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The Stammering Frame: on recent French and Austrian Film Experiments

Frédérique Devaux

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This volume on avant-garde film has emerged as part of a wider reassessment of 20th century avant-garde art, literature and film carried out in the framework of a research project at the University of Edinburgh. It paves the way for a fresh assessment of avant-garde film and develops its theory as an integral part of a newly defined conception of the avant-garde as a whole, by closing the gap between theoretical approaches towards the avant-garde as defined on the basis of art and literature on the one hand and avant-garde cinema on the other. It gathers contributions by the most esteemed scholars in the field of avant-garde studies relating to the "classical" avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, to new trends emerging in the 1950s and 1960s and to the impact that innovative technologies have recently had on the further development of avant-garde and experimental film. The contributions reflect the broad range of different moving-image media that make up what we refer to today simply as "film", at the same time as reconsidering the applicability of the label "avant-garde", to offer a comprehensive and updated framework that will prove invaluable to scholars of both Moving Image Studies and Art History disciplines.



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AVANT-GARDE FILM



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The Stammering Frame: on recent French and Austrian Film Experiments

Frédérique Devaux

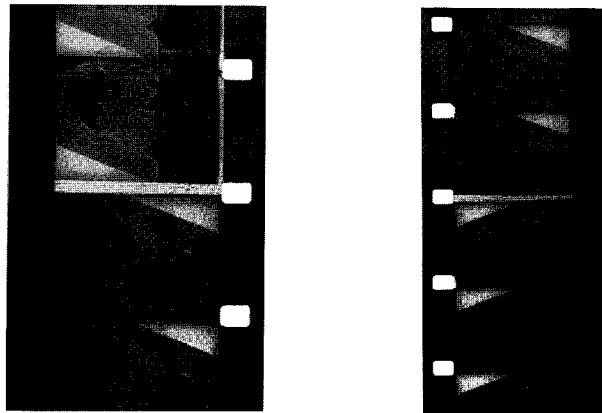
Abstract: This chapter identifies an aesthetic of repetition at the operative heart of films by three contemporary European filmmakers, Michel Amarger, Martin Arnold and Rafael Montanez Ortiz. These figures engage the spectator in a game of perception, generating hypnotic and psycho-optic effects that at once alienate us and bring us deeper into the viewing experience.

The interest in experimental cinema is due in particular to the fact that many of its *auteurs* work within what one could call cinematic “niches” in their most minute and manifold variations, while at the same time occupying a position at the meeting point of the visual arts and music. This essay examines three experimental films that are all based on the structural principle of repetition: *Slug ou la dernière limace* (Michel Amarger, 1987); *Passage à l'acte* (Martin Arnold, 1993); and *Dance n° 22* (Rafael Montanez Ortiz, also 1993). As will emerge, however, the first of these films, *Slug ou la dernière limace* contrasts sharply with the other two in that it does not feature repetition of frames in the strict sense. It is a found-footage film composed on a small cutting table constructed by the director. Amarger worked by visually counting the individual frames after having established a strict score, very similar to a musical score.

Apart from this major difference, the three films under discussion have in common a concern for continuous action, which the filmmakers respectively interrupt using *trompe l'œil*. The three artists work with found footage taken from either documentary or fiction material. The reedited montages reveal elements that standard projection could never divulge, either – as in the first case (*Slug*) – through the manipulation of the frame (vertical and horizontal tilting/inversion of the image) or through repetition and extension of filmic time, such as we see in Arnold, who begins by assailing the eye

with imperceptible bursts of action, developing narration on a higher register – a kind of “supra-narrative”.

For *Slug* Michel Amarger selected frames in which the action is simultaneously banal and static (there is no spatial movement), contrasting interior and exterior work with masculine labor being progressively “injected” into the female work of hanging a cauldron up on a hook over the fireplace. There is a written sequence for this montage: (10 (woman) 1 (man)/ 9 (woman) 2 (man), etc.) in alternation with horizontally and vertically rearranged frames. The rhythm thus unfolds according to a metric calculation (in the literal sense, as in Eisenstein’s “metric montage”) that becomes ever more complex. This gives the impression especially that the female figure, though motionless, is moving. The viewer contributes to and participates in a game of perception in which immediate vision is distorted, and our perception deceived. The two audible sounds, (a siren which, according to the author, is intended to recall the world of work; and the jazz – a tranquil counterpoint to the highly rhythmic movement), while they are also “found”, are provisory. In other words, complete freedom is maintained for the composition of the “soundtrack” at the point of projection. These variations (the sound can be live or improvised) permit different rhythms to be combined with the images on the filmstrip.



Slug ou la dernière limace (Michel Amarger, 1987)

Martin Arnold built a special optical printer for the making of *Passage à l'acte*. The evocative title most likely refers to the scene in which

the boy has just sat down again at the table and begins “playing” with his knife on the edge of the table, triggering the viewer’s imagination. Everyone more or less sees an act of masturbation, all the more so because the boy is prepubescent, and because the action begins in a moment of crisis with his parents, i.e. with the established order. His triumphant cry is audible, like that of a rooster and, indeed, we even imagine we can make out the ‘clucking’ of an orgasm.

This film is structured in a narrative loop that operates on at least two levels: a) first the boy leaves the room, and at the end of the film the girl leaves. Could the patriarchal model be exploding? In the penultimate shot of the film, the girl kisses her father on the cheek which, thanks to the repetition, sounds like a gentle slap; b) The entire film is constructed from samples placed in a loop with variations within each of these repeated passages. Arnold, an Austrian, (the country of Kren, Kubelka and Export, but also where dodecaphonic music was developed at the beginning of the 20th century, and the homeland of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud), runs the samples (a 33-second extract from Robert Mulligan’s 1962 film *To Kill a Mockingbird*) through a computerized analytical projector capable of accelerating or slowing down the projection time.

The sequence featured in this work is emblematic: a family meal with a father, a mother and their two children (respecting a family setup that in French we call “*le choix du roi*” or “God’s choice”, the boy being a little older than the girl). This can be seen as a sort of pagan Last Supper with all the attributes of patriarchal society, and therefore in line with the family model favored in Hollywood. All the codes – social, aesthetic and continuity – are respected: the parents, guarantors of order, face us, whilst the children, the dissidents at odds with the codes, have their backs to the spectator. Shot composition is balanced between the crowded space of the principal action on the left, and that of the secondary action on the right, which is open. This is a quasi-archetypal scene, one that we have all experienced, an everyday scene of action or of ennui that allows each of us to refer back to our own experience and, of course, to a communal experience: the family meal. In this way, we participate actively in the iconoclasm and in the fall of idols (of parental authority, as well as of the cinema), this pre-pubescent crisis being one of its earliest symptoms. We participate too in the dismantling of images and of sounds as created by this “film as

process”, to use the terminology of Steve Reich, who analyzed “music as process”.

I do not refer to this musician by chance: what interests me here is the possible rapport – this brief exposé is only a small part of it – between this “experimental” work and what we called, in the sixties, “repetitive music”, as is familiar from the work of Philip Glass and Steve Reich.

We could read this film, then, as follows: we have a trio, or rather a duo (two singer-musicians – the children); the conductor of the orchestra (the father, who sets the tone when he raps on the table saying “Jeremy” or “Jem”, we cannot understand clearly which); and an audience (the woman) who smiles, cries, is moved, and so participates emotionally, but remains passive from the point of view of the action. Through the effect of repetition, at the end of the film the mother applauds. She is the only one who doesn’t have her own “scene”, by which I mean her moment of close-up action or sound. She is always present in the composition that simultaneously envelopes and disregards her. She does not exist as herself, since she remains somehow “outside” the scene even if, without her, the action might have developed along very different lines (you don’t play to an empty parterre). Furthermore, as the young boy “clucks” to his “orgasm” we catch sight of a fragment of a further figure in the background, which could be the house servant.

Returning to Steve Reich: he was born in 1936 and grew up against a background of reformed Judaism. He claims to have learned neither Hebrew nor the cantillations. Nevertheless, there is plenty to say about the possible influence of Jewish religion on artistic activity, and especially on that of Reich, but that is not our concern here.

Briefly, the gradual processes under way are not only mechanical in nature: Steve Reich, who is interested in the diverse forms that rhythmic structures can take, uses African music as a source and model, as well as Indian ragas, with their peaks of sound, issued over and over again. He is also fascinated by the Balinese gamelan and its repetitive musical articulations.

Reich manipulates speech captured on magnetic tape, making loops using two tape recorders. These loops are synchronized, with their rhythms matched. Then he gradually brings one of the two recorders to a stop, which, through the progressive time-lapse between the two recordings, creates unedited forms ranging from echoes to completely new sound figures. Reich calls this manipulation the

“gradual process of phase differentiation”. He works on the voice first of all (according to him the voice is unclassifiable, therefore allowing him to avoid predetermined approaches), putting this process into play – most notably – in *It’s Gonna Rain* (1965) starting with recordings of a sermon by a black minister in San Francisco. The phase differentiation (as used in Reich’s “minimalist” music between 1965 and 1971, but which I prefer to describe as “repetitive”) progressively prolongs each note played.

I don’t want to talk about the process of composition, but rather about passages of music which are literally processes. The pertinent trait of musical processes is that they determine simultaneously the ensemble of details, note after note, sound after sound, and the totality of the form. I’m interested in the processes that can be perceived there. I want to be able to hear a process as it unfolds in sound. In order that listening to it be fine and precise, a musical process should be produced in an extremely gradual way. (Interview, “*France Culture*” 2004)

Beyond the obvious relationship between a sound fragment from *It’s Gonna Rain* and a sound fragment of Arnold’s film, or in *Dance n° 22* (also from 1993) by Rafael Montanez Ortiz, what is interesting for us is the possible parallels between these “works as process”. We will focus in particular on three points of convergence which, quite naturally, also bring up some elements of divergence.

1. Rather than playing on simultaneity, since the cinema, by virtue of the unfolding of frames, is an art of succession, the phase differentiation in Arnold, as in Amarger, takes place between what we foresee in the logical unfolding of banal action, thanks to our powers of anticipation (in a scene that we have all experienced) and what becomes of it through the manipulation of the tape. In Arnold, the sound serves as a “calculation-guide” or metronome for the frames, since the ear is able to perceive variations, as well as phonemes, in cases where the eye is not capable, for example, of identifying the passage of one, two or three frames.

2. We should recall that the so called “repetitive” musicians wanted, amongst other things, to bring psycho-acoustic facts to the fore in a search for acoustic effects able to create a geometry of “*trompe l’oreille*”. The hypnotic effects obtained by repetition or by long-held notes (just as there are images that are held for a long time in these films) generate a very peculiar phenomenon of impregnation

in our brains: the listener loses all notion of time and enters into another type of listening. These psycho-acoustic effects can be found again in the form of psycho-optic effects in the three films that we are analyzing. In the films of Arnold, Amarger and Montanez Ortiz, the viewer-auditor engages, so to speak, in another type of vision, of perception of the facts. The viewer-auditor sees a movement where there are minimal gestures, such as the hanging of a kitchen utensil on a hook, or else perceives the outline of an act of masturbation, or hears either a cock's crow or an orgasm. In short, our senses deceive us, as if in a reversal of inhibition (that of Hollywood), to use a Freudian expression.

3. Let us look at one final supporting example in the shape of Philip Glass. In 1968, while making "One plus one pour solistes" the musicians, through tapping their fingers on an amplified table, discovered a process of unedited progression that Philip Glass described as "additive" (123 4 123 45 123 456 123 4567, and so on). Then, the artist proposed a series of additions and subtractions, rendering the process ever more complex.

All these processes create, as we have said, a structural subversion that is auditory, but they equally achieve a different apprehension of rhythm: i.e. they modify perception, which mutates ad infinitum.

In certain moments of *Passage à l'acte* (notably the scene where the father, who, in tapping on the table, plays a superb repetitive score, or in the confrontation between the brother and sister) or even in Amarger's score, we can see an illustration of these new metric, visual and audio forms, with subtle and sensitive variations that render these works engaging and complex. In accordance with each passage, Arnold creates fine and varied rhythms and variations: sometimes one or two images more or less. Alternatively, he introduces flashes, which make the metric structure of the film richer and more complex, even without taking into account the gradual discrepancies between sound and image, or between one sample and the next, which might even be the very same sample, give or take an image.

Inscriptions of Volatile Reality

Abstract: Bill Morris nitrate celluloid film. In compiling highly detailed rationales for its construction, the local effects that dissolve into dissolution. *Decasia* and materiality of representation.

Decasia is both a film and a *Musiksommer* concert. In New York Bang On A Can produced *Decasia*, and record the performance. The pianist assistant for the performance provide the image of the operation between the decay. After a performance worked with apparatus performed in Basel. Sinfonietta stood on a stage projected on to a screen structure. Seated in a wrap-around sound system release was re-edited and premiered in 2002.

Gordon's piece. Executed with drums made from the tradition of Percussion crescendos. As the screeching decay.