

## On *New Forms in Film* and Other Exhibitions

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A conversation  
with *Annette Michelson*,  
by *Adeena Mey*

Adeena Mey

In your writings, your work as a founding editor of *October*, and in your teaching, you are famous for having championed avant-garde film and given it a place in academia. Less well known are all the exhibitions and programs you have organized, the most remarkable being *New Forms in Film* which took place in Montreux in Switzerland in 1974. Could you tell me about its genesis and how you came to curate it?

Annette Michelson

I was given the opportunity to give a talk in Paris on another occasion, I guess it was P. Adams Sitney and Jonas Mekas who invited me—they brought films and the first Brakhage I ever saw, I think.

Adeena Mey

Are you talking about P. Adams Sitney's *New American Cinema Exposition* (1967)?

Annette Michelson

No, there was something earlier, as I remember... In any case, my first incentive to teach this kind of film came in Paris and New York and after that it became a political act and I went on to teach cinema at NYU.

There was a certain amount of literature, which still exists, that you could use to teach that kind of cinema. But I thought that, if I was to teach avant-garde cinema, I had to adopt a political stance. That didn't involve making political films but rather making films politically.

Then, in the summer of 1972, I made the film series—*New Forms in Film*—for the Guggenheim<sup>1</sup>. It was mostly seen by a middle-class sort of art audience. Somebody turned up from Switzerland, whose name I cannot quite remember. He had heard about the screening somehow. Anyway, he suggested that we organize a season of cinema possibly around the time of the Montreux Jazz Festival. Someone else had already mounted an exhibition of this kind, I can't remember if it was before or after Montreux.

Adeena Mey

Are you thinking of René Berger? At that time, he was the director of the Musée des beaux-arts in Lausanne, and, according to the catalog, he invited you to Switzerland to organize *New Forms in Film*.

Annette Michelson

No, I'm thinking of Pontus Hultén who was at Beaubourg at that time. I'd known Pontus for years. He had got very interested in cinema and was very friendly with Robert Breer. I knew him independently of that. When he knew that I was doing something at Montreux, he sent one of his young curators from Beaubourg over to see it. Later he bought the lot. That was the beginning of the Montreux collection, which formed the basis of the Beaubourg film collection. I had been

<sup>1</sup> *New Forms in Film*, part of the Guggenheim's *Summer Arts Festival*, 2–13 August 1972, Guggenheim Museum, New York. The filmmakers shown included Jonas Mekas, Hollis Frampton, Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, Harry Smith, Joyce Wieland, Ernie Gehr, Paul Sharits, Barry Gerson, Yvonne Rainer and Ken Jacobs.

- 2 *Artforum*, Vol. 13, N°8, April 1975, p. 62–67.  
3 See Peter Kubelka (ed.), *Une histoire du cinéma*, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris 1976.  
4 See Andrew V. Uroskie, "Beyond the Black Box: The Lettrist Cinema of Disjunction", *October*, N°135, Autumn 2011, p. 21–48.  
5 Annette Michelson (ed.), *New Forms in Film*, Imprimerie Corbaz, Montreux 1974.

in and out of Beaubourg for several months. I was working as an editor for *Artforum* at that time and writing a piece entitled "Beaubourg: The Museum in the Era of Late Capitalism"<sup>2</sup>. I was particularly interested in the cultural politics of France. That appealed to Pontus. I think that is why he sent his young curator and that was the beginning of everything.

An interesting character at that time was Noel Burch. Burch was not really involved in avant-garde cinema, but we were very close friends at the time so we went to see each other's work. He started to select films and show them to a few people in Paris. This was in the late 1960s or early 70s. It was part of the growing interest in the New American Cinema in Europe. Another person of interest was someone who wasn't directly connected to any of the filmmakers, but had been great friend of mine for many years—the well-known gallery director, Daniel Cordier.

Adeena Mey

Of the Daniel Cordier Gallery?

Annette Michelson

Yes. He was almost the only gallery director with whom I had a real friendship. He was deeply involved in Boulevard Sébastopol milieu. He held major Surrealist exhibitions and shows by Breton and Duchamp. He was an extremely intelligent man and I'm sure he had an appreciation of these films second to none.

He came to an exhibition I put on along with Peter Kubelka. We were supposed to have worked together, but actually, in some things, Peter doesn't work with other people.

Adeena Mey

Are you referring to *Une histoire du cinéma* at the CNAC (Centre national d'art et de culture) and the Pompidou Center (1976/1977)<sup>3</sup>? Did you work on it together?

Annette Michelson

We did. But it was a curious experience because a number of the works, which did not fit well together, had been supposed to be in an exhibition on its own. It is true that Peter and I worked together; but, at the same time, he clearly did his own thing. I designed the catalog with Peter. We also shared a cinema and were on a panel together—he would come and give talks, and then he would do his number. He was never really involved in the things that we talked about together. Interestingly, the Lettrists turned up.

Adeena Mey

Isou and Lemaître both came?

Annette Michelson

Lemaître did. He came to every introduction and lecture I gave. I must say that I had known him earlier but hadn't taken him very seriously. Our discussions did have their interesting moments and I eventually came to realize

this. Indeed, we are due to publish something in *October* on Lettrist cinema<sup>4</sup>.

There was no real connection with Langlois. He would bring some of his students to see some of the screenings that Burch was involved in organizing. Effectively, at that time, the main people were Cordier, Pontus and the Lettrists. At that time, at around 1974, we were ignored by museums. I can understand that. I remember that once, when I had come back to live in New York, two friends who were visiting said that Woody Allen was the only cinema there was then! So I thought that there was still some work to do—and I tried to do it essentially through my study of film history, and the fact that I saw those films almost as if they were the last wave of the modern image. I'm very attached to Modernism. There was the feeling that those filmmakers were really redefining cinema and doing so in a very interesting way, yet, no one except P. Adams and Jonas offered them any support. I had a very different take on cinema from P. Adams and I thought I could really do something.

But to get back to Montreux. First of all, filmmakers found it extraordinarily appealing. Our terms were very generous. I could have anyone I wanted to invite and Montreux paid for travel, hotel accommodation, etc. They had new prints made specially for the festival which they gave to the filmmakers at the end of the festival.

Adeena Mey      The new prints were funded by Montreux Tourist Board, like the rest of the exhibition?

Annette Michelson      Yes, I worked to achieve that. That was part of our agreement. It was because we had these new prints which were screened in Montreux that Pontus was able to send someone over to see them. And now they are in the Beaubourg collections.

Adeena Mey      Do you remember how the films were received at the time?

Annette Michelson      There was a decent audience. Amazingly, a number of people actually sat for three hours through a Michael Snow's film.

Adeena Mey      I wanted to ask you about the setting insofar as the event took place in what was the then newly built congress hall, which also hosted the Montreux Jazz Festival. It was neither a film theater nor a museum.

Annette Michelson      I got there early, perhaps a week or two beforehand. I brought a wonderful projectionist with me, a student of mine who also used

to work at Anthology Film Archives.

Adeena Mey      Helen Kaplan who worked as an assistant both for *New Forms in Film* and *Une histoire du cinéma*?

Annette Michelson      Yes. She was a fantastic projectionist and did a really wonderful job.

What I did was to introduce the films, and some of the filmmakers (Michael Snow, Jonas Mekas, Robert Breer, Petser Kubelka and Ernie Gehr) attended. Ernie Gehr was very particular about the way his films were shown and presented, so he projected his films himself and gave his own presentation.

We also appeared on Swiss television and I went somewhere, Geneva I guess, to record a TV program. I remember some excerpts being shown, one of them from a Breer film. The people at the TV were very upset by the blank images that cropped up between film images. We managed to have the excerpt shown anyway!

Do you still have the *New Forms in Film* catalog<sup>5</sup>?

Adeena Mey      I do, yes.

Annette Michelson      When I was editing the catalog, Noël Carroll, one of my graduate students, an extremely brilliant student—he worked in film aesthetics—was watching me thinking about which images I should use. He said “why don't you just put in an empty screen?” I said “That's not a bad idea, but whose empty screen? Frampton's?” Potentially, there were lots, as many as five or six at least. There was an incredible number of empty screens in American film at that time!

The audience at Montreux was not large. Some people came back, over and over again. I remember one of them, a rich married woman who happened to be in Switzerland. When I went to Geneva to meet her, she even donated some money to help Harry Smith. As far as I know, I don't think that Beaubourg has ever shown all the films that we screened at Montreux. However, I never managed to create the European audience for the New American Cinema that I had wished.

Adeena Mey      How did *New Forms in Film* compare to exhibitions that you had previously organized or co-organized? I'm thinking here of *Forms and Structure in Recent Film* (Vancouver Art Gallery, 1972) and *Options and Alternatives. Some Directions in Recent Art* (Yale Art Gallery, 1973).

Annette Michelson      They were both very good, and we also did the catalogs for them. The Vancouver one was a film exhibition. I went and worked on

it with Dennis Wheeler. But it was far away, and, essentially, we had very little contact with each other. Yale, however, was very different because I was teaching there at the time, I was replacing Standish Lawder, a film scholar who was actually the son-in-law of Hans Richter and who lived in Yale itself. I had met Richter when I went to the Venice Biennale, some years earlier. I was hired to teach film at Yale but they had no tradition of teaching film. The man I was replacing had done his PhD dissertation on Fernand Léger. I was still a very young film scholar, but I worked very hard and enjoyed the experience. In any case, my contribution was part of a larger exhibition. The second half was the responsibility of the art history department and curator Klaus Kertess. I had a kind of dual role. I was responsible for the film part and I was also able to invite a number of artists, including Richard Serra and Robert Morris. The catalog was produced by students under our supervision. It was a very nice piece of work. I thought it was a very interesting exhibition. There was a floor piece by Serra who was still a young sculptor at that time, and, as I remember, the fire department got very upset because they thought it blocked the door.

For the first fifteen years that I was at NYU, I could show any film I wanted from Anthology Film Archives. My students were totally dedicated. At that time, I was also an editor at *Artforum* and published in the journal. So, in a sense, I feel that my efforts in the United States were productive. In Europe, to some extent, my efforts were not so much about consolidating an audience, but rather about convincing a few well-placed people, at Beaubourg, in galleries and other museums, to get involved in film.

There are two things I regret. That there was not enough communion between documentary film and the so-called avant-garde. And also, in a way, that independent filmmaking was never supported in the way that documentary film was supported at that time.

Adeena Mey

So, are you happy with the recognition that some of the experimental filmmakers you once supported are getting now?

Annette Michelson

Yes, of course. Back then, and this finally started to happen in the 1970s, some filmmakers began to find their way into universities and teach. Two things happened: they started to earn their livings and stopped being provocative; some of them—like Ken Jacobs—also got very involved in teaching and started to write dissertations and get PhDs. People didn't branch out like that in Europe. There was some interest but it never became a movement. That movement is over now.

In talking to Michael Snow, I told him that the days when he was part of a movement are now over. Some people still make films, but it's no longer a movement.

In any case, my main point is that the kind of effervescence that this cinema created in America has lived on in academia. I don't think this ever really happened in Europe. However, I think it can be said that the reception of American independent, avant-garde, experimental film in Europe was real and did actually happen.