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VIEW MASTER

FILMS BY ERNIE GEHR

★★★★

By Fred Camper

Earlier this month I heard a wonderfully erudite, enthusiastic lecture on Frank Capra by University of Chicago professor James Chandler. Making his case for Capra's films, he said in part that there are some self-referential moments in the narratives—a plausible argument that also set me thinking. Ever since the 70s, when heavy doses of European theory first made film study "respectable," scholars have spent much of their time on mainstream Hollywood movies, taking one of two basic approaches. One faction asserts that these films are not the naive escapist stories, transparent vehicles for stars, and affirmations of mainstream values that they seem but are instead somehow subversive, containing subrosa cultural critiques, suggesting fissures beneath their apparently unified forms, or even—as in the case for Capra—breaking with illusionism to make the viewer aware that he's watching a movie. Another, probably larger group criticizes Hollywood films as seamless entertainments that seek to lull the viewer into semiconsciousness while affirming the dominant ideology. But for both factions mindless escapism is the enemy and self-awareness is a virtue.

Given that position, it's genuinely stupefying that only a tiny number of film professors have specialized in the vital, vibrant American avant-garde movement, which dates back six decades. Not only have these films opposed the values of mainstream culture almost by definition, one of the defining characteristics of the best works is that they make conscious references to the filmmaking and viewing processes. When Maya Deren shows herself peering out of a window in her landmark 1943 *Meshes of the Afternoon*, she acknowledges that filmmaking mediates between viewer and external reality: the glass signals not only her consciousness, interposed between her eyes and the world, but the filmmaking process, with its lenses and rectangular frame, that expresses that consciousness. One cannot become mindlessly absorbed in the fictive world of this film because Deren acknowledges the process of its making—and, by implication, of its viewing.

One reason the avant-garde may be underacknowledged is that key filmmakers are rarely given screenings. In the last decade there have been perhaps four one-person Ernie Gehr shows in Chicago—his best-known work, *Serene Velocity* (1970), is a rapidly edited study of a corridor. But I've been unable to verify that any of the three films on the March 8 program at the School of the Art Institute—the 55-minute *Still* and two shorter films, *Untitled (1977)*, and *Table* (1976)—have ever been shown in Chicago. Interestingly, this screening was not scheduled by a curator, film programmer, or professor wishing to rectify an obvious oversight but came about because some filmmaking students wanted to see the films.

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Ernie Gehr was born in Milwaukee in 1941; he moved to New York City in 1966 and lived there (aside from some months in Berlin and some brief teaching stints, including two at the School of the Art Institute in the early 80s) until 1988, when he moved to San Francisco to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he remains today. I mention this history in part because the three films on this program have a distinct New York look: anyone who's ever walked a New York street should recognize their oddly compressed sense of space—the way that forms fill it or even seem to collide with one another.

Three key elements characterize all of Gehr's works, including those shot in such diverse locales as San Francisco and Berlin. First, he provides a cinematic representation of a space that's in some sense true to it—the window view in *Untitled (1977)*, for example, perfectly captures a certain kind of urban space. Second, his works always refer, often explicitly, to the materials of cinema—but never in the didactic, academic manner of many filmmakers who came after him. Third, because the relationship between the elements of his films is paradoxical and often surprising, his frequently mundane subjects serve as meditations on what one can and cannot know through the senses. Gehr's films seek to open up the black box of the viewer's perception: do I see a car or the image of a car? On film, of course, it's the image of a car, but Gehr also makes one think about how "artificial" retinal imagery is, mere electrical signals that the brain interprets. Yet Gehr's unpacking of perception is never overly analytical: in the end his films leave one with a more vivid sense of its mysteries.

All this can be found in capsule form in the silent *Untitled (1977)*, whose four minutes reflect the shooting time of a 100-foot camera roll, the shortest length generally available in 16-millimeter. (Gehr's early silent films are intended to be projected at 16 frames per second instead of the usual 24; his intention is to make the flicker of the projector—and thus the nature of film as a succession of projected stills—more visible. The slowest projection speed available at the School of the Art Institute is 18 frames per second, but the appearance is close enough.) As *Untitled (1977)* opens we see whitish blue streaks close to the camera continually appear and disappear. The background is indistinct, but gradually similar streaks seemingly at a greater distance come into focus, while the foreground streaks grow fuzzier. Soon we guess that we're looking at falling snow, and it seems we're viewing it from a window (in fact, from the window of Gehr's Brooklyn apartment) as he gradually changes the focus from close-up to infinity. Well before the focus change ends, a tannish red mass starts to materialize in the background; as it comes into focus we realize it's a brick wall. Shortly afterward the film ends.

For New Yorkers of ordinary means Gehr's brick wall represents the classic "picture window" view—indeed, it's luxurious compared to views of narrow airshafts. And it seems that for Gehr the barrier that many city dwellers face daily is a metaphor for the limitations of the cinematic image. The falling snow recalls the grain of film, while the individual streaks heighten our awareness of the individual still frames, as does the slow projection speed; by contrast, conventional films aim for the illusion of movement and of the actors' continuous presence. The rectilinear brick wall refers to the rectangular film frame, while the change in focus suggests a journey that merely replaces one visual barrier—the snow, or the film grain—with another, the brick wall.

STILL

Whereas in conventional narrative filmmaking the frame functions as an invisible window that leads us almost unawares into a fictional world, in a Gehr film windows or implied windows also suggest that the film frame can never really represent anything other than the materials of film itself. This might seem an academic point were it not for the fact that Gehr, like many of the best avant-gardists, sees the film frame as a metaphor for consciousness. Encouraged to peer into the *Untitled (1977)* scene, we find that its final image, the brick wall, is a kind of meditation device allowing us to reflect on the barriers to vision inherent in each of us.

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There's no window in the 16-minute *Table*, but there is another singular view: we see Gehr's breakfast table filmed from two slightly different angles. The filmmaker outlined two positions for his camera's base on a piece of wood and kept moving the camera back and forth between them. At times he also placed red and blue filters in front of the lens at both positions. Thus we see this small room over the course of a day through colored filters and in natural light and from two different angles. As the day passes, the sunlight moves across the room and the shadows cast by objects change, until finally it gets dark.

This description leaves out one key element: most of the shots are only a few frames long, and many are only one frame. Thus we see a very rapid, violent flicker throughout; similarly, the table's edge and the objects on the table's surface shift back and forth as the camera shifts between the two positions, an alteration so rapid that at times we seem to be seeing superimpositions. The flicker undercuts the stability of each individual image, and the color changes call into question the truth of any color perception. The slight displacement caused by the two camera positions not only reaffirms the arbitrariness of imagery but seems a conscious reference to binocular vision. Overall the effect is extraordinary; rarely have I watched a film that made me feel so alive.

Indeed, the nearly superimposed red and blue views reminded me a bit of 3-D comic books viewed without the colored glasses that come with them; such books also remind us that depth perception is an "artificial" construct. And the way the shadows define the composition is reminiscent of the exquisite candlelit narrative paintings of Georges de La Tour, in which light from a single source casts shadows that give the work a distinctive geography. I also thought of still life painting and Cezanne in particular, although Gehr presents this static scene as anything but still: his treatment suggests that even the most mundane perception is an almost violent process of creation and destruction. Gehr also reminds us that colors are assembled from components of various wavelengths—whether by means of the retina or of film projection, since the hues of color film are the result of its three layers, one for each primary color.

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Still remains one of Gehr's least screened and least appreciated films. It's slow for a Gehr work, in that its single view of a street—the camera never moves—is presented in real time. And the scene seems somewhat randomly selected: one looks across the street at a few buildings and storefronts, one with a small awning that says "Furniture" and another with a larger "Soda-Lunch" sign. The camera is at a very slight angle to the street, preventing one from equating the view with the film frame—as is encouraged by the head-on camera angle in *Untitled (1977)*—and indeed suggesting that the composition is nothing special. The film has eight sections determined by the length of 100- and 400-foot camera rolls: the first four are about 3 minutes each and silent, and the last four about 11 minutes each and include street sounds. These begin

and end, demarcated by black leader, without regard to the movements of cars and pedestrians—though Gehr did stage a few small incidents.

Gehr's main intervention is that all sections but the last are double exposures, each roll shot twice. And since the camera usually isn't moved between the two exposures, the facades of the buildings and the parked cars remain solid. But moving objects—cars and pedestrians—appear as ghostly, almost transparent shadows. Further, for some layers Gehr used a darker exposure or filmed them in lower light, so that some pedestrians seem gossamer thin. Gehr again calls attention to the nature of film, specifically the transparency of the film strip (he even titled an earlier work, a view of a highway, *Transparency*).

Still constitutes a dual meditation on the arbitrariness of film representation and of street life. The pedestrians and cars that enter and exit the frame generally have no relationship to one another, reminding us of our atomized existences, and when a man and woman do meet, then enter the "Soda-Lunch" shop together, it comes across as a moment of high drama, both because of the possible romantic connection and because most of the movements we see are lateral: any movement from front to back seems dynamic. Another "dramatic" moment comes when we see some parked yellow cabs in the first sound sections that are somewhat transparent: apparently they were moved between the two exposures. Forced to question our assumptions about objects' solidity, we're once again reminded that nothing on film is "real." This perception is heightened later when we see pedestrians through a parked van.

Viewed on its own, the single-exposure final section might appear banal. But the "lesson" of the prior sections transforms this mundane scene. Here one notices the profoundly alienated disconnectedness of the action, the way the frame selects only part of a larger reality, and the unstable nature of the objects on film.

Just as Gehr's apparently offhand, shifting compositions make the arbitrary choices of film visible, so his superimpositions call into question our usual assumption that film records a monolithic past. So when we watch the single exposure of the last section, we feel not only how transitory and limited our perception of this seemingly eternal street is, but how horrible, almost claustrophobically impoverished is our usual vision. Ironically, that sense sets the mind to work in protest, imagining new superimpositions and beginning to see all objects not as solid things but as accretions of light, just as they are on our retinas. ■