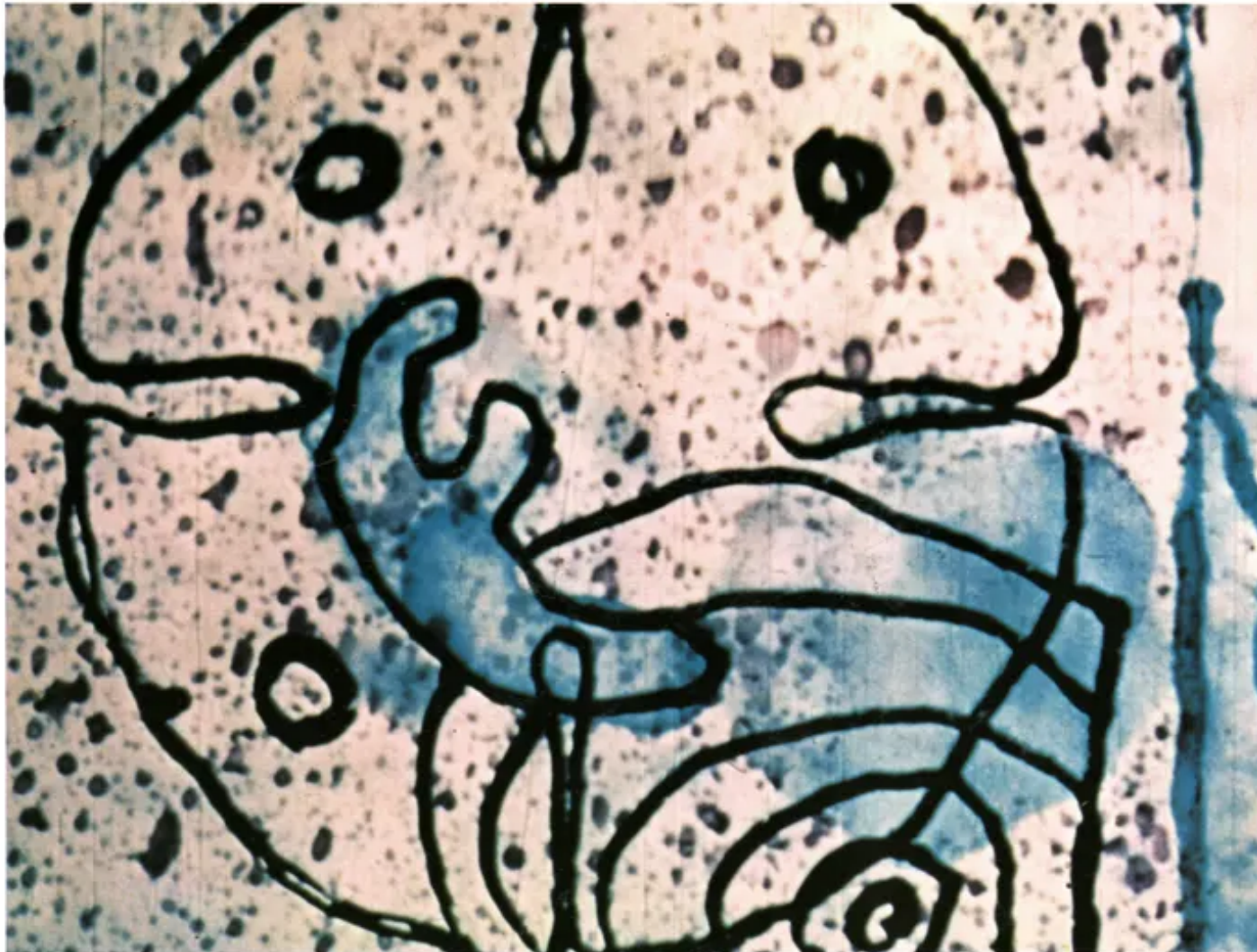


## ANIMATING THE ABSOLUTE: HARRY SMITH



Harry Smith, No. 1, ca. 1940. *The eccentric circle in metamorphosis.*

(All stills from the Anthology Film Archives' collection.)

I  
The dominant trend within the American avant-garde tradition has been the evolution of the subjective cinema. There is strong evidence of a shift in the late 1950s from the trance film (the psychodramatical quest for sexual identity in the form of a cinematic dream) to mythopoeia in the works of several film makers working independently of one another. Yet not all avant-garde film-making of the late 1940s had utilized the trance form and psychodrama. The graphic cinema offered a vital alternative to the subjective. This polarity (and the potential for its convergence) extends back to the origins of the avant-garde film in the 1920s. Repudiating the depth

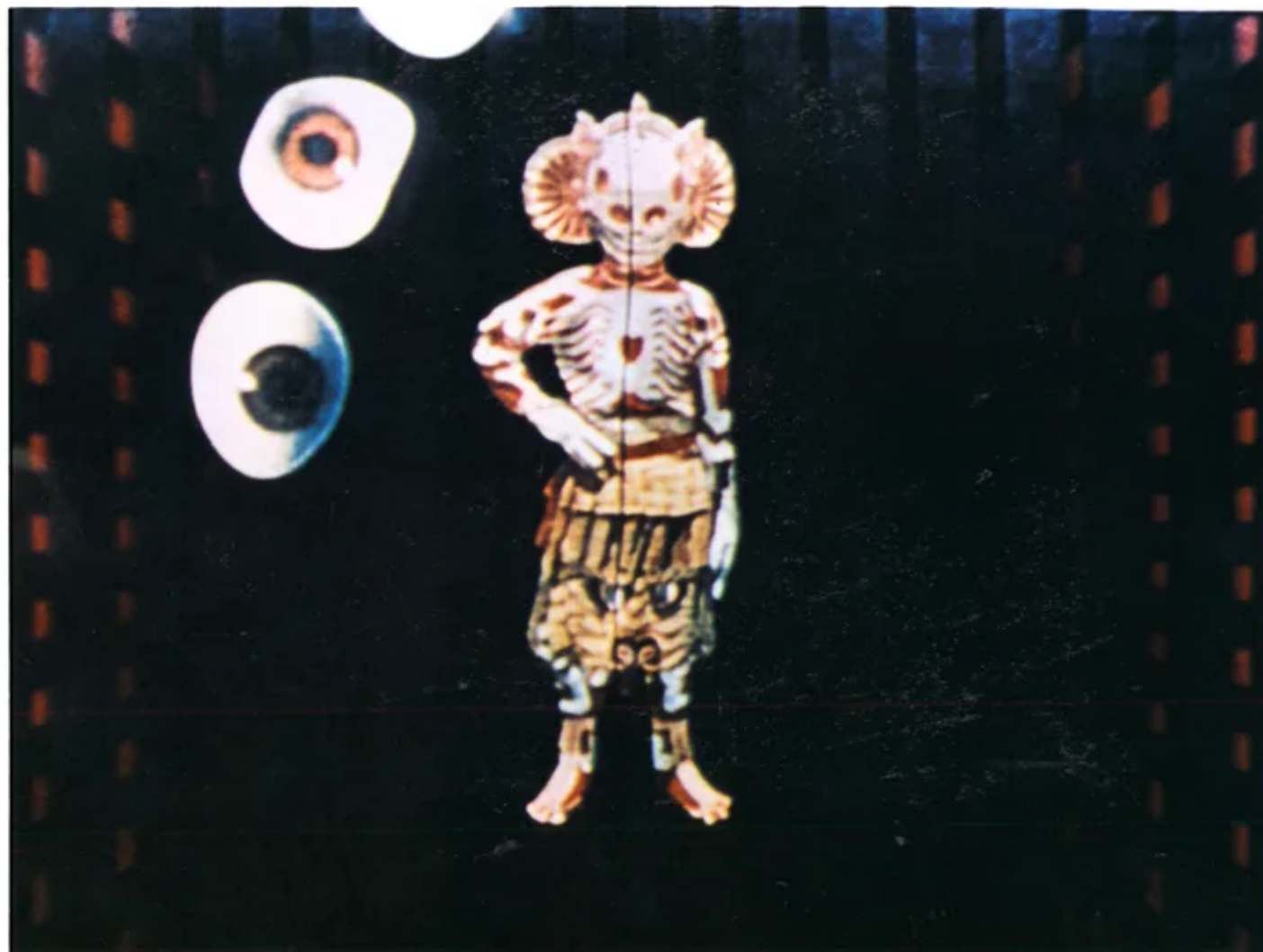
of space cinema inherited from still photography, and which the very first films exploited gloriously, the graphic film maker set out to establish a virtual depth by manipulating the scale of flat plastic shapes (as in Richter's *Rhythmus 21*, 1921 and Eggeling's *Symphonie Diagonale*, 1924) through presenting and unmasking simple optical illusions (as in Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema*, 1927) and lastly with the obliteration of accustomed depth while retaining traditional photographic images (as in Léger's *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924).

The most radical invention within the graphic tradition was the complete rejection of photography by Len Lye. In 1935, he made the first handpainted film, *Colour Box*, by coloring and drawing directly on top of transparent film stock. When in the early 1940s Harry Smith made his

first handpainted films, he was unaware that the concept was not original with him; such is his claim which the author believes. To the historian of cinema it would make little difference if Smith acted by invention or imitation, for his reputation is not bound to any proof of priority. The handpainted films with which he began his career as a film maker are the most remarkable ever achieved by that technique, and his subsequent films, both animated and photographed from actuality, sustain his claim to be one of the central film makers of the avant-garde tradition.

With characteristic self-irony and hermetic allusiveness he composed the following notes on his work for the catalogue of the Film-Makers Cooperative:

My cinematic excreta is of four varieties: batiked





abstractions made directly on film between 1939 and 1946; optically printed non-objective studies composed around 1950; semi-realistic animated collages made as part of my alchemical labors of 1957 to 1962; and chronologically superimposed photographs of actualities formed since the latter year. All these works have been organized in specific patterns derived from the interlocking beats of the respiration, the heart and the EEG Alpha component and should be observed together in order, or not at all, for they are valuable works, works that will live forever—they made me gray. No. 1: Hand-drawn animation of dirty shapes—the history of the geologic period reduced to orgasm length. (Approx. 5 min.)

No. 2: Batiked animation, etc., etc. The action takes place either inside the sun or in Zurich, Switzerland. (Approx. 10 min.)

No. 3: Batiked animation made of dead squares, the most complex handdrawn film imaginable. (Approx. 10 min.)

No. 4: Black and white abstractions of dots and grillworks made in a single night. (Approx. 6 min.)

No. 5: Color abstraction. Homage to Oscar Fischinger—a sequel to No. 4. (Approx. 6 min.)

No. 6: Three-dimensional, optically printed, abstraction using glasses the color of Heaven & Earth. (Approx. 20 min.)

No. 7: Optically printed Pythagoreanism in four movements supported on squares, circles, grillworks and triangles with an interlude concerning an experiment. (Approx. 15 min.)

No. 8: Black and white collage made up of clippings from 19th-Century ladies' wear catalogues and elocution books. The cat, the dog, the statue and the Hygrometer appear here for the first time. (Approx. 5 min.)

No. 9: Color collage of biology books and 19th-Century temperance posters. An attempt to reconstruct Capt. Cook's Tapa collection. (Approx. 10 min.)

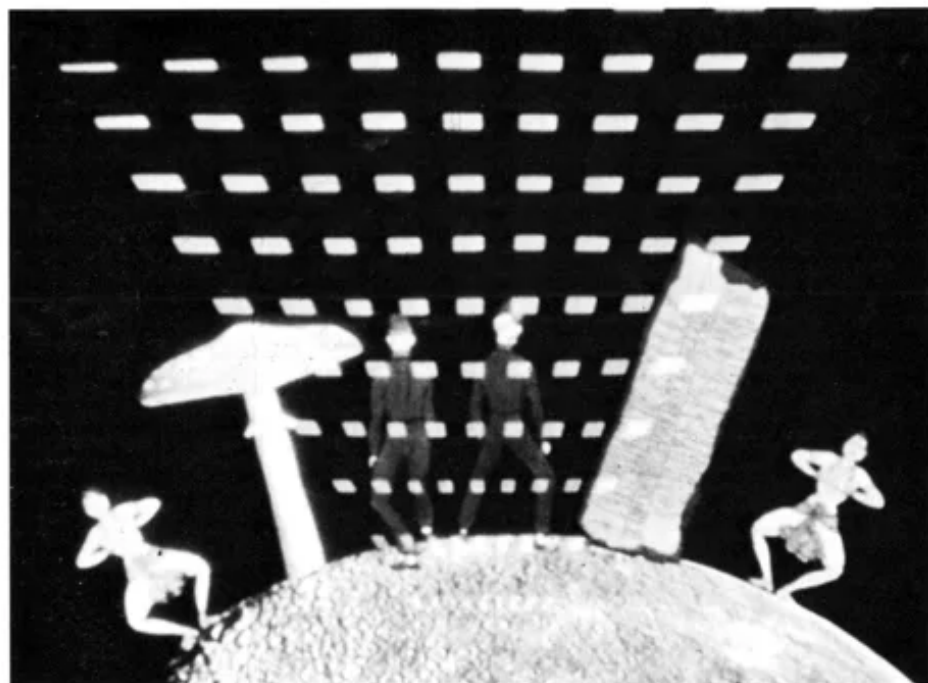
No. 10: An exposition of Buddhism and the Kaballa in the form of a collage. The final scene shows Aquatic mushrooms (not in No. 11) growing on the moon while the Hero and Heroine row by on a cerebrum. (Approx. 10 min.)

No. 11: A commentary on and exposition of No. 10 synchronized to Monk's "Mysterioso." A famous film. (Approx. 4 min.)

No. 12: A much expanded version of No. 8. The first part depicts the heroine's toothache consequent to the loss of a very valuable watermelon, her dentistry and transportation to heaven. Next follows an elaborate exposition of the heavenly land in terms of Israel, Montreal and the second part depicts the return to earth from being eaten by Max Müller on the day Edward the Seventh dedicated the Great Sewer of London. (Approx. 50 min.)

No. 13: Fragments and tests of Shamanism in the guise of a children's story. This film made with van Wolf, is perhaps the most expensive animated film ever made—the cost running well over ten thousand dollars a minute—wide screen, stereophonic sound of the ballet music from Faust. Production was halted when a major investor (H.P.) was found dead under embarrassing conditions. (Approx. 3 hours)

No. 14: Superimposed photography of Mr. Fleischman's butcher shop in New York, and the Kiowa



Harry Smith, No. 10, ca. 1953. The protagonists on the rim of the moon.

around Anadarko, Oklahoma—with Cognate Material. The strip is dark at the beginning and end, light in the middle, and is structured 122333221. I honor it the most of my films, otherwise a not very popular one before 1972. If the exciter lamp blows, play Bert Brecht's Mahagonny. (Approx. 25 min.)

For those who are interested in such things: No. 1 to 5 were made under pot; No. 6 with schmeck (—it made the sun shine) and ups; No. 7 with cocaine and ups; Nos. 8 to 12 with almost anything, but mainly deprivation, and 13 with green pills from Max Jacobson, pink pills from Tim Leary, and vodka; No. 14 with vodka and Italian Swiss white port.\*

\*Of these films Nos. 6, 8 and 9 seem to have permanently disappeared. A section of No. 13 has been prefixed to a recently made film, shot through a kaleidoscope of the film maker's construction, and called, at times, *The Tin Woodsman's Dream*. He has also shot a short animation of Seminole quilt designs. Now (1972) he is editing a cinematic version of the full opera Mahagonny, which in part served as a soundtrack for No. 14. The dates assigned to the films in this note are unreliable, especially regarding the earlier films. (P.A.S.)

The continuity of Harry Smith's cinema is remarkable, all the more so because of its variety. The shifts in technique and the swerves in intention of each new film seem grounded in the principles of the previous film. After the initial attempt at a freely drawn handpainted film (No. 7), he made two progressively more complex batiked geometrical animations (Nos. 2 and 3), colored by spray paint and dyes, also directly applied to the film. Then he began a series of photographed abstractions, first in black and

white (No. 4), then in color (Nos. 5 and 7) with quanta leaps of intricacy at each stage. Nos. 10 and 11 integrate collage and fragmentary animated narrative into the spatial and color fields established in the earlier films. That narrative tendency expanded in No. 12 and would have reached an even greater elaboration had No. 13 been completed according to his plan. With the abandonment of that film, Smith turned from animation to the actual world for his imagery, but he maintained a plastic control over what he filmed by means of superimposition (No. 14) and through the mediation of a kaleidoscope (*The Tin Woodsman's Dream*, second part).

The curve and regularity of this progression, encountering in its course several versions of hermeticism — from Neoplatonic formalism through ritual magic to shamanism — describes a graph of evolving concerns and reveals an amazing patience, at odds with the language, but not the sense, of the film maker's comments on his work. Smith alone of the major American avant-garde film makers who have more than two decades of work to their credit gives the illusion of having a plan to the ensemble of his films, which even the lacunae of the lost and aborted films do not obfuscate.

His insistence that the works be seen "together, or not at all," a condition which, by the way, he has relaxed since issuing that note in 1963, re-



affirms the myth of the absolute film. Yet in Smith's case, that aspiration, common to many avant-garde film makers, explicitly converges with the alchemical notion of The Great Work. Unlike Mallarmé, who appropriated the alchemical mythos to the theory of poetry, unlike Duchamp who applied it to the artistic object, Harry Smith is a practicing hermeticist. His films share concerns central to American avant-garde cinema and incarnate its historical morphology. Nevertheless, they separate themselves and demand attention as an aspect of the synthesis of Smith's "other" work. Smith divides his time between film-making, painting (which has waned in recent years), iconology (he has a formidable collection of Ukrainian Easter eggs and has spent years practicing Northwest Indian string figures, in preparation of books on those symbolic cosmologies), musicology (his reputation as an authority on folk music matches that as a film maker, among experts), anthropology (Folkways will soon issue his recordings and notes on the peyote ritual of the Kiowa), and linguistics (an amateur, but intense, interest).

Since childhood Smith has sustained an interest in the occult and in the machinery of illusionism: "... My father gave me a blacksmith shop when I was maybe twelve; he told me I should convert lead into gold. He had me build all these things like models of the first Bell telephone, the original electric light bulb, and perform all sorts of historical experiments. ... Very early my parents got me interested in projecting things." His father also initiated his interest in drawing by teaching him to make a geometrical representation of the Cabalistic tree of life. Thus when Smith speaks of Giordano Bruno as the inventor of the cinema, as he did in an hilariously aggressive lecture at Yale in 1965, quoting the thesis of *De Immenso, Innumerabilibus et Infigurabilibus*, that there exists an infinite number of universes, each possessing a similar world with some slight differences — a hand raised on one, lowered in another — so that the perception of motion is an act of the mind swiftly choosing a course among a finite number of these "freeze frames," and thereby animating them, we see that he regards his work as belonging to the deeper historical tradition of magical illusionism, extending at least back to Robert Fludd who used mirrors to animate books, and Athanasius Kircher who cast spells with a magic lantern.

This would not be worth mentioning were it not helpful in understanding Smith's aloofness from some of the vital theoretical issues facing film makers today, who seek to define their art in terms of the essence of their materials and their tools. It puts into perspective as well the fact that he has repeatedly ventured into mixed media presentations when the most important of his peers have firmly and at times vociferously rejected such excursions as irrelevant to the urgent problems of cinema. Yet his disassocia-

tion is not complete and has tended to diminish in the last few years. In an interview in the *Village Voice*, he offered the following unexpected evaluation of his work as a film maker among film makers.

I think I'm the third best film producer in the country. I think Andy Warhol is the best. Kenneth Anger is the second best. And now I've decided I'm the third best. There was a question in my mind whether Brakhage or myself was the third best, but now I think I am.

(*Village Voice*, June 3, 1971)

The smoothness of Smith's development as a film maker reflects the ease with which the formal and the hermetic poles meet in any given film along that graph. One measure of the success of his achievement might be the degree to which all of his films are accessible to both formalistic and traditional analysis, without being satisfying unless both are combined. In the ensemble of his work neoplasticism converges so undramatically with Surrealism that we are led to remember that the distance between the theosophy of Suprematism, the Neoplatonism of Kandinsky and Mondrian, and the alchemical and Cabalistic metaphysics of Surrealism was not as great as the difference between their respective spatial and tropic strategies. The intellectual synthesis of these ancient world views had animated the Renaissance. Their superimposition was not a difficult matter for Harry Smith, who already occupied the new theoretical center their synchrony would necessitate.

The hermetic artist is one who finds the purification, or the formal deduction of his art, coincident with his quest for a magical center that all arts, and all consciousnesses, share. The paradox of hermetic cinema which we encounter in the later films of both Kenneth Anger and Harry Smith is that the closer it comes to self-definition, the further it moves from autonomy, the more it seems to involve itself in allusion, arcane reference, obscurity. Where most of his contemporaries found first the dream and then the myth to be the prime metaphors for cinema's ontology, Smith, following the same path, posited a moving geometry as its essence, before he joined the others in a simultaneous move to mythopoeia.

He defined the geometry of cinema not through reduction but in terms of its potential for complexity. His early films succeed one another with progressive intricacy. Yet his first film is remarkably sophisticated in its range of tactics. He contrasts hard-edged figures, made by sticking paper squares to the film before painting it and removing it after the color dries, with freely drawn figures, gradual metamorphosis of forms with sudden changes, outlined shapes with solids; the paint appears as the solid color background, as foreground figures, and as splatters, sometimes over and sometimes in the absence of a background. The film articulates a rhythmic structure by the continual movement and trans-

formation of the figures within the frame syncoated with changes of color (foreground, background, and splatter), and a respiration of contraction toward the center of the screen and expansion to its edges. An overall form emerges from the repetition of familiar shapes and, at the end, the two flashes of a bright figure.

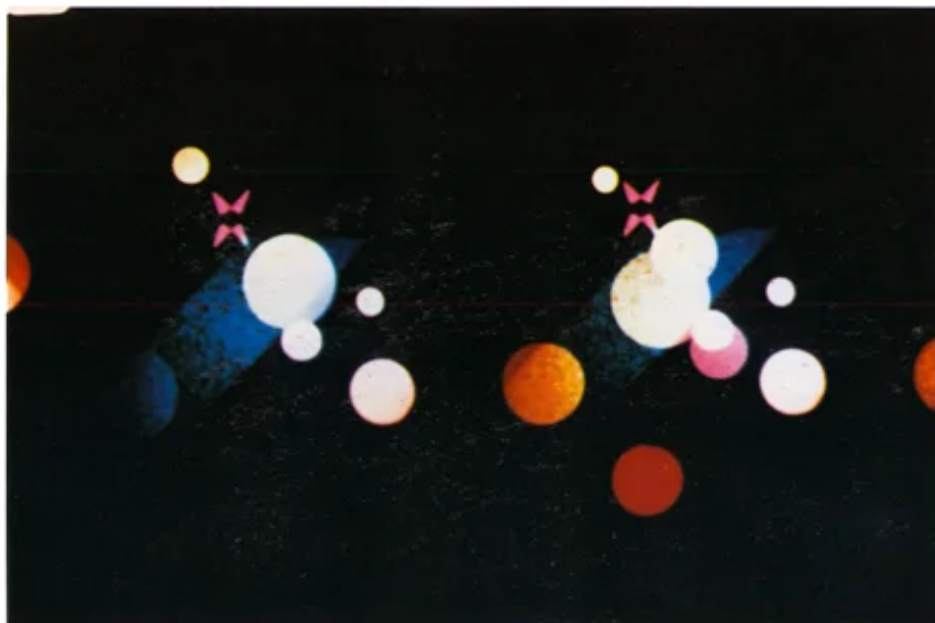
No. 1, the most eccentric of Harry Smith's animations, utilizes a principle of imbalance and unpredictability as a source of visual tension which is reflected in several aspects of the film's imagery and form. Its freely drawn Arp-like figures resist precise geometry, and the base itself, when it becomes solid, has a tendency to leave a band of a different color at the right edge of the screen. The hard-edged squares cannot be integrated easily into this context of fluctuation and eccentricity. A vibration occurs when they appear at the beginning, in the middle, and just before the conclusion of the film.

Positions and colors alternate quickly, jumping within the frame, as the two squares move toward each other along a virtual diagonal, as in Eggeling's *Symphonie Diagonale*. No shape is formed before it starts to change; amorphous circles turn into squares which open up to contain circles again. Only the original hard-edged squares resist transformation as they fall again in the middle of the film.

The instability of the ground, which changes color, becomes texturally settled, and can dissolve into splatterings, reflects the ambiguity of the outlined forms which occasionally transform outside to inside. The film maker's reference to "dirty shapes" in this film must isolate the vaguely phallic wedge in the middle of the film, which becomes a triangle with a hole through which a circle and (again somewhat phallic) a soft rectangle pass. Once the ground turns into the figure in the manner of Richter's *Rhythmus 21*, a horizontal band expands in both directions; but before it wipes the previous base away, it bends upon itself as if to become a new circle. As the outer shell dissolves, circles form within circles until the distinction between a circle and a square weakens. Four soft triangles with holes in them come together to suggest a rectangle. In the final appearance of the rigid squares, they again overlap to create a negative space and create the most complex set of variations in the film.

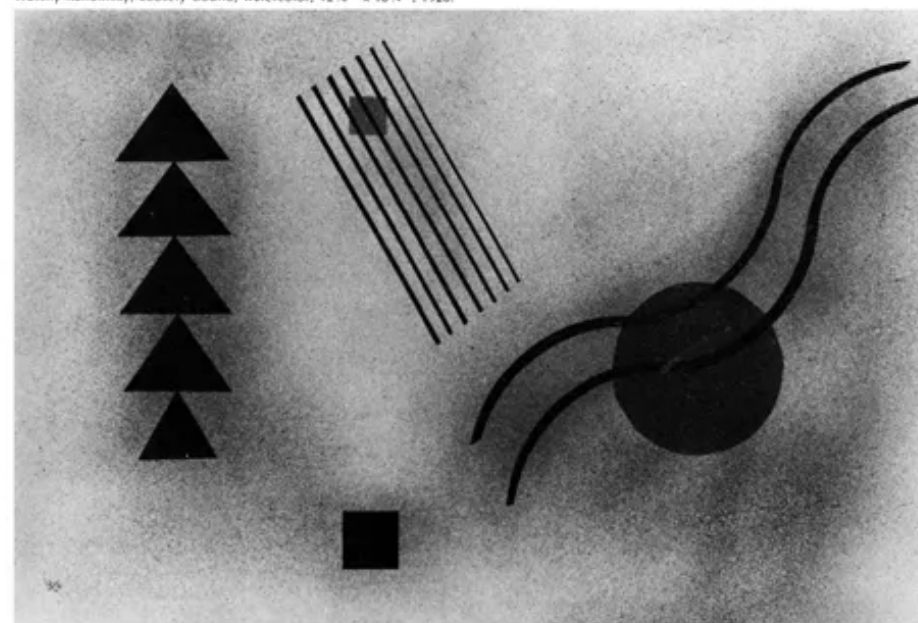
The difficulty of adequately describing No. 1 derives from the excessive instability of its imagery. Changes continually occur on at least two levels, that of figure and that of base; and there are often two or more simultaneous developments on both levels, with perhaps one point of synchronization (between one change of figure and one of ground) while all else is asynchronous. This instability which always seems about to resolve itself on the level of the figure actually finds its satisfying conclusion, its unexpected *telos*, in the two flashes, first eight frames long, then eleven, of the irregular yellow and red





Harry Smith, No. 7, ca. 1951. "... comes the closest to animating a painting of Kandinsky in his geometrical style."

Wassily Kandinsky, Loosely Bound, watercolor, 12 1/2" x 18 1/2", 1928.



shape — the chromatic climax of the film — just before the end. For the viewer the prolonged experience of irresolution might be a cinematic equivalent to atonal music: not the rigorous formalism of Anton Webern, but the witty unbalance of Charles Ives.

In Nos. 2 and 3 Harry Smith abandoned the handdrawn figure. He concentrated on the exhaustive use of the batiking principle by which he inserted the hard-edged squares into his first film. As he describes it in an interview in *Film Culture Reader*, that process involved placing "come clean" dots on 35mm film, spraying color on it, then covering the strip with vaseline before removing the dots. Another spraying will give two colors, one inside and one outside the circle. Of course the process can be multiplied with different colors. This shift of technique implied a new dynamics for the films. In No. 1 the film maker recognized the essential instability of a drawn line which has to repeat itself twenty-four times a second. He elaborated the whole form of his film out of this basic instability, exaggerating it, and mimicking it in structural and textural ways. The batiking process removed the essential vibration of line. Smith responded to this fact with more rigorous rhythmic form, a heightened centrality of imagery, a smoother balance of colors, and a strict reliance on basic geometrical figures. In No. 2 in particular he explored the use of offscreen space implicit in the opening and in several moments of No. 1. By opening with and predominantly using motion from the top to the bottom of the screen he introduced a sense of gravity, around which the offscreen vectors are organized.

After an opening of a circle expanding from a wedge, a welter of circles of different sizes and colors fall vertically across the screen. This is the only instance in the film of a mixed scale of circles; it is deliberately chaotic. In the penultimate image of the film these same circles rise again and pass out the top of the screen.

The rhythmic pace seems measured and even throughout; the time required for a wedge to expand, or for a circle to fall, or for a dance of squares to occupy its positions in a circle, or for the contraction, collision, or expansion of circles, register as equivalent. This metric regularity reflects the consistency with which the color changes at the entrance of each new circle or each sweep of a wedge into a full circle.

The reliance on primary colors emphasizes the purity and regularity of the film's form. By making this directly on film with the batiked process, rather than animating it from drawings as would have been possible, Harry Smith maintained the vibrancy of directly applied color with its frame-by-frame fluctuations which otherwise would be lost. There is also a minimum of arbitrary blending and/or an absence of color at the points where the circles meet the base. This, and a discreet amount of flaking especially on the inlaid squares, give the film a textural

immediacy. With the geometric regularity of the circles and the structural regularity of the film's construction, Smith has created a form in opposition to the color's irregularity. The result is more successful than the opposite tactic employed in No. 1.

When Smith says that "the action takes place either inside the sun or in Zurich, Switzerland," he is alluding to the hermetic source of the circle, the sun, and suggesting that the film might also take place in the mind of C. J. Jung, then living in Zurich. His subsequent claim that No. 3 is the most complex handpainted film ever made has been sustained by everything the author has seen in this mode. The most ambitious aspects of Nos. 1 and 2 are merely preludes to the textural, rhythmic, and structural complexity of No. 3. It is not difficult to believe the film maker when he says that it took him several years of daily work to complete it.

This time the film maker makes little use of offscreen space; he organized much of the movement within the film in terms of the illusionary depth of the screen. Images recede into and explode out of a virtual deep center. Emphasis is placed on the relative positions of foreground and background figures. The changes of color are more complex than in No. 2; solid hues rest beside clearly defined areas of splattered paint, and when figures overlap their common areas take on different colors. Finally, different rhythmic structures intermesh with a complexity equal to the most elaborate achievements of the entire graphic film tradition.

## II

By the time he completed this film Harry Smith had established contacts with other film makers, both in the San Francisco area where he was working and in Los Angeles. It was at this time that Frank Stauffacher and Richard Foster founded Art in Cinema where avant-garde films, both those from Europe two decades earlier and new works, had their first rigorous screenings on the American West Coast. Although Smith continued to paint throughout this period he came to identify himself with the emerging cinema. In fact, when Stauffacher and Foster split up, and it looked as if Art in Cinema would fail (as it did), he tried for a brief time to program new films for it. It is nearly impossible to pin Smith down on specific dates within this period of the late 1940s, and equally difficult to precisely fix his movements from other sources. Nevertheless we know that he worked in San Francisco and Berkeley during this time, and that he met John and James Whitney of Los Angeles during this period, who were to have a decisive influence on him, and later on Jordan Belson.

Between 1943 and 1944 the Whitney brothers had made *Five Film Exercises* on the homemade animating and sound composing equipment. One of their highest ambitions was to produce

"audio-visual music" or "color music" by the synchronization of abstract transformations to electronic sounds and by the utilization of basically musical forms for the overall construction of their films. In one article of 1944-45, they refer to Bauer, a source of inspiration they shared with Smith; in another of 1945 they speak of Mondrian and Duchamp (in so far as he urged mechanical reproduction over handmade objects of art) as primary inspirations. Their early films show hard-edged or sometimes slightly out of focus figures in a state of continual transformation and movement about the screen. A shape that seems to curve three-dimensionally will change to make its flatness apparent (*Film Exercise 1*); the whole screen or half the screen will flash with color flickers (*Film Exercises 2 & 3*) behind geometrical variations; a reciprocal play of movement into and out of virtual screen depth will structure a film (*Film Exercise 4*) or a process of echoing and recapitulation in different colors will be an organizing principle (*Film Exercise 5*).

Harry Smith credits the Whitneys both with teaching him the techniques of photographic animation and with helping him to formulate a theoretical view of cinema. Ironically, he has been silent on theoretical matters, excepting of course occasional allusions to hermetic precedents, which obviously do not derive from his contact with the Whitneys. The three geometrical animations of Smith's that survive repeat the curve of development of the initial three painted films; but Nos. 4 and 5 are crude works in comparison to Nos. 1 and 2, or to any of the Whitneys' *Five Film Exercises* (1943-44).

He remained faithful to the circle, the triangle, and the square or rectangle as the essential forms of visual geometry. Before the black and white imagery of No. 4 begins, Smith pans the camera over a painting of his from the same period. The movements on the painting are in color. In contrast to his film work the painting uses organic bulblike forms rather than rigid geometrical figures. In *Film Culture* he described this painting:

It is a painting to a tune by Dizzy Gillespie called *Manteca*. Each stroke in the painting represents a certain note on the recording. If I had the record, I could project the painting as a slide and point to a certain thing. This is the main theme here, which a doot-doot-dootdoot — doot-dootdootdoot; those curved lines up there. . . .

The possibility of translating music into images is another of the correspondences immanent in the hermetic world view. In practice Harry Smith's use of sound with film has been very problematic. The initial three painted films were made to be shown silently. After they were finished the film maker had the following experience: "I had a really great illumination the first time I heard Dizzy Gillespie play. I had gone there very high, and I literally saw all kinds of color flashes. It was at that point that I realized

music could be put to my films." He claims that he then cut down No. 2 from an original length of over thirty minutes to synchronize it with Gillespie's *Guacha Guero*. Neither the original long version nor the synchronized print survive.

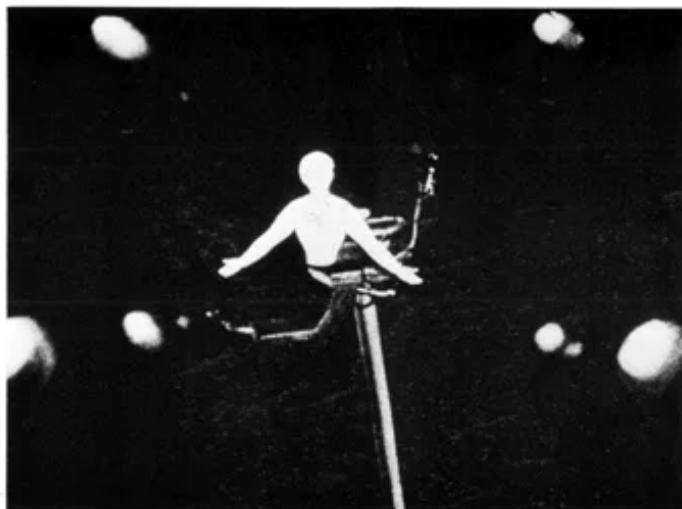
Smith is notoriously self-destructive. The loss of several important films from his Great Work attests to this. He has proven in films like No. 11 and No. 12 that he can use both music and sound effects meticulously, and in the case of the later film with genius. His elaborate preparation for the *Mahagoney* film indicates that again he will create a true sound and picture synthesis. His ability in handling sound makes all the more alarming the extreme casualness with which he put the Beatles first album to an anthology of his early films, *Early Abstractions*, for distribution. It seems as if he wanted to obscure the monumentality of his achievement in painting and animating film by simply updating the soundtrack.

No. 4 combines camera movement with superimposition to create a dance of white circles and squares against a black background. No. 5, entitled *Circular Tensions*, extends the use of moving camera and superimposition into color and geometry.

In the late 1940s Harry Smith and Jordan Belson invited Hilda Rebay of the Museum of Non-Objective Art (now the Guggenheim Museum) to see their painting when she was in San Francisco. That visit ultimately resulted in a grant from the Solomon (not to be confused with the more famous Simon) Guggenheim Foundation during the years of 1950-51 for Smith to begin Work on No. 7, the most intricate and fully achieved of his abstract films. When he moved to New York at the completion of the film, he was again helped by Hilda Rebay and given a studio within the Guggenheim Museum. At that time the Guggenheim Museum specialized in collecting the works of Kandinsky and Bauer. Of all of his films, No. 7 comes the closest to animating a painting of Kandinsky's in his geometrical style of the 1920s.

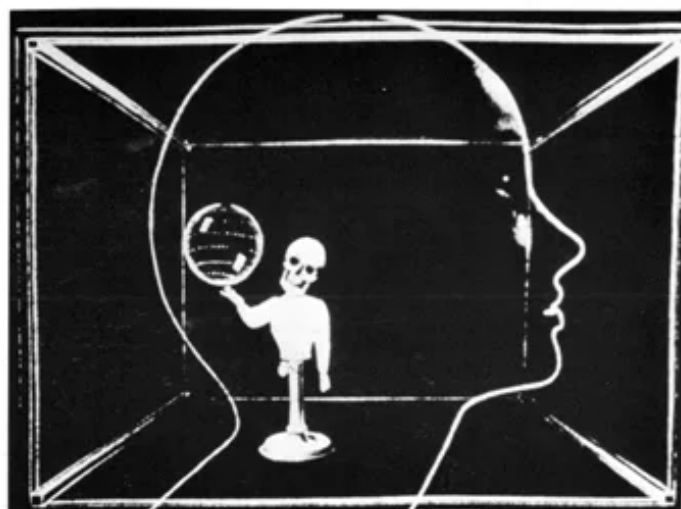
To make this film Smith set up a primitive backscreen projection situation that worked with astonishing precision. One machine projected black and white images on a translucent screen. On the other side of the screen a 16mm camera rerecorded them. A wheel of color filters in front of the camera was used to determine the hue of a figure or a background. By keeping an accurate record of where any pattern was recorded on the film strip, the film maker could make elaborate synchronous movements by means of several layers of superimposition. Most of the visual tropes of No. 7 derive from earlier animations of Smith's; but here they attain their apogee of intricacy and the greatest color control. No use is made of offscreen space. Illusory depth orients the entire film but, unlike the earlier films, there is a tension here between images which have their center of gravity in the





Harry Smith, No. 12, ca. 1958.

*The ascent to heaven on a dentist's chair.*



*The first tableau of heaven*

absolute center of the screen and sets of images with two (or more, rarely) lateral centers.

After finishing No. 7 Harry Smith moved from San Francisco to New York. There he began to make collage films. Unfortunately all we know of No. 8 and No. 9 are his laconic notes. By the time he made No. 10 and No. 11, which are successive versions of the same film, he had a highly developed collage animation technique in color. Many of the formal operations of the earlier films, especially No. 7, were incorporated into these two films. Of the several modes of tension in these works, the relationship between the screen as an enclosed world and offscreen space is particularly important. Similarly, dialectics between a flat plane of action and illusory depth, between collage animation and abstract convulsions of the whole image, between gravity and the screen as an open field of movement, between sequences of transformation and abrupt change, derive from and elaborate upon the strategies of his earlier films.

Both No. 10 and 11 are explicitly hermetic. They describe analogies between tarot cards, Cabalistic symbolism, Indian chiromancy and dancing, Buddhist mandalas, and Renaissance alchemy. The process of animation itself, with its continual transformations, provides the vehicle for this giant equation. Surrealism's version of the hermetic enters in at least two places rupturing, through unexpected and irrational juxtapositions, the logic of the occult analogies. The first of these inclusions is a postman (in a child's wagon) who plays an important role in the film because of his resistance to being transformed. The second would be the comic appearance of a grimacing lady looking out of a window near the end of both films. The presence of such imagery, which jars the consistency of the film, provides yet another dialectic and para-

doxically enriches the hermeticism it is confounding by distancing it from the rational.

A detailed description of these films, short as they are, would require a volume. So many of the fleeting collages are composed of internal subcollages, associating within a single shape the iconography of different cultures, that several pages would be needed to describe each one's presence — which lasts on the screen perhaps a second — before one could go on to the shape it changes into, which of course would also have its subdivisions. Beyond that there is a welter of images and symbols moving around or behind the central image at many points in the film. In short, Harry Smith is utilizing cinema's potential to confound, through its speed, the perception of the spectator with a profusion of complex imagery. The language of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* has a comparable verticality. But in reading it, one adjusts by slowing down, analyzing. The speed of the film is fixed; the only recourse is to see it again and again at the same rate.

No. 10 begins with snow crystals falling through the frame. They become a molecular cluster with an abstract circumference of outwardly pointing red wedges. The atoms of the molecule separate to become the tree of life, an outlined figure with ten points which is the central Cabalistic diagram. A bird lands on it turning it into a skeleton with various totemic masks. At this point the flat background of expanding rings of wedges changes to radiating squares along a diminishing line of perspective, turning the plane of action into a field of depth. It is as if the idols and icons of the world's religions came to life within the spaces defined by all of Harry Smith's previous films. The most dynamic and most often employed illusion of depth in the film emerges from the creation of a recessed room or theater, whose

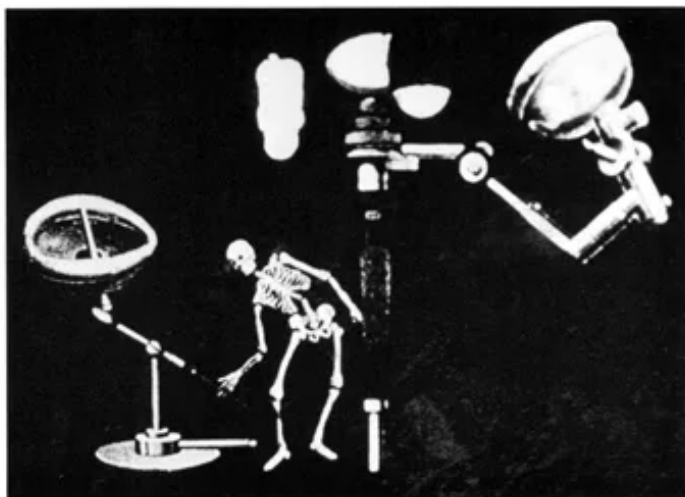
walls are receding planes of different colors. As on a stage it is as if a fourth wall had been removed so we can see within.

The first appearance of this theater coincides with the breakup of the skeleton and its reformation as a masked shaman, who floats upward through the ceiling and offscreen, leaving the space empty for a moment before it fades out. An unsupported flame hovers in the center of the room. Soon an athanor encloses it. In the earlier films an act of enclosure, of circles within a square, for example, almost always initiated a chain of transformations of the forms within at a rhythm all its own. So, too, here enclosures generate interior metamorphoses.

The fire constantly changes its shape, becoming birds and alchemical symbols, while a legged mask continues to circle the stage. After the athanor breaks up, the mask descends to the center and is instantly turned into three images: a football, a tiny globe, and again a mask. When vertically aligned, these three images become a goat-headed devil sitting on the earth, around which the serpent of the Aion has wrapped himself. At this point two illusions of depth are compounded as the squares radiate from the depth of the screen while everything remains situated within the theater.

A fire on the goat-devil's head becomes the bird which will carry him offscreen while the snake unties himself from the earth. The theater dissolves into an expanding purple circle, but the snake and the globe remain in the foreground over changing flat patterns and exploding wedges only to finally disappear in a briefly appearing circle of spectrally diffused colors. But out of the center of that circle which obliterated him the snake emerges slowly, with a string of beads and a child's doll for a body.

Most of the imagery of No. 11, or *Mirror Ani-*



The skeleton juggling a baby in the central tableau of heaven.



Max Müller casts a spell on the magus.

mations, is identical to that of No. 10. The film differs essentially in that it is carefully synchronized to Thelonius Monk's *Mysterioso*. Most of the significant scenes of the earlier film recur here with slight variations; the dance of an Indian and her shadow, the pursuit within a subdivided theater, the chiromantic variations, and a grimaing woman in the picture frame all appear in approximately the same temporal sequence. The tree of life, the snake, the symbols of the sun, moon, Hermes and Neptune within the pillbox, the tarot cards, the athanor, present themselves in altered contexts. The Buddhist and Tibetan imagery, as well as the entire end of the film from the appearance of the moon on, are absent.

The most prominent innovation in No. 11 — a priestess dressed in white who is created at the beginning of the film when lightning strikes a snowflake — generates rhythmic and structural differences. Her hierarchic gestures are synchronized to the pulse of Monk's music. Her occupation of the center of the screen at the beginning and end of the film finds reinforcement in regular movements of figures and triangles of light around all four sides of the screen. The transformations occur within the metrical pattern established by the movements of her arms, even when she is not on the screen. Her presence and the way she brackets the whole film diminish the weight of the dancer and the postman.

Despite some elaborations on the spatial strategies of No. 10, such as a scene in which the snake wraps itself around the back of the recessed theater and snatches a figure within it, No. 11 underplays the dialectic of depth and plane so important in the earlier film. There are less convulsive changes of the depicted screen space. The whole film seems to move slower and the dazzling flood of imagery is somewhat chastened.

This chastening and the presence of the priestess as the mediator and controller of the operations of the film forecast the radical jump in style to No. 12. This film, sometimes called *The Magic Feature* or *Heaven and Earth Magic*, is Harry Smith's most ambitious and most difficult work. Although it is particularly risky to assign dates to the animated films he made in New York, No. 12 seems to have occupied him through most of the 1950s, especially toward the end of that decade.

The conception of this work incarnates the myth of the absolute film in its expansive form. The hour-long version that can be seen today is but a fragment of the original plan, but even so it is among the very highest achievements of the American avant-garde cinema and one of the central texts of its mythopoetic phase.

In the interview published in the *Film Culture Reader*, the film maker describes the plan for the whole film:

I must say that I'm amazed, after having seen the black-and-white film (#12) last night, at the labor that went into it. It is incredible that I had enough energy to do it. Most of my mind was pushed aside into some sort of theoretical sorting of the pieces, mainly on the basis that I have described: First, I collected the pieces out of old catalogues and books and whatever; then made up file cards of all possible combinations of them; then, I spent maybe a few months trying to sort the cards into logical order. A script was made for that. All the script and the pieces were made for a film at least four times as long. There were wonderful masks and things cut out. Like when the dog pushes the scene away at the end of the film, in-

stead of the title "end" what is really there is a transparent screen that has a candle burning behind it on which a cat fight begins—shadow forms of cats begin fighting. Then, all sorts of complicated effects; I had held these off. The radiations were to begin at this point. Then Noah's Ark appears. There were beautiful scratch-board drawings, probably the finest drawings I ever made—really pretty. Maybe 200 were made for that one scene. Then there's a graveyard scene, when the dead are all raised again. What actually happens at the end of the film is everybody's put in a teacup, because all kinds of horrible monsters came out of the graveyard, like animals that folded into one another. Then everyone gets thrown in a teacup, which is made out of a head, and stirred up. This is the Trip to Heaven and the Return, then the Noah's Ark, then The Raising of the Dead, and finally the Stirring of Everyone in a Teacup. It was to be in four parts. The script was made up for the whole works on the basis of sorting pieces. It was exhaustingly long in its original form. When I say that it was cut, mainly what was cut out was, say, instead of the little man bowing and then standing up, he would stay bowed down much longer in the original. The cutting that was done was really a correction of timing. It's better in its original form.

Although the film was shot in black and white, Smith built a projector with color filters that could change the tint of the images. Furthermore, the whole film was to be projected through a series of masking slides which would transform the shape of the screen. The slides take the form of important images within the film, such as a watermelon or an egg. Thus the entire movement would be enclosed within the projection of the slides. A different filter could determine the color of the surrounding slides. The whole apparatus functioned only once. In the late 1950s or early 1960s he presented the film for



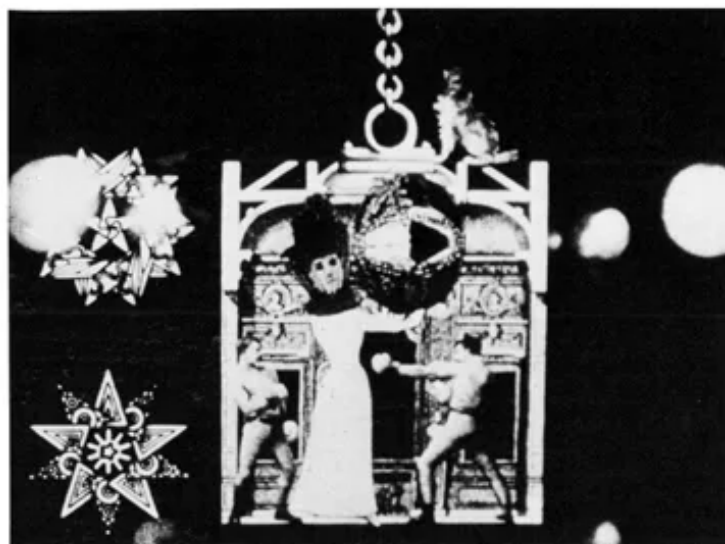
potential backers at Steinway Hall in New York. Smith would have liked to have installed seats in the form of the slide images — a watermelon seat, an egg seat, etc. — with an electrically controlled mechanism that would have changed the colors and the slides in accordance with the movements of the spectators in their seats. Lacking the extravagant means necessary to achieve this, he manipulated the changes by hand.

Despite the multiplicity of their references and obscure allusions, Nos. 10 and 11 offer easier access to the viewer than No. 12. Here Smith avoids historical iconography, with the possible exception of the universally understood skeleton. The form of the film evokes hermetic maneuvers, which are all the more distanced because of their abstraction and lack of specificity. The tone of the film seems to call for a close reading which the form frustrates. Furthermore, the investigation of his sources (which he alludes to obliquely in his notes on the film) opens up seemingly fruitful approaches to the film without ever providing satisfying insights.

The note veers from an elliptical description of the film's images to allusions to its sources. When he writes, "Next follows an elaborate exposition of the heavenly land in terms of Israel, Montreal, and the second part depicts the heroine's return to earth from being eaten by Max Müller on the day Edward the Seventh dedicated the Great Sewer of London," he is deliberately obscuring the film with hints about it. By Israel he means the Cabalah, particularly the three books translated by MacGregor Mathers as *The Kabbalah Unveiled*: "The Book of Concealed Mystery," "The Greater Holy Assembly," and "The Lesser Holy Assembly." Here the Cabalists interpret the tree of life in terms of the body of God, with intricate and detailed description of features, members, configurations of the beard, etc.

The reference to Montreal, he later explained, indicates the equal influence of Dr. Wildner Penfield of the Montreal Neurological Institute, whose extensive open brain operations on epileptics are described in *Epilepsy and the Functional Anatomy of the Human Brain* published in Boston in 1954. Several aspects of Penfield's book intrigued Smith: the hallucinations of the patients under brain surgery; the topology and geography of the cerebral cortex; and the distribution and juxtaposition of nervous centers. His occasional remark that No. 12 takes place in the fissure of Silvius, one of the major folds in the brain, is another allusion to Penfield.

A photograph of Max Müller, 19th-century philologist and editor of *The Sacred Books of the East*, actually appears in the film. What Smith does not say is that this is the only face, out of several, which has a specific reference. Naturally Smith's identification of this figure (which does have a privileged place in the film) leads us to wonder, fruitlessly, who the other Victorian visages might be.



Harry Smith, No. 12, ca. 1958.

The descent from heaven in an elevator.

Finally, the allusion to the day the London sewers were inaugurated turns out to refer to the engraving from an illustrated magazine that provided the backdrop for the final scene of the film. The very choice of late 19th-century engravings as the materials for his collage brings to mind the influence of Max Ernst's books, *La Femme 100 Têtes* and *Une Semaine de Bonté*. As we shall see there are other, structural, reports with Ernst in this film.

The broadest outline of the "action" of No. 12 agrees with the film maker's ironic note. As in No. 10 there are two main characters, a man and a woman; but here the man assumes the role of the priestess from No. 11, not that of the postman. Although Smith has described him as having the same function as the prop mover in traditional Japanese theater, his continual manipulations in the alchemical context of No. 12, coupled with his (almost) absolute resistance to change when everything else, including the heroine, is under constant metamorphosis, elevates him into the status of a magus. According to the argument of the film, he injects her with a magical potion while she sits in a diabolical dentist's chair. She rises to heaven and becomes fragmented. The "elaborate exposition of the heavenly land" occurs while the magus attempts a number of serial operations at putting her back together. He does not succeed until after they are eaten by the giant head of a man (Max Müller) and they are redescending to earth in an elevator. Their arrival coincides with an obscure celebration seen in scatological imagery (the Great Sewer) in which a climactic recapitulation of the journey blends into an ending which is the exact reversal of the opening shots.

The reader of Dr. Penfield might identify the injection of the heroine and the subsequent explosion of her cranium with the effects of open brain surgery on the conscious patient. Since the operation is painless, after a local anesthetic has been applied to the surface of the skull, Penfield had his patients talk while he probed their brains with his surgical needle. The visions, memories, sensory illusions, and motor reactions of individual patients when particular areas of their brains were touched, are recorded by Penfield in numerous case histories.

A significant case of the fusion of a religious cosmology with mental disorder would be Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. Harry Smith first brought this book to my attention in a context unrelated to No. 12, but later he referred to the first tableau after the ascent as "Schreber's heaven." In the book, a well educated, influential German jurist describes vividly two periods of extreme paranoia in 1884 and 1893. The text is neither clinical nor apocalyptic. Although Schreber sees himself as mentally disturbed, he presents his fantasies as metaphysical revelations, and himself as the privileged martyr to these insights. In essence, his thesis is that God attracts human nerves to the "forecourts of heaven." Among his numerous paranoid hallucinations were the ideas that he had contact on the nerve plane with other people which they refused to admit in the flesh, that his stomach had been replaced with an inferior one, and that the boundaries of male and female were confused within him. Freud wrote a psychoanalytical study of the book, finding it a psychosis based on homosexual fears. Harry Smith seems to be interested in it, as in all psychological





Max Ernst, *La femme 100 Têtes*, engravings, 1929.

phenomena, because of the quality of its imagination.

Schreber's father, Daniel Gottlob Moritz Schreber, was a physician and author of a very popular exercise book, *Medical Indoor Exercises*. From this book Smith took the character of the magus. By cataloguing the illustrations for the exercises, he collected a sequence of gestures which he animated into all the movements of the film's main character.

What makes the film much more complicated than its argument and what obscures its outlines are the multiplicities of details filling the images and the refusal on the part of the film maker to indicate a hierarchy of importance among these details. For example, before the dentist's chair can be used it must be adjusted. A bird might lay an egg out of which comes the hammer with which the magus can transform the dentist's chair. Other figures might carry out bottles, mortars and pestles, and syringes to prepare a liquid with which to oil the chair; an almost identical set of operations would be repeated for the preparation of the potion to be injected into the heroine. Since the viewer never knows the desired end of an operation or a series of operations, he must portion his attention evenly to these endless varied paratactic procedures.

In addition to this, countless creatures and things are crossing the screen while these actions are going on: a dog, a cat, a skeleton horse, a walking house, a cow, sheep, two spoonlike creatures, an homunculus, birds. At times they contribute to the operation at hand, but just as often their participation is deliberately obscure.

The technique of distancing the dramatic focuses of a story behind a continual foreground of evenly accented detail is a literary tactic dating from the novels of Raymond Roussel (before the First World War) and periodically revived, most recently in the plays of Richard Foreman. Harry Smith has offered its hypostatic instance in cinema. His continual alternation between associative and disassociative sound effects underlines this distancing; for as often as he will synchronize the sound of a dog barking when the dog crosses the screen, or screams when the woman is being dismembered, he will connect moanings with a horse, suddenly inject applause, or precede or follow an event with the sound appropriate to it.

Perhaps even more disorienting than the pressure of detail and the dialectic of the sound is the random combination of certain recurrent images. Like Brakhage in *Prelude: Dog Star Man*, Harry Smith found a way of incorporating aleatoric operations into his film without sacrificing its structure to chance. In the *Film Culture Reader* he says:

All the permutations possible were built up: say, there's a hammer in it, and there's a vase, and there's a woman, and there's a dog. Various things could then be done—hammer hits dog; woman

hits dog; dog jumps into vase; so forth. It was possible to build up an enormous number of cross references.

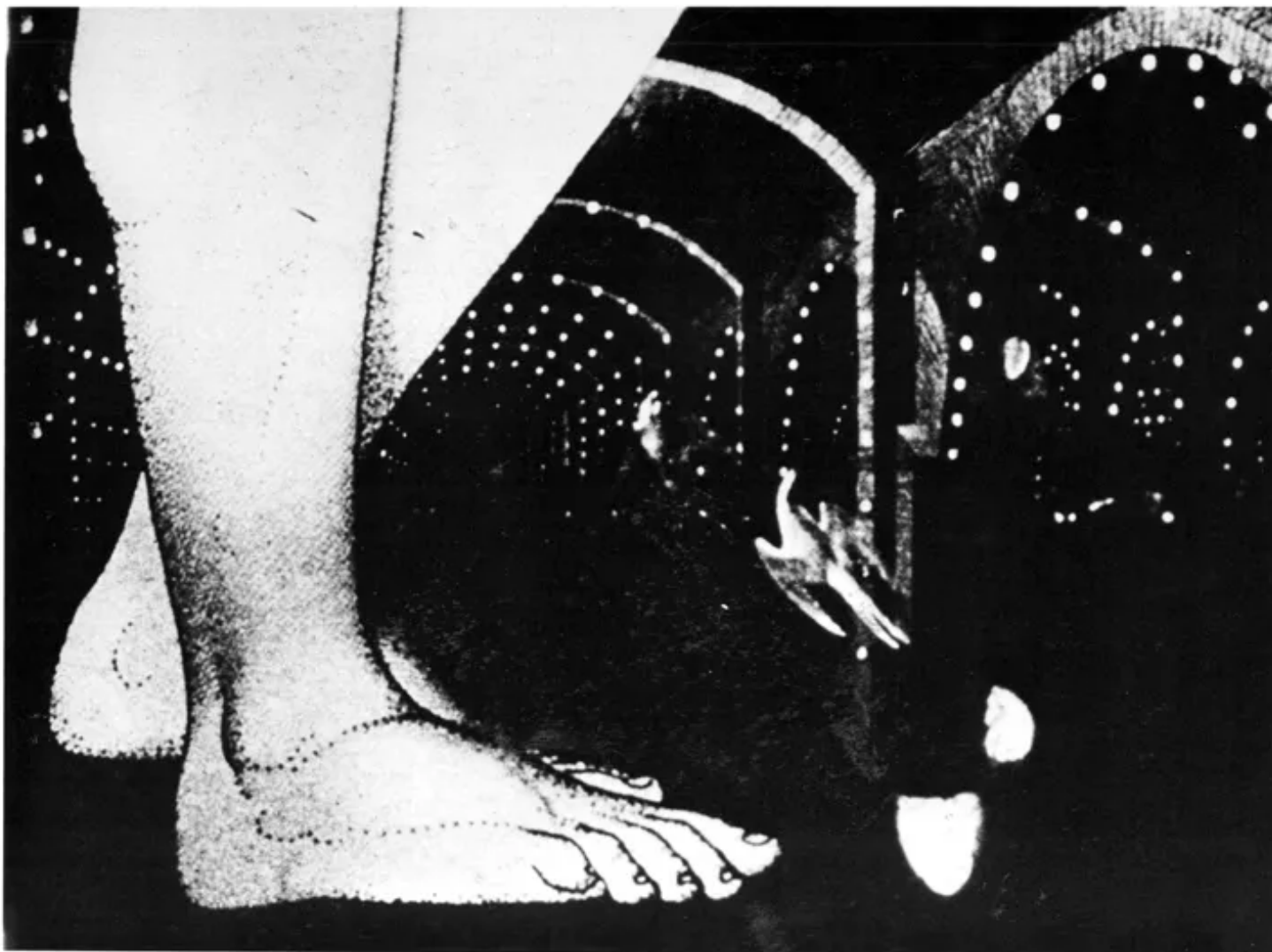
I tried as much as possible to make the whole thing automatic, the production automatic rather than any kind of logical process. Though, at this point, Allen Ginsberg denies having said it, about the time I started making those films, he told me that William Burroughs made a change in the Surrealistic process—because, you know, all that stuff comes from the Surrealists—that business of folding a piece of paper: One person draws the head and then folds it over, and somebody else draws the body. What do they call it? The Exquisite Corpse. Somebody later, perhaps Burroughs, realized that something was directing it, that it wasn't arbitrary, and that there was some kind of what you might call God. It wasn't just chance....

I never did finish that sentence about the relation of Surrealism to my things: I assumed that something was controlling the course of action and that it was not simply arbitrary, so that by sortilege (as you know, there is a system of divination called "sortilege") everything would come out all right.

Smith's use of chance coincides with his idea of the mantic function of the artist. He has said, "My movies are made by God; I was just the medium for them." The chance variations on the basic imagistic vocabulary of the film provide yet another metaphor between his film and the Great Work of the alchemists. For the Renaissance alchemist the preparation of his tools and of himself equaled in importance the act of transformation itself. Since every element in an alchemical change had to be perfect, each instrument and chemical had its own intricate preparation. Alchemical texts tend to read like endless recipes of purification, fire-marking, etc. The commitment to preliminaries is so strong that, in its spiritual interpretation, alchemy becomes the slow perfection of the alchemist; the accent shifts from goals to processes. The viewer of *No. 12* finds himself confronted with repetitive scenes of preparation — an egg hatches a hammer, which changes a machine, which will produce a liquid, etc. — toward a *telos* that is absolutely circular. The characters of the film end up precisely as they were at the beginning. Everything returns to its place of origin.

*No. 12* shares with the mythopoetic cinema of Brakhage, Anger, and Markopoulos, the theme of the divided being or splintered consciousness which must be reintegrated. This collective theme is an inheritance from Romanticism. In Smith's version of the myth, heaven and the human brain are conflated. When the physically divided woman first arrives in heaven she is seen within the frame of a female head. Her release from the anxieties of Selfhood comes at the end of the film when the elevator brings her back to earth, down through the titanic body of Max Müller, who is last seen circumscribed by the same female head. Her disappearance from the action of the middle of the film cannot be construed as an escape from her anxiety (which I





Harry Smith, No. 12, ca. 1958.

*The first vision of earth: Max Müller's feet.*

have called Selfhood); these are her moments of maximal fragmentation when all of the magus' efforts are directed at bringing her back, or, at least, preparing the tools to do so.

All the movement in the film occurs along the plane of the screen. There are no actions into or out of the screen depth. In place of it, considerable attention is paid to offscreen space. While most of the off movement involves the left and right sides of the image, following the law of gravity, there are occasional descents and ascents from the top and bottom. At the very beginning of the film, Smith elliptically suggests that the magus has walked around the back of the screen: he pushes one sarcophagus on from the right; then without crossing the screen he pushes another on from the left.

The absence of movement in depth draws the viewer's attention to subtle spatial illusions of foreground and background within the frontal plane. Figures do pass in front of or behind one another. Late in the film an elaborate chase occurs around a masonry palace, with the magus rushing off and on screen, carrying the heroine, pursued by several figures. At each alternative sweep they pass in front of or behind the palace (through whose windows and arches they can be partially seen).

At one point in the film the whole plane of the screen splits laterally to show another plane on which a skeleton is operating a machine. The film maker postponed the use of superimposition until the climax. At the end of the film, when the elevator lands on earth, transparent Greek statues pass in front of the action; somewhat later the major images are recapitulated in superimposition within a crystal ball.

Although there is no movement into or out of screen depth, various strategies are employed to suggest, at times, a recess of space there. The radiating balls, which help to create the illusions of ascent and descent to and from heaven, are the first of these. A room or theater is suggested immediately afterward in the first of the heavenly landscapes. Finally, the image of the Great Sewer, the last backdrop of the film, looks like a group of receding arcades.

Among the more interesting spatial strategies in No. 12 are the sudden manifestations of the law of gravity. Through most of the film, figures simply move along virtual horizontal lines imagined within the black background. They do not need the support of a floor or structure to keep from falling out of the frame. But occasionally, as when the arch forms in the lower part of the screen, such support suddenly becomes necessary. The most dramatic use of this change of pace occurs during the episode in which a line of couches descend vertically down the screen. They create a void within the screen. The magus cannot pass without leaping onto one of the passing couches for support. His alternative, of course, is to fly over the void by means of the umbrella as a parachute.

A related configuration of space within the black background would be the series of arches through which the magus walks or rides on the couch-boat. Normally, passage across the screen is smooth, along a single plane. When he begins to pass through arches (by crossing in front of the right-hand pillar and behind the left-hand pillar of the arch) a sense of depth emerges without the illusion of diminishing into the vanishing point of the screen.

The circularity of the film's form, the use of 19th-century engravings, and above all the theme of the mutable woman recalls Max Ernst's collage novel, *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1929), whose title in French puns as the woman with a 100 (cents) heads or the woman without (sans) heads. That novel, in collage pictures, begins and ends with the same image. Within it are sections and subsections built upon varying degrees of thematic and narrative sequence. Whenever a series of plates has a specific narrative and therefore temporal logic, Ernst introduces another image, or images, into the collage which does not follow the same unity of time or scale.

The collages abound in complex machinery and scenes of violence and dismemberment. Studying the images in sequence, the reader experiences promises of narration which continually evaporate or transform into chains of metaphor. The ultimate unity of the book is that of the dream. Harry Smith has said that he let his dreams determine the filming of No. 12. According to his account he slept fitfully in the studio where he was filming for the entire year in which the film was being shot. He would sleep for a while, then animate his dreams. The exact relation between his dreams and the structure of the film is ambiguous, unless we can suppose that he dreamed the life of the figures he had already cut out and assembled for his film. What is more likely is that he established an intuitive

relationship between the structures of his dreams and the substructures of the film.

Last year at Anthology Film Archives Smith spontaneously delivered a lecture to a group of students he happened upon in that theater. As they were looking at a film, not by him, in the realist tradition — a film of photographed actuality — he said, "You shouldn't be looking at this as a continuity. Film frames are hieroglyphs, even when they look like actuality. You should think of the individual film frame, always, as a glyph, and then you'll understand what cinema is about." It is certainly true that within Smith's own work the hieroglyphic reduction is essential. When he finally began to shoot actualities, for No. 14 (1965), he translated the spatial and temporal tactics of his earlier films into superimposition structures. He also managed to directly fuse animation to live photography when he combined the approach to the Emerald City in No. 13 with a kaleidoscope sequence to make *The Tin Woodsman's Dream*.

Now he is editing *Mahagoney*, for which No. 14 had been preparatory. Again he speaks of it with the language reserved for the myth of the absolute film. It will be, he forecasts, the greatest avant-garde film, a work which will diminish all that preceded it, including his own films; for it will coincide with (perhaps instigate) a new American revolution. Again its proportions seem to be growing beyond the normal range of cinema. He speaks of projecting it on a wall made of four specially designed pool table tops and prize fight rings, reflecting the central scenes of Brecht and Weill's opera upon which it is based, loosely, but devoutly as the Cabala is based on the words of the Bible. ■

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The final tableau of earth: all things return to the origins.

