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## Eager Ears and Ardent Eyes

Stojan Pelko:

## Eager Ears and Ardent Eyes

Andrej Zdravič Interview

**- When we first talked five years ago for *Ekran* (magazine), you told me that you came to film from music. I didn't ask you then what you meant by this?**

I was one of those kids who grew up with the radio. When I was four or five years old I spent many hours searching in-between stations, tuning in on frequencies. The radio... stirred my imagination. All these distant places and spaces fascinated me. We never had a TV at home. Later, like all teenagers, I listened to a lot of music. For four years from 1969 on, I worked as a sound engineer with Radio Študent (Ljubljana). At the time I was a student at the Faculty of Arts (University of Ljubljana), but above all I spent most of my time at the radio. We were doing radio plays with the theatre people, but I also had my own shows on jazz and ethnic music. I spent all my money on records. I listened to tons of music. It always triggered associations with natural events, spaces in motion. I visualized spaces. I listened to, say, Alice Coltrane and this music opened up imaginary landscapes and atmospheres.

So, music inspired me to start filmmaking from a 'space and movement' viewpoint. I realized that photography (which I also liked) was too static for me. The idea struck me that I should *dance* with a movie camera. And the effect of music on me was just that: not so much intellectual, but rather physical in the sense of movement.

**- Does then the term *Soundvision* that we find in your film credits mean that sound precedes vision, that it even dictates it?**

I shot my first films to music in my headphones. I had a button on top of the Super-8 camera trigger, so that every time I ran the camera, I also triggered the cassette player. Yea, I had this on my ears way before walkmans came about.

**- What would you listen to?**

Jazz. I really liked, for example, a song from the first Weather Report album - which was something special... When I would listen to this music back at home, it would reminisce me of a place I already knew, really strong vibes. Then I would return to that place with the music in my ears. I knew every beat of the song. I would get ready for a scene and say to myself: "OK, for this movement in the song, I'll do this move with my camera!" - and would hit the trigger. The music started playing and at the same time I would shoot a move. Then I would stop, leave the tape alone, and go to another spot to shoot another move, or a series of short bursts. In this way, I shot an entire 50-foot roll of film to a particular piece of music.

**- With this style of filming, is the object still important at all, or is everything conveyed by the camera move itself?**

Usually I dealt with landscapes. The object was important, but above all, it was about movement, the expressiveness of the camera. That was in the beginning. No post-editing. I had the film developed, and when I got back the three-minute roll, I synced it with the start of the tape and watched how it all went together.

**- Was it in sync?**

More or less. In this way - with the music in my ears - I also shot *Waterbed*, my first 16mm film. Again, I used a piece by Weather Report - *Will...* it has an ostinato feel. I scouted the Niagara Falls terrain: "For the beginning of the song, this section of the river, for the middle, that one, then I'll go to the rapids..." So I made up a scenario in my head according to the evolution of the music piece. Then I would shoot the material in the same way, with that button-trigger.

During film editing, I then decided to drop the music! First, I edited the silent film - still under the influence of music, for sure - then I went and recorded the river sounds and mixed them to the pictures.

**- That was during your studies in Buffalo. Did you go there to study film?**

Yes. During my days at Radio Student I was thinking of taking up sound engineering. At the time, there were no specialized schools for that, though.

I inquired throughout Europe but all such schools were strictly technical: printed circuits and the like... No sound mixing as an art. People learnt it on-the-job, in practice, or directly from some master engineer. When I made my first film experiments, I was struck! As if I were illuminated - this is my way! Naively; in the sense that I wasn't one of those people who sat in the movies day and night. I liked cinema, like everybody else I'd go and see a film once in a while. But I did not start making films because I was crazy about twenty directors. In any case, that wasn't the main impetus.

I tried to find such schools, and ended up in Buffalo: Center for Media Study (State University of New York), which at the time was one of the only schools besides the San Francisco Art Institute to be focused on experimental filmmaking. The courses were taught by avant-garde filmmakers video artists, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Steina and Woody Vasulka, and documentary maker James Blue.

**- If I understand you correctly, your aural way of seeing - this music in your ears and your camera dance at the same time - above all had to do with a sort of intuition. Does a moment occur when your intuition is confirmed by meeting with an established author, or do you feel you're completely on your own path?**

These are big questions - why we are doing something. Of course, one is working out of an inner drive. But it's also important that you show your work. When this transmission happens, when you see that somebody has experienced something, this confirms your aspirations - that it all makes sense. How to answer your question? When I came to America with my two little reels of S-8mm films and ten of my favourite music tapes, I was 21 - I had nothing. I told myself on the plane: now I am going on my life journey. A real trip! I was elated, I lived for this. Then at school, we really watched an awful lot of films. In fact, that's what it was: looking at and analyzing films. These were classical films which were in fact experimental, for they were searching for a cinema language: Vertov, Eisenstein, Man Ray, Clair, Lang... And above all the American avant-garde. I saw some similarities with Brakhage; he is a lyricist with a camera. But then again, he wasn't someone for whom I would say: "Wow, this is my master!" For one thing, he negated the use of sound. He was convinced that pure cinema is silent cinema...

I have to say that the whole experience really confused me, "bouleversé, j'étais bouleversé". I was really overwhelmed. I didn't know all these films. I remember Kubelka's *Arnulf Reiner*, a so-called flicker film. In mid-sixties, Tony Conrad made *The Flicker*. A purely black and white pulsation of light, very strong gut, organic impulses. Pure abstraction. It impressed me - like energy pulsation. After that period, I collected myself and focused on the things that have definitely always most impressed me: nature. Even when I came to New York; my *New York Studies* dealt with physical energies: wind, shifts of perception caused by boat movements, or reflections in puddles. I still conceived of the camera as a 'musical instrument', as a means of expression, like a wave of hand, like a performance.

**- *Breath* is from that period. If I had to give it a name, I would call it "What does a flying newspaper hear?" The basic premise reminds me of Wenders' angels, inasmuch as your camera is, in your case, moving through space in order to listen to different sound layers.**

**I am interested in the purely chronological genesis of this film.**

Maybe I could classify my films in two groups. On the one hand, films that are born from spontaneous encounters with environments, objects and matter - those are more or less edited-in-the-camera: *Vesuvio*, *Carbon Arc*, *Venezia*... *Breath*, on the other, is a different type of film which is totally reconstructed.

I was intrigued by these papers... I spent seven months shooting them, of course not every day. Because at that time I also worked a lot, physically, for subsistence, for money and bread. Those were modest times. I got a Beaulieu on loan from Buffalo, the only electric camera they had. Whenever I could, a few times a week, I went walking in the streets looking for these papers. Mostly in lower Manhattan, around Wall Street. Sometimes I'd find them here, sometimes there; lingering about or flying in the air. When I had all the material, I totally deconstructed these papers. I spent many years editing films helping myself out with objects found on the street. They would discard 8-foot fluorescent fixtures from offices, for example, and I would use them to build large light-tables. In making *Breath*, I would lay out all the strips of film on the table. I would move around the pieces of

B/W film like little images. The advantage of such a method is that you can see, at a glance, the structure of the film. You can see the rhythm: ten or fifteen centimetres of film equals one second. And if the rhythm swings in, then you know, the paper went this way. I organized the film with the help of these patterns of lightness and darkness which show the rhythm. Just like the optical sound pattern on the edge of the film, that little graph which is jumping in and out, tells you a lot about amplitude of the sound, so do these patterns of light say a great deal about the units and lengths of the rhythm. So I literally spread out the film on the light-table. Beforehand, I also looked at the film footage many, many times to memorize the material in my head - but in fact it was edited on the light-table. I would splice it, project it, and so forth...

**- This method of seeing several images at once, which are often just a couple of seconds apart, is it not in fact the basic premise of your *Time Horizons*, later on?**

The idea of time delays, upon which is based my *Water Waves - Time Horizon* installation at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, did in truth also occur to me as a result of this endless analyzing of individual shots on the light-table.

It seems to me that in recent years, from *Ocean Beat* onwards, I am trying to submit myself to things. I am still advocating a very organic approach, but much less expressionistic. This has to do with a fairly well known idea of using oneself as a receiver. Maybe it is about a reverence for what is out there.

**- Phenomenologists would probably use heavy words for your 'reverence': "let things be". It seems to me as well that your frenetic camera, which once obeyed the voice in the ears, is now stabilizing, as if it wanted to stop and listen. The camera's stabilization is in fact its sensibilization. It probably wouldn't happen to you today - as in *Airborne* - to zoom into the cloud just out of curiosity for what is hidden there. This 'curiosity' gave way to patience.**

In this way the phenomena are more pronounced. It's a play. It's still about movement, but it's very sensitive, just at the right time. What's important is to capture the quintessence of things, not to destroy it with your expressionism. The zooming is still from the period when the camera was an 'instrument': the zoom was like a pull on the trombone, and the swing of the camera was like a solo saxophone... In *Water Waves*, I shot for the first time everything from the tripod. For one thing, because - in view of the nature of the installation - it wouldn't have been appropriate to have the camera moving as well. I wanted only the wave to be moving over the steady horizon.

**- It's only by waiting, being on the look-out that you can catch these unrepeatable moments such as, for example, that twig in *Kres* which is slowly turning unto itself...**

And *this* is a monumental moment. An event occurs. These little monumental moments interest me. The dance of pebbles in the river Soča, autumn leaves hovering over the bottom. For me these things become living beings. You won't believe it, but I have a very personal feeling for that little twig which cracks. It's not just any branch there which burns out. It just can't hold any longer, there is a cosmic force... It's a very big moment. And you can only find such moments in a state of inner quietude. Which is directly linked to a calm way of seeing.

**- Time. So you are literally taking your time. How can you afford it?**

So far I've never used miles of film, because there has always been the pressure that it's running out. I want to point out that I financed myself most of my films, that I had to earn them with my work. Because film is so expensive, many things are shorter than they ought to be. But what's essential is that you take time to fuse with the subject matter. If a certain thing attracts me, excites me, then I first want to get to the heart of it. It's about discovering the world through cinema, really. For me, film is the impetus, it's the key, the tool to discover the world. The world is not here so that I should make films. When I was filming in the aircraft, I read a lot about navigation, controls... The same with medicine. I studied a lot of texts on microsurgery. I even considered taking a course at an American college where in two years you can get a diploma enabling you to work as an assistant in surgical interventions. Not on your own, of course, but you can suture blood vessels. I found it so fascinating: that I would suture arteries!

So my approach is not: "OK, now I'm going to make a film about Soča. Here's the plan of shooting, let's go!" No. Soča already excited me a long time ago; I can remember vividly, when I was six years old, I would watch sand in the water. Basically, I came back to film what I had seen as a child. And

then I take the time to explore it. I collect materials, I read and especially I go there. I try to feel in, to understand what it is about, I try to see its very essence: Why is something so captivating? What is so special about it? Maybe that's why I always did all the filming alone: you need a certain peace around you, no distractions. How can I have a cameraman and tell him: "Hey, I like this scene, put the camera here and shoot it." That's impossible. What if, in the middle of shooting, the pebble jumps and we have to turn the camera?

**- I keep thinking of *Il Postino* and his farewell sound letter to Neruda. He walked around the island recording sounds, then he had to mix them with music and commentaries. Without his explanations we couldn't have known the meaning of the sound: we wouldn't have known, for instance, that we were listening to his "father's sad fishing nets" or the "starlit night on the island". But you do not directly resort to words?**

A film can speak without speech. Why have I avoided speech? Because in **general I have always avoided things that were too literal**. The moment you say something that's already a very concrete piece of information. But I did try using speech in a different way. In the film *Anastomosis*, for example, I switched on during the operation a sound recording of a fisherman explaining somewhere in the background about his fishhooks. What he is saying has nothing to do with what is shown by the picture. He is talking about fishhooks and about fish swimming in deep water - whereas we are looking at a surgical operation. I also have bits of interviews out of which I took parts of sentences - so that we only see the lips moving on the screen; several times I even put different words into someone's mouth. In brief, I wanted to get rid of the direct connection between what somebody is saying and the meaning of his words. I'm interested in speech as sound information.

**- Tell me something about your father?**

As a surgeon my father was terribly busy and I didn't see very much of him during my years in secondary school. When I started making films, I wished to go and see with my camera what my father was doing. I can't put it better, I wanted to discover what his work was like. I shot *Phenix* around Christmas in 1974, a little over a year after I started in film. My father set up the Department for Plastic Surgery and Burns (Medical Center Ljubljana). He was head of the Department and opened all doors for me. This experience made... if I say, a profound impression on me, it wouldn't be enough. It literally shattered me. Emotionally. A whole new dimension of the human condition opened up to me. This is very different from seeing a medical picture and saying: "Oh, that's horrible, I'm not going to watch this".

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**- Fascinated?**

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It is incredible how much knowledge and work it takes to bring relief into someone's life.

As a result of this experience, I have a different attitude to violence in media and film. I am referring to the incredibly graphic portrayal of violence with the latest techniques. There is a duality in people: on the one hand, they are unable to face images of surgery saying they cannot stand the sight of blood; on the other, they are willing to look at the most horrendous things in films saying that this is not real, it's just fiction. Which obviously is not true because these are images too. And these images pile up in our subconscious and affect us. If not now, then a few days later...

*Phenix* was for me a terribly difficult film to make, I literally had a hard time digesting it. I remember having had recurrent nightmares during the editing. At night I dreamt that hands with scalpels were rising up from underneath my bed, and cutting me up. Horrible!

Then, when I was making *Anastomosis*, the film about the hand - which is a kind of a culmination of 4, 5 films I did together with Dr. Buncke - I was faced with performing myself a large toe excision, and then, there it was this toe in the air and I did not know how to put it on the hand. What should I do with it? I was totally petrified: I cut off a person's toe and I did not know how to put it on the hand. It was horrifying!!

**- Was this a dream?**

Of course, this was a dream. I just want to illustrate how images embed themselves in our psyche. That's why I detest any use of violence in films. I think that people who portray violence, and say that they do it because the public wants it, are hypocrites. It is not true. These people are exploiting man's inborn fascination for the visceral! Maybe this fascination goes a long way back to the times when man lived in the savannas and ate raw flesh, when the bare existence depended on killing. Maybe these violent impulses are tucked away somewhere in the archaic part of the brain and are triggered off again in man by violence in films? That's why I think this is terribly dishonest. I don't want to moralize, but it seems extremely important to me that we do not make films carelessly. And that we don't say: "Wow, that's a strong film!" - just because it's got drama, because that guy killed some woman and did such and such.

**- I admit that during *Phenix* I looked away when they sutured the eyelid on this patient at the end of the film. When it comes to eyes and snakes, I look away. Do you also have some phobias? Is there something in films you cannot bear the sight of, and look away?**

When I was shooting *Phenix*, I really felt for the first time in my life that I was slowly getting to the point of passing out. It was getting very bright in the room... and a certain lightness of being... I knew I was going to faint. I remember: I went to a corner of the operating room and tried to look out through the window. They have windows there. I was humming to myself a McCoy Tyner piano solo. I tried to shake off this sensation with music, to keep myself together - and somehow I managed.

**- Is it naive to say that perhaps the camera helped you to look away, not to have to look directly?**

When it comes to surgery, you have to take the whole thing in perspective. If I put a man on the table here in this room and started operating on him, it would be terrible. But an operating theatre is a very special room: a special setting with a special atmosphere, everything is set for the job. During surgery, the operating field is isolated, everything is covered - and one focuses on a given problem. Then this becomes the center of attention and is interesting in itself. If you're opening a foot, you start to look closely: "Aha, this person has this nerve which runs over here and not there, like in the other person, this one has such arteries, as opposed to the other..."

**- Are you saying they frame the shot for you?**

Something like that. And because you concentrate, it becomes very interesting in itself. Fascinating. Because you take things in context, you can also experience them as a layman. This was exactly my challenge in making *Anastomosis*: how to make people who don't want to see this sit through my film to the end? And more: how to achieve this without any introduction whatsoever, without anyone telling you: "Now you will enter the operating room, and this film is about this and that..." How to do this in a universal, speechless way? I spent ten minutes just introducing the viewer into the operating room. When they finally get there, they first see only the nurses, hands, lights, and then slowly, slowly... the body with no visible blood. I simply wanted to break this phobia.

**- Do you dream a lot in general?**

I like very much the following analogy: when I am making a film, it is like entering a special space. A surgical room, a church, a chapel... and there I fuse with the subject. When I start having dreams about passages in my film, how I might edit this or that, then I know I am getting down to the bottom of things. Of course, this does not happen at once. My principle is to saturate myself with the material, to inundate myself. I look at it and analyze it as long as it takes to trigger off dreams, to actually see the shots and sometimes their connections... This is not to say that I edit my films according to how I saw

them in my dreams, but I dare say that now and then I did get the feel for some things in my dreams... And that's a nice feeling indeed.

**- This reminds me of a favourite scene of mine in Miller's *Colossus from Maroussi*. His hero, Katsimbalis, in his fits of madness, takes upon altering the city plans of large world metropolises, and then in his dreams, he gets lost in his imaginary streets of Sebastopol and Shanghai...**

Yes. We have this urge to interfere with everything in the world, including nature. We don't give ourselves the time to... *effacer, s'effacer soi-même*. To put ourselves behind and let, in a state of inner peace, the world flow - as the old masters of haiku did: to connect with the nature of things, this sheer simplicity which has the dimension of the whole universe. It is only through this peace of mind that we can begin to have authentic experiences. This is the only way in life to arrive at a synthesis, to find oneself, to experience something profoundly. I would discreetly observe visitors while they were watching my *Water Waves* installation. It was great to see people with expressions of wonder, surprise and discovery on their faces. You know, they follow the waves with their eyes, they move their heads - and then suddenly their eyes brighten up. What joy! It's wonderful to see people in their moments of discovery.

**- You observe them looking at what you saw... Isn't there also a bit of narcissism in this mirroring?**

I did it for the purpose of technical analysis. I had a small Hi-8 camera underneath the monitors because I didn't want them to see me. For a museum of science that's pretty much a routine procedure, you know. First, I wanted to see how people would react, if they followed. Second, I wanted to see what they would do with that box. The idea at the prototype stage was to put people in the seat of the film editor, having them enjoy it as much as I did when editing the film: playing, stopping, back a little, forward a little. I said to myself: "How wonderful it would be to give people a chance to discover film in this way - not just to have the film run by and it's gone!" So we had that box with the buttons enabling you to stop and go. It was therefore partly a study of people's reactions: I wanted to see what they were doing. It turned out that having buttons was unproductive since most of the people, especially children, would plunge for the buttons, pushing them - forgetting about the pictures.

**- You yourself obviously have no problem with the fact that it is the state-of-the art technology that leads you to the most subtle inner depths?**

I know it's a paradox that I go out into nature loaded with 50kg of luggage - I'm aware of that. I often think how great it is for a poet: he has just a notebook and a pencil, he packs up and there he goes. I am especially aware of this when I have to carry around all this gear. On the other hand, I don't have a problem with this, for the technology is actually in the background. I don't know how you experienced the installation *Secrets of Soča* in Trenta? Did you think all the time that there was a computer and laser discs behind all that... or did you just 'fall' into *Soča*?

**- Your father is opening the way to the body and projects images, your mother puts them to music... The legend about the filmmaker is thus complete. Where will you go after the retrospective?**

... Let us say it's about the first 22 years of exploration, the end of a formative period. I will certainly continue working with the image, but I would also like to take out more time for sound only. For several years now I've been quietly developing my musical ambitions with sounds. It seems as though I am searching for some nuclei, potentials, capsules of musical forms in everyday sounds, in the strata of sounds. Many others have already worked with noise, for example, the futurists, and all the *musique concrète*. But I am, in my own way, searching in these bits of sounds certain clusters, sources of possible music. I'm not saying: "Boom, here is five seconds of sound - see, that's music!", but I take sound as the initial substance from which I extract a musical form in a sort of sculpturing process. Filters, the digital sampler and digital delay (a device for repeating sounds) are my chisel and hammer. All these electronic instruments aren't just sources of great effects, but they also point to a certain potential in sounds that you can't experience without them - just as you can't experience a sculpture if it hasn't been sculpted.

/.../

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