Archeology of Cinema at Vox Populi

Amongst the potpourri of assorted artistic attempts at innovation, hip euphoria, bar-style virility—as well as the subtle humorous traces and small instances of refreshing displacement in the corners of its back rooms—two pieces resonate in the most recent exhibit at Vox Populi. Intriguing undercurrents curiously link them together as differing attempts to return to the nascent state of cinema in an archeological exploration of the relationship between nature and culture.

Hiraki Sawa’s Eight Minutes presents the viewer with a series of vignettes juxtaposing serene, abandoned domestic spaces with the uncanny appearance of miniature instances of the natural world: shrubs and trees that act as the decor for a persistent parade of tiny goats. This contrast between nature and culture exhibits the shrunkken traces of vegetable and animal life encroaching on the aseptic spaces of household appliances as the domestic is oddly re-colonized by an organic world of feral goats and traces of their natural milieu. Indeed, the domestic spaces themselves are transformed into microcosmic ecosystems haunted by the constant migration of animals headed to an unknown destination. These mesmerizing black and white défilés create a more or less intoxicating phantasmagoria as the untamed forces of nature transfigure the intimate corners of civilization into an aquarium of natural life. The surreal change in spatial scale and apparent critique of the artificiality of culture recall Luis Buñuel’s magisterial reconfigurations of space-time and lived critique of the discontents of civilization in Un chien andalou (1929) and L’âge d’or (1930). Yet, the precise orientation of Sawa’s practice remains—perhaps charmingly—unclear. His resuscitation of surrealist motifs and preoccupations do not appear to bring with it the critique of repressive society found in Buñuel and Dalí, and yet he does seem to be commenting—at least abstractly—on the exclusion of nature from civilization and the former’s power of “re-possession.” As the artist’s work continues to evolve, the precise nature of this relationship will hopefully be given the same crisp clarity of some of his images. In addition to echoing early cinematic experiments, Eight Minutes also recycles Eadweard Muybridge’s pre-cinematic studies of movement that were so important for the development of film. The near constant stability of the camera and frame, animated by the ambulatory movements of migration, successfully resuscitates the magical power of film to reproduce a four-dimensional reality by adding time to the photographic image (thereby taking what André Bazin once called the “mummy complex” to the point of embalming time itself). However, the appearance of goats as the animal of choice is left lingering and undetermined. Is this simply to resist what early members of the Frankfurt School would have called the rampant rationalization of civilization? Is it due to the symbolic quality of goats as diabolical animals? Is this a suble reference to the children’s book, My Pet Goat (which George W. Bush happened to be reading with an elementary school class when he was informed that an airplane had hit the World Trade Center)? There are many insightful moments, captivating images and a crisp sense of refinement in Eight Minutes, but there are also undetermined elements that leave the spectator wondering if they were intentional, or if the project could migrate to yet a deeper level of insightful production.

Brent Wahl’s Arrivals and Departures also invites the spectator to return to the nascent state of cinema in order to explore the relationship between nature and culture. His slowly rotating quarter cylinder is a partial recreation of a Zoétrope, a mechanism often fore-grounded as an important predecessor to film. However, Wahl’s Zoétrope is inhabited by a three-dimensional assortment of aluminum foil forms (including barrack, miniature trees and Le Corbusier’s famous vision of communal living), and is immediately conjures up an image of sophisticated, civilized and progressive worldliness, complete with the background music of the 1985 multicultural hit single “We Are the World!” It is a welcome antidote to any of the nefarious connotations linked to a neo-liberal economy that has sabotaged social welfare, extended a photocentric empire throughout the entire world, and drastically increased the gap between the rich and the poor.

Democracy

The contemporary use of the term democracy is not unrelated to the worldview associated with globalization. Through a repetitive use of analogical reasoning, it has often been suggested that the liberalization of markets equals the emancipation of people who are then free to choose the products sold on the open market, including candidates auctioned off through costly campaigns, or even that a free market produces a free people due to a natural synchronicity between economics and politics. However, this connection is based on a simplistic linguistic analogy, and it is ultimately founded on nothing more than free association. If we are not content with this pop psychology that receives so much airtime thanks to the mass media, we would do well to consult Karl Polanyi’s powerful classic The Great Transformation, in which...