

VISUAL ESSAYS: ORIGINS OF FILM
(1973-1984)
56 min. color, sound

Al Razutis

Abstract: These six essays on film/image history reconstruct cinema history by 're-imagining' its origins, and its poetics, and use historical films themselves (as 'text') to provide the meanings of their creations. Together, these film essays comprise a critical/structural investigation of silent cinema ending with Sergei Eisenstein's works (for Stalin) - from Lumiere and Melies through surrealism and horrors, to montage and propaganda, we 're-invent' epochs in cinema that became its language and culture.

"Both the visual artist and the educator make their appearances throughout Origins of Film, but it looks to be the poet who has the final say. Informing the overall shape of the project is an argument that is presented at a number of levels. Each film is structured around a distinct set of optical printing and collage techniques [and] ... embodies a 'look' which becomes the film's central strategy and metaphor."

(Peter Chapman, Independent Eye)

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component segments/films

LUMIÈRE'S TRAIN (ARRIVING AT THE STATION

9 min. sound b/w 1979

The subject of the first essay is cinema itself: an apparatus of representation wherein fact and fiction are recreated. As such, the pro-filmic facts are necessarily drawn from two of cinema's "pioneers": Louis and Auguste Lumière and Abel Gance (La Roue), with additional material provided from a Warner Brothers featurette, Spills for Thrills. The film breaks down into four distinct sections and is loosely centred around Lumière's classic one-shot film of a train pulling into a station L' Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat (1895).

The exposition and form of the film is closely tied to the tradition of cine-structural poems which foreground the materials of the medium (light, dark, form as shadow-projection of the cinematic apparatus). Using alternations between positive and negative, the film chronicles the "coming to life" (of the apparatus) and the resulting action/movement and documentation of events - encompassing incidents (the near mishaps), human expectations (the arrival at the station), and human spectacle (the destruction of the trains, the station in chaos). Towards this purpose, I have used an expanding narrative, a play on the title itself, and the shifting conditions of synchronous and asynchronous sound/image (and image-to-image). (A.R.)

MÉLIÈS CATALOGUE

8 min. color silent 1973

The first essay created in 1973 and inspired by the origins of cinema and the works (1896-1912) of magician-illusionist Georges Méliès. This burning celluloid montage film presents the mythic iconography of the films of Georges Méliès - a dreamlike terrain, a grab-bag of magician's surprises, a cornucopia of players that proceed from the imagination of that "magician" of cinema - announced by the opening motif, "the magic box". These incidents are presented/framed within the graphic form of burning frames, each image-shot erupting and being displaced by the following shot. This is an essay featuring discontinuity and surprise. Images in this piece were compiled from approximately 30 films by Georges Méliès, most notably A Trip to the Moon (1902) (A.R.).

SEQUELS IN TRANSFIGURED TIME

14 min. sepia-color sound 1974



This returns to Georges Méliès and notably portions of *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and other early Méliès films (including a hand-colored early film, and uses techniques of 'frozen stills becoming movement', still which are initially 'abstractions' through the absence of movement and denial of depth (via graphic solarization). The stills are meditations on the "becoming of motion-picture reality" through movement and seamless editing (the "invisible"cut), mechanisms in the 'creation of narrative' (which Méliès thought to be secondary to a 'dreamland' for the eye). This essay is also an elegy for Georges Méliès, his "Eden lost and found," his cine-world becoming obsolete and "ghostlike." (A.R.)

GHOST: IMAGE

12 min. b&w sound 1976-79

Thematically proceeding from the previous (Méliès) fantasy films, *Ghost: Image* encompasses that tradition of "fantastic" films that includes Dada, Cubism, Surrealism, Expressionism, Poetic Realism, Symbolism, and eventually the horror genre (and of course Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*). Its formal design, the mirror image, creates a denial of axis and screen direction, with the result that the viewer must read "through the images." At times, the mirror images are reduced to their Rorschach component, and complemented by the presence of fragmented poetry (after T.S. Eliot and automatic writing), a metonymic realm suggesting "automatic disclosures" and unconscious correspondences in the developing discourse.

The familiar myths of woman as 'madonna' / 'victim' / 'temptress', and 'redemption through knowledge and science,' 'fear of the undead,' and 'fear of the irrational,' form the signposts of this historical and cultural terrain. Contains excerpts from approximately 20 surrealist, dada, horror, films. (A.R.)

FOR ARTAUD

10 min. color sound 1982

Re-imagining Antonin Artaud's *Theater of Cruelty* within a context of Dryer's (*Passion of Joan of Arc*) and spectacle, we reach into a 'terror' as evoked in this films of sparkling fragmented images and cacophonies of chant. The film tears and recombines, as the film expressionism of Dryer meets the tradition of Gothic horror and beyond that, Artaud. It brings to mind a humanity caught between absolutes, the good and the evils of monstrous proportions, of classicism, and of questions of individuation. Artaud, though a figure indirectly associated with film history, is suggested in this essay as prime provocateur in the collision between classicism (the "Greek chorus") and romantic expressionism. Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* - in which Artaud himself appears (as the monk) - serves to set the stage for this "inquisition." (A.R.)

STORMING THE WINTER PALACE

16 min. color sound 1984

14 min. sepia-color sound 1974

This last visual essay focuses on montage and the dialectics of Sergei Eisenstein's films, indicating their influence as cornerstones of silent cinema and as major contributions to the evolution of later cinema. Eisenstein's work in the areas of 'methods of montage', non-verbal signification and allegorical subjects constructed by juxtaposition (the collision, the dialectics) of meanings, is subjected in this film by Razutis to three "framing" processes: inversion of chronological narrative, fragmentation and repetition of selected montage passages, and the interrogation of selected Oktober sequences by the application of 'saccadic eye movement' (animated) techniques.

The end of the visual essays cycle brings on the 'textual' (to be read) cinema, the cinema of constructed meanings, and persuasions, where a new 'winter palace' (center of power) is sure to arise. The film contains sequences from Battleship Potemkin and Oktober by Sergei Eisenstein, now in the service of the Party.

http://www.alchemists.com/visual_alchemy/film_visess.html

AMERIKA

(1972-1983)

single screen length 170 min. - three-screen length 56 min.

AMERIKA is a "feature-length experimental film which was created one reel at a time to function as a mosaic that expresses the various sensations, myths, landscapes of the industrialized Western culture (1960's -1980's) through the eyes of media-anarchism and avant-garde film techniques." (AR)

'AMERIKA' REEL ONE

component segments/films

THE CITIES OF EDEN

8 min. sepia color 1976

Reconstructed from turn-of the century footage, an ironic vision of high industrial pomp and pageantry - in substantial shadows of ancient prerogatives engulfed by history. Original historic footage from eras long past is rendered as 'bas relief' in changing sepia tones of photo-textural kind which ends in fiery infernos of image and destruction.

Sections include: 'The Cities of Eden', 'The Parades of Eden', 'The Queens of Eden', 'The Amusements of Eden', 'The Machines of Eden' and 'The Closing Night of Eden' which are presented as separate visual narratives, ending with 'and then We shall start anew"...."east of Eden".

HEAD TITLE / SOFTWARE

3 min. color 1972



Head title of Amerika is presented as placeholder, with video screens awaiting programs. In the short film Software, the pixel lights of the industrialized world (electrical power) are re-formed in the speckles and patterned light of the video screen -- a metaphor for energy as information transfer, but still at the service of the power structure.

VORTEX

14 min. color 1972

The intense subjectivity of techno-psychedelia converges with the technological gamesmanship of the space race.

This film-video hybrid, created from experiments in film and video image manipulation, features some of the earliest analog video synthesizer processing combined with film optical printing and driven by a pulsating ARP synthesizer soundtrack. Analog synthesis as precursor to digital effects. The subject matter, however, is 'space' and extinction.

ATOMIC GARDENING

6 min. color 1981

Dropping in on a ballistic missile launch, overheard as NORAD missile control chatter and countdown, we see visuals of biological mutation in the eerie white light of nuclear annihilation and macro time-lapse of strange crystalline growth on NATO integrated-circuit boards submerged in underwater wreckage. While the audible crew prepares to launch a nuclear ICBM, circuit boards grow tentacle-like crystals while undergoing decay in some underwater wreckage of parts and circuits. The confidence of 'nuclear preparedness' is contrasted with the natural processes of 'nothing lasts' and 'all is subject to decay and extinction'.

MOTEL ROW (part 1)

8 min. color 1982

A vision of the wasteland, and absence, of image industries, time-capsuled and entombed in our ruined cities. 'Messages to whom?' scrawled on graffiti walls. 'West-Coast' and 'East-Coast' necropolis with inner chambers populated by glowing monitors and historical, mythical, and mystical referents. 'The Somnambulism of the Rich' obsessed with after-life and 'Egyptian' mythos. 'Cameo' appearances by the grave-robbers of 'Wolfman' (sound) and Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

98.3 KHz: BRIDGE AT ELECTRICAL STORM

13 min. color 1973

The suspension bridge as electromagnetic tower, antenna for sixty years of radio waves and engulfed in video storm. A spatial image of the transition from an industrial


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society linked by transport to a postindustrial society linked by communications. The film is segmented into 'two parts' and appears in two places in Amerika.

A repeating journey across the San Francisco Bay Bridge becomes a journey into disintegrating visuals, video transformation, with an accompanying soundtrack taken from "40 years of Radio". As a film, it anticipated the end of the film medium, and the emergence of the video medium.

Synesthetic and 'structural films broke new ground in the experimental film 70's and the film-video 'hybrid' violated that 'special insularity' (the separation by media) that both film and video artists of that time enjoyed.

MOTEL ROW (part 2)

12 min. color 1980

It's a drive-by journey through Vegas style landscapes where sexual recreation and libidinal flow frozen into electronic signs and signals, voyeurism and commodity, image consumption, and sounds from the mediascape. As if continuing from 'The Wasteland and Other Stories', its drives through deserts and into the amusements of Vegas, this film features long tracking shots of the 'motel row' of Reno, Nevada, and Vegas, interspersed with 'adult tv' (pornography clips), worthy of an 'motel'.

Point of view is voyeuristic, seemingly indifferent, yet scanning the sidewalks for 'something'. This voyage of alienation culminates within and without a motel room, in a electronic burlesque sequence (Runway Queens) which teases the viewer with synesthetic and the female grind.

RUNWAY QUEENS

5 min. color 1974

This short film video hybrid, combining film and video processing (colorizing, feedback, mixing, quantizing) saturates the viewer's sensorium with colors and echoes and the burlesque grinds of the 1940 and 1950's dancers as recorded on historical footage. The 'motel' viewer checks out the past, while turning up the dials on the video-synthetic future.

With the beginnings of video and art in the 60's, dance and the nude female body have figured prominently. Accompanied by music from those burlesque eras.

REFRAIN(S)

Various durations - various subjects - 1982-3

A moment, or a series of moments, on 'theoretically informed reflection' - lampooning the conceits of Film Theory and Film Analysis (dominated in the 80's by 'feminist 'psychoanalysis of the cinema' - Mulvey, Penley, et al.), as well as the 'ideological disconnects' resulting from switching reference and source. Each REFRAIN combines a disconnected - reconnected soundtrack from Vaudeville radio shows and comedy shows with images from the film (as ground) and an on-screen 'bozo' - a ventriloquist rubber dummy - as figure. We hear audio skits, including Charley MaCarthy doing the 'Marylin' we were 'made for each other' skit. The sign of things to come in the future hives of web meanings, where cause and effect



(signifier/signified) can become interchangeable or freely manipulated.

AMERIKA REEL TWO

component segments/film:

THE WASTELAND AND OTHER STORIES

15 min. color 1976

Travel as mediated spectacle, a time lapse journey from Vancouver to Reno and Las Vegas Nevada; speed as stasis, abstraction, violence, culminating in a 'televised abduction and police chase at the border' and a 'letter to home'. Within this long, high-speed with time-lapse drive through deserts and neon wastelands of 'Amerika', we can ask: 'Who is the voyeur, who kidnaps who, who is cruising the boulevards, and who is the object of the gaze'?

The opening subtitles, paraphrasing film theories of 'subjectivity' and 'voyeurism', allude to a narrative that is 'perverse', and 'male'.

REFRAIN(S)

Various durations - subjects - 1982-3

A moment, or a series of moments, on 'theoretically informed reflection' - lampooning the conceits of Film Theory and Film Analysis (dominated in the 80's by something termed 'psychoanalysis of the cinema' - Mulvey, Penley, et al.) Theoretical film questions are posed, and answered through visual ventriloquism and a dummy standing in for the implied 'subject' of 'discourse' and the 'gaze'.

Each REFRAIN(S) combines a disconnected - reconnected soundtrack from Vaudeville radio shows with images from the film (as ground) and an on-screen 'bozo' dummy (as figure). Not for the 'theoretically uninformed'.

MOTEL ROW (part 3)

5 min. color 1981

Flash-forward or flash-backwards to abandonment, desolation. Empty amusement park(s) of childhood's (and AMERIKA's) 'past', past walls of corporate graffiti, with sounds emanating from the lost era of the 'amusements of Eden'. Presented as 'photo negatives' portraying empty spaces, shapes, and places now vaguely 'familiar'.

98.3 KHZ: BRIDGE AT ELECTRICAL STORM (part 2)

13 min. color 1973

The suspension bridge as electromagnetic tower, antenna for sixty years of radio waves and engulfed in video storm. A spatial image of the transition from an industrial society linked by transport to a post industrial society linked by communications. The film is segmented into 'two parts' and appears in two places in Amerika.

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THE WILDWEST SHOW

12 min. color 1980

It re-tells a "day in the life" of "Television City" - an urban landscape that features the most exaggerated moments of Western history iconically portrayed in large motion-picture billboards (the shape of things to come).

The main vehicle for the narrative is the game show format, where players attempt to surmise whether the question posed is true or false. We witness a visual panorama that includes footage of stunts, science fiction, war, atrocity, natural disasters, news, and commercial interruptions. This is a society in which origins of messages are lost, truths are indistinguishable from lies. The society itself, one could say, has lost it, lost a sense of meaning, proportion, authenticity. The film re-states the persistent question: "Did Amerika really look like this?"

A MESSAGE FROM OUR SPONSOR

9 min. color 1979

A 'commercial' that interrupts 'The Wildwest Show', deals with television and its mythologies - the fetishization of violence through competition (seen as a dominant historical process in American culture), and the fetishization of sexuality through consumption. The film uses only 'appropriated footage' (unlicensed, copied, etc.)

The claustrophobia of media "reality" - compartmentalized into game shows, movies, news reports, commercials - is presented as continuous interchangeable spectacle. This film looks at the ideology of misrepresentation, the turning of facts into icons, history into myth. It analyzes the media's metalanguage, especially the image of woman as spectacle and commodity; and the psychology and economics of male voyeurism.

PHOTO SPOT / TERMINAL CITYSCAPES

10 min. color 1983

The filmmaker, as reluctant host, confronts his audience (art historian, film critic, marxist ideologue, psychoanalyst) taking calls and responding to the off-screen callers. The incidents are named: Fault Line Spot, Imago Photo Spot, Berlin Spot, Anthropomorphic Haven, and Number Seven Spot. As the calls become more critical of the filmmaker and his works, we hear Al exclaim that he is going to 'crack up' if he 'can't finish this film', and that 'no, he isn't sick' in the head like the caller suggests.

The direct, personal intrusion of the filmmaker's voice is set against scientific charts about visual perception and film chemistry, and optically constructed scenes linked by the concepts of the photogenic and the pervasiveness of perceptual/technical "error."

AMERIKA REEL THREE

component segments/film:

EXILES

10 min. color 1983

Urban 'deconstruction' and graffiti is presented as a form of guerilla warfare against current "industry standards" for society, political organization, and cinema; as a form of resistance to the ideologies of naturalism and biologism, and 'film narrative'. Starring Samantha Hamerness-Coombs and Lincoln Clarkes. Soundtrack of soundscapes by Tony Giacinti and appropriated 'Black Angel's Death Song' (Velvet Underground - Lou Reed vocal) accompanies the shots of urban decay, graffiti, and light-color flaring of images (like when the can of film is opened up) and transitions.

THE LONESOME DEATH OF LEROY BROWN

25 min. color 1983

A two-part voyage: the first through the ruins of Amerika, culminating in a voyeuristic stalking of a 'victim'. The second, a meditation on television violence, evangelism and the viewing subject. This film is a culmination of social and personal disintegration, desolation, decay and entropy - the end of western history as male narcissistic fixation on the self. The absent viewer/subject of Reels One and Two emerges as "the last man on earth," and as either a 'victim', or 'with a captive victim', for such is the fate of those afflicted with 'projective identification'.

In Part One, shot from a car window, the camera tracks back and forth ('the structural avant-garde'), across American roads, landscapes, cities, and alleys, until it has located it's 'subject', a blonde female (appearing throughout the film) who suddenly turns on the voyeur-camera and fires her gun, and not killing 'him' flees. The places appear arbitrarily named, and the names are purposely obscured behind graffiti and ruin. Continuing on the semiotics of projective-identification and voyeurism in Amerika.

In Part Two, we see a similar female sprawled unconsciously on the background bed as the 'drunken pervert' watches a repeating scene of a black man being shot by police on TV. As Jimmy Swaggart (on radio) spews 'fire and brimstone' on the radio, the protagonist is getting 'his nerve up'...and then slowly he turns and blows the observing (tv) screen away.

AMERIK': a culture of voyeurism and violence taken to the extreme...now relegated to a motel room, where Nixon-era 'entertainment'...and 'tell me it ain't so' meets the Jekyll and Hyde of our film's points of views. We conclude the film with a (taped) singing of 'Amerika' as the screen bleaches to white.



(FIN)*

10 min. color 1983

As a closing thought, and a sequel to A MESSAGE FROM OUR SPONSOR, (FIN)* - 'end' in French, or an acronym containing 'fetish' in parenthesis with asterisk - deals with the auto-destruction of Amerika as a discourse, ultimately questioning the image, its provenance, authorship, and interpretation. It presents the final deconstruction of the viewer as subject of media metalanguage. The main strategy is to employ four layers of images: two layers of motion picture (figure and ground) with juxtaposed horror, documentaries and award winning commercials; a layer of still graphics (subtitle, intertitle, main parenthetical graphic) which convey film studies and semiotic (Metz) questions to the viewer; and a scrolling left to right electronic (pixelated) message board containing anarchist comments about the other interpretations.

Because film theory is invoked in this film, let's continue the film description with a little dose of same:

Beginning with the subtitle: "As for the fetish itself" - a play on 'figure' and 'ground' and the re-combining of the object of the gaze and the voyeur as a 'single fetish' image/sequence and stand-in for 'reality' - we see the flesh-eating zombies from Romero's Night of the Living Dead attack the 'living', and see further violence (Hitchcock's Psycho, and Polanski's Repulsion) committed against 'the female body' (the 'site of inscription'), and against the 'viewer's subjectivity', as if to fulfill the Freud-Lacanian 'film theory' assumption/conceit that the male fetishized view is 'perverse' (sadistic) in its depiction and reification of the female 'masochist' body in the essentialist 'duality' that obsessed film studies in the 70's and 80's. Film theory then becomes an accomplice to oppression, just as 'history', 'art', 'power', become accomplices to oppressive ideology, say the anarchists. The four layers of image (background image scenes, foreground framed scenes, frame graphic with asterisk, and electronic subtitles) combine to construct 'the fetish' and invoke the 'imaginary' and its anarchist response. With a compilation of clips from Cannes Film Festival award-winning commercials, horror movies, clips from various features, commercials, animations, and appropriated footage, this film portrays the arguments between theory and practice, capitalist messages and communist messages, commerce and art, on a simultaneous 'bulletin board' that is 'to whom it may concern', as the following statements are offered: 'it was the absence of the object seen', according to the academics, but countered by the electronic messages of anarchists that 'all history is bunk'...'all theory is speculation'...'metalanguage rules OK`...'`primar process rules OK`...'the plot of this film is bank robbery'...'image bank robbery'...'rip them off!'...'snuff them out before they`.....

O KANADA!

5 min. color 1982

The CBC-TV sign-off with a musical O Canada!, in historical and cosmic perspective, with the 60's separatist riots in Quebec, riots against 'the Queen' (of Eden?), riots against Trudeau, riots against confederation and government, royal and secular authority, and the Crown, are the subjects (and backdrop) as the film and evening signoff is taking place on some 'planet' - an empty landscape, like the moon, or asteroid of projection and remembrance. (A.R.)



http://www.alchemists.com/visual_alchemy/film_amerika.html

Al Razutis (1946, Bamberg, Germany) is a US and Canadian film-maker, multimedia artist, educator, critic, historian and avant-garde activist. He is an inventor and innovator in motion-picture film and video technologies, stereoscopic 3D video art practice, holographic art and technology, and web-interactive 3D virtual reality. Educated in physics and chemistry, with extensive experience teaching film production and film studies, he has brought a combination of technological interests and critical-theoretical views to his multimedia arts. His studio web site can be found at http://www.alchemists.com/visual_alchemy