Notes Towards Paracinema and Interruption[*]

ESPERANZA COLLADO

I. Cinema: a dialectical question?

Where does cinema take place: on the screen? in a gaseous conical flux of light that operates above our heads? in the mind?
A phenomenological question, dialectical by nature.
Doubled-sided viewpoint in cinema:
Camera eye/spectator's eye,
Mechanical eye (camera)/ human eye(filmmaker).
, , , -confrontation of what happens simultaneaously behind and in front of our heads-. This duality is what I understand as the source of the problem regarding the material of cinema, the physical material of film.
Two ways to approach the materiality of film (cinema's matter):
A. Reification of cinema -projector, screen, strip of celluloid, camera-.
B. Intelligible matter that cinema brings to light: the processes of the mind / the mobility of thought.

II. Artaud and the 'Impower' of Thought

The speculations of Antonin Artaud around the great themes of the moving- image and its relations with thought. What cinema advances is not the power of thought but, on the contrary, its 'impower'. Cinema does not need a language because it is a matter of neuro-physiological vibrations: the image must produce a shock, a nerve-wave in order to give rise to thought. Cinema and automatic writing = appropiation? A sort of automatic writing not absent of composition but a gathering of critical and conscious thought combined with the unconscious in thought: 'spiritual automaton'. Burroughs' cut-ups: 'the cut-ups technique is closer to the actual factors of perception. When looking at a window, going down the street, looking around a room, etc., consciousness is being cut by random factors. Life is a cut-up rather than a straight linear narrative'.

III. Cinema and Life (Montage)

Eisenstein on montage: montage as a reflection of intellectual processes of thought by no means restricted to the cinema, but an everyday phenomenon found when we have to deal with the juxtaposition of two facts, two objects or two phenomena. 'The form of montage is a restoration of the laws of the process of thought, which in turn restores moving reality in a process of unrolling'. (Eisenstein)

In 'The Myth of Total Cinema' Andre Bazin suggests that the invention of cinema is the culmination of a long-standing effort to bring to light a principle found in everyday life, being the source of cinema's invention due to the convergence of its obsession: a myth, a total cinema, life.

The essential articulation of cinema -montage- as a method or principle that contemplates the simultaneity of phenomena. It presupposes the fragmentation of reality, as Burroughs indicated, which combined in heterogeneous compositions plays an important role in the fine arts, literature, theatre, and film. Introduction to I Ching; Carl Jung: synchronicity and montage are processes of knowledge and perception of the world.

IV. The Sublation of Art

Art proclaims a suicidal gesture of protest. Death of art (a weak death). Avant-garde proposal as a sublation of art in the Hegelian sense of the term (renewed by Gianni Vattimo): art was not to be simply destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be preserved, albeit in a changed form. (Think of Lettrism...).

V. Suspension of disbelief.

The material of film as an original form of art therefore had to change in order to separate itself from the cinematographic industry and inject itseft into life. This transformation or process is precisely what I understand as paracinema: the gradual dematerialization of avant-garde cinema; the loss of the corpus or body of film embodied in artworks and actions that often present themselves as films while subverting the very (traditional) materials of the medium.

To put it differently: paracinema is the practice of making films without celluloid, camera, screen nor projector. One of the first strategies avant-garde cinema employed for such means was to destroy or reveal the technical aspects conventional cinema utilizes in order to make possible a "suspension of disbelief" in perception (the willingness of a person to accept as true the representative illusionary premises of a work of fiction). The darkness of the cinema venue and the presence of the screen quite facilitate the so-called redemption of reality in film.

VI. From Brakhage to Gysin.

Even so, the destruction of the cinematographic plot and narrative wasn't enough for filmmakers as Stan Brakhage, for example, who, in addition, dispensed with the use of the camera and editing. Brakhage explored the plastic materiality of the strip of celluloid painting and scratching films, using, in short, the filmic material as an expressionistic canvas in search of visual music and hypnagogic vision, a type of natural inner vision that takes place with eyes closed and could be related to the effect produced by Brion Gysin's Dream Machine.

VII. Assault on Cinema.

The death of cinema begun, therefore, with the destruction of the plot and narrative and continued with a series of irreparable assaults on montage, cinematic movement, matter, space and time at the hands of Structural film, a term coined by P. Adams Sitney, which referred to an experimental film movement prominent in the US in the 1960s. Structural filmmakers produced a type of cinema that shared many features with minimalist and conceptual art in their tendency to reduce the medium to its more fundamental properties and materials. As the Structural/materialist films of the UK and the rest of Europe, this was a cinema of structure that insisted in its shape, which was predetermined and simplified to the detriment of its content.

Cinema was putting into question the veracity of the realist image; it was refusing to represent, negating the linguistic conditions conventional cinema had imposed. Perception itself and the procedural aspects implied in perception were now subject of exploration. Canadian artist and filmmaker Michael Snow, in two of his most influential films, Wavelength and Back and Forth, for instance, created a tautological correlation between cinema and time and space respectively. He elaborated a parallelism between the presence of the spectator in the artwork -physically static, mentally mobile- and the procedural situation involving his/her presence. Wavelength is a seminal work and unquestionably one of the most iconoclastic and original experiments of the sixties. It consists of a continuous, almost imperceptible zoom movement, which traverses the length of an eighty-foot New York loft...

Andy Warhol could not be more explicit in respect to the act of perception as a procedural activity. 8 hour-long films 'Empire' and 'Sleep' constituted a manifest assault on montage, but also on the unreal, fictional and illusionary nature of the cinematographic enterprise. Warhol's assault had as correlate the staging of film duration itself, frame by frame, destroying cinematic movement. In Warhol's films, we are confronted with perceptual process as duration in its purest state, the full measure of time. We are confronted, as a last resort, with ourselves as center of the artwork, to use the expression coined by John Cage.

Exploring the possibilities of the extreme mobility and the immobility of the support of the camera, Snow and Warhol destroyed the representation of time and space in cinema, which had become quasi-physical matters or plastic materials in a sculptural sense; they could be modulated or shaped. As Deleuze put it, the time-image had become direct because time was no longer subordinate to movement; on the contrary, movement subordinated itself to time in these particular films. The image thus had as object the functioning of thought, which is the real subject in cinema, bringing us back images.

VIII. Degree Zero.

However, after all these experimentations cinema reached its degree zero at the doors of its total dematerialization. With its metrical montage, its absence of images and movement, and its flickering luminous impulses, cinema saw a decrease towards its own genetic material. Flicker films were complex mathematical compositions of black and white frames, and, ultimately, pure and simple alternation of light and darkness. In fact, that is essentially cinema, or, at least, that would be a materialistic definition of the medium: a strip of celluloid composed by a succession of frames and intervals unrolling through a conical flux of light.

'Arnulf Rainer', by Austrian filmmaker Peter Kubelka, is one of the first frame-by-frame abstractions that entirely dispenses with the image, consisting solely of carefully orchestrated alternations of black and white frames. The first film that responded to this description was 'L'Anticoncept' by Lettrist artist Gil J. Wolman.

IX. Cinema now wanted a body...

Cinema now wanted a body, that corporeal presence which had remained the prerogative of theatre. And the request of a body was, according to Deleuze, the formula of philosophical reversal, because the body was no longer an obstacle that separates thought from itself or that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. Contradicting all natural perception, the flicker films of Tony Conrad, Peter Kubelka, and Fluxus artist Paul Sharits quite generated gaseous perception, defined by the free movement of each particle, and the photogramme coming out of the celluloid and screen surface. Flicker cinema didn't give us the theatrical presence of the bodies because that was not its purpose; it spreads a white space over us, while its luminous waves and dancing corpuscles thus facilitated the physical awareness of the audience and film's own materiality.

X. Physical exultation/Interval/Irrational cut/Interruption.

Artaud would have loved this cinema, because with it the flickerings multiplied the interstices like irrational cuts, generating neurophysiological vibrations beyond movement; exploring the physical exultation -and even intoxication- that the rotation of images communicates directly to the brain. As with Heidegger's notion of Being, flicker film raises only as that which at the same time withdraws from us, because, above all, it is a cinema of intervals.

Paul Valery had already indicated that the true place of poetry is between words, while Stephan Mallarme quite literally demonstrated it in his poem Un Coup de Des... (A Dice Throw at Any Time Will Never Abolish Chance, 1860s). Punctuation signs, pauses, and blank spaces between words or between frames are indispensable in the construction of meaning; the interval is the cut through which the spectator constructs sense, it is a space for interactions, chance, the dice throw...

Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov had already gone a long way in this direction when in 1922 he stated that the material of film, the 'artistic elements of motion' -are the intervals between frames, and not motion itself. Moreover, it is through the interstices of the discontinuity of the flux, where paracinema and the death of film descend. Exploring the nervous system and the most literal persistence of vision, flicker films summoned up a flickering cerebral process based on a demystification principle: cinema is not movement but luminous change, a principle that reconciled body and brain in cinema, provoking epileptic seizures even.

None of the arts, artist and filmmaker Hollis Frampton wrote, reflects the flux of vital breathing in such complexity and thoroughness as cinema. That was the dialectical formula in materialist-flicker film, that of the relation between the image and its absence, which had as correlate the screen as a medium of luminous variations.

XI. Cinema... Corpus versus Cerebrum

In short, the defining components of flicker film: the discontinuity of the flux, the persistence of vision, and the molecular parameters that reached the particle of matter in gaseous perception, radically damaged the materiality of film. Cinema had finally reached its objective: a primitive state previous or separated from the domain of language and the image, a degree zero defined by a disbelief in the dramatic and psychological association of images.

There weren't, after the suicidal gesture of flicker cinema, many possibilities left in regard of the material explorations of film. Moreover, the projection space would never be the same, it had been transformed into a quasi-sculptural situation, closer to installation, on the one hand, and to happening and performance works, on the other. The request of cinema was the body in 'Line Describing a Cone', for instance, in

which the projector's light-beam becomes a quasi-tactile 'solid light film' that interacts with the physical presence of the audience. 'Line Describing a Cone' is a film-installation that questions the traditional film limitations eliminating the screen in favor of the primacy of the projection event. In fact, eliminating the duality or the doubled point of view in cinema mentioned at the very start of this paper, the audience watches the film by standing on her back towards what would normally be the screen, looking along the beam towards the projector itself. The film begins as a coherent line of light, like a laser beam, and develops through the 30 minute duration, into a complete, hollow cone of light (...).

'Zen for Film' (1964) is a film performance event by Fluxus artist Nam June Paik, consisting of a 30 minutes projection of 16mm clear leader that increasingly accumulates scratches and dust with each successive projection. During the projection, and clearly influenced by John Cage's notion of chance operations and indeterminism, the artist meditates and performs a series of minimal actions in front of the screen. Furthermore, this work, by showing no images, questions the illusionary condition of cinema industry and abolishes the purely reproductive function of film by activating the spectator as a participant, drawing attention to the actual context of the film screening.

Many of the works produced in the late 60s, which involved shadow plays and projections, were trying to generate cinematic experiences linked to the very principle of cinema (the mobility of thought, the relinking or chaining of images) outside the physical boundaries of the medium, rather than a film effect.

Cinema could request now the brain, because film could take place in the mind, beyond the physical limitations of the camera, screen or film stock. Such was the case in English artist Anthony McCall's piece 'Long Film for Ambient Light' (1975), a film in which there was no actual filmstrip, screen, nor projector. In fact, there was no actual object or element in 'Long Film for Ambient Light' subject to an exchange of merchandise of artistic value.

XII. Modularity of Time and Space.

Film, or, more specifically, the idea of cinema, was found in the very modularity with respect to space, time and light, in the coincidence of three found elements placed in the location where the piece took place: a calendar covering fifty days, showing the actual time-period of the presentation of the piece; an altered space consisting of a single electric light hung in the centre of the room at eye- level, and a series of windows covered with white paper (which limited them to being light-sources during the day and reflective surfaces -screens- during the night; and, the third and last element, a two-page statement on the wall titled 'Notes on Duration'. In it McCall says that 'an artwork that does not change within our time-span of attending to it we tend to regard as object, while an artwork that does show change within our time-

span of attending we tend to regard as event'. 'Long Film for Ambient Light' is, therefore, a paracinematic event consisting in the production of experience, a cinematic experience found outside the standard film apparatus. According to McCall, this work sits deliberately on a threshold between a static condition and being a work of movement. Even so,' Long Film for Ambient Light', beyond McCall's interpretation, sits on another threshold: the one formed by the expansion of cinema, the perseverance on the process that constitutes the artwork, and an understanding of art as activity.

In his photographic and installation works, Michael Snow demonstrated that, when articulated in pairs or pages of a book, two related images can generate visual mobility in the mind and variations within perceptual duration. Works as Cover to Cover, a book consisting of pairs of photographs taken simultaneously by two opposite cameras, produced a cinematic quality far beyond the traditional materials of cinema.

Ultimately, these kind of works are paracinematic, because the create an experience that shares with cinema and thought the continual relinked parcellings, rather than the linkage of images, present in imagination and the dream. Lettrism (a French avant-garde movement with theoretical roots in Dada established in Paris in the mid-1940s by Isidore Isou) had already gone long way in this direction. Isou proclaimed: 'Cinema is dead. There can be no more films. It's time for debate'. Roland Sabatier (Lettrist artist) said: 'contemplate my word, which speaks about cinema, and you will see my film'.

XIII. Towards a Corporeal Cinema.

Finally, it is worth mentioning here, in order to illustrate the notion of paracinema, the radical works of Viennese Actionist artists Peter Weibel and Valie Export. They conceived a number of cinematic actions with and without film intended to overcome the dichotomy of object and depiction, production and reproduction, presence and representation. Furthermore, their commitment toward a redefinition of the art practices did run contrary to film's linguistic character and the mechanisms of identification and involvement that the medium, at large, entails. Their rejection of filmic representation was accompanied by what they called 'an audience activation', which consisted in dismantling the image of reality constructed and controlled by the media apparatus.

'Tapp und Tast Kino' (1968) and 'Action Pants: Genital Panic' (1969) are two public performances by Weibel and Export that meditate about voyeurism, the metaphorical penetration of the body by the media and its estimation of the female body as a sexualized object for visual consumerism. With a cardboard box attached to her chest resembling a mini-cinema, Valie Export stood on a busy street in Munich while passersby, solicited by Weibel, were entreated to feel Export's bare breasts hidden

behind the box's improvised curtains. In Genital Panic, Export entered a darkened erotic cinema venue. Roaming up and down the aisles of the cinema and, with the crotch of her pants cut out, she shouted and challenged the public to grasp 'the naked truth'.

Weibel and Export, proclaiming a more tactile than visual cinematic communication, were searching for new forms of experience directly integrating art into life, a modernist symptom that returns in the postmodernist age. The same symptom can be addressed in the performances and happenings of George Brecht and Alan Kaprow, the Situationist International actions, Andy Warhol's 'Exploding Plastic Inevitable' and other American expanded cinema events. Land-Art is to be considered here, as Jean-Christophe Royoux puts it, the result of the collapse of cinema and sculpture.

XIV. Temporary Conclusions (...).

All these artistic forms of paracinema displaced radically the role of the artist, which should be understood as a producer of experience. In fact, avant-garde practices direct themselves to the way art functions in the public sphere. They do so by generating conversational spaces and situations that function as artistic practices on an interchange and mediation basis.

The formalist history of the avant-garde is that of the radical negation of mass-culture. Moreover, experimental filmmaking was, so to speak, the avant-garde of this postmodernist practice of anti-illusion. In this respect, what we need is not a history of avant-garde film; as Malcolm LeGrice proclaimed, but a history of immaterial avant-garde practices that involve the idea of cinema. This is not an easy project, since the inherently ephemeral nature of such practices makes them structurally incompatible with conventional forms of documentation.

In his Movie Journal Jonas Mekas reported in the 70s that the 'film medium was breaking apart and moving towards some place, where, I don't know', he concluded. I think, to this respect, that the avant-garde has already begun to spill across the traditional boundaries of the art world, which demonstrates that Sheldon Renan's prediction in 1967 has been accomplished: new image making technologies and practices (video, television, the internet, computer graphics, multimedia theatre, light shows and so on) would fulfill a radical and heterogeneous idea of cinema. Perhaps they do, and in the process we, as producers (referring here to both to audiences and authors), can even become the actual film.

Paracinema constitutes the demonstration that works of art don't exist anymore as objects of traditional production. What do exist, as La Societe Anonyme puts it, are labors and practices that we can call art. They have to do with cultural production and the dismantling or deconstruction of representation, illusion, mass-media, the work of art as merchandise, and the traditional Art-institution. Finally, another prediction has

become a reality. That of Bertold Brecht's theory of immanent reflexivity, which is to say that any form of art will reveal the principles of its construction. This is precisely what Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad and Peter Kubelka were doing when their metrical/ mathematically- structured films led filmmaking to a thinking-image, the zero degree of cinema. This way, film does not film/record/register the filmic process without projecting its cerebral process -and revealing, therefore, the principles of its construction: the phi-phenomenon or how the brain connects frames filling the intervals (a phenomenon explored outside the film apparatus by William Burroughs and Brion Gypsin's Dream Machine). However, that zero degree led filmmaking to a cinema of expansion with no camera, even with no screen nor film. Everything could be the screen, the body of the performer or the bodies of the audience; and everything could replace the film, from the imagined film that occurs merely in the mind, or the filmic impressions found in the backside of the eyelids, to the tactile films that we can even touch. These are the forms of paracinema in the age of immaterial work, the realization of a total cinema. What cinema achieved, that which the other arts couldn't, was overcome in the various ways already described. Cinema hasn't died; it remains, since it continues bringing to light an intelligible matter.