

10/00

METAPHYSICAL STRUCTURALISM

The Videotapes of Bill Viola

By: Gene Youngblood

Bill Viola is recognized around the world as a major figure in video art. Many believe he is the most important artist working in video today. With tapes of remarkable visual and aural beauty, poetic resonance and technical virtuosity, Viola has virtually defined the state of the art for more than a decade and has given the young tradition at least a score of its acknowledged masterpieces. There can be no serious center of film/video studies in the western world and Japan that has not exhibited his work, and his influence on his contemporaries and on the new generation of video artists in the United States is incalculable.

Born in New York in 1951, Viola received his early training in electronic music and video at Syracuse University; his first videotapes were produced there in 1972 at the pioneering Synapse Video Center. Meanwhile he continued working in electronic and acoustical sound. In 1973 he began a long association with composer David Tudor as a founding member of Tudor's Rainforest ensemble; the following year he also performed with Alvin Lucier. He has maintained active involvement in musical performance and sound installations ever since, an interest that is reflected in the structure, rhythm and acoustic qualities of his work in video.

Conceptual and performance art were also important early influences, not only in the general cultural sense but through working as technical assistant to other artists, first at the Synapse Video Center, later (from 1974 to 1976) as technical director in charge of production at Art/Tapes/22 in Florence, Italy. Nam June Paik, Alan Kaprow, Dennis Oppenheim, Vito Acconci, Douglas Davis and Peter Campus were among the artists with whom Viola worked at these facilities. Campus, who used video techniques to create visual metaphors for psychological and metaphysical themes (as in Three Transitions, 1973), strongly influenced Viola's approach to performance in video. But Viola was equally inspired by the work of experimental filmmakers, especially Michael Snow and Stan Brakhage. The influence of Snow's 1966 classic of structural cinema, Wavelength, is apparent in The Space Between the Teeth (1976) and Ancient of Days (1981). References to Brakhage are found in Hatsu-Yume (First Dream) (1981) and in I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like (1986).

The life of other cultures has also been an important influence on Viola's work. He has traveled to every continent on the globe for the production of his videotapes, renowned for their exotic settings. For the first two years of this decade he lived in Japan, where he studied with Zen priest Daien Tanaka and was artist in residence at the Sony Corporation. Since 1982 he has resided in Southern California. Still a young man not yet midway through his career, he has already received retrospective exhibitions at some of the most prestigious museums in the United States and Europe, and has been honored with this country's highest awards for distinguished achievement in his field. He is among the very few video artists who are successful enough to practice their craft full time without commercial compromise.

If Viola is the most acclaimed video artist in the world today it's because his work transcends video as such; it represents a fundamental contribution to the larger domain of cinema in general. Although video art usually is identified with the contemporary fine arts community, its proper context is the tradition of experimental cinema, outside of which it cannot be understood on any level more serious than that of art world fashion or sensibility. It is important to separate cinema from its medium just as we separate music from any particular instrument. Cinema is the art of organizing a stream of audiovisual events in time. It's an event-stream, like music. There are currently at least four media through which we can practice cinema -- film, video, computer, holography -- just as there are many instruments through which we practice music. Of course each has distinct properties and contributes differently to the theory of cinema. Through its technology and the cultural and aesthetic milieu in which it has developed, video expands the possibilities of cinema, enlarges our understanding of what cinema can be and do. What we really mean by "video art," then, is experimental cinema practiced electronically -- a personal rather than institutional enterprise, representing the poetic form of cinema as opposed to the prose form of narrative storytelling. In other words, it's the true art of cinema, the opposite of entertainment, if by art we mean a process of exploration and inquiry.

Viola's contribution to cinematic language represents a synthesis of four traditions: the tradition of magic cinema begun by Georges Melies; the tradition of structural cinema, particularly that of Michael Snow; the tradition of lyric or visionary cinema represented by Stan Brakhage; and the tradition of performance art, especially the early video performances of Peter Campus. On one hand Viola constructs a universe of fire miracles and magic mountains, of levitations and shamanism, of mirages and mystic rituals, of Dreamtime and the Other World. Yet these marvels are rendered in a self-referential manner that foregrounds the logic of the event-stream, keeping us constantly aware of the structure of our experience: Viola operates simultaneously as structuralist and fabulist, phenomenologist and visionary. This paradoxical combination of illusionism with self-reference is quintessentially postmodern. It has been the goal of the poststructuralist movement in all the arts for more than a decade. In contemporary theatre it is represented by Robert Wilson or Tadeus Kantor, in dance by Pina Bausch, in painting by Eric Fischl or Robert Longo, in photography by Cindy Sherman, in cinema by Jean-Luc Godard, Hans-Jurgen Syberberg, Manoel de Oliveira or Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Viola is the only artist of comparable achievement currently working in video. The distinctly modern sense of self-referential presentation as opposed to illusory representation is achieved in his work through formal strategies, particularly the manipulation of time, and through the influence of performance art. The latter endows his work with the quality of an intensely personal, deeply subjective private language that is so appropriate to the intimacy of his chosen medium and the spiritual nature of his concerns. Like Walt Whitman, like William Blake, he works with the self in an extended sense, seeking the universal in the personal. The result is distinctly a "style" -- at once a uniquely personal idiom and a commanding public medium.

Viola's work has come to be synonymous with state of the art technology; yet in its restraint and simplicity it could not be farther from the superficial "effects" that unfortunately pass for art in so much video today. For where his contemporaries are merely clever Viola is great; that is to say, he can do great things without being clever. His signature is unmistakable: a kind of metaphysical structuralism in which nonverbal streams of image and sound -- impeccably crafted, magisterially orchestrated explore the nature of the photographic medium, the splendors of the phenomenal world, the categories of perception, the cognitive and spiritual inner life of the witness. Compounded of many resonances, each level of meaning interwoven with myriad others, these exquisite "visual songs" give us the elegant music of the poet's voice.

Visual Thinking: The Fundamental Narrative

Like all poetry these compositions demand concentration and reflection. As much as they are to be looked at and listened to, they must also be thoughtfully "read." Even though they're just nonverbal chains of audiovisual events without words or music, they are nevertheless linear narratives. Their structure is based on the natural learning curve, that fundamental perceptual/conceptual narrative that lies beneath language. As in life, the witness is presented with novel information; there's a series of observations, attempts at making sense of the data, discerning patterns, establishing connections. Through this analysis perception becomes conception, image becomes idea, and there is realization. This process of visual thinking follows the classical vector of linear narrativity from beginning to middle to end in that order. It is not unique to Viola. From Dziga Vertov to Stan Brakhage, visual thinking has always been the language of experimental cinema. Vertov and Brakhage approach it primarily through editing. The rhythm of editing is important for Viola too, but in his work the narrative is carried equally by the archetypal nature of his images, so full of resonance that they function as a kind of protolanguage without the literalness and specificity of speech. Entering this prelinguistic terrain the witness feels everything to be a thought. Yet these images, like Chinese ideograms, aren't so much symbolic as suggestive, steering the mind in general directions: a composition may express a specific set of concepts while remaining open to diverse interpretation. There's as much meaning in Viola's work as the witness can project into it.

The organization of the event-stream is essentially musical. For Viola as for Vertov and Brakhage, there's no fundamental difference between cinematic and musical composition; both are processes of orchestrating events in time. Playing on rhythm, repetition and series, he works as a composer. As in music, his compositional elements are cycles, dichotomies or harmonic opposites -- foreground/background, time/timelessness, active space/empty space, sound/silence, stillness/motion. As in music, silence and inactivity are as important as sound and activity. And, as in music, duration is the most important element of all: rhythm and timing create the narrative. There's perceptual timing and conceptual timing; if percept is to become concept, time must move slowly. "Duration is to consciousness," he has said, "as light is to the eye." Sustained duration forces thinking instead of only seeing; it's a metaphor for contemplation. It allows us to step outside of the event-stream and perceive it in a larger context of

meaning and relationship. It's the difference between being in an automobile accident and witnessing it from the side of the road. There's a necessity, then, for extended time, for dreamtime, for a meditative time that allows us to project our imagination into the event-stream. Only in this way can sensation become thought, perception become an act of intelligence and of grace. Only in this way does the process of viewing become a creative act. No longer voyeurs, we give the experience to ourselves. We become the narrative.

The Sound of Space and Time

No one in the history of film or video has employed sound so brilliantly, integrated it so totally into the form and content of the narrative. If Viola's organization of the image stream can be called musical, his approach to sound is even more so. His work may contain no music in the conventional sense, but he records and orchestrates ambient sound in a manner that is profoundly musical. What normally is regarded as background noise is for him foreground figure or object -- positive rather than negative space. He seeks it out deliberately, records it at a high signal level and organizes it according to musical categories such as timbre, texture, tone, interval, rhythm. This is a consequence of his involvement in music. Through his work with Tudor and Lucier he came to understand sound as "a material thing, a physical entity" that defines space as much as light does. Like Lucier, La Monte Young, Max Neuhaus, Bernhard Leitner and others, he experimented with sound as a spatial, architectural phenomenon, using oscillators to generate standing wave patterns that were perceivable only in certain places in a room. As a result, he came to think of audio as another way of representing space in video. His medium would be an all-embracing "perceptual field" in which sound and image would support an expanded apprehension of space and time: object perception became what he called "field perception." What Viola does with sound is similar to what he does with time through image manipulation -- it's an attempt to bring into consciousness that which is just beyond our level of awareness but is not inaccessible. For this reason he's particularly fond of the low base frequencies at that point where sound crosses over from a conceptual to a physical phenomenon capable of penetrating walls and of resonating in one's chest. Among other things, this provides a "bottom" that anchors the image-stream in a surrounding spatiality, endowing it with grandeur and monumental presence.

With few exceptions Viola always uses sound that was recorded with the image; if the image is later slowed down, so is the sound. In contrast to the standard Hollywood practice of mixing discrete soundtracks down to two stereo channels (which flattens the sound and disconnects it from the image), Viola's method of binaural recording simultaneous with photography naturalizes the cinematic space, giving it realistic depth and resonance. It's ironic, then, that of the forty-four tapes he has produced to date only the last seven are available in stereo (in this collection only Ancient of Days is stereo). All his tapes since Migration were recorded in stereo, but until 1980 they were edited at the Television Laboratory at WNET Channel 13 in New York, where he was artist in residence. The Lab's old two-inch quadruplex tape machines didn't have stereo capability and there was no way the original stereo soundtracks could be retained in the final edit.

Research in perceptual psychology has shown that our ability to recognize a sound is determined primarily by its transient: if a few milliseconds are shaved off the beginning of, say, a taped violin note so that the waves don't start at the onset of the sound, we don't immediately recognize it as a violin. Viola turns this "mistake" into clever advantage: he begins a scene with some familiar off-screen ambient sound -- radio, automobile, airplane, siren -- recorded loud and introduced mid-transient; the resulting cognitive dissonance endows the scene with a dramatic intensity normally achieved through music. This is particularly striking in his time-lapse works where numerous recordings are made of a space over long periods of time and then compressed together ("compared") in editing. Since the weather and topology of the space change over time, its sounds change also; the result is a kind of musique concrete which suggests, hauntingly, that time has a sound.

Frequently the ambient sounds issue from the off-camera presence of Viola himself producing the very cinematic space we're witnessing -- his footsteps, his voice whispering to an assistant, equipment being moved about. Again, what seems a mistake is, like the truncated transients, a deliberate strategy in this case to underscore his theme of subjective perception. We are witnessing some magical event that can't possibly be happening in the real world; normally the intrusion of such noises would be disastrous to our suspension of disbelief. But since illusion isn't the point they actually reinforce the metaphor by representing the "objective" side of the dualism: the dream world is on the screen while the "real" world is on the soundtrack. This device has the paradoxical effect of drawing attention to the artificiality of the cinematic space while reinforcing its realism, for we know that both image and sound were recorded simultaneously. Dreamtime and real time seem to occupy the same phenomenological domain -- which of

course they actually do: the cognitive domain of the witness, the ultimate subject of Viola's art.

Cinematic Self-Reference

Three general themes run throughout Viola's work and structure it on metathematic levels. The first is self-reference: the tapes are about the materials (image, sound, motion, time) and procedures (photography, editing) of cinematic practice in video. Experimental filmmakers of the sixties and seventies conducted a thorough investigation of the properties of the cinematic apparatus; few, however, managed so broad a spectrum of reflections as Viola, whose various works constitute meditations on the properties of the image (resolution, light, scale) and of sound (physicality, spatiality), on the illusion of motion, the enigma of time. He is frequently inspired by what he knows about a particular piece of equipment or cinematic technique. For example, Chott el-Djerid is about how video treats light as a liquid and about the illusion of depth in images of horizon-less space. But it's also about the telephoto lens in the same way that Migration is about the macro-closeup lens. The Reflecting Pool, on the other hand, explores in a self-referential way the nature of the composite image.

But it's the innovative approach to time that is the most prevalent feature of Viola's work and represents his most important contribution to cinematic language: cinema isn't a visual art, it's a time art; we don't look at pictures, we witness events. His singular project constitutes a profound investigation of those temporal manipulations of image and sound by which the attention of the witness is choreographed and meaning is produced in the cinematic space. Ancient of Days is a kind of anthology of his experiments with time, particularly the relation of digital timecode (used in computer editing) to perception. He may well be the only artist in the world today who is not only systematically addressing this issue but is actually beginning to reveal some possibilities, specifying new trajectories for cinematic language, whose evolution henceforth will depend on and be inseparable from the computer, that most intelligent of possible clocks.

Allegories In the Language of Subjective Perception

All this situates Viola's work in the tradition of structuralism; but it is rescued from structuralism's tedious didacticism by the presence of metaphor and poetic content: every reference to some property of the medium, every innovation in some cinematic strategy is meant to be read simultaneously as a metaphor for consciousness or perception, as a spiritual allegory, or as a reflection on the individual in society. This is the second thematic level, where the tapes become what Viola calls allegories in the language of subjective perception. Here the raw data of experience -- the images and sounds of the phenomenal world -- become metaphors for the personal subjective world of perception, cognition, imagination, dreams, memory.

On this level the tapes are about "what we do in our minds, how we perceive things inside rather than the physics of what they are outside." The artist becomes epistemologist, exploring the ways in which we perceive both the environment and experience itself. He addresses two aspects of this subjectivity. The first has to do with the physiology and psychology of perception: how the human perceptual apparatus (which Viola considers "part of the medium" of video) participates in the construction of reality as a subject-dependent phenomenon. We know for example that "out there" there's no light and no color, only electromagnetic waves of varying frequency; "out there" there's no sound and no music, only periodic variations in air pressure; "out there" there's no heat and no cold, only moving molecules with more or less mean kinetic energy; and certainly "out there" there's no sweet or sour, pain or pleasure. This is the neurophysiological side of our subjectivity, the cognitive interface between witness and world, wherein human reality is constructed. Viola addresses it through perceptual games or traps inspired by experiments in the literature of perceptual psychology. In Migration and Chott el-Djerid, for example, there are games of recognition that depend on resolution. The Reflecting Pool is structured around a subtle game of distraction and disappearance. Ancient of Days is filled with expectation traps and games of temporal ambiguity.

In these experiments the environment itself becomes the medium with which Viola works; for this reason a sense of place is paramount in his art. "Sometimes," he has written, "the landscape is the subject; other times it shares the moment in balance with an action taking place within it; yet always its energy is present and felt for what it is -- the natural raw material of the human psyche." Culture and spirituality are for him "expression of the overwhelming power of the landscape." He travels the world in search of power spots in the belief that there's always just one right place where an idea can come to life.

This attention to the enigma of the external landscape is balanced by evocations of the inner landscape of imagination: his work always contains metaphysical allusions beyond the empirical world. “Although I go out with my camera to record images,” he has said, “the real source of the images is within. The origination of the world within the self is the landscape I’m interested in. I think of building images from the inside out rather than from the outside in.” At times these reflections have the flavor of thought experiments devised by a scientist caught up in wild hypotheses, fascinated by metaphysical what-ifs what if we could surf on a soundwave at the speed of sound? (The Space Between the Teeth, 1976). What if a vase could release the energy of life? (The Morning After the Night of Power, 1977). What does a rock look like in slow motion? (Hatsu-Yume, 1981). How does the world appear from a moth’s point of view? (Sweet Light, 1977). What if we could see the limits of the visible? (Migration and Chott el-Djerid).

Thus, while Viola's work is emphatically of this world it aspires to revelation. He puts us on a level with ordinary experience and yet we experience it as a miracle, as an ecstasy. This is the third thematic level, where the works are compounded once again to read as metaphors for the domain of the spirit. It's a generalized spirituality that embraces grand themes like birth and death, the union of the animate and inanimate, the release of creativity, the identity of the soul. But Viola is influenced primarily by Eastern spiritual traditions, particularly Sufism and Buddhism, both notably epistemological, concerned with consciousness and the illusion of reality. This interrelates all three thematic levels so that the tapes are ultimately about the inseparability of the medium, the witness and the world.

Migration

(1976. Color. Monaural. 7:00 minutes)

The idea for Migration came to Viola while he was walking down a street one rainy day in New York. His glasses were covered with raindrops and he saw that each drop was a lens. Everything around him was covered with little hemispherical lenses that contained optical microcosms of the environment. He was surrounded by worlds within worlds. He couldn't see the images in the beads of water on a passing car but he knew they were there. It was a question of scale. He recalled an exhibition of satellite photos that showed first the east coast, then the New York area, then just Manhattan, then just lower Manhattan. What fascinated him was not that one could see buildings from that distance, but that such detail wasn't the result of a zoom or a blowup as we normally understand them. They hadn't used four different telephoto lenses and made four different pictures. It was all one computer-enhanced electronic image, a database. The information in the closeup existed already in the larger-scale .

End