

# Tapes That Think

Sixty years separate Eisenstein's method of filmmaking, "intellectual montage," and the works shown in this exhibition. At first glance, these tapes might seem to fall under the shadow of Eisenstein's work, and to reflect his elaborate and enthusiastic theories of montage. They appear to share many fundamental traits with the great filmmaker: the breaks in continuity, the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images and ideas, the gaps and leaps, the high degree of heterogeneity, and the sense that a 'concept', or an interpretation, which is the product of critical thinking, lies waiting for us at the film's end. Eisenstein's films were "intentionalist"; they were designed to achieve a goal, a specific effect, which was always to convince us of something.

It is this last characteristic that these tapes do not share with Eisenstein's intellectual montage. One will look in vain for the same type of message-making machine that Eisenstein so painstakingly integrated into his films. These tapes do not have a singular idea or interpretation that they wish to impart, for they are still in the process of thinking. The viewer has the strange sensation of confronting the tapes, as it were, in mid-thought. They seem to suggest the situation is complicated; we don't even understand the question yet. We must therefore explore the relations that exist between different ideas, and between ideas and images, in order to help us reformulate the question.

This is another characteristic of these tapes: they seem to be more interested in the relations between things than in the characteristics of things themselves as they exist in isolation. This structure is made explicit in Tran T. Kim-Trang's *Operculum*, in which a split screen separates a scrolling text describing an experimental form of lobotomy, on one side, from edited footage of a visit to a cosmetic surgeon, which unfolds on the other. These domains do not mix easily, and the viewer soon perceives the risk of such a structure: a juxtaposition of two distinct and seemingly unrelated domains threatens to make nonsense of both. Yet other possibilities soon emerge. The interpretive possibilities of one domain can be mapped onto the other, and from this a provisional interpretation becomes possible. Perhaps we are being asked to see the intention of the young Vietnamese woman to have her eyelids "Westernized" in a similar light to gruesome, casual violence of the lobotomy; both can be seen as the result of impossible and perhaps cruel demands to conform. But once the meaning of this similarity has been tested, perceived, and appreciated, the huge differences between the two cases re-emerge. One wants to distinguish for example, between the acts of volition in each case, for surely the performing of a lobotomy cannot be seen in the same light as someone who pays to undergo cosmetic surgery. Any singular interpretation will seem too simple.

Because the juxtaposition between the two domains in this work is both reasonable and unreasonable, seen as it is from perpetually shifting vantage points, the process of thinking it through cannot ever really stop. The tape does not operate as an expression of a completed thought, but as a tool to think with, or better, as a device to break up the rigid habits of thought which might have occurred if the two domains had been seen independently of each other. Steve Reinke's particular use of the split-screen device in *Speculative Anthropology* points to the inadequacy of the juxtaposition.

Displayed beside an image of jungle-like plants, photos of people from non-Western, tribal cultures are first revealed, removed, and then replaced with other photos. No information is given about these people or these cultures; they all seem the same. A voice-over laments that our Western imaginations are powerless to interpret them, while the images suggest that all we ever

got from an older, discredited anthropology was an interpretive model which reduced all these different cultures to simple adjuncts of nature. This is followed by uncontextualized, voyeuristic shots of city street scenes at night, and the tape ends when an angered man, seeing that he is being spied on, throws a rock at the camera. Nihilistic in character, this short tape, having shown what one cannot do, provides no leads. The process of thinking terminates in critique.

Elsewhere in Reinke's mushrooming world of short tapes, *Joke (Version 1)* shows considerably more ambition. Contrary to basic psychoanalytic dogma, a man claims to have been born fully individuated, without the endemic crises and illusions of self that others so painfully have to overcome. Having never experienced a 'split subjectivity,' this miracle of consciousness can proclaim, beatifically, "the world is full." Of course, saying it's full does not make it so, and the consequences of this mistake are soon revealed in his inability to distinguish between expressions of reality (jokes his father told) and reality itself (his "real" father). When the joke his now dead father used to tell is told again (which concerns a child being beaten, first with a loaf of bread, then with a cake), the viewer, it is claimed, will confront the real, literal father.

The work is riddled with nonsense, but it is good, productive nonsense. Because the denial of childhood delusions is itself a delusion, the work declares early on that the boundaries of proper discourse have been neatly removed. Yet there is clearly much more at stake, for the work is highly structured; it is like a map, which is handsome in itself, but which lacks any suggestions about what exactly one is to do with it, or where to go with it. Yet it should not be thought that the artist is then that person best able to articulate the meaning of the work, or predict what will be the arrival point or destination of the thought process which has been set in motion. That's not the artist's job. Perhaps such works should be seen in the context of play, where the suggestions 'what if?' or 'let's pretend that...' are the first to be presented, with a tacit agreement on the part of the viewer that the rules of the game are also in question. It has been frequently observed that one of the indirect accomplishments of play is to help us expand, through experimentation, the range of contexts and rules of our activities in general, and to prevent us from being saddled with too few interpretive options. Jokes, in their humble way, achieve this by linking unrelated things (what's the difference between a bobcat and a green escalator). The filmmaker Greta Snider invoked this process in her own montage style when she said that bringing together two previously unrelated ideas was like the actions of two trapeze artists: the further the reach, the better the act.

Rodney Werden's remarkable *I'll Bet You Ain't Never Seen Noth'n' Like This Before* links together two disparate thoughts: a sexual act typically understood to require two people is shown to be achievable by one. One of these thoughts is common; the other, as the title suggests, is not. But if we adjust the frame of the reference slightly, we also see the reverse happening; instead of one term being linked to another, as in the case of *Operculum* or the *Joke*, we also see two terms (two-person intercourse) being collapsed into one (auto-eroticism). Or more metaphorically, the 'outward' movement of the joke or montage is matched by the 'inward' movement of auto-eroticism. What was designed to be connected up to something else can be connected up to itself.

The second section of the tape reproduces this simultaneous inward/outward movement. Using the same dispassionate delivery, the subject demonstrates to the viewer his own rather idiosyncratic use of the shortwave radio. A tool of communication, the shortwave is designed to link distant parts together, and the ever-resourceful protagonist does just that, using radio signals usually thought of as 'noise' for his own sexual pleasure. But as in the first section of the tape, what was thought of a linkage between two term (communication between two parties by shortwave) is set aside, in order to explore another, less orthodox, linkage, that between waste

sound and eroticism.

The tapes in this exhibition can be perceived as representations of thinking. When we are exposed to the thought of 'thinkers,' in the form of essays, for example, what we usually see is a finished, finalized product. A social need akin to hygiene prevents us from exposing the process which brought us there. But the act of thinking should not be confused with its products; thinking is altogether messier and more complex than the expressions that it yields. Thinking does not reject what is assumed to be foreign to it, like emotion, desire, confusion, or even stupidity, which are certainly as essential to thinking as is reason. In the process of thinking, curiosity counts for everything, while a seeming absence of error counts for nothing.

To represent thinking rather than its products is to take risks. Artists always risk having their thinking transformed into thoughts which they would never have intended. And there is nothing they can do about it. Therefore artists who work in this way hope that their work compels the viewer to do what they do: experiment with the many bewildering aspects of social reality by prolonging the processes of thinking, in order to help improve the quality of thought.