Movie Industry In 1960s: Markopoulos And Cantrill

Gregory Markopoulos in NYC (1960-67) and Beyond

When Gregory Markopoulos (1928-92) arrived in New York City in 1960, he had already established himself as a leading figure of American avant-garde cinema. In the late ‘40s, he had moved to California to study at USC Film School, and started his early trilogy Du Sang, de la volupté et de la mort (1947-48). He completed the trilogy after returning to his home-town in Toledo, Ohio, away from the “systematic instruction” of “dull men” at the university.

During the ‘50s, he travelled throughout Europe, where he screened his work, gave lectures on cinema, and came into contact with several significant figures in the arts (André Gide, Jean Cocteau, and Marcel Carné among them).

In a lecture delivered in Athens in 1955, Markopoulos enshrined the cinema as an “intimate” art form, one that offered its spectator far less distance than did, for example, the contemporary theatre. For him, cinema could—like the cardinal arts of Ancient Greek theatre and sculpture—access humanity directly. It could “reach the very seat of the film spectator’s psych.” In a later essay, he would recall visiting the temenos—an insulated area for worship—of the theatre of Delphi in 1958. The experience led him to question how and where he might stage his own art. He imagined that, in future screenings of his work, the desired effect on the spectator would be one of both aloofness and immersion—a “visual incubation as in the ancient temenoi.”

The example of Delphi, and of the Greek tradition in theatre, literature, sculpture, and philosophy, would continue to shape Markopoulos’s innovative practices as a filmmaker, projectionist, preservationist and writer after he moved to New York. He had returned to America believing that the “delphic guardians of the poetic spirit of Cinema” had been very few and mostly European—von Sternberg, Eisenstein, Dreyer, Bresson, Rosselini. But, in 1960, after Markopoulos helped to found the New American Cinema Group (which would grow into the Film-Makers Cooperative two years later) in New York alongside Jonas Mekas (the group’s leader), Stan Brakhage, Shirley Clarke, and Lloyd Williams, he readily identified the provenance of the Delphic tradition in the city’s energetic underground city movement. He even characterized the committed film-goers at the “sacred precinct” of the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque as a “Dionysiac confraternity” who, like the spectators at Delphi, were salubriously bewitched by the supreme art of their age:

“Undergoing examination, holding firm, munching on sandwiches, drinking cognac from tiny flasks, motionless, entranced (like the initiates at Delphi) the New Cinemas Spectators at the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque became future spectators, i.e. actors, the real, the actual, existing in the present but involved thusly, in the Past and the Future. Beginning by tolerating himself, tolerating the spectator next to him, tolerating the total assembly of spectators in the tradition of the ancient theatre of Greece, aloof and apart from the sense of boredom, of posing, of brooding ... the New Cinema Spectator begins to reflect the Silver Screen, and many an emotion which has not glistened as truly as on Mediterranean of Chaldean mirrors returns with joy at incising the Light Years, Past, Present and Future …”

For Markopoulos, his own films, as well as those of his peers such as Brakhage and Warhol, had revitalised the communal “religious act”.

Throughout the early ‘60s, Markopoulos contributed regular to Mekas’s Film Culture magazine, and wrote with great enthusiasm about fellow New York filmmakers. He believed there was a “unique climate of film-making in New York City” that resulted in the “magnificent work” of the Film-Makers’ Cooperative. In 1964, he praised those same filmmakers for their exemplary individualism: “every one of them [has] that divine fire and confidence which the ancient Greeks called thrasos. That is to say insolence. But insolence of a divine nature.” During those years, Markopoulos made films with several East Village artists, including Warhol, Taylor Mead, Jack Smith, Gordon Baldwin, Susan Sontag, Shirley Clarke, Jasper Johns, the Kuchar Brothers, Allen Ginsberg, and Jonas Mekas.

However, during the later ‘60s, his enthusiasm for the New American Cinema started to wane. Though the New York City filmmakers had shown “passionate intensity”, Markopoulos believed that their fire had been necessarily brief, and that they had left few few outstanding monuments in their wake. He suggested that the “creative spirit” needed its next migration—that he ought to go “somewhere else,” beyond the United States, “just as the ancient Greek philosophers fled to Asia Minor and Italy.” In 1965, he had also met the young filmmaker Robert Beavers who soon after became his partner. Beavers increasingly became the sole referent of the laudatory terms that Markopoulos had earlier applied to the New York filmmakers: “delphic,” “film-maker physician”, guardian of the medium of film (which he came later to call the “film as film”). In 1967, at the height of his reputation in New York, and on the heels of a special screening of his New York-made feature film The Illiac Passion at MoMA, Markopoulos left the US. He and Beavers relocated to Europe where they would develop their vision for a film archive and projection space for, and commensurate to, their work. This would eventually be founded in Lyssarea in Arcadia, Greece, which was conceived of as their gift to a future audience—those ideal “New Cinema Spectators” that Markopoulos, some years earlier, had thought he identified in the Film Makers’ Cinematheque audience in New York.

As part of his exile from the US, Markopoulos began to pull his films from distribution and demanded that P. Adams Sitney’s chapter on him in Visionary Film (1974), a seminal study of American avant-garde cinema, be expelled from the second edition. After a long hiatus from publishing his writing in America, he officially announced his dissociation from the New American Cinema and the Film-Maker’ Cooperative in an open letter in Variety in June 1974.

In the same month that Markopoulos’s renunciation letter was published in Variety, one of his key essays, “The Intuition Space” first appeared in the Cantrills Filmnotes—the Melbourne-based film journal run by the Australian experimental film pioneers Arthur and Corinne Cantrill. In fact, by this time, the Cantrills had published his essays numerously. (His first piece in the journal appeared in 1972, not long after the journal’s inauguration the previous year). As part of his disjunction from the New American Cinema and Anthology Film Archives, Markopoulos also-quite surprisingly, given his increasingly limited distribution of work—allowed fifteen films to be added to the National Library of Australia’s Film Collection (now the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia) in Canberra. This rare event coincided with a period - the late 1970s in particular—when the National Library was under instruction to acquire a larger amount of films, including avant-garde works. (When living in Canberra at the beginning of the decade, the Cantrills advised the library on the selection of New American Cinema, which was by then becoming the “Old American Cinema”.) The films were also bought in the years after

Markopoulos and Beavers were in a bus accident in Greece in 1976. The accident left Beavers severely injured, and burdened the two struggling filmmakers with significant medical costs.

Some of the prints that Markopoulos and Beavers gave to the Australian archive are quite rare working prints. In truth, much of Markopoulos' output was still technically “working”, or at least, re-workable material. He made several films in Europe, over the two decades after leaving the US, many of which were not shown. Along with all his work since 1948, he would re-edit these films into a major, unified project called Eniaios, an 80-hour silent film. Before his death in 1992, Markopoulos spliced the film, but did not print it. Since 2000, it has been the ongoing work of the Temenos Archive, run by Beavers, to restore Eniaios in full. Thus far, restored sections have been screened at four-year intervals, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016. The screenings are held at the Temenos site in Greece, Markopoulos’ nominated “institution space”.

The Cantrills and the New Cinema in Australia and Abroad (1960-75)

In the early ‘60s, Arthur and Corinne Cantrill (1938- and 1928-) began to make their first films together in Brisbane. Some of their earliest works included short documentaries about creative activities for children, as well as films on landscape, the environment, and on artists and their practices (such as their films on the sculptor Robert Klippel). During this period, they were members of the Brisbane Cinema Group, which was early receptive to the New American Cinema, including Jonas Mekas’ film-work and his magazine, Film Culture.

The Cantrills moved to London in 1965, where they were able to see a variety of avant-garde films from around the world. In London, they developed their technical practices, made further films about artists (including the painter Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, and the etcher Charles Lloyd), and engaged with the city’s experimental music scene. In 1967, they attended the Knokke Experimental Film Competition in Belgium—the fourth instalment of the festival, now infamous for its major publicity of the New Cinema and the contemporary avant-garde. In that year, Michael Snow’s extended zoom film Wavelength memorably took out the Grand Prize. Markopoulos, whose Twice a Man had won an award at the previous instalment of the festival in 1964, premiered The Illiac Passion at Knokke in 1967. The Cantrills later met with him in London, and even briefly considered purchasing a print of his new film.

In 1969, the Cantrills were awarded a Creative Arts Fellowship at the Australian National University in Canberra, and so came back to Australia. Having received very little inspiration from the vistas of Europe, they returned to the Australian landscape with great fervour, and began making a series of energised and energising films depicting a key feature of their work: the Australian Bush. During this time, they also continued their work in film-portraiture, including a major work on the Australia poet Harry Hooton (1969). They began to explore the possibilities of Expanded Cinema—extending the film experience beyond the single rectangular screen and into the world of objects, movement, and greater spontaneity (making the film event truly “live” as in theatre). Like Markopoulos, the Cantrills were committed to the unique projection event, and to exploring the therapeutic potential of the cinematic experience.

When they completed their Fellowship in 1970, their next move was to Melbourne- a move partly inspired by the city’s performance and poetry scenes. In Melbourne, they collaborated in various performance events and developed their work in expanded cinema, which they

presented in a major exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1971. That same year, they published the inaugural issue of their legendary journal Cantrills Filmnotes (1971-2000). The Filmnotes provided space for filmmakers in Australia and abroad to share their own work, and to discuss other developments in New Cinema. The journal's receptiveness to contemporary work from around the world might account for Markopoulos' early inclusion, but also his absence from the mid-'70s onwards, when his essays became increasingly insular and dismissive of his contemporaries. Moreover, the journal became a means for the Cantrills to record and preserve their work—and others'—in a format more durable than film.

By 1973, the Cantrills had begun to feel stifled in Australia, and sensed that they were being "pushed out by the film establishment and the official endorsement of all that is trivial and worthless in the Australian film scene…". Their next move was to the US, where Arthur taught in film production, history and criticism at the universities of Oklahoma and Penn State. During this time, they screened their work throughout North America and met several other leading figures in independent cinema and the burgeoning video art scene. (This is evidenced in the concurrent editions of the Filmnotes of this time, which they continued to publish while abroad, and included pieces from Brakhage, Nam June Paik, Woody and Steina Valuska, and Markopoulos.) Notably, they screened their work at the 10th and 11th installments of Charlotte Moorman's New York Avant-Garde Festivals (held at Grand Central Terminal and Shea Stadium respectively), and, in 1975, they also became the first Australia filmmakers to have a "Cineprobe" of their work at MoMA. (They would be the subjects of two further Cineprobes in 1988 and 2000.

In 1975, the Cantrills returned to Melbourne, where they were based for over thirty years, and continued to make much of their seminal work across film-portraiture, experimental sound, expanded cinema, autobiographical film, teaching, writing, and publishing (The Filmnotes continued regularly until its final, 100th edition in 2000). Their work is held in major archives and galleries around the world, including the Royal Film Archive of Belgium (Brussels), Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek (Berlin), the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), MoMA (New York), the Australia Centre for the Moving Image (Melbourne) and National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (Canberra). The Filmnotes are held in the National Gallery of Victoria's Shaw Research Library.