OUTERSPACE:

The Manufactured Film Of Peter Tscherkassky

In half-light and fractured, staggering visuals, a young woman enters into a suburban house at night. As the door closes behind her, both the physical space and the surface of the projection begin to splinter, collapse and rupture. Spaces enclose and enfold, the female subject multiples and shatters across the screen, and the film itself screeches and tears as the sprockets and optical soundtrack violently invade the fictional world. Any semblance of a cinematic narrative is overwhelmed and assaulted, leaving it scattered in a thousand shards amid an entirely unique cinematic language. This is Peter Tscherkassky's *Outerspace*. It is the most recent work of a filmmaker at the forefront of avant-garde film practice. And in its sheer filmic materiality it may seem to be an anachronism in a time of hype about new technological modes. Yet, Tscherkassky, strictly working in film as he has done for over two decades, continues to employ celluloid as a singular material with which to investigate theories of subjectivity, memory and perception, as well as the aesthetic limits of the cinematographic image. Tscherkassky sculpts with time and space, rhythms and arrhythmia in a way that feels like an entirely new film space, a new language altogether.

As such, *Outerspace* is difficult to compare to any other style of film. It is the kind of violent brilliance that mainstream films such as *Fight Club* (1999) and *Se7en* (1995) attempt to appropriate in their mimicry of optically printed experimental styles. It is extraordinarily intense and, though only ten minutes in length, relentless in its sensory assault. At the same time, shot in 35mm cinemascope Outerspace is quite simply, a lush cinematic production. Horror buffs will recognise the woman in the opening moments of the film as Barbara Hershey from Sidney J. Furie's 1981 film *The Entity*. In the original film, Hershey is cast in the role of a woman possessed by a violent spiritual force. In Tscherkassky's masterful and playful reworking of the original footage, different sequences displaying the violence of this possession are used to reinforce the crisis that occurs at the surface level of the image. The woman is sent smashing from wall to wall, her face splintering across screen, flashing in ghostly traces or exploding into numerous directions. At one point she dissolves on screen leaving an empty corridor, then suddenly she explodes again into the frame. Her screams are punctured by the scratches and glitches of the torn film, of the sprocket holes that bleed across the screen, or the

mechanical groan of the optical soundtrack as it forces any narrative from the screen altogether. As the crisis reaches its peak, the woman suddenly smashes a mirror and there is a brief respite. A small calm. At this point Tscherkassky is playfully exploding the notion of "film as a mirror" articulated by Christian Metz which was, in turn, stated in opposition to Bazin's narrative concerned statement that film is a window to the world. As he fragments Metz, who before him fragmented Bazin, we know that Tscherkassky is searching for something more.

The immersive experience of the film is marked by a collapse between the world of the frame, and the mechanics of filming and projection. It is as if Tscherkassky is suggesting that there is a potential violence restrained by every film frame. An explosion of off-screen energy that can shatter the veneer of the film form. The expression of this shattering is a deeply sensual experience which implicates and surrounds the viewer. The constant layering of images also creates a space in which the viewer is able to insert themselves, no longer withheld by the pretense that this is a separate world presented on screen. Rather, it is something immediate and tangible which can be destroyed in the act of viewing, and then created again in an abstract rhythm of torn sound and image fragments. This is not simply an act of subversion, but something like the fractured cut and paste ethics of avant-garde composers; a mode of using the violent rhythms of delay, rupture, fragmentation, looping and degraded image and sound. It is a style more aligned with the abstract cut and paste density of contemporary musicians such as Kid 606 and Matmos than the careful superficiality of most cinema.

Tscherkassky's film has always been a meeting point of cogent theoretical preoccupations and a kind of anarchic punk energy. His first explorations in film were an inspiration and inheritance propelled by the films of Kurt Kren, Peter Kubelka and the Vienna Actionists. Although one of his earlier super-8 films, *Aderlass* (*Bloodletting*, 1981) took the confronting performances of the Actionists as its model, it was Kren and Kubelka's concern with the materiality of film that would continue to inform his own work. In works such as *Urlaubsfilm* (1983), *Freezeframe* (1983), and *Manufraktur* (1985) Tscherkassky is interested in the limits to which film can be subjected to degradation and dissolution via

refilming, layering and imposition, and visual fragmentation. But the rhythms of fracturing the sound and image are so precise as to never appear random. Commonly, as in Outerspace, Tscherkassky begins from a state of calm , a black or white screen, or a coherent piece of found footage , which he then takes to the edge of absolute destruction via processes of degradation and splintering, only to return the viewer to a state of calm, their senses bombarded with a new awareness of the possibility of film. These works are a frustrated resurrection of the material which has been placed at the service of the staid traditions of narrative language and conventions. Roman Jakobson wrote that "in order to show an object, it is necessary to deform the shape it used to have" (1) and this is precisely Tscherkassky's concern.

Another defining element is his use of found footage, from the work of the Lumiere Brothers to home movies and studio melodramas or horror films. The use of previously existing source film is increasingly common to artists whose devotion to the medium is as much a reaction to the prevailing artistic climate as it is a continuation of a century of cinematic experimentation. Tscherkassky himself expressed the revival of found footage filmmaking as a "response from a technological standpoint, to the overwhelming presence of electronic imagery: a conscious return to the artistic specificity of the medium's historical expression." (2) Other artists in the influential Austrian avant-garde scene such as Lisly Ponger, Dietmar Brehm and Gustav Deutsch , many of whose works are supported and distributed by Sixpack Films, an organisation Tscherkassky founded a decade ago, are similarly intrigued by the meeting point between the materiality of film and its history as an aesthetic form. Indeed, some of Tscherkassky's work borders on a reverence for the history of film as a plastic material. *Motion Picture* (1984) is a visually bizarre but theoretically intriguing film in which Tscherkassky laid out foot long strips of film in a grid. Upon this grid he then exposed a still image from the very first piece of film ever exposed: the Lumiere's *La Sortie des Ouvriers de l'usine Lumiere ý Lyon* (1895). The result was that tiny divisions of the black and white image exposed each frame, and the projected film was like a binary map of strobing light, meaningless without the idea behind it. To some a film should speak for itself, but for Tscherkassky the presence of the filmmaker and the traces and resonances of their production is a defining element of avant-garde cinema. The manual processes of production should not only remain

undisguised but should be brought to the fore so that the filmmaker and viewer meet actively, redefining and reassembling the manufactured splinters of the filmmaking process.

There is little doubt that the filmic work of Austrian Peter Tscherkassky is confounding. This is not because it is fundamentally abstruse in its meaning or avoids placement within a context of cinematic practice. Tscherkassky distils his theoretical concerns into bold but specific statements about the medium and the manufacture of film. And his films develop on modes of expression that can be traced within a recent history of structural and avant-garde film practice. Tscherkassky's films are confounding because on the one hand, they can be explosively violent ruptures of the usual artifice of cinema, and on the other, they are sensually overwhelming, seductive experiences to which it is very pleasurable (and often physically staggering) to surrender to. And, they confound, because, in this very act of surrendering to the image, one is working against one of Tscherkassky's primary concerns, which is to explore and expose the limits of the physical and intellectual mechanisms that constitute "film".

1   Jakobson, Roman, "On Realism in Art", Language in Literature,
        Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 26
      2Tscherkassky, Peter, "A Poet of Images , the work of Matthias
        M¸ller", XXXVI Mostra Internationale del Nuovo Cinema,
        Pesaro Film Festival 2000 Catalogue

Outer Space (1999 Austria 14 mins)
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