

## TOUCH, FOCUS, MEMORY: ROBERT BEAVERS AND HIS FIRST PRINCIPLES OF FILM

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### THE FILMS OF OTHERS

On Saturday 15 November the film-maker Robert Beavers ran a study day in Norwich, showing the films of other film-makers and talking about their practice in order to shed light on his own. If you've seen any of his films, you will be familiar with the care with which they are composed and edited, the patience of his methods: waiting before filming, pondering and memorising before editing. Is there a more fastidious film-maker at work



today? It was a surprise then that all the films he showed of fellow film-makers had an improvisatory quality about them, and Beavers especially praised the way they used in-camera editing. These were:

*François Boué* is a French artist and sculptor now resident in New York. He works in super 8mm (by choice apparently, not by economic necessity) and his films have their origins in installations rather than film shows. He works in series and his films (at least the ones we saw) are a response to sites and places, finding in them a "kind of sacred significance".

*Bruce Baillie* was a major figure in the American underground film of the 1960s, especially on the West Coast. Beavers showed his 10-minute *Valentin de las Sierras* (1967) which he made in the town of Chapala in Jalisco province, Mexico, a poetic response to a Mexican community, to Mexican sunlight and shadow, and to a Mexican song sung by a blind man. Baillie particularly liked to shoot with a fluid hand-held camera and to use mattes which darkened areas of the screen and emphasised the still-visible areas.

*Ute Aurand* works in Germany and her *Maria und der Welt* was a portrait of Maria, showing her, the things she did, the objects she surrounded herself with. It is filmed in short segments and cut very fast.

*Helga Fanderl* wanted to be a writer but following her attendance at the classes of the film-maker Peter Kubelka in Frankfurt, she began film-making in her 30s, again on super 8 mm. She has lived in Paris for the last four years. She likes to show films in performance where she can control things. As with the others, her films are a response to places by filming a single situation, editing them in the camera. The films we saw were all very short, none more than three minutes long. They made sense as a series.

*Jeannette Muñoz* comes from Santiago and now lives in Zurich. Her films, which were shot in Sao Paulo, are her memory of the neighbourhood she once knew, a place in which she is completely at home (unlike Baillie, the sympathetic American outsider in Mexico) but she then makes the film from a distance. Beavers spoke of her 'anti-narcissism', and acceptance of loving relationships.

## HOMAGE TO MARKOPOULOS

Last, but not least, *Gregory Markopoulos*, the film-maker and mentor with whom Beavers's name is linked, at present inextricably, although I believe future generations will separate the two and give each a distinct personality as film-makers. We saw Markopoulos's *Bliss* in two versions. This is a 'portrait' of a Greek orthodox church on the island of Hydra, off the south-east coast of the Peloponnese in Greece. The original version was six minutes long, but Markopoulos re-edited it in the late 1980s and included it in his *Eniaios* project (*Eniaios* IV Reel 2) as a 25-minute film. The first version Beavers explained was edited in the camera, while the later re-edit uses the same material to develop it through repetition and to space it through the use of black leader. We were advised not to concern ourselves with the mathematical length of the black leader, but with the weight of the images, whether 1 frame, 2 frames, 4 frames or whatever, and how we perceive these. Markopoulos was "articulating thoughts of his own in the numbers that he's chosen", and in tune with the film's subject – the sacred space of a church interior, whose decorations emerged from the dark (I was reminded of Ezra Pound's "in the gloom the gold") – Beavers referred to the skill of Greek mosaicists who knew how to put the tesserae, the pieces of the mosaic, at a particular angle so light would enter into them, a technique which illuminated Markopoulos's method of editing, spacing frames within the black "so that light would enter" them more strongly.

Mention of Markopoulos is inevitable in considering Beavers's films, because he speaks of him himself. Markopoulos made about 100 films, all silent, but with sufficient money only to edit them but not distribute them. The two of them set up the Temenos project in Arcadia in Greece with annual screenings in the 1980s. Then in 2004 and 2008, a decade after Markopoulos's death, "Beavers returned to this site to present the first screenings of the opening hours of *Eniaios* to an international audience."<sup>endnote 1</sup> This is a "creative movement" which Beavers hopes might endure beyond his own lifetime, in which film-making, film-showing and film-preserving are all linked, with each supporting the other. It was not impossible, he surmised, that other film-makers will be shown at Temenos as well.

And he then, in his modest way, said something remarkable. He called to mind the way Felix Mendelssohn rescued J. S. Bach "from oblivion" (for example, by mounting the first performance of the Matthew Passion outside Leipzig in 100 years, a performance which brought Bach's large-scale works to public attention) and gave "energy to performing Bach". "How will the film archives respond to Markopoulos?" he asked, posing a challenge of sorts. To give his own answer to that question, he summarised his own allegiance to Markopoulos: "My part is one small strategic investment. As with poets, the audience is not insignificant, but it is scattered. We are our own patrons." Bach and Mendelssohn, distinct composers closely linked; Markopoulos and Beavers, distinct film-makers similarly linked.

## PORTRAITURE

The first Markopoulos film I saw was in 1968. It was called *Through a Lens Brightly: Mark Turbyfill* and was a portrait of the poet. I was 20 years old then, and this idea of depicting someone, not by putting the camera down in front of the person, letting the camera run and getting the subject to talk, but by showing them in rapid glimpses, and by emphasising the spaces in which they lived, felt utterly radical. Portraiture is an important element in Beavers's films, different from his mentor's approach, but equally concerned with perception and space, and while history will remember both film-makers for a number of things, I suspect that their pioneering approach to film portraiture will be to the forefront.

In the film programmes at the Aurora Festival in Norwich featuring Beavers's own work, we saw some of his earliest films, *Early Monthly Segments* (ca 1968-70/2002) and his most recent film, *Pitcher of Coloured*

*Light* (2007). The early work included portraits of Markopoulos and of Beavers himself, while his latest film is a touching picture of his elderly mother, and by including a pastel drawing of himself as a young boy, also a self-portrait. In between these two films are other portraits, if not of living people then of places, and of painters, for example, Leonardo in *From the Notebook of . . .* (1971/1998), and Borromini in *The Hedge Theater* (ca 1986-90/2002). The subtle nature of his portraiture is well illustrated in *Ruskin* (1975/1997), a picture of Venice, but also of the English Victorian John Ruskin as a writer on art. Beavers had gone specifically to Venice in order to make a film, inspired by Ruskin's 'The Stones of Venice' (published in three volumes, 1851 to 1853), and Beavers's thoughtfulness makes it much more than a simple architectural film. Ruskin is honoured in several ways. Some of the shots are in black and white in an echo of photography in its early decades when Ruskin was writing his book. (They also reflect Beavers's enthusiasm for silent cinema in black and white.) Secondly, since Ruskin loved mountains, Beavers links the Venice material to textures of light and shapes in Les Grissons in the Swiss Alps. The third location for the film is Portland Place in London which sits oddly in the film until you appreciate that Ruskin was very preoccupied with the link between the economy and the overall health of society, in particular as it manifested itself in England. (The fact that there are three locations I link also to the fact that there are three lenses on the lens turret – see below.) Finally, a section towards the end of the film uses shots of the pages of a book being flickered through by hand, so that individual words jump out at the viewer. The book is Ruskin's 'Unto This Last', a work of 'political economy' which makes a link between the quality and status of workmanship and the quality of society.

This 'portrait' is not a 'document' in the sense of being 'documentary' and the use of a condensed method of composition pushes the film "more towards song than prose". The sense of place comes through not as being conveyed by a roving eye but through the intellectual and emotional response. This responsiveness to place is a notable element of Beavers's career. He left America as a young man and settled (with Markopoulos) in different places in Europe: Florence, Switzerland, London, Berlin, Venice and, most importantly, Greece, the cheapness of daily life being a significant factor in the choice of where to live, and therefore where to film. Yet there is an overall sense of purpose that is more than accidental: 'nomadic' is the wrong word to describe his journey; perhaps 'peregrination' is a better noun, a word linked etymologically to 'pilgrimage', because Beavers gives a sense of the movement to different places creating a progression and when this journey is seen as a whole, it has a meaning.

#### AESTHETIC ADVENTURE

Now, something about Beavers's aesthetics, a word I use advisedly because besides the physical journeying, his films give a sense of an 'aesthetic adventure'. Four things need to be highlighted: his use of the lens turret, his methods of editing, his use of sound and of silence, and his waiting.



First of all, the lens turret. Beavers's films are utterly distinctive in the way he takes the three lenses on the lens turret of a 16mm camera (see picture) and uses the rotating lever to change the lens on the turret while he is filming. As a result, the image slides downwards or upwards out of the frame, and a black space is created in between the change of image. This space can be used in editing to change the sequence of material allowing new images spaced themselves by black leader to be spliced in. It also produces a crescent mask in the frame, a half-moon or *mezza luna*, which directs the eye to a part of the frame.

Secondly, editing. Beavers made his initial contact with the New York avant-garde cinema in the 1960s, and judging by his subsequent practice, I believe one of the things to have struck him most forcibly was the way the eye could perceive images vividly even when they were only visible for a fraction of a second.<sup>endnote 2</sup> But it led well beyond that to a consideration of how the eye perceived space. The trick with the lens turret explores the space between aperture (where the shutter excludes light, and clicks open to allow its entry) and lens (focusing the light); then the framing and picture framed creates a space to be explored, that between lens and object. He has been very preoccupied with using the hand to direct the viewer to perceive space, and gives a fundamental importance to it as a delineator of space by having the hand come from behind the camera as it were into the visible frame. In *AMOR* (1980) he links the movement and sound of hands clapping in a sort of scissors motion to the act of cutting – the hands manipulating scissors to tailor cloth and to tailor film.

Thirdly, silence. Many of his films have sound, but there is very little use of voice. The sound is of sound effects, sometimes music (for example music from Berg's 'Wozzeck' is used in *Sotiros (Alone)*), but also there is silence. This underlines the other seminal influence beside the New York avant-garde that got Beavers into making films, namely a response to seeing silent films in the 1960s, notably those of Dreyer, Fritz Lang and Stroheim. Silent films most impressed him for their light, and then later, the way the great silent film-makers chose actors, their "embodiment and physiognomy".<sup>endnote 3</sup> Another thing that distinguishes Beavers is his pursuit of colour and clarity in the image. One of the achievements of the American underground is its celebration of 'roughness' and the way films come onto the optic nerve, hence the use of standard 8 and super 8mm formats, the furriness of Ron Rice's *Chumlum*, the sliding shapes of Baillie's *Castro Street*, the short rapid movements of the camera in Brakhage's *Sirius Remembered*, the re-invention of the primitive technique in Warhol's first films, whereas Beavers, possibly in emulation of the clarity of the images on black and white film stock in the 1920s, even when shot through a gauze, has given a sharp focus to his images and a clarity and richness of colour that is very striking not least because it feels so different. To achieve this it has helped him that while he has filmed on 16mm, he has used internegatives to transfer the film to 35mm, which shows up in the brightness of the projected film.

Fourthly, his quality of waiting, one might almost say 'attentiveness' (French *attendre* means 'to wait'). This manifested itself in two ways: the fact that on arriving in a new place he looked at it first, and absorbed it, before he began filming it. Secondly, many of the films have gone through a process of editing and then later re-editing: hence the dating of a number of them includes two dates. For example, the footage from *Borromini*, made in 1986, has been re-edited for inclusion in *The Hedge Theater*, which is dated to 2002. Beavers spoke with great care – one might even call it caution – reflecting something about his personality. He talked of finding and following clues for the subject of a film, of creating a structure, of the operation of luck, of finding "space for a good time to make the film".

#### **A MUSICAL COMPARISON**

This quality of attentiveness therefore felt very different to the improvisatory nature of the film-makers he showed, especially Boué and Fanderl, who rely on editing in the camera, on roughness in the image, and on using the lightness of the super 8 camera. Beavers by contrast uses a 16mm Bolex, which is quite heavy by comparison, and pays close attention to achieving exactitude of framing, of camera movement, of editing and of sound. Since he had talked too of a wish to achieve on film the seriousness that composers and performers brought to creating music (and audiences too in listening), the question arose in my mind that to match such seriousness required a calculated approach to composition, whether in music or in film, such as he himself

practised. But Beavers had a good answer to this: in-camera editing was as valid as improvisation in music, and required the same readiness and high technical skill. "I admire this direct encounter," he said, and praised the sense of spontaneity this method gave, like a sketch as opposed to a finished oil painting. It occurred to me too that while Beavers's method of execution might be different, like these film-makers he allows intuition to play an important role in responding to a place, a reaction of the heart and eye, not necessarily of the rational mind. The end results may feel distinct but the starting-point is the same.

"Touch, focus, memory." Touch brings to mind the fundamental importance of the hand in Beavers's films. Focus emphasises the clarity of colour, of texture, of the human figure, in a process that "adds vision to sight". Memory is his films' special gift – perhaps the gift of all great films – in helping us to remember in images, which are as crucial as words in preserving time past, or to put it more cogently, in making the mortal immortal.

Tim Cawkwell/ November 2008

#### ENDNOTES AND FURTHER READING

1 See Mark Webber's essay on Beavers in the book published to mark Aurora 2008, pages 16-19 [Norwich: Aurora 2008]. P Adams Sitney wrote about the Temenos festival in an article entitled 'Idyll Worship' published in 'Artforum' in 2004):

[http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary\\_0286-14746979\\_ITM](http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-14746979_ITM)

2 In the interview in the 'Millennium Film Journal' (see below), Beavers says that he saw most of a Brakhage retrospective in 1966. Among the films was likely to have been the black-and-white film, *Fire of Waters* (1965), in which Brakhage 'documents' a lightning storm playing round a house. When I first saw it I thought this was a filmed storm, but in fact I believe it was created by interspersing single frames of a house in various conditions of light with black leader.

3 There is a fascinating interview between Beavers and Tony Pipolo published in the 'Millennium Film Journal' No. 32/33 (Fall 1998). It can be read online at:

<http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ32,33/pipolointerview.html>

Beavers speaks in particular of his response to seeing silent films in the 1960s.

See also P Adams Sitney on Beavers's *Pitcher of Coloured Light* :

[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0268/is\\_1\\_46/ai\\_n28045883/pg\\_1?tag=artBody;coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_1_46/ai_n28045883/pg_1?tag=artBody;coll)

Two brief aesthetic statements by Beavers himself can be found in:

- 'The Senses', page 15 of the Aurora Festival book;
- 'Millennium Film Journal' No. 32/33:

<http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ32,33/beavers.html>