

HENRY HILLS

INTERVIEW

LA: I'm interested in the relationship between editing and subject matter in your films. In *Radio Adios* (1982) and *Money* (1985), and also *Plagiarism* (1981)—in which you work with New York poets, dancers, musicians including John Zorn, Diane Ward, Sally Silvers, Ron Silliman, James Sherry, Abigail Child, Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Hannah Weiner, Jackson Mac Low—there is a highly kinetic use of cut-up techniques that is structured by certain cadences or tempos that emerge from within the montage. Particularly in *Money* there is a type of dialogue with Sally Silvers' choreography and Zorn's music, with the rapid "turnover" of images echoing the idea of commodity, monetary flow, etc. To what extent would you say that the film was an act of collaboration, or an articulation of a collective "poetics"?

52 | HH: Sure, I'd like to make the world into one big poem, but "cut-up technique" (although it's something I was interested in and informed by at a certain point in my development, along with other aleatory methods) is not an accurate description of what I do. I shoot almost all of the footage which I use, and most of the shot lengths are determined in the shooting. I don't shoot long takes and then cut them up. I do favor a certain level of rhythmic intensity, but it would be incorrect to say that I impose this on the footage; it *is* the footage, my preferred way of gathering moments from the constant flux of life. I think my cutting is very sculptural in general, but especially in the sense that I allow the material to ultimately reveal itself in its perfection by spending enough time with it and paying close attention, especially at the periphery. Choosing the actual frames which conjoin is essential. "Collage" might not be a wholly incorrect description. Perhaps my work also has a "process" orientation: I improvise in the shooting and then there are layers upon layers of improvisation in the editing. I leave in evidence all of the phases. I do always start off with a fixed idea. I generally write it down, and then, when I'm finished, it amazes me, when I go back and read what I had written, how close the final results are to the initial vision, because it seems like madness and diversions and winging-it,

constant problem solving and questioning at every step along the way. When I look at my own films, which I always do if I am present at a screening, I feel a strong sense of physical comfort. This is because the rhythms are mine, the rhythms of my body and mind. I think my films are very physical in that sense. I hone them in the editing until the rhythms are perfect and I can tell when this is because I finally relax. So it's especially gratifying when the audience is with me. Though this is a dynamic I think which operates below the surface.

Not that the surface is inessential. I don't want to discount the documentary function of film, for instance, which not only is unavoidable and totally manifest at every point, but is also that quality which avoids abstraction. It distinguishes moving imagery from music, the world's favorite art form. On the other hand, it is not the aspect that is most of the time at the forefront of my mind while composing a work. It's always there at the beginning, as what one thinks one is doing, and it is there at the end, often as a source of fear and discomfort, since moving imagery is all-revealing but those aspects which are being judgmentally noticed are constantly changing with evolving societal mores and the flickering tastes of fashion. There are so many other aspects of the surface to consider. Everything is on the surface in fact! But most of the effort in the making is involved in delving into and revealing motions of consciousness and this is what makes films re-viewable and different every viewing with an active participation. The ever flowing consciousness of the audience is banging up against this exploratory model of a moment of a maker's flow of consciousness.

I had begun filmmaking primarily focusing on the basic unit of film, the *frame*, but I soon discovered that it was the *interval* which gave it propulsion. My silent, single-frame (San Francisco) movies were basically dynamic landscape studies. I think I retained this intense consciousness of the flow of frames after I started holding the trigger down. Moving to cacophonous New York, I felt the need to make sound films and I decided to learn how sound films worked by making *sync* sound films. With video everything is automatically sync, so today

this might seem obvious & a tautology, but soundtracks in film have always been constructions. It would be typical for a low budget 16mm filmmaker to create the image and then add the audio afterwards or sometimes to begin with a piece of music and cut the image to it. Shooting sync sound in film requires more equipment and generally a crew. In my case, however, I was using a recently retired 16mm television news camera which recorded a track of sound onto a magnetic metal coating on the edge of the reversal film strip being exposed, so the situation actually was somewhat like with video today and I was thus able to shoot and record audio by myself and so work intimately.

When I decided to start working with sound, I was painfully aware of the limited amount of material I would be able to afford to generate with my fixed and finite bank account, that a relatively small amount of footage would comprise my entire vocabulary for an extended period of time. I went to my friends who I took to be experts in their fields at that time, at least to the degree that I could be said to be expert in mine, looking to the three traditional elements of movies, musicians for sound, dancers for movement, and poets for language. Trusting in a continuous flow of interesting noises and words and motion from my cast, I would stop listening after I had set the levels and turn the camera off and on as if I were shooting silent, just focusing on the visuals. Editing is generally approaching a finite and fixed set of material and giving it concision, coherence, and rhythm. My films are truly made on the editing table. I would transcribe the words and make various scribbles and notations to help me recall the sounds and gestures and then create new writing moving across the various voices. *Radio Adios* was like a poem (the text was published and I gave a reading once); *Money* was more a prose piece where the fragments were re-formed into sentences. The dance was cut in a different manner, however. In *Radio Adios* footage of Sally Silvers was used to fill holes in the visuals (I had not been happy with the way *Plagiarism* looked, my works usually have a certain driving visual acuity, so after I finished assembling *Radio Adios* on the flatbed where I edited watching the motion, I spent some time working on the filmstrip on rewinds; whenever I wasn't happy with the visual rhythm of the succession of frames on the strip,



Stills from *Money*, with Charles Bernstein, John Zorn & Diane Ward



Collage from "Nervous Ken," *Emma's Dilemma*

the material unprojected, I replaced those frames with other footage); in *Money* the improvisations of Pooh Kaye and Sally, on the other hand, were synched to tracks from music performances which were underexposed (the idea for *SSS* grew out of this "contingency").

As for the "cadences of montage," of course I begin here with speech rhythms, but people speak faster on a

crowded Canal Street, say, than in a quiet apartment, and there must be additive adjustments to make the varying voices fit together into a pleasing rhythm. I think, especially in *Money*, I was as concerned to make a musical composition (although it is mono) as a literary one. Zorn, just shortly before this, in works such as *Pool* and in a lot of his improvisation, was playing little



Still from *Kino Da!*

discreet bleeps and I cut bits like that into the mix to adjust the phrasing and tempos. It's funny how (*Williams Mix* notwithstanding) musicians hate editing; they like to flow on and on; you can see this is the basic design difference between ProTools and Final Cut or Avid. I recently re-mixed the track for a 35mm blow-up and was kind of amazed to rediscover the number of single

frame and even half-frame audio cuts I used to create the fullness I wanted.

I do like the idea of a "collective poetics." We were the same age at this particular intense locale and period & for the most part at a similar place in the development of our personal aesthetics, but still developing, although many of the participants didn't know others' work and

maybe still don't. I saw aesthetic parallels and tried to make them visible, and even hooked various artists up. I've always in theory liked the idea of collaboration, but it's so hard in actual practice. *Money* is almost like a historical document now, but maybe it's my fiction of a lost glorious period of collective endeavor.

A few weeks after I had filmed Hannah Weiner on her roof reading from the notebooks which ultimately became *Little Books/Indians*, she gave a reading on WBAI of some of the same pieces. They were almost twice as long, with new sentences woven between the earlier sentences, phrases between phrases, and words between words. That was pretty much the way that I was building my rough cuts on these film; I think the Russians must have worked in a similar manner in the 20's. It was a delight for me to listen to her changes, because editing the film was sort of like "audio-visual education," I basically had the poems memorised in their earlier form, so I felt I could peep into her creative processes. I think in cutting her, in particular, I was informed by her compositional methods. I felt a very strong affinity to the "language writing" thrust in those early exploratory years, especially while the poets were writing short works—I'm still making short works myself! As she explained, she saw words (she took a very analytical and structural approach to her schizophrenia, her muse) on her forehead, on the TV set, certainly on the page as she gave readings, and so she read what was new alongside of what was typed out (sometimes in her books she represented these different levels of seeing text as different fonts or font-sizes).

Peter Seaton used to come watch what I was working on in the editing room. Back then he was the best person to show work-in-progress (I somehow frequently have the temptation to show people what I am working on, I guess because it takes so long to finish, and it's almost always a mistake or even a disaster; I think my work is kind of a balancing act and the balance has to be perfect and whole or it just seems chaotic) because he would project and even fantasize on where it was going and what that meant for the development of the poetic consciousness and ... it's just so sad how enthusiasts crash. When we heard he had died a few weeks ago, no one knew how to feel, since he had dropped out of our lives so many years ago so definitively.

LA: In 1953, Amos Vogel organized a symposium in New York on the topic of "Poetry and Film." You yourself have worked with a number of innovative poets—what sort of relationship do you see between contemporary investigations into film form and poetics? In *Kino Da!* (1981), with Jack Hirschman, you make explicit reference to the work of Vertov and Eisenstein, and much of your own favours the concrete qualities of montage and the contingent quality of its "subject matter" (including found material, as in the music video you produced for John Zorn's *Naked City, Gotham*, in 1990). There's something Iain Sinclair once said of J.G. Ballard, that his work succeeded in forging a poetics out of that which contained least poetry (in the conventional sense). Is this a task you see yourself actively undertaking?

HH: I recall my students reading of that Vogel symposium with Arthur Miller and Dylan Thomas as being just the old farts trashing Maya Deren. They all seemed drunk and the more they rode her, the more pretentious she became. It made a very bad first impression on me and I never looked at it again. It made me feel sorry for Marilyn Monroe.

I had always felt there should be an affinity between poets and experimental filmmakers because neither could possibly earn a living from their work and so they both could be honest. They both deal with material that everyone feels that they understand but both make constructions that most people don't feel that they do understand and are thus often hostile towards. Maybe they have a shared martyr complex. Now that the curators are the stars, though, I no longer trust filmmakers to be honest.

What do you mean "the contingent quality of its 'subject matter'"? In *Gotham* the subject matter seems if anything over-determined. The band is named after a Weegee book, a famous photo from which is on the cover of their first album, and so most of my images are either re-creating Weegee pictures or using stock shots (gangsters' corpses, Weegee himself puffing on a cigar) in the same mode, though there's much less found footage used here than you may imagine. I shot most of the images and degraded them to look like found shots, in the same manner that I had degraded the imagery of *Kino Da!* to make it look like an old Russian

film. Jack Hirschman had written me a poem to cut up into “zaums” which he read in both Russian and English. But, of course my thoughts on and practice of editing is somewhat informed by the silent films of Eisenstein and particularly Vertov (and Griffith’s *Intolerance*, which was a major influence on both of them) and also the way these ideas went with Brakhage. I don’t think any of those four ever felt their subject matter was contingent. I mean it’s unavoidable anyway.

LA: In 1997 you began an as-yet unfinished project with the late Emma Bee Bernstein, entitled *Emma’s Dilemma*. The film includes a series of “interviews” with Susan Howe, Ken Jacobs, Richard Foreman, Tony Oursler, Jackson Mac Low, Carolee Schneemann, Kenneth Goldsmith, Julie Patton, Lee Ann Brown, among others, framed by, and interspersed with vignettes from the life of its “protagonist,” Emma Bernstein. The film seems to pose a number of questions—the most obvious one being about the status of so-called documentary, cinéma vérité, etc. It would be hard to describe *Emma’s Dilemma* as documentary in any conventional sense. If it records a series of “real” encounters, it does so on the level of cinematic reality alluded to by André Bazin. Bazin, however, was unsympathetic to montage, and it’s through montage and other techniques of editing that the encounter with a cinematic reality is brought about in your work in general, and in this film in particular. This encounter isn’t narrated from within the interview format, but from within the cut: as Godard says, “simple juxtaposition, makes it possible to tell a story.” My question would be, when you were editing *Emma’s Dilemma*, was there a particular *rationale* at work? Did the film’s structure evolve out of any additional concerns—for example, for the formal concerns of the artists being interviewed, expressed in their own work? There is, for instance, a certain dramatic/choreographic element in the section devoted to Richard Foreman and the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, in which—among other things—soundtrack is used to support the tempo of the edit. Foreman himself says at one point: “Art is built out of contingencies.” Or elsewhere, in the section devoted to Susan Howe, the footage is edited in such a way as to emphasise the vowel sounds of Howe’s speech—something she herself identifies as a concrete element of language that has

preoccupied her as a poet (“open letters that sound in an open way”). Interestingly, Emma Bernstein says only one line in this section—“you have to back it up now”—which is replayed three times. Would you see your work as exploring, in a sense, what “backs up” the documentary realism of the “image,” of “sound” or “language”? I mean, in terms of what comes to the fore through the editing process—what’s unexpectedly “revealed,” so to speak, of a type of cinematic unconscious?

HH: *King Richard* with Richard Foreman, *Nervous Ken* with Ken Jacobs, and the Susan Howe section, which I feel are among the more successful of the sections I’ve completed, clearly reflect in some way the work of the artists involved. Not all of the shoots lent themselves to that sort of manipulation, however, and, as I worked on this piece off and on over a very protracted period of time, I explored a variety of impulses. This is the first piece I ever did wholly on the computer; I was exploring a new way of working. I’m still working on it.

Most of the films discussed here are included on Hills’ 2 DVD’s produced by Tzadik: SELECTED FILMS 1977-2008 and ASTRONOME (www.tzadik.com). Also, many are available for viewing or download at <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Hills.html>.