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Back to Basics

J. Hoberman

Ernie Gehr's work explores the fundamental conditions of film itself.

Ernie Gehr is a filmmaker's filmmaker—an unassuming thirty-nine-year-old New Yorker whose movies are so lucid and tough-minded they could serve as primers of motion picture perception. Between 1968 and 1971, Gehr released eight films ranging in length from five minutes to an hour; before he was thirty he was recognized by his peers as one of the two or three most brilliant practitioners of what was variously called “minimal,” “reductivist,” and “structural” filmmaking. Then Gehr fell silent. Only recently has he begun to release new films—confirming his position as one of the key avant-gardists of his generation.

Like Michael Snow, Paul Sharits, and others, Gehr has addressed himself to the fundamental qualities of film as film: the paradox of apparent motion, the “anxiety” arising out of three-dimensional representation on a two-dimensional plane, the tension between the photographed image and its material base.

Morning and *Wait* (both 1968) used varied time exposures to change static interiors into percussive flicker films. The black-and-white *Reverberation* (1969) re-filmed a few shots from an 8mm home movie—retarding the motion while accentuating the film grain—to “re-present” the original images in a haunting pointillist vortex. In *Transparency* (1969), Gehr created rippling, sinuous bands of color against a blue sky by undercranking his camera from a fixed position alongside New York's West Side Highway. For the black-and-white *Field* (1970), he moved the camera so rapidly over a landscape that nature was recorded as a mad, diagonal onrush of lines and shadows. With *History* (1970), Gehr dispensed with the lens altogether, exposing the film through a piece of black cheesecloth. The result was forty minutes of seething grain patterns, organized by the viewer's eye into a kind of



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Ernie Gehr's new films have confirmed his reputation as a key avant-gardist.

cosmic vista. (“At last, the first film!” wrote Michael Snow.)

Gehr's next two films became his best-known works. In *Serene Velocity* (1970), he created a stunning head-on motion by systematically shifting the focal length of a stationary zoom lens as it stared down the center of an empty, modernistic hallway. Without ever moving the camera, Gehr turned the fluorescent geometry of this institutional corridor into a sort of piston-powered mandala. *Still* (1971)—his longest film—shot over the course of a year, used static double exposures (made at various times of the day) to transmute a banal stretch of lower Lexington Avenue into a sumptuous, mystifying mix of “solid” and phantom forms. A unique synthesis of Lumière documentary recording and Méliès camera magic, *Still* brought the first period of Gehr's filmmaking to a triumphant close.

The reputation of these early films grew, but no new ones followed them. Mid-career burnout is an occupational hazard of avant-garde filmmaking, and Gehr's seeming inability to complete any more films was seen as unfortunate but unsurprising. Structural filmmaking had been accorded its historical niche, and many of its leading practitioners moved on to other fields. Abruptly, eight years after *Still*, Gehr began to exhibit new films that have placed him once again at the cutting edge of the avant-garde.

The first new work to be premiered was *Eureka* (completed in 1974), an extraordinary recapitulation of Gehr's previous interests. To make the film, Gehr performed a few precise operations on a primitive tracking shot taken in San Francisco around 1905: In a single, continuous take, a camera mounted on the front of the Market Street trolley travels forward toward the increasingly massive tower of the Ferry Building at the end of the line. Maintaining a constant rate of speed, it sails across a midday sea of pedestrians, bicyclists, horse-drawn carriages, and motorcars. The title, which serves to underline Gehr's use of “found” footage, is taken from the logo “Eureka, California” inscribed on a wagon that crosses the camera's path in the final half minute of the film.

Gehr allows us to savor this, as well as the thousand and one other transitory dramas of his fossilized street by optically reprinting each frame of the original four-minute film eight times. A simultaneous increase in contrast causes the gray tonalities of the original to undergo a violent, mysterious shift with each eight-frame pulse. The background flickers, the image oscillates between abstraction and representation, and the viewer becomes acutely aware of every scratch or scar on the original emulsion.

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EXPLORATIONS

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But even as the material fact of the film is shoved smack up to the foreground, the eye is irresistibly drawn deep into the frame by both the camera's headlong movement and the classic vanishing point created by the two parallel trolley tracks converging toward infinity. Out of these simple elements, Gehr creates a dizzying play—as forceful as that produced in *Serene Velocity*—between the exaggerated flatness of the image and the depth perspective it represents. One's perception continually rebounds from the surface of the film to that of the street, from 2-D reality to 3-D illusion, and back.

In 1980, Gehr released two more films from the mid-seventies. *Table* (shot in 1976) is the celluloid equivalent of a cubist still life—with an uncanny element of Vermeer as well. The subject is an ordinary kitchen table, a homely clutter of crockery and utensils. For sixteen minutes, Gehr alternates two slightly different fixed points of view, accentuating individual shots through the use of blue or red filters (and sometimes no filter at all). This simple, if painstaking, procedure transforms the image into a stuttering, hypnotic shuffle. Some objects appear simultaneously in two positions; others flex their shimmering forms or collide with their neighbors, while a few barely move at all.

Along with *Table*, Gehr premiered *Shift* (a film he had worked on between 1972 and 1974). For Gehr, *Shift* broke new ground—hence, perhaps, a pun in its title. The film is his first to employ extensive montage; virtually all of his earlier works were created through the application of predetermined shooting systems and thus edited in the camera. *Table* is pure visceral sensation; *Shift* is more dramatic. The actors, however, are all mechanical—a series of cars and trucks filmed from a height of several stories as they perform on a three-lane city street. Gehr isolates one or two vehicles at a time, inverting some shots, so that a car hangs from the asphalt like a bat from a rafter, using angles so severe the traffic often seems to be sliding off the earth, and employing a reverse motion so abrupt that the players frequently exit the scene as though yanked from a stage by the proverbial hook.

A sparse score of traffic noises, obviously culled from a record of sound effects, accompanies the spastic ballet *mécanique*. Not only the action but Gehr's deliberate camera movements are synced to the music of honking horns, screeching brakes, and

grinding gears. The eight-minute film is structured as a series of obliquely comic blackout sketches: Trucks run over their shadows; cars unexpectedly reverse direction or start up and go nowhere.

Early this year, Gehr released two more films (both completed in 1981). One harked back to his earlier work; the second consolidated the territory staked out in *Shift*. For the first—a ten-minute piece Gehr has tentatively titled “Mirage”—the filmmaker replaced the lens of his Bolex with a semicircular piece of plastic found in a Canal Street junk bin and filmed whatever came to hand around his apartment. The resulting footage is surely the most disorienting negation of Renaissance perspective afforded by any film since *History*.

“Mirage’s” imagery alternately suggests a bizarrely striated sunset, a train rushing by at superhigh speed, and the textures of a highway as shot from the muffler’s point of view on a truck doing seventy m.p.h. Colors ebb and flow; the bands of light change their ratio or intensity, and—most peculiarly—appear to slide in front of, or behind, each other. Although it’s impossible to tell what causes these shifts, much of the film’s beauty derives from the knowledge that its patterns are logical, determined by the physical properties of Gehr’s substitute lens.

Even more impressive is Gehr’s second new film, yet to be titled. The movie is his most formally complex work since *Still*. Again, the subject is the urban landscape, but here—for the first time in Gehr’s oeuvre—the city’s human inhabitants take center stage. The film is a half-hour series of brief close-ups of people on the street, shot from a high, but still intimate, angle, as though Gehr were working out of a first-story window or from a tenement stoop. In a constant interplay of figure and ground, the film shows fragments of feet, heads, hands, and elbows against the backdrop of an ancient sidewalk. None of Gehr’s subjects ever acknowledge the camera, and he periodically blurs the focus to emphasize their shapes.

The film is fast on the eye, with many staccato camera moves. But, partially because the people in it are bundled up in winter clothes, one experiences it as a succession of cushioned jolts—the collision of soft, bulky forces that (even more than the steel-and-chrome vectors of *Shift*) enter the frame from all directions. There is, however, too much raw human interest in the footage for the film to ever become completely abstract.

Although Gehr is purposefully vague about his specific locations, the film is obviously set on a shopping street in a neighborhood heavily populated by elderly Eastern European immigrants—a sort of asphalt shtetl. Gehr’s subjects use their hands a lot, and these expressive, vulnerable, fleshy sensors take on a life of their own. In one sense, the film is a jagged symphony composed of the most transitory gestures. In another, the film is an exercise in Hals-like portraiture in which an entire character is evoked through isolated details (the back of a neck, a pair of swollen ankles, the angle of a hat).

What lifts the film beyond the descriptive are Gehr’s editing strategies. At times he employs crosscutting to create imaginary interactions, or uses shock cuts—in which his subjects saw the air like magicians to conjure the next shot. Like *Shift*, the film is not without humor. In the most describable of Gehr’s visual jokes, an image of a woman in sunglasses is replaced—at roughly the same spot in the frame—by a startling, high-angle view of another woman wearing her sunglasses on her head. (This is the closest anyone ever comes to making eye contact with the camera.)

Most frequently, Gehr practices a kind of visual rhyming, in which different subjects of similar shapes “complete” each other’s movements over the course of several shots. At times, this match cutting produces a heady, spiral rotation of human forms around an empty patch of weathered pavement. Elsewhere, the persistence of afterimages creates a slightly uneven montage (unique in my experience) wherein some portions of the image seem to change a split second before others do.

Despite its restricted subject matter, it’s difficult to consider Gehr’s latest film as “minimal.” There’s no shortage of visual information here. The movie, in fact, is so dense that it’s unlikely anyone will ever see it the same way twice. After three viewings, I have just begun to come to terms with its complicated rhythms and understated sight gags. Working with neither the recognition nor remuneration given Hollywood directors and successful Soho painters, Ernie Gehr is among the most powerful and original visual artists in America today. ■

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