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Making a "film" today rarely involves a journey to the lab as images are more often recorded digitally and not on celluloid. Even video's electromagnetic record is transformed to bits and bytes. There is no frame to splice. The visual material exists as a virtual reference only. As McLuhan points out, new media doesn't replace the old, existing media, but changes it. Theorists often point to the photograph and its impact on the painting. A similar event was the emergence of video technology and its ensuing relationship with film, a relationship whose differences have become increasingly transparent.

Looking at the work of Adam K. Beckett offers an opportunity to examine the dialogue between these technologies during the 1970s and to consider the relationship between avant-garde filmmaking and experimental animation. He is an artist whose work deserves to be reconsidered in the ongoing discussion of animation and media art. His animation, unlike that of many of his colleagues, was steeped in process and technical innovation, a proclivity akin to those filmmakers whose paramount concern was the structure and material of film, and video artists who were exploring the electronic signal of video.

Adam Beckett was nationally recognized as a new emerging talent in experimental animation in the 1970s.[1] He was in the inaugural class of the California Institute of the Arts, which opened its doors in 1970, and while there made six ground-breaking films: *Dear Janice, Evolution of the Red Star, Heavy-Light, Flesh Flows, Sausage City,* and *Kitsch in Synch*. His animations were screened alongside experimental films but resisted fitting into any specific film theory that was being touted during that time.

Structural/Materialist theory was prevalent, as well as parallel thoughts and practice in the new media of video. Gene Youngblood's seminal text *Expanded Cinema* was published in 1970 followed by P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* in 1974, and Peter Gidal's *Structural Film Anthology* in 1976.

Beckett's primary instructors at CalArts were the animator/artist Jules Engel and experimental filmmaker Pat O'Neill. He also took a course called "Expanded Cinema" taught by Gene Youngblood, and a video course by Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe. Youngblood's class introduced Beckett to a rich assortment of experimental cinema, and also to a broad way of

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[1] Beckett collaborated with James Gore on the award-winning animation The Letter, and also made Quacked Jokes: Early Animations at Antioch College, before attending CalArts. The last five of the six films made at CalArts were award-winning pieces, playing in festivals such as the Ann Arbor Film Festival, Sinking Creek Film and Video Festival, 9th Tournee of Animation, Animafest Zagreb, and the Chicago International Film Festival. Three of his films were included in the 1974 Whitney Museum's New American Filmmaker's program, curated by John Hanhardt, and his Evolution of the Red Star was selected as one of six films for the NEA pilot program Short Film Showcase in 1977. The other five films were James' Whitney's Lapis, Robert Breer's Gulls and Buoys, Jordan Belson's Light, Clay by Eliot Noyes, Jr., and Frank Film by Frank Mouris. Significantly, Beckett was included in the first edition of Russett and Starr's "Experimental Animation", in the section "A Rising Generation of Independent Animators", along with such notables as Caroline Leaf, Frank Mouris, John Stehura, and Dennis Pies. Unlike them, he was not included in the second edition from 1988 due to his early death in 1979 leaving no new work to announce, and no one to push the distribution of his work. His contribution was noted, later in 1994, in the section "Innovators of tradition: the independent par excellence" of Giannalberto Bendazzi's Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Animation. Five of his films were restored in 2006. Three were included in two Museum of Modern Art programs, and all five screened in programs dedicated exclusively to his work at the National Gallery of Art in D.C., at REDCAT in Los Angeles, and in Chicago, as part of Animation World's Fair, all in 2006. Two more films were restored in 2007.

thinking about cinema. Youngblood's approach reinstates the broader meaning of cinema as relating to its origin, 'kinesis', referring to images that include the dimension of movement. For Youngblood, the phrase "expanded cinema" is not limited to performed or executed images.

Youngblood (1970, p.11), declared that:

> "When we say expanded cinema we actually mean expanded consciousness. Expanded cinema does not mean computer films, video phosphors, atomic light, or spherical projections. Expanded cinema isn't a movie at all: like life it's a process of becoming, man's ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes."

This perspective of expanded cinema, and understanding how different media practices inform each other, offers the best vantage points for examining the work of Adam K. Beckett. While his work is undeniably animated, it resists being defined solely as such. The imagery he creates refers to the electronic media of video and computer graphics, and his technique reaches beyond the – then – orthodox methods of animation. He relied not on drawing so much as what he did with the drawings on the animation stand and then with the animated footage on the optical printer. His films did not constitute a narrative, but rather a loosely structured journey through abstracted space and forms.

Beckett worked in close proximity to video artists working with image processing in Paik's video class. Paik and Abe were building their video synthesizer, and with it the students were working with the video signal, altering it, layering it, or in some fashion changing it. Michael Scroggins, a fellow classmate, recalls, "Nam June was holding up tin foil and blinking Christmas lights in front of this amazing image generator and saying 'ahhh beauteous, beauteous' and the students were scratching their heads like 'what's this, it's so cheesy' and of course Nam June was trying to say it's all cheesy, in his Fluxus way."[2]

Paik was accompanied by a number of other Fluxus[3] artists, including Allan Kaprow, Alison Knowles, Dick Higgins, and Emmett Williams. Beckett had a silkscreen printing class with Knowles, and a "Language Happenings" class with Emmett Williams. It is in this non-traditional setting that Beckett developed his "one and only original film discovery – animation of a cycle under the camera" (Russett 1976, p. 11), which became the trademark of his work. Beckett would draw an initial cycle, shoot the cycle then continue to draw, under the camera, as he repeated the cycle. So if he started with 24 separate animation drawings, after weeks of shooting and animating under the camera he would finish with the same number of drawings. In this way complex, animated forms would be created.[4]

Once recorded on film, the animation would then be taken to the optical printer, were he re-photographed the frames, phasing the image in time, changing the colours and scale of the image. Multiple passes were made, layering the image onto itself, slightly altered, creating a new version of itself. It is easy to see here a connection to video image processing and the idea of feedback.

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[2] Michael Scroggins, telephone interview, September 2, 2005.

[3] Fluxus was – and still is – an international collective of artists influenced by the ideas of John Cage. George Maciunas is credited with naming and organizing early Fluxus events. It can best be described as a creative force rather than a particular style of art. Fluxus art during the 1970s tended to not be affiliated with a gallery but instead featured events and happenings in other spaces. See http://www.fluxus.org.

[4] Beckett was aware of earlier artists who animated under the camera. He referred to the earlier work of McLaren and Fischinger's *Motion Painting No. 1* when describing his process, pointing out that while they worked on a single image under the camera, he worked on a cycle, which added a different set of issues. See Russett, p. 11.

The results were groundbreaking at that time. As his teacher, and colleague, Pat O'Neill noted, Beckett was drawing from stream of consciousness. "You look at it and it's so complicated that you think you're seeing a continuous animation but you realize that there're phrases that you recognize. Experienced animators looked at it and they couldn't figure it out."[5]

In *Dear Janice* (1972) Beckett used 24 separate drawings and, as the title suggests, it is a letter of sorts to a friend. The text of the letter provides the structural foundation, and the space is gradually filled with objects such as hearts morphing into breasts, blobs of colour changing shape and unfolding geometric shapes. He is animating a continuous cycle and also changing the camera position so that the frame, at times, follows selected shapes around a circular path, or moves 'back' (up on the animation stand) to reveal the complex animated universe in motion. The circular path of the animation leaves the centre space empty and after the animated sequence is completed, Beckett optically prints live action into this area. Here we see several elements that are consistent in Beckett's films – specifically humour, the influence of pop culture imagery, and the

Fig. 1: Dear Janice, image courtesy of The iotaCenter

absence of 'subject' as the imagery is present for its graphic content, not to convey larger meaning. The exception to the above is his film Heavy-Light which is serious and mysterious, with no overt humour or connection to pop imagery.

Evolution of the Red Star (1973) is a cycle of only six drawings and demonstrates increased involvement with the optical printer. The opening shot is a static image of Chairman Mao who is crying animated red stars while blue lines emanate from his head. This is the only 'real' image in the film. The body of the animation is of concentric star shapes, and other geometric forms, with negative spaces filled by a progressing, organic tube-like form. Again, he repositions the camera to focus on specific developing areas of the animation, and then he takes the film to the optical printer. Here, almost as an alchemist attempting to transfigure the original into a new form, he layers the imagery, alters the tones, shifts the position and time between layers. This creates an electronic-like, pulsing, mutating image that at times appears embossed, monochromatic, and/or inverted.
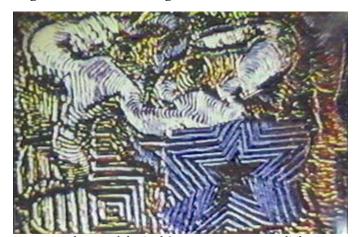

Fig. 2: Evolution of the Red Star, image courtesy of The iotaCenter

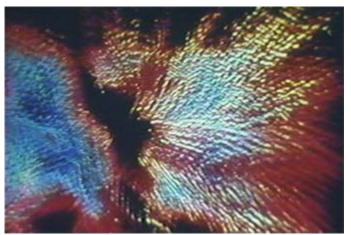[5] Pat O'Neill, personal interview, July 26, 2003.

Fig. 3: Heavy-Light, image courtesy of The iotaCenter

Heavy-Light (1973) stands apart from Beckett's others in that it is completely abstract, having no reference to an actual form and no recognizable image. It appears to be made of pure, coloured light, traveling through the screen space in a variety of movements. At times the light forms appear to dart around on a triangular path, and sometimes they swirl and float, and engulf the viewer. Suggesting light in motion, the images have an electric quality and resemble imagery created via video feedback or perhaps computer graphics. However, like all of his films, *Heavy-Light's* source is drawn. The incredible variety of shapes and movements seen here come from a cycle of thirteen drawings.[6] This is perhaps the apex of Beckett's mastery of the optical printer.

Flesh Flows (1974) is based on recognizable, imaginative forms that are somewhat erotic, and that change into other shapes, or create a landscape of sorts. This film is unique in that it is not based on a cycle. Instead the entire animation sequence is repeated three times, with the second and third repetitions transformed into a more ethereal, ab-stracted space via his work on the optical printer. The resulting abstracted imagery takes on a life of its own, becoming seething, nebulous trails of color that briefly redefine as the original shape emerges, then disintegrate into the changing mass.

With *Sausage City* (1974) Beckett returns to the additive cycle technique, this time using 48 animated drawings.[7] Beckett's description in the Canyon Cinema catalogue (1976, p.17) reads:

> "Starting with a white screen a city of interlocking boxes evolves, always moving, constantly changing perspective. After a while, this group of sausages begins to emerge… As time passes there get to be a whole bunch of sausages; in fact, the screen becomes one mass of seething, throbbing, pullulating life. The ending is a surprise."

Fig. 4: Flesh Flows – Before optical printer effects, image courtesy of The iotaCenter

Fig. 5: Flesh Flows – After optical printer effects, image courtesy of The iotaCenter

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[6] Barry Schrader, personal interview, October 10, 2004. The drawings have not been found and the animation is so complex there is no way to isolate the 13 drawings. Schrader worked closely with Beckett while making the sound score and was able to provide this, and other important information on this film.

[7] David Berry, personal interview, February 11, 2003.

Fig. 6: Sausage City, image courtesy of The iotaCenter

The amorphous shapes are reminiscent of *Dear Janice* and it doesn't include the sophisticated optical printing transformation of his previous three films. Here the optical printing is more traditional, compositing a character onto the animation. A thin man wearing a hat peers at us from the left edge of the frame then steps into the work, which we now see as an animating plane of images on the ani-mation stand. The registration pegs and the wooden table outside of the animating area are briefly visible.

The last film that Beckett completed was actually a collaborative effort. *Kitsch in Synch* (1975) was made while he was teaching both animation and optical printing at CalArts and he directed the students as they created the sound track, the animated sequences and the initial optical printing. The animation students made black and white cut-outs and colour – brilliant colour – was added in the printer. Images are mirrored, each side having different colours to offset the symmetry, and layered. These shapes, propelled by the unique sound-track, create a riotous cacophony of sound, colour and form.

Many artists were experimenting with alternative approaches to animation, both in use of media and content. As Giannalberto Bendazzi noted, observing the work of independent animators in United States from 1970s and 80s, "A diversification of themes and techniques was the main characteristic of this wave of animators. Everything was subject to experimenta-tion, from drawing on simple sheets of paper to clay puppets, to computer ani-mation, to collages, to retouched photo-graphs, to object animation." (1994, p. 238)

Fig. 7: Kitsch in Synch, image courtesy of The iotaCenter

The aspect of Beckett's work that really set him apart is that he used the printer, and abstraction, to the extreme. The optical printer, to most, was a post-production tool; Beckett used it for the production of his primary imagery, transforming the material from the usual realm of animation to the more cosmic realm of avant-garde film, or a graphic, psychedelic cinema experience. Evolution of the Red Star, Heavy-Light, and Flesh Flows are the films that best demonstrate Beckett's unique artistry with the optical printer and suggest a connection to other media practices from the time period.

Connections: image processing in video art

Video was still in its infancy as an art form at that time, as the Sony Portapak had only been introduced at the end of the 1960's. Yet artists had quickly co-opted this technology and already a variety of approaches were evolving, with some entering a critique of television, while others

looked to the inherent physical nature of the video signal itself. Inherent artifacts of the electronic video signal, such as glitches, were utilized and exploited. Devices were created to act upon the electro-magnetic signal adding colour, instability, distortion or abstraction.

Audio synthesizers preceded video synthesizers and early artists and engineers realized a parallel between the synthesis of electronic music and electronic image. The audio synthesizers generated tones, altered pitches, and modulated waves – sounds were created and processed, layered and used to create textures. The same ideas compelled video artists, assisted by engineers, to create instruments to electronically alter – or generate – the video signal.

Beckett was well aware of both technologies, and the processes they motivated, from a first hand perspective. He had access to the Buchla 100, an early audio synthesizer, at CalArts.[8] The sound score to *Evolution of the Red Star* and *Heavy Light* were created by electronic composition artists - Carl Stone, a student, and Barry Schrader, an instructor. Adam worked closely with Stone and Schrader and was familiar with the audio synthesizer and the processes it enabled. Stone, in fact, points to the relationship of what Adam was doing with the optical printer and what he was doing on the Buchla, and to video feedback:

> "I mean basically what he was doing was a kind of analog feedback. Heavy-Light is feedback - a feedback system. You'd take an image and process it, you'd shoot it again, changing a little bit and it's feedback. So I think that somehow, tangibly or intangibly, the work that the video guys were doing crossed over."[9]

This thinking across processes, with one process informing the other is apparent not just from video to animation, but also from animation to audio composition, as Stone notes Beckett's influence on his approach to music composition. "…the processes that he was using I felt great resonance with and I continue to use, in a way, to this day. It's the idea of the sort of additive looping where he would create a film loop - an animation loop - and then add material, as it would loop." Loops with additions could translate into a system integrated into music composition, especially with the presence of electronic audio synthesizers and tape recorders.

Michael Scroggins, who migrated towards the new media of video and computer graphics, recalls that Beckett was directly motivated by what he was seeing happen in the video studio, and the dialogue around that.

> "He said 'I can do this same video feedback stuff with the optical printer. You don't need video.' Many of us were saying this is pure video art, right. It's all about video it's not a film thing. Actually Tony Conrad made a feedback film to make that same point."[10]

The two media, film and video, were indeed rubbing up against each other. While very different technically and materially, the image content they captured and created often overlapped, and some artists easily migrated back and forth between the two mediums. Many, of course, had worked in film before video was available. Also, artists working in video had to rely

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[8] Morton Subotnick, who was the assistant dean of the Composition area, with Ramon Sender commissioned the building of The Buchla synsthesizer. Sender and Subotnick had founded the musique concrète center, San Francisco Tape Music Center, and desired a way to get around the tediousness of splicing tape and manual editing.

[9] Carl Stone, personal interview, March 5, 2003.

[10] Scroggins, telephone interview, September 3, 2005. He also noted that Tony Conrad made *Film Feedback* in 1974 to make the same point. It was a black and white 16mm film, running for fourteen minutes, and was created by re-filming the projected film. This title is also dated at 1972, and is credited as being a class project while teaching at Antioch College, two years after Adam had left for CalArts.

on film to record the image from the video monitor before the time base corrector appeared to stabilize the signal and allow dependable recording onto tape. This hybrid of video-film can be seen in work by Nam June Paik, working with Jud Yalkut from the mid to late '6os.[11] The immediacy of the recorded movie image – and its ability to record in more challenging light situations – made it appealing. Beckett, while not discounting the work being created in video and computer graphics, remained with film.

The whole of his work – including the many exercises and loops he made – attests to a developing language that centres on process and discovery. This desire to create new images and to see what the collaboration between the artist and the machine would conjure was also a direction many video artists were taking. They were pushing and pulling at the video signal, via the camera/monitor relation and electronic modulation, while the material for Beckett was light on film, through the drawn image, explored via the camera and the optical printer. Like the video artists, he was interested in generating images that had not been seen before, by taking a source and sending it through a device, multiple times, to see what the image could make from itself.

Richard Herskowitz (1988) relates a kindred approach in the video work of Woody and Steina Vasulka, working at the Center for Media Study (CMS) at SUNY Buffalo in the early seventies, noting, "The Vasulkas were engaged in 'dialogues with tools', and their path-breaking experiments with image processing (colorizing, keying, and otherwise transforming the video image) were intended to discover images which their minds could not preconceive." This can be seen in Matrix I and Matrix II, installations based on their exploration of the inherent, electronic properties of video between 1970 and 1972.

In order to manipulate video's electric signal many artists built – or got an engineer to build – devices to massage and bend the signal. An array of box-like instruments with patch cables, meters and knobs – synthesizers, processors and colorizers – emerged. Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe, mentioned earlier, were pioneers in this effort, designing and building the Paik-Abe synthesizer in 1969 and 1970. Peter Donebauer and Richard Monkhouse designed the Videokalos Image Processor in 1975 with the idea of using it as a live performance instrument. As Donebauer noted, "I felt that getting involved with the integrated circuits, chips and transistors and all the rest of it, would get me closer to the heart of the medium" (Meigh-Andrews, 2000).

We can see a relationship between Beckett's Evolution of the *Red Star* and *Heavy-Light* and Donebauer's *Circling and Teeming*, from 1975. What these works have in common, formally, is a contemplation of the abstract transcending what can be seen through the camera aimed at the external world. The visual plane is a place for revealing forms derived from a dialogue between the image, the technology and the artist. Both begin with an identifiable image, but only as a source for processing. Donebauer explains that in Teeming, "External imagery only appears at the beginning and end of the tape; all other imagery was generated by feedback i.e. the electronics looking in upon itself". (Donebauer.net)

In *Circling* there is a shared attention to the cycle as Donebauer notes that it "was inspired by the cyclical processes that occur in all natural events." Beckett developed the cycle as his central theme, both conceptually and technically.

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[11] This was brought to my attention by Stephen Vitiello, a sound artist who worked with Paik for several years and also worked as archivist at the Kitchen and at Electronic Arts Intermix.

The idea of cycling has, needless to say, many obvious philosophical, aesthetic, and scientific implications. Cycles occur in nature on all levels from the astronomical to the psychological. The filmic idea of cyclical evolution mirrors the anti-entropic process of biological evolution. It provides an escape from static repetition by a process of positive feedback or continual addition (Beckett in Russett, 1976, p.11).

Note Beckett's use of the term "feedback" and also how he saw the cycle as a stabilizing force, pointing to the regenerative behaviour of nature, where video artists often were intrigued with artifacts and the degeneration of the image. Donebauer often referenced nature in talking about his work, looking at what would soon become known as chaos theory. In his manipulation of the electronic image, he was intrigued by the way the results mirrored permutations in the biological world.

Within avant-garde film theory

Focus on the materiality of the medium in the newly available technology of video, had a parallel in film. The new medium encouraged artists to challenge the boundaries and rethink the form of existing media, as can be seen directly in Beckett's response to video feedback in his creation of *Heavy-Light*. In the world of avant-garde filmmaking, work that did not follow traditional narrative structures but examined the actual material of film and its process, became known as *Structural and Materialist film*. This has been thoroughly addressed in two texts by Peter Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology* and *Materialist Film*, and also by P. Adams Sitney in *Visionary Film*.

Sitney places the crux of structural film on its shape, "the primal impression of the film". This is in contrast to formal art films in which the shape is formed to "explore the facets of the material" (p. 369). He goes on to explain that:

> "The structural film insists on its shape, and what content it had is minimal and subsidiary to the outline. Four characteristics of the structural film are its fixed camera position (fixed frame from the viewer's perspective), the flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography off the screen." (p.369-370)

Structural influence was seen in film emerging from CalArts, particularly in the work of David Wilson, who was in the film/video graduate program in the mid-1970s. Wilson made a number of films, but two in particular relate to the ideas around Structural film: *Stasis* (1976), and *Dead Reckoning* (1980). Both films employ footage shot in a landscape of sorts, without narrative content. The 'event' of the film is the gradual changing of the film through optical printing.

Dead Reckoning has a fixed object within a landscape, a cross shape, like a cross-hair, on a dark beach. The film is structured in three sections. The first section of the film is footage that is apparently hand-held – we can see the wobble of the camera in relation to this object. The optical printer is the subject of the middle section. It is not shown in real time but filmed so that we see a fast, time-compacted version of the printer at work. The third, and last, section shows the same footage but with the 'crosshair' lined up frame by frame through the 'corrections' made on the optical printer, seen at work in the previous section. The result is a subtle film whose content is not the actual footage but rather about the process of filming and rephotography.

In view of Sitney's criteria, we can see that Dead Reckoning could be considered a Structural film. The fixed camera position is simulated via the optical printer, stabilizing the hand-held imagery. There is no flicker effect, *per se*, or loop printing that is obvious. The re-photography,

while not off of the screen is present as the optical printer prints directly from the backlit film. The shape of the film is initially the "primal impression of the film." What tends to linger is an underlying, deeper impression, which may or may not be Wilson's intent. It seems to refer to the rawness of experience and our attempt, or desire, to fix some aspects of that experience. Leaving room for allusion would question its fit in the structural/materialist film camp for some theorists.

Gidal (1976, p.14) puts forward a more stringent demarcation in his Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film, contesting the "romantic base" of American structural theory as put forward by Sitney. He asserts that there is no element of illusion in the Structural/Materialist film, instead film is clearly film and it is a "record of its own making" (p. 2). He includes, among many additional conditions, the concept of reflexivity, explaining, "A film practice in which one watches oneself watching is reflexive." This involves a certain self-perception or consciousness of the production of the film itself. He makes clear that this self-consciousness "must in no way imply transcendence or transcendent subjectivity" (p.11).

It is in considering *Dead Reckoning* with Gidal's criteria in mind, that the difficulties lie in determining if this work is truly structural/materialist or not. When does the content "imply transcendence" and what if it does for some viewers and not for others? Clearly the cross-hair on the beach is not a 'subject' per se, but rather a singular element whose purpose is determined by the filmic process. This is true as well in Stasis where the landscape itself is not overly significant.

This is echoed in the drawn elements of Beckett's films. While the image plane of Beckett's films can often be described as a cacophony of seething shapes, the actual content is minimal. The star in *Evolution of the Red Star* serves as a focal point to be acted upon but in and of itself serves no narrative purpose, conveys no meaning. Once the forms are determined there is no introduction (with minor exception) of new material, no cuts to another set of imagery, another treatment, no building of a mythic or symbolic vocabulary within the film. The material is there to be acted upon, via multiple passes through the optical printer with time, scale and position offsets, and colour changes. The content is minimal and subsidiary to the outline of the whole.

While Beckett's work does not fit comfortably in the structural camp, those ideas would have been part of the discussion happening around him and influential to some degree in his own thinking about film. Beckett's concern with 'film material' is more about exploring "the facets of the material", which for Sitney would make it a formal art film. Beckett's work is not self-reflexive, as defined in the structural/materialist view. Yes, the re-photography of the animation is a sort of "animation looking at itself", but this is taken to such an extreme that the original is transformed. Here the objective is not to show the process but to use the process to transcend the original. The reflexive intention isn't the same as watching the optical printer in motion in the middle section of David Wilson's *Dead Reckoning*. Wilson is creating more of a "record of its own making" while Beckett is playing with the audience and in a way emphasizing the 'other-worldliness' available through the illusion of animation. The "element of illusion" that Gidal said must be absent was definitely present. And Beckett, especially in the films from 1973-1974, was aiming for a cosmic encounter for the viewer, an evolution of thought and experience, of transcendence via the material of the film.

Belson and Brakhage – transcending the external

The question of transcendence in a film such as Beckett's *Heavy-Light* is most aptly considered by looking at two other films from 1973 and 1974: Jordan Belson's Light and Stan Brakhage's The Text of Light, respectively. 'Light' as a physiological occurrence on film as well as a

metaphor for seeing, for revelation, was concurrently a preoccupation with all three. Here the film medium was a conduit, affording access to the experience of images that would not be readily available in the external world.

Jordan Belson's film is, as William Wees points out, about the physiological and psychological being of light (1992, p.136). As in most of Belson's films, this work expresses an inner vision, informed by his experience with eastern philosophical traditions. He looks to the physical phenomena of light to represent a spiritual, metaphysical passage. He points the camera at real objects on what is, according to Youngblood, a sort of optical bench (1970, , p.158). He is interested in what illusion may occur, pulled from real physical space into the other internal experience. In describing Belson's more geometric, ethereal composition, Wees notes that "The effect is like an animation of Turner's most abstract seascapes, or a slowed down and smoothed out passage from Brakhage's Text of Light" (Wees, 1992, p.135).

Youngblood's evocative description of Belson's work could just as easily be referring to Beckett's *Heavy-Light*. "In their amorphous, gaseous, cloudlike imagery it is colour, not line, which defines the forms that ebb and flow across the frame with uncanny impact. It is this stunning emotional force that lifts the films far beyond any realm of "purity" into the most evocative and metaphysical dimensions of sight and sound" (1970, p.157-158).

Brakhage's *The Text of Light* (1974) stands out in his prolific body of work, as it has a more singular image source, which is the fracturing of light through a large crystal ashtray. The kinship to Beckett's *Heavy-Light* can be easily detected in this description Sitney gives of Brakhage's piece. "This magnificent film – a slow montage of iridescent sprays of light and shifting land-scapes of sheer colour, which acknowledges debts to Turner and American Romantic landscape painters as well as to James Davis, the pioneer filmmaker of light projections…" (1974, p.421).

Brakhage was very articulate regarding his approach to film, writing manifestos and addressing the possibilities offered through a pure film experience. Beckett didn't ascribe deeper meanings to his work, perhaps because of his young age – he was 24 when *Heavy-Light* was completed – and because the tendency to theorize about one's work wasn't as prevalent in animation as in avant-garde film. They were what they were.

Heavy-Light provides a cosmic journey, a meditation or trance of sorts, but this is not prescribed or informed by an underlying philosophy or study. His intent is to create something new, something unique. He seems to acknowledge that his 'unique' film is not so distinctive after all and supplies a straight-forward description in the Canyon Cinema catalogue.

This is one of those abstract animated films in which coloured, richly textured light moves in a black, three-dimensional space. The pictures and the electronic score are unified in a strict structure made of three main sections which progressively develop three subsections. (Beckett in Canyon Cinema, 1976, p.17)

Beckett's intent lies closer to Brakhage's than Belson's in that he is concerned with the physiological, and the pure experience of the visual space. His approach is intuitive and mathematical as he sets up a structure of three parts, with three sub-phases within each part. His work on the optical printer is precise, with slight variations across an extreme number of layers and passes through the printer. He is an alchemist, but remaining in the science and Math realm without an overt interest in metaphysics. His magic lies in his intuitive understanding of the innate language of the tools he used, and his ability to collaborate with them beautifully.

Post note

Like the work of John Whitney, Sr. and Jordan Belson, Beckett's abstract animations were noticed by the commercial visual effects industry. His put aside his personal work while he was employed briefly by Robert Abel and Associates doing effects for television commercials. He left there to become the head of animation and rotoscope for the first Star Wars movie. Due to his eccentricities and artistic vision, the effects industry was not fulfilling for Beckett. He was attempting to finish two films, Knotte Grosse and Life in the Atom, and also create a shorter version of *Dear Janice*, when he died suddenly and tragically on March 6, 1979 in a house fire. ❧

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