

INCITE: JOURNAL OF EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA

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A *SPIRAL*-SIDE CHAT WITH TERRY CANNON

Walter Forsberg and John Klacsmann

SPIRAL was an experimental film journal published by Terry Cannon, founder of the Pasadena Filmforum (later, Los Angeles Filmforum), over the course of nine issues from 1984-86. This interview was conducted expressly not over Skype, but by telephone, on August 10, 2015.

TERRY CANNON: I hope I can give you a little feedback on *SPIRAL* but that was a long time ago. Let's see, I think the last issue was in 1986, so it's been almost 30 years since the last publication.

JOHN KLACSMANN: Well, first of all, we wanted to thank you for taking time to talk to us. Are you still actively watching experimental film, or did you move onto other things?

CANNON: I'm still loosely involved with Filmforum, which is now based in Los Angeles and run by Adam Hyman. I occasionally go to screenings. A few years ago Filmforum had a big Getty-funded project ["Pacific Standard Time"] – kind of an ongoing series of films and oral history documentation – and I was involved in that as a consultant. I did a few oral histories for them. But, no, I'm not very well connected anymore. I'm doing a lot of other things. I work at a public library [the Allendale Branch of the Pasadena Public Library]. About 20 years

ago I started a traveling baseball museum [www. baseball reliquary.org], and I do that, but I'm not very well connected with the experimental film world anymore.

KLACSMANN: Well, Filmforum is quite an important institution for west coast experimental film.

CANNON: I started it in 1975 and ran it for about eight years, but everybody who has since taken the reins of it over the last 40 years has done a great job and put a lot of effort into it. Adam, now, has been running it for over ten years – longer than anybody else. It's had great leadership over the years and I think that's one of the reasons why it's still around.

KLACSMANN: We're curious to know about how SPI-RAL came about. By the time the first issue was published, Pasadena Filmforum had been running for a while. What lead you to start an experimental film publication?

CANNON: One of the reasons that I turned the reins of Filmforum over, in the fall of 1983, was that I was burning out in terms of film programming. Things were changing quite a bit, then, and I wasn't too much into grant-writing or board development. Over the first eight years we were able to get by with limited funding, but it was pretty apparent by the early 1980s that if Filmforum was going to continue to exist as an independent film showcase we were going to really need to put a lot of effort into board development and looking for funding beyond governmental agencies. I wasn't particularly interested in managing that, so I turned it over to some people I thought would be more adept: Trish Knodle and Albert Kilchesty. I was looking for a new challenge. I had some background and experience with publishing a couple of underground newspapers, right when I got out of college, and I wanted to get back into publishing. The last underground paper I did was called GOSH!.

KLACSMANN: Was *GOSH!* mostly focused on music, or art, or...?

CANNON: It was all kinds of art, and I did have some coverage of experimental film. Doug Edwards, who ran the Theater Vanguard and Encounter Cinema – kind of a sister organization to Filmforum – wrote some pieces for GOSH!. I think I stopped publishing GOSH! in 1981, so by '83 I was kind of interested in getting back into publishing albeit something different. My recollection is that the first issue of SPIRAL came out in 1984, after my last year with Filmforum in '83. I felt that there was a need for the kind of experimental film journal akin to what I was conceiving of. Basically, I was moving my energies

from film programming to a film magazine; it was a revitalization process. Since I had a background in publishing, that was my natural next direction. I think *SPIRAL* lasted a little over two years and we did nine issues.

KLACSMANN: Yeah, the first issue came out in October 1984 and the last issue, which is number nine, came out in October 1986. The thing that really strikes me about it, vis-à-vis other experimental film publications of the last fifty years, is that *SPIRAL* has a distinctive aesthetic – an avant-garde aesthetic, even. Can you talk about the design?

CANNON: I wanted to do something that was going to be quite different than the publications that were coming out at the time. Most of the film publications at that time were along the academic lines, because that's where most of the funding was. The only other comparable thing I recall coming out at the time was *Canyon Cinemanews*. In fact I edited one of their issues. Every once in a while you would get an issue of Film Culture, and Film Culture had interesting graphics. But, I wanted to do something completely different, something a little more artistic, a little more outside the box. For SPIRAL, I collaborated with Bill Scaff who was a Super 8 filmmaker. Bill was working on a few different projects, and his graphic sensibility was very unique. When we sat down and came up with a title and started to work on the design – I worked very closely with Bill, and he deserves a huge chunk of the credit – it just evolved from there. The biggest problem that we had was that we had almost no money and couldn't use a good quality printer. All of those issues were done at a very cheap offset printer. At that time

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FROM THE EDITOR

The publication which you hold in your hands has been several years in the planning and development. It is the result of discussions with many independent filmmakers whom I had the pleasure of personally meeting during my eight year tenure as program director of Pasadena Filmforum (now known as Filmforum and based in Los Angeles). These discussions focused on what the filmmakers themselves believed were the strengths and shortcomings of existing periodicals devoted to independent film, and what issues and subjects were not being adequately addressed therein.

What seemed to be a recurring theme in these conversations was the lack of, and the need for, a publication which actively involved the filmmakers: i.e., a magazine which incorporated their writings, their artworks, and which explored topical issues endemic to their situation as independent filmmakers. Most agreed that there was a plethora of overly academic writing in the various art and film periodicals.

Gradually, out of these conversations, the concept of SPIRAL began to develop — a periodical which would endeavor to clarify the immediate concerns of independent filmmakers, and then provide a serious and thorough examination of the issues involved. The idea of a publication which would be truly accessible and meaningful for all persons interested in film as a medium for artistic expression began to emerge.

What is SPIRAL and how will it be different from the other publications? We would like to develop SPIRAL as an artistic support system for filmmakers and the filmmaking community, wherein a common ground of communication will exist for all. In our efforts to establish a networking system, so to speak, we offer an ongoing forum in the pages of SPIRAL entitled "Point of View." This section offers readers the opportunity to participate in a discussion of significant issues confronting all persons involved in independent film. We also intend to generate a lively letters and correspondence section surrounding topics examined in "Point of View," and thereby keep alive important and timely subjects that are deserving of more coverage than can possibly be provided in one issue.

We hope to encourage in the pages of SPIRAL a vigorous and passionate brand of film criticism by writers who are deeply involved with and committed to independent cinema. SPIRAL is not adverse to academic film scholarship and complex theoretical analysis, which are valid and important pursuits. But this will be a publication which will generate an enthusiasm on the part of the readership to seek out work which is discussed, and broaden the potential audience for that work. As an example, we invite you to read Wendy Brabner's article in this issue — "Looking Homeward" — which is an insightful critique of four filmmakers based in the Midwest, a region which unfortunately seems to receive the short end of critical coverage in the West and East Coast art and film publications.

Since film is, after all, a visual medium, it seems necessary that there exist a publication devoted to film which is conceptually and visually imaginative. In this direction, we intend to showcase photographs, collages, drawings, and graphics by filmmakers, in addition to featuring an ongoing selection of stills from films. The art direction of SPIRAL will be capably handled by William Scaff and Carol L. Lewis, whose art backgrounds and innovative graphic design sensibilities are uniquely suited to a publication of this scope. And, surprise!, SPIRAL will not be confined solely to the printed medium. Each year we will publish one issue in a totally different format. For example, production plans are now well underway for SPIRAL No. 3 (publication date: April 1985), which will be a 60-minute audio cassette.

We welcome your specific comments on this first issue of *SPIRAL*, as well as your general reaction to what we believe is a unique new contribution to independent film literature.

1 Pun Cannon



you could go to these little offset print shops, where people would take flyers and simple publications to print on offset equipment. There was a print shop, here in Pasadena, and we pushed the envelope with them because they were kind of limited in what they could do. For some of the covers we did, you know, we'd buy unusual coated paper stocks, use unusual shades, etc. I would collate the printed pages and every one of the copies would be hand-punched and hand-bound with spiral comb binders. It was very much a labor of love. I viewed it more as an art piece – an art offering. George Kuchar wrote a piece for the inaugural issue and there were some religious labels we hand-placed on every copy of the issue. Every copy was hand-produced. There was a handmade quality to each issue.

KLACSMANN: The handmade efforts really come through.

CANNON: Then, we started thinking about the idea of doing SPIRAL in different formats. We did the audiocassette issue [SPIRAL No. 3] and the postcard issue [SPIRAL No. 7]. I thought those two issues were really exceptional. But, it certainly did not make it easy to sell the publication. I remember taking a few issues over to Larry Edmunds Cinema Bookshop in Hollywood - the major cinema bookshop in Southern California – thinking I would sell a few. I think the cover price was \$6, but they wouldn't even handle it. As you may recall, the name never appeared on the cover; it was always a spiral image. So, the few bookstores we contacted simply asked why we were even trying to publish a magazine that didn't have its name on the cover. They weren't really enthusiastic about carrying it. And, I did all of the typesetting –

this was years before computers - on an IBM Selectric Composer. My dad had an automobile publication, and I worked with him on that (and later took over the editorship), and we had invested in an IBM Selectric Composer on which you could justify type. That's now a completely defunct piece of equipment. I would do the typesetting and Bill would do the layout. Since we were printing individual pages we could interleave some color pages, and several of the issues incorporated a white paper stock with color images. It was exceedingly low-tech, but at the time we were doing what we could afford to do. That was always a big issue, of course, throughout the life of the publication: how to support it. The most disappointing thing for me about SPIRAL was that it was never really very well received by the filmmaking community. It was designed as a publication for the film community, and not for the general public, so it meant that if the thing was going to survive and thrive, the film community had to embrace it. Either I misjudged the interest level, or was just more interested in doing a fun art publication, but we never really had that many subscribers. The people that did subscribe were very devoted and loved it, but it just never got many subscribers. I don't exactly know why. It may have just been the fact that it was kind of unusual.

KLACSMANN: It's interesting to hear you say that because while I don't have any idea of how it was received at the time, when I read it now I'm impressed by how many actual filmmakers seemed to be involved in the publication. In lieu of critics or academics, it's really full of actual filmmakers' writing.

CANNON: Right. That was the idea of the publica-



by Fred Camper

1 Several years ago, in a lecture, Peter Kubelka advocated that each media-form should utilize its own unique properties, rather than try to imitate

other media. In film, one works with its rapid succession of individual, still frames: "Cinema is not movement." Kubelka went on to add that he does not like



tion. I think in the first issue I tried to make it clear that we were trying to go down a different route than most of the publications that were out, then – more academic publications that had some level of funding from schools or academic presses. We had no funding. It was basically just money coming out of my pocket, and whatever we could get from subscriptions. Subscriptions were pretty inexpensive – I think they were about \$20 a year for four issues.

KLACSMANN: Did you distribute it in any other way, besides subscriptions?

CANNON: No, there was no other support beyond subscriptions. Like I said, we had no newsstand sales because newsstands and bookshops wouldn't touch it. It didn't follow the look of traditional publications and it pretty much relied upon the filmmaking community. I knew a lot of filmmakers, of course, from my eight-year involvement in Filmforum and those were the ones we relied on for subscriptions. I can't even remember how many subscriptions we had – probably between 100 and 150. Usually we printed a couple hundred issues. But, that \$15 or \$20 annual subscription didn't go very far.

WALTER FORSBERG: Can you talk about *SPIRAL*'s recurring "Point of View" section?

CANNON: I thought one of the most interesting things we came up with was the "Point of View" section, which explored certain issues, related to experimental film, and that was a way of trying to engage filmmakers. Each issue would pose a question, inviting responses for the next issue. There were quite a few filmmaker responses, and some of them saw their

names two or three times over the course of the run of the publication. I remember running into Stan Brakhage, at one point, and he said he really loved it. Again: there were some people who were very passionate about SPIRAL, but it just didn't click. Everybody knew about it, but very few people were willing to drop down the \$15 or \$20 to subscribe to it. I guess that was my major realization: that people just weren't responding. I thought that more filmmakers would embrace it, because I thought that it was something for them. Every once in a while I would do something that made the readership really angry. Somewhere along the run we did an issue that had a baseball theme [SPIRAL No. 4] and I remember some of the subscribers writing to say they didn't like that: 'Why are you dealing with baseball?'

KLACSMANN: Can you talk about that – your interest in baseball and filmmaking?

CANNON: The intersection of baseball and art is something I've always been interested in. I'm still dealing with that today. For 20 years I've run The Baseball Reliquary – an organization that is a kind of a sporting version of the Museum of Jurassic Technology. That issue of *SPIRAL* was one of my early explorations of the interrelationship between baseball and art, and I knew some filmmakers who had that similar interest. For example: Albert Kilchesty, who ran Filmforum at the time and was very involved in the film scene for years, who now lives in Portland. There were quite a few people that I knew who had this baseball interest – Michael Guccione had a piece in that issue, as well as Tom Palazzolo...

FORSBERG: Jeff Kreines has some photos of Wrigley



Field in that issue...

CANNON: There were quite a few people that I knew, who came through Pasadena to screen their films, who had a baseball interest and went to baseball games while they were here. I didn't think it was that unusual of a jump. But, for whatever reasons, some people didn't like that and voiced their opinions to me. Hey, you're not going to love every publication – that's just the way all publications are.

KLACSMANN: I like it. I like how tackling a theme like baseball, within the avant-garde film community, is itself an avant-garde move.

FORSBERG: The readership's reaction seems also typical of the experimental film community: grumpy, bitchy...

KLACSMANN: And, conservative...

CANNON: Yeah, looking back on it I think that was the most disappointing thing – the reaction. A lot of what I do is just based on my own enthusiasm and interests. Obviously, I didn't really read the film community very well. I thought that they would embrace this more than they really did. There was a kind of conservatism. To take an example: I did an issue of *Canyon Cinemanews* which is the publication that came out of the film distributor Canyon Cinema in San Francisco. They used to do a semi-regular publication.

KLACSMANN: Yeah, it was very erratically released.

CANNON: Part of the charm of those old issues of

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Cinemanews is that they were very much based in San Francisco. I remember when I first started getting into experimental film, I really enjoyed reading those because they had offbeat things like recipes by San Francisco filmmakers – it was a very localized kind of thing. I knew a lot of the filmmakers up there, and I even pushed them, I said: "Listen, you know what you ought do? Canyon is a national coop, even though it's based in San Francisco, but you should bring in other ideas from other parts of the country." So I proposed to them the idea of moving the editorship around and having, maybe, one issue that was produced in LA, one issue that was produced in Boston – or, at least having one issue a year edited by someone outside of San Francisco. I kind of sold them on that idea, and they said: "OK, why don't you do the first one?" So, I produced an issue and boy! The negative feedback from the people in San Francisco! I heard through the grapevine that Bruce Conner said, "If you ever have anyone outside of the Bay Area edit this again, I'm pulling my films out of Canyon." Of course, he was notorious for that. Probably 50% of Canyon's revenue was from his films.

KLACSMANN: Conner did pull his films out, and subsequently put them back, several times.

CANNON: I love Conner's work, but he may have wielded a little too much power in this instance.

KLACSMANN: Do you think people looked down on *SPIRAL* because it was from Pasadena?

CANNON: I think some people did. I'll always remember Paul Arthur coming and doing a screening in



MYSTERY FILMMAKER QUIZ

Our mystery filmmaker is shown here accepting his honorary doctorate in recent ceremonies at the San Francisco Art Institute. Can you name him? For answer, see page 18. Photo courtesy of Dominic Angerame.



Pasadena and saying: "Pasadena is to Los Angeles what Hoboken is to New York." That was definitely something I had to deal with when I ran Pasadena Filmforum. Most people, once they came here, gave us a shot. We put on great screenings and had goodsized audiences who were well informed. Many of the filmmakers who came to screenings at Pasadena Filmforum screened all over the country and all over the world, and said that their Pasadena screenings were some of the best they ever had – the best reactions, the most engaged audiences. It really opened their eyes. But, we had to deal with that element over the years because most people were interested in showing their work in the major centers of experimental film activity and weren't as high on showing their films in Pasadena. I think you can make the same kind of argument about a film publication coming out of Pasadena.

FORSBERG: Do you think that the community simply wasn't larger than your subscription base? How did you know there was a larger audience?

CANNON: Oh, I knew there was a larger community. I knew what was going on in terms of film and there were lots of filmmakers I knew who did not subscribe. I don't know what my projection was, but I think we would have needed somewhere between 200-300 to be able to break even on the publication. I certainly wasn't being paid. I was giving Bill some money for his design work and, of course, we had all the various printing costs. I never derived any money from *SPIRAL* and each issue was a financial drain on me.

FORSBERG: I think SPIRAL's eventual existential cri-

sis is reflected in your final "Point of View" question in issue nine – the last issue you published. That question asks for readers to contemplate the need for an experimental film publication. I was wondering if you could reflect more on *SPIRAL*'s role as an "agent-provocateur," asking these questions in the "Point of View" section.

CANNON: Those were ideas that, as a person who ran a film organization, were brought up to me – things that were going on in the experimental film world. A lot of those were controversial. And, there were some really good responses. On one occasion I think Scott MacDonald took exception with something I wrote and was pretty scathing in his comments. Those kinds of questions were a way of engaging the filmmakers. I wasn't the filmmaker; they were the filmmakers and these were the concerns that they had to be dealing with. That last question in issue nine was probably more related to me, personally, than anything else because it sought to understand if such a publication was still viable. There were a lot of new publications coming out at that time, probably a lot of them that fell by the wayside just like SPIRAL. But, by '86 or '87 there were definitely a lot more film publications coming out than before I started SPIRAL. I don't know if there was just too much going on, or the film community was changing - I don't know. SPIRAL was a serious effort for a couple of years and I look back on it very fondly. I've had many failures over the years, and that's simply part of life. I don't regret any of them. I learned a lot from it. I suppose, looking back on it, SPIRAL was pretty close to how I originally conceived of the thing.

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POINT OF VIEW

In each issue of SPIRAL, we will present a statement (along with a series of related questions) which explores essential, often controversial, issues involving the contemporary avant-garde cinema. We solicit interested readers to submit written responses to the statements in an effort to establish an ongoing and international dialogue on these issues. We will endeavor to print as many responses as possible; however, due to space limitations, we request that responses be kept to 1000 words or less. These statements are, admittedly, provocative and opinionated; however, it is not our intention that every reader agree with the point of view expressed in the statements; on the contrary, we look forward to a wide range of arguments and responses – pro and con. The issues which will be discussed are, after all, quite complex and certain to evoke a diversity of opinion. In this sense, the statements are a means to establish a significant interchange of ideas on topics of concern to many people involved with avant-garde cinema.

STATEMENT: In a sociopolitical context, the concept that art can change society is beyond the scope

of most avant-garde filmmakers, whose primary concerns are formal and aesthetic.

In responding to this statement, you may wish to address several or all of the following questions:

1) Is it possible to synthesize avant-garde film with a progressive political consciousness?

2) Despite the fact that the avant-garde filmmaker attempts to challenge traditional modes of perception and works within a radical art form which opposes the dominant culture, can this approach be viewed as a "political" stance even if the artist has limited political awareness or limited understanding of the principles underlying social change?

3) Does the specific form in which a film takes — representational or non-representational, abstract or narrative, etc. — have any relationship to its being politically progressive or reactionary?

4) How has the institutionalization of avant-garde film, and the development of an economic support structure heavily reliant on government funding, affected filmmakers' ability to challenge the establishment?

Warren Sonbert

Now it is quite possible to hide behind being a Gayist, a Feminist or a Marxist and still be a lousy artist. Art is tied to Politics in absolutely no way whatsoever, or rather Art can be used by Politics, but Politics cannot be used by Art. There is no difference in the tools of hagiography of Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will and Vertov's Three Songs for Lenin. In both, demagogues and tyrants are celebrated with Eisenstein's knee-jerking technique of dialectical montage — a curse of the cinema if there ever was



KLACSMANN: SPIRAL is still a remarkable achievement.

CANNON: Just talking with the both of you I realize that the trouble with its lack of acceptance was that it was probably more of an artwork or conceptual piece. Filmmakers were more used to a traditional journal, which you could buy in a bookstore and put on your shelf, but SPIRAL was a little more artful. It had informational value, as would any journal, but maybe it was just a little too unorthodox. I still look back on that audiocassette issue with fondness. Those special format issues involved a little bit of pre-planning, and I had a friend Keith Ullrich who was really good at mastering tapes. We would go over to his studio with everything that came in on audiocassettes, and we would transfer them and adjust all of the sound levels. I look back on that as being perhaps the best issue that we did. Still, actually, today I think it sounds pretty good. The postcard issue, too, was pretty different. SPIRAL had kind of a short life but it's nice to hear that you guys enjoyed it. Looking back on it, it's kind of an archaeological piece of the alternative film culture of that era.





BACK ISSUES

NO. 1 (OCTOBER 1984): "Looking Homeward" by Wendy Brabner, a review of films by Sharon Couzin, Peter Bundy, Jean Sousa, and Rob Danielson; "Frank Stauffacher: The Making of *Mother's Day*" by James Broughton; photographic portfolio by Willie Varela.

NO. 2 (JANUARY 1985): "The Institutionalization of Film Art," writings by James Irwin, Fred Camper, Marjorie Keller, and others; "The Spirals of Oskar," a selection of spirals, circles, and vortexes from the films and paintings of Oskar Fischinger; photographic portfolio by Renata Breth; drawings and composite photographs by Pat O'Neill.

NO. 3 (APRIL 1985): A 60 minute audio cassette tape, produced in Dolby Stereo. An anthology of music and sound works by Paul E. Garstki, Tom Palazzolo, Rob Danielson, Willie and Becky Varela, William Scaff, Ellen Zweig, Janis Crystal Lipzin, Stuart Sherman, Keith Ullrich, David Yuratich, Victor Ingrassia, Robert Huot, Richard Lerman, and Peter Rose. Excerpts from interviews with Malcolm Le Grice and Manuel DeLanda.

NO. 4 (JULY 1985): "The Image and its Eclipse: The Films of Peter Hutton" by Tom Gunning; "The Seen Screen: Considerations for a Film Installation" by Jerry Orr; "The Other Side of the Moon: Talking with Kurt Kren" by Wendy Brabner; "Two American Cinemas" by Fred Camper; and "Baseball and Filmmaking."

NO. 5 (OCTOBER 1985): "The Trouble with Video" by Fred Camper; "1963 Application for the Ford Foundation Grant in Filmmaking" by Bruce Conner; photographic portfolios by Adele Friedman and John Schlesinger; *Esho Funi*, paintings from an animated film by Diane Benda plus an original watercolor in each issue.

NO. 6 (JANUARY 1986): Interviews with Barbara Hammer, Bruce Elder, Al Razutis, Walter Gutman, Willie Varela, and Richard Myers; KU, the script of a film/performance by James Irwin; photographic portfolio by Willie Varela; "The Summer of 1980," a sketch diary by Bruce Posner; photograms and a moving collage by Albert Nigrin; a photo-cartoon by Barbara Lattanzi.

NO. 7 (APRIL 1986): Postcard series, featuring 39 postcards by Betzy Bromberg, Lloyd Dunn, Paul Glabicki, Barbara Hammer, Kurt Kren, Helen Levitt, George Melies, Tom Palazzolo, Hans Richter, Calogero Salvo, Stuart Sherman, Tom Whiteside, and many others.

NO. 8 (JULY 1986): Reviews of the works of 8mm filmmakers Richard Lerman, Scott Stark, Yasunori Yamamoto, Margaret Ahwesh, William Scaff, Albert Nigrin, and Gail Currey; "The Vegetarian," a short story by Peter von Ziegesar; "10 Years of Home Cookin' — A Brief History of Berks Filmmakers" by Albert Kilchesty; photographs by Christopher Cascone and Linda Adlestein; "The Book of Legends, Part 1" by Jane Brakhage.

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