

Ain't a Bird That Knows Your Tune

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Maybe it is the flashing and jittering light, distracting enough that the quality, texture and function of the accumulated pops, snaps and rumblings, you know — sound — is lost. Doug Aitken, it feels safe to say, sent us down this path of indeterminate and yet preoccupied music video ambiance. Perhaps it is unfair to condemn him for the prevalence of lazy sound design in video art, as he has produced some effective and startling works, like *Diamond Sea*, 1997. And of course success breeds imitation with lesser returns. What is also easily forgotten during the blur, pan, cut, track is how the ambient soundscapes of his videos drive the sense of a restlessly mobile planet bursting with electrical impulses, information blasts traveling multiple velocities day and night.

Many artists are seduced into copying the surface affect of Aitken's work, gravitating toward the slick, easy glide rhythm and minimal electronic soundtrack, and end up hedging emotional or structural content. Other times you witness an artist mimicking Aitken's dramatic use of silence punctuated with sparse bursts of closely recorded, or at least hugely amplified, mechanized clang-clack. These tactics are justified as an appeal to an openended space where the viewer is activated to "make the connections," which is true a time or two. It also is a way for the work to pull short of risking a specific request of the viewer's attentiveness, something even a non-fan like myself must admit Aitken does. Still, an adroit writer such as Daniel Birnbaum can spend an entire chapter in *Chronology* discussing Aitken without once mentioning the sound design. He comes closest when he remarks on the pacing of Aitken's videos, "Everything moves smoothly, glides, and drifts in perfect sync, as in a music video liberated from all restrictions and free to concentrate only on ambience and flow."¹

But here Aitken and Aitken's influence are just red herrings. Another pause for another confession: I am going to do the inexcusable and make little distinction between film and video from here on out, if I have any justification, it is that in general the contemporary art world has been confusing film and video and their separate but related trajectories and histories since at least the late 60s. On to the matter at hand, I have written elsewhere on Mary Ellen Carroll's dual-screen 24 hour digital film *Federal*, 2005, a static shot documentation of the front and back of the Federal Building in Los Angeles, located at 11000 Wilshire, designed by the architect Charles Luckman in 1969.² Undoubtedly the work is political in its surveillance: Luckman's drab slab of a building houses the FBI, GSA, and Commerce Department among other federal agencies. *Federal* is in a way a perverse sequel to Andy Warhol's 8 hour black and white movie *Empire*, 1964. Unlike *Empire*, *Federal* unfolds in "real time": one screen per side of building, it captures one full day, and the screening begins at 9am and ends at 9am, just like the filming. The film was made with a digital camera on a tripod on both sides of the building. A two-person crew maintained each camera for the duration of the shoot. As the camera recorded so did the microphones. Here a split occurs, because the camera lenses are focused on the Federal Building while the microphones are 250 meters from the building and only

capture the closest ambient noise. For example, we never see the film crews, but hear them early and often. Ordinary sounds startle because they appear without visible analog. Additionally, both screens (one shot in a parking lot, the other in a cemetery) of the film have a distinct audio experience in ways the similarity of the two facades does not prepare a first-time viewer for. Security forces confront the crew, crew discusses the pros and cons of voice-over acting, meals eaten, game wins celebrated, dumpsters emptied, phone conversations held—all behind the camera lens. The unblinking projection forces you to concentrate your peripheral perception to interpret the richly layered sounds. One needs to listen for what one hears, and you are reminded that you can close your eyes but you cannot close your ears. Don't be fooled by the unwavering building at the center of the frame; the film better captures the context (social and physical) of the office building. In a way, Carroll's film crystallized my desire to consider sound and moving image. The soundtrack for *Federal* is amazing, I could listen to it all day long. I write again about *Federal* here to stress the use of sound, as I did in my previous essay dealing with the film, and to stress here that an inventive sound presence need not be grafted onto image. Do not obscure or glide, engage: in film the most complex sound, the one that orients us to the space, can be the trifle that just happened beyond view.

In 1894, Edison had been attempting to bring his Kinetoscope personal moving picture viewer and cylinder phonograph together when he finally touched upon the Kinetophone. As the image of the Kinetoscope advanced, a phonograph hidden in the cabinet would deploy, but synchronization wasn't much more than putting the right style of music to the image and hoping for connection. Anything more required intense concentration and manual manipulation. Edison at first shrugged off transforming his device from a personal viewing cabinet to a projection device that would open up the experience to multiple viewers at once. He soon relented while still complaining that the individual viewer method was the best investment. Others perfected the technique of synchronizing sound to image on film to a degree missed by Edison.³ The rest, as they say, is history.

Rodney Graham has tinkered as much as any artist with the synchronization between sound, image and individual beginning with his work *School of Velocity*, 1993, on to the film *How I Became a Ramblin' Man*, 1999, through his most recent works. Graham's *The Phonokinetoscope*, 2001, a 5-minute 16mm film with modified turntable and 15-minute 33 1/3rpm vinyl LP, even gets its title from an alternate name for Edison's Kinetophone. Slightly more advanced, Graham's contraption is pretty much the same but in opposite, when the needle hits the record, the film projector begins. Like Edison's invention, synchronization of image and sound means getting the right kind of music (in this case a psychedelic rock dirge) to the right kind of image (Graham on an LSD trip in Berlin's Tiergarten) and not much more.

One of Graham's most recent sound films, *Lobbing Potatoes at a Gong*, 2006, obliquely follows on *The Phonokinetoscope*. This black-and-white 16mm film documents, in a style that recalls films of Fluxus performance from the early 60s, Rodney Graham, with beard and scruffy longhair disinterestedly leaning back in a chair doing just what the title says. The film, like much of Graham's work, is based on a historical anecdote, this one relating

a concert from the late 60s where, reportedly, Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason threw vegetables at a gong. Graham's song for *The Phonokinetoscope* quotes a lyric from Pink Floyd's song "Bike," and Graham reports thinking about a particularly famous film of Pink Floyd's infamous acid casualty member Syd Barrett on the drug in question. Summarizing *The Phonokinetoscope*, Graham has said, "My point is, the trip is the thing."⁴ I don't think he's only referring to the effects of LSD. What *Lobbing Potatoes at a Gong*, *The Phonokinetoscope* or even *How I Became a Ramblin' Man* do is propose sound as a model of a mental state, not as a reflection, but perhaps more like an evocation. During these films, if your mind was elsewhere, you'd be home by now. During *The Phonokinetoscope* we can't feel the LSD, but we sure can groove out on the tune; the random and unexpected juxtaposition of the film, cycling over as the insistent song unfolds to a more leisurely pace offers a hint of the dislocation Graham's blank stare cannot share. To quote philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in his recent book, *Listening*, "the visual persists until its disappearance; the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence."⁵

Even when the sound supplies what little drama unfolds, have we grown to expect the pairing of sound and image to such a degree that we do not scrutinize how they function together? *Lobbing Potatoes at a Gong* is a relatively quiet affair, as Graham's lackadaisical tosses only intermittently hit their target. There lies a double-ended joke in Graham's historical staging: the film is a droll send-up of experimental interdisciplinary performance in the 60s at the same time that it offers a pretty convincing sound piece. The shimmering, warmly metallic ringing punctuating the performance is interspersed with silence, low crowd shuffling and the occasional dull thud of a potato errantly crashing to the floor. The camera pans and contrast heavy 16mm film miss the action as often as they catch the rare potato igniting a tone burst. *Lobbing Potatoes at a Gong* has a leaden air about it, your mind searches for something to grasp, to give a point to the plodding. I needn't quote the Nancy passage again, but perhaps Kierkegaard, who in the "Rotation of Crops", from *Either/Or* declared, "It is very curious that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion. The effect that boredom brings about is absolutely magical, but this effect is not one of attraction but of repulsion."⁶

A typical episode from season three (1989) of TV sitcom *Full House* opens. Within a minute, Tanner sisters D.J. and Kimmy are carrying a television upstairs, suddenly younger sister Stephanie enters and questions their actions. "We're taking this TV upstairs so we can watch the music videos and the news at the same time. Pretty smart idea I had, huh?" responds Kimmy. Soon, an accident, then a transmission breakdown intercedes and the entire Tanner family clan is lost in a sea of flickering visions that awaken technological Rorschach tests. Chicago-based artist Michael Robinson's brilliant (in all manners of the word) mesmerizing and captivating *Light is Waiting*, 2007, is perhaps not the most obvious choice for this essay. After all, the first choice should probably be his 16mm film *And We All Shine On*, 2006, where a karaoke rhythm track of Prince's Nothing Compares 2 U guides the viewer through a mythic video game quest for a paradise just beyond reach of all mediated subjects. Though less seductive on the surface, the sound

environment of *Light is Waiting* opens a beguilingly inquisitive space. Rippling and stuttering tones lap like a rising magnetic tide throughout, while the shifting voice of Aunt Becky cuts through the interference, "Where are you going?" "Did something break?" Aural swelling keeps you searching for clarity, recognizing that you are not just hearing sounds, you are listening. Is that Rock-a Hula Baby? Trying to comprehend, to catch a recognizable fragment, and that in this process "to listen is to strain."⁷

Robinson's work is the toughest of all works discussed here to accurately describe because its effects are the least straightforward. *Light is Waiting* is constructed, in a self-knowing fashion, from many of the tropes of experimental filmmaking— abstract flicker light, malfunctioning image, symmetrical composition, sudden break, mirrored and/or superimposed imagery. Building an unabashedly experimental video from three episodes of *Full House*, with a cast featuring perennially B-listers and/or trainwrecks Candice Cameron, Dave Coulier, the Olsen Twins, Bob Sagat, and John Stamos, is almost too easy of a critique to engage. Seeing the 11-minute video projected large scale in a theater is overwhelming and elicits greater induced physical reflexes than any Dave Coulier may have experienced during an equal amount of time with Alanis Morsette in another movie theater. *Light is Waiting* progresses from straightforward appropriation to abstract journey to mirrored landscape to shape-shifting vision quest as scenery moves from the interior of the Tanner house to a wayward vacation where the Tanners encounter "native savages" in Hawaii and bizarrely perform in concert. Everything transforms, the ghostly doubling and symmetrically fluctuating footage produces human demons of all variety every passing second. Still, the speed of the transformations seems deceptively calm as the resonant soundtrack slows the perceived cadence. The split selves of the Tanner clan cling together and attempt to dance their way out of the nightmarish environment, but in Robinson's mordant mirrored process every hip shake sends them further beyond hope of return to the simple and solid identities they held in their usual situation comedy escapades. The even timbre resounding through the manipulated and manipulating source material resounds "above all the unity of a diversity that its unity does not reabsorb."⁸ The split images will not reassemble, so the monstrous symmetrical beings seek redemption in the triumphant pitch-shifted applause that the end of their stage antics elicits. Finish on a 12-second silent red/white/blue flicker.

Of course, it is easy to forget that sound and moving image have had a conflicted relationship. Earliest films were silent, and once experiments with pairing sound to the moving image began, the sound of the projection equipment (there were no projection booths yet) greatly hindered the efficacy of any soundtrack. And nowadays the sound is generally used to simply reify the images. So why listen? Hum, sustained tone, low-level electronic burping, possibly the sound of an electronic communications device, a keyboard wash, iconic pop tune, murmuring, possibly a limp dance beat: many soundtracks make the task too easy. Others than those discussed here of moving image works where the sound is an integral and effective element could be listed, for example performance troop My Barbarian's *Who Put the Gold in the Golden Age*, 2007, where a shuffling group song 'n' dance in front of a studio audience soulfully calls out the machine that has always given global capital its cache.

One of Chris Marker's many great works, *Sans Soleil*, 1983, is an essay-film travelogue detailing the many wanderings of a cameraman around the world. Near the beginning Alexandra Stewart, Marker's proxy narrator, intones, "He said that in the 19th century mankind had come to terms with space, and that the great question of the 20th was the coexistence of different concepts of time."⁹ The discordant time in question for Marker is those between Africa, Asia and Europe. So much of *Sans Soleil* covers the pace of remembering and forgetting that it might be possible to get Marker to add a few categories of time to his personal list of 'things that quicken the heart.' Crossing datelines, decades and centuries, one of the many beautiful qualities of *Sans Soleil* is the construction, using silent 16mm film footage combined with voice-over narration, squiggly synthesizer music and snippets of ambient sounds recorded on a cheap early 80s cassette recorder with no synchronization capabilities to the camera. The many materials open a 'spiral of time' in *Sans Soleil* of some relation to the spiral of time Marker sees in Kim Novak's hairdo from Hitchcock's 1958 thriller *Vertigo*. How could someone so attuned this "vertigo of time" not agree with Jean-Luc Nancy that visual time is not at all like sonorous time, which is "present in waves on a swell, not in a point on a line, it is a time that opens up, that is hollowed out, that is enlarged or ramified, that envelopes or separates, that becomes or is turned into a loop, that stretches out or contracts, and so on."¹⁰ What I have been chronicling here is the touching point between times, when we perceive the borders between two distinct types of sensory meter, opening a zone to catch the resonance of a transitive empiricism. Of course, at that junction you cannot help but consider the 'great question of the 20th century' Marker attends to and recognize that here in the 21st century we are still woozy and waiting for a light to carry us home. Maybe we should listen as well.

¹ Daniel Birnbaum, *Chronology*, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2005, 50.

² "Exquisite Fucking Boredom (or Surrender to the Void)," in *BAT*, issue 2, April, 2006.

³ Historical points mostly taken from Russell Lack, *Twenty Four Frames Under*, London: Quartet Books Limited, 1997.

⁴ Rodney Graham, "A Thousand Words: Rodney Graham talks about The Phonokinetoscope," in *Artforum*, Nov 2001.

⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007, 2.

⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part I*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987, 285.

⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007, 6.

⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007, 41.

⁹ Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*. Argos Films, 1983.

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007, 13.