

The Distinction of Idioms:

Non-Industrial Film in Los Angeles

Curated by
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Their idioms were distinguishable, but not notably so; and if fuller knowledge were extant it might be necessary to recognize half a dozen dialects instead of the two which the presence of the missions has given the appearance of being standard.

—A.L. Kroeber, on the indigenous languages of the Los Angeles basin

The historiography of non-industrial film in the United States has generally been modeled on the European modernist, aesthetically autonomous, avant-gardes, especially painting, and so has posited the primacy of a tradition of similarly “avant-garde” film.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 8:00

Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra,

Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapich	1928	16mm	11:00
<i>Meshes of the Afternoon</i> , Maya Deren	1943	16mm	14:00
<i>Puce Moment</i> , Kenneth Anger	1949	16mm	6:00
<i>Cartoon Le Mousse</i> , Chick Strand	1979	16mm	11:00
<i>Illusions</i> , Julie Dash	1983	16mm	34:00
<i>Standard Gauge</i> , Morgan Fisher	1984	16mm	35:00

AT HOLLYWOOD MOGULS

**SCENE
MISSING**

Traced from French Surrealism and various experiments in abstraction (rather than from the commercially successful German Expressionism or the explicitly communist Soviet Constructivism), this tradition is supposed to have been brought here by émigrés like Hans Richter and Oskar Fischinger or reinvented here by Maya Deren and Sidney Peterson, and since then to have been self-producing and self-determining, unaffected by either the commercial film industry or the wider social field. The formulation, “the precise relation of avant-garde cinema to American commercial film is one of radical otherness. They operate in different realms with next to no significant influence on each other”¹ bespeaks both the binary and the autonomy of its parts.

The prestige of this theory has resulted in the misleading assignment of an ongoing plurality of popular practices to alien and procrustean schemas—most egregiously, to the “high” end of the reductive “high-low” seesaw. Sanctioning only the two languages of Hollywood and the avant-garde, the critical missions have ignored the half dozen (and more) other dialects of film, themselves not always comprehensible or even audible to each other. As I have argued elsewhere, the

received model should then be supplemented with, and in many case replaced by, one that would recognize the following:

—the binary division between Hollywood and an avant-garde is misleading; non-industrial film is produced in a field that comprises multiple positions more or less close to, more or less distant from studio production, with representational codes and production strategies continuously circulating among them.

—non-industrial films have been generated not only by isolated artists, but also by social movements, micro-political identity groups, subcultures and so on, who have found film useful or unavoidable in their own social self-production or self-articulation. Furthermore, the films made by these groups have frequently been informed by other cultural practices (music, theater) more organically associated with them.

—non-industrial films are often self-conscious about both their other and their own otherness, and typically produce themselves, not as permutations of the formal axioms of their antecedents, but by way of more or less explicit, more or less allegorically displaced, envisionings of Hollywood and of their own relationship to it.

Nowhere is the pertinence of these principles greater than in Los Angeles where, on the one hand, the industry all but totally permeates and frames consciousness and, on the other, urban decentralization has dispersed the various identity groups into isolated sectors of the city, inhibiting their articulation. Eschewing the missionary position, then, the present program attempts to sketch the alternative reading. It assembles films from different historical periods in which different groups, differently situated in respect to industrial production, have used the medium for their own priorities and possibilities, but all of them entailing a reading of Hollywood.² Marginals in the industry, students, and visual artists; women and gays, Blacks, Chicanos, and Asian-Americans; these and others have all imagined themselves into being by reimagining actual Hollywood films, the codes of Hollywood cinema in general, its materials and production methods, or the forms of social organization it has sustained.

Though preceded by numerous European works, the U.S. experimental art film begins as early in Los Angeles as anywhere,³ probably with Dudley Murphy's *The Soul of the Cypress*, made in 1921, the same year as Paul Strand's *Manhatta*. Seven years later, the dialogue with the industry was explicit and multi-leveled. Combining live action and special effects, *Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra* (Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapich, 1928) employed an expressionist visual vocabulary to sketch both the architectural fabric of the city and to critique the human costs of its chief business. The genre of narratives about the lives of film folk, already well established industrially, was here re-enacted in a domestic, artisanal production, though the efforts of Charlie Chaplin nevertheless secured it a commercial distribution. The genre would continue to pass to and from among various modes of production and indeed different media (it was especially important in *noir* novels of the late '30s like Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust*, 1939), down to the present; Jon Jost's *Angel City* (1977), Gregg Araki's *Long Weekend (o' Despair)* (1987), and Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992) are three of endless examples. As an industry calling card (and how various a hybrid genre that must be!), it served its purpose. Both Florey and Vorkapich went on to extensive industrial careers, one as a feature director, and the other as a maker of both his own experimental films (*Moods of the Sea*, 1942) and of experimental interludes in commercial features. Cameraman Gregg Toland, of course, shot the art-film-as-such, *Citizen Kane*, itself arguably the major influence on *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren, 1943).

While Deren's husband and collaborator, Alexander Hammid was, like Vorkapich, a European experimental filmmaker looking for work in Hollywood, *Meshes'* Dutch angles, moving p.o.v., and high-contrast lighting suggest not only

European experimentalism, but also a specifically feminist reworking of Hollywood genres, those of wartime *noir* and the '40s women's film.⁴ Combining the *femme fatale* character type of the former with the locations, temporal extensions, and exaggerated affect of the latter, *Meshes* created a new American film language, even as Deren herself created a new cinema. With justice, the film displaced its few predecessors to become recognized as the founding text of the tradition of autobiographical films in which women artists confront their own objectification, as well as providing a matrix, no less for the '60s underground than for '70s feminists. In her reworking of commercial film language, Deren also prefigured the more explicit interrogations of Hollywood genres in the work of theoretical feminists like

Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), but with a gay rather than a (proto)feminist agenda. It was followed by *Puce Moment* (1949), also shot in Hollywood, "a lavishly colored evocation of the Hollywood now gone" (Anger's own words). In it, a young person, apparently female but of equivocal gender, sorts through a number of shimmering gowns. Finding one that fits her, she reclines on a couch, transfixed in fantastic self-projection, justifying the designation the credits afford her: the Star. The film is all that remains of "a planned feature on the Hollywood of the '20s," a project that Anger displaced into the celebration of Hollywood decadence in his book, *Hollywood Babylon*. Together with the work of Anger's friends and classmates at USC, Curtis Harrington and Gregory Markopoulos, both films reflect the



Meshes of the Afternoon

Laura Mulvey and Sally Potter which, at least in the latter case, eventually mutated back into industrial production.

The artisanal restaging and rephrasing of selected elements of the Hollywood feature was picked up four years later in

strong homosexual underground in L.A. in the late '40s that was furnished by the wartime accumulation of sailors in the area and the emerging gay porn industry, as well as by Hollywood's own gay community.⁶ While subsequent use

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of the trance genre that *Fireworks* passed on from *Mesher* did not have a specifically gay inflection, the genre initiated by *Puce Moment* did. The domestic drag film—fabulous improvisatory masquerades in which men played the personae of female Hollywood stars—reached a radical maturity in New York in the mid-'60s in the films of Jack Smith and Ron Rice, and Andy Warhol's middle period (e.g. *Hedy*, 1965), before returning to Hollywood itself as gay cinema became mainstream.

After Hollywood found ways to tap the '60s youth cultures, a process completed with *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), itself an amalgam and appropriation of several underground genres, the boundary between avant-garde and industry became even more porous than before. Industrial narratives about beats and hippies, civil rights and peace workers demanded the simultaneous appropriation of the techniques and motifs these groups had negotiated in their own filmic self-production. As a result, the period saw more formal and thematic intersections and reconfigurations of film dialects than any other, at the same time that the restructuring of the studio system allowed for the extremes of the two production methods to be bridged in an unprecedented number of more or less independent feature productions. The results were, on the one hand, the New Hollywood, and on the other an increased popular currency for cultural experimentation of all kinds. Of the many forms this latter took, three will be addressed here: visual music; film in the art world; and the new Black cinema.

Since the meeting-ground for the *rapprochement* was often rock music, the Southern Californian tradition of visual music, which had since the '30s sustained a highly specific interface between the experimental and the industrial, developed new forms. Deriving from Oskar Fischinger (who moved from experimental light shows in his studio in Germany in the '20s to Disney and animation for *Fantasia* in the '40s), the tradition of audio-visual spiritual synaesthetics manifest in, for example, James Whitney's *Yantra* (1955) and *Lapis* (1966)

was secularized in at least three forms: in Hollywood collaborations (e.g. Jordan Belson on *The Demon Seed*); in light shows at rock concerts (which continued on in the various stadia and nightclub visual pyrotechnics that accompanied the mutations in popular music, down to the present psychedelia revival and the appropriation by the music video industry of visual codes from the underground); and in art-world installations involving film. All three currents pass through and around the work of Pat O'Neill.

A sculptor and also a member of Single Wing Turquoise Bird, the city's premier light show, O'Neill combined the two interests in his film work, where multi-layered matting creates intensely sensual and complex coloration and graphic design; the combination provided, more than the work of any other filmmaker, the vocabulary for the image manipulations in the most technically sophisticated of contemporary music videos.⁷ Since the autonomous beauty of these effects tended to generate not the economy and drive of narrative but cycles of formal permutation, the works uncommonly repay prolonged and repeated viewing, and so easily accommodate and indeed frequently imply the loop projection and material presence which installation supplies.

Such art world connections mediate O'Neill's dialogue with industrial culture, but the latter is overtly inscribed in several ways: in the frequency of his recourse to 35mm, the standard gauge which alone permits the precision of his matting; in the traces of actual Hollywood film which edge or corner or, like the return of a repressed unconscious, appear beneath the most abstract patternings which somehow they shape; and in the trajectory of his career as a whole. If the '60s appeared to suggest that the mainstream would come to the underground, in subsequent decades it more often seemed that the underground could only survive by going mainstream. Like others of his generation, O'Neill has lately come to frame his projects in feature-length for theatrical distribution, a historical compulsion which can hardly be regretted as long as it produces epics like *Water and Power*.

From the allure of Hollywood, then, not even the severest aestheticism has been immune. While elsewhere Structural Film either focused its metacinematic analytics on the material properties of the medium or, when it considered specific historical usages, did so via texts which were culturally remote (like Ken Jacobs' manipulations of Canal Street or pre-Griffith footage), the outstanding Los Angeles practitioner of the genre was thoroughly, though idiosyncratically, preoccupied with the industry. In a series of films made mostly in the '70s, Morgan Fisher enticed wallflowers hidden in remote corners of studio apparatus to give up a rare dialectical booty. The quasi-scientific connoisseurship of films like *Cue Rolls* (1974) was, however, only apparently impersonal; as obsessive and integral as any star-struck fan's, the infatuation that sustained it would at last openly speak its name in *Standard Gauge* (1984), Fisher's melancholy autobiographical masterwork in which he does the medium in different voices, but never loses sight of the fact that they are all policed by the industry.

The priorities of Structural Film were similarly accommodated in a highly personal way in Chick Strand's films of the same period. After her early poetic ethno-documentaries, Strand's work coalesced into two main genres. The first consists of intimate portraits of women, conceived in what became her signature trope: by photographing her subjects in motion, frequently back-lit, using a hand-held telephoto lens in extreme close-up, Strand magnified the somatic responsiveness that Maya Deren had claimed as the great potentiality of the body-as-apparatus, creating an extraordinarily sensuous lyricism that constantly dissolves into abstraction—a powerful feminist idiolect, however unfashionable its premises at the time. The second genre is made up of compilation films that surrealistically fragment and juxtapose found footage, often foregrounding women's issues. *Cartoon Le Mousse* is unique in Strand's oeuvre in juxtaposing both styles, and in fact pushes each to such an unprecedented degree that the formal specificity of the different found footage and the materiality and grain of film are forced into visibility. The yoking of the several heterogeneous industrial and the avant-garde

dialects in such an unexpectedly paratactic montage has the impact—and the anxiety—of a shotgun wedding.

Combining the scrutiny of Hollywood production methods instanced by Fisher and the feminist reworking of Hollywood genres instanced by Strand is Julie Dash's *Illusions*, a conspicuous example of the school of Black filmmaking which emerged in the early '70s, especially around the Ethnocommunications program in UCLA's film school. (The student film, of course, is yet another agora, where the tongues of many different traders are spoken.) Crafted to resemble studio films of the period, Dash's fable of racism and sexism in wartime Hollywood produces in its best moments (especially the scenes in the recording studio) concise yet multi-valent images that summarize the intersection of different mediums, different degrees of industrialization, and different modes of exploitation that comprise industrial culture, together with the reticulations of class, race, and gender that subtend it. The heroine's final determination to make films that will restore Black people to the medium and to history—where previously they have only been illusions—is prophetic of Dash's subsequent work and indeed the aspiration of her generation (*vide* Charles Burnett's career). It also expresses an ethnic and perhaps class-specific attitude to productive options; whereas other avant-gardes have accepted the marginal exposure offered by screening organizations like Filmforum, Black filmmakers have typically sought mass distribution and, on occasions like the Blaxploitation era (which began in L.A. with Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*) or the present, found it.

Other ethnic groups have not so far been as successful. If for Blacks music was the vehicle of intervention, for Chicanos it has been forms of theater and visual arts. Theater has informed successful features like *Zoot Suit* (Luis Valdez, 1981) and the most splendid Chicano cinemas have been the formal and informal paintings on the walls of the barrios. The varying forms of access allowed by the different mediums were brilliantly registered in the series of No-Movies made in the early '70s by

Gronk, Harry Gamboa, and Patssi Valdez.⁸ Simultaneously wall-art and performance pieces, and consisting of the posting of xeroxed advertisements for screenings of non-existent movies, these were at once Dada critiques of the virtual exclusion of Chicanos from any position in cinema other than as consumers, and acts of cognitive restructuring, totalized aestheticizations in which life as a whole was conceptualized as cinema. In this latter, they were an intriguing invocation of the native American total cinema imaged by the great avant-garde/industrial film, Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie* (1971) (which is only appropriate since his LAPD apologia, *Colors*, 1988, was such a porcine travesty of what a popular Chicano cinema might be).

The Asian-American film-culture that also emerged out of the UCLA Ethnocommunications program and which was institutionalized as Visual Communications emphasized working-class documentaries and historical recovery projects through the '70s. After this period, video was increasingly the medium of choice for vanguardist projects, reshaping the two components of the interventions considered here—the self-representation of marginal groups and their confrontation with their previous industrial representation. The cheapness of video made the former much more feasible, while the latter was transformed by the new ability to sample old films on video to produce more or less modified collages that foregrounded submerged subtexts. The latter became a key strategy in lesbian and gay cinema, instanced respectively by *Dry Kisses Only* (Jane Cottis and Kaucyila Brooke, 1990) and *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (Mark Rappaport, 1992). The possibilities of combining both were displayed in the remarkable Japanese-American macaronic, Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory*.

In Los Angeles, however, the Asian-American interrogation of industrial culture has been most fruitful in Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's remakes of soap operas, commercials, and other genres, not of film, but of broadcast television. Their most recent project demonstrates the collusion of both mediums in the social construction of Japanese-Americans. Initially one component in a gallery exhibition as a

whole summarily entitled *Dis-integration*, *Environmental* is an installation consisting of a video assemblage of outtakes and endclips from Pacific theater WWII films projected across the gallery space onto another assemblage, one comprised of home movie screens, stacked vertically so as to approximate theatrical proportions, while on the opposite wall a domestic-size television monitor plays an assemblage of '50s TV commercials. Conjoining the Yonemotos' concerns with the mass media saturation of the psychic environment, its specifically racist cast, and so its adversarial position in identity micro-politics, *Environmental* finds its own voice by speaking through the voices of a history of misrepresentation; but it also looks to a future about which nothing can be predicted with certainty—except that it will be irreducibly polyglot.

Notes

- 1 P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, second edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) viii. Though here I contest this position, Sitney's original formulation had tremendous heuristic power.
- 2 If the present program were not limited to short films, then a much wider range of modes of production could be illustrated. In these notes, I have sometimes referred to apposite examples screened at other points in *Scratching the Belly of the Beast*, such as Pat O'Neill's *Water and Power*.
- 3 The point is made in the two seminal essays on Los Angeles film, Paul Arthur's "The Western Edge: Oil of L.A. and the Machined Image," (*Millennium Film Journal*, 12, 8-28), and William Moritz, "Visual Music and Film-as-an-Art in California Before 1950" (in Ann and Paul Karlstrom, eds., *The Edge of America: Modernist Art in California Before 1950*. Archives of American Art/ De Young Museum, San Francisco, 1994). The present notes are deeply indebted to both essays and to other scholarship by both writers.
- 4 The former connection was made by J. Hoberman, "The Maya Mystique," *The Village Voice* 23, no. 20 (15 May 1978) and by Paul Arthur, op. cit.; the latter by Lauren Rabinovitz in *Points of Resistance: Women, Power and Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991). P. Adams Sitney, who makes the strongest case for Deren's reference to French Surrealism, nevertheless notes the influence of Kane's "regular shifts of perspective" (op. cit., 15).
- 5 Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1967), 108.
- 6 See Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (Routledge: London, 1990), 111-17.
- 7 See Paul Arthur, op. cit. for a discussion of the relation between the heavily-machined "finish fetish" of several strands of Southern California culture and the work of O'Neill and other independent filmmakers.
- 8 See "Interview: Gronk and Gamboa," *Chismearle* No. 1 (Fall 1976), 31-33.