

This is Called Moving: a Critical Poetics of Film

Foreword by Tom Gunning

Poetry in Motion: Make Movies, Not Just Meaning

Abigail Child's This is Called Moving: a Critical Poetics of Film opens a space of intersection between film and poetry. Words play a strong role in the soundtracks of Child's films (many of which are transcribed in this book). But a quick glance at these transcriptions reveals that Child treats words as raw material, containing meanings, yes, but fragmented in a radical manner, often broken into phonemes. The poetry of Child's films does not come simply from her use of language. Rather, in her films images, sound and words are all treated as plastic matter, open to re-arrangement, liberated from predetermined meanings, and embarked on adventures in ambiguity and discovery.

Child imagines a language that goes beyond the purely verbal, a new language using several sensual registers (visual and aural, as well as a rhythmic sense which centers itself throughout the body), a language in which meaning is played with but never denied. A *moving* language. A language called into being through movement, and a movement that finds its calling in the hands of the filmmaker. And this book -- an essential part of Child's work, not simply its record -- in words calls out to this new language, treating words as material as much as meaning. This is Called Moving contains transcriptions from Child's films, notes on their making, interviews, letters, manifestos, and responses to films by other filmmakers, as well as memories and a bit of autobiography. But all this disparate material remains aimed at the process of discovery and making: *poesis*.

A Bit of History

More than half a century ago, shortly before Halloween in 1953, Amos Vogel, the mastermind behind the alternative film exhibition outlet known as Cinema 16, organized a symposium in New York City on the topic “Poetry and Film”. Cinema 16 had been founded as an American equivalent to the European cine-clubs, showing films outside of commercial distribution, but whereas many European film clubs in the 1950’s were rediscovering and falling in love again with the Hollywood cinema (withheld for many during the war years), Cinema 16 more closely resembled the cine-clubs founded in Europe in the 1920’s, focused on alternatives to Hollywood and the commercial cinema.

In the 20’s European film clubs embraced the possibilities of an avant-garde film practice, innovative in style and usually politically radical, often featuring the new filmmakers of the Soviet Union (Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov), as well as political filmmaking by such figures as Jean Vigo, Joris Ivens or Charles Dekeuliere, (who were all members and organizers of these clubs). In New York in the midst of the conformist 50’s (when Hollywood itself was being cleansed of radical elements by its anti-communist blacklist), Cinema 16 took up this radical aspiration and viewed cinema again as a subversive act, innovative in form and often dealing with taboo topics (race, homosexuality – or any sort of direct sexuality) as well as political films.

Cinema 16 and the American avant-garde cinema generally – and most certainly the tradition which the films of Abigail Child exemplify and renew – affirmed a relation between radical form and radical content, even as the relation might be complex and subject to transformation. Cinema 16 was founded on the belief that film art (at that time still a hotly debated and polemical term) might not be best served by the standards of mass production, distribution and exhibition controlled by Hollywood studios (a system then being broken up by the US government, allowing the rather brief emergence of the art film theater, fostering a growing interest in foreign films). Curiosity drove Cinema 16, as a

thirst for something different on the screen emerged from the depth of the 50's, attracting large audiences for films that even went beyond the fare offered by the art house circuit.

On the formal level, no issue could better express the difference between the sort of counter-cinema then being gestated in the United States and the Hollywood product (or even most art house films) than the idea of a poetic, rather than a narrative, cinema. And no one could represent this tendency, or argue more articulately for it, than the champion of the poetic film and the American Avant Garde cinema, Maya Deren. Beginning in the early forties (although drawing on a rich heritage of modernist filmmaking from the twenties, in Europe and America) Deren's films -- Meshes of the Afternoon, (1943), At Land (1944), Ritual In Transfigured Time (1945), Choreography for the Camera (1946), Meditation on Violence, (1948) -- had drawn on the imagery of surrealist painting and photography, the rhythms of both modern and ethnography dance, the aleatory logic of modern music and the scenography of experimental theater to create a truly unique demonstration of the power of cinema to create its own logic of space and time, fantasy and desire, repetition and ritual. But to describe the form of her films, and of the new films being featured at Cinema 16 -- the early films of Anger, Broughton, Harrington, Markoupolis, (and soon, Stan Brakhage)-- Deren chose the profound analogy with poetry.

Deren defines poetic form as deriving from a work's total structure and therefore a possibility not only in literature but also in film. To describe these, Deren makes a contrast between what she describes as the "horizontal" approach of narrative and the vertical approach of poetry.

To quote Deren directly:

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 [...] Now it may also include action, but its attack is what I would call the “vertical” attack and this may be a little clearer if you will contrast it to what I would call the “horizontal” attack of drama. [...]¹

Immediately censured for her abstract terminology by the other participants in the Symposium, Deren does not get much of a chance to expand her theory. But I think it is clear that Deren is exploring an opposition between two forms of temporal developments found in film history. The narrative attack, carefully developed over the first decades of silent commercial cinema, honed the devices of film editing in order to create an ongoing, dramatically elliptical and suspenseful rush of continuous time (with carefully marked out flashbacks, when needed), dedicated to dramatic story telling. The other poetic approach, often drawing on the techniques of editing introduced in dramatic storytelling, liberated images from this linear, forward thrust and fashioned devices (repetition, interruption, circularity) to circumvent narrative form. Filmmakers like Jean Epstein, Sergei Eisenstein, Germaine Dulac and Dziga Vertov used cinematic devices (e. g. elliptical or repetitive editing, freeze frames, slow motion, superimposition) to interrupt action, allowing a spectator to watch film images and their juxtaposition in a manner that does not simply use them as a vehicle for an ongoing story or drama.

Returning in some ways to the energy of the poetic films from the twenties (Cocteau, Bunuel, Dulac, Man Ray,), in the midst of the fifties, Deren sketched out one program for an alternative cinema, creating an opposition between it and the commercial cinema based less on a historical imperative (implied always in the term “avant-garde”) than on a difference in genre. Film poetry could demand a rigorous formal approach, bringing to film some of the

varieties of viewing (or reading) practices we find in the other modern arts. Deren's influence, the still fresh energy of surrealism, the memories of expressionism and the blending of the two in a uniquely American fashion in the contemporaneous movement of Abstract Expressionism, opened the door to a new tradition of American filmmaking. This vision was carried into the sixties by Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, Gregory Markopoulos, Harry Smith, Ken Jacobs, and scores of others, as a burgeoning counterculture supplied alternative spaces for screening and production, while guerilla filmmakers swarmed urban landscapes creating not only oppositional political newsreel and new expressions of sexuality, but also new possibilities of form in cinema within the poetic context Deren had defined.

A Neo-Constructivist Poetics

I rehearsed this history partly in order to restore primacy to the relation between poetry and film. The publication of this wonderful collection of the writings of Abigail Child within a series of publications dedicated primarily to poetry places this often-neglected relation front and center.

For Child a poetics is not a guide to the evolution of film style and its narrative grammar, but an exploration of both its materials and forms, by a practicing filmmaker. It takes seriously Deren's claim that a poetic cinema exists and that it is as different from the standard commercial feature film as poetry is from standard fiction. Although it is not a term Child herself privileges, her practice and thinking exemplify an experimental attitude. She outlines in her preface the questions she poses in her work (which includes the writing collected here, as well as the films she has produced, equal partners in a project carried out in words as well as images and sounds):

How meaning is made, how elements join together, how far elements can stand apart and still "connect", how resonance

and meaning is created, how putting together fragments of the world can create new forms, new ways of thinking, the utopian aspect, and the problematic of that desire [...]

Child does not approach these issues primarily as a theorist (although theory is one component of her work), nor as a historian (although history remains important to her), but as a *maker*, and in that sense an experimenter as well as a poet. These works (both films and writings) are not products, but processes.

Child's work originated during the 1970s, and if it took its initial energy from the utopian and liberatory rush of the counter-culture sixties, it was tempered and formed in the consequent critical reassessment of that period that came in the seventies, performed especially by both feminism and structuralism, in different ways. The result is what I would describe as a neo-constructivism.

The crashing of the romantic and idealist aspiration of the sixties counter-culture led many American avant-garde artists to look for a rigor of analysis to replace the highly individualistic and 'personalized' aspects of the Beats and the youth culture the Beats in part inspired. Painting, as it moved into Minimalism, provided one alternative model. Just as important was a re-discovery of the art and theory of the Soviet literary avant-garde of the twenties, the constructivist ethos which proclaimed the importance of the revolutionary political context of artistic practice, and proposed a scientific analysis of the laws of art, inherent in its materials and their assembly. The Russian Constructivists offered a tradition that was strongly modernist (as opposed to representational and traditional), but also avant-garde and political (as opposed to the corralling of high modernist art as the stock in trade of a elite consumer market created by individualistic artists).

Within this Neo-constructivist context, cinema reasserted an interrogative function, questioning the limits not only of the forms of film, but also of the conditions of spectatorship. Film Theory in the seventies launched an interrogation of the conditions of spectatorship, perhaps best exemplified by Laura Mulvey's frequently quoted (but rarely thoroughly read) essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". While the essay launched a thousand analyses of the role of the gaze in Hollywood cinema, how many readers, then or now, notice that the essay ends with a call for a new cinema, an avant-garde and oppositional practice? In a demonstration of Sartrean *mauvais foi* the critique of Hollywood cinema became a means of maintaining one's fascination with commercial cinema, rather than seeking alternatives.

Child's writings and films not only seek alternatives, but in their very form and address proclaims questions to viewers. "Is this what you were born for?" asks her powerful series of films from the eighties in which Child shoulders the questions of the fascinations of narrative film and its genres of melodrama, mystery and romance without either simply denouncing or reproducing them. Using the push /pull dialectic so crucial to modernism, Child intervenes in the attractions and sensations of a commercial cinema, quoting passages directly, restaging others with a twist, and creating a seesaw between engagement and detachment. The seduction of gender images and their perversion interacts with the detachment of the experimenter, pulling apart elements rather than simply letting them pull us in.

Reading Child's notes and transcriptions for these films provides both a complex gloss on the images, and a spin into another space. They can rub against the images on the screen or fly off and do their own dance of verbal interplay, exploring how words evoke images (and vice versa) and the ways they also repel each other into their own space. The thoughts, hesitations and inspirations recorded here read like the laboratory notes of a sensual and existential scientist. In both the writing and the films one feels Child cooking the material, exposing them to pressures that break up the genre associations we

have with them, but in no way simply abstracting them. A film like Mayhem seems amazingly *dirty* to me -- in the best sense. It leaves stains on my consciousness, the bits of excess that a tidy plot might clean up with a final resolution. The excess energies given off by Hollywood (and other international cinemas) in genres of gender conflict (the melodrama, the thriller, the film noir), seem distilled here, yielding a final grimy residue, rather than being wiped away by a narrative resolution.

Thus one aspect that Child's work shares with post modernism, in contrast to the high modernism of the minimal filmmakers of the seventies, lies in taking popular culture seriously through a process of taking it apart. Child's method of finding inspiration in the material of film extends to this idea of testing, distilling, probing film images that the culture has given her and us. What secret seductions, what deadly delusions do they contain? What energies and desire might be liberated from them? For what purposes were these images born, constructed, and can that destiny be arranged by deconstructing them?

Language/ Body: Language of the body?

Child's strong inheritance from constructivism includes her astonishing grasp of montage. While much of the seventies avant-garde work seemed to be fascinated by duration and continuity (although this can be a deceptive impression -- think of the breaks in continuity in Ernie Gehr's Serene Velocity or even Snow's Wavelength), Child and a few other key filmmakers remained very much devoted to the aesthetic of fragmentation and juxtaposition that the Soviet masters introduced. Child understands vividly that montage is not only the art of juxtaposition, as Eisenstein defined it, creating new meanings through the meeting of images and sounds, but also a method of interruption. Montage means breaking down, giving words and sound in bursts that transform meaning and association, braking the velocity of a gesture or action to

allow a contemplation of its force and contradictions, before it has become sealed in a finalized intention.

This interest in isolating and juxtaposing images and sounds, decomposing them into smaller elements, reveals the strong influence structuralist linguistics exerted on avant-garde film of the eighties, a drive toward analysis as a creative process, rather different from the more meditative experiences of what became known as “structural” film. This is best exemplified by Child’s interest in “difference,” that basic concept of structural linguistics in which elements signify by the differences among them. But for Child, the interest lies not only in the way these differences make up a system, but in the ways differences can be maximized to create new systems, counter-logics and anti-languages. The twist Child’s work give to the basic utopian aspiration of avant-garde practice comes from recognizing the dependence on language and systems of meaning that such play involves. But this is not capitulation on Child’s part. She sees this dependence as a critical opportunity, a zone in which the system can be -- not abolished – but re-imagined, re-arranged.

I feel that all serious considerations of the relation between film and languages must first of all recognize the differences between them, the lack, in short of a double articulation in cinema, that essential aspect of language whereby words can be broken into letters or phonemes: elements whose significance does not carry meaning, but simply indicates difference. Images, too, can be broken down, even reduced to unrecognizable patterns, but they never form a system of defined elements like letters. Nonetheless, the method of language inspires filmmakers to attack the recognizable image and transform it into fragments, uncovering aspects that allow it to be re-configured. But the resistance the image (and especially the *moving* image, the film image) offers to fragmentation relates, I believe, to another essential aspect of Child’s work -- its connection to the body.

The film image captures many things, but central to its whole conception of space is its portrayal of the body. Film was invented (deriving from the

work of scientific photographers such as Muybridge, Marey, Demenÿ and Londe) in order to provide a scientific tool for the investigation of the body in motion. If a fascination with language and its possibilities of articulation occupies one aspect of Child's cinema, an investigation of film's relation to the body balances and interacts with this linguistic drive.

The body itself dwells within the grid of difference and Child's exploration of gender through film explores this intersection. The investigation of body language offered by the systematic reworking of found footage in Covert Action explores the way gendered bodies interact with each other and with the camera. Child becomes, in effect, a feminist Muybridge, breaking down gestures and actions to reveal unconscious and otherwise invisible patterns and determinates. But while always suspicious of a romanticization that can conceal hierarchies of power, or an essentialization that mythifies gender difference, Child also captures the rhythms and confidences of the body in movement, with dance offering an inter-text as important to this aspect of her work as poetry is to her engagement with language. As a viewer as well as a maker (and much of Child's work in this book consists of engaging with the work of others, thinking through her issues with their imagery), Child seeks out the excessive gesture, such as the way a little girl's shrug of her shoulder seems to puncture the flow of Vertov's The Man with a Movie Camera, making room for the body within a system of ideological montage.

This, of course, brings us face to face with the central paradoxes that produce the energy behind all of Child's work, a system founded not on coherence, but on breakdown, not on continuity, but interruption. Cinema and poetry share for Child the possibility of manipulating a language (or imagery and sound) generally taken for granted and subjecting it to shocks, interruption, gaps, and space. This nearly physical pummeling of the material shakes the viewer/reader out of the complacency of the "horizontal" attack, of knowing how to go on, how to follow the action, and forces her to sink beneath the surface, to plumb the text vertically. For Child, as for the both the Russian For-

malists and Constructivists, such interruptions and defamiliarizations do not simply play a game with art, (or play a game called art), but rather place a stake in the go-for-broke game of history and politics. These interruptions that experimental art employs make us re-access the world we live in, test and question it against the edge of an unfamiliar artistic experience. We are, in fact, changed by this encounter. This is called moving. The moving picture cannot simply be grasped in stillness, contemplated, but instead demands we run our minds alongside its mobile imagery, learning new patterns of thoughts, new gestures for our bodies, new ways to live, re-conceiving what we were born for.

¹ "Poetry and Film: A Symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler, Chairman Willard Maas, Organized by Amos Vogel" Film Culture Reader ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 174.