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Obstructed Windows: The Films and Paintings of Power Boothe.

Published in *Motion Picture*, 1986.

- I -

In adopting the grid in his paintings of the early 1970s, Power Boothe placed his work against a tradition that has long used grids, both as perspective nets and Cartesian geometric coordinates, as instruments in the service of an absolute order. Even where it seems most rational, however, Boothe's work has consistently refused to be tempted by ideal form. His grids neither impose such a form upon the work nor do they act as its emblem; rather, they govern systematic painting procedures which generate and are simultaneously overwhelmed by fields that cannot be assimilated into the system's order. This work particularly reveals itself where it most resists the grid's rationality, where its materials fully assert themselves against the structure they embody.

Boothe's grid paintings are constructed out of a series of thin acrylic washes which progress systematically across the squares, shifting from a minimum density—minimum layers of pigment—at the lower left to a maximum density at the upper right. No matter how carefully the pigment is applied, however, its viscosity and translucency prevent the achievement of perfectly flat tonal densities. Most particularly in the lighter squares—but even in the darkest—variations of color and texture create overall fields which vibrate with contingency. Paradoxically, methodical procedures are here used so that chance occurrences can have their play.

In *Red Black Shift* (1975), the progressive alteration of tonal density is accompanied by a similarly systematic color shift of the red horizontal lines that traverse the individual squares. The color of these lines is most intense along the left edge, where they are placed to the right of the center of each square, and along the bottom, where they are to the left of center. Their brightness diminishes square by square along the two diagonals that lead away from these edges, reaching a minimum brightness opposite them. The four corners thus receive the strongest, and the center the least, compositional definition. So contrived, the painting guides the gaze in a regular corner-to-corner motion while simultaneously pulling it back and forth between the clarity of its edges and the rich ambiguity of its interior.

In his painting of the late seventies, Boothe switches to an aggressive use of oils and adopts a more intuitive, though still ordered, painting process whose procedures are reinterpreted brushstroke by brushstroke. This work provides few stable reference points from which viewers can make forays into the central fields and back to which they can safely return. The viewer must, moment by moment, enter into and construct islands of order within complex fields that constantly threaten to collapse into chaos.

As Far as You Can See (1980) has so dense a series of lines, organized into bands of contrasting colors and sloping at a variety of angles, as to seem an almost impenetrable chaos. Only two bands of red lines which seem to float above the central field allow the eye a resting point. Once a leap is made into the painting's inner density, the tonal and spatial relationships are so complex that the work can only be experienced within a montage of staccato glances that never achieve final resolution. The grid paintings' stately opposition between system and accident, order and disorder, here breaks opens into tense, incessant confrontation.

The conflict inherent in Boothe's individual works is also reflected in his periodic stylistic shifts. His most recent paintings, for example, return to the orderly arrangements, though not to the grids or systems, of the early work. These paintings consist of rows of horizontal registers whose upper and lower boundaries are formed by the precisely parallel end-points of series of left-tilting vertical lines. As these registers get smaller as they approach the top, they establish a step-like recession into illusionistic space.

The eye's path up and into these paintings is periodically blocked where vertical lines of two contiguous registers join together. As the register boundaries are violated, the eye falters and is abruptly thrown up to the surface of the canvas. The steady perceptual drift up the canvas thus becomes impeded by shifts and hesitations. As always with Boothe's work, order is only sanctioned within structures that allow their own violation.

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The tensions of Boothe's work are illustrated in a Dürer woodcut of an artist who is separated from his reclining nude model by a perspective grid of strings. This separation mirrors a more radical duality that stands between the knife point through which he squints from the stylus point with which he draws. In the space enforced between these points, the draftsman's intuitive union of eye and hand is disrupted and the possibility for systematic representation emerges. With one eye closed and the other subjected to the rigorous discipline of the grid, he can precisely map out each fold of flesh on his model's body. The knife through which the artist focuses has become an instrument of analytic dissection.

Dürer's own representation of the model, leads us to doubt whether the artist will be able to fully order his vision of the woman. Through the interstices of the grid, the force of flesh will assert itself against the imposed system. The artist will waver, caught in a tense struggle between desire and method. It is precisely such a wavering between a quest for order and a delight in rich contingency that gives Boothe's work its characteristic intensity.

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The stable monocular vision of Dürer's artist is essentially that of a camera's optics. The lens, like the methodical draftsman, systematically applies the laws of perspective to the representation of visual objects. Unlike the draftsman, however, the lens is never tempted to violate those laws by reintroducing the vibrations of lived vision. Yet the rigor of the photographic image is not immune from human intervention. As the photographer imposes compositional order upon contingency, tensions inevitably re-emerge. Even the most perfectly composed photograph recalls the viewer to the less perfect world that surrounds its frame.

Such recollection is crucial to the understanding of *Match*, a film made by Boothe in 1973. In *Match*, images of a hand striking matches and holding them until they burn out are arranged in temporally overlapping superimpositions that start at the top left corner and work their way somewhat unevenly across and down to the bottom right. As the matches accumulate and disappear on the dark screen, the film moves between a clearly composed beginning and end, through a cluttered compositional and temporal center. *Match* ends as the last match is extinguished.

This drift of images through an ambiguous interior clearly echoes the grid paintings. In both, a compositional system is established and simultaneously obstructed. In *Match*, the use of in-camera superimpositions ensures that the individual images will be precisely positioned neither in the frame nor in time. The film's irregular composition and erratic rhythm at best alludes to the ideal procession implied by the film's system.

A film cannot be a direct translation of a painting. The elicited eye movements of the paintings are only superficially similar to the path of the images across the screen. Where the static frame and idealized grid of the paintings stand tensely poised against the drift of the eye across their surface, the Heraclitean film screen, itself renewed at each moment, accepts easily its images' movement. The viewer's gaze can relax in *Match* in a way that is impossible when confronting the paintings.

The shift in medium also changes the meaning of the role of contingency in the work. The paintings contain no external references, and their disruptions emerge purely from the application of their systematic rules; the eruption of the contingent within them thus has a force close to that of logical paradox. The hand and matches, however, clearly exist outside the film and cannot be reduced to their role within its system. Because *Match* is so closely bound with the world, it is almost inevitable that the world's accidents should impinge upon it. Although quite beautiful, *Match* cannot reproduce the tense vitality of the paintings upon which it is based.

At the end of *Match*, the film's structure is, by chance, seriously threatened when the next to the last match seems about to outburn the final one. The resulting tremor of suspense is quickly resolved as the hand feels the heat and shakes the match out, avoiding a burn and—incidentally—maintaining the film's integrity. This intrusion of narrative incident into a work ostensibly concerned only with compositional procedures demonstrates how deeply the film's represented objects remain embedded in their world.

That narrative emerges within *Match* should not be surprising. In portraying motion, film almost inevitably gravitates towards the narrative structures that provide the most natural context for events and actions. Boothe's most recent films are, in fact, largely premised upon the viewer's tendency to organize film images into narratives. However, just as the paintings hint at but never achieve compositional order, the events of Boothe's films are never allowed to coalesce into full narratives.

The events of *Current Events* (1984) are extremely simple: a woman sits by a window; she rises to open its shutters; she places a water-filled glass on a table and a plant inside the glass; she stands before a table and picks up and puts down playing cards. These simple events, however, are presented with a gravity that implies a significance that goes beyond the domestic. For example, just as Vermeer implies a wider context for his household scenes by inserting maps and paintings within them, Boothe's repeated juxtaposition of the water glass with a shot of the sea opens up the film's room to a conceptual space that goes beyond its physical borders. When, at the end of the film, the music abruptly stops as the woman unshutters the window, the viewer must conclude that this ordinary event is meant to have a more than ordinary significance.

However, any attempt to assign a stable meaning to *Current Events* must falter as one confronts the complex and ambiguous representation of its simple events. Although the viewer is carried along its rapid montage by the strong forward flow of its music, the film's continual superimposition of image fragments makes the assimilation of its events into a coherent spatio-temporal or narrative whole impossible. The window is at times open, at other times shuttered; day alternates with night; the glass of water arbitrarily appears or does not appear on the table. Shots are frequently repeated, although those that seem identical are at times actually different. The conventions of film syntax are manipulated: the assumed identity of matched contiguous shots of a similar

action is rendered questionable by an unexplainable change in background from one shot to the next. The rapid editing of superimposed images even makes it difficult for the viewer to determine whether the film uses one or several performers. Although *Current Events* evokes an expectation of narrative unity, its contradictions also make certain that this unity will remain elusive.

With its dense, layered composition and lack of overall structure, *Current Events* recalls Boothe's paintings of the period of *As Far as You Can See*. Boothe's latest film, *Overture* (1986), on the other hand, like his most recent paintings, returns to more clearly delineated structures. In place of the almost unrelenting flow of *Current Events*, this film organizes its images into five sections, each of which is set off by a change of music.

The overall shape of *Overture* is particularly defined through the mirroring of its first and last sections. The film begins with three overlapping superimposed zoom shots towards and through one of a wall's several windows. In that window a piano appears and, as the film cuts across the threshold, a male pianist sits and, in the film's only close-up, begins a jagged improvisation by hitting a sharp block chord whose dissonant overtones seem to generate and reverberate through the rest of the film. As the section ends, a woman walks in, puts down a chair, and walks off to the right. The final section reverses and completes these actions as the woman returns to sit on the chair—which now, however, is located away from the piano—and the pianist finishes his piece. As he rises to leave, the woman glances back out of the frame, as if responding to him. The film ends with three zoom shots away from the window.

Overture's middle sections are thus framed by a minimal narrative of the type associated the penny arcades of cinema's earliest history, although its spatial disjunctions give it as much the character of a funhouse as of a peep-show. The alternation of two different patterns of wallpaper in the zoom shots suggests that perhaps both sides are being shown; the confusion of interior / exterior is heightened as it becomes apparent that the wall stands between two large dark almost empty spaces and not the enclosed domestic environments implied by the wallpaper. Coherent spatial mapping is further subverted as the wall, the viewer's only possible point of positional reference, appears within a space that had previously been established as its own reverse side. Through out-of-scale superimpositions, even the optically generated space within the frame is deformed: as the woman enters, her relative size places her at an immense, but indefinite, distance from the pianist. This man and woman interact, however tenuously, on extremely unstable ground.

This fluid space opens up the film to the hallucinogenic flow of images of its central sections. As the woman exits, the amorphous sound of an orchestra tuning fades in over the piano music. She reappears, framed at the torso, walking along the walls, which now, because of the matched continuity of the previous two shots, is placed in still another impossible location. As the camera follows her march-like walk and continues tracking even after she fades away, a right-directed scroll-like motion is initiated that carries the viewer along until the film's final moments. The energies generated by the pianist are thus dampened by her steady walk into the regular flowing movement that characterizes much of Boothe's work.

In the third section, the camera's continuing track along the apparently endless wall and a meandering piano improvisation that never quite coalesces into *Clair de lune* lull the viewer into a state of almost dream-like acquiescence. The previously shaded windows are now open, revealing an eerie still image of a group in evening clothes, clearly taken from an old photograph, who peer out at the viewer through space and time. The image is given further resonance as the passage across the windows is echoed by an intercut shot of eight lamps being lit one by one across the top of the dark screen. Spatial order is wholly surrendered as tracking across the wall is cross-cut against an image of the woman walking to the wall in the open space that had been occupied by the piano; simultaneously, the wall occupies two distinct locations, each of which is defined as occupying its own

reverse side. As the woman lies down and rolls next to the wall, the tracking shot is replaced in the parallel editing by the image of the lamps being sequentially lit across the screen. With each cut back to the woman, an additional image of her action is layered over the others until, when the final lamp is lit, she dissolves into a diaphanous blur. As the wall and then the woman fade to black, the section ends.

The film's spatial rifts are here gently pulled open, and a world is revealed whose events are bound together by analogy and similitude, not by causality and social codes. Drifting past these images, their ambiguities are accepted as one accepts the ambiguities of a dream. For a short time, *Overture* enters a utopia where rational order is not disrupted so much as transcended.

A utopia of the imagination must, for Boothe, ultimately be as unacceptable as the perfected space of reason. Thus, just as the disruptive lines of the most recent paintings destroy the illusion of depth, the fourth section of the film abruptly shatters the regular drifting movement that allows the viewer to be so readily transported into an easy acceptance of the film's ambiguities and contradictions. The dream-like coherence of the central section must, when faced with the shock of this disruption, dissipate as rapidly as does the unrecounted memory of a dream. In the middle sections, the pianist cedes control of the film's energies and allows them to flow where they will; as *Overture* ends, that control, however tenuous it might be, as always in Boothe's work, returns.

In the fourth section, after a brief reprise of the woman's walk along the shaded windows, the lamps are again sequentially lit. Now, however, they irregularly flash across and down the screen, in an image that recalls *Match* without even the pretense of embodying a system. As the pianist and his music return at the section's end, the lamps move and flash wildly, as if responding to his disjointed rhythms. With this disruption of established order, there can occur the final section's reversal of direction and its consequent narrative mirroring of the opening.

At *Overture's* end, the woman glances back out of frame, seemingly in response to the pianist's exit. For just this final moment, the inconsistently mapped space of the film seems to cohere, to provide a common ground upon which the two characters might reasonably interact. By this point, however, the film has reneged on too many promises of syntactical consistency to permit confidence in the implied spatial continuity. Formed of the illusory symmetry and cul-de-sacs of a maze of mirrors, *Overture* so compromises perceptual faith that it is unable to reliably sustain even this simplest of narrative gestures.

- IV -

Each of the figures in Dürer's woodcut stands framed against a window view that emphasizes the character of their role within the work. By echoing the curves of her body, the hills at the horizon of the harbor scene place the nude within the surrounding natural world. The level horizon of the seascape which frames the artist, on the other hand, mimics not his person but the grid lines of his representational method; the view is, moreover, obstructed by a neatly trimmed potted plant that stands on the windowsill. The draftsman's method sets him apart from nature and allows him to master, prune, its contingencies. As simply inserted within the studio's wall, however, this opposition remains merely schematic; it is only when its terms are brought together in the print's third window, the perspective net, that they can truly enact their struggle for the domination of the representational image.

It is, of course, this third window that provides the most appropriate model for Boothe's work. Refusing to ever grant full domination either to the ordering process or to contingency, his work neither permits reduction to stability nor an unstructured wandering through random events. Each moment of its viewing must reenact the struggle which engendered it, and the work thereby pulls the observer back and forth between its opposite poles.

In opening the window shutters at the end of *Current Events*, the performer completes a gesture whose earlier stages had been previously shown in fragments. Although the shot's aura of definitive narrative significance is not sustainable—the open window has already been shown so incessantly that the shot is more of an anti-climax than a narrative conclusion—the gesture does summarize both the immediate concerns of *Current Events* and those of Boothe's work as a whole. By throwing his film open to the random traffic patterns of the street, Boothe rejects the draftsman's role as a virtuoso of phenomena and, like the pianist that he pseudonymously portrays in *Overture*, he adopts the more moderate role of an artist who initiates but refuses to fully determine his work. This refusal to impose absolute control is at the center of Boothe's work both as a painter and as a filmmaker.