

METAMORPHOSIS: ANDREW NOREN'S, *THE LIGHTED FIELD*

BY JOHN PRUITT

Of Andrew Noren's impressive, open-ended series of films which their maker has entitled *The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse*, its fifth chapter, *The Lighted Field* (1987), commands particular attention because within it there is not only the dazzling, kinetic display of light and shadow, achieved with relentless stop-action photography, the kind of virtuosic command of the cinematic image that one has come to expect from this artist — but also, in my opinion, there is Noren's most forceful comment yet on his characteristic view of the underlying, theoretical nature of that same image. Given the shots of film strips, cameras, and projection devices which *The Lighted Field* offers, many viewers may recall Dziga Vertov, who in *Man with a Movie Camera* produced one of the most enduring and complex self-referential meditations on film. While this admittedly represents one of several possible avenues of appreciation for a film on which its maker spent several years of arduous effort, the context of Vertov's film puts Noren's own highly original achievement into the kind of relief where one can more forcefully appreciate what the latter has been trying to do all along in his magnum opus. Noren has acknowledged an admiration for Vertov yet insists that *The Lighted Field* was never meant in any way to relate to the Soviet master. But I find the connection appealing on a number of rewarding levels, not so much because of similarities perhaps but because of the significant differences between two practitioners whose work confronts perceptual issues of filming largely un-staged events on a daily basis.

The burden of Noren's own reflexive meditation rests primarily on an extended sequence that more or less commences the film, one in which found footage is integrated with his own original material, and employed in a way that indirectly suggests some quite trenchant metaphors for cinematic vision. In my own reading of these images, it would be wrong to infer that the montage structure generates a fixed, didactic scheme. Rather, not unlike Bruce Conner, whose work has been almost exclusively devoted to the found-footage collage film, Noren discards mere cleverness for an expressiveness that is muted and

indirect, which, above all, preserves the unique beauty and mystery of the isolated shots. These were painstakingly selected from otherwise undistinguished newsreels of the sort which the filmmaker reviewed virtually every weekday in the course of his long employment as a film archivist. Thus, behind the enigmatic cutting strategy in which the archival material seems to intrude upon Noren's more familiar stop-action continuity, lies a deeply disguised link of quotidian subject matter. A large degree of Noren's artistry has always consisted of an explicit dare to interpret his imagery beyond its impressive surface pyrotechnics or its diaristic qualities. For those who wish to make the effort, I think the depths are indeed there and *The Lighted Field* in its challenging, opening gambit makes a special invitation to uncover them.

Where Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* starts with a sequence which suggests the beginning of a film screening as the vast waking up of a city and its people to commonplace material duties and pleasures in an all-revealing, eternal, Marxist daylight, Noren's film seems to embrace the very ambiguity and incantatory magic, even morbidity, which Vertov either clearly eschews or playfully dismantles. *The Lighted Field* opens with a high contrast shot of sunlight reflected in water, filmed in such a way as to emphasize the abstract, pure light values of the image. This is followed by a shot of sunlight refracted through some sort of prism. This inaugural display of light suggests an elemental prologue before the first, directly representational shot: one of Noren asleep. Significantly, we never see him wake up, and the stillness of sleep or perhaps a pre-figuring of death (the series title suggests the protagonist as an "exquisite corpse" after all) thus hangs over the rest of the film. Though like Vertov, Noren, too, has always celebrated the life of everyday activities and objects, his cinema steadfastly clings to the shadowy world of dreams and memory, a fact reinforced by the telling, subsequent shot of a photograph of a very young Noren and his mother, an image which will have faint echoes in later footage.

Paradoxically, as his earlier black and white

film, *Charmed Particles*, emphasized, the more Noren has approached the material world, the more he de-substantiates it. This is Noren, the self-described “light bandit and shadow thief.” Yet I think it’s a mistake to think of Noren as merely a stylist, a technical show-off, who takes light as his subject matter. Rather he strikes me, especially in *The Lighted Field*, as an artist who risks a far more daring and self-consciously complex agenda. Noren’s “playing” with light seems also to be poetically affirming that the so-called real is ultimately elusive, magical, miraculous. Like Vertov, Noren acknowledges the camera as a passive recording device, which can penetrate and celebrate the sunlit material world in a fashion superior to the human eye. But unlike his predecessor’s, Noren’s camera, especially taken on its own terms, so to speak, as a brainless, mere technological mechanism, is nevertheless an alchemical device, a relentless metaphor-generating engine because it can’t help but metamorphose objects and people into a peculiar dance of spectral shapes. Noren does not merely exploit the camera as a potential instrument of pure light, but presents us with a persuasive context that makes the viewer aware of the implications behind such a gesture and feel that they are inevitable. Hence Noren’s consistent and resonant use of chiaroscuro effects, of image after image with deeply shrouded people and objects along with mirrors, smoke, and most especially, fleeting human presences. For instance, often his own “image” as he is making a shot, with slanting sunlight behind him, can be seen only as the stamp of a camera-holding shadow intruding into the field of vision before him.

But *The Lighted Field* contains even more aggressive rhetoric than that. For instance, we see found footage of some scientific gadgets being manipulated; their quaint, relative antiquity incidentally is a source of irony and humor. Within the montage structure, we see that these gadgets are perhaps part of a projection device, and once again, as in Vertov, we see a film projected to an audience — at first, a shot of a classic, banal, routine event — a woman applying lipstick. However, the “normal” photographic results turn into an x-ray vision of the same event as we see, against a dark backdrop, not the exterior flesh of the woman’s face, but the eerie vision of her otherwise invisible bone structure. The footage has an

odd otherworldliness — as if it were a foreboding remnant of a Val Lewton film of the 40s, an atmosphere only magnified by subsequent found footage a few shots later. Here, we see a hooded man being led to the gallows. The trap door springs. He falls, and in an apparent match cut, we seem to be watching him splashing into a body of water far below us. But our eyes have been deceived, and rather, what is eventually revealed in the shot of the water splash, is a reverse motion shot showing two dogs rising up from this same body of water and magically re-perching themselves on the edge of a bridge. Again, one recognizes Vertovian playfulness but it is a playfulness which leaves us vaguely disconcerted and puzzled as to what it all means — especially that recurring obsession with death.

To my way of thinking, it signifies Noren’s idiosyncratic view that the cinema embodies a transformative process, that is to say, the capturing of a person’s image on film is not unlike a rite of “death and transfiguration.” We know the familiar superstition that a photograph can steal one’s soul. Noren’s own imaginative vision is not so far removed from that. Almost every one of his commentators feels obliged to cite the initial and apt title of his on-going series — *Kodak Ghost Poems* — a title he was eventually prevented from employing by doubtlessly shortsighted corporate interests. Cinema is a curiously two-staged enterprise in which the image of the world in flux is first passively stamped and frozen, frame by frame, onto a filmstrip, and then in a reverse process, reconstituted and re-animated through projection. A major dramatic element in *The Lighted Field* (which I will develop again later) is prepared by two found footage shots, closely related but widely dispersed in the film. The first, seen early on within the introductory sequences, shows a nearly naked man, in some sort of bizarre public stunt, having himself encased in a large block of ice whose shape unmistakably resembles a coffin. Much later, at a crucial moment, we see him re-emerge Houdini-like from the same block of ice, alive and vigorous. Noren’s incisive comment on the double-stage of the cinematic process, whereby the moving, vital world must be initially “frozen” — made lifeless — before it can move again with a newly charged energy not of its own making (why a corpse can go on an adventure in the first place), should by this time be obvious.

Of course, one can discuss this same process in less symbolic terms and from a slightly different angle: cinematography renders the continuous real world of substance and three-dimensionality as a series of discontinuous two-dimensional patterns of light and shadow-producing grain. At first glance, this seems like one of those obvious, reductive assertions which leads nowhere, but Noren's art consistently hammers home this mechanically-based transformation as one that is ultimately uncanny, in which the rational connection between object and its image is not so easily made. In Noren's poetical construct, then, the object, by leaping onto the film strip, as it were, has been made virtually unrecognizable, as if to say that from looking at two German shepherds, to make reference to the montage trope described above, we could never infer that, before "arising from the dead," they were once an anonymous criminal condemned to execution in an earlier life. The fact that this surrealist-inspired metamorphosis of the hanged man occurs over a "realistic" match cut with an at first cleverly disguised and anti-naturalistic time reversal to boot, is precisely the point: Noren reminds us that the physical properties of the lens and the chemical properties of photographic emulsion, in a word, the ostensible, rational basis for an objective photographic record, are radically undermined by that curious cinematic pattern of nearly identical rectangles arrayed in single file on the filmstrip which, to say the least, don't necessarily preserve logical links of cause and effect between the world and its replication. At the heart of cinema, in fact, lies a radical disjunctiveness implanted in the stuttering, stop-start action of the shutter. Hence, Noren's relentless dependency on stop-action photography, his propensity for shooting in staccato "bursts" — most often of only three frames — a technique which imbues his work with a powerful tension, since his most characteristic sequences remain in strictly chronological continuity as he records in "newsreel" fashion inconsequential moments of his daily life. But at every moment we are forced to confront these casual events as "cine-things" (one of Vertov's terms, by the way), as sequences of inherently discreet, still frames. Later on in the film, after some visual material reminiscent of earlier Noren films — for example, shots taken from the rear window of a New York apartment, the details of eating breakfast on a sunlit morning, a cubistic study of glassware in a dishrack, etc. — there is a stunning,

apparently continuous pan from a window, presumably showing a summer urbanscape, to blackness, to another "adjacent" window which shows the same backyard overview — but now the presence of snow shows that it is winter and that the black silhouette of the interior wall has masked a cut. Again, the viewer is faced with the irony of a camera device (the pan) which purports to preserve temporal and spatial continuity only to reveal the opposite — a brilliant comment on the possible trajectory of stop action photography, which can range from a split second between shots to six months. Any appearance of a dependable continuity is a self-deception. The movie camera forces the exterior world to submit to laws that are in fact alien to it.

Or take note of a sequence coming just after the x-ray footage. We see a man holding a plank of lumber in front of a giant concave, solar mirror. Sunlight is focussed on the wooden object with such intensity that it literally burns. Any lens and aperture, photographic or otherwise, focuses sunlight in much the same way, albeit with far less intensity. In poetical terms, yet with an irony that underscores the scientific, rational principles involved, Noren has forcefully expressed to the viewer that a lens is an instrument of vision containing such intensity that it "burns" or "transforms" the objects placed before it. Think of little boys torturing ants with a magnifying glass. A following close-up of a human eye with a beam of light shining on it reminds us that the eyeball contains a lens, and is a camera of sorts, too — and thus the motion picture camera is perhaps, as it were, just a more heat intensive extension of natural vision. Cinema allows the act of seeing to reach a flashpoint. It should be said here that at times the sheer intensity of Noren's cinematography, the rapid, almost frame-to-frame flickering of his marvelous high contrast imagery, can have a visceral, percussive effect on the viewer, as if Noren wants to overwhelm our retina with a sensual immediacy in the way certain pieces of music — say a work by Olivier Messiaen — seem to envelop us in a total environment of harmonic sound. In any event, with Noren the lens is decidedly not a cool instrument of detachment that somehow stands apart and leaves its objects of vision undisturbed. On the contrary, Noren exploits the capability of any lens and aperture to alter light values until his representational imagery approaches a highly

pitched drama of nearly pure white versus pure black.

Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of *The Lighted Field* is the overall dramatic arc of its one-hour length. In almost narrative fashion, the film contains an extended epilogue which seems to sum up, in grand terms, Noren's essential theme of cinematic transformation. For the first fifty minutes or so, as in all the earlier parts of the *Exquisite Corpse* series, the setting is primarily urban. With great subtlety, however, we catch traces of a theme one might call "family building" — perhaps another reason for the inclusion of a photograph of young Noren and his mother seen early on. There are, intermittently, sequences of Noren's wife and child. Then towards the end of the film, in impressive, rhetorical fashion, we suddenly see the Houdini man (whom we have forgotten by now) emerge from his ice coffin. This shot launches us into the final section of the film: an extended pastoral of trees, grass, and shrubbery, which takes place in a lush, suburban backyard. The field of Noren's title might mean "field of vision," "magnetic field" (like "charmed particles," an allusion to high energy forces,) or to several other possible plays on that word, but once confronted with the final section of Noren's film we see a poetic evocation of "Elysian Fields" — the mythical, pastoral paradise that heroes passed over to after death. Noren seems to be celebrating a new self that has found a simple, domestic happiness in stable companionship. Even here, Vertov haunts the scene; for, upon reflection, one is reminded that *Man with a Movie Camera* ends with a futurist/socialist paradise of communal urban play — soccer, swimming, chess playing, music making, etc. Noren's paradise is, on the other hand, a more private, cultivated garden, initially inhabited by the wife and child, too, and then solely by his own shadow as Noren's camera generates a brilliantly sustained, shimmering, pointilistic landscape out of the natural environment.

But one more mythical metamorphosis is in store for us in the last couple of minutes of the film. In three-frame bursts, Noren begins to alternate shots of shrubbery and trees with similar shots that are dominated, however, by his own shadow. The composition and flickering effect give us the strange sense that the shadow is walking or "floating" in an upright position. Combined with zoom-in effects, the shadow seems to be dispersing or "fleeing" into the

greenery. This montage structure is so intensely rapid, we find ourselves in a swirling world where shot boundaries blur into an illusion of superimposition. Eventually Noren's shadow (always with camera in hand, mind you) disappears altogether and only a solitary tree remains. The filmmaker must be alluding to the myth of Daphne who fled Apollo's advances, and, in answer to her prayers, was eventually turned into a tree so as to permanently escape capture. The Daphne myth reaffirms the by now familiar principle of metamorphosis, and the evocation of a final pastoral "escape," but I would also be willing to bet that Noren knows the very first poem of Ezra Pound's collected short works, *Personae*. Entitled "The Tree," it evokes the Daphne story, but in this context seems even more attuned to what I take to be Noren's insistence that the radically passive, mechanical eye of the motion picture camera doesn't see the world as we supposedly know it, so much as it poetically reveals a wholly alternative world, an Elysium, a lighted field or privileged, illusory space that releases us from the burden of materiality. The final shot of Noren's film is of a tree's shadow, "inside" of which Noren remains unseen until, almost like a tree branch, his arm emerges out of the shadow of the trunk and then, in one possible reading, points to himself three times. I think he is not simply pointing but mimicking the pressing of the camera's shutter button, one final reference to his chosen cinematic vision. Here are Pound's opening lines to his poem: "I have stood still and was a tree amid the wood / Knowing the truth of things unseen before."

[Note: The author is indebted to a valuable exchange of ideas with the filmmaker in the preparation of this essay. It initially appeared in *First Light*, edited by Robert Haller and published by Anthology Film Archives, but through an unfortunate oversight, the version which was printed there was an earlier, uncorrected draft of the essay that appears in these pages.]

