Interview to Steven Woloshen
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by Sebastian Wiedemann

1. First of all, tell us about your backgrounds. When was your first approach to cinema and especially to handmade cinema?

When I was a 12-year-old kid growing up in the suburbs of Montreal, I discovered that art class was always an anti-democratic process. I had to sit behind a wooden desk and listen to an army of pre-school educators and bitter, burnt out teachers. They decided how art supplies and cameras should be properly used and they habitually divided acceptable and positive behavior from weird, anti-social experiments. But in the summer of 1972 while I was lying on the floor of the YMCA movie club (in the Laval Community Center), I was finally given an opportunity to make an animated film with a three-foot strip of 16 mm film and a black felt-tip marker. In the windowless basement of that film club, we surrounded ourselves with film and watched lots of National Film Board of Canada short animations (on our Bell and Howell 16mm projector). We also ran around the newly painted halls while we “clicked off” pixilated frames of our super-8 camera and shaped flat, paper cutouts that danced on construction paper backgrounds. But I confess, I just wanted to watch cartoons, not make them. Five years later - same suburb: I am so bored of making silent super eight films. Are the weekend family outings and cross-country camping trips the only subject for my super eight cameras? In 1977, I began shattering the plastic film cartridges with hammers and screwdrivers. My goal was to extract the film stock from its container then project it. My family bought this film to record our holiday time, but I wanted to liberate it into the light tight box and scratch off the emulsion with the dull edge of a pair of scissors.

2. It is clear the influence of Norman McLaren in your work. In certain way you are one of the most prominent filmmakers, that makes continue his legacy. Tell us about your relation with McLaren's work.

When I first saw Norman McLaren’s animation, “Love on a Wing,” I was determined NOT to reduce my subject matter to a series of simple icons. Films like Len Lye’s “Swinging the Lambeth Walk” were very inspirational film for me. It was the sense of derailment that interested me. The opening titles lead the viewer in one direction, and then the rug is pulled out from under your feet. I thought that treating a filmstrip like a “small rebellion” was a great idea.

I spent the next 15 years shrugging off the McLaren influence on my work. But, in the spring of 2012 in Lille, France, Marcel Jean (now the artistic Director of the Annecy International...
Animation Festival) curated a program of short abstract films titled, “From McLaren to Woloshen.” Just before the program began, I finally realized that my films would be part of an enduring legacy of abstraction in the cinema. McLaren’s films were not the absolute beginning of abstraction on film, and my films are not the final word but between he and I, there is complicity – like two artists working on a surrealist “exquisite corpse.”

3. Which other influences do you have in your work?

My major influences are Warner Bros. cartoons, Len lye, Oskar Fischinger, Vertov, Picasso, Klee, Rutmann, Martin Arnold, Paul Sharits, Harry Smith, Mary Ellen Bute.

4. I see you as a handmade filmmaker, between animation and avant-garde or experimental film tradition. But your work is mostly appreciated in animation environments. How do you see your relation with this two contexts/universes?

In the last ten years or so, the definition of experimental seems to have broadened to include aspects of media art that do not fit into the generally acceptable genres such as comedy, fiction, documentary, etc. Moving images that are “edgy” or horrific are reclassified as “experimental” not due to the formal elements (i.e. the self – reflexive and meta- properties of the medium) that pushed boundaries of the content, rather, they were gothic, poorly constructed or just - cheap.

For me, “experimental” is a process. It’s an ongoing logbook or field guide. It’s a long-term study of the medium itself. In my case, it’s a study of the surface of film. It’s also a way to disseminate the elements that make up an image. For example, I always ask my self: “What is color?” And “what is movement?” I am still trying to distill analogue cinema down to its core, then rebuild it according to my own visions of cinema. Many times, people ask me to comment on the differences between the digital and the analogue. This is an endless discussion and to be perfectly honest, I would rather (esp. in the world of animation) define the differences between the mechanical frame - whose shutter chooses the image (see: Muybridge) and the films of any animator - who chooses his own frame and his own set of thermodynamic values pertaining to movement.

These days, I also choose to think about the abstract verses the photographic as well. On one hand, the photographic – which may remind the viewer of death (because every living thing that has ever been caught on film is eight dead or dying.) On the other hand, the abstract – whose perception is constantly renewed by the perception of another viewer. I do not have any definitive answers, but I honestly DO enjoy the ongoing search for answers.

So, I approach filmmaking (and all my professional activities) from an optimistic point of view. Regardless of the project that I am working on, I invariably try to reflect a joyful effervescence in everything that I produce. As an artist and an explorer/scientist, I throw myself into every new film as if he were starting a game.
Even my most meditative works like “The Babble on Palms”, “Phont Cycle” or “Crossing Victoria” are the result of a whimsical, optimistic creative process. But after this many years, I am still unable to define the difference between experimental animation and experimental film. It is even harder to define what is an experimental approach to art.

5. Because your work lives between this two worlds, I would prefer a third approach, the "in-between" that you call Scratchatopia. Tell us about this fertile territory where your work lives and is made. What are the particularities of this cinema?

In 2003, I was looking for a title of a handmade filmmaking workshop. I discovered the TV show, “Dinotopía” and I thought it would be fun to change that to “Scratchatopia: An undiscovered Land.” Later that year, I hosted another workshop in Huston, Texas and the word must have struck a chord with the South West Media Project. Now they call all their workshops, “Scratchatopia.” Did I invent a new word?

6. The art of scratching is an art where the hands think more than the eyes. What do you think about it, about a tactile cinema in relation to a visual cinema?

In the last 10 years or so, I have looking for a way to describe “A Mechanical Paradise.” (The phrase “the Mechanical Paradise”, coined by Robert Hughes in his book The Shock of the New, reflected new visions in painting and sculpture in the age of machines, Kino Pravda being among the chosen mediums of this post-WWI movement.) I was looking for ways to express my direct relationship to a filmstrip that was at all times three feet (more or less) from my eye. I have always believed that working directly on the film surface means that we can explore cinema without the need for a social code. Everybody who experiences the abstract results of this work can understand the direct relationship that the artist has with surface of the film, or to be more specific, the viewer can feel the physical energy of scarring the filmstrip.

7. I see a political and ethical dimension in your work. A kind of politics of perception. No doubt our perception changes when the hands are the ones that take the control over the eyes in the process of film composition. And on the other side I see an ethical dimension, because this cinema apparently demands another way of life. A life that just “amateur” filmmakers can live. I'm thinking in the beautiful text of Brakhage or in the anecdote that he made/painted entire films in cafés and bars as you made “1000 Plateaus” in a car. In some way filmmaking is part of your everyday life. How do you see this two dimension in your work and life?

Naturally, when you are making cheap, ready-made media art in a public arena, you are afforded an opportunity to make a statement (or demonstrate) about capitalism and the excessive spending in the Hollywood film industry.
8. And what about music? Is clear that it is an important factor in your work. I'm thinking in pieces like "Camera Takes Five" or your last film "1000 Plateaus". Sometimes I have the feeling that is in music that the film is born or that the sound/music comes first like a kind of genesis of the visual image. Tell us a little about your ideas on sound and music film.

Audio, and especially music are some of my most important elements in my non-objective filmmaking. Music can help define and guide its progress in many different ways: When the imagery seems loosely connected and frenetic, music (either quick or slow) could create an interesting harmony or an ironic juxtaposition between what we see and hear. Music, especially occidental, has its own narrative structure (i.e. repetitive phases, tension releases, rondos) that could guide the filmmaker’s choices in the imagery. And finally, when music is closely synchronized to the images, the relationship between both senses is cemented in a form of harmony.

9. Filmmaker as cook, as cook teacher. One of the things that I most admire is your desire to transmit your knowledge, not just in workshops but also in your books, like "Recipes for Reconstruction" or your incoming "Scratch, Crackle & Pop". Tell us about your teaching/education concerns. Why is it important to you? Why is it important that someone learn to make handmade films? Why should someone learn it?

When my book was first released to the public, people asked why I would want to “out source” my secret techniques? As a long-term strategy, I knew that this attitude towards secrecy could only help to accelerate the extinction of hand-made filmmaking. My art practice has to include education. Sharing and understanding is the Rosetta Stone of art. Taking the time to explain your process to other artists (especially the next generation of film artists – young children) is an unselfish act that will ensure the survival of film and film-related art forms. Today, I work with a film preservation unit at the National Film Board of Canada. They took the time to explain the process of preservation and conservation as a means of training. And now, the process of understanding has come “full circle” because I am helping future generations appreciate the actual 35 mm and 16 mm films of Norman McLaren.
10. Finally, what would you say, what message you’d let to the new filmmakers or to the incoming ones?

In my opinion, movement is one of the most important elements of nonlinear/non objective animation. In other animated styles, human efficiency in maximized by reducing animated movement to the bare essentials. For example, in cel animation, backgrounds become fixed images where foreground movement dominates. This style also exists in stop motion, character driven computer animation and claymation as well. On the other hand, it would be physically impossible to duplicate each frame in direct filmmaking. Movement is indivisible and it forms continuous gestures in the filmstrip. In character driven animation, metamorphosis, or organic change between characters form the defining raison-d’être for utilizing the animated genre. In abstract animation, we always address some of the key characteristics such as colour, shape, metamorphosis and kinetic activity. Sometimes, the simplest forms of expression are the best tools of communication.