Oskar Fischinger: *Raumlichtkunst*

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> *I mean this thing began at the horizon, this vibration which didn't resemble those we then called sounds, or those now called the 'hitting' vibrations, or any others; a kind of eruption, distant surely, and yet at the same time, it made what was close come closer; in other words, all the darkness was suddenly dark in contrast with something else that wasn't darkness, namely light*. (Calvino 1993: 26)

A hypnotically pulsating mix of geometric conviction and organic flurry, the installation of Oskar Fischinger's 1926 *Raumlichtkunst* (Space-Light-Art) at Tate Modern affirmed the German artist's position as a key figure in early twentieth-century animation and avant-garde film-making. With Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter and Walter Ruttmann, Fischinger formed part of what Jean-Michel Bouhours has called a 'German School of abstract film' operating in the 1920s as a pivotal part of European avant-garde cinema (Bouhours 2012: 33). Fischinger's direct influence on film-makers that include Jordan Belson, Len Lye and Norman McLaren, is evident in testimonials they have written and in which they and others have cited him as a formative influence on their approaches to avant-garde film-making (Moritz 2004: 163-171).

Raumlichtkunst is a collection of three films, aligned horizontally and projected approximately twelve feet (3.6 metres) high to form a single panorama expanding the 30-foot (nine-metre) length of a purpose-built space for the work's installation at Tate Modern. Looped and accompanied by

Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation* (1929-31) and John Cage and Lou Harrison's *Double Music* (1941), Fischinger's ten-minute films constitute a churning landscape of psychedelic patterns, monochromatic eddies and amorphous swirls.

Fischinger's imagery charts a fictive course through an abstract solar system of curves, globes, magma and fire. On viewing the work, one is instantly struck by the intense complexity of the animated abstract sequences, in which various forms project the viewer through a visual composition of heliocentric galaxies, where planets whirl, patterns turn and the Earth hurtles towards us. A churning of coloured wax slowly rotates around an ever-encroaching black hole. Vortexes overlap figurative forms. Pulsing rings of blue, violet and purple are counterpoised with crimson explosions, whilst the scurried rise and fall of pistons mark and hurry time. Pictorially, the work shifts between flat graphic composition and illusory space. Figure and ground continually dissipate or converge, switching in and out of flatness. Constantly forming new spatial combinations, the series of three projections present iterations of repeating shapes that shift between the familiar and unfamiliar.

The installation of *Raumlichtkunst* at the Tate is not the definitive work. There is no definitive work. It is in fact an attempt to capture some of the effect of his innovative film shows of the late 1920s and early 1930s, in which he used multiple projectors and musical accompaniment to form immersive cinematic environments of light and sound. Re-mastered in high-definition video, some of Fischinger's nitrate films from the time have been digitised and re-configured by the Center for Visual Music in Los Angeles,[1] for the multi-screen projection. In contrast to Fischinger's original *Raumlichtkunst* performances however, which presented changing configurations and live performative iterations, the contemporary installation at the Tate has a slick assuredness now perhaps overly familiar to us in the context of the art gallery. Yet the films and selected music still offer us a sense of the dialogue Fischinger intended his work to have with cinema and about which he wrote:

> Of this Art everything is new and yet ancient in its laws and forms. Plastic-Dance-Painting-Music become one. The Master of the new Art forms poetical work in four dimensions… Cinema was its beginning… *Raumlichtmusik* will be its completion. (Goergen 2012: 43)

A precursor to the Expanded Cinema experiments of the 1960s, Fischinger's *Raumlichtkunst* is an assuredly modern work. The decision to site the work within the Tate's newly curated 'Structure and Clarity' rooms, in architectural and historical adjacency to the gallery's selection of abstract art from the 1920s and early 1930s, emphasises the cross-disciplinary concerns existing between film, painting and sculpture of the period. Unlike the ever-resplendent canon of early abstract art, however, housed in the adjoining gallery, *Raumlichtkunst* retains a youth and vitality that feels somewhat spent in the presentation of works by the likes of Brancusi, Hélion and Hepworth, whose refined attempts to encapsulate an abstract dynamism may now appear overly formal and familiar. This distinction is even more marked when one considers the fixed form of Fischinger's work at Tate Modern, in contrast to what would have been it's improvised and multiple incarnations within his live performances.

Fischinger's precise sense of editing is still clearly apparent within the films, which although digitised in their current form, still contain marks and traces from the original nitrate films used by the Center for Visual Music to re-imagine Fischinger's work. In the black-boxed context of the Tate's installation it's easy to lose oneself in the precision of the sequences of animated space and complex pictorial abstractions. The disjunctive intensity of *Raumlichtkunst* can also be read as a precursor to our digital age of dispersed screens and saturated information. In the historical context of the 1920s and 30s its use of different media and live performance to encourage a multi-sensory

engagement also denotes a critical relationship to any disciplinary divisions of early twentieth century modern art.

In its embryonic use of sound and manifold projection, Fischinger's work resonates acutely with the reconstruction of Lis Rhodes's *Light Music* (1975), which was concurrently installed at Tate Modern in the subterranean Tanks spaces. Rhodes's *Light Music* consists of two identical 16mm films of shifting stripes, simultaneously projected on opposing walls in one of the Tanks' dark concrete chambers. The duelling projections, crisscrossing in the centre of the room, form a staging of light in which shadows of the viewers' movements are asymmetrically collapsed onto the pictorial surface of each wall. Using photo-electric cells to convert changes in the projected light to amplified voltages of sound, the composed images serve as visual code for the work's accompanying soundtrack, establishing a direct correspondence between what we see and what we hear.

Both works have an enveloping effect on the viewer. Rhodes's black and white projections fill the volume of the chamber in which they are sited, literally placing us inside the work. In contrast, the installation of *Raumlichtkunst* utilises the close proximity of viewer and screen to activate the viewer's peripheral vision. Installed in a dark, narrow, 30-foot-long room, Fischinger's restless patterns of mutating geometries engage us in a an optical process of scanning, in which repetitions of patterns and stark formal differences between projections demand an ever-shifting attention to what is identifiable through the centre of vision and what is simply grasped at the periphery. The effect of this, as one transfers attention between films, is an impending sense of something about to happen, something about to materialise, some 'thing', that never appears.

This lack of pictorial resolution denotes *Raumlichtkunst's* spatial complexity. Mutating forms are edited and arranged to present abstract configurations of hard and fluid geometries. This

abstraction is not a reduction of figurative space, but in fact the opposite, a starting point from which the pictorial space of figuration and other types of space seem to emerge: a pulsating rhythm of lines momentarily structure themselves against a concentric swirl of expressionistic gestures and then dissolve again. In this sense Fischinger's particular use of abstraction embodies a constructive, rather than reductive, form.

In the iconoclastic atmosphere of the early twentieth century many artists readily believed that abstraction held a political and revolutionary potential. The question of how abstraction embodied, represented or critiqued the society it was made in became central to understanding its cultural siginificance. Arguments centered on the differing values of abstraction and representation, and a perceived responsibility the artist might (or might not) have to distance their work from the latter.

For Meyer Schipiro, writing in the thirties, abstract art was politically bound up with the cultural context it emerged in. He argued that Formalism's insistence on foregrounding the inherent value of particular abstract forms as 'significant', in and of themselves, presumed an artistic essence that was historically and culturally transcendent (Shapiro 1994: 181). For Shipiro abstraction in art presented other ways of seeing that were intrinsically tied to their historical context, presenting a critique of dominant modes of representation.

Making a distinction between the abstraction 'of' art as a form of pictorial reduction and this idea of abstraction 'in' art as a process of speculation Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have gone on to describe the latter as a 'bearer of glimpsed forces' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 181), capable of producing alternative forms of subjectivity:

> Making […] invisible forces visible in themselves, drawing up figures with a geometrical appearance, but they are not more than forces – the forces of

> gravity, heaviness, rotation, the vortex, explosion, expansion, germination and time. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 182)

Such forces constantly materialise and dissipate in *Raumlichtkunst*, inextricably tying the work to a Constructivist concern with the 're-spacing' of our relationship to the built world. John Rajchman has noted that this kind of 'constructive' abstraction can be understood as a device for suggesting and experiencing new organisations of space and duration that offer 'other new ways of proceeding' (Rajchman 1995: 17-18). In Fischinger's *Raumlichtkunst* this manifests itself in the ever-shifting formal and symbolic configurations of imagery within the films. Our reading of combinations of patterns, movements and colours never fully settles, constantly shifting our attention as we attempt to draw relationships between the emergence and dissipation of forms. This idea of testing and constructing spatial relationships resonates in Fischinger's ambition as a *Bildmusiker* (visual musician), which in the form of installations such as *Raumlichtkunst* are made apparent as a kind of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*.[2]

Without documentary evidence of Fischinger's choice or use of music for his animations, other than a single reference to various percussive accompaniments, it is historically difficult to gauge the original qualitative relationship between sound and image in his filmic experiments. The Hungarian composer Alexander László, who had commissioned Fischinger to produce visuals for a score to accompany his own travelling *Farblichtmusik* (colour-light-music) show (1925), described a percussion group accompanying a screening of *Raumlichtkunst* in Munich as 'hardly making music, but rather trying to create enough ruckus to drown out the roaring and clunking from seven projectors' (Moritz 2004: 12).

The Varèse, Cage and Harrison scores selected to accompany the Tate's installation of the work offer contrasting foils to Fischinger's visual poetry, each framing the dynamics of the work to

different effect. They form analogous relationships between image and sound, with the accompanying musical scores inflecting the visual effects of rhythm and tone. The historically contemporaneous soundtrack of Varèse's *Ionisation*, a heady mix of interrupted drum rhythms and percussive soundscapes, is somewhat abrasive. The subtleties of Varèse's composition – the temper of the glockenspiel or the hanging curve of his trademark siren – are often lost amidst the aggressive competition played out between the bass drum, gong and piano; the latter instruments sometimes abruptly intruding on the rhythmic poetics of the three projections. On the other hand, the restrained quietness and indeterminate rhythms of percussive accompaniment in Cage and Harrison's *Double Music*, seemed to resonate more subtly with the visual refrains and pulsating shifts of Fischinger's animations.

The choice of Cage is telling. The American composer explicitly acknowledges the impact of meeting with Fischinger in the mid 1930s, whom he credits with focusing his attention towards the innate spirit of specific materials, recalling:

> He spoke to me about what he called the spirit inherent in materials and he claimed that a sound made from wood had a different spirit than one made from glass. The next day I began writing music, which was to be played on percussion instruments. (Pritchett 1996: 12)

This strand of modernist spiritualism invokes Kandinsky's notion of *innerer klang* (inner sound), a term used by the Russian painter to refer to the intrinsic resonance and affect produced by the combination of different elements of line, shape and colour within his paintings.[3] Although darker and more brooding, the visual dynamism of *Raumlichtkunst* is reminiscent in many ways of the more forceful chaos of Kandinsky's later paintings. One of Fischinger's own descriptions of his *Raumlichtkunst* films, written in a letter in 1927, captures this sense of esoteric chaos, in which cosmic analogies abound and reference is made to the Hindu concept of 'Atman'.[4]

> A happening of the soul, of the eyes, of the eye's waves […] sun rising, effervescent, star rhythms, star lustre, a singing, surf breaking over chasms, a world of illusions of movements of lights, sound and song tamed – leaping breath, Atman, a wandering through clouds. (Moritz 2004: 176)

The significance of Fischinger's ideas and works on cultural heavyweights such as John Cage and László Moholy-Nagy, who used Fishinger's *Raumlichtkunst* films to accompany his lectures at the Bauhaus, are testament to his impact beyond film-making. And although Fischinger's immersive ambitions for his early abstract experiments are calculatedly restrained in the set-up at Tate Modern, the installation of his work there is a timely reminder of the expansive richness and brute force of his films in the context of one of the most dynamic and diverse periods in European art history.

Almost a century on and as practices in film, video and expanded cinema continue to negotiate their critical relationship to the mainstream circulation of imagery in today's cultural environment, the legacy of Fishinger's engagement with abstract film and his inventive development of technical processes as a means of exploring forms of space and spacing, continue to echo in the work of young film-makers such as Tina Frank, Bas van Koolwijk and Simon Payne. Fischinger's experimental approach to live multiple projection and technical innovation also resonates with a contemporary tendency towards the speculative event, in which art practices are increasingly understood as a kind of experiential research. In this context and as the critical and performative space of film installation becomes ever more acutely debated, *Raumlichtkunst* serves as both historical precedent and provocation, drawing renewed attention to the relationship between spectacle and the mechanised role of staging film, in which the resulting space might be understood as a kind of laboratory.

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Notes

[1] The Center for Visual Music is a non-profit film archive, based in Los Angeles and dedicated to the research, preservation and curation of visual music, experimental animation and avant-garde media. As well as an extensive collection of Fischinger's films and documents related to his life and work, CVM's collections include preserved film material by Jordan Belson, Jules Engel, Charles Dockum, John and James Whitney, Harry Smith, Pat O'Neill and John Stehura.

[2] Although Fischinger didn't use the term 'visual music' explicitly until the mid-1940s, implicit in his work is an embedded exploration of the correspondence and relationships between image and sound. In a foreword to a preview of his work in New York in 1948 he wrote: 'Figures and forms have a definite effect on the consciousness. When they are in colour the effect is emphasized. The staccato movement of rows of geometrical figures on the screen will get the same reaction from a person as the staccato sounds from a musical instrument.' (Keefer 2012: 165)

[3] Kandinsky's notion of *innerer klang* is most explicitly outlined in his essay, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1911, where he writes: 'Color is a means of exerting a direct influence upon the soul… Thus it is clear that the harmony of colors can only be based upon the principle of purposefully touching the human soul. This basic tenet we shall call the principle of internal necessity' (Lindsey 1982: 160)

[4] The term *Atman* refers to a Hindu notion of the self. A concept of the soul, it can be understood as an essence or spirit distinct from the mind or body, as well as any designation of race or identity.