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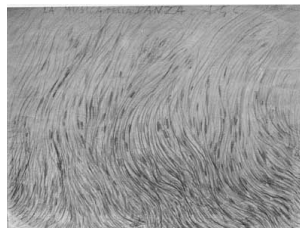
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*WRO99, Media Art Biennale, 1999.*

## The Absolute Film

Dr. William Moritz

The term "Absolute Film" was coined by analogy with the expression "Absolute Music," referring to music like Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* which had no reference to a story, poetry, dance, ceremony or any other thing besides the essential elements - harmonies, rhythms, melodies, counterpoints, etc. - of music itself. Cinema even more than music seems dominated by documentary and fiction functions, both of which relied on film recording human activities which had their primary existence and meaning outside the film theatre. Absolute Film, by contrast, would present things which could be expressed uniquely with cinematic means. Other terms for this film genre sprouted everywhere: "Pure Cinema" (which was purely cinematic), "Integral Cinema" (Germaine Dulac's phrase, using "Integral" in the French sense of "Wholly and completely") and finally the two socio-political terms "Avant-Garde" and "Experimental," the first of which unfortunately implies military scouts invading enemy territory and the second of which sadly implies the filmmaker groping for some unclear result.



The most unique thing that cinema could do is present a visual spectacle comparable to auditory music, with fluid, dynamic imagery rhythmically paced by editing, dissolving, superimposition, segmented screen, contrasts of positive and negative, color ambiance and other cinematic devices. Already in the 1910s, the Italian Futurists

Arnaldo Ginna and Bruno Corra made at least nine films, painting directly on the filmstrip not only non-objective pieces (the gradual takeover of the all-green screen by a red star, playing with afterimage) but also taking a divisionist painting by Segantini (a girl lying in a field of flowers) and re-painting it on frame after frame of the film to allow the colored dots to vibrate even more brilliantly than on the canvas. Unfortunately these films are all lost, as is the German Hans Stoltenberg's film painted directly on the filmstrip about the same time. Other artists made plans for abstract films that were never realized: Leopold Survage (Parisian-based friend of Picasso and Modigliani) painted several hundred sequential images, *Colored Rhythm*, in full color on paper, with the hope that they could be filmed, but he was unable to find an adequate color process before World War I put an end to his project. Likewise the Polish artist Mieczyslaw Szczuka drew numerous sequential images on scrolls of paper, and published two fascinating samples in 1924, just a couple of years before his death, but was apparently not able to get them filmed.

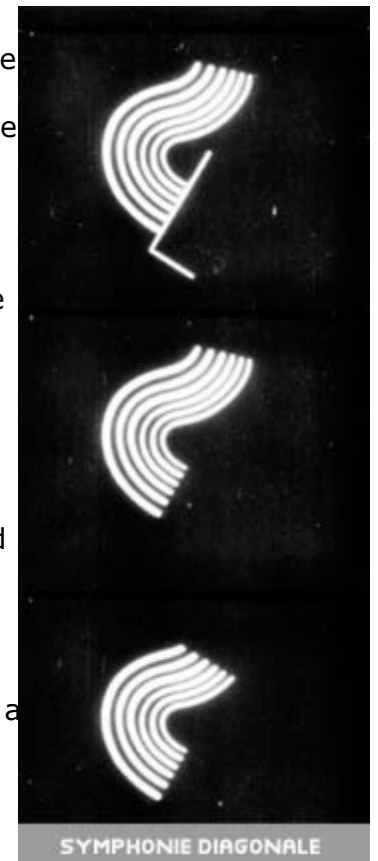
Walther Ruttmann was the first filmmaker to finish an Absolute Film and distribute it in public cinemas. A painter and musician by training, Ruttmann renounced his abstract oil painting in 1919, declaring film to be the art-medium of the future. He mastered the techniques of filmmaking, and prepared his first film *Movie Opus I* with single-framed painting on glass and animated cutouts. The film was colored by three methods -

toning, hand-tinting, and tinting of whole strips - so there was no single negative, and each print had to be assembled scene by scene after the complex coloring had been done. An old college buddy Max Butting composed a musical score for the finished film, and Ruttmann himself played the cello in the string quintet that performed live with each screening at several German cities in the Spring of 1921. Ruttmann made three more *Opus* films, but used simpler tinting and did not prepare special music so that the films could be more easily and widely screened.



Oskar Fischinger saw the rehearsals that Ruttmann made with *Opus I* in Frankfurt before going on tour. He decided to devote himself to making a comparable Visual Music, but carefully avoided using the type of painterly images that the elder Ruttmann had already used so well. Fischinger experimented with slicing wax and clay images, with models and silhouettes, and some drawn animation. Many of his earlier films were collaged in the 1926 multiple-projection performances that Fischinger prepared first for Alexander Laszlo's *Colorlightmusic* concerts, but then continued independently in Munich in 1927. Fischinger used five 35mm projectors, three of them forming a triptych, while the two additional projectors laid extra color effects over them. He also employed slide projectors to project painted geometrical images above and below the film triptych, and some ordinary stage lights to give changing color ambiance to the proscenium.

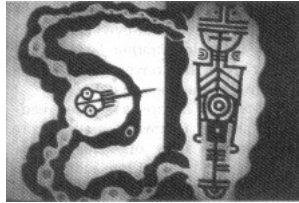
The Swedish painter Viking Eggeling independently decided to make his non-objective paintings into films so that the musical qualities of time and interaction could be incorporated. He did not believe that the resulting film should have a musical sound played with it, but rather that the imagery should be built on the same principles of harmony and counterpoint that auditory music followed, and therefore would be a pure visual music that needed no sound to satisfy completely. In 1921, his first scroll drawings for a film called *Horizontal-Vertical Orchestra* were shot onto film by technicians at the UFA studios, but the results lasted less than 30 seconds, since his laborious, complex drawings were essentially what animators would call a "storyboard", images of key changes without enough "in between" drawings to give them a sense of true movement or transformation from one image to another. At that same time his friend Hans Richter also had a scroll drawing filmed, and it also made hardly half-a-minute of screen time, but Richter went ahead and showed it under the title *Film is Rhythm* - once to a critic in Paris who took his glasses off to clean them, and found the film over before he got his glasses back on. Eggeling began making scroll drawings for a second film, *Diagonal Symphony*, adding many more images, but still not enough for genuine animation. A young Bauhaus student (who later became the celebrated photographer Re Soupault) met the ailing Eggeling in 1924 in Berlin, and figured out how to animate his imagery: she cut out the shapes from tin-foil, then snipped away tiny increments from the form, shooting a single-frame after each cut, making the shape appear or disappear by shooting forwards or backwards, or grow larger and smaller by moving the camera closer or farther from the



artwork. She finished the film only weeks before Eggeling's death.

On May 3, 1925 the UFA Theatre on Kurfurstendamm in Berlin hosted an historic matinee screening, *The Absolute Film*, which included a live performance of three *Color Sonatinas* by Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack of the Bauhaus, using a "color-organ" instrument he had constructed called the Reflectorial ColorPlay. Viking Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony* received its public premiere (Eggeling was unfortunately in the hospital, unable to attend). Walther Ruttmann screened his *Opus 3* and *Opus 4*. (Hans Richter's 30-second *Film is Rhythm* had been listed on the program, but when Richter realized the scope and complexity of Ruttmann and Eggeling's films, he withdrew his little test). Rene Clair's film *Intermission* had been shot as an intermission feature for the Dada ballet *No Performance Today* designed by painter Francis Picabia with music by Eric Satie (both also appear in the film, along with Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, and the lead dancers from the Swedish Ballet, who had given *No Performance Today* its premiere in Paris in the fall of 1924). Rene Clair used every sort of cinematic device to give *Intermission* a zany Surrealist improbable logic, and it certainly qualifies as absolutely a film - something that could only be done by cinematic means. Similarly the film *Mechanical Ballet* used imagery in non-realistic fashion as rhythmic and satirical collisions of ideas. It also passed through a number of different hands before it was finished, also in the fall of 1924. Two Americans began it: Man Ray had produced the superb *Return to Reason* (a witty collage of all things "movie") which screened at a Dada happening, "An Evening with the Bearded Heart". Dudley Murphy, who had filmed about 10 "Visual Symphony" live-action shorts synchronized with music, as well as a comedy feature and an animation film, saw Man Ray's film and proposed that they collaborate on a larger work. The title came from a Francis Picabia satirical artwork published in his magazine *391* while Picabia was living in New York in 1917 - in an issue which also contained artwork and a poem by his friend Man Ray. Dudley Murphy and Man Ray set out to gather footage in the streets of Paris, animated stocking-model legs to do the Charleston, made scenes of Murphy's lovely wife Katherine posed in greeting-card banalities, and set up scenes in a studio room where they filmed Man Ray's mistress Kiki (and various other things) through special beveled lenses that Murphy had developed, which gave an automatic "cubist" quality to the image. They also shot footage of kitchen goods and plunging machine parts which were meant for an ironic intercutting with pornographic footage. Then they ran out of money. The painter Fernand Leger offered to finance the completion, but Man Ray dropped out and asked that his name not be used on the film. It is unclear what if any of the footage Leger had a part in filming (the Charlie Chaplin puppet is a Leger sculpture, though he would not know how to animate it), but the editing was accomplished by Murphy, since Leger had no actual filmmaking skills. The radical musical score (which included player-pianos, typewriters and an airplane motor among the instrumentation) by American composer George Antheil was commissioned by the wealthy American Natalie Barney whose notorious Parisian salon harbored many expatriate artists. Murphy returned to America (where he would direct a dozen features in Hollywood) after the completion of *Mechanical Ballet*, with the agreement that he would have American distribution rights and Leger could distribute in Europe. Leger had new titles made that omit Murphy's name from the credits, and he habitually pretended that he had made the film, even though he never mastered the fundamentals of filmmaking. In any case, *Mechanical Ballet* remains an impressive (and oppressive) grand work of radical filmmaking. Germaine Dulac (who helped organize The League of Independent Film, which arranged for independent filmmakers to distribute their films and tour in all the European countries) saw *Mechanical Ballet* one too many times. She prepared her own film *Theme and Variations* as a Lesbian Feminist response, positing the traditional

ballet dancer as a "meat puppet", manipulated by male choreographers to perform repetitive mechanical actions of little meaning, not appreciably different from the (quite obscene from Dulac's viewpoint) violent gestures of machinery. Using duration as an expressive device, Dulac shows the dancer's momentary escape from this long mechanical slavery into a natural world of organic phenomena, where she can move in lithe, sensuous, joyous expressions -- but that lasts only a little while before the harsh clank of machinery recalls her to her slavery.



The new fad for sound film in the late 1920s posed special problems for independent filmmakers. Shooting silent film had been relatively easy and not impossibly expensive, but sound required extra recording fees and further difficulties with editing and printing film copies. The New Zealand-born Len Lye, working in London, found support in the government film unit, where he was free to experiment with painting abstract imagery on the filmstrip and manipulating new color film processes to create layers of imagery surrealistically blended of abstract and everyday footage - all disguised as promotional films for the post-office service or other government business. Most of these had musical scores devised by Australian composer Jack Ellit who had composed music for Lye's "silent" absolute film *Tusalava* as well as Francis Bruguiere's abstract *Light Rhythms*. Oskar Fischinger similarly supported his absolute art films by making commercials and special effects, which gave him access to recording and printing facilities. Fischinger's series of 16 *Studies* (drawn on white paper with charcoal, using the negative for positive to produce white figures moving through black space) became internationally popular in regular cinemas, and helped to inspire such diverse artists as British Norman McLaren, French-based Alexandre Alexeieff and Claire Parker, and American Mary Ellen Bute. Fischinger began making color films in 1933, when he helped the Gaspar brothers perfect the 3-color system Gasparcolor. Fischinger's lush *Circles* and *Composition in Blue* created a new sensation which led to a contract with Paramount in Hollywood. Relocated in America, Fischinger experienced many disappointing situations, including a frustrating episode working at the Disney Studios on *Fantasia*. In 30 years, he only managed to complete four absolute films (*Allegretto*, *Optical Poem*, *Radio Dynamics*, and *Motion Painting No. 1*) but each of them is superb. He relied more heavily on abstract oil-painting as an outlet for his artistic expressions. His presence in California, however, inspired a new generation of absolute film artists. John and James Whitney saw his films at an art gallery during a 1939 exhibit of Fischinger paintings. They did not think his choice of music was as good as his abstract imagery, and decided to make films of their own which would have fresh modern musical accompaniment. John Whitney immersed himself in technology, eventually becoming a pioneer of computer graphics. James Whitney, much influenced by Asian mysticism, believed in hand craftsmanship, and created extremely complex non-objective imagery with hand-drawn dot patterns, with occasional solarization of the film to give aleatory textures and colors. In 1946, the San Francisco Museum of Art began an annual series of *Art In Cinema* screenings. A young painter, Harry Smith, volunteered to visit Los Angeles to convince Fischinger and the Whitney Brothers to travel to San Francisco for the festival. Harry was thrilled by Fischinger's work and his kindred interest in spiritual philosophies. Smith immediately took up filmmaking, and since he had no filmmaking skills or equipment, drew his first films directly on the filmstrip - with incredible complexity and fine detail. Smith painted abstract murals on the walls of a jazz club Bop City, and often played his films as a sort of "light show" with the live jazz performances. He also created multiple-projector absolute performances, which he re-filmed from the screen during performance. In his later films, Smith collaged his pure non-objective imagery with representational

images of mystical symbolism. Smith's friend Jordan Belson was similarly inspired by the Art in Cinema screenings to move from static painting to moving film imagery. Belson also shared a mystical bent, and his early films like the exquisite *Mandala* of 1953 already exhibit a contemplative balance. Beginning in 1957, Belson curated *Vortex Concerts* which combined new and ethnic music (using innovative stereo tape recording) with large-scale projections of abstract imagery on the dome of a planetarium. Hy Hirsh's pioneer oscilloscope imagery, James Whitney's hand-drawn dot-pattern *Yantra*, and Belson's own abstract film footage were screened. Belson's 1961 film *Allures* preserves some reminiscence of these spectacles, with their dynamic evocation of a kind of psychedelic experience. In a sequence of 15 subsequent films, including such titles as *Chakra*, *Samadhi*, and *Light*, Belson has rendered a complete portrait of spiritual states from astonishment to ecstasy, using soft abstract imagery of remarkable beauty and subtleness.

The absolute film tradition continues to the present. Sara Petty still draws by hand a complex work like *Preludes in Magical Time* while Larry Cuba's computer graphics brilliantly balance positive and negative in *Two Space*. The Basque painter Jose Antonio Sistiaga paints directly on the filmstrip, not only a serene short like *Impressions in the High Atmosphere*, but also a feature-length absolute film! Austrian Barbel Neubauer and Canadian Richard Reeves, among others, also make direct film of high quality. A glimpse of the world of "Light Shows" remains in John Stehura's *Cybernetik 5.3*, which hints at the layered live-action and computer graphic abstractions and liquid distortions characteristic of those spectacles.

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Moritz, William. Lecture notes, WRO99, Media Art Biennale. Wrodaw, Poland: 1999.

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