

Letter to Hollis

Frampton - Nov. 22, 1971

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Dear Hollis,

My very grateful thanks for the opportunity to see "Zorn's Lemma"; and this then an appreciation of that event.

Yes!, the film manages to create its own world, utterly and visually. First come 'sayings'; then 'letters', then 'words'; and it is thus of an order perfectly suited to prevent one from taking the whole of it as reference -- tho' . . . and this is the jolliest part of it -- language DID surely develop in that order; and yet it clearly no longer ordinarily DOES: thus "Zorn's Lemma" closes circle on itself. The last shot is a miracle; I mean, I KNOW you could never have expected it to be THAT variably subtle when you let it photograph itself. At least, when such images come to me I credit Angels (my feeling about them all the same whether, as in different periods, I 'call the shot' via God, gods, Muse, chance and/or whatsoever I happened to be worshipping outside self). That last shot shifts itself through every subtle mood appropriate to the occasion -- the first 'flares' falling in sync with "light", the snow beginning in an earnest of its oblivion, then abating to extend the overall metaphor, then returning in gusts to suggest the 'echoes' of itself, each recurrence as widening rings in the pool of consideration. . . this ranging from 'across the river and into the trees' to the solidnest Document of film-maker's END I've ever seen, beginning and ending that shot -- the final edge flares giving us a greening of those trees for Spring before their 'blank' and resultant 'black mtn.' after-image. Wonderful!

And the beginning of "Zorn's Lemma" is what everybody knows, old wives tales. In thinking back on it I remembered Gertrude Stein's oft repeated, many versioned, sense that there is nothing new and true which is not known already to every peasant, or Freud's rhetorical amazement that his world of critics had become so fussed by (1) his 'discovery' that night-dreams and daydreams are essentially the same (which is implicit in the language) and (2) that children masterbate (which any mother or nurse obviously knows.) I was moved by "Zorn's Lemma" to return to G. Stein's "Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind or The Geographical History of America". For instance:

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"Philosophy tries to replace in the human mind what is not there that is time and beginning and so they always have to stop going on existing. There are consequently ^{equally} practically no masterpieces in philosophy.

"Philosophy then says human nature is interesting. Well it is not. That is all there is to say about that. It is so easy to be right if you do not believe what you say."

"Zorn's Lemma" is, as I saw it, one continuous tussle between these extremes termed 'human mand#'" and "human nature" by Gertrude. I'll quote one of the opening sections of that book:

"Let us talk not about disease but about death. If nobody had to die how would there be room enough for any of us who now live to have lived. We never could have been if all the others had not died. There would have been no room.

"Now the relation of human nature to the human mind is this.

#"Human nature does not know this.

"Human nature cannot know this.

"What is it that human nature does not know. Human nature does not know that if every one did not die there would be no room for those who live now.

"Human nature can not know this.

"Now the relation of human nature to the human mind is this.

"Human nature cannot know this.

"But the human mind can. It can know this."

You dance, mid section of that film, upon The Alphabet in a way very related to Stein's Geographical dance; and for the end of the film? -- :

"I know so well the relation of a simple center and a continuous design to the land as one looks down on it, a wandering line as one looks down on it, a quarter section as one looks down on it, the shadows of each tree on the snow and the woods on each side and the land higher up between it and I know so well how in spite of the fact that the human mind has not looked at it the human mind has it to know that it is there like that, notwithstanding that the human mind has liked what it has which has not been like that."

Thus, as I see it, you go both ways, to put it simply: beginning section, Visuals being mind's sightless track, black leader while Audio natures 'on and on'; and mid-section dances geographically with mind-(hind)-sight and natural input, viz. and visual; and the end does reverse Audio-and-Visual's beginning 'roles', the track a word at a time (philosophy replacing human mind, as Gertrude suggests) and The Vision of that shot so natural as to be almost Romantic (almost to have achieved THE specific Style which mothered cap "N" Nature into Art). Wonderful!

Besides all this, it is hellish fun to watch. No description of the film which I have heard (and I've heard many) prepared me at all for the experience of watching "Zorn's Lemma". I had, in fact, told the kids it probably wasn't for them (even tho' they watch most movies in this house; but then they have come to hate movies with long loooooong ~~###~~ shots with subtle changes and/or oft repeating images -- many of such coming into our house these days . . . all labeled "structuralist" -- most of them boring everybody here, with only myself finally dutifully seeing them thru to end alone). Anyway, the kids decided to give it a try (as they usually do); and I wish you could have witnessed their excitement. They played the whole mid-section's game with ever-mounting curiosity and emotion -- which letter would be replaced next?, and with WHAT? The mood became so intense that when one of your "C"s spelled "Crystal", my eleven-year-old daughter named Crystal cheered with a passion of having found place in The World. There were many other examples of this World-making total acceptance of the film. When "C" was replaced, that image became charged in the room as surely as if Crystal had gone through initiation rite and been granted totem.

I am most concerned in my work at the moment with Document (as distinct, as I can make it, from Documentary -- knocking that "airy" off the end giving me the sense I'm escaping that rhetoric and outright propaganda associated with "Old Doc" school of film-making . . . that I would rescue "ment" for some end in absolute -- hoping to get the Latin's documentum sense of "example" in the first place . . . where "documentary"'s "lesson" now sits). My photography of late has led me to a gathering of images (rather than editing) which refers to its Source (say Policemen, Hospital Corridors, etc., as in "eyes" and "Deus Ex") rather than reflect that Source;

that is, the images and the orders/rythms/tones of their 'gathering' tend to make all reference terminate in the film, thus bouncing energy back only on The Viewer, his Policemen, Men, etc., his Hospital Corridors, hallways, alleys, tubes, what-have-him. I'm coming to believe that, along this line of recent work, I've stumbled upon a way to plug yet another energy-leak in Art (in a line with Charles Olson's "getting the energy of the poem all the way over to The Reader"). A 'concealed art' and a lack of obvious 'self-expression' are essential along this 'tack'. You've tackled it in "Zorn's Lemma" from an opposite direction; but I feel very close to you, thru this film 'lemma' and "Lemon" as well inasmuch as you've fashioned some similar 'energy-trap', tho' more like a 'book' (in the sense Chartres or certainly Notre Dame were once referred to as "Books" -- i.e. collections, etc. and/or like what I was specifically after in making "Scenes From Under Childhood", opening 'chapter' of my "Book of Film").

Anyway, as opposites attract (or old wives say so), let's write -- if you like; I'd be very happy to have your thoughts on these matters, most especially those relating to Document ... if any sense of that term has haunted your working processes -- I mean I'd be desperate to get any sensible feed-back, even out of left-field, apropos Lumiere on up't; (your quote of Louis: "The cinematograph is an invention without a future": and your pursuit of "the fact", "too many facts", and so forth, raised the hair on the back of my neck; thus could you try to pry my lid off a little further by entertaining "The Document" as fully as you did "the fact"?)

You'll also probably have some idea of how desperate I am about all this. We share at least the 'factual' experience of having both photographed corpses in Pittsburgh. Sally told me something of your photographic sessions; and they sounded much jollier and more metaphorical (tho' that maybe Sally's sight of it) than mine at The Morgue. Your bodies were more 'pickled' at least, your search more anatomical; and, as I understand it, the images you've made are to be part of a film called "The Magellenic Clouds" (wonderful title!). My images have come to the title: "The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes" (the large case letters deliberately setting this context in opposition to "The Art of Vision"), its title the most exact complete meaning of the Greek Autopsis wherefrom Autopsy, and scratched on film by me specifically because THIS was the most specific meaning I could give to those impulses which moved me to photograph at The Pittsburgh Morgue. Well, you were 'in on this' in the beginning. When Sally told me last summer that you wished to photograph Anatomy, I immediately replied "oh, yes, God, I have to do that too, sometime!" When it fell out that The Pittsburgh Press remained 'on strike' at my arrival to photograph there, Sally had already 'lined up' The Morgue as 'card up sleeve'. I was terrified -- hadn't meant "yet", "not now/yet" . . . "I'm too young to -- "; but there I was up to my eyes in it anyway, 3000-and-some feet worth finally.

I only have an occasional nightmare about it now; and the gathering of these images is about to begin. What the light fell-on at The Morgue, The Source (as defined above), is so contained in even the un-cut footage that there is no fear therefrom watching it whatsoever. What IS frightening is 'the container', The Document it makes of itself (which makes "eyes" and "Deus Ex"'s styles look baroque by comparison). I am writing writing these days (letters every which way) to empty my mind of all these previousnesses. I too (like many in audiences who have booed hissed and walked-out on "eyes" and "Deus Ex") wish, in my laziness, I could simply have gone on with, say, "Son of Dog Star Man", "Dog Star Man Meets The Wolf Man", "Bride of Dog Star Man", even "Bud Abbott and Lou Costello Meet...", etc. But instead, as usual, all trains of thought have leapt the tracks. Any, es-

pecially 'geographical', survey you might send, any old treasure map you've minded, would help; for I am, as usual, exhausting all thought to liven the synapses preparatory for work; thus I'm not just making up a conversation with you but rather more-or-less 'hollaring in the dark'.

Let me give you something specific to go on. It is not "infinite cinema" (as you defined it in your article for "Art Forum") -- NOT that that I'm after, at the moment ... tho' I am heading for the "exit" you promised when superimposing your "labyrinth" -- but not, for me, any "finite" with that "in" before it. I mean, I figure if I can get the "grain of sand" (as Blacke puts it) the INfinite'll take care of itself.

I'm reminded to say that I was very disappointed that Sept. '71 Artforum didn't contain an article on Ernie Gehr's "Serene Velocity". Ken Jacobs put the case for Ernie's film best with his statement on it ending (to be specific) with: "If you're in visual range you're hit, no need to tolerate culture here." Until I saw "Zorn's Lemma", Ernie's "Serene Velocity" would have been the first "ontological film" (to borrow Ken's Levi-Strauss binoculars) I would have shown the kids and/or anyone and every one. It IS a transformation, not into "culture" but rather -- well . . . Ernie makes jewelry of that hall; but he's not 'crafty' about it at all -- rather 'straight', like they say; and "Serene Velocity" is (thereby those means) an art; but it has not yet been capped as such (here: let me do it!: An Art) nor properly recognized at all by all those who insist upon a round-trip ticket to/from The Renaissance: (oddly, or perhaps naturally, it is always those who most verbalize against Tradition as such who end up stuck with The Sistine Ceiling): (Peter Kubelka's an excellent example of the previous parent-thesis).

Okay, that's enough; I'm tired. Give me a word or two back, if you've the time. I think I'd rather meet ~~with~~ you than any man I've heard of, seen work thereof, wathin the last several years. Looka thar!; my grammar's all breaking-down since I looked at my mid-night clock. Kid/s'll be up in a very few hours to catch the seven o'clock bus to distant school. Therefore my thoughts start collapsing on me usually around eleven P.M. (and that'll be somewhere mid-page-three of this letter.

Until and hear-from and/or have a chance to meet you . . .

Blessings,
Stan

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