FIRST-PERSON CINEMA

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We, as audience, are trained to respond to film based on theater. We are almost invariably presented with an intermediary, a middleman - an intercessor for us in the game; someone with whom to empathize, - and someone to judge. This remove keeps us in a normal, mundane mode of evaluating, and maneuvering.

The cinema that I want to talk about today, however, is a cinema that involves the spectator on the most immediate level possible: as direct experience with no intermediary. That is to say. it is first-person cinema. The viewer is the protagonist. It is a cinema that works on a visceral level, and at best energizes and educates the viewer to improvise on his own moments. As parallax vision combines images from each of two eyes to form a more complete, three-dimensional picture in the brain, this cinema proposes ways of looking at one's own experience with increased perspective and fuller dimension.

This is not a cinema fascinated with the study of character. It does not concern itself with personality. It is cinema without a main character on the screen. without a person as the viewer's proxy in adventure. I am talking about a specific cinema. It does not use the eyes in the same way that practical vision does.

The eyes usually function as the primary tool that the human beast uses to recognize food, acquaintances and bodily dangers, and to make moving around more efficient. But in modern life it is less and less necessary to concentrate on these matters. Most people live at consistent locations, and don't go looking nightly for cover. Water comes from faucets. Food is available in markets and does not need to be hunted for every day. Supplying the necessities seldom requires energy from all the faculties.

And so the senses are free to ramble. Given such liberty they could begin to work

at expanding their perception. They could train to be the noble and indomitable faculties that are inherent already within the magnificent equipment. People would acquire more dignity and more satisfaction.

There exists a film art that seeks to do this. It is an evolved art form, practiced intensely since the inception of the film medium - and has a long and illustrious tradition. Its canon includes the great and largely secret names (secret at least from public education at large) of Georges Melies, Germaine Dulac, Dziga Verfov, Harry Smith, Luis Bunuel, Maya Deren, Hollis Frampton, Peter Kubelka. Ken Jacobs, Larry Gottheim, James Whitney, David Lebrun, Stan Brakhage, Paul Sharits, Chick Strand, Ernie Gehr, Pat O'Neill. Peter Huron. Bill Moritz and Barry Gerson, to begin a list.

But films that promote true, practical freedom of thought are dangerous to systems of centralized power that rely on obedience, for example, to the diurnal structure, or to the five-day work week followed by the weekend of forgetting.

Current events, human interest stories and the news comprise a synthetic system that most people accept as reality. Media tools are used to sustain old concepts. They are used to set trends and direct attention to social pressures, and to effectively establish what values shall be prevalent, and what issues shall be foreground in public consciousness. This tiny, complete construct can effectively obscure to the senses and intelligence the available richness of first-hand experience, of immersion in a simple tremendous moment (for example, like feeling one's stomach growl to the smell of fresh bread while hearing the low rumble of a passing plane, sensation that grounds a person in total connected present tense.)

There is a film art that cultivates this sort of perception, but it meets with great opposition at every turn. Some of this is simply neglect of films deemed "not profitable", (though powerful elements from these films are incorporated into commercial work to advertise products for sale). But worse, some opposition comes from those who lack energy, who are simply too listless to check out anything different from the usual favorite flavor.

Those of us who decry what seems a deterioration of our senses, who decry the spectacle of youth with diminishing powers of concentration, with the video

arcade trigger finger and an inability to sustain any curiosity that unfolds slowly or irregularly, who are accustomed to T.V.'s quick cutting, to short duration of any image, to immediate gratification and a quick pay-off, those of us who observe that constant exposure to horrors in which one can neither interact nor intervene tends to produce passivity; those of us who despair to see diminishing mental faculties in the population at large, let us now heat up our labors to teach the difficult, hard-won arts of perception. The effort pays off absolutely.

By re-focusing attention to perceptual phenomena usually taken for granted or ignored, these may be transformed from the mundane to the extraordinary. But the eye and mind must work. They can be led, like the muscles of the body, to exercise. To develop compassion, that most necessary human quality, said the poet Shelley, requires engagement of the imagination.

First the eyes must be sensitized, for instance by exposure to an unaccustomed duration of time with a seemingly barren image. This usually meets with resistance, but there are such exciting vistas on the other side that it is well worth the perseverance.

Consider a long shot of a desert horizon, with time in which the eye will begin to wander for lack of other action. Since the image has been identified, the eyes are no longer called upon to interpret. After a moment (usually of impatience) through the organ's natural restlessness the eyes begin to improvise. They try to perceive the image differently. Perhaps the sense of depth disappears and the image then reads as a flat design, of areas of dark and light shapes. Then maybe the interpretation will shift, the dark spots read as receding space and the light ones advancing. The apparent movement of the grain in the film emulsion may take on the rhythm of an internal dance. The eyes might fall into a pattern of movement in the frame, flying around as if they were a body located inside the depicted space. Or the eyes might find after roving a satisfying vista and settle on it and rock there for a while.

The mind will, by the symmetry of its nature, extract a narrative from any information. Order will arise.

These are the eye games of infants which we are conditioned not to indulge in and come to forget. It takes a practiced eye to learn again to appreciate and play

them.

Later, when the eyes are practiced and ripe, when image is followed by image, these may be read as articulate phrases. Unexpected lines of development arise which may lead the mind down unused pathways. Adventures are now possible in terms in which the viewer was not previously conversant - except in moments of delirium, in listening to music perhaps, or in meditation.

This is not new or unusual. All babies are cognizant and their experience must be abstract, as they have no means by which to identify and define it. And it must be intense. The full impact of each newness is not yet diminished by a faculty for naming and quick categorization. Because their vision is unfocused. objects are simplified to various bulks; shapes are monumentalized.

A cinema is possible, and practiced - even in this city, Los Angeles, the company town of Hollywood, - which is the self-professed capital of the movies, lacking patron saints – (unless you count St. Lucy, who holds her eyes before her on a plate). A cinema is possible, stripped of the specifics of time, place and situation in society, and refined to its essence. in which these simple, unused sensations can be orchestrated in accordance with classic dramatic laws.

By a feature unique to the medium (i.e. that a still image may be moved, either by moving the camera or by its contextual placement in editing) the eyes of the viewer may be moved, and sensation made so strong that it is bodily felt. There is something more purely sensual in this than the usual commercial usage, with stories of pursuit and seduction as an excuse.

This is a different employment of the eyes. Here they are used as a pronoun, "I", to dance and play, to swoon and to be permitted to swoon. (An animal alert for danger cannot afford this concentration.)

This is film as chamber art: It can involve a group sitting in shared intimate darkness. The spell that is that fragile construction in two dimensions on the screen comes into being in the way that a classical stage magician may weave a spell of hands; and his gestures carve semi-solid forms in space that hang and float and linger - and then disperse like smoke.

That this cinema remains occult, not seen, not shown, not taught, is particularly unfortunate. These works were not intended to be obscure. Rather they were made for no other profit but to be seen and grasped by the brothers and sisters of the filmmakers. They were specifically made to enlighten, and to uplift the magnificent human equipment.

The images evaporate. But the skills that develop in the course of experiencing these pleasures, these mental-perceptual abilities, remain and evolve, with even the slightest encouragement. And these are the ennobling toys which cannot be taken away.