

VISUAL MUSIC

Sensory Cinema 1920s-1970s

Sixties Synaesthetics

Wednesday, April 14, 2010

Northwest Film Forum

Co-presented by The Sprocket Society

Seattle, WA

PLEASE BE ADVISED

The final film of the evening, *The Flicker*, consists of rapidly **strobing light**. Those with extreme photosensitivity may wish to leave the theater prior to it. There will be a pause before that film.

Programming Note

Due to archival restrictions, we are not permitted to edit and combine all of the films onto larger reels. This necessitates an unusual number of pauses as we rethread for the next movie. We hope you will forgive the somewhat disruptive viewing experience in the spirit of helping to preserve these rare works for future audiences.

VISUAL MUSIC Sensory Cinema 1920s-1970s

April 9-14, 2010

<http://SensoryCinema.org/>

Co-presented by the Northwest Film Forum and The Sprocket Society, in association with the Center for Visual Music

Series curated by Peter Lucas

This evening's program curated by Spencer Sundell and Peter Lucas. Program notes by Spencer Sundell.

This series was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment For The Arts.

Some Suggested Reading

Barry Spinello. "On Sound and Image as a Single Entity." *Offscreen* (Vol. 11, Nos. 8-9, Aug/Sept 2007).

Downloadable from: http://www.offscreen.com/Sound_Issue/spinello_sound_image.pdf

Wheeler Winston Dixon. *The Exploding Eye: A Re-Visionary History of 1960s American Experimental Cinema* (State Univ. of New York Press, 1997).

USCO Timeline – <http://1904.cc/timeline/tiki-index.php?page=USCO>

Kerry Brougher, Jeremy Strick, et al., editors. *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900* (Thames & Hudson, 2005). Large-format, lavishly illustrated catalog for the 2005 multi-format exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, DC) and The Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles). Includes essays, photographs of artworks, rare stills from films, a chronology, etc. Probably the best single source on the topic of visual music.

William Moritz. *Optical Poetry: The Life and Work of Oskar Fischinger* (Indiana University Press, 2004). Illustrated. The most thorough book about him in English. Includes a detailed filmography.

Lauren Rabinovitz. "Mary Ellen Bute." Included in *The Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), edited by Jan-Christopher Horak. An illustrated essay about this unjustly-neglected but extremely important filmmaker.

Roger Harrocks. *Art That Moves: The Work of Len Lye* (Auckland University Press, 2009). Illustrated, includes DVD. A follow-up to the author's landmark biography of this seminal filmmaker. The DVD includes four of Lye's best films (otherwise unavailable), plus two documentaries.

John Whitney. *Digital Harmony: On the Complementarity of Music and Visual Art* (Byte Books/McGraw-Hill, 1980). Illustrated. An early treatise on digital animation qua visual music by one of the greatest (and earliest) masters of the form.

Center for Visual Music, Online Library – <http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/Library.html> Numerous articles, historical documents, and reference materials on visual music and related artists.

"Visual Music" (blog) – <http://visualmusic.blogspot.com/> "Sites that document work, artists, filmmakers, composers, musicians, video artists, events that work with the medium of visual and sound."

When the Organ Played 'Oh Promise Me' (ca. early 1940s)

Cecil Stokes

3 min / color / sound / DigiBeta (originally 16mm; transferred especially for this program)

Crystal formations filmed in polarized light

Soundtrack: Bing Crosby (vocals) and Eddie Dunstedter (organ)

Print source: Robert Martens

All but forgotten today, Auroratone films were created in the early 1940s by British inventor and mystic Cecil Stokes (1910-1956), who intended for them to be used as a therapeutic aid in the treatment of post traumatic stress, manic depression, anxiety disorders, and similar conditions. They typically consisted of abstract visuals — often time-lapse photography of crystalline growth filmed in polarized light — accompanied by slow, mildly sad and melancholic music. Most films were shot on 16mm Kodachrome, but there are indications that at least some 35mm three-strip Technicolor films were made as well.

Stokes was awarded a patent on his film process: “Process and Apparatus for Producing Musical Rhythm in Color” (US Patent no. 2,292,172, awarded Aug. 4, 1942; application submitted May 24, 1940).

Stokes formed the Auroratone Foundation of America to distribute his films; one of his partners in the effort was Bing Crosby, who contributed songs to a number of them. Auroratone films were donated to a number of hospitals in the US and England, where they were used as part of therapy. Circa 1946, Capt. Herbert E. Rubin and 2nd Lt. Elias Katz of the Crile General Hospital in Parma, Ohio, published articles in several prominent medical journals detailing their use of Auroratone films, reporting positive benefits. “Most patients became more accessible...[and] spoke more freely,” making it “possible for the psychiatrist to establish rapport.” An article about Stokes and his Auroratone films also appeared in a 1944 issue of *Rosicrucian Digest*.

According to reports published in *Billboard* magazine, Stokes later hoped to make the films available to the general public in “film jukeboxes,” commonly known as Scopitone machines, which were popular in bars and lounges during the 1940s and '50s. In the summer of 1945, he made a presentation to a number of such distributors in Chicago, but the businessmen demurred, reportedly saying “the haziness of the color pattern – or lack of pattern – made the process unsuitable for adaption to juke.” (Too weird for bars in Peoria.) The record appears to fade after that. Stokes died less than 10 years later.

Our research continues, but at this time this is the only surviving Auroratone film we are aware of. We are extremely grateful to film collector Robert Martens and his family for preserving this extremely rare film, and for the efforts taken by Mr. Martens to make it available for us this evening.

Peyote Queen (1965)

Storm De Hirsch

9 min / color / sound / 16mm (original format)

Direct animation, pierced film, hand-drawn art, optical printing, in-camera optical effects

Soundtrack: Various ethnomusicological and pop sources, unknown

Print source: *The Film-Makers' Cooperative*

According to the filmmaker, *Peyote Queen* is an “exploration in the colour of ritual, in the colour of thought, a journey in the depths of sensorial disorder, of the inner vision, where mysteries are represented in the theatre of the soul.” It is an attempt to visually render the kaleidoscope visions of peyote, the hallucinogenic cactus ritually used by some Indians in the southwestern US and northern Mexico. During the 1960s, it was widely screened and achieved a cult following.

Peyote Queen, along with the films *Divinations* (1964) and *Shaman, A Tapestry for Sorcerers* (1966), is part of De Hirsch's trilogy *The Color of Ritual, The Color of Thought*, intended as a mystic exploration of life. In these works, she was also exploring alternative techniques of filmmaking.

"I wanted badly to make an animated short, but I had no camera available," she explained in a later interview with Jonas Mekas. "I did have some old, unused film stock and several rolls of 16mm sound tape. So I used that — plus a variety of discarded surgical instruments and the sharp edge of a screwdriver — by cutting, etching, and painting directly on both film and [audio] tape."

Storm De Hirsch (1922?-2000) was a published poet before moving into filmmaking. Her first film, the 35mm feature *Goodbye in the Mirror* (1964), attracted the notice of artists such as Shirley Clarke. De Hirsch went on to make quite a number of films, including more works on 16mm and a series of lauded "Cine Sonnets" on Super 8. Although marginalized in later histories, she was an active, prominent, and influential part of the New American Cinema movement of the time. In 1998, the Women's Film Preservation Fund awarded a grant to preserve ten of her early Super 8 films.

DVD: *Peyote Queen* is included on the box set, *Treasures IV: American Avant Garde Film 1947-1986* (National Film Preservation Foundation, 2009).

Blazes (1961)

Robert Breer

3 min / color / sound / 16mm (original format)

Drawn and painted imagery

Soundtrack: Robert Breer

Print source: *The Film-Makers' Cooperative*

"One hundred basic images switching positions for four thousand frames. A continuous explosion." – RB

In 2008, Breer was honored with a retrospective film screening at the Harvard Film Archive, which noted: "Combining a meticulous attention to form and rhythm with an acerbic wit and talent for satire, Breer provides an important link between the abstract films of Richter, Eggeling and Leger and the lyric and radical traditions of the avant-garde, from Brakhage and Baillie to Kubelka and Sharits."

Robert Breer's (b. 1926) career as painter, sculptor, and animator spans more than 60 years and his works have earned him an international reputation.

The son of an inventor and engineer, Robert Breer (b. 1926) studied engineering at Stanford, only to shift focus toward hand crafted arts, which led to experimenting with flip books drawn on index cards. Between 1949-59, he lived in Paris as a painter, influenced by the geometric abstractions of Mondrian, Vasarely, and other early 20th century avant garde artists. His first films were made between 1954-1956 – a series of stop motion studies based on his abstract paintings, called *Form Phases*. Ultimately he returned to the US, where he continued to make films.

In addition to a large body of strictly experimental works, he also began to make short documentaries, including segments on art produced for the TV show, *David Brinkley's Journal*. In later years he created animated segments for the PBS children's program, *The Electric Company*.

During the 1970s and '80s, Breer's work became more complex both in technique and in personal associations, using "photography and drawing, object and image, sexual desire and the domesticity of family life. Home movies loosely rotoscoped in crayon collide with mythic American icons of baseball, airplanes, telephones and, well, take your pick."

DVD: Breer's *Eyewash* (1959) is included on the box set, *Treasures IV: American Avant Garde Film 1947-1986* (National Film Preservation Foundation, 2009).

Turn, Turn, Turn (1966)

Jud Yalkut

10 min / color / sound / 16mm (original format)

Newly-restored print by the Center for Visual Music

Optical printing, filmed environments

Soundtrack: manipulated audiotape, by USCO

Print source: *The Film-Makers' Cooperative*

“...decidedly brown-acid...” – Danni Zuvela, *RealTime* magazine (Brisbane, Australia)

Turn, Turn, Turn was Yalkut's first of numerous collaborations with the pioneering Korean-American video artist, Nam June Paik. Yalkut has described the film as an “exploration in the filmic translation of kinetic and luministic artworks... An exploration of the effect-versus-content thesis of Marshall McLuhan's ‘the medium is the message/massage.’” The source material was footage of “cybernated light-refracting sculptures (Nicholas Schoffer), moving reflected ‘lumia’ light (Julio LeParc), electronically controlled and strobed light (USCO), and the ‘pure’ electronic light which the cathode ray tube emits (Nam June Paik).” The soundtrack for the film is a modified and manipulated tape recording of the song by the Byrds.

Jud Yalkut (b. 1938) first began making films in 1961 with an 8mm camera his wife gave him as a gift, producing “eight or nine” films in the first year. In 1964, he acquired a 16mm camera and began collaborating with USCO (The Company of Us), an interdisciplinary arts group that considered itself a “spiritual communal” and created live environmental experiences using poetry, painting, filmmaking and electronics. Yalkut became USCO's resident filmmaker. “We did shows in museums and we did shows with Marshal McLuhan and Timothy Leary. We toured all over; we were the entertainment at the LSD conference at the University of San Francisco; we did a show called *us Down by the Riverside!* at the Riverside Museum in New York.”

While working with USCO, Yalkut also began collaborating with Nam June Paik. They met in 1965 when Yalkut asked to film Paik's work at the Bonino Gallery.

In a 1975 interview with Jud Rosebush, Yalkut said “I was very much into the McLuhanistic idea that you can isolate the effect of the media from the content of the media, and often from the package. So you get inside a television set and you film what's going on and you transmute it through editing, superimposition, and any other technique in a filmic experience.

“Then you take the film and put it back into video and do things that can't be done in film. And you work back and forth through a series of generations that way. You make use of the imperfections of the medium and you become more aware of what the limits of the medium are. I use the limit of the medium to define it at the end of the film.”

Through his art, Yalkut has explored a theme of spiritual transformation through sensory overload and aesthetic impact. Refining his ideas and experimenting with new technologies, Yalkut continues to create meditative and spiritual based installation and single channel works.

In 2000, Yalkut was the subject of a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 2003, he received the Lifetime Achievement Fellowship Award from the Montgomery County Arts and Cultural District in Southwest Ohio, where he has resided since 1973.

Notes adapted from Seth Thompson, “Jud Yalkut: A Video Beachcomber,” Afterimage, Sept/Oct, 2004.

Six Loop Paintings (1970)

Barry Spinello

11 min / color / sound / 16mm (original format)

Direct animation

Soundtrack: Self-adhesive plastics applied to the film's sound area

Print source: *The Film-Makers' Cooperative*

“In *Six Loop Paintings*, as in [the earlier film,] *Soundtrack*, sound and image are hand-applied directly on to 16mm clear leader. The image at a given instant is repeated both on the image track and soundtrack, so that the viewer is visualizing the image he is hearing. However, unlike *Soundtrack*, the images and sounds in *Six Loop Paintings* are not painted; they are made by cutting to size and pasting acetate self-adhesive patterns (Micotape and Zipatone) directly onto the clear film. Each pattern yields a distinct sound. Patterns of lines yield square wave sounds; patterns of dots yield sine wave sounds; patterns of diamonds yield sawtooth wave sounds, etc. The finer the pattern, the higher pitched the tone. The further spaced the pattern, the deeper the tone.... I especially recommend *Six Loop Paintings* to those interested in the texture of sound and image, and in the ways sound and image can relate to each other.”

– Barry Spinello

From 1967-72 Spinello made films without camera or tape recorder by hand-painting sound and picture onto clear 16mm leader. These included *Sonata for Pen, Brush and Ruler* (1968), *Soundtrack* (1969), and this evening's film, *Six Loop Paintings*. The idea was to integrate both sound and picture in a single creative process, using the same tool.

“I got into this type of film making in a round-about way,” he explained in a 1968 letter to John Scofield. “Ten years of musical training in the NYC school system, privately, and as an undergrad; a BA in '62 from Columbia College in English literature with an emphasis in writing, Architectural drawing and painting for two years in Architectural School in Columbia until '64; and then three years painting in Florence Italy and other European centers. About [1967] I realized that my previous interests could be combined in a single art form.”

Since 1972, Spinello has made documentary films, including the Academy Award-nominated *A Day in the Life of Bonnie Consolo* (1975). Recently Spinello has returned to the ideas of filmpainting, but now working entirely digitally. One such new work is *Towards an Art Form of the 21st Century*.

OffOn (1967)

Scott Bartlett

with assistance from Tom Dewitt, Michael McNamee, Glen McKay, et al.

10 min / color / sound / 16mm (original format)

Kinescopic film, live studio video, video processing

Soundtrack: Manny Meyer

Print source: *Canyon Cinema*

Winner of many international awards, *OffOn* was the first videographic film whose existence was equally the result of cinema and video disciplines. Like all true videographic cinema, *OffOn* is not filmed TV, in the way that most movies are filmed theatre. Rather, it's a metamorphosis of technologies.

...The basic source of video information was in the form of 20 film loops that Bartlett and Tom DeWitt had culled from more than 200 loops they had made for a multi-projection light concert called

Timecycle, described as a “two-hour moviemural.” The iconographic character of the *Timecycle* imagery was clean and simple since it was intended for use in addition to other image projections. These loops were superimposed over one another to a depth of as many as eleven print generations for one strip of film, separating images from background, positives from negatives, adding colors to separate strips, and then recombining them optically.

Black-and-white loops were fed through a color film chain in the television control room, adding videotronic phosphor-texture to the cinematic graphics. Simultaneously, other loops and portions of Glen McKay’s light show were rear-projected onto a screen on the studio floor, which was televised as a second video source. Both video sources were routed into one monitor: two images riding between two incoming channels, each pattern competing for exhibition on the monitor, generating a cross-circuited electronic feedback loop “...to the point where white information in competition with itself breaks down into colors: spectral breakdown.” A second TV camera televised the monitor, feeding the signal to a videotape recorder. This master tape was again processed through the switching/mixing system. Instead of being recorded back onto film in the usual kinescope process, a special camera was set up in front of a monitor that filmed at the video rate of 30 fps instead of the movie rate of 24 fps.

“The entire process took three hours,” said Bartlett. “The advantage I had was that all the material was on loops and I could just keep adjusting knobs and arranging appliances, cameras and such, until I had what I wanted, and then just film a burst of it.” This videographic imagery was again processed through an ordinary cinematic optical printing system in Bartlett’s studio. “The video colors were pale, but they were for that special texture that you can’t get any other way. After I had that, I separated the film into AB rolls and dyed the strips with food color. One roll was dyed one color, another roll was dyed a different color. I built a trough and filled it full of dye and rolled the film from one reel through the trough and up along banks of heaters. I sat atop a ladder and very slowly rolled the film through this assemblage at a rate of about five or six inches a minute. Took me all night. A yoga dedication.”

Excerpted from: Gene Youngblood, Expanded Cinema (E.P. Dutton, 1970), pp. 318-319.

The Flicker

Tony Conrad (1966)

30 min. / b&w / sound / 16mm

Alternating footage of pure black and white

Soundtrack: Tony Conrad

Print source: *The Film-Makers’ Cooperative*

...I began to wonder what kind of relationship there might be between the sort of subjective psychological, let’s say even phenomenological conditions of flicker, which as I understood it had something to do with alterations of the actual functioning of the brain on the one hand. Then on the other hand understandings of narrative, storytelling, linguistic and visual, more complex linguistic and visual activity, speaking in a subjective framework. Basically what sort of things might happen if one were to combine images and flicker in one place.

...It happened that also at this time I was involved with a music performance group which was exploring a kind of sound production which generated the kind of music that we now call minimal music. (This group included me, John Cale, La Monte Young, Marian Zezeela, and Angus MacLise, for the most part.)

The key to it turned out to be an understanding of musical pitch in terms of frequency ratios, and the whole idea of harmonic structure in music, which goes directly back to the time of Pythagoras... It

seems that it's possible to structure music according to some kind of arithmetical principles. [But] if you look for a comparable way of understanding experience in visual terms, or in terms of touch, taste or other modalities, you just have a lot of trouble locating anything that makes sense.

I was spending a lot of time on this and it occurred to me along the way that flickering light was one of the very few frequency-dependent modalities in the whole human sensorium, and the question [that] occurred to me was whether there might be harmonic structures that would obtain within a range of experiences which are afforded by flickering light. ...It seemed just vaguely possible that one might find some sort of harmonic experience in a frequency spectrum that would be up to three octaves wide.

[But] maybe I would really blow people's brains right out the back of their head. I didn't know. I was concerned, lest there be some kind of untoward outcome. Consequently I consulted with Beverly's mentor, Sandor Rado, who was a very prominent psychoanalyst... Speaking with Sandor was very helpful, because as it turned out he recalled having actually used flicker himself in the treatment of what was called shell shock during the First World War, when he did some battlefield medical, psychological treatment to soldiers who had I guess what we would now call post traumatic stress syndrome, and he treated some of these people with flicker, successfully, and he was able to attest to the breadth of application and effectiveness of this tool....

In part through his recommendation, I contacted the American Epilepsy Association [and] I spoke to this doctor... He was able to fill me in on the statistics, and let me know that the danger would be greatest for the one in 15,000 people who actually suffered from photogenic epilepsy...

He suggested that it might be a good idea not to use the disclaimer or warning because I would probably get more seizures from having the warning, than from anything else. I toyed with the idea of just making a film out of the warning, to see if I could get anybody to have seizures. But to tell you the truth, I never did have people complain about epileptic seizures without cause, and in the whole life of the film to date, I've only heard of one case where someone did have a seizure...

I did think of *The Flicker* as a kind of science fiction movie at its best in which one experienced the full impact of narrative transport, but rather than being transported to some sort of planet that in the end really just looked like Earth, with *The Flicker* you did become transported to a different planet which was entirely abstract, a parallel universe that was structured in a way uncannily different from everything else. This idea of *The Flicker* as a movie, rather than a formal art piece, was very important to me, and the fact that it sustained in that way, in other words that one went to this as a film and saw things that were weird and became transported to some other space, this gratified me tremendously, and attested to the fact that the film would really function as a film. And, because of course, in this particular respect, it didn't entail any kind of period trappings, like it didn't have actors who looked like they were sixties people, it could survive. So it had a kind of timelessness about it, in that respect.

Now there was another way in which, of course, it was time-bound, and that was the way in which it was interpreted as an extremely effective high modernist art work, and so, since other filmmakers were making films at the time that dealt with structure as a foregrounded principle, and this seemed to be built around mathematical principles, it was adopted as a kind of flagship film for the structural film movement, where it dealt with abstract light-organizing ideas. I felt a little awkward about that, because first of all the film, although it was arithmetically conceived in its relation to harmonic structure, it wasn't a mathematical film. Although it had a simple sort of structural design, I saw this as sort of like a way of leading in and out of the trance space of the narrative, rather than being a structural feature.

This was a part of the narrative design of the scenes in the film.

Condensed from: John Geiger. Interview conducted 28 February, 2002 with Tony Conrad, by telephone from New York State University at Buffalo. Transcript archived at <http://tonyconrad.net/geiger.htm>



Visual Music

Sensory Cinema 1920s-1970s

Friday, April 9, 2010 @ 8:00 PM

Optical Poetry: Oskar Fischinger Retrospective

1926-1947, 35mm

Saturday, April 10, 2010 @ 8:00 PM

Seeing Sound: The Films of Mary Ellen Bute

1934-1952, 16mm

Sunday, April 11, 2010 @ 8:00 PM

Jordan Belson, Films Sacred and Profane

1959-2005, 16mm & DigiBeta

Tuesday, April 13, 2010 @ 7:00 PM

Seattle Psychedelics

History Round-Table: Light Shows, late '60s - early '70s

Wednesday, April 14, 2010 @ 8:00 PM

Sixties Synaesthetics

Films by Robert Breer, Storm De Hirsch, Jud Yalkut, Scott Bartlett,

Barry Spinello, and Tony Conrad, 1961-1970, 16mm

Plus a rare "Auroratone" film, ca. 1942



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