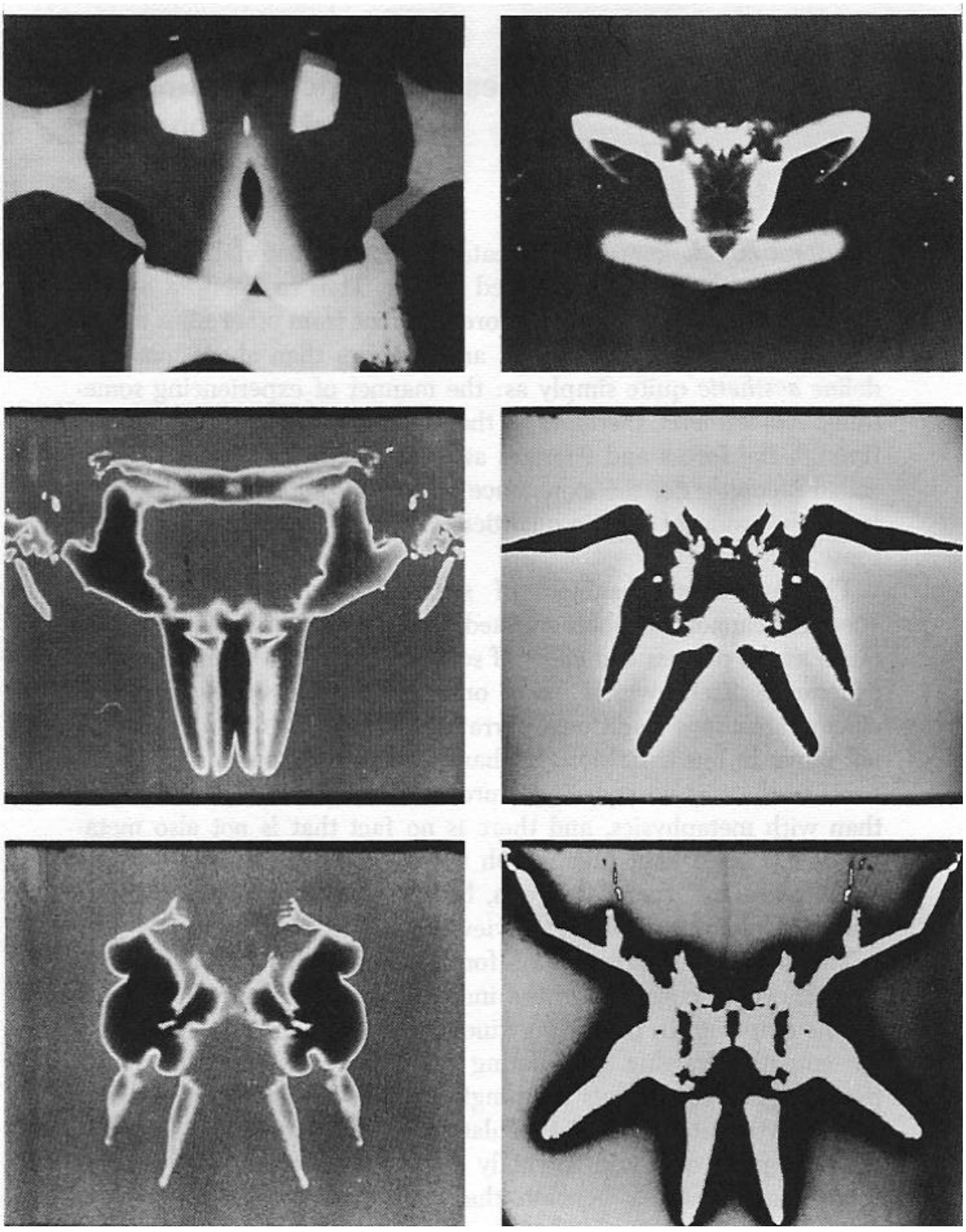
The term *kinetic* generally indicates motion of material bodies and the forces and energies associated with it. Thus to isolate a certain type of film as kinetic and therefore different from other films means we're talking more about forces and energies than about matter. I define *aesthetic* quite simply as: the manner of experiencing something. *Kinaesthetic,* therefore, is the manner of experiencing a thing through the forces and energies associated with its motion. This is called *kinaesthesia,* the experience of sensory perception. One who is keenly aware of kinetic qualities is said to possess a kinaesthetic sense.

The fundamental subject of synaesthetic cinema—forces and energies—cannot be photographed. It's not what we're seeing so much as the process and effect of seeing: that is, the phenomenon of experience itself, which exists only in the viewer. Synaesthetic cinema abandons traditional narrative because events in reality do not move in linear fashion. It abandons common notions of "style" because there is no style in nature. It is concerned less with facts than with metaphysics, and there is no fact that is not also metaphysical. One cannot photograph metaphysical forces. One cannot even "represent" them. One can, however, actually *evoke* them in the inarticulate conscious of the viewer.

The dynamic interaction of formal proportions in kinaesthetic cinema evokes cognition in the inarticulate conscious, which I call *kinetic empathy.* In perceiving kinetic activity the mind's eye makes its empathy-drawing, translating the graphics into emotional-psychological equivalents meaningful to the viewer, albeit meaning of an inarticulate nature. "Articulation" of this experience occurs in the perception of it and is wholly nonverbal. It makes us aware of fundamental realities beneath the surface of normal perception: forces and energies.

Patrick O'Neill: *7362*

New tools generate new images. In the historical context of image



making, the cinema is a new tool. *7362* is among the few purely cinematic images to evolve from this new seventy-year-old tool. All the visual arts are moving toward the cinema. Artists like Frank Stella or Kenneth Noland have been credited as significant painters within the last decade because they kept the game going. One is impressed that they merely discovered new possibilities for a two-dimensional surface on stretchers. But the possibilities are so narrow today that soon there will be nowhere to go but the movies.

Pat O'Neill is a sculptor with a formal background in the fine arts. Like Michael Snow, also a sculptor, O'Neill found unique possibilities in the cinema for exploration of certain perceptual concepts he had been applying to sculpture and environmental installations. *7362*, made some five years ago, was the first of many experiments with the medium as a "sculptural" device. The term is intended only as a means of emphasizing the film's kinetic qualities.

7362 was named after the high-speed emulsion on which it was filmed, emphasizing the purely cinematic nature of the piece. O'Neill photographed oil pumps with their rhythmic sexual motions. He photographed geometrical graphic designs on rotating drums or vertical panels, simultaneously moving the camera and zooming in and out. This basic vocabulary was transformed at the editing table and in the contact printer, using techniques of high-contrast bas-relief, positive/negative bi-pack printing and image "flopping," a Rorschach-like effect in which the same image is superimposed over itself in reverse polarities, producing a mirror-doubled quality.

The film begins in high-contrast black-and-white with two globes bouncing against each other horizontally, set to an electronic score by Joseph Byrd. This repetitive motion is sustained for several seconds, then fades. As though in contrast, the following images are extremely complex in form, scale, texture, and motion. Huge masses of mechanical hardware move ponderously on multiple planes in various directions simultaneously. The forms seem at times to be recognizable, at others to be completely nonobjective. Into this serial, mathematical framework O'Neill introduces the organic fluid lines of

Patrick O'Neill: *7362*.1965-66.16mm. Color, black and white.
11 min. "Human and machine interact with serial beauty,
one form passing into another with delicate precision."

the human body. He photographed a nude girl performing simple motions and processed this footage until shebecame as mechanical as the machinery. At first we aren't certain whether these shapes are human or not, but the nonrhythmic motions and asymmetrical lines soon betray the presence of life within a lifeless universe. Human and machine interact with serial beauty, one form passing into another with delicate precision in a heavenly spectrum of pastel colors.

John Schofill: *XFilm*

The young Berkeley physicist John Schofill has exhibited a thorough and creative grasp of kineticism as regards the representational organic image. Although *XFilm* is a spectacular example of montage-as-collage, it does not ignore the conflicts of volume, scale, mass, and graphic direction that Eisenstein found so central to film form. Other physiological montage effects postulated by Eisenstein—metric, rhythmic, tonal, overtonal—also are used by Schofill not for any result that might resemble montage, but rather to generate an overpowering sense of kinaesthesia, or rushing dynamic force.

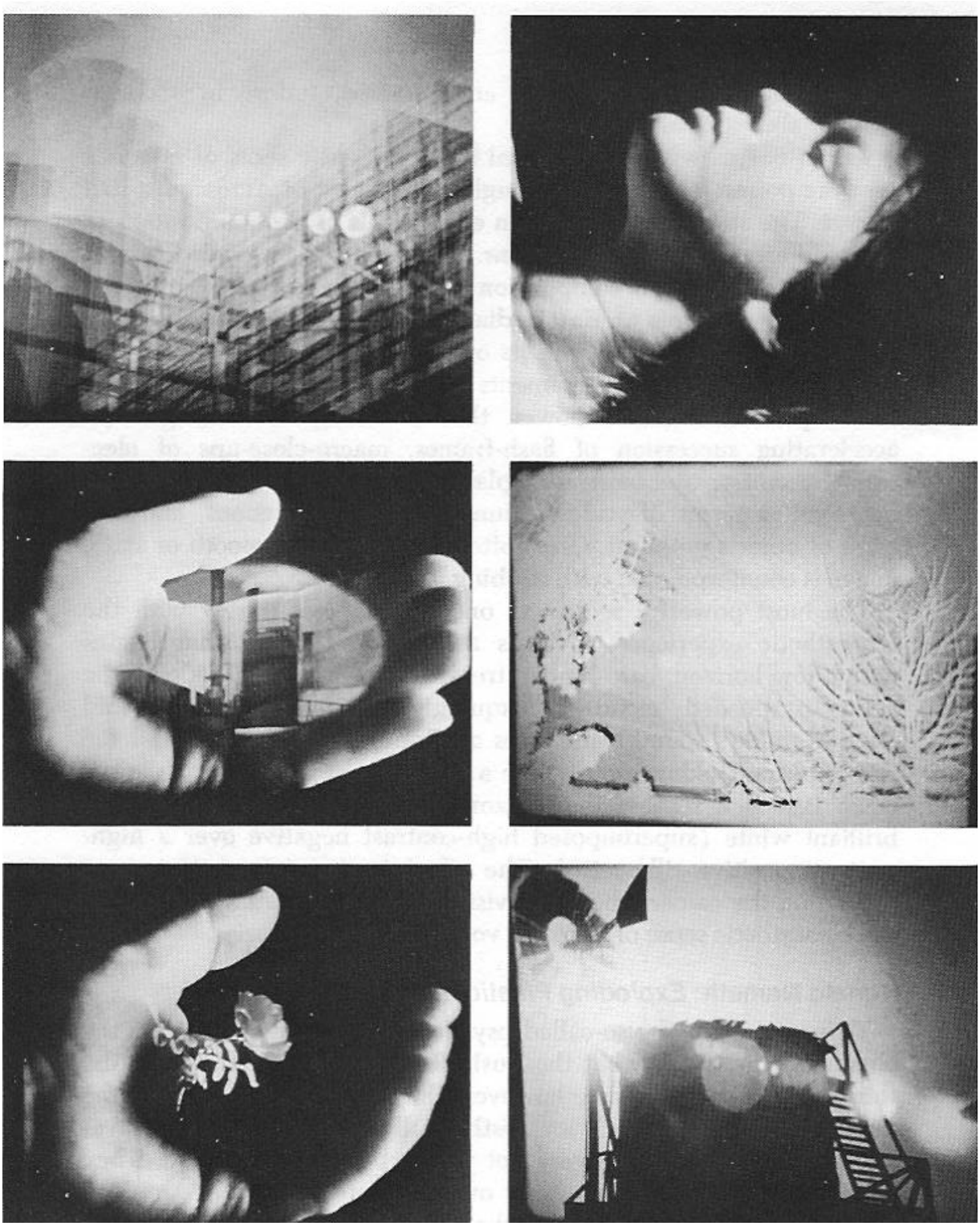
Through precise manipulation of individual frames and groups of frames, Schofill creates an overwhelming sense of momentum practically unequaled in synaesthetic cinema. There is almost a visceral, tactile impact to these images, which plunge across the field of vision like a dynamo. Yet they are punctuated with moments of restful quietude. It is a composition of point-counterpoint, the better to accentuate kinaesthetic content.

Schofill has developed a method of A-B-C-roll editing for superimpositions, adapted from Karel Reisz's methods of cutting single footage.[19] It's a rhythmic concept, that is, a shot is divided into definite kinetic "beats." The kinetic activity begins, reaches a middle point, and ends. In triple superimpositions, the corresponding

[19]Karel Reisz, *The Techniques of Film Editing* (New York: Hastings House, 1968).

John Schofill: *XFilm.* 1967.16mm. Color. 14 min. "Images which plunge across the field of vision like a dynamo... punctuated with moments of restful quietude."

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rhythms of each piece of film are matched, fading in and out without abrupt cuts.

XFilm begins with quiet formal imagery: static shots of factories spewing poison into the sky, strongly reminiscent of Antonioni's *Red Desert.* The structures are seen in eight levels of superimposition of eight different zoom-lens positions. The sound track explodes with an extraordinary tape composition by Berkeley composer William Maraldo, a synthesis of East Indian and rock music that perfectly counterpoints the visuals with its own sense of dynamic thrust. We see a series of tableau statements in which a nude girl's cupped hand opens to reveal a flower, then a factory. Then begins an accelerating succession of flash-frames, macro-close-ups of electronic circuitry, tree bark, dirt, plants, human flesh. Each image is balanced in terms of scales, volumes, masses, directions, and textures of objects within it. Quite often a particularly smooth or static image is counterpointed with strobing flash-frames.

The most powerful sequence, one which deals purely with the kinaesthetic experience, involves a time-lapse sunset that begins with a low horizon, bare-limbed trees, and a blue sky. Suddenly the action is speeded: clouds and squiggly jet contrails rush up and over. Maraldo's sound track takes a spiraling, droning dive and the sun appears, sinking rapidly like a comet from upper left to lower right. Just as it reaches the horizon the foreground and trees flash brilliant white (superimposed high-contrast negative over a high-contrast positive silhouette). The effect is stunning. A train, approaching the camera, becomes visible as the sun fades, continuing the kinaesthetic sense of dynamic volumes and trajectories.

Ronald Nameth: *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*

To some extent the so-called psychedelic discotheque was to the cinema of the sixties what the Busby Berkeley ballroom was to the thirties. In a larger sense, however, they are by no means in the same class either socially or aesthetically. The Berkeley extravaganzas, like Hollywood, were not places but states of mind. They generated their own ethos, their own aesthetic. They answered an obvious need for escape from the dreary hardships of the times. Life imitated art. But thirty years later Hollywood had degenerated to the point that it was, at best, an imitation of an imitation. The spate of

"hip" Hollywood films, which began to appear after 1966, was about as socially significant as the various Kennedy assassination "souvenirs," and was proffered with the same exploitive street-vending zeal. Like all commercial entertainment, these films were *about* something rather than *being* something, and so were the discotheques they imitated.

Andy Warhol's hellish sensorium, the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable,* was, while it lasted, the most unique and effective discotheque environment prior to the Fillmore/Electric Circus era, and it is safe to say that the *EPI* has never been equaled. Similarly, Ronald Nameth's cinematic homage to the *EPI* stands as a paragon of excellence in the kinetic rock-show genre. Nameth, a colleague of John Cage in several mixed-media environments at the University of Illinois, managed to transform his film into something far more than a mere record of an event. Like Warhol's show, Nameth's *EPI is* an experience, not an idea.

In fact, the ethos of the entire pop life-style seems to be synthesized in Nameth's dazzling kinaesthetic masterpiece. Here, form and content are virtually synonymous, and there is no misunderstanding what we see. It's as though the film itself has exploded and reassembled in a jumble of shards and prisms. Gerard Malanga and Ingrid Superstar dance frenetically to the music of the Velvet Underground (*Heroin, European Son,* and a quasi-East Indian composition), while their ghost images writhe in Warhol's *Vinyl* projected on a screen behind. There's a spectacular sense of frantic uncontrollable energy, communicated almost entirely by Nameth's exquisite manipulation of the medium.

EPI was photographed on color and black-and-white stock during one week of performances by Warhol's troupe. Because the environment was dark, and because of the flash-cycle of the strobe lights, Nameth shot at eight frames per second and printed the footage at the regular twenty-four fps. In addition he developed a mathematical curve for repeated frames and superimpositions, so that the result is an eerie world of semi-slow motion against an aural background of incredible frenzy. Colors were superimposed over black-and-white negatives, and vice-versa. An extraordinary off-color grainy effect resulted from pushing the ASA rating of his color stock; thus the images often seem to lose their cohesiveness as though





wrenched apart by the sheer force of the environment.

Watching the film is like dancing in a strobe room: time stops, motion retards, the body seems separate from the mind. The screen bleeds onto the walls, the seats. Flak bursts of fiery color explode with slow fury. Staccato strobe guns stitch galaxies of silverfish over slow-motion, stop-motion close-ups of the dancers' dazed ecstatic faces. Nameth does with cinema what the Beatles do with music: his film is dense, compact, yet somehow fluid and light. It is extremely heavy, extremely fast, yet airy and poetic, a mosaic, a tapestry, a mandala that sucks you into its whirling maelstrom.

The most striking aspect of Nameth's work is his use of thefreeze-frame to generate a sense of timelessness. Stop-motion is literally the death of the image: we are instantly cut off from the illusion of cinematic life—the immediacy of motion—and the image suddenly is relegated to the motionless past, leaving in its place a pervading aura of melancholy. Chris Marker's *La Jetée,* Peter Goldman's *Echoes of Silence,* and Truffaut's *400 Blows* are memorable for the kind of stop-frame work that Nameth raises to quintessential beauty. The final shots of Gerard Malanga tossing his head in slow motion and freezing in several positions create a ghostlike atmosphere, a timeless and ethereal mood that lingers and haunts long after the images fade. Using essentially graphic materials, Nameth rises above a mere graphic exercise: he makes kinetic empathy a new kind of poetry.

Ronald Nameth: *Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable.* 1966.16mm. Color, black and white. 30 min. "An eerie world of semi-slow motion against an aural background of incredible frenzy. He makes kinetic empathy a new kind of poetry."