FLASH FLOODS

on Peter Tscherkassky's film
"PARALLEL SPACE: INTER-VIEW"

by Amy Taubin

Peter Tscherkassky's Parallel Space: Inter-View is a film about transformation. Still photographs become motion pictures. That's what Tscherkassky refers to as the "structural" basis for the film. As we watch the ghostly, flickering images, we also become aware of the processes by which perceptions are transformed into images, and images, in turn, are transformed into memory. In the transformation of perception to memory, photography can operate as a go-between. Moreover, photographic processes -- the material transformations involved in recording, developing, printing, and in the case of film, projecting -- function as metaphors for psychological processes. To use the verbal play which Tscherkassky gives power of place in the film: grain storms evoke brain storms.

In Parallel Space: Inter-View, language precedes image. The 18-minute film opens with a few sentences spoken over black leader. "This is the message he left: 'Dear Tim, thanks for the use of your space. I'm in a hurry. I have to go right away. Here's the new film. It's finished at last, as you can see. Originally, it was going to be a strictly structural one, but it turned out to be one of the most personal I've ever made. Basically what I tried to do was to..." As the voice fades, a flickering, high contrast, grainy black and white image, partially superimposed image appears. It's basically a hand in close-up pushing a series of white cards into the frame and writing first the word "physics", and then in succession the phrases "the physics of seeing" and "the physics of memory." The image is accompanied by a pulsing, percussive electronic sound through which fragments of speech and music fade up and down. Except for the words, the flickering image seems largely abstract. As one's eye becomes accustomed to the flicker, however, one begins to discern spacial and architectural outlines. After about two minutes, a close-up of a computer screen comes into focus, the words "All I remember is: I was looking for you," crawl across it. The image resumes its insistant flickering, through which one can detect the outline of a woman's head, a man with a camera on his shoulder, the view from a

window. Then, suddenly, the image of the computer screen returns. This time the message reads: "I tried to follow but I stumbled..." In the context of the elusive imagery and anxiety-provoking sound, the phrase suggests the narration of a dream.

During the remaining 10 minutes about a dozen image nodes surface with increasing intensity: a room and its furnishings, a couch and a chair (suggestive of the space of psychoanalysis), a sequence from the Hollywood film Wild River, the face of a woman in extreme close-up, presumably the same woman undressing in long shot, an old fashioned photograph of a couple, a close-up of a young boy. Robbed of detail and three dimensionality by the high contrast, grainy, superimposed opticals, the entire film looks as if it had been sketched in charcoal. Just before the final fade, the words "I was looking for you" again appear on the electronic screen. This time, however, the sentence is broken. The phrases "I was " and "for you" appear on two separate screens that are superimposed on one another. Finally, a hand comes into the frame and writes the word "looking"-- the verb that connects "I" and "you". The hand slides from view and the film is over.

Tscherkassky writes that Parallel Space: Inter-View orginated with his realization that one frame of 35 millimeter still film is the same size as two frames of a movie film. He optically printed 35mm stills onto a film strip, thus spliting each still frame into two frames of motion pictures. When the film is projected, the two halves of the photographs, seen in rapid succession, are superimposed in the viewer's eye. The integrity of the image is thus called into question and its illusion of three-dimensional space destroyed.

The technique is a familiar one, used most notably in the early 60's by the American avant-garde filmmaker George Landow. Landow made a series of films in which he printed strips of 8mm film onto 16mm. Tscherkassky's involvement with the the material surface of the film strip can also be traced back to Landow, specifically to the 1966 Film In Which There Appear Sprocket Holes, Edge Lettering, Dirt Particles etc.

But the primary connection between Tscherkassky and Landow is linguistic. Compare Tscherkassky's twice repeated "I was looking for you." to the subtitle "This film is about you and not about its maker" which appears near the beginning and again at the end of Landow's 1970 Remedial Reading Comprehension -- its placement parallels that of Tscherkassky's key phrase. In the Landow film, the title is printed over a shot of the filmmaker running on a shadowy street. The image is a superimposition: Landow refilmed the original shot of himself running and printed the second shot over the first, making no attempt

to match the two exactly. This depiction of a split-self makes the "you" in the title extremely ambiguous. "This film is about you and not about its maker" could mean this film is about the Landow who is an image on the screen and not the Landow who is a filmmaker. Or "you" could refer to the audience, suggesting that the film is about its reception, that the reponse of the viewer is the subject of the film. Since these interpretations (and several others as well) are equally valid, the effect of the statement is to destabilize the relationship between viewer and object (or viewer and filmmaker), to put the subject/object positions into flux.

In Parallel Space: Inter-View, the sentence "I was looking for you" creates a similar destabilization. It's possible that the filmmaker is the "I" who is looking for his identity within the film. The image of the small boy confronting his father that occurs near the end suggests that kind of search for self. Or perhaps the "you" is a lost object -- a lover or a mother. It's also possible that the sentence refers to the reciprocal relationship between the filmmaker and the viewer--that each performs the act of looking in the service of the other.

What Tscherkassky does is to take various tropes of 60's structural filmmaking (derived not only from Landow but also from Peter Kubelka, Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr and Paul Sharits) and run them through a Lacanian psychoanalytic sieve. When the filmmaker (or more exactly, his invisible stand-in) says in note he leaves for "Tim" that this "is the most personal one I've made", he doesn't mean the film is diaristic. Rather, it contains certain clues about the Oedipal construction of the self that a psychoanalyst might relish. If the film approaches the experience of dreaming, then the filmmaker is both the analysand who delivers the dream and the analyst who interprets it.

In this context, Tscherkassky's use of the sequence of found footage from Elia Kazan's 1960 Hollywood film Wild River is particularly striking. It's a fairly obscure piece of material -- nearly a lost object. A box office and critical failure when it opened in the U.S., Wild River was partially rescued by the critics of Cahiers Du Cinema. In the U.S., it ocassionally turns up on television in a butchered print, rescanned for the small screen. It's doubtful that a viewable cinemascope version still exists. The film, in that sense, underwent a negative transformation of its own, long before Tscherkassky get his hands on the videotape which he scavenged for his film.

Set in the mid 1930's Wild River stars Montgomery Clift as an ambitious government worker under the Roosevelt administration's Tennessee Valley Authority. Clift has been given the unpleasant job of evicting a flinty old matriarch (played by Jo van Fleet) from the island

where she and her family have lived for 60 years so that the government can complete its project of building a dam on the Tennessee River. The concept behind the T.V.A. was that the dam would both generate hydro-electric power and also prevent flooding. Wild River, therefore, was itself a film about the transformation of matter (water into electricity). What's more the film's publicity campaign played on the metaphoric connection between the energy of matter and libidinal processes. "Their love was as wild as the river", was the slogan on the posters.

The coupling of Clift and Lee Remick (who plays van Fleet's widowed daughter-in-law) was one of the most aberrant in the history of Hollywood cinema. Kazan cast Clift only when Marlon Brando, his original choice, became unavailable. By 1960, Clift had become a diffident and almost entirely passive screen presence. It's hard to believe that on some level Kazan didn't realize that his leading man would totally sabotage the conventional depiction of torrid screen romance. Clift's extreme passivity forced Remick into an aggressive sexual position. In the scene Tscherkassky excepts, she risks humiliation by declaring her passion to the unresponsive Clift. When he tacitly rejects her, she flings herself onto him, as if to overwhelm him by the force of her desire. It's one of the few instances in Hollywood cinema, outside of screwball comedy, in which a "good" girl is allowed to be sexually aggressive. What's more, her aggression pays off. Clift proposes in the next scene (after Remick has saved his life).

In the final sequence of Wild River, the newly-wed Remick and Clift fly over the now completed dam. (Van Fleet died shortly after being forced from her island.) The institutions of New Deal democracy (with FDR as the great off-screen patriarch) have prevailed. The river has been contained, the matriarchy deposed, female sexual desire regulated by marriage. What's more, Remick, in the tradition of cinematic "good" girls has colluded in her own oppression.

Tscherkassky appropriates a sequence from Wild River but eschews the narrative closure which equates conjugal bliss with good government. Fetishized for its disturbing mix of desire and frustration, the love scene between Remick and Clift is evidence of the oedipal anxiety that prevades Parallel Space: Inter-View. Tscherkassky superimposes the images of a woman (shown in both close-up and long shot) on the Wild River footage. The woman undresses, then there's a brief shot of what might be a couple on a bed. The love making is interrupted however by a male voice on the heavily processed sound track instructing someone to "say what your mother says." While the phrase is repeated over and over, a photograph of a young boy flickers on the screen. "There is an apple on the table" says

the voice again and again. The sequence, which is extremely disturbing, gives way to the sound of orgasmic moaning and an image of bodies photographed in such extreme close-up that they're virtually abstract. Finally the image of the video screen with the word "remember" appears superimposed on the photo of the young boy. This is followed by the final sequence of the hand inscribing the word "looking" which connects the two parts of the electronic message "I was for you."

From an American point of view, the revival of sixties structural film by Tscherkassky and other members of his generation of Austrian filmmakers is a bit puzzling and not particularly compelling. In Parallel Space: Interview, however, the rephotographed skeletonal images, the distressed surface of the film strip, the fragmentation and repetition of both sound and image are powerful correlatives for the psychical processes Tscherkassky wants to evoke. There's a tension, moreover, between the hermetism of the form and the desire to expose the self to the eyes of the other. In both form and psychological content, Parallel Space: Interview is deeply reflexive. To "look for" the other is to "look for" the self.

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