

FILM FORM AS FILM HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION TO ERNIE GEHR

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Fig. 1 – *Table* (Ernie Gehr, 1976).

*The art work should be a field for noticing
Which means: It should INVITE
The viewer to SEE what's THERE.*

[...]

*Art should ground us in what-is-to-be-living.
Not develop our lust for solutions.*

Richard Foreman

Writing on Ernie Gehr means dealing with one of the most sensitive, intelligent and simply beautiful cinematic investigations of the last forty years. As an introduction, this essay intends to strongly echo the formal process of Gehr's film *Still* (1969-1971), in which different layers of light are superimposed onto each other. Here, these layers will be the different *formal memories* we can observe conflating in the present instant of watching one of his films. In *Still*, Gehr filmed Lexington Avenue, New York, from inside the Filmmakers' Cooperative, where he was working at that time. The layers of light, filmed in the morning and afternoon of the same day, give the

images a wide range of opacity and transparency, so that the film makes visible the history of his own process, which transcends it, often blurring the layers of time and space and freeing the spectator's perception from within the monocular perspective vision of the camera. More than a simple mimesis of mental processes, this «layering of imagery»¹ really intends to «embody the life of the mind»². In a more hidden way, the layering concerns Gehr's personal perception of the urban space in his everyday work at the Cooperative, since it seems to embody the Proustian-Bergsonian *durée* of modern perception³ as an attempt to reconfigure the chaotic stimuli of big cities as seen by Simmel. We shall see how Gehr's practice of film and video deals with different traditions, from modern art to his own personal history, revealing their morphology and transcending them in the present tense of the form we experience.

Film as film

What is film? What can it be? A central question at stake in Ernie Gehr's films is the exploration of film as a medium, going as far as to explore its physical properties («the intrinsic aspects of film itself»). In this aspect, Gehr's first films seem to share a “modernist” intention in Clement Greenberg's sense: each of them explores just one fundamental, elementary aspect of the cinematic apparatus, such as the variation of the exposure timing (*Wait*, 1967), the projection conditions (*Reverberation*, 1969), the variation of the camera speed (*Transparency*, 1969), the grain of the film (*History*, 1970) the movements of the camera (*Field*, 1970), and so on⁴. Isolating these variable elements is a way to explore them and to become aware of their possibilities, but it is also a way to allow the film itself to think⁵ within its formal means and through its own devices. That is what in modern aesthetics we call “reflexivity”, something we can understand better if we consider the avant-garde film – or at least the cinematic practice involved, which is closer to artistic tradition – as modern art.

However, this is a delicate point. Many spectators or critics have seen pictorial references in Gehr's abstractions, mainly to abstract painters like Frank Stella, Mark Rothko, Piet Mondrian and so on. According to Gehr, this is only «a surface resemblance»⁶, that is, a resemblance between formal shapes devoid of their material heterogeneity but with a profound difference in the creation process itself. While admiring the other arts (especially music and painting), his modernism lies precisely in his concern for the specificity of his own medium, not in transposing particular formal patterns. Certainly, Gehr's films examine the questions par excellence⁷ of “modernist painting”: the *frame* and the *flatness* of the picture. But he does so by resolving them in cinematic terms: his reflection on the filmic frame concerns, among other aspects, the dialectics between internal frames and the format of the picture⁸. It also concerns in-camera editing (since film deploys in time, and the intervals between frames are visible gaps that put the unreeling of the film into question: consider the vibrating frame in *Reverberation*, or the “trespassing” lights at the edges in *Serene Velocity*, 1970). And the flatness is to be seen in its relationship with the screen and the architecture of the movie theatre, since film is a “nothing-over” medium (as opposed to Greenberg's “all-over” definition of Pollock's paintings). He sometimes seems to be considering a particular painting tradition, such as Cubism (*Table*, 1976, Fig. 1), or Jackson Pollock's abstractions (*History*); but the result is radically different, as in *Table* where the discrete images of Muybridge, Cubist composition and an editing approach using a sort of 3-D red-white-blue (the three filters he used in filming it) converge in a still life changing in time, evoking Impressionist tradition as well. In this way, art history conflates with filmic means.

Enclosing his films within self-referentiality (especially in the first decade of his production), Gehr frees them from the reduced perspectives of narration and representation, while attaining these perspectives in new ways. Contrasting the idea of “seeing through” the frame in favour of a consideration of the 2-dimensional surface, Gehr’s aim is not only the basic avant-garde necessity of *negation* (of representation, naturalism and so on) but, more precisely, to reach «the 2-D/3-D reciprocal tension of a two-dimensional image»⁹. When the film attains abstraction, it does so through a process that starts from reality, not by following a dogma. One example is *Field*, which shows complete abstract moving images since it is made up exclusively of very fast pans¹⁰, but which has been shot in a real field, near a small lake. As a result, shooting a field becomes an investigation of the cinematic field itself, as it questions both 3-D representation and the reference to concrete shapes. Abstraction is not a state to attain and maintain, but something that is always vibrating in its relation to the real. The direction of the pans is itself blurred at some points, recognizable at others, as Gehr is always on the edge between knowing the world and seeing it differently, combining consciousness with ecstasy.

Archaeology of the present

The autoreflexive¹¹ path led Gehr to rediscover early cinema (*Eureka*, 1974) as well as the scientific devices and toys of the 19th century (*Cotton Candy*, 2001), which are not simple anticipations of cinema, as the “pre-cinema” label tends to imply, but the defeated promise of different possibilities in film history. Since the 1970s, there has been great interest in returning to this period, not only to Lumière and Méliès but also to Muybridge, Marey and to the various visual toys¹². In a way, the achievement of modernism lies in this tension with the origins, in order to find and preserve the forgotten memories of the past – a project close to Benjamin’s aims – and Gehr’s found footage film, *Eureka*, can also be read in this perspective¹³. In the *phantom ride* tradition (a movement filmed from the front of a car, a streetcar or a train), *Eureka* shows a long tracking shot, slowed down four to eight times by re-photographing each frame. Passing through the city of San Francisco and rediscovering the amazement of the people seeing themselves filmed, maybe for the first time, the tracking shot ends in front of the inscription “Erected 1896”: the date, more or less, of the birth of cinema, which we are led back to see. In returning to these origins, Gehr finds new cinematic forms: as Adorno would have put it, «the new is the nostalgia for the new»¹⁴. Similarly, the “vertical panorama” of *Side/Walk/Shuttle* (1991) takes on a modern vision device (Muybridge’s panoramas), going beyond the discipline of the eye whose role it assumes, and appropriating the function of the place itself (a glass elevator in a San Francisco hotel). Moreover, *Cotton Candy* embodies the tension and the extreme distance between the present instant – the quintessence of time in modernist practice – and memory, even if it does so in a very different way. What is quite astonishing is Gehr’s capacity to explore different techniques and processes, and very different formal patterns: an aspect that has often been neglected, but fundamental to understand a filmmaker whose work demonstrates at the same time such coherence and such liberty.

Since his very first films, Gehr’s archaeological project involves an investigation of the «conditions of possibility», as Foucault would have said, of a modern device like film¹⁵. His archaeology of modernity is also a look into modern perception through a modern technology such as cinematography. The frame-by-frame technique allows Gehr to give the spectator the sense of continuity/discontinuity and stillness/motion that shape the fundamental paradox of

cinema. If modernity is the age of «the emergence of cinematic time»¹⁶, Gehr's cinematic practice is a personal investigation on modern devices and modern perception¹⁷. For Gehr, reflecting upon film means questioning the very matter of film, taken as «a real thing»¹⁸ which «is reacting internally»¹⁹ just like a living being would. He seems to transcend the primary philosophical opposition between conceptualism and empiricism: exploring the layers of the mind, seemingly effacing his subjectivity, while always exploring the present reasons of his existence as a filmmaker, he's able to articulate in a humble but decisive way lucidity and emotion, or «passion» and «serenity» as Sitney has underlined (quoting Benedetto Croce).

The personal eye

When he first started making films, Gehr told Mekas he was moved by «a desire less to express myself and more of making something out of the film material itself relevant to film for spiritual purposes». Brakhage, speaking in a more obscure and formalist way, said that he intended to «magically transform [...] every vibration of unspeakable private origins into Form». Sharing an immanent-transcendent conception of form²⁰, Gehr and Brakhage seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum regarding the place of the subject-object question in their films: Brakhage as the subjective genius and Gehr as the “cold”, “structural” one. But if the former made among others the wonderful hyper-phenomenological *Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1971), the latter is able to deeply conceal a very personal dimension in his own work. Sitney asserted as much when he said about Gehr: «I find the man and the films more intimately related than he would acknowledge». Personal, subjective involvement remains a factor in Gehr's work, as *Still* (Fig. 2) suggests. We touch here on one of the most delicate questions in discussing an artist's works: the obscure links between human life and the products of human labour. This should not take the form of a mystery, but should rather be the place for a necessary silence to be maintained by the spectators, most notably critics.



Fig. 2 – *Still* (Ernie Gehr, 1969-1971).

Gehr's films can be considered in a way similar to what plays are for his friend Richard Foreman, in the tradition of Gertrude Stein: «A combination of the THING and of my PERCEPTION (of the fact I perceive it)»²¹. Concealing subjectivity allows Gehr to explore the relationship of formal patterns to the filmmaker's mind, and to give the spectator the gift of a more intense and sensitive consciousness. To inscribe subjectivity, not to show it: that is the task of the filmmakers

and the critics who watch Gehr's films. The personal is political: subjective perception is social and collective, and the attempt to transcend historical determinations within such perception is still alive. Likewise, the questioning of modernity is paralleled by the exploration of the personal historical background of the filmmaker, as in the 1980s, when Gehr's interest in urban spaces became more concerned with political history, notably in his works *Untitled: Part One, 1981* (1981), *Signal – Germany on the Air* (1982-1985), *This Side of Paradise* (1991), and *Passage*, which focus on Germany, the country his parents had to leave after Hitler's election, and Berlin in particular. Travelling through Europe and the USA, Gehr is able to create unique connections between all continents, as in *Side/Walk/Shuttle*, which shows the two major tensions of Gehr's cinema through the back-and-forth movement between the search for transcendence and the search for a place in which to live on this earth. "Walking" up and down a hotel by elevator, *Side/Walk/Shuttle* seems to exorcise the painful urban spaces of the 20th century. After that re-grounding cosmic experience, he made a home movie, filming his son (*For Daniel*, 1996): he did not at first intend to show the result to public audiences. After five years of shooting, he eventually decided to show it, again and always more deeply relating his public work to his own existence and his feeling of the present moments of his son's growing-up. This strong link to infancy will return in *Cotton Candy*, a sort of fiction film in which he uses some classical editing devices and in which there is a place-holder for a subject, for instance the empty place in the cradle moved by a woman sitting on a bench (which may also bring to mind Griffith's *Intolerance*, 1916). Is this the place of the author, recalling his infancy, cotton candy, toys and merry-go-rounds? Between hiding and inscribing subjectivity, Gehr leaves the spectator free to inscribe his own experience. In a way quite similar to Jackson Pollock's practice, art is a process that involves the subjectivity of the artist in a way which seems to efface him. As Gehr shows us, since the first half of the 19th century the model of vision has become subjective, and its truth is «grounded in the density and materiality of the body»²².

Layers for ecstasy

These different "histories" that Gehr is able to unite in his work (filmic and aesthetic, political and personal, and more generally the conditions of modern perception) could mark a line of evolution, from a dominant "objectivist" reflexivity to a prominent inscription of the subject as a historical being, in the films about Germany and US, which articulate personal memory and the history of the 20th century. In the materiality of their form, Gehr's films are able to bring together the spatial memory of modernity as it has been crystallised in urban spaces, the tradition of art, the history of humanity and its relations to personal history and feelings. But Gehr invites us to carry out a morphologic reading that goes beyond an evolutionary model. His own activity in organising screenings of his own films, an activity which is both an exploration of correspondences and a creative invention on links between them, may underline some major themes of his work. Following a recent program, for instance (at the Tate Modern in London), one may note some of these themes, such as self-referentiality, interest in urban spaces, and the return to the 19th century.

In this short introduction to Gehr's work, I hope I have been able to show at least a part of the richness of the articulations that link this variegated work together, work that is unified by the experience of Gehr's life. This is a "personal cinema" as Brakhage's is, only the person is very different. The formal coincidences between the two are not what is most important: their

approaches to film share similarities because they are rooted so deeply in human condition and history. All the cinematic questions that Gehr poses, all the “emoted ideas” to which he gives shape, resume the main issues of modernity and articulate some constitutive poles: abstraction/reference, 2-/3-dimensional space, continuity/discontinuity, slowness/fastness and so on. Between these poles, Gehr is searching for his own place; the articulation between all these apparent dualisms seems to be the paradoxical *negative dialectics* conceived by Adorno, the place where a late modernist can shape a constellation that is not a synthesis between opposite elements, while attempting to constitute a fragment of serenity.

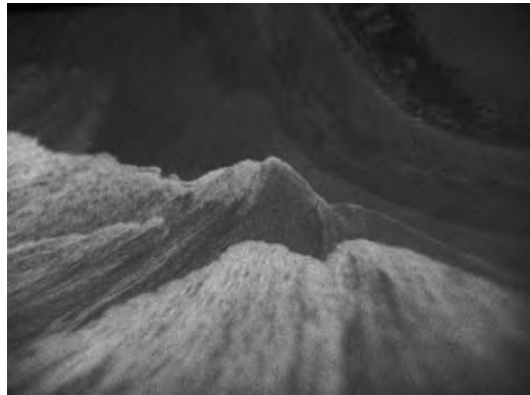


Fig. 3 – *Glider* (Ernie Gehr, 2001).

In conclusion, a last point must be considered. As I said at the very beginning, all these layers of history are condensed in the present of the frame projected on the screen, since the present is the modernist timeframe *par excellence*, the *Jetztzeit* (“now-time”) in which it becomes clear that «origin is the aim»²³. In the same way as the buildings in *Side/Walk/Shuttle*, Gehr’s time is a present laden with history. But all the magic of the film is in the present moment, and so the film on the screen creates an interaction of realities, from reality to audience and back to a new vision of reality. Within Ernie Gehr’s transcendent-materialistic vision, there are some mystical moments, like the dawn at the end of *Serene Velocity* (which gives even more necessity to the entire film), the quivering of the cinematic substance onto the buildings in *Eureka*, the shape of an eye that emerges from the cosmic vision near the end of *Glider* (2001, Fig. 3), the beauty of a flickering tree which concludes *Cinematic Fertilizer 2* (2007). Just as in *Eureka* or in my dreamed vision of *History*, the cinematic frame is teeming with flecks of light, like a drip painting by Pollock. The ultimate aim of Ernie Gehr’s cinema, it seems to me, is to free the spectator’s perception in the instant of vision. Halfway between the phenomenological eye and the geometrical abstraction, between haptic and optic, Gehr brings forms, structures and processes to their very limits; through precision and discipline, he is able to reach the very site where something begins to vibrate, to “happen” thanks to and beyond its premises. His modernism lies in this attempt to both assume and go beyond these limitations, liberating at their furthest reaches something that is not extreme, but rather an energetic serenity that we may inhabit.

- 1 P. Adams Sitney, *Ernie Gehr*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis 1980.
- 2 See Ernie Gehr, "Program Notes for a Film Showing at the Museum of Modern Art, February 2, 1971 at 5:30 P.M.", in *Film Culture*, no. 53-55, Spring 1972, p. 36.
- 3 Richard Foreman called *Still* «the first truly Proustian film». See Richard Foreman, "On Ernie Gehr's Film 'Still'", in *Film Culture*, no. 63-64, 1977, p. 28.
- 4 For a discussion of Gehr's relationship to (mostly architectural) modernism, see Gilberto Perez, *Gehr's Still*, in Ted Perry (ed.), *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema*, Indiana University, Bloomington 2006.
- 5 See Jacques Aumont, *A quoi pensent les films?*, Séguier, Paris 1997.
- 6 *Ibidem*, p. 27.
- 7 According to Clement Greenberg, *Modernist Painting* (1960), in Id., *Art and Culture*, Dutton, Boston 1961.
- 8 I will just mention the internal frames in *Serene Velocity*, the table in *Table*, and most of all the walls and other framing elements within the urban spaces, which many Gehr's films investigate and reflect (*Germany – Signal on the air*, *Passage*, *Before the Olympics* and so on).
- 9 "Ernie Gehr interviewed by Jonas Mekas, March 24, 1971", in *Film Culture*, no. 53-55, Spring 1972, pp. 25-36 (p. 29). According to Stephen Bann, that is exactly the main question at stake in modern art. See Stephen Bann, *Ways around Modernism*, Routledge, New York 2007.
- 10 In describing this film, we could reuse Michael Snow's definition of his own *La Région centrale* as «the only moving picture». *History* and *Mirage*, which like *Field* are shot without a lens, reach complete abstraction starting from something "real" before the camera, while for instance a film like *Untitled* takes the reverse path, from out-of-focus abstract forms to concrete ones.
- 11 I define it "autoreflexive" instead of "reflexive" because it questions the apparatus itself, not only the process of enunciation.
- 12 See notably the works of Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault; cfr. also Bart Testa, *Back and Forth: Early Cinema and the Avant-Garde*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto 1992.
- 13 Jeffrey Skoller has linked *Eureka* to Benjamin conceptions of allegory and of history as wreckage, and to the Deleuzian time-image. See Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 2005.
- 14 Theodor Wiesegrund Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1973, p. 45.
- 15 In this sense, Gehr says he works «with the articulation of the chemical mental/optical and mechanical factors that make the film image, the movement in time and space possible».
- 16 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Harvard University, Cambridge 2002.
- 17 Annette Michelson was probably the first who remarked a possible link to phenomenological tradition (and it's here the major link and the major difference between Gehr and Brakhage).
- 18 "Ernie Gehr interviewed by Jonas Mekas, March 24, 1971", cit., p. 30.
- 19 *Ibidem*.
- 20 Gehr was fascinated by Brakhage, and his first attempts were some 8mm films which seem to have been strongly influenced by Brakhage.
- 21 Richard Foreman, *Plays and Manifestos*, New York University, New York 1976, p. 16.
- 22 See Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*, MIT, Cambridge 1999.
- 23 See Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* (1940), in Id., *Selected Writings: 1938-1940*, Harvard University, Cambridge, 2003.