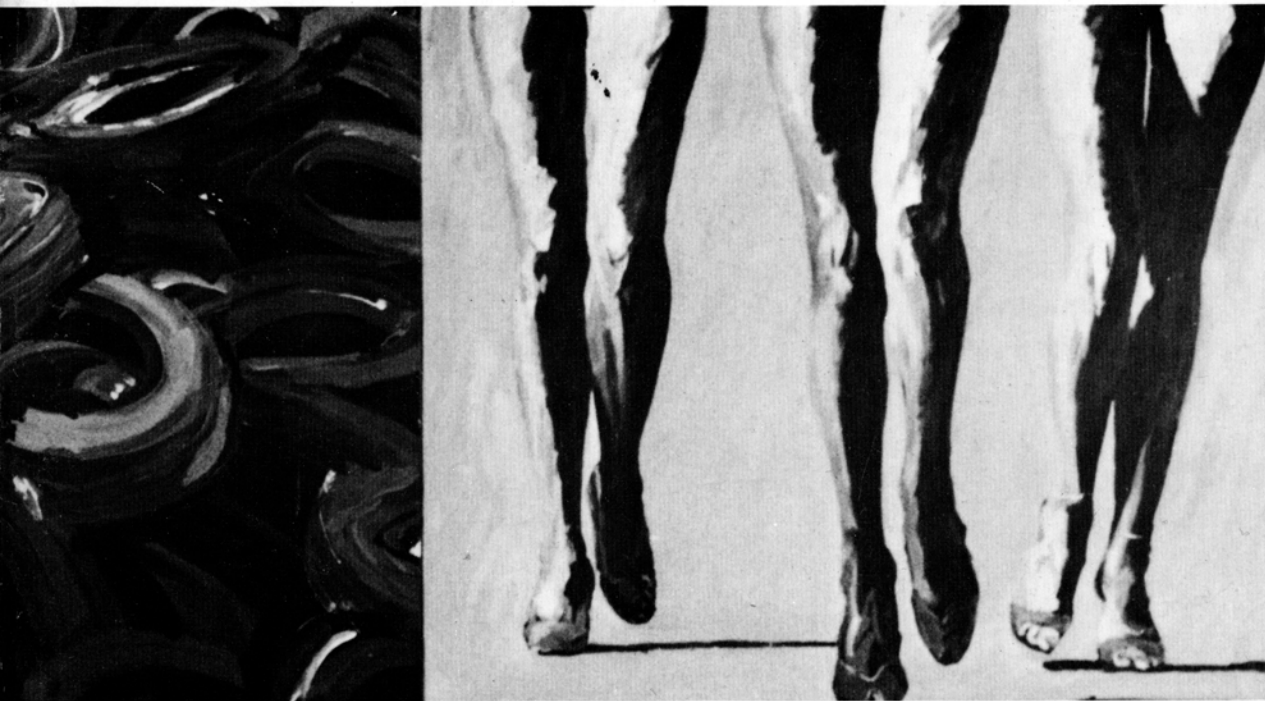


DREAMWORKS

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ERICKA BECKMAN'S *OUT OF HAND*: IN SEARCH OF MEANING

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Ericka Beckman's remarkable film *Out of Hand* (1980) begins with the image of a man sleeping peacefully against an imageless black background. After the appearance of the film's title, a chorus of women's voices echo what at first sounds like the chant "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy" as the camera slowly zooms in toward a model of a colonial house. The rhythm of the words, coupled with the camera movement into the model, its small lights burning brightly against the black field which surrounds it, arouses a feeling of somehow returning to the past, of travelling into a place deep in memory. At first the journey is as awesome and terrifying as Sylvia Plath's lament for her own "Daddy", and fraught with as many incestuous possibilities. Here, however, the mood is suddenly dissipated as the chant becomes clearly recognizable as "steady, steady, steady", articulated in slow, mysterious tones. The camera continues to probe deeper, but does not immediately enter the house as one might expect. Instead, the front porch suddenly detaches itself and stands alone against the black background. The inward motion continues into the triangular space above the front door on which is represented an eagle. Magically this wooden triangle, now detached from the door, takes in the function of the eagle represented at its center, and flies away.

Many of us have, at one time or another, been plagued by that lost memory; i.e. that image of a person, place or thing, long forgotten, buried, as it were, somewhere deep in the backs of our minds. Our attempts to search for that forgotten image sets us on a "journey," past a cluttered array of images which can be said to race past our mind's eye, as we move back to the desired point. Beckman, in *Out of Hand*, takes us on a cinematic journey of this excavation, or more appropriately, of this unravelling, and does so by literalizing many of the verbal terms often used in describing this mental process. Her film is a "search", a camera-generated journey, past an array of colorful shapes, often models of building blocks and toys; past sound fragments, words and music, even moments of emotional intensity, all of which are represented to occupy the limitless space of the imagination. She presents this space as black, hollow, without boundaries; a space which holds images that are seemingly generated by the "dreamer," a reclining figure who is quite conveniently represented in the film. He sleeps contentedly, like a baby, one might say, against the imageless black field. The film is apparently his dream, his reverie, but are we, as viewers, not also implicated in this process? Is it not also our "dream," our foray into a domain of imagistic, or more specifically, symbolic thought?* Beckman has even incorporated a directive in the film which serves to

*The use of the "symbolic" in this essay will comply with the use of that term by Jean Piaget, as it appears in his writings. In opposition to the use of that term by Jacques Lacan, it is that stage of development, just prior to, but totally integrated with, the onset of language. Symbolic thought in the child is the ability to use a visual image to "stand for" or represent a missing object.

imageless, it has lost the ability to define objects in terms of their position, size, or perspective. In this ever-changing world, what had appeared to be on top may turn out to be on the bottom; what had looked like depth may soon become surface; what had been seen as big may later appear to be small.

Time too loses its objective reality, and becomes more a function of the activity presented; events are often extended or contracted, taking on the "emotional time" of the action, rather than the real time of the event. A man runs in the direction of the camera, the sound of his footsteps indicates a fast pace, but he does not seem to be advancing as quickly as he should. A hand extends into a furnace, reaching repeatedly, but somehow not moving or changing, and thus incorporating the duration of its emotional intensity. The literalized image of Time is also presented in the film. Here it is a revolving disc punctuated by five colorful boxes arranged in a circle, and demarcated by a white bar, as it moves in response to a ticking sound. "Time," however, is soon literally "suspended" and then "disrupted" as the man (the same person originally seen as the "dreamer" but who now is the "performer") takes it off the wall and first builds his own replica of it, apparently to function according to his own needs, and then in short order, destroys it.

Along with the non-objective time and space appears a non-logical causal system. Sounds often appear before the action which produced them is presented: objects fall but make no sounds; the manual rocking motion engaged in by the man as he moves a model of a hobby horse from side to side, seems to cause a "car" driven in response to the same rocking motion to collide against a fence. Moreover, many of the images themselves are fantastical. Three sets of torso-less cheerleader legs have airplane propellers spinning at their waists; the house we had seen at the beginning of the film flies away by means of these same propellers.

Images are superimposed as they come into being through associative sets of combinations and recombinations. For this reason, the sequence of activities engaged in by the objects, who have thus taken on a life of their own, are not to be read in a linear manner. The performer too, although he is involved in a singular goal-directed search, has little development or progression of action across the span of the film. He continuously and obsessively searches. The images in *Out of Hand* can then best be seen as parts of a picture puzzle, or rebus, an imagistic system where ideas are in the process of "writing" themselves; where thoughts are in the process of formation. In fact, the film as a whole may be read as a visualization of the thought "I've got to find it."

Through this breakdown of the coordinates of an objective reality, the film identifies one of the necessary conditions for symbolic thought. Whether we look at the symbolic thought of the infant, the child involved in symbolic play, the adult day-dreamer or dreamer, they are all characterized by a *degree* of loss in the ability to distinguish between the self and other, between subjective and objective reality. For this reason, time, space, causality and object all operate on conditions created by the individual; the images too, whether they are picture images or sound images combine to create an egocentric world, based on egocentric associations. In the film *Out of Hand* all of these conditions are generated by the fictionalized personage known to us as the "dreamer." But since the self is so unstable in these states of lowered differentiation, the identity of this personage also becomes somewhat diffuse. Not only does the dreamer "dream" the film, but he is also the major "actor" in it. He runs to the house, he searches through the trunk for the lost object and he also conducts the flow of images that race past him. In short, the dreamer is both "I" and "he" in relationship to his dream.



But why does the singular figure repeatedly gesture us into the film? Could it be that our position as film viewers, a position often called into theoretical debate as being akin to that of the day-dreamer or dreamer precisely *because* of this decreased differentiation between the subjective and objective world, is here directly confronted? Perhaps a look at the verbal directives in the film can help clarify this point. Functioning almost as captions, the verbal statements are presented either by means of intertitles, or spoken by a woman's voice-over, and serve to define the actions, or even at times to direct them. For example, the voice sometimes speaks of the dreamer in the third person: "He does not know where he put it" or at times in the first person, "I go deep into it;" or at other times it shifts, speaking in the imperative: "Con-Con-Concentrate" or "Let it slip, passover it". In this undifferentiated situation to whom does "I" refer? To whom are the commands directed? Since we have been inscribed as viewers by the man's gesture and by the direct address of the caption-like statements (i.e. a direct communication between the narrator and the viewer) the "you" can be seen as the dreamer, or may even be seen to refer to the viewer. In addition, "I go deep into it," spoken as it is by the narrator, performed by the dreamer, and watched by the viewer, who is metaphorically taken "deep into it" across the span of the film, becomes an ambiguous statement. Through the interchangeable use of these pronouns, the strict boundaries between the dreamer, the viewer, and the narrator as referential identities become somewhat confused. In this manner, Beckman has attempted a breakdown of the subjective/objective poles of the self, thus making an analogy between the dream, or daydream state and the viewing situation.

In *Out of Hand*, we, as adults, are taken through a re-enactment of the search that, according to Piaget, is only possible when the child has developed the ability to formulate mental images to signify the missing object. The dreamer in the film is an adult, but he moves back through his memory, to a world dominated by childhood images, back to the toy, perhaps even to the metaphorical original image which marked the acquisition of this representational ability. We first meet the dreamer in *Out of Hand* as he runs to a house, breaks in and then leaves. But, as we are told by the intervening titles, he has left something behind. He runs back to the house and finds himself in front of a boarded up door. The forgotten object, which he now seeks to find, is apparently behind this door, and so literally "barred" from access. But he breaks through nonetheless, destroying Time, as we mentioned earlier, and entering a metaphoric deeply-hidden space. This space is made up of childhood toys, building blocks, and other familiar household objects: tools, a shovel, a neatly folded shirt. It is here, as the man searches in a large trunk (an often-used metaphor for the mind) that the objects begin to indulge in their "play." Most importantly, however, the objects represented are only models or replicas of the real things. The rocking horse, the doll horse, the suitcase, the propellers, even the building blocks, those beloved childhood toys, are not the actual objects, but foam-core reproductions of the originals. So then, quite literally, the man in the film is looking in his memory (the trunk) for the representation, the mental image (the toy model) of a lost object.

We must, however, take this observation one step further. As film images and therefore, representations, the object/replicas are actually *representations of representations* in much the same way that dream images, as reproductions taken from the storehouse of memory images, are in turn themselves representations of perceived events. In this way, individual memory images may be extracted from their contexts and used as symbolic units, to combine and recombine with other

symbols and so create a nexus of meaning. It is in conjunction with this point that we can understand why Beckman has chosen film for the re-enactment of the symbolic process.

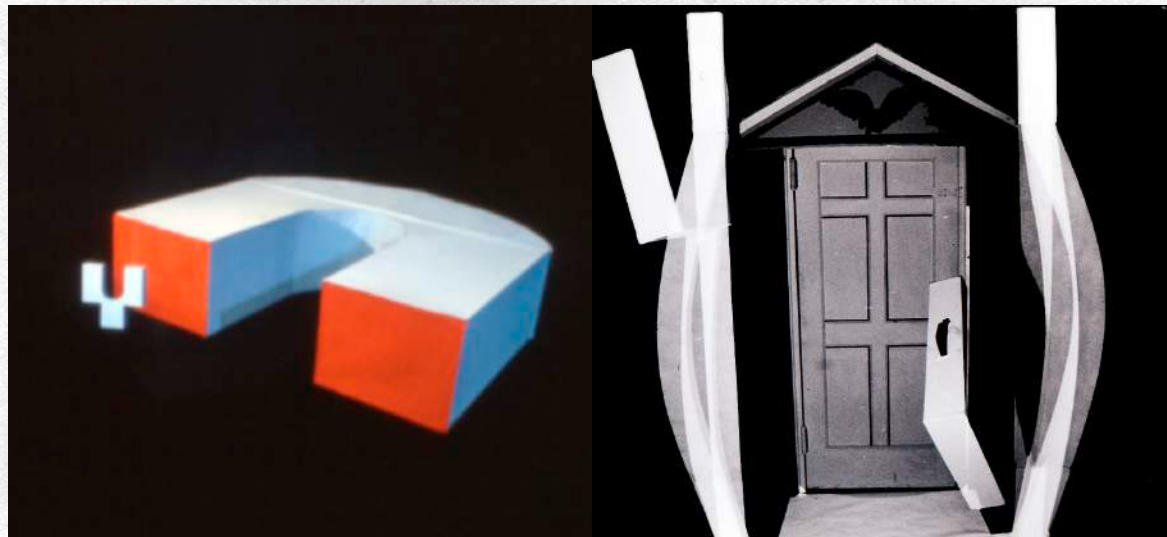
The concern for the conditions of imagistic representation are so important to Beckman because she comes to film as a visual artist, trained as a painter and a printmaker. While many filmmakers may now concern themselves with the narrative possibilities offered by film, or with the material components of the filmmaking process, Beckman employs many of film's attributes, i.e. sound, image, time, space, movement, rephotography, editing, dramatic situations, props, sets, actors, and uses them to explore the representational process itself.

Beckman is most interested in the way that film and photographic images make meaning. In fact her work can be seen to share some of its fundamental concerns with the early work of such artists as Robert Longo and Jack Goldstein. Longo's work, for example, concentrates on the possibility of the image, or more specifically in this case, of the picture, to function as a "hieroglyph," or symbol.³ Longo's figures are not representations of objects taken from a perceptual reality, but instead, they function as metaphors for this process. Longo makes representations of representations by using photographic stills as his imagistic sources. In this way, his pieces are first taken from a source which was formed by means of an "imprint" (i.e. the indexical method of the photographic process) and then extracted from their photographic contexts as "molds" of a single figure: a wall relief, a drawing, a performance. It is then precisely because of this missing context that the images hang suspended, often quite literally, on the brink of meaning. His work then points to both the way a photographic image is formed, and to the way in which it creates meaning: i.e. an image is understood or "read" according to its context, and according to the associations it generates.

Beckman, by choosing film as her medium, adds the dimension of *time* to her representational images and in so doing addresses herself to some of these very questions. It is almost as if one of Longo's works, a figure frozen in an ambiguous pose, were given the ability for *movement*. By animating her objects Beckman presents us with just this possibility. She makes models of stationary objects, some of which are abstract shapes, and then animates them, having them operate in the manner of symbols in symbolic thought. In much the same way that a "hat," for example, as a symbol in a dream or in childhood play, can be used to represent the person who usually wears it, or, by virtue of the fact that it now supports a battalion of toy soldiers at its summit, can take on the meaning of "hill," Beckman animates her objects so that they change their significances according to their contexts, and according to transformations based on a system of similarities.

For example, a U-shaped building block is first read as a huge magnet, as it propels the dreamer, now dwarfed in comparison, into its gravitational field; later the same object is seen as a fireplace, standing upright and emitting a bright yellow glow from its center. These objects have changed their meaning according to their context. (In the dreamwork the process by which symbols are created along this plane of contiguity is known as displacement.) Now as the dreamer reaches into the hearth of this fireplace, the U-shaped block suddenly becomes quite small and rests on top of the man's wrist, somewhat like a bracelet. The cupped shape of the building block is then replaced by a woman's hand, which reaches down and grabs the man's arm at the wrist. Magically the man's arm disappears and is replaced by

3 Craig Owens "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," Part 2, *October* 13, 1980, p. 74.



an object similar to it in terms of its shape and position. The woman's hand is now left holding a long red pole. The hand suddenly begins to twirl the pole and so changes the meaning, or identity, of the object from "pole" to that of "baton". These images have thus replaced themselves via associations based on the similarity of shape, position and function. (Here the progression of meaning has been along an axis of congruence; or by unravelling that function performed by the dream work known as condensation.)

By first re-enacting the way in which symbols come into being in symbolic thought, i.e. according to associations based on contextual elements and those based on a system of similarities, Beckman then takes us one step further. She makes a specific reference to the photographic process. A careful look at the reverse shot of the man searching through his trunk reveals a *film screen* positioned on the far side of the trunk. A series of shot/counter shot alterations implies that this man is projecting his fantasies onto this screen. For example, by means of it he drives a "spaceship," having it soar into an "outer space" of inverted "U's." This same film screen is later the place on which are projected the silhouettes, or shadows (i.e. punning on the photographic process that makes images by means of an imprint) of an arrangement of household tools; an arrangement which is alternately shown to us in its positive form. Beckman here implies the connection between the means by which mental images are constructed and make meaning, and those similar properties of the photographic image.

In the making of *Out of Hand* Beckman has used Piaget's model for the mind's symbolic process, both in its early stages of acquisition, and in those of its functioning. By implying the connection between this mental model and the photographic image, the question of similar properties arises. A photograph is formed by an imprint; it is a light-struck replica of the original objects. As a visual signifier, the photographic image is read spatially in terms of the juxtaposition of its elements (in film, this reading is extended onto a temporal plane) and according to the associations (again a spatial metaphor) based on the depth of its similarities.⁴ In Beckman's film, the viewer has the opportunity to consider the relationship between the dream image (as examples of the symbolic process) and the photographic image.

Moreover, Beckman accomplishes this re-enactment with a marvellously unique array of images, sounds and rhythms. The bright primary colors of the object vibrate against their black fields, and their movements, often coupled with Beckman's original drum rhythms and sound collages, surprise and delight the viewer with all the joyous quality of a childhood game. It is precisely here that Beckman's power lies. Her film is not didactic. Instead it provokes, implies, resonates. The images and sounds she presents undergo processes of transformation across space and time; processes, of course, all too magical to exist anywhere else but in the world of the imagination, or significantly, in that of film. The sudden appearance, disappearance and transformation of these objects, however, occur not as they do in a Méliès film, merely to startle the audience with the magic trick which is cinema, nor, it must be stressed, to simply present the personal consciousness of the artist. Instead, *Out of Hand* can be seen to re-enact, in filmic terms, certain central conditions of the symbolic process itself, both in the way symbolic images are formed and in the way they are read.

4 Roland Barthes *Mythologies*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1957, p. 122.