

Meshes of the Afternoon

Maya Deren and Cinepoiesis

Explorative Research and Praxis (M7X02015)

moving image seminar

artists' moving image

In Britain in the 1990s there was been an unprecedented expansion of visual art practice, evidenced in media terms in the high profile of young British artists at home and increasingly overseas. On the ground, this shift is registered in the growing networks of studios, new galleries, artist-run exhibition spaces and events. At the same time an increasing number of visual artists are using time-based media from film and video to new possibilities offered by digital technologies.



early cinema

realism v formalism

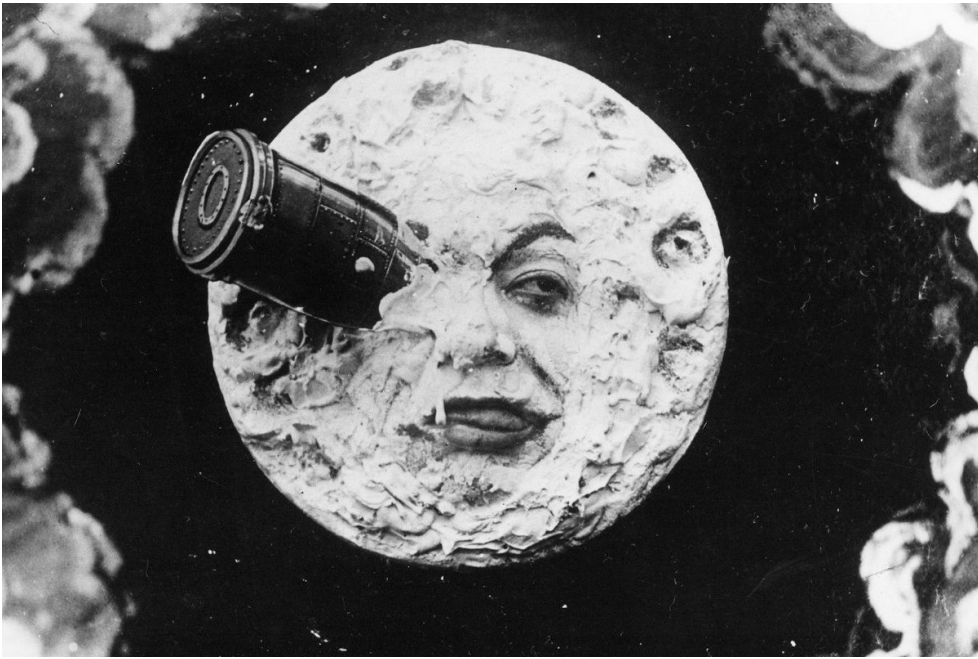
- Lumieres Brothers (**realism**)
- Georges Melies (**formalism**)
- Mallarme - cinepoetry – unfolds the cinematographe
- Duchamp
- Bunuel

Lumiere Brothers

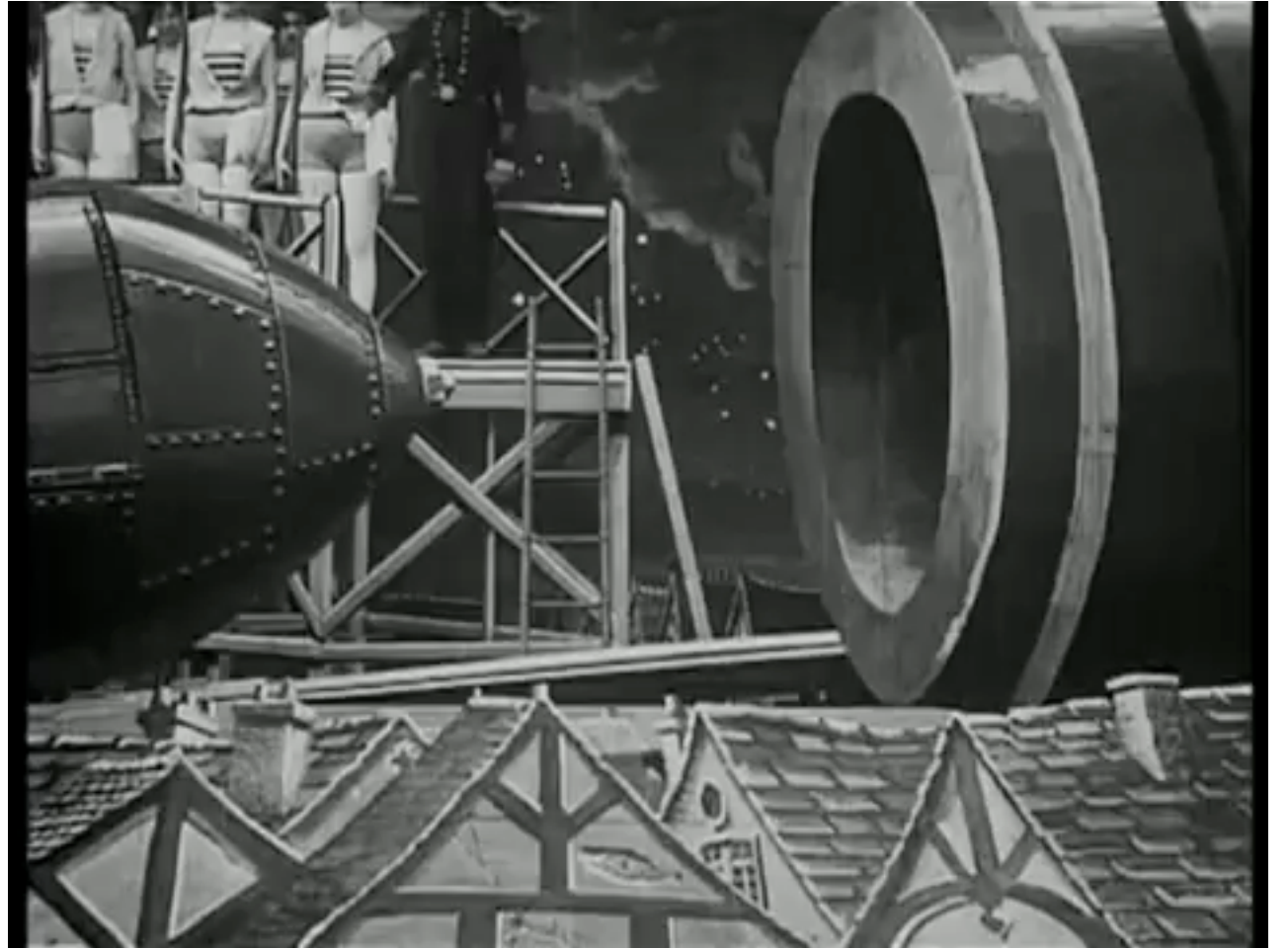


“La Sortie des usines Lumière”(1895) | Louis Lumiere

Georges Melies

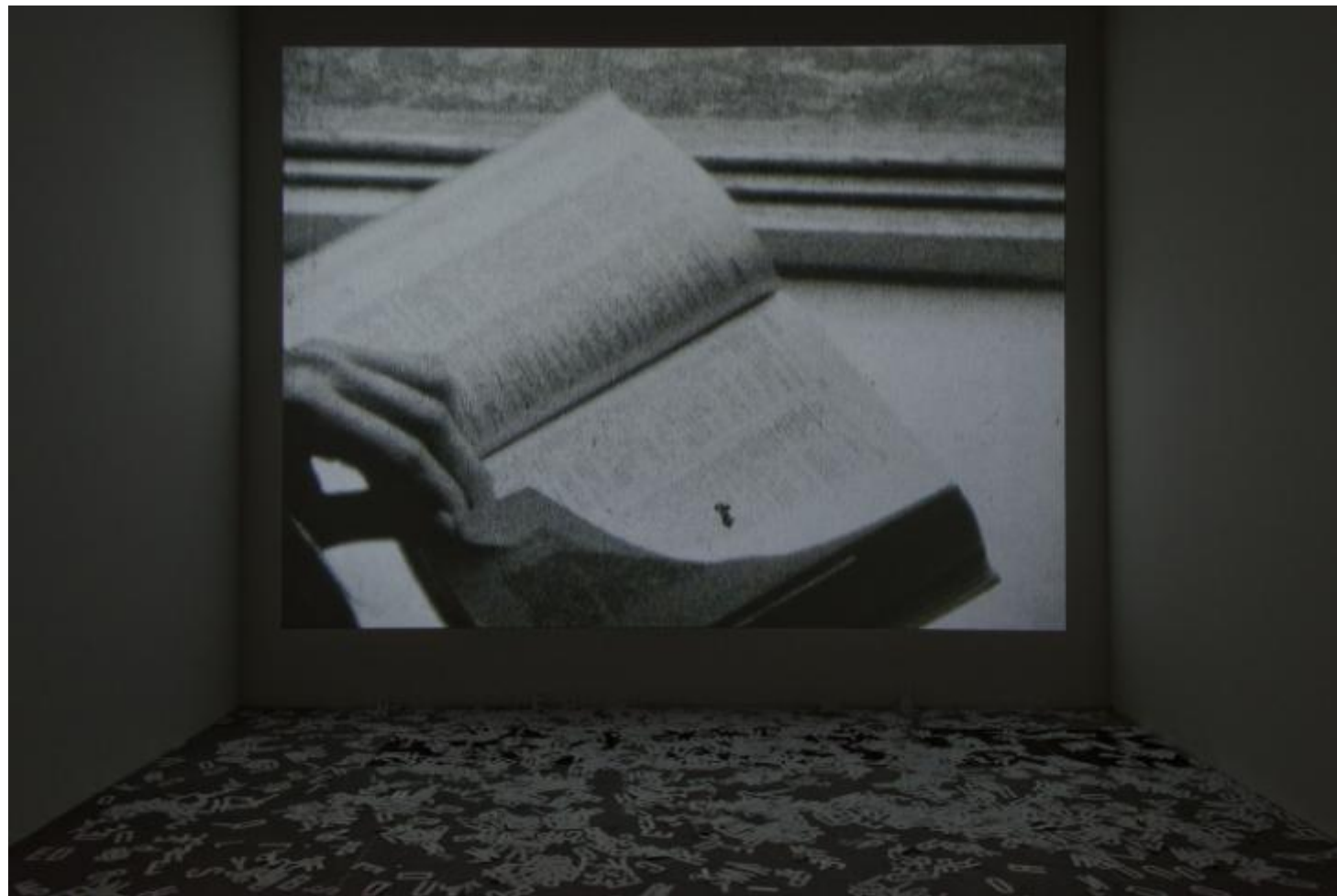


Le voyage dans la lune | 1902 | Georges Melies



Avant-garde and Experimental Film

Poetic Cinema



Ewa Partum Active Poetry (1971–3)

Maya Deren

(1917 – 1961)

Avant-garde, filmmaker, photographer,
dancer, writer, poet and theorist.

protagonists are somnambulists

trance film



Meshes of the Afternoon | 1943 | Maya Deren

‘What I do in my films, is very, oh I think very distinctively, I think they are the films of a woman. And, I think that their characteristic time - quality is **the time-quality of a woman**. I think that the strength of men, their great sense of immediacy, they are a ‘now’ creature, and a woman has strength to wait, because she’s had to wait nine months for the concept of a child. **Time is built into her body in the sense of becoming....and, she sees everything in terms of it being in the stage of becoming.** She raises a child knowing not what it is at any moment but seeing always the person that it will become. Her whole life from her very beginning, built into her, **is the sense of becoming.** Now in any time-form this is a very important sense. I think that my films, putting as much stress as they do, upon **the constant metamorphosis, one image is always becoming another.** It is what is happening that is important in my films not what ‘is’ at any moment. This is a **woman’s time-sense** and I think it happens more in my films than in almost anyone else’s.’

Maya Deren

Meshes of the Afternoon (1943)

The work of Maya Deren is generally regarded as the modern starting point for film as **personal expression**.

She made ***Meshes of the Afternoon*** in the Hollywood Hills in 1943 and, except for its use of the basic tools of cinema, it bears little resemblance to the films being made by the mainstream industry.

Deren **developed her own film language** that echoed prewar European experimentation and the early Soviet avant-garde. *Meshes* was the first "**trance film**", in which a lone protagonist wanders through a succession of dreamlike episodes that represent an interior psychological journey.

The **psychodrama, with its references to myth and surrealism**, became the dominant form of a film renaissance.

Horizontal and Vertical Thinking in Film

By 1953 Maya Deren had created five short films. Her approach to filmmaking was arguably a meditative one, and she'd been theorizing about film in formal written essays and articles. She had published *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film* seven years earlier, but her contribution to the **Cinema 16 Poetry and Film: A Symposium** would extend her thoughts *on film poetics and introduce her ideas about horizontal development and vertical investigation*.

Maya was also a film theorist. There was a record of an extensive discourse about [Poetry and the Film: A Symposium \(1953\)](#) between Maya and few other renowned artist, one of them is Arthur Miller.

Here, she spoke about her theory on vertical cinema. ***“The distinction of poetry is its construction (what I mean by “a poetic structure”), and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a “vertical” investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned in a sense not with what is occurring, but with what it feels like or what it means.”***

Vertical Thinking: Vertical Exploration in Film as A Meditative Thinking Approach

- A poem, to my mind, creates visible or auditory forms for something which is invisible, which is the feeling, or the emotion, or the metaphysical content of the movement. Now it also may include action, but its attack is what I could call the ‘vertical’ attack, and this may be a little bit clearer if you will contrast it to what I would call the ‘horizontal’ attack of a drama, which is concerned with the development... (Deren)
- Poetry, to my mind, is an approach to experience, in the sense that a poet is looking at the same experience that a dramatist may be looking at. It comes out differently because they are looking at it from a different point of view, and because they are concerned with different elements in it. (Deren)

Vertical Thinking Building Meaning in Film Through Maya Deren and Martin Heidegger

- In the avid pursuit of horizontal development for social and economic reasons, popular filmmaking, in a distancing from the meditative approach, **has lost concern for the vertical poetic investigation** of Deren's description, in the visual, the symbolic, and the act of characterization.
- What remains is **a shallow preoccupation with pace, a perpetuation of action not story or substance**. What is forgotten is content - narrative and otherwise - **the meaning of a moment, a character, an exploration**. Such films can be seen as a reflection of present culture, which has come to reject the vertical poetic in thinking as well.
- Duality and intersection are central ideas to both Deren's horizontal/vertical investigation in film meaning and **Heidegger's calculative/meditative thinking**. **Heidegger's meditative thinking** is concerned with the search for meaning and understanding, "thinking that contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is" (Heidegger 46). In the same way, Deren's vertical exploration of a moment is concerned with what the moment feels like and what it means. These ideas stand in opposition to the absence of meaning in calculative thinking, which seeks only progress, attainment of goals, and horizontal development, which seeks only to produce action.



FANDOR

Being and Cinema: beyond Time in Poetic Cinema

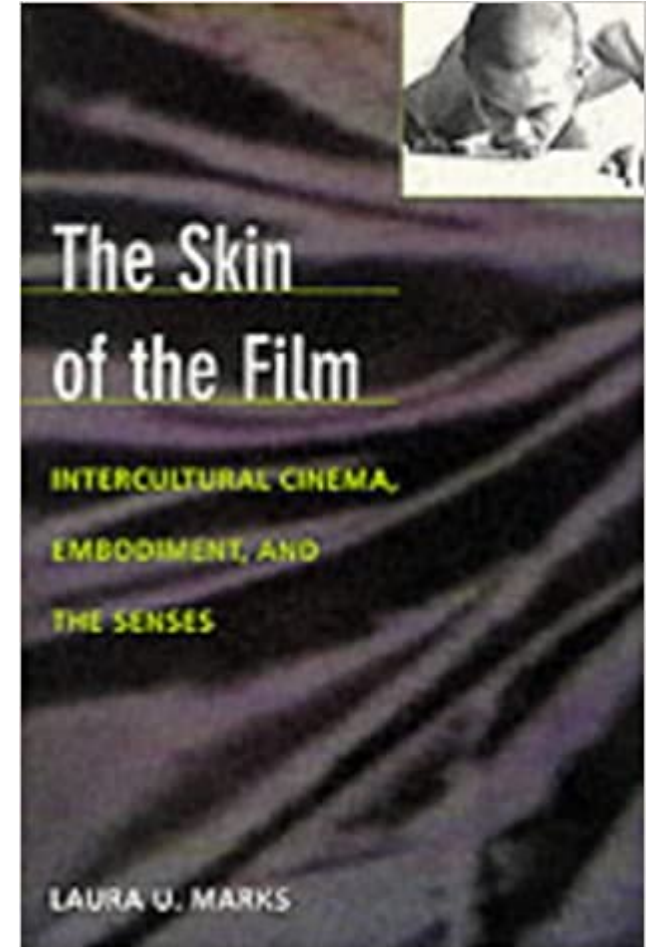
The “**Poetic cinema**” resides far away from theories or definition; beyond meanings or interpretations it is found in a space without a place.

It's a fact that the sense of the poetic description and explanations are inserted in it. But the meaning's search for an objective author, his work and the spectator.

The work of the creator is placed, very often, beyond the work creation itself, causing uncertainty over the effects and the eventual consequences of this production.

The Haptic Image – Laura Marks

- Film's relation to the body is traditionally distanced: the audience sits far from the screen in order to view it; the actors' bodies exist only as intangible arrangements of light and shadow. Reading film with an awareness of the characteristics and connotations of moving fabric refigures cinema as a potentially tactile medium. Laura Marks's work on what she terms "haptic visuality"—"the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes" (Marks 2000: xi)—provides groundbreaking insights on visuality and tactility, and astute interpretations of Deleuze's work on film. However, discussions about the haptic have not dealt with the specific presence and impact of fabric-based media.



Fabric in Film and Film as Fabric:

...in/through Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*

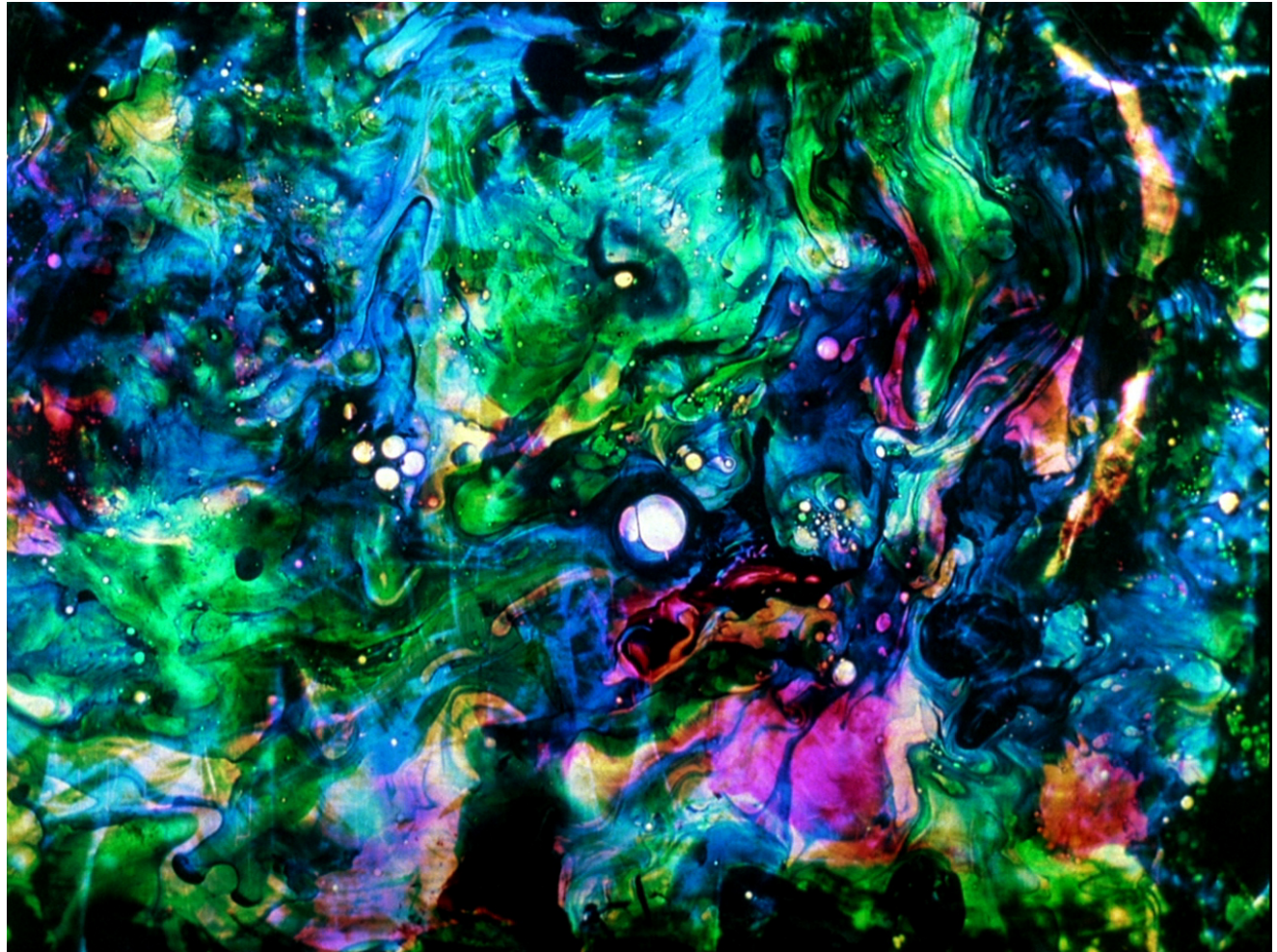
- Fabric is often thought of in either of two ways: as a part of everyday usage, often as protection from the elements or from public exposure, implying contact with the body, as in clothing and upholstery; or, in the present day, as an untouchable piece of art such as tapestry.
- ...as a parallel between the medium of film—the screen, as well as the representation of fabric on film—and fabric in Maya Deren's 1943 film *Meshes of the Afternoon*.



Stan Brakhage

a poet with a camera

“All things that are, are light.”



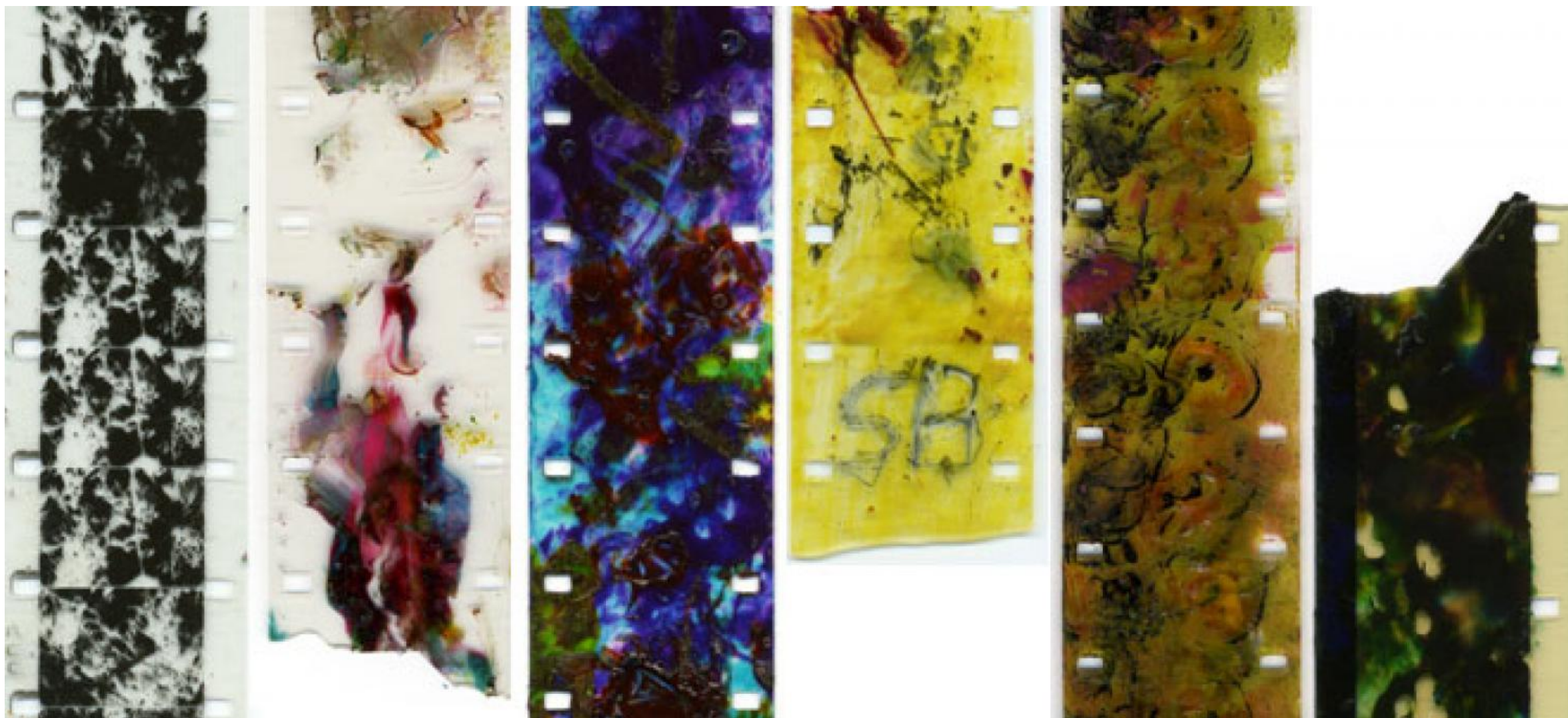
Still from Brakhage's film The Dante Quartet, 1987

the still image

articulated light

When giving sight to the medium, **"with, not through, the eye"** (William Blake), **with, rather than thru, machine**, with any means at your bestowal (rather than disposal), **with the light**, and naturally then of all these things also as in any gift, the term "moving picture giving" takes on a blessed (and necessary to me) dimension.
—Stan Brakhage, A Moving Picture Giving and Taking Book





A selection of films strips that were painted and manipulated by Brakhage.

“In a word, the image is not a certain meaning, expressed by the director, but an entire world reflected as in a drop of water.”

—Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*

Poetic Realism in British Cinema

“In film as in no other medium”, **Annette Kuhn** writes, “the active forward movement that characterizes narrative and drama (what the experimental filmmaker **Maya Deren** calls the horizontal plane of development) can combine with the in-depth ‘vertical’ investigation, the exploration of a detail or a moment, that distinguishes poetry.

In film, an action, an image, can be slowed down or brought to stillness; a moment can be stretched out (horizontally) in time so that it can be contemplated (vertically) in depth.

In this way, film can accommodate a meditative attitude that is akin to reverie.” (**Kuhn 2008**)

Poetic Realism

In the context of Moving Image Arts, **'poetic realism'** refers to a **realist aesthetic** that is used to explore the lives of ordinary people in a way that seeks to look more deeply into their experiences and emotions.

As Kuhn indicates, **linear narrative and plot gives way in poetic realism to the exploration of a deeper emotional experience and resonance.**

Poetic Realism

Yet both cinematic works step outside the ordinary and depart from the conventions of realism with transformative moments of visual poetry.

As Annette Kuhn explains, *“Both films take it as read that meaning and food for the imagination lie in the everyday details of the most apparently unglamorous of lives. A meditative (‘vertical’) look at commonplace details, activities and gestures, of the kind that normally go unregarded.”*

In the words of **Terence Davies**; *“You can say important things by concentrating on the small...And I think you can do that for ordinary people because I do passionately believe in the poetry of the ordinary.”* (Kuhn, 2008)

Ratcatcher (1999) Lynne Ramsay

A 12 year old boy accidentally contributes to the drowning of another. The boy retreats into himself, away from his desperate family and towards the gang of misfit teens that roam the grimy streets.

THE CRITERION COLLECTION



ratcatcher
a film by lynne ramsay

Case Study: *Ratcatcher* (1999)

- The poetic exploration of ‘moment’ in *Ratcatcher* takes many forms as Kuhn explains; ***“lingering, thoughtfully composed, motionless or near motionless images; slow, silent explorations of spaces; intense, searching close-ups; visual rhymes; recurrent visual and auditory motifs.”*** (Kuhn, 2008)
- Director Lynne Ramsay often plays these ‘poetic’ moments in complete silence, while at other times the musical soundtrack underscores the visual lyricism. The effect is, however, the same. Both soundtrack and silence signal a transition in thought and feeling to a mood of reverie, wonder or imagination.

From Realism to Reality

In his **1955 essay “From Realism to Reality,” Alain Robbe-Grillet** recalls visiting the ocean-side landscape of Brittany in order to attempt to recover a clear and distinct memory of how gulls looked when they were flying. “But from the first gull I saw, I understood my error,” he wrote.

The only gulls that mattered to me at that moment were those that were inside my head. Probably they came there, one way or another, from the external world, and perhaps from Brittany, but they had been transformed, becoming at the same time somehow more real *because* they were now imaginary.

Lynne Ramsay reveals the gulls inside her characters’ heads, the real altered by the imaginary, almost always with disquieting results. This project aligns her with the Poetic Realists more than the radical experiments of Robbe-Grillet, but perhaps all of them might be aligned against the saccharine dispensers, against conventional fiction, and in favor of new kinds of openness towards projects, narratives, and image-making, whether in cinema, fiction, or poetry.

Case Study: *Ratcatcher* (1999)

It is in these poetic moments that the director invites us to enter the inner world of her characters, “***a world separate and different from, and yet still to be found within, the everyday.***” (Kuhn, 2008)

One such moment is the scene where the young protagonist explores his new house in the countryside and escapes into another world. This scene attains a level of lyrical intensity as the director conveys the sense of awe and wonder experienced by the young boy as he enters through the window into a world of beauty and spiritual repose.

Dermatology as Screenology: The Films of Lynne Ramsay



***Ratcatcher* (1999)** director: Lynne Ramsay - cinematographer: Alwin Küchler

De Luca, R., 2019. Dermatology as Screenology: The Films of Lynne Ramsay. *Film Criticism*, 43(1).



Maya Deren – Meshes of the Afternoon



Lynne Ramsay – Ratcatcher







A photograph of a window with light-colored curtains featuring a subtle floral and leaf pattern. The window is divided into several panes, and the view outside is a soft, hazy landscape under a pale sky. The title 'Ratcatcher' is printed in the upper right corner.

Ratcatcher







