

and how blundering the visitor may seem to the host. Consequently, I am recommending Eric Dregni's *In Cod We Trust* not so much for what it may say about Norway as for what it may teach us about encountering another land.

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Sitney, P. Adams. *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 417 pp. (index included). ISBN 978-0-19-533115-8. \$25.15.

Few paragraphs in American literature are as well known as the “transparent eyeball” passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*. The critical bibliography that in various ways engages what has been referred to as the “most notorious” part of Emerson's work is impossibly vast.¹ Yet, despite the concept's evident connection to the field of visual culture, it is only now that we have a thorough, transaesthetic exploration of the material and conceptual trajectory of the transcendental philosopher's impact on American film art. P. Adams Sitney's monumental study of the Emersonian influence on mid- to late 20th century experimental filmmaking is thus an extremely welcome contribution to both cinema studies and American studies, and—above all—to that fertile interdisciplinary space where the prospective interests of the two fields overlap.

A point of departure for Sitney is his conceptualization of American aesthetics as fundamentally Emersonian. When Emerson resigned from the Second Church of Boston in 1832, the event was richly symbolic of the increasing secularization of the ferocious sermons of the New England divines. The essentially oral style that this particular artistic discourse engendered—at once committed, severe, rapturous and uncompromising—became a performative touchstone for generations of later poets, painters, composers and filmmakers, most of whom in Sitney's reading could be identified as “unwitting Emersonians” (4).² What this book posits, then, is the existence of a strong historical continuity in the field of American aes-

1 Harold Bloom, *Agon: Toward a Theory of Revisionism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, 157.

2 P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 4. All further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

thetics discourse, one whose rhetorical roots can in fact be traced back to the Puritans but whose primary architect was the Concord Sage.

Standard textbook histories of American cinema hardly mention Emerson as a precursor of the indigenous experimental film tradition. The most commonly evoked references as far as the question of aesthetic influence goes are the Surrealist movement, the Soviet montage directors, as well as other avatars of the various Modernist sensibilities that flourished throughout the last century. The terms of this particular aesthetics discourse is, if not exclusively, then at least overwhelmingly European. In his erudite account of the postwar film avant-garde, Sitney in a sense nativizes the work of a long line of illustrious visual artists that in his own words “inherited the exhilaration of the transparent eyeball” (8).

It is impossible to do justice here to the broad array of Emersonian filmmakers discussed in *Eyes Upside Down*, so I shall attempt to focus on some of the defining characteristics that link most of them to Emerson’s transcendentalist poetics. The book covers three generations of filmmakers; those who started making films before 1960 (Marie Menken, Ian Hugo, Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas, though Sitney traces the astonishingly rich and long-lasting careers of the latter two virtually up to the present), those who first emerged on the scene in the late 1960s (Hollis Frampton, Robert Beavers, Andrew Noren, Ernie Gehr and Warren Sonbert), and those who began in the late 1970s and became important figures in the following decade (Abigail Child and Su Friedrich). Common to all these artists is an embrace of an optative modality and a celebration of “newfound vision and inventive vitality” (246). Sitney delves into a staggering number of films with an eye to foregrounding aspects that function as embedded responses to tropes and themes discussed by Emerson in some of his major essays. The channels of influence, however, are anything but straightforward and, as would be expected, they get increasingly convoluted as the story progresses. Sitney paints a holistic picture of the genealogy of Emersonian thought—which the audacious scope of his treatise allows him to do—one in which the likes of Henry David Thoreau, Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound become important mediators of Emerson for Mekas, Brakhage, and Frampton respectively, who in turn act as conduits for the later filmmakers. Many of these avantgardists were also writers and lecturers (Brakhage, for instance, wrote the seminal theoretical work *Metaphors on Vision* (1964) and Frampton’s writings were collected in *Circles of Confusion* (1983)—they both taught periodically at universities or art institutions to support them-

selves), and Sitney emphasizes the way in which the persistence of the oral and epistolary traditions of Emerson and his contemporaries is reflected in extra-filmic forms, genres such as essays, interviews, lectures, program notes, exhibition catalogs and introductions to film screenings (the latter a practice pioneered by Maya Deren).

Eyes Upside Down argues, often persuasively, that these eleven filmmakers are spiritual children of Emerson, and the notion of the transparent eyeball could be seen as a suitable metaphor for the behavior and operations of their cameras. The subject of the dissolution of the self, the orphic sentiment, the translation of the metaphysics of the Beautiful Necessity into a poetic category, and the “primacy of the visible and the transformative value of vehicular motion” (6)—these are facets of Emersonian aesthetics that are repeatedly enacted in the work of the visionary film artists. Theirs is a cinema that eloquently captures the sense of perfect exhilaration with which Emerson is preoccupied in *Nature*, characteristically conveyed in the form of a quiet ecstasy that is the result of discoveries (internal and external) made possible only through the camera. Marie Menken’s *Arabesque for Kenneth Anger* (1961), for instance, documents the filmmaker’s stroll through the Alhambra of Granada, paying rapturous attention to the minutiae of the spatial field; Jonas Mekas’s diary film *Walden* (1969), which Sitney describes as a cinematic heir to Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (94) encyclopedically records the multitudinous sights of the artist’s adopted home of New York City; Warren Sonbert’s *Carriage Trade* (1972) contains a dizzying mélange of shots from and of a variety of moving objects (trains, buses, taxis, airplanes, merry-go-rounds, boats, ships, escalators, trolleys, subways, and helicopters, gondolas, rickshaws, kites, bicycles and ferries) and locations (San Francisco, New York, France, England, Greece, Turkey, Morocco, India, Egypt and Iran); and Ernie Gehr’s *Side/Walk/Shuttle* (1991) shows us the incessant commotion on the streets of San Francisco as seen from an exterior elevator at the Fairmont hotel in the city’s Nob Hill district. These examples could all be said to engage with the Emersonianism of a *pictorial air*, “the spiritual emancipation automatically brought about by ‘certain mechanical changes, a small alteration in our local position’” (47).³ Writing about the automatism at work in *Carriage Trade* (a combination of cross-cutting, rapid rhythms and euphuism), Sitney offers a description that

3 *Essays and Lectures*, 33–34.

I think is fairly representative of the comparative style that characterizes this lucid work as a whole: “he [Sonbert] fused the Emersonian litany of familiar sights with his version of Whitman’s great catalogs, the dilation of the spirit that widens to engulf what it sees and hears” (223).

The body of films produced by the Emersonian visualists is frequently autobiographical and diaristic, eschewing (especially in the case of Brakhage and Mekas) any facile separation of life and work. It also demonstrates what Sitney sees as the American avant-garde cinema’s “historical obsession” with the human body (22), expressed stylistically as an eroticization of the field of vision (as in Menken’s corporeal aesthetics or in Andrew Noren’s *Huge Pupils* (1968)) and as the cultivation of the “somatic camera” as an aesthetic device. Cinematographically, the practitioners of this particular brand of experimental filmmaking relied heavily on formal techniques such as superimposition (Hugo, Brakhage) and, above all, the handheld camera (of which Menken was an early champion), which—in the hands of visionaries like Mekas, Brakhage or Beavers—became a means of psychic exploration and existential revelation. In terms of genre or subject matter, the work was often structured as a cinematic crisis lyric, in which the camera acts as an instrument of discovery and/or resolution/acknowledgment. Hugo, for example, made films—often in collaboration with his wife Anaïs Nin—that tended to articulate his crises, and there is a similar orientation toward such a compositional framework in the films of Brakhage, Sonbert, and others.

Sitney’s magisterial book accomplishes many things. It remains—in its meticulous examination of the afterlife of Emerson’s thought—a significant contribution to the history of ideas. At the same time, it presents us with yet another insightful analysis of postwar American avant-garde cinema from one of its foremost authorities. While the “emersonization” of these filmmakers is convincing in most cases (the chapters on Child and Friedrich, the most contemporary of the 11 artists dealt with in the book, might be an exception), there is, on occasion, admittedly a sense in which some of the film readings would have worked just as well with or without this contextualization. That is, the unquestionable applicability of an Emersonian aesthetics for the appreciation of filmographies like these does not always translate into necessity. There is also perhaps a too insistent emphasis on the uniquely American aesthetic tradition by which these films are defined, but this is obviously a matter of perspective and accentuation and should thus not be construed as criticism. *Eyes Upside Down* is an immensely reward-

ing and sometimes vertiginous tour-de-force through the conceptual strata of Emersonian filmmaking, part Cinema Studies, part American Studies and part Visual Culture Studies.

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