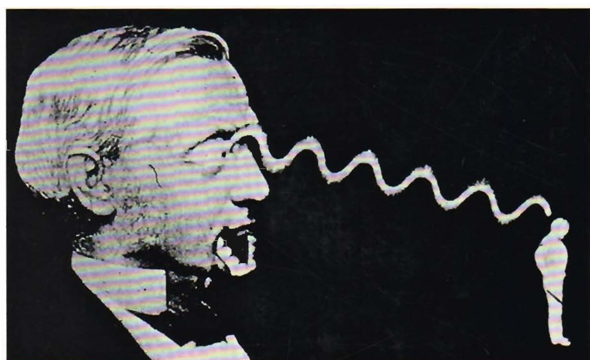
VISIONARY FILM



THIRD EDITION

THE AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE, 1943–2000

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apparently solid figures in motion with transparent people and vehicles of varying intensities of exposure. This layering of imagery against the same background stresses the horizontal planes of movement—dominated by the right-to-left flow of one-way traffic—so that the occasional diagonal movement of a jaywalker becomes a rich visual adventure.

After an extensive presentation of this ghostly spectacle in silence, the film-maker switches to sound for the latter half of his film. The street noises hover in an ambiguous, almost synchronous relationship to the compound image. In the last of the eight sections the superimposition stops, leaving the "natural" street and its synchronous sounds. By structuring this unadulterated present moment as the terminus—rather than the starting point—of his work, Gehr offers it to our attention burdened with the accumulated suspicions of almost an hour's analysis of the fragility of the concept of the "present" within filmic representation. The opacity of the static and the translucence of temporal activity are the "emoted ideas" of *Still*, a film which instructs us that the opaque is merely the repetition of a pattern of light on the same portion of successive frames, while the translucent simply disperses its reflected light across a path on those same frames. This particular lesson has been long known through film theory, but it took Gehr's film to make it so vividly experienced.

Robert Beavers is one of the most original film-makers to have matured in the seventies. After his first film was finished he moved to Europe where he has made the remainder of his works. The best introduction to Beavers's films was written by Ken Kelman. He centers his 1971 essay on what he takes to be the master/apprentice relationship of Gregory Markopoulos and Beavers:

> The most obvious or surface similarity between the two artists' work is a lapidary quality; that is, the fastidious arrangement of exquisitely precise images—fragments of scenes—within an abstract setting roughly equivalent to plot. The entire structure thus takes on a strong sense of mosaic, in terms of pure plastic appearance; in terms of time both Beavers and Markopoulos share a concomitant and most unusual quality of static flow—the serene progression of brief images sharply distinct from one another yet not at all disjunctive in juxtaposition. Such relationship of fragments by an inner logic and an outer design in space and time was unique to Markopoulos in fact until the advent of Beavers upon the film-making scene.
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> Most remarkable of all is that the identical central essential theme lies at the heart of late Markopoulos and early Beavers: that of life transfigured by, indeed redeemed by art.
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> When the theme of a work is its process, when a vision concerns vision, when film is about the nature and creation of film,

> then things will hardly be what they seem. That is, the images themselves can never be taken literally, at face value, since they merely constitute a rather arbitrary material to fill the fundamental form. There is about Beavers as about Markopoulos something intensely Platonic; an unswerving devotion to the Idea, which all things *will* fit; without which there is chaos. Beavers makes this clearer and severer than his mentor, as he does away with the charms of plot and character, and insists upon the fascination with, the dedication to, the properties, powers and very materials and machinery of film.
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> *From the Notebook of . . .* indeed goes so far as to be a statement of the identity of life process with film process; a virtually metaphysical expression and an intensely (oblique) romantic one. The moving quality of this work lies in the love implicit in such dedication, such utter immersion in the machinery of movies. The film-maker appears (in this self-portrait) as nothing more than another instrument to serve cinema. The lover and beloved become one. Nothing is seen simply through human eyes—the mediation of machinery is always crucial, always stressed. The machine is manipulated by the artist; but there is no sense, as with Brakhage, that the camera is just an extension of the eye and its powers, and cinema a mere medium (no matter how prophetic) of expression. Rather, for Beavers, cinema is the object of vision and passion, the veritable incarnation of spirit, the ideal.[14]

Kelman's emphasis on the ties to Markopoulos's cinema was, in part at least, a result of the earliness of his essay, for between *Still Light* (1970) and *From the Notebook of . . .* (1971) a clear shift in the evolution of Beavers' style can be observed. He divested his films of their nominal protagonists (who functioned as somewhat reduced, purified, and even negative versions of Markopoulos's mythic heroes) and made himself, the movements of his mind, and his relationship to his métier the subject of most of his subsequent films.

In embracing a Continental cultural tradition, Beavers did more than merely attempt to escape from the historical forces that had molded the American avant-garde cinema; he began to incorporate elements of the European artistic tradition in its most elevated forms in his films quite consciously and thematically, and thereby he tried to locate a position for film itself within that tradition. (Yet nothing could be more typical of the aspirations of American visionary film-makers.) The title of *From the Notebook of . . .*, for example, refers to the notes the film-maker kept, inspired by the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci. The film was shot at Florentine locations mentioned in Leonardo's text. Perhaps an even more

significant reference is to Paul Valéry's *Introduction à la Méthode de Leonardo da Vinci*, the poet's early and very brilliant essay on the creative imagination which takes Leonardo as its pretext. This essay of 1894 would appear to be Beavers's model; for he also freely seizes the occasion to speculate about some possibilities and parameters of cinema. The finished film is his response to his own notes: he puts into practice, or puts to the test, his elliptical hand-written suggestions, which are incorporated in the film. A similar intellectual bridging of the Renaissance and modernity through the mediation of an earlier text recurs in *Work Done, The Painting*, and *Ruskin*. Valéry, and Ruskin for that matter, confronted and interiorized in his work the burden of his aesthetic tradition; his late Romantic efforts to reduce and purify inherited poetic language guided Beavers's cinematic enterprise.

The intertextual mediations prevent any raw, primitive encounter of the self and nature in Beavers's work. What we see in his films is a series of neat, composed, and obviously crafted "images," which are often represented in the very process of being refined. Nowhere is this more directly articulated than in *From the Notebook of*. . . . There the views of buildings, streets, and rooftops of Florence are framed so that the slightest portion of the film-maker's head—his eye, even his nose—protrudes into the edge of the scene to indicate that we are seeing him in the act of directing his attention to whatever constitutes the image. Alternately the camera will pan from a site to show us the position of the film-maker as observer. Another characteristic gesture of Beavers's style is the programmatic insertion of a filter or the manipulation of a matte to mask part of the frame. These insertions and manipulations generate the rhythmic matrix of *From the Notebook of*. . . . Furthermore, this interior rhythm dominates the temporal signature of the film (and all his films) since sequential or narrative structures are suppressed. The notes within the film confirm the impression that his work as a whole gives; namely, that he is exploring a system of proportions between the spatial dynamics of the image (angle, distance, movement) and the duration of the shot.

A comparison with the work of Gehr will clarify the unique temporality of their films. In Gehr's early films the negation of the authority of whatever is before the camera, its translation into light impulses, entails a compensatory nervous response in the form of a firmly ordered, often monomorphic, shaping of the film. Beavers's version of the imagination, on the other hand, requires acts of momentary, discriminating observation, specific to the potentials of cinema and the asequential elaboration of those acts in montage. The temporal modes of his films reflect the operations of the mind in concentrating and considering its relation to whatever it addresses itself. These operations include comparison, repetition with variation, and reconsideration under a change of perspective or intensity.

Early in *Work Done* (1972) the camera isolates a sign in an Italian shop: "E rigoramente vietato l'ingresso alle persone non addette a lavoro"

(Entrance is strictly forbidden to anyone not employed on the work). The message becomes a polemic warning to the viewer. Beavers is engaged, and would engage us, in the "work" of film-making and film-viewing; the acts of the mind that his films describe have been represented through meticulous labor within a venerable tradition, and the viewer must be prepared to perform an analogous creative act when "entering" the film. In this particularly masterful film, the tradition of the medieval and Renaissance illuminated "Book of Hours" provides the latent mediation—if a secular breviary can be imagined. Within the film itself the rebinding of an ancient book recurs several times as a metaphor for the structure of the film and its relationship to history.

However, when Beavers answered questions at the Museum of Modern Art (February 12, 1974) following a screening of the film, he alluded to the topography of Dante's *Inferno*, describing the whole film as an elaboration on the meaning of the block of ice with which it begins. The deepest recesses of Dante's Hell hold sinners encased in ice. Conversely, the most exalted image of the *Commedia* represents God as a book in which the whole universe (substance and accidents) is bound together. Despite these image associations the reference to Dante is puzzling, for Beavers's film puts up continual barriers to an allegorical reading. Although the Alpine river, the sawing and felling of forest trees, the repaving of a street cobblestones, and above all the frying of pig's blood in lard to make crepes (these, along with the bookbinding, are the dominant elements of the film) can separately sustain symbolical interpretations, the film-maker's "descent" into a symbolical landscape occurs without a fall and without fear. The rhythmical scrutiny of his careful, asymmetrical pans and intense still images draws our attention to the very thingness of the things-in-process he has filmed, and away from their positions in a symbolical constellation. Beavers is rather a "Symbolist" in the looser sense with which that word is applied to a range of late nineteenth century poets, as diverse as Mallarmé, George, and Biely, who shared a fascination with connotation. The polarity of ice and fire, the association of running water and ice, the analogy of lumbering and slaughtering shape the film and bind it in a web of internal tropes. The systematic use of displacement on his soundtracks reinforces this aesthetic.

There is neither a fall nor fear in the film because the world Beavers projects in his films lacks divinity. This, indeed, may be the most significant of his departures from the cinema of Markopoulos. Beavers's skeptical and radically aesthetic perspective centers the cinematic vision in an act of apperception that neither points beyond itself in a chain of meaning toward an absolute nor admits epiphanies. His aesthetic reduction of the religious can be found in *The Painting* (1972), a film which moves back and forth between the static Renaissance representation of "The Martyrdom of St. Hippolytus," an anonymous Flemish triptych in the style of Hugo van der Goes, and a busy traffic intersection in downtown Berne.

The painting of the martyr's body just before the horse-drawn ropes pull his limbs apart constitutes one pole in the force field of the film. Beavers shot in elegant and richly shifting detail and often reshaped it with masking mattes. The other pole is the continually moving patterns of traffic in the modern city, recorded from a never-varying still-camera position. Changes of color filters are common to both. Between them images of a shattered glass slide or camera matte and of a welter of mote-like floating disks point to the optical energies within the frame of the recording instrument. The painting and the public plaza act as models of description for cinema. Although the film brings us no closer to them as actual entities and, in fact, renders them problematic, the very process of describing them fundamentally entails a description of cinematic representation.

Ruskin (1976) treats the stern and self-disciplined power of scrutiny of John Ruskin from a characteristic remove. One can hardly guess at the film-maker's attitude to the fascinating writer who in an obscure way "mediates" the images of this dense film. There is a remote analogy, for instance, between Beavers's sometimes icy withdrawal from the immediacy of his images and the admonitory tone of *The Stones of Venice*, written as a lesson of decline for the British Empire, or the fierce defense of the "truth" of Turner's vision throughout the six volumes of *Modern Painters*. In the film, a book of Ruskin's prose appears repeatedly on the screen, intercut with some of the most frequented sites in his *oeuvre*: a mountainscape, Venice, and London. The editing establishes a chain of architectural or sculptural contours. There are natural geometries formed in the mountain terrain; then more complexly there are unstable shapes created by the interaction of landscape and fog. The constructed cityscapes of London and Venice appear as variations and elaborations of the naturally given formations; the stones of Venice, in turn, interact with the water patterns of the canals. The final link in this chain of molding or containing forces is the precise demarcations of the visual field which the film-maker imposes with his mattes and filters. In this exploration of sublime, civic, and historical locations the shaping power of the mind discovers its reflection in the elaborate connections between the forms the camera "finds" in the natural and the humanized environment. More fundamentally the film-maker charts the range of filmic space: the alternation of black and white and color, the matching of camera movements from different locations, the sudden stillness, the rhymes of mattes with patches of light, with boulders, and with facades each contribute as much as fog, water, streets, and buildings to the articulation of space within the frame.

Ruskin brings to mind the "architectural theme" that runs through *Dog Star Man*. Brakhage relentlessly analogizes trees and marble columns, leafy bowers and stained glass windows, stressing the mimesis of nature in the evolution of buildings. Beavers's film disdains that mythologizing vision and admits the weight of tradition in forming our perspective. The slate is never clear, *Ruskin* insists, and before Brakhage's primitive en-

counter with the sources of architecture there were already John Ruskin's insightful mediations. A truly modern cinema, as Beavers's work outlines it, begins by encountering the aesthetics contemporary with cinema's invention and development (rather than by envisioning an Edenic myth of camera consciousness and world) and proceeds toward a clarification of its unique role in the visionary tradition.