



NEON ADVERTISING IN *PASSING THROUGH* (DIRECTED BY LARRY CLARK, 1977), FRAME GRAB.



The Sound of Color / The Color of Sound: The Aesthetics of *Passing Through*

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How does the new emerge in the world? This question has, of course, a formidable philosophical pedigree: but it has perhaps been an especially urgent question for scholars of cultural production, as the mass industrial arts of the 20th century have rather suddenly morphed into the frenzied image production—the “digital delirium”—of the 21st. For a time, in the 1970s—incidentally the decade which saw the production of Larry Clark’s *Passing Through*—film theory took as its major project the analysis of the ways in which this cultural production served as a means for the social reproduction of capitalism; the question of “political cinema,” then, was constructed in a “reactive” way, so that the radical work was characterized precisely in relation to the dominant codes which it was violating. The problem with all this was that what ended up

getting ignored was the *aesthetic* question; aesthetics here taken to be that which brings to our perception the indeterminate, the indiscernible, the virtual. To recast the question of political cinema as a question fundamentally connected to aesthetics, then, is to assert that we can’t possibly know in advance when, where, or how a new sensibility or a new engagement with the world will emerge: we can only “attend” to it, in all the senses the Romance languages give to this word. Depending on the variant of critical theory you subscribe to, you can call this moment an encounter with the Real, an instance of counter-actualization, or a speculative engagement with the foreign, but in any case, we must see these as fundamentally connected to aesthetic experience.¹

Clark’s *Passing Through*—like the jazz ensemble which the film takes

not simply as its nominal subject but as its formal model—is very much centered on this close attention to the new in emergence. It goes without saying that “free jazz” tries to distance itself from pre-given progressions that anchor the improvisation of the more traditional jazz ensemble. And in several early rehearsal sequences, we see the main character, saxophonist Warmack, as he searches for the right sound, having just returned to Los Angeles from a stint in Attica prison. But more than this: Warmack (and his girlfriend Maya) search for new paths out of the neocolonial economic structures of South Central. In this, Maya takes the lead by quitting her job as photographer for a glossy black magazine owned and run by whites. Warmack, too, understands how the white music industry appropriates for its own profit the

artistic production of black men, which leads him to attempt—in one of the film’s few narrative lines—to start an independent record label. Within this system, heroin becomes the perfect metaphor (however real its presence in the music industry): for it points at the profound psychic risks that accompany the constant pressure to move into new and uncharted terrain, which then can be exploited by the white drug dealers who form part of the infrastructure of the entertainment industry.

But the fact that Maya is a step ahead of Warmack in her decision to break with these structures points to yet another way in which the film engages with the new, insofar as it attempts to understand new modes of relationality between black men and black women. An entire section of the film—woven together by a seemingly incessant rain that

joins the sequences together—explores the slow development, with all its vicissitudes, of the relationship between Warmack and Maya, as Warmack confronts his insecurities in the face of an accomplished and independent woman, whose political awareness extends beyond the local and links the African-American struggle to anti-colonialist movements across the globe. In this way, the film—though never invoking it explicitly—brings to mind the charged sexual politics of the radical black left in its attempt to reconcile women's rights and equality with the need to nourish a black masculinity made precarious by centuries of slavery and racism. One thinks, for example,

(RIGHT) FIGURE 1:
Flashing neon sign outside Warmack's apartment window in *Passing Through* (Directed by Larry Clack, 1977), frame grab.



“HISTORY INHABITS EVERY FRAME, EVERY SPACE, OF THE FILM, AS THE URGENT RAW MATERIAL FROM WHICH THE NEW MUST BE FASHIONED.”

of the ways in which, in the decade preceding this film, this very issue in the Black Panther Party led to the development of the “Womanist” position; or of the ways in which the sexual violence recounted in Eldridge Cleaver’s collected prison writings, *Soul on Ice*, created a firestorm of controversy in the national (white) press, even as Cleaver acknowledged the misguidedness of his earlier acts. Indeed, history inhabits every frame, every space, of the film, as the urgent raw material from which the new must be fashioned.

All of this, I want to argue, is linked formally to the film’s extensive use of the color red. Certainly, one can’t help but notice the way that most of the film’s interiors—with exceptions like the offices of Maya’s magazine, the corporate headquarters of the record company executive, and Attica prison—are lit with lighting instruments gelled red. This is especially prominent in Warmack’s apartment (Figure 1); but it is noticeable in almost every instance of what I would call the “spaces of resistance” in the film (Figure 2),

those spaces whose cracked and textured plaster walls give a vague suggestion of “the outmoded,” in contrast to the glassy smoothness of the corporate office (Figure 3). For Walter Benjamin, the value of the outmoded, its “revolutionary potential,” lay precisely in the way it makes capitalist production visible per se: the novelty that renders an object outmoded has nothing to do with the really new, but rather illustrates how, despite appearances, everything remains the same.²

“THE TECHNICAL AND AESTHETIC PROBLEM CLARK FACED THUS OPENS UP TO A UTOPIAN ASPIRATION: TO SEE BLACK SKIN ‘IN A NEW LIGHT,’ LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY.”

Larry Clark, in talking about the overall chromatic design of his film (and not specifically, I should add, addressing the use of red gels) has said that he was lighting for black skin. In other words, by-the-book lighting of the kind that one might learn in film school is going to tell you how to light skin that is by default white skin. The technical and aesthetic problem Clark faced thus opens up to a utopian aspiration: to see black skin “in a new light,” literally and figuratively. Whether or not pushing tungsten light toward the red part of the spectrum was done toward this end or some other one, I would like to argue that this utopian aspiration produces, almost as if a byproduct, the red glows that pulsate through the various spaces of the film. That light suggests at once the state of emergency that characterized black urban experience in 1977

(and given recent events regarding the policing of black communities today, suggests that the state of emergency is far from over); but also states of emergence: of new modes of relationality, new distributions of the sensible, a politics “to come.”

For Walter Benjamin, color was a privileged means through which our experience might open up to new potentialities, insofar as color is able to move across boundaries and expresses itself as an intensity rather than a fixed property of a thing. These ideas are beautifully compressed into what has become a rather well-known entry in the *Arcades Project*: where Benjamin writes, “What, in the end, makes advertisement so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery red pool reflecting it in the asphalt.”³ Benjamin, too, is talking about a redness as

a kind of byproduct: in this case, one produced by capital itself. The red glow on the pavement, like the outmoded object or space, is one of those “unintended consequences” that have the potential to expose, in a “profane illumination,” the irrationality of what we normally take to be the common sense of everyday life. Significantly, Benjamin gave this entry a title, “This Space for Rent,” suggesting that underlying the capitalist exchange of spaces for rents, there is the potential for a “montage” to emerge which would disrupt this circuit of exchange.⁴

(RIGHT) FIGURE 2:
Spaces of resistance: the jazz club
in *Passing Through* (directed by
Larry Clark, 1977), frame grab.



The reds of *Passing Through* are not the same as Benjamin's reds: they are not the reflected glows of the phantasmagoria of capital, but as I indicated earlier, instead come about as the result of a utopian aspiration. Indeed, the only red "advertising" signs we see are the block-lettered names of the string of motels lined up one after another in a strip mall (image on page 27); and the only neon is a partially visible flashing sign which is outside Warmack's apartment window, put there, according to Clark, because he needed to give the impression the apartment was above ground level in order to link continuity with the exterior sequences outside the apartment (Figure 1). But in a sense, what Benjamin was getting at in treating color as expressive intensity was to bring out its *musical* qualities: like music, color can overrun fixed boundaries, can pass through

certain thresholds. And affectively, this is the sense that we get from the reds in the film: feelings of linkages across distances, of rising and falling intensities. (In fact, the film's opening sequence makes an explicit connection between music and color: against a deep black background, colored lights become associated with particular instruments, and as the instruments interact with one another, the colors begin to occupy various zones of the processed image.)

When Warmack returns to L.A. from the prison stint, there is an amazing monochromatic sequence in which Warmack takes his saxophone to a pier on the Pacific Ocean and improvises, with the sound of the ocean waves present in the background. These sounds of waves return periodically at key moments through the film, and formally they

correspond sonically to how the film is handling color in the image. The waves, that is to say, produce constantly shifting rhythmic patterns, and constantly varying levels of intensity, from a vast number of "micro-movements." In this way they are akin to free jazz, insofar as in both the rhythmic structures are in constant variation. But in a larger sense, the waves of the ocean present us with a case of the "mathematical sublime": the reference point for measurement is constantly in flux. And finally, the ocean creates a metaphor, as it alludes to the traumatic histories of diaspora that make up the black musical tradition.

Given the details of Benjamin's entry, "This Space for Rent," it might be instructive to look briefly at a film made around the same time as *Passing Through*, one in which the red is directly linked, as

"THE OCEAN CREATES A METAPHOR, AS IT ALLUDES TO THE TRAUMATIC HISTORIES OF DIASPORA THAT MAKE UP THE BLACK MUSICAL TRADITION."

Benjamin describes, to the capitalist phantasmagoria: Martin Scorsese's 1976 *Taxi Driver*. In fact, Scorsese's film so exactly reproduces the images Benjamin evokes that one might think Scorsese was deliberately referring to it! The film's noir-inspired hosed-down streets, the windshield and mirrors of the taxi, the glass storefronts, all of these reflective surfaces take up and redistribute the glowing red neon signs, with signifiers like "FASCINATION," strewn across the urban landscape of the city seemingly on the verge

of collapse. We must then ask, what "profane illumination" will arise from all the fragmented signs? Unfortunately, the film's formal system encloses all of this mise-en-scène in a kind of circular movement that is nothing if not the formal manifestation of a repetition compulsion; the only available politics is the missed encounter between a venal presidential candidate and a borderline vigilante. In a humorous but telling detail of the film, a political button manufacturer has misprinted the campaign slogan of

the candidate: "We are the people" instead of (the correct) "We are the people." We can see here the way the first slogan gives us the formula for fascism; while the second gives us the formula for identity politics, as the protest of those excluded from the emphasized "we." But what is most evident in *Taxi Driver* is that in the emergent regime of neoliberalism (which in hindsight was what all the "creative destruction" was preparing the ground for), "the people are missing."

In *The Time-Image*, Deleuze takes this quote of Paul Klee and develops it into a theory of Third Cinema. In particular, he argues that what the formal devices deployed in Third Cinema attempt to do is to “invent a people” via the powers of fabulation.⁵ In other words, this is the way the new comes to appearance in Third Cinema. And this is indeed where all the formal resonances and affective relays—of sound and color—lead us in *Passing Through*. Toward the end, the film presents us with a series of fabulations. In one of these—the killing of the murderous record company executive who is



(RIGHT) FIGURE 3:
Red accent marks in the corporate office in *Passing Through* (directed by Larry Clark, 1977) frame grab.

trying to prevent the group from forming a new label—the popular is invoked via a send-up of the genre of Blaxploitation. After the death of Clarence Muse, i.e. Poppa Harris, the old man who serves as mentor to Warmack, a clairvoyant friend of Muse presents Warmack with gifts from his mentor, while also doing a

Tarot reading which fabulates the future not only for Warmack, but—because of its abstractions, such as “you must slay the dragon”—for a potential people to come. Muse leaves Warmack a cryptic poem which, when deciphered, reveals to Warmack that the legacy of the jazz greats who preceded him point as

well to an as-yet-unrealized futurity. And while this genealogy might seem to invoke the “African tree” and an “arborescent” structure, the violent history of the diaspora makes this really a “rhizome,” where inventions of the new leap from one place to another, in all manner of improbable connections.⁶ ■

¹ In this essay, we must leave to the side the relatively recent “accelerationist” position: in this view, capitalism has achieved “full subsumption,” the aesthetic event has become fully accounted for and even “monetized,” and so the only strategy left is to plunge fully into the production of simulacra, to the point where some vaguely conceived implosion (maybe? hopefully?) occurs. See Steven Shavro, *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

² Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” *Collected Writings* v. 2 part 1 (1927-1930), trans. R. Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 216-218.

³ Quoted in Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (University of California Press, 2012), 154; for a quick outline of Benjamin’s “philosophy of color” more generally, see her footnote to this quote, 329 n78.

⁴ “Montage” insofar as from the point of view of exchange, every successive rental is independent of the others; but to the extent that the space holds within it inscriptions from the past elements of this series, it acquires a density of potential if improbable linkages. Imagine, for example, that “this space for rent” is a billboard: with each economic exchange, the new image is supposed to obliterate the one underneath. But if the space of the billboard loses its value for some reason and falls into disuse, then the tolls taken by weather and aging might bring separated layers to the surface.

⁵ See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: the Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson, R. Galeta, (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 214.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari begin *A Thousand Plateaus* with an extended discussion of the binary opposition arborescent / rhizomatic. The arborescent stands for structures that are tree-like and hierarchical (whether social formations or philosophical systems); whereas the rhizomatic stands for formations that are characterized by multiple points of entry, multiple ways of negotiating pathways, etc. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), plateau 1.