

THREE FILMS BY HANNES SCHÜPBACH

Saturday 18 February 2012, 6pm
Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich

SPIN

(2001) 16mm film, colour, silent, 12 min.

Turning toward the interior

“The concept of Spin, the inherent turning momentum of electrons, stands for the passing of time and for time itself. The unceasing transformation of the world is translated into film via the gliding movement of the camera. Bright light and blurring portray the environment of the film’s elderly subject, my mother, as pure atmosphere. Her few calm gestures in the face of diminishing time and energy convey a personal presence undisturbed by specific goals. She sits and breathes quietly. When walking she travels across space. The turning away of a tree full of apples evokes regret, as does a sharp light that narrows and dissolves. In the final image my mother seems to taste a bitterness that eludes comprehension.”—H.S.

VERSO

(2008-2011) 16mm film, colour, silent, 13 min.

Towards

“Verso—turning to things and landscapes, reading them. A movement along things, as if tracing written lines, in order to understand or to grasp, take up, collect them—keeping them around, sustained in memory. There, they continue to rearrange and refocus into sharp or nearly sharp images. These slip and shift, allowing room for a new direction. All the gaze can hold is the single motif from a movement that continues onward. It is my father who stands up. He wants to see. This impulse draws multiple lines—in getting up, in crossing a field of stones, then in the descent of a memory, in slipping and piecing together.”—H.S.

L'ATELIER

(2007) 16mm film, colour, silent, 16 min.

Sight and Thought

In the “drawing” on film, described by the gestures of the recorded image, the physical space itself becomes the work. The space evolves in a counterplay to internal movement. Following an insight, a glance falls on one object, then another. This aspect of the texture of the work that connects the sight of objects with the movement that lies within them, leads me to think admirably of the two painters Paul Cézanne and Pierre Bonnard: Cézanne, the master of line and the “painterly quantum,” who depicts space as a reality composed of individual moments; Bonnard, the master of painting an animated space.”—H.S.

Hannes Schüpbach (b. 1965 in Winterthur, Switzerland) studied visual art at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Zurich and Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst in Basel from 1988 to 1991. In 1992 he dedicated six months to cinema and performance studies at New York University.

Schüpbach has exhibited internationally, with programmes at Museum Reina Sofia in Madrid, Tate Modern, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona and the Harvard Film Archive, amongst others. In 2012, he will present his work at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and Kunsthalle Wien.

“My own instinct is that the poles of existence and non-existence alternate at an extremely fast speed, and that we float in that alternation. We don’t experience the non-existence, the moments between existence; there is no way to perceive these moments as such. But accepting their presence aerates life, and suffuses the “solid” world with luminosity.”¹

Between the light and the shadow, the rock and the water in Hannes Schüpbach’s films lies an eternal silence, a black pause; and it is in this void that the artist’s formal and philosophical concerns are activated. Framing lyrical, richly symbolic images of the elemental and infinite, the gestural and mortal, whether languorous gaze or brief glimpse, the dark interstices – black film leader – with which Schüpbach separates sections or single images create stanzas, and the structure and duration of the images themselves line and meter; and in this way, with the dancing metaphor of the portraits it draws, his work approaches a rare poesis of vision.

The book *Hannes Schüpbach: Cinema Elements*, published to accompany the exhibition *Hannes Schüpbach: Stills and Movies* at Kunsthalle Basel from 25 January to 22 March 2009, identifies thematic and formal concerns which permeate both Schüpbach’s painting and moving image works. The essays discussing Schüpbach’s work, by Adam Szymczyk, Eleonore Frey, Philippe-Alain Michaud, Andréa Picard and the artist himself, describe the artist’s interest in minimalism and Systems-like process; and in the structural and formal qualities of the frame, and, by extension, the screen. The bounded image, Szymczyk shows, is suffused in Schüpbach’s practice; a preoccupation in early paintings with the form of the frame and the plastic qualities of the screen, which “might represent the limit of vision” and depend on the movement of viewers through space, playing with the parallax view and the (filmic-sculptural) possibilities of framing and editing in space – which, of course, are explored, in his moving image work, with the addition of time.²

Andréa Picard offers that the “darkness [of intervals] intensifies moments captured by the artist”, which it does, undoubtedly. But it also acts itself, becomes itself: it is not an absence, just as the silence of the films is not an absence of sound. It is darkness in and of itself.³

This weighted interval, this apparent absence, cuts, dismisses; yet cradles, softens, insists, beckons. It is at once grammatical interlocutor and fragile separator: as a blink, it turns the eyes, measures the look. And it corrals the frame itself, the artist’s hand becoming a secondary aperture, isolating mountain slopes and rushing water, a vignette to marshal the gaze.

Snow, wood, flame. *Winter Feuer* (1999 – 2000), Schüpbach’s first film, summons an elemental triptych of endless rebirth, each weighed against the other: copper sparks against black sky; spectral faces vizarded, born of ember, extinguished by ash. And throughout, the eternal opposition of crystalline snows and winter fire. It is a searching, fleeting, diffident image that appears here; a flickering impression wrought by stolen glimpses, overlaid and disjunctive pictures appearing suddenly, fading quickly as the fire itself.

Whilst *L’Atelier* (2007) follows many of the same formal and philosophical concerns that Schüpbach had established in earlier works – indeed, in his paintings too – it is altogether more complex, and draws together several hitherto disparate

enquiries in a vertiginous interplay of time and space, motif and structure. It is here that the artist interrogates the frame most completely, as aperture, perimeter, plane, surface, window. From within a room high above the street, his camera surveys its bounded space restlessly: bound within itself by the endless black of its silent chamber, bound without by the aperture of window. A chamber within a chamber.

Looking, searching, Schüpbach’s soft-focus recalls the half-gaze, the glimpse, the dart of the eyes. A hand obscures and reveals: another, more mercurial frame. Reflections on the glass panes of the windows in turn describe plane; planar surfaces bisecting the world, signalling a (the) fiction. Always the outside, the without; always this reminder. The heavy air of the interior, the sweet breeze of the outside. Existing behind glass, trees gently swaying in the wind framed by the straight wooden frames they yielded.

But also: this is the artist’s room, his atelier. Here is where he eats; this is the window he looks out of. *L’Atelier* becomes at once a possibility and a record: expression and impression. And then, in a strangely indirect light, now steel-blue, now crimson, lamplit nights, moonlit nights are summoned. Day, and cumulus clouds loom behind buckling branches: and below, away from the sky, their same movement plays out in a sharp chiaroscuro of sunlit and shadow-drenched greens and blacks.

Flashes of frames, of grids, close the film, the bound edges moving violently and with gathering speed, matrices of trees, buildings, skies. And black.

“On a visceral level,” writes Nathaniel Dorsky in *Devotional Cinema*, “the intermittent quality of film is close to the way we experience the world. We don’t experience a solid continuum of existence. Sometimes we are here and sometimes not, suspended in some kind of rapid-fire illusion.”⁴ And so it is with Schüpbach’s films, which share, incidentally, many of the concerns of those of Dorsky: it is transience, intangibility, transmutation — alchemy, no less; ultimately, the unfettered mores of chaos itself which best speak to our existence, not measurability, certainty or permanence.

Gregory Markopoulos and Robert Beavers, filmmakers to whom Schüpbach’s work is often compared, similarly made use of intermittency via black intervals; Beavers, too, isolates landscape, architecture, gesture precisely via vignettes. Like them, whilst affirming frame and apparatus, Schüpbach avoids Structuralist asceticism, his fluid composition becoming instead an act of concentration, ensnaring the air, training our gaze. He is, nevertheless, in many senses a materialist, just as is Beavers. Writing in *Cinema Elements*, he observes that “The thin, transparent plastic substance of film bears an image as its outermost surface. Viewed from the side, a faintly raised relief can be made out on the colorless medium. It remains as an imprint of the photographed object revealed through the chemical process. Reduced to a nearly two-dimensional configuration of color particles, the film image renders the configuration of objects, of surfaces, as they converged in front of the camera and in the angle of the lens at the moment of exposure.”⁵ Yet this materiality transcends the idea of the film-as-film alone: it is the objects, the surfaces, the shadows and streams. As Roland Barthes wrote, invoking Susan Sontag:

“The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.”⁶

From materialism, both Adam Szymczyk and Philippe-Alain Michaud go on to contextualise Schüpbach’s moving image work in light of the importance to him of minimal and

metrical systems, citing Morton Feldman and Markopoulos as influences. Schüpbach draws on Feldman’s compositional technique – most explicitly in his *Feldman-Lesung*, reproduced in *Cinema Elements*, which offers a quasi-musical notation for the organisation of images – to liberate the structure of scene and edit; verse and chorus.

Spin (2001), with *Verso* (2008) forms part of a trilogy (of which the final film, *Contour* is forthcoming) in which the artist’s thematic concerns – simply, of the personal and universal, or mortal and eternal – are united. A portrait of the artist’s mother, *Spin* presents gesture as (an) inscription of the human, and of the particular—and the gestural in both the film’s subject and in the way the artist’s camera approaches that subject inform one another: his mother’s crisp blouse, her neat hands. The way her hands are held. The rise and fall of her chest as she breathes. An eye glittering in the half-light. The crown of her head, the chair where she has sat. And outside, hollyhocks in the sunlight; heavy rain; the impassive stare of the mountains.

Navigating an eternal landscape of rock, dry rock and water as a means to articulate a portrait of the artist’s father, *Verso* returns, explicitly, to the elemental narrative of *Winter Feuer*, and in many respects brings together the formal, poetic and philosophical concerns of Schüpbach’s earlier works. Here again is the use of the deliberately de-focused image to suggest the glance, the gesture of look, and to return the frame almost to form alone. Here, too, is the juxtaposition of contrasting thematic elements, though they now weave a more complex thread, perhaps: the verdant domesticity of the artist’s father’s garden thrown up against the blank scree and violent granite of the alpine foothills invokes the consideration of mortal and immortal time-space: the timeful and the timeless. And the mortal, the father, here moves through this space outside of time, feet picking their way along boulder-strewn paths, across singing streams. A hand frames the mountain, shrouding it, containing it. And everywhere the rock: a song of stone. Straggling gorse huddled in a fissure. Water caresses rock, white water boils. And a hand – the artist’s father’s – touches the water, frames the mountain, and, at the end, at the close of summer, collects fallen hazelnuts, making real the materials, activating the elements.

And here, as before, the black spaces, the radical interstices. And perhaps, beyond the merely visual, the black interval asserts itself as part of a body, as the interior voice of the film, its naked self. Not blink, not gaze averted, but breath. Pausing to take breath; the dark pool a moment of becoming before the release. And then the lit scene as filled chamber; that aspirant interior, pregnant, alive.

* * *

This article originally appears in *Artesian*, Spring 2012. *Artesian* is available from the London Review Bookshop and selected outlets nationwide.

The short texts on each film (overleaf) were originally published in *Hannes Schüpbach: Cinema Elements*, Kunsthalle Basel (Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess, Zürich, 2009).

1. Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, p.31

2. Adam Szymczyk, *Stills and Movies*, in *Cinema Elements*, p.23

3. Andrea Picard, *Material Moments*, in *Cinema Elements*, p.110

4. Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, p. 30

5. Hannes Schüpbach, *Folds and Film*, in *Cinema Elements*, p.203

6. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp.80-81

Many thanks to Hannes Schüpbach, Veronica Sekules, Simon Dell and Monica Nuñez Laiseca for making this screening possible.