A Conversation with Ericka Beckman
 by Lionel Biovier and Fabrice Stroun

Lionel Bovier and Fabrice Stroun
The *Super-8 Trilogy* makes direct reference to Piaget's theories of learning processes. Additionally, these works make use of rules, games, and, more precisely, sport—as a spatial and social transcription of these rules. How did you become interested in these questions and how did they come to structure your early works as a whole?

Ericka Beckman
As a young artist I was looking for a language to explain the relationship between the knowledge of one's self and movement in the physical world. I knew that movement was a language we learn long before the language we speak. I discovered by making short experimental works that sound and image could be substituted for each other as long as the viewer understood the temporal and spatial coordinates. Somehow physical reality was a system more deeply ingrained in our consciousness than the expressive forms of language, image, or even music. So I abandoned all my philosophical readings and delved into Piaget. The first thing I read was *Genetic Epistemology*, a very short book that synopsized all his research to dote. That's when I started this *Super-8 Trilogy*.
The first film *We Imitate; We Break Up* (1978) deals with imitation and the formation of a stable identity. When challenged by uncertainty and change it is through establishing regularity that personal identity becomes stable. This film is a display of physical actions between characters, or actions between characters and obstacles, which start off as uncoordinated and chaotic and gradually, through the course of practice and repetition, achieve balance or stability. At the end, once the actions have achieved perfection, they become images or symbols, and are internalized for identity construction.

In the second film, *The Broken Rule* (1979), I set out to show how rules are formed. There are two kinds of rules. There are the rules or truths that you live by that are formed by a social consensus through the process of testing and acceptance. Then there are rules that are created by the individual that provide a sense of purpose and self worth. They both carry real consequences. The question I carried as I made this film was: "If everybody does it, will it be a real rule or not?"

The Broken Rule was also in part, a celebration of the artist Mike Kelley, who I had just discovered in California, and whose work and energy I felt represented the individual commitment to self-established rules, which I was embracing in this film. I created the final performance for him.

The third film, *Out of Hand*, was a depiction of memory formation. I don't exactly know what Piaget book I read for this film; it could have been a combination of Play and Imagination and *The Creation of Myth and Memory in a Child*. The boy in *Out of Hand* is the quintessential Peter Pan, who can't move into adolescence and holds back to locate a nostalgic object from his childhood. However, his maturation is unavoidable. The first scene sets up the problem. He wakes up from a dream where he sees himself being removed violently from his home. The film shows the path his mind takes as he searches his past for something he can only find in his future. To move into adulthood, he must abandon his attachment to toys and embrace a symbol that can represent that toy in his memory. The toy that comforted him as a child becomes the handle of a shield that protects him or shields him from the world beyond his home. In the last shot he lets go of it. This film represents the struggle in the emotions between childhood love and direct attachment to objects of love, to a more mediated reality, where love can exist in your mind and no longer be in your present. The toy is no longer present but has been absorbed in this new understanding; it exists as a vibrant symbol in the formation of this new understanding.

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At this time in my life when I made the *Super-8 Trilogy*, I read Piaget's books very loosely, almost with a poetic freedom to just enjoy his tests and his children's response to his tests. But I also tried to deeply absorb his definition of the successive levels of intelligence leading up to the acquisition of language. It established in me a love of logistics. His books showed how he structured the proof to support his theorems. This reading of Piaget's scientific process gave me confidence to build my own logical systems.

Lionel Bovier and Fabrice Stroun
You have mentioned in the past the influence of Jock Goldstein's short films of the end of the 1970s/ early 1980s. Do you remember what effect they had on a young artist coming out of CalArts like yourself? Was his notion of a "distanced spectacle" relevant to you at the time?

Ericka Beckman
I went to CalArts as a graduate student for two reasons: because I liked the percussionist John Bergamo who taught there, and because I saw the film loops of Jack Goldstein when I was visiting the campus before attending. Jack, who was now living in NYC, was in Los Angeles producing those first loops and he was kind enough to show me his work. I knew I wanted to make visual films that were emblematic, rather than narrative, and his work stayed rooted in my memory for those years at CalArts. Everyone who knew him at this time had great respect for what he was making. He was really ahead of his peers from CalArts.

This term "distanced spectacle" was not in my head at the time. I think I heard that term in the title of a performance by Robert Longo, *Sound Distance of a Good Man* (1978). A friend of mine—Tony Conrad— and I discussed distance in the mid-1980s in terms of performance and identification in film viewing. We met to talk about Super-8 film in which we were both engaged. He had this theory that there was a distance between the screen image and the viewer and a distance between the viewer and his memory. If the distance between these three points is contracted there is immediate identification. The cues directed at you from action and image on the screen immediately register as real and pick up confirmation from your memory.

However, once this distance is greater, it takes longer to either register what you see or understand what you see. This distance sets up a delay in your response. Your memory has to catch up and confirm what you see, making it somehow real. Tony was doing a lot of thinking about structural film and perception. I immediately saw how I could manipulate this distance by taking the easily assimilated images from my childhood and my culture, and perform them differently, so that the audience could not rely on what they expected to see but instead had to assign a new meaning to them.

I believe a lot of my friends and myself looked to images that we could appropriate from our past, because we were so radically transformed by the TV and radio we watched and listened to. Inner time and maturation were marked by episodes of TV shows and music. We clung to their short-lived status and listened and looked deep into their sounds and images. The media experience of my youth was linear and each new sequel, news story, or album changed or wiped out the one before, in a blotter effect.

Lionel Bovier and Fabrice Stroun
In all your films, there is a very strong sense of artificiality: all your images seem mediated by technology. This McLuhanesque concern can be found in the works of many artists who surrounded you at the time. Do you think that this set of questions has changed since the nature of images has been altered by new digital technologies?

Ericka Beckman
I would say that today is more mediated than my youth was, in that we believed that the songs and the characters portrayed real-life experiences. Today a musician or a commercial artist has to prove that they are sincere, since everything that is mediated has to break through the barrier of artificiality.

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I always identified with the idea of "performing the image." That is the term I gave myself when I made images that moved. The notion of construction goes deep into the art making process. You first construct a mental model that then gets reconstructed in reality. In my case the whole reason to use moving images rather than painting or still representation was to directly engage in this process of making movements that could be identified and communicated.

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Yet your films and photographs are obviously handcrafted. Even today, while you could easily use CGI technology, you still rely on cardboard models and stop-motion animation. Why is that?

Ericka Beckman
The physical process of making on object brings with it a certain kind of concentration and focus that I do not find when I work with an interface. Also, most of stop-motion work of late is physical. I have been shooting with o small dolly and a Bolex Camera and I create movement vectors through architectural spaces. I follow the lines of the design of the buildings. I move in relation to the light. I am the camera and I am the camera mount. I only see what the camera sees and I am building on action sequence intuitively. I see the results when I get the film back from the lab.

I do use more sophisticated robotic equipment for model motion control, but this model work is secondary to what I discover when I design a real camera move that I have to perform. What I like about making films is that it can address the audience in the "first person," creating a direct sensation that can mirror reality. So why not create experiences that use these reality cues for reinforcement, but take us into an unfamiliar perceptual experience.

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a Swiss developmental psychologist and philosopher known for his epistemological studies with children. His theory of cognitive development and epistemological view are together known as "genetic epistemology".

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