

## Landscapes of Desire: Ken Kobland's Lyric Cinema

*Le plagiat est nécessaire. Le progrès l'implique.*

Isidore Ducasse (Lautréamont) 1846-1870 <sup>1</sup>

The connections between narrative film and narrative writing are so obvious, so deep as to sometimes appear uncanny. It is as though narrative movies were, if not doubles, at least extensions, of the novel. The lines blur. In *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert cuts back and forth between a seduction scene and a cattle auction; he consistently expresses the emotional state of his characters by describing the world as they see and hear it, much as film-makers are more or less compelled to by the nature of their medium. Yet Flaubert wrote decades before Melies' *Voyage to the Moon*. Nowadays, more often than not, the novel is a kind of accessory or valet-sidekick to narrative film, a literal pretext for the movie or, in the most degraded form, a novelization. A library could probably be devoted to the relationship between literary fiction and narrative film. Just as clearly, there is no obvious, public connection between poetry and film. The idea that there might be some kind of relationship between poetry and so-called non-narrative or experimental film has little or no currency. Were the connection suggested, I suspect someone might hazard a guess that both are self-indulgent: poetry because it is sometimes associated in the public mind with a form of universally accessible self-expression that is beyond criticism (poetic license writ large); experimental film, if it registered at all on their radar, because, again, 'anyone can do that.' - string together apparently unrelated images or record tedium. At the same time, poetry enjoys a kind of archaic prestige that the more recent novel cannot match. Of course, much of the poetry responsible for that is narrative. The classical world knew narrative, dramatic and lyric poetry. The major contemporary manifestation of the first two of these categories appears to be narrative film (with film displacing theatre and the novel by powerfully combining narrative *and* dramatic elements). Lyric poetry in the ancient sense is directly represented today by the unfathomable wealth of songs. So, to relate *poetry* now to so-called experimental film is to invoke a genre as relatively recent as the novel itself, with its own prestige, linked to *form*: the modern lyric poem. It is a form notoriously difficult to define, since it idiosyncratically combines traditional features, distilled and condensed into something new. Generally speaking, it seems fair to say that lyric poets from Ronsard to Rimbaud, from Shakespeare to Ashbery, exploit *formal* phonic, metrical and rhetorical resources to construct a *personal* or subjective vision capable of being communicated and shared. Because it is so intimate and so directly bound to delicate, quasi-organic forms, the lyric poem has a quality that is at once heart-rending and heroic.

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<sup>1</sup> "Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it." *Oeuvres Complètes d'Isidore Ducasse*. Livre de Poche. Librairie Générale Française. 1963 P. 402

It is a high-wire act, so much accomplished with so little. If this kind of poetry has not made an impact on the public consciousness via film it is probably more because of the economic and logistical constraints that have severely hampered the creation and distribution of what I shall call *lyric films* than because film has an inherent lack of poetic aptitude. If film has not often traveled the lyric path it may be because there haven't been enough Ken Koblands.

Ken Kobland shows us not only what lyric film looks like, but how fetching it can be in the hands of an artist in full command of an instrument each one of his films further defines. Where poetry uses rhythm, sound and semantic/rhetorical devices to attract and hold the reader's attention, Kobland's films use sound, image and text to much the same effect. The movement of images, their texture, position and pattern; those of the sounds, be they words, the whirl of machinery or actual music; the appearance of text on screen—together these create a strong, pre-reflexive, physical presence, a virtual body engaging the spectator...in a dance. You *feel* these films, the way you feel a poem (or that music which underlies the term *lyric*), before and after reading them. Indeed, despite their sensory power, the term *reading* seems more appropriate to Kobland films than the term *watching*. The spectator's active interpretation is solicited. It isn't conventional, monolithic character and emotion we are asked to identify with, but a host of suggestions about the world that populates the artist's desire. As in lyric poetry (and other art where form is inseparable from content) the formal elements of Kobland films derive their strongly inflected personal identity, or immediately recognizable style, from their iconic ability to both be and signify at the same time. His signature move compounds this by asking us to treat landscape as if it were sign and sign as if it were landscape, thereby setting into motion a dizzying circulation of signifiers. The most Kobland-esque among them being film itself. Film frames are figured in the movement of repeating frames found in the world: moving train and subway cars and their windows; or repeating buildings and windows viewed from moving vehicles; even the grid of a radiator cover along which runs a hand, or that of a cathedral railway station ceiling caressed by the camera. Sometimes the 'real world' frames and the film frames are merged by slowing the film until its own frames are visible. Such elements precede meaning. They exist at the idiosyncratic intersection of body and sign, like breath in lines of free verse. The lyric film brings to the table multimedia resources well suited to the aspirations of modern poetry. The multiple dimensions afforded by film feed poetry's (or is it rhetoric's?) thirst for plural, if not inexhaustible or impossible meanings, for a text or an art *worthy* of the ambiguity and strangeness of existence.

The films in this retrospective would seem to fit into two rough categories, with enough overlap to partially invalidate the distinction: the films of circumstance and/or collaboration on the one hand and the more formally, personally composed on the other. It should be noted not only that all of these films involve important collaborators (Nancy Campbell and E. Jay Sims in particular), but that Kobland's work evolves in a collaborative milieu perhaps unmatched since the days of the original Paris surrealists: that of the Wooster Group, an avant-garde theatre collective that has existed since the late sixties (when it was known as the Performance Group) and of which he is a long time

associate. There is a strong affinity between his work and theirs. Let's say they share the collagist-intertextual (always already post-modern) aesthetic central to 20<sup>th</sup> century art and literature. This tendency, which has its roots in the rhetorical processes characteristic of poetry and paves the way for the very possibility of lyric film, involves recasting and recoding the art and artifacts of the past and present. Marcel Duchamp's promotion of a urinal and demotion of the Mona Lisa are among the clearest and most celebrated examples of the trend. The fact is that both Ken Kobland and the Wooster Group represent distinct but related moments in a rich tradition that includes many other artists, some of whom share affinities within that tradition, whether or not they actually met, and did or did not influence one another. One such grouping that comes to mind includes Max Ernst, Joseph Cornell (who also made lyric films) and Marcel Broodthaers, probably because their work intersects with Ken Kobland's in a way the work of other 20<sup>th</sup> century intertextualists, (such as, say, Andy Warhol and Jean Giraudoux) does not. The one film that features an actual collaboration with the Wooster Group, *Flaubert Dreams of Travel But the Illness of His Mother Prevents It* (1986) is an explicit homage to Bunuel and Dali's *Un Chien Andalou*. In addition to material directly copied from that film, and a Robert Desnos, trance-like, surrealist group photo atmosphere, it manages to reproduce the a-rational spirit of the original. It is as enigmatic as any surrealist dream-object, recasting the stymied sexual desires of the young 1920's Spaniards into something more appropriate to 80's Manhattanites facing middle age in the shadow of AIDS, who seem to relate surrealism to memories of the 60's. Like all Ken Kobland films this one is layered like a palimpsest. Quite literally so, in this case, since it was shot when the Wooster Group was in the early stages of developing a theatre piece that included Flaubert's *Temptation of St. Anthony* and material from his biography and letters. There is humor in the soundtrack, in the title, in the very idea of a middle-aged remake of *Un Chien Andalou*, where the grandiose dream imagery of sexual inhibition has been replaced by, for instance, the television image of a professional bowler's expression of disgust at missing a strike! The burning desire of the original has yielded to casual nudity, aging and/or moribund flesh and a flaccid penis. The scenes directly copied are those dealing with physical deterioration. Maybe this isn't so funny after all. Is the atmosphere of paranoia an LSD flashback? Are we in the midst, the aftermath, or simply the dream of a bad trip? The soundtrack hints at something of the sort. Or are these people peering through the blinds at the specter of AIDS? Such a reading may not have been intended by the author. Ideally, it wasn't. But the film's most visible actor, the one probing the bodies with a stick (a gesture associated with an attempt to ascertain signs of life), the great Ron Vawter, who masterfully embodies the Surrealist gaze, died of AIDS in 1994. **End Credits** (1994) is an homage/memorial filmed in his dressing room when he was performing *Roy Cohen/Jack Smith*, playing both roles; the former a right-wing, homophobic closet gay, the latter a flamboyant, inventive, openly gay performance artist. Both died of AIDS. *Flaubert Dreams of Travel*... exemplifies the lyric film because, in addition to the formal, photo-aural qualities that directly affect the viewers' senses, it treats meaning in much the same way a poem does. The stable relationship between signifier and signified has been disrupted. The suppression of denotation (story?)

narrative?) creates space for plural connotations. We can therefore revisit a Ken Kobland film the way we would a poem, over and over, more satisfactorily than we might a much longer narrative film. Looking at *Flaubert*... again, I might wish to explore how the Gustave Flaubert/Temptation of St. Anthony motif relates to ergot poisoning (St. Anthony's fire) or, more profitably, imagine all kinds of other things that aren't there.

*Flaubert Dreams of Travel*... also reminds us that Ken Kobland and the Wooster Group have maintained a degree of artistic integrity, an experimental, heuristic rigor that bears comparison to surrealism, but a disillusioned brand of surrealism, wary of the very utopian dreams it may harbor. All the films allude to this tension. The aspect of surrealism most germane to Kobland's work, however, is the one that may have been most important to the surrealists themselves: *receptivity*. For them this involved a variety of techniques (from automatic writing to the pursuit of so-called objective chance) designed to favor the emergence of unconscious desire; even if it dictated the prohibition of gainful employment! For Ken Kobland it would seem to involve travel above all: travel of the kind the surrealists had in mind when they boarded trains without knowing the destination. Kobland's travel is a kind of hyperbolic strolling. In this turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century film-maker, the 19<sup>th</sup> century flaneur, the aleatory surrealist of the 20's and 30's, the lettrist drifter of the 50's all seem to have found their poet.

*Vestibule* (1978), the film that establishes Kobland's voice and vocation, functions like a somewhat tongue in cheek manifesto. Episode one (Place) adaptively cites Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*. The narrator tells us that he "used to read fundamental books", engaged as he was in what he calls his "vertical search". We are told that he took walks around the neighborhood "as a diversion". One "memorable night" reading *Language, Truth and Reality* he finds that his search is complete: "the universe had been disposed of so to speak" but "I was left over". So he undertakes "a different kind of search, a horizontal search... What is going on in my room is less important. What is important is what I'll find when I leave the room and travel in the neighborhood. Before this I would wander as a diversion, but now I wander seriously and sit and read as a diversion." What is found stands in stark contrast to the weighty philosophical tomes listed by the narrator. It is shown on the screen, and just in case, titles are provided: "a girl pedaling a bicycle"; "a child riding a scooter"; "a man carrying a vase"; "a red Pontiac Firebird with a black vinyl roof" are found to be more important than Sartre or Heisenberg, perhaps not for "the universe" but for "I".

*Moscow X* (1994), described by Kobland as "fly on the wall reportage," relates a 1990 stay in Moscow, just before the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In keeping with the relatively straightforward nature of the film, it contains an explicit statement on the "horizontal search", on the idea of travel and landscape that is so important to Kobland: *Another sidewalk. But just for one moment think of it, just think of it as a sort of landscape, one perhaps too familiar to even notice, to pay attention to, hardly worth a photograph, to say nothing of a place worth mentioning in tourist guides to Moscow; empty space, really; a place to be traversed. But try lingering here for a moment without a place to go, without reason, without intention, and observe for a minute a landscape so common and so vacant. Do we recognize, can we only see monuments? The world as a*

postcard? Is it the Empire State Building we think of truly when we conjure back to ourselves an image of our visit to New York? Or is that just what we tell the others? The way we prove that we were there? But in our dreams, in our private, most idiosyncratic of landscapes, isn't it that odd crossing or that anonymous street which we just happen to look down that comes back to us with a vividness we don't expect when suddenly someone says the name Moscow.

Rooted in aesthetics, Kobland's stance has profound ethical and political implications. It is probably no coincidence that among his closest spiritual antecedents is a band of utopian revolutionaries descended from surrealism, the Lettrist-Situationist International. During the 50's and 60's this tiny group, whose ideas 'seeded' the French student uprising of May 1968, developed a remarkably sophisticated critique of modern commodity-based society, which they termed *the spectacle*. As early as 1953 they sought to apply art practices to a revolution of everyday life. As Greil Marcus puts it "Their means were two: the *dérive*, a drift down city streets in search of signs of attraction or repulsion, and *détournement*, the theft of aesthetic artifacts from their contexts and their diversion into contexts of one's own devise".<sup>2</sup> The difference between Ken Kobland and the situationists, despite their mutual embrace of these surrealist discoveries and their critique of the spectacular, is that Kobland never succumbs to the temptation of "verticality". He keeps things *horizontal*, personal, ambiguous, unresolved, incomplete, real. Although he manages to offer a glimpse of rapture and the absolute (as powerful a glimpse at times, I would argue, as art is capable of delivering), it is implicit that they can only be glimpsed or signified, not possessed (through situationist "total revolution" for instance). The aesthetics of collage/readymades/intertextuality/sampling/détournement combat the monumentality of identity, on many levels. They expose fantasies of truth, purity and origin, the way miscegenation exposes the fantasy of race. Art of this sort can claim to be democratic inasmuch as it fulfills Lautréamont's call for a *Poetry made by all, not by one*. Both surrealists and situationists hailed Isidore Ducasse, self-styled Comte de Lautréamont, as the progenitor of détournement or deconstructive sampling. Is it simply a marvelous coincidence (a manifestation of the *objective chance* that results from the exposure of desire to contingency) that a Man Ray photograph representing something vaguely curvaceous under a tarp secured with rope, entitled *the enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, serves as the frontispiece of both issue #1 of *La Révolution Surréaliste* and Kobland's *Foto-Roman* (1990)? The photograph was chosen because it parallels the imagery in the film's opening shot of a freighter that looks like it is bearing Man Ray's occulted object on its deck. The film's opening sequence is as magnificent as the photograph. The lyrics and the music of a Chinese song, and the majestic progression of the mysterious ship seem to embody *that beautiful thing we feel we've lost*.

*Foto-Roman* features a narrative excerpted from the pages of the Jim Strahs novel *Queer and Alone*, read by Vito Acconci (whose voice was originally intended to be heard over the radio). The narrator is reminiscent of cranky travel writers, hardboiled private eyes and Graham Greene characters. The exotic locales, the train travel, the woman in the

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<sup>2</sup> *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Harvard University Press 1990. p. 168

old-fashioned slip, the voyeuristic camera, all construct a generic spy thriller atmosphere. This is film noir à la Kafka. Like K. in *The Trial*, the narrator, a Mr. Desmond, has been marked for death. What is he guilty of? My guess would be, *existing*. Isn't that what is implied when he speaks of *the annoyance of the inevitable that is taking me to my death; those small indications of future activity; the announcements of monotony to come; an advertised action fulfilled in each excruciating detail. The checkout girl puts five small items in a slippery plastic bag...a man beginning to dial a number...etc?* So he flees North. While he feels that "travel makes one so much more fit for ordinary life," he allows that "while traveling, I occasionally experience great mental anguish ...I feel as if I am fleeing some extraordinary fate awaiting me in my native land." It sounds like it is death he's fleeing. Yet, he goes on to say: "myself, I can't disappear for an instant, even though it would be my fondest desire. My perception remains a constant and sequential hell." As the narrator utters these words, the image of a lace antimacasser draped over the back of the driver's seat of a taxicab, fills the screen. In a gesture familiar to anyone who has seen several Kobland films, a hand gently sweeps across the lacy pattern, caressing the tiny, repeating frames, as if to say, "Well, *here's* a sequence in which to lose yourself."

In keeping with lyric tradition, the self and its avatars make up the ultimate subject of the films. To be more precise, a problematic of the self is at issue. The self is experienced as a limit or an obstacle to be overcome. *Arise! Walk Dog Eat Donut* (1999), the most recent film, described by Ken Kobland as "a blatant, mid-life crisis lament" revisits scenes from earlier films, either sampled or re-shot. It regards middle age, not in terms of lost youth or wasted opportunities but as the apotheosis of repetition, as the absurd, doomed perpetuation of the self-same. Artistic activity itself is called into question by the long quotation from Fellini's *8 1/2*. We do not register this as whining self-pity, however, thanks to a masterly turn of comic juxtaposition worthy of Buster Keaton, the text of which is a poem in its own right. An old, plaintive song in another language is repeatedly "translated", appropriated and expropriated, to express a state of mind in great, personal detail. The emotional proximity of song and "translation" combine with the logical incongruity of their juxtaposition to startling and comic effect. There are also the usual beautiful images of moving frames, or moving stills, which, like the hand running down the radiator cover, seem to invoke *another* sequence to replace the one that structures the self. Footage of a train station suggests a way out, the horizontal *dérive* again: *I walk and photograph, that's all. Looking at things from the outside, it can be a bit edgy. There's a vertigo to displacement. But, alone, everything fascinates me, unfolds as the theatre it really is. I move about without intention, a spectator empty and released, adrift somewhere between the familiar and the strange. Here, others exist instead of me, full of intentions and desires. Here, especially here, I'm happy.*

Often, though, the self manages to persist, individually or collectively. *Vestibule* turns out to be a failed *dérive*, despite the epiphany of episode 1. Episode 2 turns sour. The vestibule leads to another vestibule, ad infinitum. Episode 3 eases the bitter pill of self-loathing with humor, as "Mr. Lonely" is too absorbed in his own pain to notice the letter waiting for him as he enters the vestibule from the street. Even the usually salutary

framing can turn ominous, as emblems of horizontal difference turn into monumental collective identities.

*Landscape and Desire* (1981) is the interpretation of a Samuel Beckett story as a cross-country journey, mostly by bus. The story, *The Lost Ones*, is described by Kobland as “essentially a description of a society of people living in holes and climbing ladders, and falling down. The usual thinly veiled description of human life...” No narrative elements of the story remain recognizable, even as fragments, in this the most formalist of the films in the retrospective. Desire seems imprisoned by the landscape rather than impelled by it. The most prominent repeating frames are museum cases displaying mounted bird specimens. Has the country itself become a museum specimen?

If *Landscape and Desire* contains an esoteric eco-political statement, *STUPA* (1992) [Tibetan burial mound/New-Yorkese stupor] could not be more blunt. This film, commissioned by a French television channel that stipulated a 60 minute continuous shot, consists of the landscape between Levittown Long Island and the Staten Island waste dump, viewed by helicopter, most of the time from directly overhead. We watch in fascinated horror as the little boxes and ribbons of highway endlessly repeat, while on the soundtrack a sneering radio host sadistically pontificates. Bits of John Kennedy speeches about civic responsibility alternate with soundtrack excerpts from the Jimmy Stewart movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. The contrast between the repulsive D.J. who exemplifies the degraded nature of much contemporary American discourse, and the American icons, who practically have the status of ideograms signifying *what could have been*, is as decisive as the image of the main New York City waste dump at the end of the film. What have our distorted desires done to the landscape? Look how it turned out. Who do we think we are?

Ken Kobland is a moral philosopher as well as a lyric poet. Nowhere are these two strands more tightly woven than in *The Shanghaied Text* (1996). This film has the look of a *tour de force*, a bona fide masterpiece of intertextual art. It is so *accomplished*; so *tight*. Its form enacts the fantasy of triumph that it stages and implicitly criticizes. The film itself is on a par with any of the icons it parades, whether the bourgeois-cowboy hero of *High Noon* (Shanghaied Noon?) or the peasant revolutionaries of Soviet cinema, cinematic sex or *images* of May '68 and the liberation of Paris. Even the landscape is not quirky or endowed with the imperfections that testify to the singularity of individual desire. It is Montana, tourist-guide worthy, monumental. Hyperbole is the operative figure here. We can enjoy it as a cinematic amusement ride (like sex and roller coaster rides, this film starts slowly and builds to a climax) through a kind of aesthetic horn of plenty. But Kobland ultimately uses it to undercut his subjects' pretensions. Exaggeration promotes disproportion, which invites ridicule. The human self is being mocked (sometimes wistfully) for its delusions of grandeur, for its collective fantasies of progress and totality, as baseless as individual fantasies of growth and wholeness, but more dangerous than they to the earth and other humans. As for his own pretensions, at the beginning and the end of *The Shanghaied Text*, Ken Kobland shows pieces of this triumph of a film, caught in the branches of a windblown, snow-laden tree, like so much discarded trash. Beautiful snow, though.

*Berlin Tourist Journal* (1988) creates a world of such intense poetic resonance that it deserves its own essay. It seamlessly combines the aesthetics of *dérive* (*Foto-Roman*) and *détournement* (*The Shanghaied Text*) into the psycho-geographical portrait of pre-end of the wall Berlin. There is a sound (is it the sound of digging, perhaps grave-digging? or stone-quarrying, related to walls?) that reminds us of how central sonority is to these films. Do the images, despite formal qualities that put them in the class of fine photographic stills, exist mainly to illustrate the sounds? How can the old newsreel prewar footage prove so haunting? Do I feel like I am looking through the eyes of someone whose picture I have seen in an album of old family photographs because the archival shots have been selected, or have been edited, so as to appear intimate? I know only too well what lurks under the surface that is under the surface here. I hope we all do. Here, no old footage of trains can be benign. In the bedroom, as the voice of J.F.K. addressing the Berliners in 1963 is heard, the beautiful nude (Marilyn Monroe?) in the (mirror) frame, comes to life (stirs) just as the last scene of the film *Carrie* plays on the television; the one where the corpse's hand shoots out of the freshly dug grave to grab the visitor's ankle... In this film, an overwhelming palimpsestic synergy is created by the convergence of a layering consciousness and the actual layers of history. There is another extended *coup de théâtre* here that involves a model of the Berlin wall. Film has used models for years to trick the viewer. Here the model is revealed *as* a model, turning the historical-impersonal into something immediately subjective and touching. *Berlin Tourist Journal* ends on a Magritte-like image summing up the cinema of Ken Kobland, by reminding us that there exists a kind of redeeming desire beyond meaning, and that it is as beautiful and indifferent as nature itself.

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