

Light years ahead

Joseph Hoffmann (Jerusalem Post 18.03.88)

Do you remember when you were a youngster and owned a little medallion which had "I O E O" on one side and "L V Y U" on the other, and when you spun it, it spelled out "I Love You"? Well, the official name for this disc is a thaumatrop; and, far from being a childish gimmick, it is - in an opposite application of the same principle - an official forerunner of the motion picture.

"The eye is essentially sluggish, and can be fooled into thinking that still images, seen sequentially, are really in movement," claimed German experimental filmmaker Werner Nekes, who was explaining his film "Was geschah wirklich zwischen den Bildern" (What Really Happened Between the Images) at the Jerusalem Cinematheque.

"All film can be reduced to creating in the mind of the spectator the illusion of movement. The ingredients necessary to complete this deception are light and perspective. It is basically the manipulation and interaction of colour and depth that gives believability to the image."

Consequently Nekes calls his approach to film "light-theatre" to remind us that control of the lighting techniques, be it candlelight or laser, was and is the principal factor in filmmaking.

"My film is essentially a documentary about the prehistory of film. It is a study of all of the lighting and perspective devices which had been in use since the Renaissance, and which can be credited with contributing to the development of the cinematic image," continued the well-known director who was recently at the Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv and Haifa Cinematheques as a guest of the Goethe Institute. Nekes, who narrates the film, discusses the many different inventions which have served as prototypes for the motion picture. These include: the camera obscura, magic lantern slides, anamorphosis perspective, Chinese shadows, silhouettes, stereopticons, chromotrops, zoetrops, phenatiskops, persistence wheels, after-images, and peep shows. All of these devices are in his own collection which he has amassed over the years by frequenting flea markets, auctions, and antique shops.

Nekes considers himself an experimental filmmaker, which he describes as "the discovery of new visual techniques - style at the expense of narrative." "Most film audiences want to see the chronological development of a plot," he says, "They are willing to put up with all sorts of surprises, twists and flashbacks, so long as the story line is comprehensible. But as soon as the filmmaker begins to suggest new ways of seeing, new uses of light or after-images, or hidden images, the audience gets edgy."

The audience also gets edgy when it feels that the director is having a laugh at its expense. Experimental films do not bring immediate pleasure - they are often an acquired taste. Many times the message of a film does not make itself clearly felt until enough time has elapsed for the viewer to reflect on what he has seen.

For example, one 10-minute film by Nekes had as its ostensible subject people lying about, reclining lazily, stepping over one another, but doing absolutely nothing. This scene was projected triangularly in the upper half of the screen with a similar - triangular shape showing the same subject upside down in the lower half of the screen. These two triangles met each other so as to form an angular figure-eight.

This image was complemented by a voice-over repeatedly counting from one to four. When it became obvious that this was to be the content of the entire film, the audience indeed became fidgety and bored. Only later did I understand the director's

message - namely, that life itself is boring, that people are quite content to do nothing, and that the two triangular shapes formed a sort of hourglass motif to stress the point that time - the counting from one to four passes remorselessly. The irony is that the audience must experience the monotony in order to "get the message." A second film, about Tarzan and his milieu, simulated a motion picture made in the infancy of the genre, complete with grainy film texture and over-exposed lighting. At one point, the sound went off, and at another, the screen went blank. Were we to think that this was intentional or simply a problem with the projector? If the director goes beyond a certain point in the manipulation of his viewers, he will lose their trust. A successful avant-garde director will understand where these limits are. "I always take my audience's sensibilities into consideration, but this must be weighed against my own vision," Nekes claimed. "After all, the experimental techniques of today will probably be commonplace tomorrow."