

Against the Grain

Steve Farrer's Cinema of Machines

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To create is not to deform or invent persons and things. It is to tie new relationships between persons and things which are, and as they are.

Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer*

An Endless Horizon

In the year of cinema's centenary a rash of pronouncements declared the 'end' of cinema, superseded by technological advances in telecommunications and specifically in the realm of the digital. The chemical-mechanical technology of cinema, of film, had suddenly lost its glamour and allure in favour of a revolution brought about by video and the promise of ever more personal interaction with images via the Internet and digital television. Many of these statements of the zeitgeist came from such respected critics and thinkers as Susan Sontag, people deeply implicated within the theories of the image and cinema itself, many who had until then promulgated cinema as the seventh art, the currency of the twentieth century. One can easily discern a millennialism in these arguments – the hope of an ever brighter future forged in the individual spaces of access and democratic choice – the desire to evade the conditions of cinematic auteurism, of side-stepping the seemingly intractable problems associated with the 'gaze', the imposed look of the voyeur, the manipulations of the cultural structures inherited through capitalism and industry.

It has become a cliché to transpose Walter Benjamin's concepts of cult value, aura and rupture to the domains of cyberspace, having used them so lately to expound theories of cinema that were revolutionary, inclusive and anti-hierarchical. Witness the fascination and revulsion with Jean-Luc Godard and others who have moved more nimbly than the academics and critics in their wake, who continue to use film and video in highly idiosyncratic ways which negate and frustrate the imposition of specific readings on their work. The limits of theory become apparent in the tussle of interpretation of the conditions of representation.

Technologies and culture move on, but humanity remains, for the most part, where it has always been, grappling with the same questions of fate, existence and meaning which our artforms constantly challenge, tease and develop as each individual's experience adds to the time in which he or she lives. The literature, music and art of centuries past still strikes us with poignancies and revelations as immediate as those of our own time, if slightly more accessible through the accumulated acceptance of their worth and merits. It is a testament to the strength and determination of human nature that we continue to explore and challenge these questions rather than submit to prescribed formulae; to forge our own paths and attempt to share our joys and discoveries with each other.

The work of Steve Farrer is exemplary of this drive to reinterpret the given conditions of the cinematic medium, the seeking after and sharing of an otherness. It makes use of frames of reference that are open to all – the languages of films, the funfair, the spectacle – but offers a unique redrawing of these frames through Farrer's own narratives of personal history, through his inventor's streak and sense of fun. He offers an inversion of the experience of watching a movie, breaking it down into its constituent elements, manipulating them, deconstructing and returning cinema to its roots with Méliès and the Lumières without the pomposity of a grand theory, or the pretension of avant-gardism. While one cannot discount his position as an avant-garde filmmaker and artist, Farrer's work is accessible on many levels precisely because he does not choose to hide his working practices or dress up his output in the fancy frills of postmodern discourse.

The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.

Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

The *Cinema of Machines* comprised exactly that – a cross between a museum of (virtually) redundant technology, an alchemist's laboratory and a funfair of erratic and eccentric machinery – a spectacle. But the image is never divorced from its means of production because Farrer chooses to integrate production and exhibition within the machines themselves. The *Machine*, a combined camera/projector harking back to the very first camera-projectors used by Méliès in his side-show tents, imposes its own logic upon the piece, as much an intrinsic element as the projected image, both by virtue of the technical restraints upon the image it can record, and the fact that it establishes a specific continuity from the act of making to the process of exhibiting. This relationship is crucial to Farrer's work because it charts an unbroken line between these events.

Through this relationship of presence it is not hard to trace the continuing influence of structuralist/materialist filmmaking in Farrer's work; his obsession with reconstructing the nature of cinema, of altering its conditions of production and exhibition is part of a history of experimental or "expanded" filmmaking. Exploding the experience of cinema beyond passive reception and locating it firmly within an event, a situation in which the audience is more immediately made aware of presence, of their relation to the image and environment, has informed his work since the 1970s. As such Farrer, whilst continuing a practice that has evolved yet stayed consistent over two decades, brings into the perspective of the 1990s work that is both anachronistic and very much of its time. It is not at all clear whether time has caught up with him or vice-versa.

The machines he builds exist as a kind of an archeology of cinema, both physical and conceptual – exposing the layers of ambiguity that exist between projection of the ephemeral image and the physical space in which the experience of viewing takes place. Farrer's specific quality is the subtlety of his presentation of these tensions – at no point are they didactic. His working practice is defined by the strict rules and conditions of representation imposed by the technical limitations of the *Machine*. The lens is fixed and frames are non-existent, inducing a conflict between developing a linear narrative structure and pure abstraction. Thus he posits a situation, or (ironically) frames a scene. His work is full of contradictory positions that give it a substance that were they not to be present would make it facile. It is a cinema of paradox as much as one of the concrete reality his machines represent because it relies so much on the ephemerality of the images, of the illusion which we, as viewers, agree to be a part of.

The *Machine* is never purely formal since its very nature relies on the content of the images projected. The images it projected at the Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art played on a situation reminiscent of the photographic experiments in human motion conducted at the turn of the century by Edward Muybridge. A relation emerges between a photographer whose animated photographs have so much filmic quality and a filmmaker whose images disrupt the notion of continuity upon which cinema is predicated to suggest the fragility of the image, the illusion of capturing 'life' which is in fact no more than a trick of the eye, interpolating its own continuity across the aporia of the framelines. Farrer's camera records an uninterrupted 360° sweep, mimicking the pseudo-scientific grids and feel of a motion study. The work is infused with an irony: the naked men wrestle, but not seriously and we are less likely to think this part of a 'scientific' and thus 'true' or 'real' representation as to enjoy the visual 'quotation'. Beneath the reference is a game, one of posing questions but leaving them unanswered.

Much could the same be said of his installation *Crossing the Line*, which evidently deals with notions of the gaze and is a wry and humorous take on the way "gaze-theory" posits the audience as a passive and manipulated phenomenon. Nicholas Ray's 1950 feature *In a Lonely Place* is projected across three screens, moving from one to the other as each point-of-view shot changes by way of a system of mirrors at the head of the lens. The scopic drive here resides less in the body of the viewer than in the non-space of the software driving the switching mechanism, an extrusion of the interplay between viewer and viewed. The complexity of the shot-counter-shot, the film's oscillating and multiple point-of-views, breaks out of the frame of cinema, rupturing the coherence of the concept of the screen by shifting it itself. The viewer is almost incidental, sidelined by the mechanism, and in particular in this case, by the unheard, but witnessed after-effects of a silent language between the analogue and the digital, the true pas-de-deux of the narrative. It is a narrative not so

much contained by the convention of the feature film but by that of the viewer installed in the space. Farrer seems to be suggesting that by taking theory too literally an impasse is reached, and the work itself seems emptied of meaning, an elaborate conceit that, like the characters in the film, is unable to go forward.

What Farrer's works inspire is curiosity; his relocation of cinema in the gallery space disrupts an accepted, consensual cultural experience, giving it a new twist and engaging the speculation of the audience. Farrer doesn't insist on any singular or objective experience — there is no revelation, no great meaning that will provoke an epiphany, but a condition that intrigues, that makes one aware of presence: of the self, objects, images and environments. The viewer must bring his or her own subjectivity to bear upon the work since there is no fixed point-of-view from which to establish the experience. Farrer's work privileges the perception of the viewer over the intention of the artist.

The faintly anachronistic use of mechanical technology in a world (and specifically the art world) ever more fascinated with the virtual points towards the intrinsic obsolescence of all technology. One could see Farrer's work as a comment upon the relation of the human to the external world in which all our material surroundings are no more than fleeting manifestations of desire. Such desire is, in part, related to the human need to impose a mark, or presence upon the world, to leave something of a signature by which we may be remembered. Farrer's *Cinema of Machines* is not so far from the loci of memory that are the boxes made by Joseph Cornell — assemblages that recycle the forgotten and discarded into a montage which exposes the fantasies and carelessness of a culture. It is ironic too that in choosing to recycle the redundant technology of the cinema many of the parts no longer existed and he needed to reconstruct and build new parts to replace them.

Farrer's fascination with technique, with mechanics, is also not so far removed from the experiments of Marcel Duchamp of the 1920s; the *Rotoreliefs* and *Anemic-Cinema*. Farrer presents a playful deconstruction of perception working back from the mechanism, creating a structure which requires the audience to participate in the game of making sense of what they see, imposing their own conditions on what is represented, and defining their impression in terms of the limits of their own perception.

By highlighting what is revealed as the tension of perception, Farrer's work seems to be trying to find a language, trying to speak. His work is not televisual in the way that so much 'moving image' work clearly aspires to be, but is resolutely in the here and now, an experience that shifts like sand and is not transferable to another state or medium. *Cinema of Machines* was constructed to be something akin to visiting a funfair, an entertainment in which the viewer moves through the sights and sounds, the layering of images, the lightshow or son-et-lumière of another's obsessions and fantasies. It emphasised that we are wanderers on a journey and our impressions of place and space are no more than waystones. We trace the threads of existence from coming into language, from the symbolic slaughter of our Minotaur in the establishing of identity, from the dark heart of the labyrinth into the blinding sun of oblivion.

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