



Interview to Michaela Grill

By Florencia Incarbone & Geraldine Salles Kobilanski

The austrian filmmaker Michaela Grill builds her work through digital format, conceiving it as the most radical form to currently think the film image. Grill believes that perception is a highly individualized activity and how it works has intrigued her ever since. This intrigue not only took her to experiment with image and sound, but also led her to be part of SixpackFilm, a non-profit-organization which disseminates the austrian avant-garde film production. The 16° BAFICI dedicated a special section to her films, during which Florencia Incarbone and Geraldine Salles Kobilanski had the possibility to dialogue with her.



How do you conceive experimental cinema?

For me personally that would include everything that challenges me, everything that poses more questions than giving answers and everything that reaches a level of pureness may it be in beauty or thought or form. If you call yourself an experimental artist it also embeds you in a history that nurtures your work and in a way is your field of reference. But like all other labels it's just a label that helps defining things and is as useful/useless as any other one. In the end, there are just interesting works and non-interesting ones.

We would like you to tell us the way in which the anecdote of the fly coming into your eye influenced the transformation of your perception.

Like probably everybody else, I assumed that my surroundings are real and how I see and hear it, is reality. Then a fly came into my right eye so that I could only see with my left eye and suddenly the world turned very blurry. The ophthalmologist diagnosed a very shortsighted left eye and a normal functioning right eye. Because the difference between the seeing ability was so big, my brain put my left eye on pause.



So all I've ever seen in my life up to that point was perceived by my right eye and for that reason, only two-dimensional. It didn't appear two-dimensional to me though because my brain would produce the third dimension through experience. When I think about it now it really is like a videogame, where the computer constantly has to generate the surroundings while you move through the space. So my reality was a virtual reality and I had to learn to activate my left eye again and stimulate it to be part of my perceptive system. It was by far the biggest shock of my life seeing the world with three dimensions like supposedly everybody else or the real reality. This experience really startled me: that all my perceptions of 20 years were only mine and nobody saw the same way as I. That when I saw a tree it only had this specific appearance to me and very different to probably everybody else. Or furthermore maybe everybody's perception is different and nobody sees the same thing. I'm not talking about the emotional side of perception but much more basic (and simple) the pure physiological/neurological side of it. I believe that perception is a highly individualized activity and how it works has intrigued me ever since.

Why is digital format more accurate than analogical for the kind of work that you do?

It's more crisp, lucid and clear-cut in comparison. A pixel is more predictable than a grain. It's always exactly the same. Therefore you can have extremely quick movement within the image that is just not possible with analogue. It's a question of texture and which one fits your work. The fuzziness which is a quality of the analogue is just very different from the pristine surface of the digital. However I'm not really interested in this fight between analogue and digital. They are two different mediums with their strengths and weaknesses and everybody should just choose whichever one they prefer without ditching

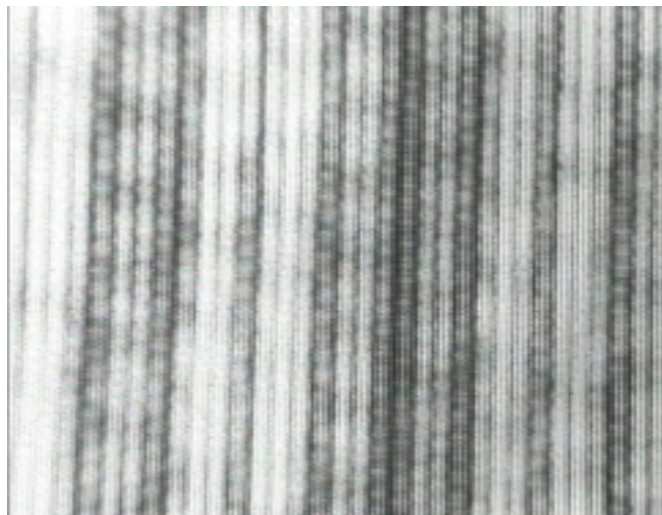
the other one constantly. I'm far more interested in the basic question of what a moving image is. The advantage of digital for my working process is that I can easily make many different versions, see them immediately and then proceed. So for every shot that makes it into the final version of the video, I have literally hundreds of slightly different versions.

Considering that you work only with digital format, while you create your films patiently and meticulously: Do you have any kind of difficulties with the screening of your films? Why can't you upload them on the Internet?

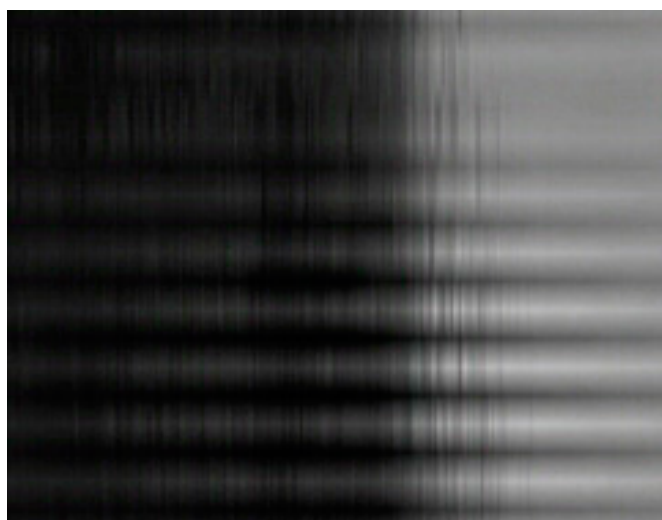
Well, first of all, they were conceived for the cinema viewing situation: you sit surrounded by strangers in a dark room with a big screen. They need the size and the darkness. I work pixel by pixel, so compression is a real problem because you lose so much information. For a DVD only every 4th pixel remains and for streaming it's far worse. So, only a small amount of the video would remain and some of the most interesting parts would just be lost in compression (also due to the fact that I work with many layers in different velocities). I guess at some point the technical possibilities will be available to do it, but then I would rather conceive something especially for the small screen. The spectator plays a huge part in the conception of my work and it makes a huge difference if you are lying on your sofa all comfy with the lights on while watching it on a 17 inch screen, or sitting in the cinema.

In some of your films –*My kingdom for a lullaby* (2002), *Trans* (2003), *KILVO* (2004)–, the image is within a constructional process. Which is the image statute in your cinema?

The construction process was very different for these three works.

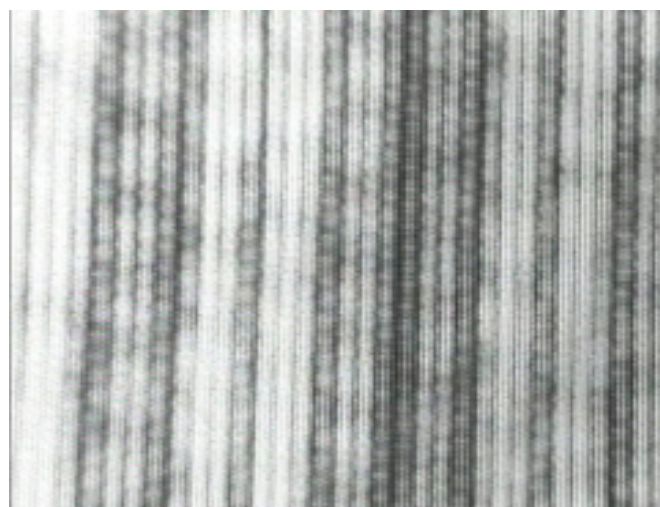


For *My kingdom for a lullaby* Billy Roisz, who is the second videoperson in the band, transformed white noise given by the musicians Martin Siewert, Christof Kurzmann and Toshimaru Nakamura with her analogue video mixer into a video signal which I further on transformed digitally and built loops out of it. In the live improvisation we both used the prepared loops plus the sound as input which generates and transforms the videomaterial. Then we would mix her and my videos. The *My kingdom for a lullaby* video is a recording of one of our concerts.



With *Trans*, Martin Siewert and I used the 5 act structure of classical drama to create an atmosphere of in-between-ness and levitation. I found these old

photographs of a harbor that totally embodied this emotion (also the sadness and melancholy of parting and saying goodbye). So I used them as my starting images and worked through the layers of the images, scratched away the unnecessary until I reached the essence.



KILVO is a classical music video in the sense that the music already existed, a track by Radian called *Kilvo* like the town in Lapland. I wanted to know what the place looked like that inspired the music, so I went online and found all these old postcards and I started collecting them. I reduced the postcards to lines to emphasize the two-dimensionality of the represented landscape. I wanted the final videoimage to look like a postcard, so I divided it in 4 parts and generated every image on a black, a gray and a white background. Each beat of the bassdrum moved the images to the next quarter and I made an arrangement so that each quarter had to move in every three colors and in every possible direction. So in the end it became this very dynamic, animated postcard.

What kind of relation do you weave between image and sound? What is the importance of the complexity of sound in your work?

Sound is 50% of the final piece and of utter importance. It's really inseparable. The way I usually work, I always start with an idea or atmosphere that I want



to create. Then I have long talks with the musician describing where I want to go with this work. Then we go off and start producing parts which we exchange. From these exchanged images and sounds we continue creating new parts. So the production happens at the same time and is totally intertwined. At the end it's really impossible to say what came first. For me that's the most fun part of it, having this conversation, that is non-verbal (because once we've started we mostly talk in images and sounds) with the musicians.

Which place does the spectator have in your cinema?

It's the most important part because the work only exists between the light that hits the screen and your perceptive system. You write your own movie de-

pending on how much you want to engage with the images and sounds we are suggesting. Without the active participation of the audience member it just remains some shadows and sound waves. In the end I don't know much more about the work and definitely have no more authority over it than anybody else in the room.

Which role do women have in the contemporary film?

I guess it's the same as in society where there seems to be equality but there really isn't if you look closer. Just look at any festival catalogues and see how many works by women are included, how many curators or festival directors are female and then you can see that we are still far away from equality.

The only available work of Grill on Internet is *Diagonale Festival Trailer*:

<http://vimeo.com/channels/diagonale/85424509>
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