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Fragments Over Experimental Film: Liminal Zones of Cinema, Art and Theory

Abstract: In what follows, I will point to theorization of concept of the experimental film. My main thesis is that experimental art is based on the project, research practice, innovation and open transgressive or subversive artworks. Art focused on subversion of institutional power features as a singular event performed within a particular social relationship, as a critical actionist, engaged, or activist practice. Transgression – literally – refers to: infraction, violation of a law or an order, while in geological terms it implies penetration and expansion of the sea over the mainland. The notion of transgression relates to excess, overrunning or, more precisely, departing the familiar for the unknown, control for freedom. Experimental art was created in different disciplines such as experimental music, experimental film, experimental theater, etc. John Cage's concept of 'experimental music' has been the starting point for new experimental art and artistic practices since 1950. Experimental film (experimental, new, avant-garde or neo-avant-garde cinema) has featured since the Second World War. The concept and term describe a range of filmmaking styles which are generally quite different from, and often opposed to, the practices of mainstream commercial and documentary filmmaking and entertainment-oriented cinematography. In the second and third part of the essay, I will present an analysis of the experimental films of the artists the OHO group and Neša Paripović.

Keywords: alternative film; artist film-video; avant-garde film; expanded film; experimental film; neo-avant-garde film; structural film; underground film

Dispositive/apparatus of experimental film

Experimental art is based on the project, research practice, innovation and open transgressive or subversive artworks. Art focused on subversion of institutional power features as a singular event performed within a particular social relationship, as a critical actionist, engaged, or activist practice. Art is focused on a conscious undermining or critical derealization of events within a social framework, be it elite practices of high art or alternative practices of popular culture. Transgression – literally – refers to: infraction, violation of a law or an order, while in geological terms it implies penetration and expansion of the sea over the mainland. The notion of transgression relates to excess, overrunning or, more precisely, departing the familiar for the unknown,

control for freedom. Experimental art includes different disciplines such as: experimental music,¹ experimental film,² experimental theater,³ etc. John Cage's concept of 'experimental music' has been the starting point for new experimental art and artistic practices since 1950.⁴ He proposed a *bi-sensual character* of new art: "We have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we are alive to use them."⁵

Experimental film (experimental, new, avant-garde or neo-avant-garde cinema) has existed internationally since the Second World War. The concept and term describe a range of filmmaking styles which are generally quite different from, and often opposed to,⁶ the practices of mainstream commercial and documentary filmmaking and entertainment-oriented cinematography:

Again filmmakers physically attacked the film, scratching it, dyeing it, using outdated stock when economically necessary or by deliberate design, to create a tactile viewing experience that reminded the audience repeatedly throughout the projection that they were witnessing a plastic construct, a creation of light and shadow, in which the syntactical properties of the cinematic medium were always an aesthetic consideration. Many mainstream approaches to commercial filmmaking and cinematography are appropriated from experimental filmmakers, including light flares, punch holes, leader streaking, and the defiant sloppiness of the 1960s avant-garde, when filmmakers sought to embrace the mistakes in their work and delighted in unexpected superimpositions and the chance manipulations of random editing, echoing the syntactical structures popularized by the composer John Cage and others. In addition, these filmmakers tackled themes of race relations, sexuality, drugs, social conventions, and other topics that the conventional cinema consciously avoided. More than anything else, the experimental cinema of the 1960s was an advocate for social change and complete artistic freedom.⁷

My discussion is about a few different and often parallel histories.

First, it concerns a series of films in the format of 8 mm, 16 mm, and the development of experimental or artistic video and television films. Experimental film is

¹ Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

² David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema* (New York: A Delta Book, 1971).

³ James Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre – from Stanislavsky to Today* (London: Studio Vista, 1973).

⁴ John Cage, "Experimental Music" and "Experimental Music: Doctrine," in *Silence* (Hanover HN: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 7–13, 13–17.

⁵ Cage, "Experimental music," 12.

⁶ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film. The American Avant-Garde 1943–1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁷ Wheeler Winston Dixon, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, ed., "The 1960s Explosion," in "Introduction: Toward a New History of the Experimental Cinema," in *Experimental Cinema, The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), 6–7.

not a film for the cinemas, but a film for specialized *spaces*: professional or amateur cinema clubs, the co-op movement, galleries-museum systems, festivals, special television programs and university experimental film programs.

On the other hand, Peter Wollen writes about two European movie avant-gardes:

Film story has developed unevenly, so that in Europe today there are two distinct avant-gardes. The first can be identified loosely with the Co-op movement. The second would include film-makers such as Godard, Straub and Huillet, Hanoun, Jancso. Naturally there are points of contact between these two groups and common characteristics, but they also differ quite sharply in many respects: aesthetic assumptions, institutional framework, type of financial support, type of critical backing, historical and cultural origin. These are other film-makers too who do not fit neatly into either camp, and films which fall somewhere in between or simply somewhere else – Jackie Raynal's "Deux Fois", for instance – but in general the distinction holds good [...] The positions is complicated too by the fact that in North America there is only one avant-garde, centered on the various Co-ops.⁸

European neo-avant-garde film (Peter Kubelka, Kurt Kren, Valie Export, Mihovil Pansini, Tomislav Gotovac) is determined by experimental research work and the expansion/opening of the film medium. Film-artists have reflected the film medium through unstable and open visual or audiovisual messages (group OHO, Neša Paripović). Film work is something between 'moving image flow' (Chris Marker) and dialectical provocation of the nonorganic political system of the communication (Guy Debord, Alexander Kluge, Jean-Luc Godard, Dušan Makavejev). Formal and material structures or dynamic events are open to political intervention through cinematic apparatus (dispositive).

The experimental film is the concept of the Anglo-American film and 'film as a new media' innovations: in the field of concept, as well as in the media's potentials of the new film production, or in different tactical media self-expressions. It is connected with optical mutations: seen and unseen, accelerated image flow, slow image promotion, etc. The basic position of the experimental film is that the film work is not the final result and goal: the film is not a finished aesthetic product/closed piece, but the open event in the development of film research and ontologization/deontologization of the film medium and film perception between the eye and the body, between the personal and mass culture, between market and junk space (Harry Smith, Jack Smith, Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, Hollis Frampton, Andy Warhol).

⁸ Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes" (*Studio International*, November/December, 1975), in *Art and the Moving Image. A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate Publishing in association with Afterall, 2008), 172.

I could focus on the distinct concepts with indications of minimal differences:

Avant-garde film	Cinema/film production connected with historical interdisciplinary and nomadic avant-gardes (approximately the first part of the 20 th century)
Neo-avant-garde film	Cinema/film production connected with interdisciplinary, transgressive and subversive film experiments (approximately since the Second World War)
Personal film	Personal cinema is: 1) home film product, 2) network active film performed in the field of media arts
Independent film	Film that is produced outside the mainstream film studio system
Amateur film	Amateur film is non-professional, private or home produced film – not for business purposes
Artisanal cinema (<i>le cinéma artisanal</i>)	Cinema as a field of personal, professional or non-professional, investigation without entering the institutional system of the film industry
Underground film	Made and distributed outside the mainstream and commercial film industry; connected with alternative or countercultures; politics of gender and race identities, etc.
Experimental film	Or avant-garde or neo-avant-garde film; different modes of artistic experimentation with film, cinema or moving images; structural/materialist films; transgression or subversion of professional, canonical concepts of the film/cinema as aesthetic art or entertainment art
Anti film	Opposing or subverting or transgressing mainstream films – deontologizing film as artwork or cultural product
Structural film*	Formal determination of film subject and technique; structural and material over determination or reflection of film medium and media practice; concrete film; absolute animation; importance of structural presentation of film's optical limits – e.g. fixed camera position, flicker effect, loop printing, rephotography, combination of moving and static image, repetition of shapes
Optical film	Film as visual music, retinal film, op-film, film representing abstract or concrete visual moving or animated shapes; film as film
Expanded cinema**	Expanded film is an experimental film that extends the media modes of presentation, projections, and conceptual frames of the film-work through different art infrastructures; expanded film/cinema could be renamed as multimedia performance or multimedia spectacle
Alternative cinema	Connected with cultural activism: feminism, gender, queer, race, class; film intervention in cultural context; representation of otherness
Cinematic	Immanent aspects of film; motion pictures or the filming of motion pictures; relations of image/photography and cinematic time
Moving image	Moving images transformed the nature of the photographic image, turning its stillness into arrestedness; where cinema exploited movement, photography could exploit stillness

Artists film/video	Films produced by visual artists, musicians, performers, new media researchers without connections with filmmakers, film industry or film craftsmen; film in the context of modern, postmodern or contemporary artistic practices and out of film institutions
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* David Curtis, "Structural Cinema," in *Experimental Cinema* (New York: A Delta Book, 1971), 181–91.

** A. L. Rees, "Expanded Cinema and Narrative: A Troubled History," in *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film*, ed. A. L. Rees, Funcan White, Steven Ball, David Curtis (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), 12.

Case studies: Naško Križnar et al.: OHO films (1964–1969)⁹

In the context of the OHO Group's oeuvre, some 53 films in different formats – 8, 16 and 35mm – were produced between 1964 and 1970. Most of the films were shot *on an* amateur 8mm camera, while their professional versions were being released in cooperation with production companies like *Viba film* in Ljubljana and *Neoplanta* in Novi Sad. The films were mainly directed by Naško Križnar in cooperation with other OHO associates.¹⁰

The film camera became an instrument of capturing, most commonly, behavioral actions. The interplay between the camera and protagonists' behavior opened a space for conceiving so-called film happenings or performances. For instance, an artwork would comprise *a sheer behavioral act* in an urban venue, and *capturing that very act* on film.

OHO films made in the middle 60s feature countercultural urban rebellion. They are all about aggressive conduct, provocative humor, references to drug abuse, *exoticism* of youth, etc. The attitude of the youth is expressed as detachment from and response to the world of the adult pragmatic citizenry, primarily to the 'socialist youth' and its didactic confidence in the *ideas* of the Party and its officials. The films advocate the hooligan lifestyle which, in the local circumstances, acquired a reputation of politically charged anti-communist behavior on the part of young people rejecting the norms of post-revolutionary society. At the same time, they emphasize the critical atmosphere of resistance to American hegemony and military interventionism in Vietnam. For instance, the film by Naško Križnar and Marko Pogačnik, *Eve of Destruction* (8mm, 1966), was based on the action of writing paroles, ranging from merely private to public and political: "This is thanks to Vietnam". The urban underground and inner life of the youth features, for instance, in the film by Naško Križnar *Devetnajsti živčni zlom* [*Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown*, 8mm, 1966], or in *Film in avtor se ljubita* [*The Film and the Author Make Love*, 8mm, 1968] by Naško Križnar.

An instance of beatnik-style hooliganism was captured when the poet Aleš Kermauner was filmed while storming the city streets. The day before he committed suicide he had run along the streets and hit the cars on his way: gesture, literal gesture, and existential gesture in place of an anticipated modernist metaphorical trace. The

⁹ Miško Šuvaković, "Naško Križnar et al.: OHO films (1964–1969)" and "Naško Križnar: White People (1969–70)," in *The Clandestine Histories of The OHO Group* (Ljubljana: Zavod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E., 2010), 55–7, 129–35.

¹⁰ "Slovenia: OHO," from *Alpe Adria Cinema*, Trieste, 1996.

film by Naško Križnar *Samomorilec* [*The Suicide*, 8mm, 1966] was dedicated to Aleš Kermauner. Individual hooligan or beatnik-style transgression is confronted with a real transgression of the *mad law* of normality in a modern socialist society.

The OHO subject is not a lonesome, anxious or disgusted solitary creator – a poet, painter, or playwright – who reveals his existential *homelessness* by means of symbols, metaphors, or allegories.¹¹ The subject of the emerging OHO is a young rebel who goes out to the streets and lives, dies, rearranges the world, publicly demonstrates violence or good disposition, provokes taboos of autoerotism, homosexuality or heterosexuality, dwells with his urban tribe, recalling the *icons* of a rebel without a cause like James Dean, or rebels with a cause like the American beatnik Allan Ginsberg, Italian painter Piero Manzoni, Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, or French film director Jean-Luc Godard, as many others.

The black-and-white film *Beli ljudje* [*White People*], directed by Naško Križnar, based on the script conceived by Križnar, Milenko Matanović and David Nez, was filmed with a professional 35mm camera, featuring Manca Čermelj, Ajra Pogačnik, Lili Malovrh, Cecila Černe, Zvona Ciglič, Boža Regovic, Milenko Matanović, Matjaž Hanžek, Tomaž Kralj, Andraž Šalamun, and David Nez. The film was produced by the film company *Neoplanta* from Novi Sad.

The film is some kind of a prolonged happening, mimicking a documentary film of a spontaneous event. However, the event was directed and subsequently edited, picturing as it did ‘white’ or, more precisely, ‘white in white’:

“I forgot to put the film in the camera”, says the head of the *White Man* (Naško). White mice graze on the white beard. White people climb down the ladder in a white room, move to the corner of the white room, cramming their white bodies, hide the white sheep hiding the white mice, white people in the white chamber...

in white cloth

in white metal

in white leather in white flour

in white fire

at the sea white people have no trouble making

white splashes (with soap bubbles)

on the white snow white people are whirling

black smoke (with charcoal)

they hide from us

and show up in the next frame

on a *kozolec*

and all that stays behind

is a nice Slovenian landscape.¹²

¹¹ Dušan Pirjevec, “Smrt in akcija [Death and Action],” *Problemi* 69–70 (1968): 317–45.

¹² “Beli ljudi,” *Polja* 143 (1970): 31.

As a form of demonstration, the film *White People* disclosed the atmosphere, situations and *phantasms* of the hippie culture and its ludistic conduct outside or, more precisely, beyond the confines of the utilitarian *normal* life pursued by the socialist citizens of Slovenia and Yugoslavia. The film aligns with the urban guerilla-style critique of the grand meta-discourses of the society and its bureaucracy. In a way, in its atmosphere it approaches a 'sexual revolutionary act' as conceived by the Living Theatre, or Dušan Makavejev's film adventure *W.R.: Misterije organizma* [*W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*].¹³ The film was banned for years, confined to *Neoplanta's* bunker as unacceptable for public release.

In this film, the fictional narrative features a literal here-and-now event: interaction between the masked, naked, passive or active bodies breaches the line between the real and otherworldly. All the essential concerns and attitudes of the hippie culture are there: liberated bodies and sexuality, group/communal ritual interactions, or indexing the otherworldly through the hallucinatory white world in the white world. Ludistic notions are brought to their ecstatic climax. Those are the strategies and tactics of hippie playfulness, soon to be abandoned by the OHO Group with their turn to a radical conceptual art, elaborated by the authors later named *Slovenian ludists* (Matjaž Kocbek, Milan Jesih, Ivo Svetina, Tomaž Kralj) as poetry-, prose-, film- and theatre-related concepts, mainly associated with the theatre project *Pupiliija Ferkewerk*.¹⁴



Naško Križnar (grupa OHO), *Beli Ljudi*, 1970.

¹³ Dušan Makavejev, *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (New York: Avon, 1972).

¹⁴ Karpo Ačimović Godina, "Gratinirani mozak pupilije f. [*Gratinated Brain of Pupiliija Ferkewerk*]," *Polja* 143 (1970): 31.

Case studies: Neša Paripović 1977 NP¹⁵

This film is in color, is soundless and lasts about 25 minutes. Shot by several cameramen, the film is the result of editing a number of short sequences. It depicts the artist 'strolling' through the city. During the walk Paripović encounters various obstacles and masters them: he jumps over a fence, climbs up the wall of Kalemegdan fortress, etc.

Four problems with the film have been pointed out.

The first problem: The film is about an artist. The artist is a representative of art, and not the work (e.g. the paintings). This is a Duchamp-type moment in redefining art as a framework for the presentation of the institution of artist. The artist's life is the source of a new mythology: the 'mythology of the artist'.

The second problem: The film is about everyday life. An ordinary activity – 'strolling through the city' – is treated as an 'exceptional object' of film presentation. The role of the obstacle is the semiotic operator (index), which transforms a trivial stroll into an exceptional act (mythical act, heroic act). But Paripović's 'mythical acts' or 'heroic acts' are 'weird' since they don't have a clearly defined goal or aim. One of the *Pouint de Capiton* of Paripović's 'visual film speculation' is the very opposite of triviality and exceptionalness.

The third problem: The repetition of movement in new locations, the mastering of obstacles, a speedy change of takes, the editing of different sequences and the dynamism of the body while walking, jumping, jumping over or running, underline the 'nature of film' as a "system of moving pictures which conjure up the movement of the body through illusion". In the film Paripović confronts the real time and the film time (condensing) of the event, as well as the semantic indices of an action film. It is possible to follow the development from American action films (from classical 'crime movies' to the film *Pont Blank*) to Godard's New Wave deconstruction of the American action film (*Pierrot le Fou*, *Vivresa Vie*). Paripović rejects narration and the 'logic of narrative continuity', confronting us with the mechanics (phenomenology) of movement. This is a very 'filmic' film. Paripović's work is the deconstruction of the narrational film by reducing the 'action' to the mechanics of movement, this is a deconstructive debate on movement (walking, running, jumping over, climbing) in a film of the art of film.

The fourth problem: The film's every frame is a structural composition of painting expressed through the visual discourse of film. A still photograph 'taken out' of the film has the same semantic weight as the film itself. Every photograph is a portrait of the artist in the open. Hermeneutics is the teaching of the rules of exegesis, which is understood as the individual interpretation of some historical text or painting. Paripović's film is a 'hermeneutic film' because it is 'visual speech' about the rules of exegesis, and this is understood as the individual (from photograph to photograph,

¹⁵ Miško Šuvaković, "Discourses on the Film *Hiatus of Hiatus*: An Initial Hypothesis for Analysing Films by Neša Paripović," in *Promises of the Past – A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, ed. by Christine Macel, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2010), 130. Miško Šuvaković, "1977 NP," in *Autoportreti. Eseji o Neši Paripoviću* (Novi Sad: Prometej, 1996), 141–42.

from film to film) interpretation of the 'artist's status' and the 'status of the artistic' (the painter and the paintings). At the same time, the 'explanation' is an interpretation based on giving newer and newer second-degree pictures in relation to the artist himself and the hypothetical (mental) picture of painting.

The film contains an ironic connotation. The artist is not an artist in that he produces a work (painting), but nor is he a passive subject who abandons the act. Paripović contrasts the exceptional, but senseless act (jumping, sometimes dangerous) to the act which is the production of the object. Paripović seems to be expressing contempt for the handicraft production of an 'art' work in the studio, and tempting fate with the 'jump'. But he is not an artist who would abandon the 'world of painting' in the name of, for example, Happening, Body Art or Performance. He is more preoccupied with deliberation on the world of art 'through the discourse of film' than he is in resolution (rejection of painting). Deliberation through the discourse of film is a deliberation conducted with the discourse of film. Deliberating the field of differences between the 'act' and 'production' leads us to the center of complex problems of the philosophy of doing: "We saw that what was characteristic of *episteme* was knowledge (rational awareness) of *what one is doing*, which thus early became *knowledge of what one is making (brinking about)*."¹⁶ With the 'use of the visual discourse of film' Paripović wishes to build up once more the difference between 'doing' and 'making', and the establishing of *this* difference entails epistemic differences. Note: not 'all' art is epistemologically constituted in the same way. This is why work with differences of the 'epistemological potential of art' leads to distinctions on the 'nature of art' (art does not have just one 'sex').



Neša Paripović, *NP 1977*, 1977.

¹⁶ Jaakko Hintikka, "Knowing How, Knowing That, and Knowing What: Observations on their Relation in Plato and Other Greek Philosophers," in *Modernism, Criticism, Realism*, ed. by Charles Harrison, Fred Orton (London: Harper & Row Publisher, 1984): 56.

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