

# Flecks of Interruption\*

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“Most thought-provoking in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking”, said Martin Heidegger. Such statement opens the main notions and considerations that motivate the programme the Experimental Film Club presents at an unusual time this month. The reason for such an odd date comes from the inspiring source of this programme: the two-part international group exhibition "Automatic", curated by Gavin Murphy and Chris Fite-Wassilak, currently on at Pallas Contemporary Projects (Dublin). Gavin and Chris proposed to us to organize a film session that explored similar ideas to those that embedded the exhibition, which works, in their own words, attempt to “stretch out the persistent, ghostly sensory circuit between the artist, artwork and audience”. Perception was indeed one of the main subjects we discussed during the plotting of this programme, not so much as an experience which could be rationally comprehended, but as a vigorous, direct and impacting encounter with a percept, or a series of percepts, beyond immediate conscious understanding.

Theories of the mind such as the gestalt system, and a considerable part of Structural Film that explores the shape-forming capacity of the senses were important factors to take into account. Nevertheless, these factors couldn't be separated, especially in experimental filmmaking, from the event of light itself. This is where flicker cinema comes into play, because its metrical montage and absence of images –subsequently, its absence of illusionist movement-, result in an exploration of intermittent light as the most essential cinematic mechanism. The way the brain reacts before such a phenomenon was intensely explored by mathematician, artist and composer Tony Conrad in his iconic avant-garde film *The Flicker*, which is an essential part of this screening programme. *The Flicker* is a study of neuro-physiology in the form of a meticulous orchestration of black and clear leader, silence and white noise; rather than addressing the senses, the stroboscopic effects produced by *The Flicker*, trigger neurological operations that generate optic impressions of colours and shapes.

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\* Notes for the film programme curated by Esperanza Collado and presented on November 15th 2009 at The Odessa Club in Dublin (Ireland). This programme was conceived to accompany the exhibition *Automatic*, curated by Gavin Murphy and Chris Fite-Wassilak at Pallas Contemporary Projects, Dublin.

On the other hand, the title of the show, “Automatic”, immediately brought to my mind the works of William S. Burroughs and his collaborations with Brion Gysin and British filmmaker Antony Balch. Burroughs explored the subconscious operations of the mind in literature and film with automatic writing and the Cut-Up technique of composing texts and movement-images, but it was Antonin Artaud’s ideas around what he named “spiritual automaton” that seemed to come closer, conceptually speaking, to the subjacent approach of this programme. According to Artaud, what cinema advances is not the power of thought but, on the contrary, its “impower”. He believed cinema didn’t need a language because it is a matter of neuro-physiological vibrations: the image, therefore, must produce a shock, a nerve-wave in order to give rise to thought.

What Artaud’s understanding of cinema and automatic writing have in common is the materialization of a controlled gathering of critical and conscious thought with the unconscious in thought. *Towers Open Fire* (1963) is an excellent example of such process. The film is articulated as an experimental montage, an assault on linear narrative that features images of Gysin operating his flicker experiment, the Dream Machine, along with the voice of Burroughs reading excerpts from *The Soft Machine*. An important part of the film, running for around thirty seconds, is the first filmic illustration of the Cut-Ups method, culminating in a frenetic random, mathematically organized, series of images shot in Paris. Written by Burroughs and directed by Antony Balch, with contributions from Gysin and Ian Sommerville, *Towers Open Fire* is the first but not last collaboration between Balch/Burroughs, a true challenge to the audience.

The use of the flicker effect and the breakage of linear narratives by ways of repetition and circular entrapment are some of the features common to the works described above and Maximilian Le Cain’s, whose outstanding video pieces have been part of our programmes on a regular basis. One of the most fascinating aspects of the work of Cork-based artist and critic is its capacity to turn a given architectonical edifice into “thinking space”<sup>†</sup>, a process that is never presented exempt of a high degree of inexplicability or strangeness. Slavoj Žižek said the most disturbing moments in David Lynch’s films are those that seem to be trapped between fantasy and reality, not being entirely in one territory of the other, but in unknown’s land. Watching *Point of Departure* (2008) inspires a similar thought; the tension is built between two irreconcilable worlds or two parallel dimensions failing to syncretize. The protagonist, Betty (theater actress Anna Manahan who recently

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<sup>†</sup> As it has been suggested with respect to Le Cain’s *Making a Home*, screened at the EFC as part of our past programme “T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G, The Architectures of Perception”.

passed away), is trapped between the claustrophobic institution in which she spends the last years of her life and her desire to escape. An oneiric black and white, slow motion picture combined with the usual idiosyncrasy of Le Cain's sound treatment, form the reality of Betty: a maze of corridors and closing doors.

As Betty goes to bed, it is perhaps time for us to wake up to the fact that extreme slowness, or even immobility, equals absolute speed. The zig-zag that glides between the explosive animated collages of Jeff Keen, the author of the 'Artwar' film series, gives substance to such energy. Although in a fragmented manner, assaulting the senses both visually and sonically, with his guerrilla filmmaking. The works of Brighton-based artist and pioneer of expanded cinema Jeff Keen amalgamate animation, live action and collage. They abound in references to popular culture such as toys and dolls, comic strips, Hollywood lines and photos, pre-war pulps, etc. In *Artwar #3: Irresistible Attack* (1995), as in the rest of the series, art is under an "irresistible attack", more plastic, materialist and malleable than ever, by "a prisoner of art".

It has been said that Keen's oeuvre is a fusion of the arts. This programme certainly is a synthesis of several art practices, including painting, music, literature, and sciences. While *The Flicker* offers a vocabulary of structure, physics, and mathematics, *Point of Departure* provides the most classic cinematographic aesthetics to the programme, especially considering its dramatic, silent film tone. And, there are, still, infinite common elements among the works discussed here. For instance, both the *Dream Machine* and *The Flicker* have been addressed as visual experiences that can produce hallucinations without chemicals, while some relationship could be traced between the intent of Burroughs to erase the word and Jeff Keen's own Dada-like vocabulary ('blatz', 'blatzom', 'kinozap', 'omozap') and approach towards language: "kill the word, don't let the word kill you!".

Programme titles:

(Total running time: 78 mins approx.)

Maximilian Le Cain

Point of Departure

(2008, 8 mins, b&w, video, courtesy of the artist)

Towers Open Fire

Anthony Balch / William S. Burroughs

(1963, 16 mins, b&w, 16mm, LUX Artists Moving-Image)

Artwar # 3: Irresistible Attack

Jeff Keen

(1995, 15 mins, colour, 8mm screened on dvd)

The Flicker

Tony Conrad

(1966, 30 mins, b&w, 16mm, distributed by LUX)