Animated Images Listed as Art

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- 1 The history of the avant-garde, or “experimental”¹, cinema is not well-known in France. So there is good reason to welcome the translation of the major reference work about its development in the United States, almost three decades after its original publication: *Le Cinéma visionnaire : l'avant-garde américaine 1943-2000*.
- 2 P. Adams Sitney was the first to attempt to put forward a typology—which has stayed the course—by formulating various aesthetic parameters shared by the works of different artists. His precise analyses of the films concerned are essential reading. The author basically singles out two major groups of films: on the one hand, lyrical or “mythopoetic” cinema, which developed from 1943 on with the films of, among others, Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, and then Stan Brakhage and Gregory Markopoulos, and, on the other hand, the “structural cinema”, which he saw taking shape from the mid-1960s onward

with, in particular, the films of Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Michael Snow, George Landow, Ernie Gehr and Andy Warhol, as forerunner... The first group encompassed films resulting from an exploration which might be dreamlike, poetic, expressive, subjective and introspective, while the second focused on an exploration of the *medium* as such. Involved here was a “cinema based on the structure in which the overall form, predetermined and simplified, constitutes the main impression created by the film”. Since the book’s first edition, it has received a wealth of critical attention. In particular, Sitney was reproached for his Americo-centric approach (what, for example, of Kurt Kren, Taka Timura and Malcolm LeGrice whose films may also, in some aspects, be described as structural?) and for an over-estimation of the legacy of Romanticism. Actually, not only is the adjective “visionary” not always appropriate, but the “structural” cinema, which seems to be part of an aesthetic contrasting with dreamlike movement, is presented by the author in a relationship of continuity rather than rupture. What is more, the correlations between “mythopoetic” cinema and Abstract Expressionism, on the one hand, and between “structural cinema” and Minimal Art on the other (cf. the important dialogues between Hollis Frampton and Carl Andre) are not explored in any depth.

- 3 Whereas the American versions covered the period 1943-1978, this publication offers French readers a new chapter headed “La fin du XXe siècle”, which underscores the importance of the quotation and the mixture of genres, as well as the major role of film-makers like Yvonne Rainer and Su Friedrich. This edition, with comprehensively updated notes, thus reinstates the chapter devoted to Markopoulos (“De la transe au mythe”) which had vanished from the second American edition, as the result of a tiff with the film-maker. So this is well worth reading by English-speaking readers, too!
- 4 Michael Snow is undoubtedly one of the most important “structural” film-makers. In his introduction, Jean-Michel Bouhours rightly underlines the specific ambivalent grammatical nature of the word *des* preceding *écrits* in the title *Des Ecrits* chosen by Snow: the article may be at once partitive (emphasizing the selective character of the choice of texts), indefinite, the simple plural of one (emphasizing the ordinary character of the heterogeneous addition), and contracted definite (for “of the”). The slightly ironical switchover in relation to the conventional and somewhat solemn title that *Ecrits* would give attests as much to a resistance to the self-indulgence produced by this type of publication as to an attentiveness to linguistic interplays. Wit, the use of homonyms and the use of Franco-English puns are part of the writing in most of the essays brought together here. Jacinto Lageira, for his part, rightly notes that if the question of the experience by the viewer can be posed in relation to any work of art, this is especially true of the devices introduced by Snow, with which perception and the connection between object and onlooker in its physical and psychic dimensions are challenged, and are an “essential precondition for the understanding of his approach”. All experimental film buffs know what the absolute difference is between the person who (for example) has experienced the extraordinary ordeal of the three-hour projection of *La Région Centrale* (1970-71), propelled into cosmic space by the camera, turning 360° around an invisible centre at the top of a mountain, and the person who has merely “heard tell” of it through a conceptual description, stressing, for example, like Max Knowles (alias Snow), the programme of a “de-anthropomorphized” camera. Experimental cinema, and music too, incidentally, are—probably as a result of their temporal dimension—practices which call for risk-taking, and an involvement of the viewer-listener, which are considerably more

demanding than a tourist visit to an exhibition, which, in an illusory way, will seem easier and faster to digest. The twenty essays here offer a good record of the many-faceted and experimental character of Snow's work, which embraced film and photography as well as music and installations. The "Letter to Thierry De Duve", in response to a lecture given by this latter on Snow's work, is a particularly tasty treatment of the link between "modernist" self-referentiality and narcissism.

- 5 "No, video must not be defined or appreciated in relation to film, with which it is almost globally contrasted, except in appearances, but to photography [...]. Video is "animated photography", writes Michel Nuridsany in the catalogue of a show devoted to video at Le Fresnoy. If it is partly possible to go along with the first part of this claim (dissociation—but in appearances as well!—with video), the second part (association with photography) leaves room for scepticism, and the argument that shores it up is not very persuasive. The author actually says a little later on, without appearing bothered by the difficulties brought about by this new comparison: "Video is a visual poem"... Inadmissible ontologization or improper generalization... Michel Nuridsany does nevertheless develop certain stimulating insights which, no matter how subjective they may be, are based on the intuitive experience of an attentive and curious observer of the "art scene" over several decades. In the present-day situation, the author singles out three directions: the installation (Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, Douglas Gordon...), the one-track video, and the video-projection (Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster...), this latter category being accused of wanting to show on picture-rails "runt-like films dreaming of big ones". In this respect, we might underline the contrast between the omnipresence, today, of film and video seeking an artistic legitimacy on picture-rails, and "experimental" works by their elders developed away from the institution, but where the earliest borrow certain features in a spirit of angelic innocence... The exhibition at Le Fresnoy only embraced the "one-track video" and the catalogue includes useful notices on 62 artists from 18 countries. Many of them are being presented for the first time in France.
- 6 Without being included in the tradition of experimental cinema, an original film programme, keen to be at the crossroads of contemporary art and film, has been regularly presented in Paris since 1998 by *Pointligneplan*. Well removed from "formalist" problems, it involves—though no main thread is ever distinctly defined—an interest in new fictional modes with which the issue of the device tends to replace that of the screenplay. This carefully presented book brings together all the texts accompanying the sessions. Some 20 film-makers, most of them French (Ange Leccia, Christian Merlhiot, Erik Bullot, Pierre Huyghe...) are introduced by as many authors from differing backgrounds (Jean-Charles Masséra, Jean-Pierre Rehm, Jacques Rancière...). This diversity attests to the openness of this territory with its very vague boundaries.
- 7 *Gels et dégels*, edited by Bernard Eisenschitz, uses a solid scientific apparatus (detailed chronology, very well informed biographical notices, index) to present an analysis of the Soviet films and film-makers who were censored over a more than 40-year period. The outstanding works we are shown point to the fact that this historical task is in its infancy.
- 8 In an essay titled *Du Commun* and subtitled *Philosophie pour la peinture et le cinéma*, Pierre-Damien Huyghe starts out from the analysis made by Benjamin to question the possibility of painting in the period of photo- and cinematographic cameras. Readers expecting an in-depth survey propped up by historical analysis will soon be disappointed. The book's approach to the three artists Kandinsky, Braque and Klee is speedy and film references

(films and film-makers alike) simply are not there. But philosophy applies only to the general... Thinking with or based on works—and not about them or without them—is still very much a current challenge for film buffs and historians alike who are exercised by the movement of art.

NOTES

1. Qualification of the field has been problematic ever since its earliest developments in the 1920s, when there was talk of such things as the “cine-poem”, “visual music”, and “pure cinema”.