

## L'AVANT-GEHR

Pip Chodorov, The Film Gallery, Paris

This will be a short introduction to artists working with the film medium in an abstract tradition, from the 1920s to the 1960s, which may be useful as an introduction to the work of Ernie Gehr. I'll start with two scroll paintings (Figs. 1-2) made by Hans Richter, who was an artist in the Dada movement, and one of the first artists to make experimental abstract films. Not the first – there is a great deal of doubt about whether he fudged the dates of his films – but he's a very good starting point for me, because the films that he made were very close to the material nature of film: black, white, the square shape of the frame, the aspects Ernie Gehr was discussing at the beginning of the round table. Richter thought about those things very early on, in 1921.



Figs. 1-2 – Hans Richter, scroll painting.

I understood Richter better when I read *The World of Yesterday* by the Viennese author Stefan Zweig, who described the period around World War I: he said that just before WWI, poets and musicians and painters across Europe could communicate and exchange ideas and befriend each other, so that he was close with many foreign poets, in France, in Germany, while he was in Austria. But when the war started, suddenly it was forbidden to communicate outside your own country, and bad poets who were nationalists became the most important poets overnight. For him, it was very stifling and dramatically violent. After the war, the artists tried viciously to create a world that was radically different from the world before the war, with rampant experimentation in the arts. Zweig felt most of it was useless and a big mistake (cubism was an exception). But I realized when reading it that 1919, when the war was over, was also the year the first surviving abstract films were made, films by Viking Eggeling and Walter Ruttmann.

Richter and Eggeling worked together in the Dada movement as painters. Their idea was to expand beyond the frame of the painting, which they felt was a barrier. So, they started painting long rolled scrolls of compositions and variations, much like musical forms, but in graphics. They were interested in the temporality of looking at a scroll, similar to the temporality of music, and their scrolls were named “symphonies” or “rhythms”. The scrolls were difficult to show in a gallery – they had to be rolled by hand, or hung around the walls of the gallery – and even more difficult to sell; interestingly, these hardships prefigure the condition of the experimental filmmaker even today. But their interest was to find new directions for painting, to break down the rigid frame and to bring in the new dimensions of time, rhythm and composition. This naturally brought them to the new technology of film. Film, they thought, would allow them to make paintings moving in time, developing over time like music. They didn’t know anything about film equipment, which was then very expensive, but they acquired a simple box animation camera and figured it out. Richter approached the filmstrip with basic components of film in mind: the rectangle of the frame, white, black and grey, negative and positive, movement in time, and the flat surface of the screen. This is one of the first films that treat the screen not as a window looking out into a world, but as a flat surface like a painting. Richter claims he had never seen abstract films before making his own. He was probably surprised by the feeling of depth in his film: when a rectangle gets smaller we experience it receding in space. All these things were to be important for the filmmakers who followed, who treated this film as an eye-opening, revolutionary experience.

Len Lye was from New Zealand, a painter and sculptor interested in kinetic motion. He made one animated film in Australia and then came to London in the 1920s. In 1935 he made *A Colour Box*, one of the earliest color films. The color was not photographed, however, but painted onto the filmstrip (actually an optical sound negative: a transparent film with music along the edge). He regarded the filmstrip in a way that most filmmakers at that time hadn’t yet, as a physical strip to work on in lengths, not frame by frame. So, he painted across the surface in different ways trying to represent movement; he aimed to create figures of motion, composing movement as musicians compose music. *A Colour Box* is a commercial for the Post Office. Lye worked for several years at the Post Office film department. Like many experimental filmmakers, Lye had to find a way to make some money, and it’s interesting to note that none of these filmmakers ever made it in the art world, unless they came from the art world to film, like Hans Richter. Films were not bought or sold in galleries or in the art market. To this day, there is a great gap between experimental filmmakers and the art market, and there is also a gap between the experimental filmmakers and the film industry: it’s in a no man’s land where these artists spend their whole life creating these very intense works of art that very rarely get seen in their original format and very rarely bring money to the filmmaker. Nevertheless, in 1935, cinemagoers would see newsreels and a feature film, both in black and white, but when Len Lye’s colorful, lively Post Office

commercials came on they were like fireworks. People loved them, and these were big audiences. This is something that doesn't happen often to experimental filmmakers these days.



Fig. 3 – *Allegretto* (Oskar Fischinger, 1937).

By 1937 many abstract films had been made by Len Lye, Oskar Fischinger and others. Fischinger was from Germany, living in Berlin, making a living in special effects for feature films and commercials, and making his abstract films in secret. He had had a big following in the late 1920s and early 1930s for his black and white film studies, and there was still a big demand for them outside Germany at this time. But abstract art was banned in Nazi Germany as degenerate, so his whole personal artistic practice was suddenly outlawed. In 1935, he had secretly sneaked an abstract film to the Venice Film Festival, where he won a prize and was invited by Paramount Studios to Los Angeles to make a dream sequence for a feature. This became *Allegretto* (1<sup>st</sup> version, 1937, Fig. 3). He spent the rest of his life in Hollywood, but the success and popularity he had in Europe was never equaled in America. His pet project was to make a feature-length abstract animated film set to music, which he eventually proposed to Disney, who accepted. He worked only a few months on *Fantasia* (AA.VV., 1940). Disney urged all his animators to contribute ideas, and with hippopotamuses and dancing broomsticks, the film rapidly deviated from Fischinger's vision. He got fewer offers and eventually stopped filmmaking altogether and finished his life as a painter.

When WWII started, many European artists and filmmakers fled to America where they had an influence on the burgeoning American experimental film. Some settled on the East Coast, such as Richter who taught film in a New York university (Jonas Mekas attended some lectures); some settled on the West Coast, such as Fischinger who befriended and was admired by Maya Deren and James Whitney. Where Europe had provided the richest experimentation of the 1920s and 1930s, it is the American avant-garde who would change the face of art and film from the 1950s through the 1970s.

Few filmmakers did not leave Europe. In 1951, two artists in Paris, Isidore Isou and Maurice Lemaître, created the Letterist cinema. They had a very new, radical approach to filmmaking. They had started as poets, reducing language to syllables and sounds, and then turned to the other arts – painting, film – to reduce them too to their constituent parts. Isidore Isou made *Traité de*

*bave et d'éternité* (1951) while Maurice Lemaître made *Le Film est déjà commencé?* (1952). The two films were conceptual, but where Richter was breaking the boundary of the film frame, the Letterists were breaking down narration, story, character, sound and image, photography, editing, even projecting, and finally the audience itself and the very walls of the screening room. They were thinking about film as an event, a performance, going beyond the image or content, beyond even projecting an image. In short, they considered film as a political and conceptual art, ten years before the Happening. The Letterists developed a following and a movement; a later split led by Guy Debord led to the Situationist movement.

In 1958, Len Lye won first prize at the Knooke-le-Zoute festival with *Free Radicals*, a four-minute film completely scratched on black leader with a needle. It was made almost as a manifesto, since Lye couldn't raise any money from sponsors for filmmaking. So, he scratched the film with a needle, spending very little besides time, and then went on strike as a filmmaker for the rest of his life, switching to sculpture where he could make a living. (He scratched four films in secret over the next twenty years). Also in Knokke-le-Zoute was *Recreation* (1956-57, texts by Noël Burch, 1 min.) by Robert Breer, a filmmaker who lived in Paris at the time and who was interested in trying to make collisions between single frames. Most of the film's images last one frame each, 1/24<sup>th</sup> of a second (Fig. 4). Breer was interested how the eye perceives the rapid-fire succession of disparate stills.



Fig. 4 – *Recreation* (Robert Breer, 1956-57).

At that time, the Denise René gallery represented Breer's abstract paintings. He was making large compositions every week, until he found himself less interested in each composition as in the transitions between compositions, and so decided to make animated films. At that time, film wasn't respected in the art world. Galleries looked down on film as "show business." At the same time, experimental films were relegated to midnight screenings. Still he preferred film: at art openings, people ignored his paintings and drink wine and socialized; at film shows, the lights went out and people paid attention; they would even clap at the end. It was a lot more rewarding to show films.

His career as an artist suffered tremendously when he left painting for film, though he still showed kinetic sculptures widely. Breer was directly influenced by Richter's early films; he felt that they had given him a lot of ideas that he wanted to explore further, including working frame by frame.

Also in 1958, Peter Kubelka presented *Adebar* (1956-57), a film made as a commercial for a bar in Vienna. Composed in black and white, as much in positive images as in negative, it follows a metric structure: the film is edited in such a way that the shots are all 13, 26 or 52 frames long. The film is one minute long and is based on rhythm more than content. This structural approach was a new idea, radicalizing film editing, but again this is based on the physicality of the strip. As for many filmmakers, a lack of funding forced him to concentrate on the small lengths of film he could afford, and so on the component parts of the film medium.

In 1960, Kubelka made *Arnulf Rainer*, consisting only of black frames and white frames, with no filmed images at all. Black images represent opacity, or the absence of light, while white images are transparent, the presence of light; the soundtrack alternated between silence and white noise (all frequencies of sound). The four elements of this film are therefore the presence/absence of light and the presence/absence of sound. Kubelka composed a structural plan, like a musical score, before making each of his films, and he often shows them as installations hanging on the wall as carefully aligned 35mm strips. This material approach was new to filmmakers. The viewers too were becoming conscious of film technology and material.

Still in 1958, another revolutionary filmmaker, Stan Brakhage, premiered *Anticipation of the Night* at the same Knokke-le-Zoute festival. It is a poetic lyrical film, silent and 38-minutes long. This screening was a first introduction to Brakhage for many and a revelation. He was making films very much about his own life, like *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), documenting the birth of his first child. The composition of lines and forms are as strong as the events pictured (Fig. 5). Later his work would become abstract in an attempt to represent "closed-eye" or "untutored" vision, as he called it, fast poems of light and color.



Fig. 5 – *Window Water Baby Moving* (Stan Brakhage, 1959).

*Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969-71) by Ken Jacobs is a "structuralist" film, in which Jacobs reworked a 1905 silent short by Billy Bitzer of the same title, refilming it, slowing it down, zooming in on the frame, on the grain, stretching it out to two hours. In one section the film passes through the projector without being registered by the shutter, we see only a blur. *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* (1968) by Paul Sharits features fast flickering of monochrome colors. The same year he made *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*, which is a more complex film: even before you go to see the film, the title gives you the idea of discrete, separated moments, to make people conscious that the film is not running in the projector smoothly, but stopping in front of the lens before it gets pulled down to the next frame. In 1973, Michael Snow made a 4-<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-hour-long film called *Rameau's Nephew*, about the relationships between picture and sound, especially concerning recorded speech. Snow brought a lot of humor into the structural concept of what film actually is. For him, the sound isn't coming from the film, it's coming from the speakers, and he draws the viewer's attention to these speakers during the film.

I'd like to conclude with contemporary examples. Marcelle Thirache works in Super-8 here in Paris, a gestural filmmaking with the handheld camera. Cécile Fontaine uses found footage, ripping layers of emulsion off one film using Scotch tape and various household chemicals and placing them down on other strips of found film. *Overeating* (1984) shows a man chewing chicken, with the film itself getting chewed in the process. In *Bouquet*, Rose Lowder weaves three scenes together by skipping frames and rewinding: in one 24-frame second we see frames of scenes A B and C repeating eight times in succession. The visual effect is a fast flicker with a sense of superimposition in the eye. Peter Tscherkassky, living in Vienna, also works with found footage. He exposes 35mm film, like Man Ray did, by hand, through recuperated strips of film using a light pen in the darkroom. Jürgen Reble, works in Bonn, Germany and has become a great master in handling chemicals, the actual chemistry of the film emulsion and developers. He explores the ways in which these different kinds of chemicals interact with the film emulsion, taking reality and making a different reality out of it, the molecular reality of the chemicals. And finally, Frédérique Devaux also works with found footage, scratching and refilming in the optical printer. These examples give an overview of the world of which the films of Ernie Gehr are a part.