

ACTIVATING THE VISUAL CORTEX

Interview with Jürgen Reble
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In July 2007, Jürgen Reble and Thomas Köner performed their piece *Quasar* at Amsterdam's 5daysoff-festival. In *Quasar*, Reble operates different 16mm projectors to project his experimental films across the walls and ceiling of the venue, as well as on the smoke that gradually fills the space. Reble is known as the 'film alchemist' for his experimental ways of dealing with celluloid filmstrip. He treats the celluloid with chemicals and manipulates it by hand using various instruments, such as exposing it to extreme weather for long periods. The result is film full of colorful, abstract images. Sonic Acts interviewed Jürgen Reble and Thomas Köner after the performance of *Quasar*, during the same week an exhibition opened in Middelburg featuring Reble's video-work *Yamanote Light Blast*.

AA: You clearly work in what we could now call a tradition of experimenting with cinema. You predominantly work with celluloid, as in *Quasar*, but not exclusively anymore?

JR: Since 2004 I have published works on video too. These are partly works made for video, and partly works made for film but transferred to video. It is more out of practical consideration than anything else. My wish is to publish every work in the same medium in which it was made. Visual animation is best

presented in the medium it was made for. But I am sure that there won't be many 16-mm-projectors available in twenty years time. That is why I started making prints of my films on video. If you work in celluloid and you refuse to do that, you will probably become quite isolated as an artist. In the end, almost nobody will care about your work anymore and nobody will see it.

Of course, my art is made for analog material. I learned filmmaking by taking the celluloid film in my hand, holding it against the light, putting it on a light table, taking a knife and then examining how many layers there are in a film. There is a red layer, a green, a yellow and a blue, and you can scrape off parts of it. Approaching film in that way was more interesting than using a camera, and I find it much harder to use a camera than to use a knife, chemicals and colored stuff to work on the celluloid itself. There is tactility to it, it has sculptural qualities. For instance, you can add layers by applying salts that you use in a toning process. You can leave the salt in the margin of the film strip and allow it to dry. Then suddenly you have salt crystals in the emulsion. If you do that, you are working with a three dimensional object and you are a sculptor, not a filmmaker. My fascination with film started from doing something with my body and my senses.

In digital film, this physicality is absent. How do you approach the digital?

Working with digital film is a thing that you do with your brain. Your brain makes decisions, not you hand or your body. But visually the approach is similar. I can work with it when I have a vision of what the material should look like in the end. How an image has to change according to my ideas and visions is obviously influenced by my experience with filmmaking. When you add a second layer in celluloid film to get a certain structure on the material, you immediately see what happens. Yet in filmmaking you are also always half blind. You have an idea of what can happen, but only when you run the film through the projector you can really see what is in the material. That is why it is always exciting to see it. The object – the filmstrip – turns into a subject and you become an object looking at the film. This change of relationship is absent when I work with digital video. With digital video, working proceeds in a much more step-by-step fashion. You make a decision, you go further with the decision, step after step. With film, I work up to a certain point, and then I decide I need a second working process to make a new composition with that film. After the film is developed and I am satisfied with the time and color conditions, and how one layer might fade into another, I start a second working process which may, for example, add a structure using an optical printer. Maybe the step-by-step process of digital video also has interesting aspects. You can bring a certain quality to images, you can add a structure in front, a texture in-between. In a sense, you can compare that with the process of putting chemicals on film, because you put something on the 'surface' of the film. But you will never have the sculptural qualities of celluloid, and you make decisions with the brain, not the hand. Working with digital video is smoother because the material lacks resistance.



Stadt in Flammen, Jürgen Reble, filmstill, © Jürgen Reble, courtesy of the artist.

The feeling of immersion you experience as a viewer seems to be crucial for the cinematic experience. Sometimes it is also used in a strong physical sense. Is this an issue for you?

I will try to explain my attitude to that. In the filmstrip there is the acidic base, sometimes there is polyester, and then there is the gelatin. When images are exposed to the gelatin they color the emulsion in which the chemicals are embedded. On the gelatin you have silver light trails and the molecules. Say I decide to film a volcano erupting: a very raw and intense physical act, stones are breaking through the surface of the earth, one element breaking through another. If I use such an image in my films, which I do, I would open the gelatin layer, and work with silver on the emulsion. I might develop the light parts. I would not bleach them with a normal bleacher but use one that disturbs the gelatin layer. In that way I create a physical reaction in the emulsion which really is the same as what the image shows. In a sense it is a re-creation of what nature does. Working like this, I can speak to all human beings because, even without having to think, they immediately understand what is happening. Because there is a physical presence, you just have to see it to feel what is going on. In my view, this is a much more direct way of communicating than filming the eruption of a volcano and then commenting on it. I work in the emulsion to make a correspondence between what nature does in the image and the structural and chemical treatment of the film. The volcano is just one example. Of course, the image of the volcano is there as content, but people are used to this illusion from conventional movies. It is what they see in the cinema (removed comma here) when a film is projected. I would like to bring things into the cinema that are normally left behind or thrown out. But I have no problem with the illusion at all – it can be very nice to play with that too.

It is interesting that you call this a 'more direct' way of working.

As my films are, in reality, very simple, I never had the impression that people were unable to understand them. They see things happening all around them all the time. Sometimes they are microscopic events, apparently invisible, but everything really happens in our world. You could ask why I still use these images when my work could be entirely abstract. It is because I like to deal with the visual cortex. Our visual cortex always wants to compare what it perceives with something that you already know. If you see a lot of structure with something floating behind it, the visual cortex will run very fast cycles to establish correlations between these visual inputs and what is already stored in your brain. That is a basic cinematic experience: activating your visual cortex.

I pour images into the brain that are not easily recognizable. I disturb the images and put things in-between so that you become irritated. Therefore, the amount of information explodes. Seeing *The Nervous System* by Ken Jacobs, in which he uses two projectors, was a very important experience for me. *The Nervous System* does a lot of things to your visual cortex that would normally never be experienced. Jacobs projects the same film twice, just a few frames apart.

The result is a flickering effect in your brain. You are always in-between two images and in-between two times. You can never bring the image together. Your visual cortex is disturbed and your brain is constantly trying to repair it. It is a very hallucinatory experience, a cinematic experience that you cannot control. You cannot reflect on it. You cannot say: "Oh, I must now watch it very carefully, frame by frame, to see what actually happens." If you try to see it analytically, the effect is lost. Of course, it is not easy to get an audience to that point and have them forget everything.

During the 1970s and 80s, Jürgen Reble was a member of the film-collective Schmelzdahin. He started making his own films, performances and installations in the early 1980s. He manipulates the film material by hand using chemical, biological and mechanical techniques. He is known as the 'film alchemist' and his work often portrays nonlinear abstract forms and colors.

<http://www.filmalchemist.de>

FILMOGRAPHY

Passion (1989)
Das Goldene Tor (1992)
Ein Bewehrter Partner (1993)
Instabile Materie (1995)
Chicago (1996)
Zillertal (1997)
Arktis (2004)
Yamanote Lightblast (2006)
L'après-midi d'un faune (2006)