

PROFILE - 04 JUN 2015

Pop Goes the Picture

BY ESTHER BUSS

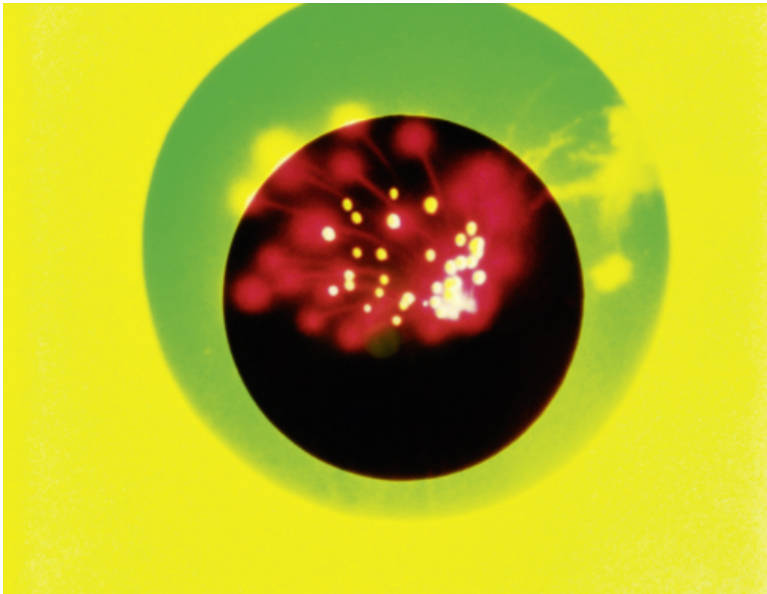
Experimental film, now in 3D



Lucy Raven,
Curtains, 2014
(all images
courtesy:
Internationale
Kurzfilmtage
Oberhausen)

When Jean-Luc Godard presented his 3D film *Adieu au langage* (2014) last year, the largely frosty critical reception of stereoscopic cinema suddenly thawed. Though the technology has been around for a century, and periodically 'rediscovered', it has only become firmly established as a mainstream media over the past few years. The fact that a tirelessly experimental filmmaker like Godard is turning his attention to the format (in

the wake of James Cameron's *Avatar*, the 2009 sensation that brought about the widespread refitting of cinemas for digital 3D screening) breaks the association of 3D cinema as solely commercial spectacle. The typically Godardian deconstruction of spatial order and picture coherence also drew attention to potential uses of 3D visualization not being exploited by Hollywood studios.



Mary Ellen Bute,
Color
Rhapsodie, 1948

Of course, Godard was not the first experimental filmmaker or artist to use the 3D format – with its immersive promise, enhanced spatial depth and objects catapulting out towards the viewer. In recent years, the spread of the technology, its increasingly easy and affordable production, and widespread distribution and screening, has given rise to a growing number of 3D works in the field of experimental and art film. Although still in its infancy, this 'alternative' history of 3D is now extensive enough to merit a first overview. With the title *The Third Image – 3D Cinema as Experiment*, the 61st International Short Film Festival in Oberhausen in May was dedicated to experimental productions 'in the slipstream of mainstream cinema', as the press release put it.



Thomas
Stellmach &
Maja
Oschmann,
Virtuos Virtuell,
2013

The **Oberhausen programme** (comprising around 50 films, not all stereoscopic) showed **there's no simple antagonism between commercial and experimental 3D cinema**. For one thing, **most of the films that were screened rely no less on visual impact than their mainstream counterparts**. The most excruciating examples selected by curator Björn Speidel (shots of the Northern Lights accompanied by mood music, tearful orgasms in close-up, etc.) displayed a certain smugness in showcasing the technology's technical possibilities, combined with a tendency for kitschy fairground effects. Outside of Oberhausen another recent example is Cyprien Gaillard's politically-charged 3D film *Nightlife* (2015), (referencing the radically leftist Weather Underground organization founded in the US in the late '60s as well as the 1936 Berlin Olympics) which premiered at the same time as the Oberhausen programme at Galerie Sprüth Magers in Berlin; its tactile and sensual effects deployed like elaborate shop-window displays. Moreover, many stereoscopic films are driven by a positively 'creationist' impulse: forms, spaces, surfaces and textures are proffered with the solemn gesture of a Promethean act, enriched with an endless succession of additional embellishments and layers.

The frame of reference for these works seems to be less the

apparatus of cinema itself than the visual world of computer games and 3D animation. One striking example is the tendency of many films towards 'ambientization', the modelling of images on the aesthetic of screensavers. Another popular technique involves the viewpoints of anonymous and sometimes strangely ghost-like observers. Not purely cinematographic, these tactics suggest the need for a far more comprehensive framework for stereoscopic images, whose significance certainly goes beyond the redundant question of their aesthetic or perceptual value. The 3D images seen in the cinema cannot be viewed in isolation from visualization techniques in other fields: from images used in news media, security and military technology and medical and climate research. In his analysis of the 3D boom in a 2010 issue of *epd Film* magazine, the film theorist Thomas Elsaesser noted that stereoscopic images and 3D film belong to the same paradigm 'that is turning our information society into a society of control and our visual culture into a culture of surveillance'.



Thomas
Stellmach &
Maja
Oschmann,
Virtuos Virtuell,
2013

Not every experimental 3D film is obliged to deal with this reality, of course. Similarly, media reflexivity should not be elevated to the new standard for 'quality' 3D cinema. But it is significant that things only really get interesting when the technology is used against itself, as it were, or when the viewer is simply unable to

navigate the visual space, as in Sebastian Buerkner's *The Chimera of M.* (2013). This fragmentary, elusive film counters hyper-defined sculptural 3D realities above all with light and a lack of outlines. As for his influences, Buerkner cites technical errors in Werner Herzog's 3D documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010).

Error forms the basis for *Red Capriccio* (2014) by the avantgarde filmmaker Blake Williams. At seven minutes long, it is a rhythmic attack on the eyes based on found foot-age of a car journey. Williams shot the film in anaglyph 3D, an outdated, low-budget format in which the two stereoscopic images are not shown side by side but are superimposed. The caprice referred to in the title is expressed via the strict denial of an illusory space and violent, staccato attacks of light in glowing reds and blues, derived from the flashing lights of a stopped police car.



Johann Lurf,
*Twelve Tales
Told*, 2014

With its choppy editing, *Twelve Tales Told* (2014) by Austrian Johann Lurf is also a rejection of common 3D mannerisms. His montage of Hollywood studio logos, densely edited into a dizzying loop, expands (and renders spectacular) an essentially 'classical' technique of appropriation art into three dimensions. The film appears as a brutal sequel to Jack Goldstein's iconic 16mm loop *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer* (1975). Ken Jacobs, who has been exploring the possibilities of 3D for more than 40 years, brilliantly combines repetition, with its potential for exerting stress on audiovisual perception, with the theme of industrial labour. The

visual material for his *Capitalism: Child Labor* (2006) is a 19th-century stereograph of a cotton mill where the workers, including children, stand in front of gigantic machines. The swift succession of two-dimensional image pairs creates spatial effects that remain unstable to the last. As well as referring to stereoscopic photography as a prologue to 3D cinema, Jacobs' film also imparts a lasting impression of the violence experienced by humans working on machines via the violence of the viewing experience (industrial noise, flickering images).

However, it's not the migraine-inducing spatial disorientation and other technical disruptions that constitute a successful 3D film. American artist Lucy Raven's *Curtains* (2014) offers a more contemplative study of the role of stereoscopic images in contemporary capitalism. Lasting almost an hour, a loop of anaglyph stills shows creative workers at post-production facilities for the digital film industry. We see them from behind, at their screens, in Los Angeles, Mumbai, Beijing, London, Vancouver and Toronto. Clues to locations and contexts (film posters on walls, etc.) are sometimes obvious, sometimes not. The motionlessness of the camera is at odds with the global moving image industry serviced by these workers. Unlike in stereoscopy, Raven makes the two images, one red and one blue, converge towards the centre and then move apart again. Any illusion of depth is momentary, and the most three-dimensional scene shows the back view of a machine, an all-over pattern of tangled wires, plugs and sockets. *Curtains* turns the image around, showing us what some stereoscopic films (and other kinds) try to hide using the means of cinematic illusion: that images are produced both by human labour and machines.

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First published in Issue 20

June - August 2015

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