

issue thirty7

fillings

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eight bucks

The Cinematic Consequences of the Materiality of Celluloid

The idea of cinema as craft presents us with various philosophical and practical challenges. The shadows cast upon us by the dead images of multiplex monoliths add to this conundrum. Nonetheless, the asinine inanity of these million-dollar images, which in their entirety contain no more than a kilobyte of cinematic content within their CGI blips and shallow shades of light, cannot solely account for this malaise. Obviously there is the hand of a craftsman within the stylistic choices of a director, writer, and editor. Yet what can we say to the cineaste who longs to have the same relationship with their medium of choice as would a draftsman, who becomes engaged in a romantic, isolated struggle with their material of choice? How can filmmakers immerse themselves within the comforts of a studio practice? Is there any possibility of sharing an intimacy with a filmmaker's medium of choice (celluloid in particular) as painters and sculptors do with the material they become engaged with? What does a sense of materialistic intimacy imply within the vague craftwork of cinematic practice?

Consider this idea: the cineaste is completely passive in the act of bringing images into existence. This is even the case for certain more intimate, first-person genres of cinema, where crew and craft services consists of nothing more than the right arm holding a camera and a bag of half-eaten cookies in the back pocket. Can we say that these filmmakers have an active role in drafting images on celluloid, the way someone who carries around a sketchbook, and sketches a landscape or portrait with pastels would? Yes, the camera is an instrument, and the images the tone, but how is a composition written? Need we depend on the formal principles of montage to make this happen? What about the politics of space and *mise-en-scène*? Perhaps we can find a solution to this problem by looking at work that calls attention to the very material that threatens us with a sense of passivity. Hand-crafted films that emphasize the materiality of their images, and whose work constantly references the structural composition of the fragile images that have been burnt within the celluloid matter, aim to overcome the inevitable malaise cinematic practice has imposed on filmmakers since its inception during the height of modern industrialization.

i. Video Killed The Celluloid Star

Consider this paradox: as celluloid artists, we have the emerging dominance of video to thank for celluloid artistry moving into the arena of craft. This is a stunning assertion considering the paranoid polemics that the foreboding dominance of video inspired among film critics and filmmakers in the early 1980s. Case in point: Fred Camper's article, "The Trouble with Video," written in 1985. Although in a later essay he acknowledges the triviality of his arguments in the wake of video's dominance in the media arts, it is still interesting to note his descriptions of video as ornamental by nature, aiming to present ambient

shades of light which aim to blend in on "the furniture box," occupying the room like an illuminated black velvet painting. He also emphasizes video's lack of depth between images in the foreground and background, along with his belief that video is unable to express a cinematic sense of dramatic space.¹ Although his assertions seem to be historically fascinating, they neglect the positive consequences that the dominance of video has had on celluloid practitioners. The movement towards digital/tape technology has not caused, and will not cause, the extinction of celluloid; it merely turns celluloid into a sort of fetish object, obsolete but beautiful in its dated mechanics. When creating motion pictures, we are confronted with a basic choice: to use film or not to use film. The odds are stacked against the use of motion picture film: it is about ten times the cost of video, lab services are quickly becoming consolidated and less independent-friendly, Kodak cancels more and more film stocks every year, and it takes much more technical know-how to get a proper exposure on film.

Video killed the celluloid star, but is this even an issue? Indeed, artists are making an obsolete choice when deciding to work on celluloid, but is it any different from painters choosing to work with water colors, when they could just pull out their digital cameras and transform their images into a billion clusters of digital pixels? Alas, we have reached an unexpected destination, a possible crossroads between the cineaste and the other arts! Perhaps our choice of an obsolete medium gives us the air of craftsman. Can the choice of an archaic medium mimic the romantic struggle of absinth-induced oil painting? Are we united in our nostalgia, in the flaneur stylings of the hard road taken?

ii. The Unbearable Lightness of Invariability

Obviously, the above arguments are completely insufficient for a sympathetic convergence between the cinematic arts and the materiality of other craftwork. Nonetheless, our emphasis on the actual material of our craft moves us into an interesting direction. The development of alternative processes in the manipulation of the archaic mechanism of celluloid allows us to overcome the passivity that has been imposed upon cineastes in traditional models of motion picture laboratory processing. Moreover, the rejection of form/content that becomes expressed in works that utilize alternative processing techniques allows practitioners to create self-referential works, which directly reference either the audience or the venues in which a specific piece has been projected.

Hand-processing motion picture film is an obvious, alternative processing technique that may allow us to overcome celluloid's cinematic submissiveness. Taking an active role in the actual processing of our images not only implies the integration of a particular cineaste's handprint on the actual medium itself, but also carries with it various other implications.

Most obvious is the integration of a previously unexploited facet of filmmaking, that of invariability. When we eliminate the industrial/scientific controls of our material, we invest in a precarious gamble. We are forced to give up all expectations of possible results. Celluloid, as a medium, already has within its material construction the constitutive aspects of invariability. Images created on video provide the phenomenological possibility of instant verification. There is no element of surprise, no huge amount of variability of what you have seen, and what you have filmed. Celluloid, on the other hand, carries with it a sort of phenomenological potential energy that holds back any sort of instant verification of the actual outcome of your images. However, following scientific/laboratory specifications, there is often not much room for variability and surprise.

Yet, if we decide to process the motion picture film against specifications, outside of industrial machinery, in our own personal darkrooms with our own hands, the results are often hazardously unpredictable. How does this gamble play to our advantage as celluloid practitioners? Having no absolute guarantee of our photographic harvests forces us to work with the results of our endeavors, rather than within a preordained studio formula. Like a sketch artist, our work becomes privy to spontaneity, surprise, and discovery. Letting go of expectant images, and embracing the idea of uncovering unexpected results, allows us rely only on the process of creating the images, and not the shot-by-shot story-boarding of the film's inception.

Work that is focused on an exploratory process is able to be infused with the spirit of the moment, previously unattainable in more formal filmic enterprises. Our decisions become unpredictable, completely dependent on the luck of the moment, the environment we are filming in, and chemicals we are processing with. This concept of invariability within our images not only effects the outcome, but the very process of making the film. The structure of film is no longer imposed, but is instead discovered within the actual material we end up creating. The form dictates the content, and the material of the film itself accounts for the structure of the film.

iii. Cathartic Fragility: The Phenomenological Consequences of Crafted Cinema.

As was mentioned above, work that has found its structure within alternative processes, and hand-crafted techniques, have unique potential to inspire an alternative catharsis within the cinema that is opposed to the sort of formulaic, cinematic response we fall victim to within the multiplex. However, when we reject the adaptation of traditional theatrical dramatic structure, filmmakers often sacrifice the clarity expected of them from their audiences. Alternative structures dispose of traditional three-act structures in exchange for exploratory work whose beginning will catch you off guard, and whose end will enter abruptly.

Yet something very important happens when people become faced with fragile images. A scratched image, an image that looks as though it has been rotting since the birth of Cinema, an image that struggles against the light that made it, being scratched away bit by bit from the hand that made it (processed it)—philo-

sophically, a fragile image seems to tell the audience that the author rejects a world view that we are able to see things with absolute clarity, that what is fleeting and fragile is beautiful, and everything else should be looked at with suspicion.

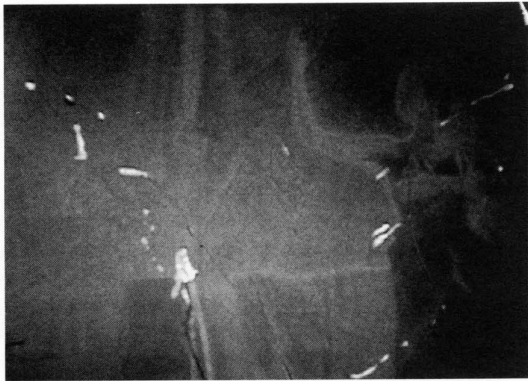
However, there is something else that broken images may inspire in the audience. Being confronted with a plethora of images that reject formal prefabricated structures, the audience is faced with the opportunity to participate in the making of meaning. When someone is forced out of their passivity in the act of watching an assortment of images being projected on a screen in a theatre, they become conscious of themselves watching the film. They search for familiarity; for being presented with a mystery of sorts, they are now asked to play a creative role in the watching of this film that has been created within an alternative structure. Viewing no longer becomes a receptive exercise, but a physiological, nerve-centered event.

Cinema of this sort should not be used for expressive ends, "but must allow solely an awareness of the implications of changing forms of visual kinetic information..." these implications include "a questioning of objectivity, of these strategies, by showing the spectator these prostheses of his/her own body, of his/her own vision." The end result could be a "reinforcement of the primary identification of... the transcendental subject."²

Thus, we reach a fascinating conclusion on our investigation of the cinematic consequences of a materialistic cinema. Our desire to create work which is formed and gets its form from the medium which created it not only places us within the realm of craftspeople, but also has great cinematic/cathartic consequences. A materialistic cinema opens the door for a new frontier of cinematic expression; by emphasizing the chance operations that the invariability of the processes that created it imposed on the work, we are able to liberate cinema from the passive industrial role that inspired it. Instead, we can create a radical, cathartic cinema that aims to inspire the audience with their own personal explanations for illusion of cinematic motion. For if celluloid is able to take advantage of the basic biological faults of the persistence of vision, perhaps it may also be able to express the emotive possibilities of a fragile cinema.

¹ For more information see Camper's article at <http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/Video.html>

² Penely, Constance. "The Avant-Garde and Its Imaginary," In *Movies and Methods* Vol. 2 576-597. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957. p 590.



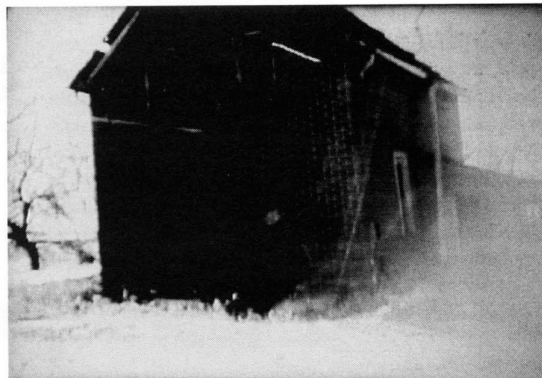
from *Rosa*



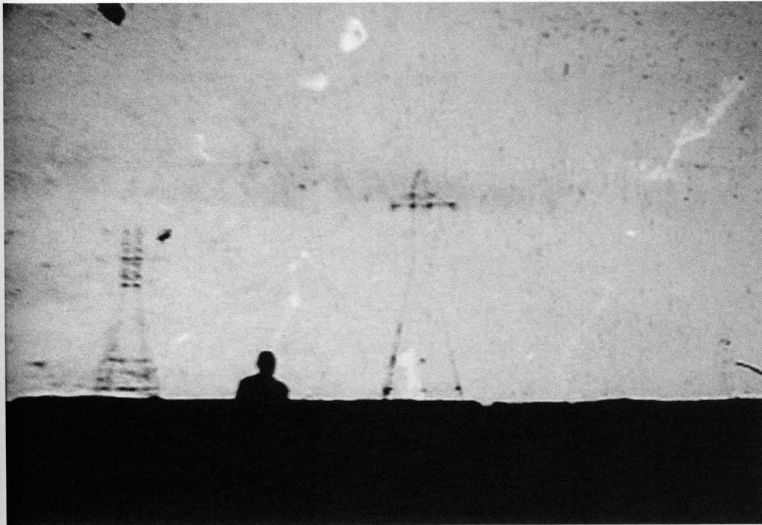
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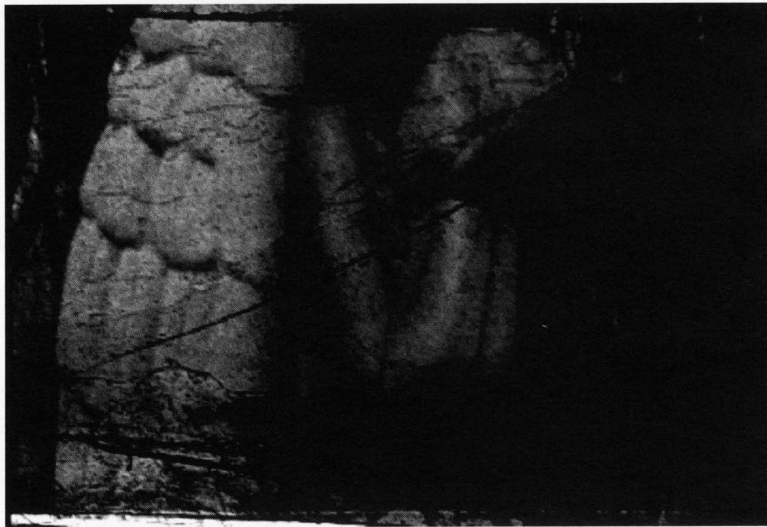
from *The Sex of Self-Hatred*



from *untitled1 (prayerielandscape)*



from *untitled3 (stone killer)*

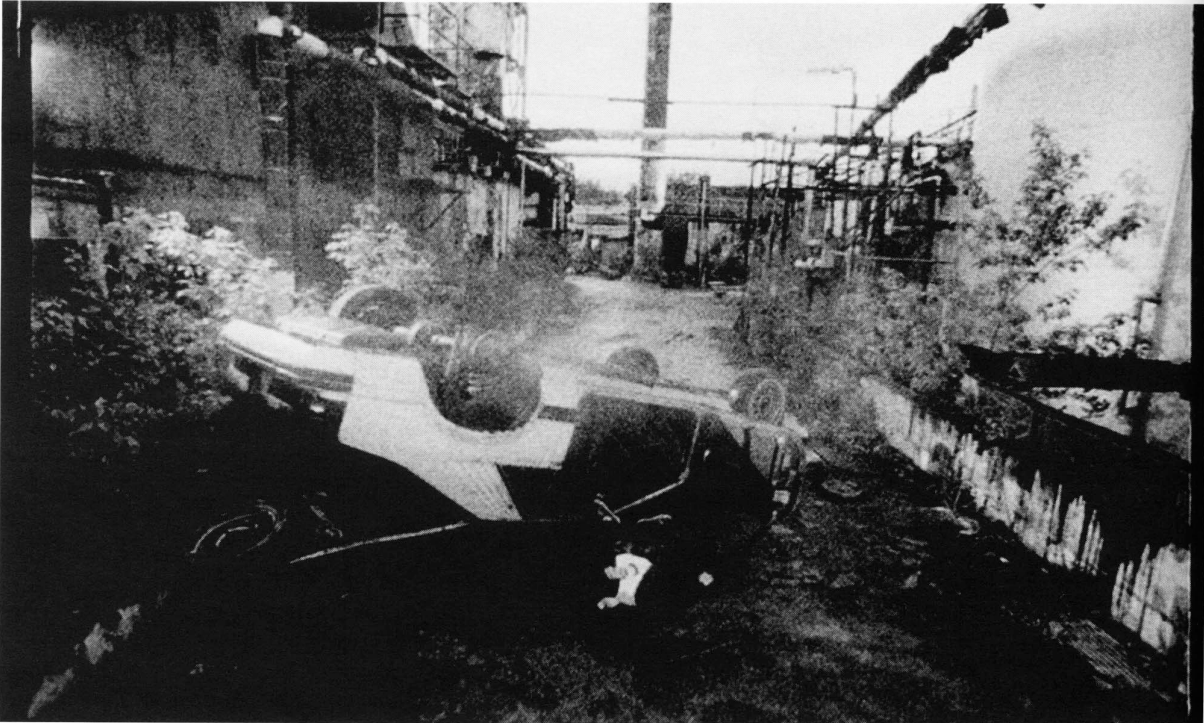


from *perhaps/We*



from *perhaps/We*

Excerpts from *Fugue Nefesh*



Scene # 7, 8, 10

Date: 5/3/05

Script Page

Bkdown Page # 5

Page Count 4/8

Breakdown Sheet

Int/Ext: EXT

Day/Night: Night

Scene Description: Nathan on street with blood/harry picks up nathan

Setting: North End Street

Location: Point Douglas?

Sequence: _____ Script Day: _____

<p>Cast Members 1. Harry 2. Nathan</p> <p>(Car in on edge of frame) C filmed During golden hour? (Street lamps work?)</p>	<p>1. Camera moves into shot Nathan lies on ground outside the car (or on the hood?) - the camera slowly creeps towards the smashed car & Nathan on the ground</p>	
<p>Special Effects 2. smoke</p>	<p>2. Still shot Harry standing - back towards the camera facing Nathan → walk toward him → lift him up 3 walks off - Nathan outside of car</p> <p>Note: - 2 & 3 must be same position</p>	<p>closer in than <u>1st shot!</u></p> <p>4(?) Over the stiller shot Harry looking at Nathan Symmetrically - Harry - walks away from Nathan @ for Nathan - <u>up</u> - (one frame?)</p>
<p><u>Smashed</u> car → smashed car - smoke coming from car</p>	<p>- Harry cannot block Nathan on <u>car!!</u></p>	<p>Special Equipment 3. smoke machine 4. Steady-Cam</p>
<p>PP. Notes → 2-3 - Color Reveal - <u>H.P</u> → <u>D.E</u> 4(?)</p>		
<p>Notes on location</p>		