Thoughts on Cinema

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Human Perception

I don't make films for machines. I make films for human beings, for myself and for other individuals who may be opened to the pleasures of non-narrative film.

I shape experience, I'm aware of that. But what I'm shaping are the physical and optical properties or processes of film. I don't think of the audience in terms of "this will make them happy, this will make them sad, this would make them feel good, or be repulsed by the information that will come across to them." I don't work that way.

Early Experiences

I can't quite place it in time, I could have been three, I could have been five. My mother took me into what I would call a movie "palace" of sorts. The movie was already in progress. It was a dark place, the doors opened and we walked in. There was what looked like a huge screen. There were a bunch of "people" standing there in funny costumes with long robes. It was strange. And they were large, larger than I knew people were, and they were in black and white. And as we kept moving forward in the dark or semi-darkness really, suddenly that long shot was replaced with a close-up of a face. And I'd never seen a face that large. I screamed and ran away from my mother and ran out of the theater. That was my first experience of the movies.

"Serene Velocity," 1970

I had trouble with the movies during childhood; I was attracted to them, but I was also troubled by the power they had over me. At one point, shortly before I made "Wait" (1968), I realized that what attracted me to film, and to cinema in general, was the experience and the phenomena of the cinematic process itself, especially during my childhood. That included things such as cinema's dependency upon light; the contradictions between the illusion of a three-dimensional space and the two-dimensional surface where the movies were actually projected upon. The discrepancies between the here and now and the space and times represented on screen. Or follow someone's life from birth to death on screen, and then, as the lights go up, realize that only an hour or so had passed.


"History," 1970

Painting and Film

Generally speaking, light in cinema refers to lighting characters, actions, effects, and sets, creating a mood—an atmosphere of some kind. The concern with light in "Wait" is different. It's about the dependency of film on light. Without light you cannot record an image with a movie camera and you cannot show a movie on a projector; you pull the plug and that's it, or the bulb blows out and there's no film on the screen. And then the concern that I had with light in film had to do with the variable intensities of light, be it sixteen, eighteen, or twenty-four bouncings of light per second, depending upon the speed of the projector and the variable density of the film strip going through the projector. In most of cinema the screen rectangle becomes a window and you look through those sixteen, eighteen, twenty-four bouncings of light, variable intensities of light, and focus on the image coming through the intermittent and variable intensities of light. In "Wait" I was interested in bringing those qualities of film and film projection back to the surface.


"Shift," 1974–1974

It's something that is not so different from looking at paintings from the modern era. You can go back to Cezanne for example, and look at one of his paintings. You have a portrait or a landscape but you're also looking at the painting, you're not looking through it, you're continuously being made aware that you're looking at paint on canvas, or on wood, or on paper. And that, to me, is very exciting. And in that sense there is no such thing as an overexposed or underexposed frame or image. It's all relative. One extreme would be light, and the other extreme absence of light, and in between you have a scale of variable intensities. In painting you also have certain terms which all of you are familiar with: figure/ground, positive/negative space. And that often refers to things we tend to focus on first of all, the characters or the flowerpot or whatever it is that's being
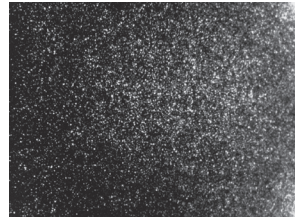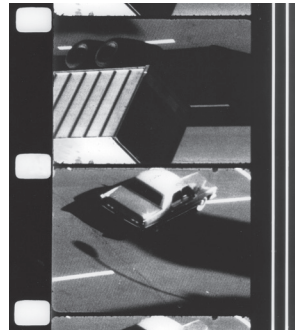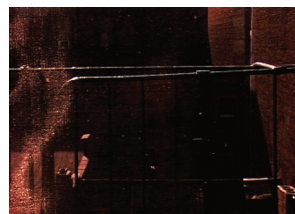
"Greene Street," 2004

"Table," 1976

depicted in the painting. Those are positive forms, and the background is the negative space. In "Wait," the situation was reversed—both, the people and the set are really the passive elements. They're the background. It's the light that's the active element, the positive force, the dynamic force, the 18 or 24 variable bouncings of light per second.

Early films were sometimes referred to as "flickers" because of the strong flicker effect of early projectors. Subsequently efforts were made to diminish that quality of intermittent light projection. However, film remains an intermittent projection of light and darkness. Even with modern projectors, when you slow the projection speed down, that intermittent quality becomes more and more apparent.

From looking at images—photographs, prints, advertisements, as well as paintings, I was aware that color tends to break up the picture plane. It not only separates one object from another, but different colors also register on the retina on different planes in space and in that manner breaks up the picture plane. As my focus was neither the people nor the set, but light, for "Wait," what I did was use outdoor daylight film stock indoors under artificial lighting conditions. That ended up giving all the colors a homogeneous reddish tone. That way I was able to work with color the way I might have worked with black and white—with a scale of light and dark tones that visually registered on the same plane rather then at different points in space.

Sensual Cinema

What I am involved with is the plastic possibilities of the medium I happen to work with, such as the materials and processes of film or the relation between sound and image. How one image might play with a sound or another image. When I'm shaping a work, I'm responding to the materials and phenomena at hand, not psychologically or ideologically, but sensually and with feeling for the physical and perceptual possibilities the materials at hand seem to offer me.

Take "Rear Window" (recorded 1986, released 1991): I worked with reversal film up to that point. Reversal film tends to have more contrast, and reproduces fewer colors than negative film does. "Serene Velocity" (1970) is an example of that. The colors there tend to be a bit saturated and limited in their tonal range. which was correct for that work. However, because Kodak was discontinuing various reversal film stocks, I felt I needed to consider negative film stock, which previously I did not want to work with. The first thing that struck me about negative was its ability to produce a range of colors and hues that reversal film just was insensitive to—or recorded
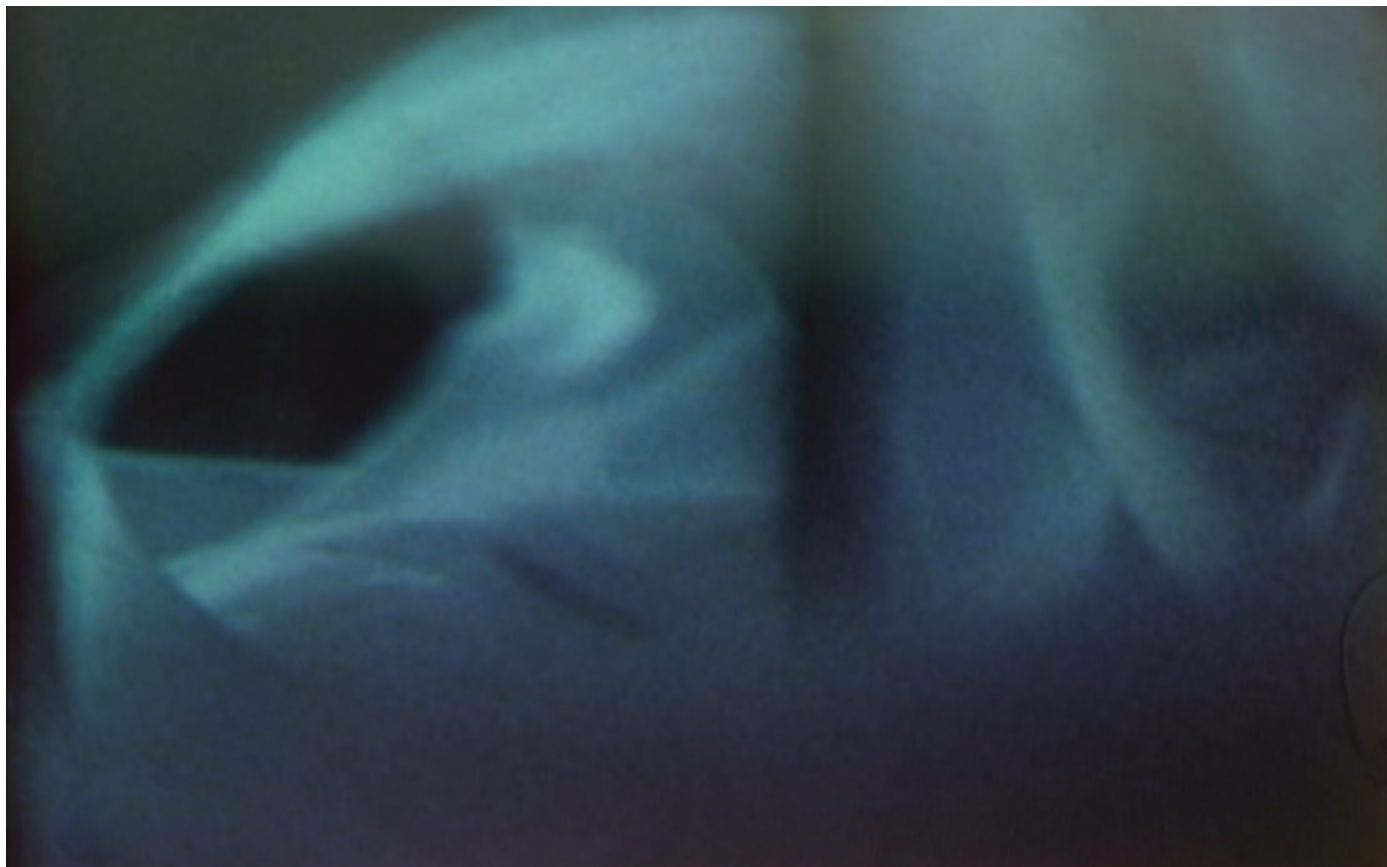
"Rear Window," 1991

"Serene Velocity," 1970

poorly. I seized upon that possibility in the making of "Rear Window." Here I was able to work with a range of pastel colors and softer tones that were just not available to me with reversal film stocks.

"Serene Velocity" and Cinematic Experience

It's like an eye and brain massage, especially if you see it in a dark room. The image on screen pulses, and the retina of the eye is opening and closing. It can be very pleasurable, and stimulating.

The work gives you a lot of room to find a way to deal with the cinematic phenomena on screen. It gives you time to scan small areas of the screen as well as the rectangle as a whole. It gives you time to focus on the "corridor," but also time to go beyond that, into the mysteries of cinematic happenings, planned as well as accidental. The work follows a pre-determent outline, but the experience of the work, when one lends oneself to an experience of it, is unpredictable and is something else then the outline. The work also touches upon matters regarding time and cinema that I could not have articulated cinematically otherwise.

Sometimes you see things you didn't see before; I myself am still discovering visual happenings and paradoxes I had not seen previously. There is the movie that is projected on screen, but then there is also the movie each viewer creates in his or her mind.

"Serene Velocity" is physical. It comes on strong at first, maybe depending upon where you are sitting and the scale of the image—those are also important factors—but then you have enough time to look around. And there is nothing that tells you that you should focus on one thing or area over another at any given time. You can look to the side, you can even look at the border of the rectangle and see what is happening between the screen rectangle and the outside of the wall or the curtain or whatever is enclosing that frame. Viewing is subjective and personal. One person will find pleasure and someone else will feel that they are been assaulted somehow, not physically but visually. One person may find it boring, another one too much. I can't do anything about that.