RETURN TO FORM

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEROME HILER

BY MAX GOLDBERG

Like many other artisan filmmakers in '60s New York, Jerome Hiler aspired to the medium's essence—the unaccountably lucid image acting as both testament and trigger to what William James called "the capacity of the soul to be grasped." Though content to stay within the intimate setting of salon screenings, Hiler nevertheless became highly esteemed during this rich period of American independent filmmaking. After a '70s move to San Francisco, where he still lives today, his films became increasingly difficult to see. As the avant garde drifted towards dogma, he opted to work in stained glass.

Given this long absence from film culture, Hiler's sudden return—three completed films in the last 12 months—is something on par with a comet. First came *Music Makes a City*, a documentary recounting the Louisville Orchestra's postwar resurgence under the leadership of a conductor interested in commissioning new work and a mayor dedicated to the idea of the civic benefits of the arts. The restrained narration breaks every so often for a musical interlude scored to Hiler's magnificent landscape footage. As Louisville made room for the arts, so the historical narration cedes territory to Hiler's lyricism.

Words of Mercury and *In the Stone House* are more directly in line with Hiler's earlier style, literally so with *Stone House*, which compiles physically fragile and intensely poignant footage shot during the same period chronicled in Nathaniel Dorsky's *Hours for Jerome* (1967-1971). Hiler and Dorsky lived together in rural New Jersey in the late '60s, and their films draw from the same well of intimate experience and acute retrospection. But how rare it is to see such a highly refined syntax multiplied across sensibilities in this way! Brought together 40 years after its inception and 20 years after *Hours for Jerome*, *In the Stone House* draws out moments of lost time like pressed flowers from a book. Lacing through the fleeting visions of passing days are several more elaborate rituals: preparations made to film an eclipse, for instance, or an Ozu-like visit home. One such scene shows Dorsky with the poet Anne Waldman examining the sky through a piece of glass. Recognizing the metaphor, Hiler advances his camera until it too partakes in the heightened view.

A rhapsody in colour reversal, *Words of Mercury* screened in its camera original at last October's Views from the Avant-Garde before showing in HD for a week at the Whitney Biennial. Cobalt night, swimming headlamps, illuminated text, rhyming branches and ironwork, auburn floorboards, and jewelled pools of gold, green, purple, red, and black all "rest in intensity," as Mary Oliver once wished for her poems. Neon lights and wild grass mingle in spring's amplitude, and when the film comes to rest on a landscape tableau—of falling snow, or two dogs leaping into an inlet—the whole picture trembles with newfound awareness of the world and its frame. Balancing description and being, reflection and volume, intuition and insight, *Words of Mercury* is an extraordinarily poised expression of the old photochemical magic, and a long overdue reminder of Hiler's extraordinary gifts.

Cinema Scope: Let's begin with your introduction to filmmaking. Did you start with a Bolex? And do I have it right that you lived with Gregory Markopoulos in the '60s?

Jerome Hiler: Yes, I started with a Bolex. It was lent to me by Gregory, and I felt quite honoured by his trust. I was Gregory's assistant during the filming of *The Illiac Passion* (1964-1967), and I enjoyed watching him relate to this handsome machine. It was always on a tripod, and Gregory was always well-dressed: always a white shirt and tie, seven days a week. Seeing this man, attired as he was, addressing the functions of the camera so precisely gave me a great respect for the instrument. Once when we were filming by a lighthouse on Long Island, Gregory was changing a roll of film very quickly and cut his finger in the process. He turned to me, holding up his bleeding finger, and said, "Look, Jerry. The blood of a poet. Cocteau is with us!" The man was so different from everybody else. It was impossible for me to emulate him and his cinematic style. I derived an enormous spiritual lift from him—the sense of expressing the essence of one's being through vision. And yes, during this period I was sharing Gregory's small apartment with him.

Even more than Markopoulos, my pantheon of demi-gods had Stan Brakhage at its summit. Most of the young filmmakers I knew emulated him, but we were like kittens trying to imitate a lion. I sometimes think that I ruined my life trying to follow his example. The shoe just didn't fit. We can't all make a giant myth about our home life. Stan had an unshakeable belief in the importance of everything he did, and that boundless confidence fuelled his life and was thrilling for us young filmmakers to see.

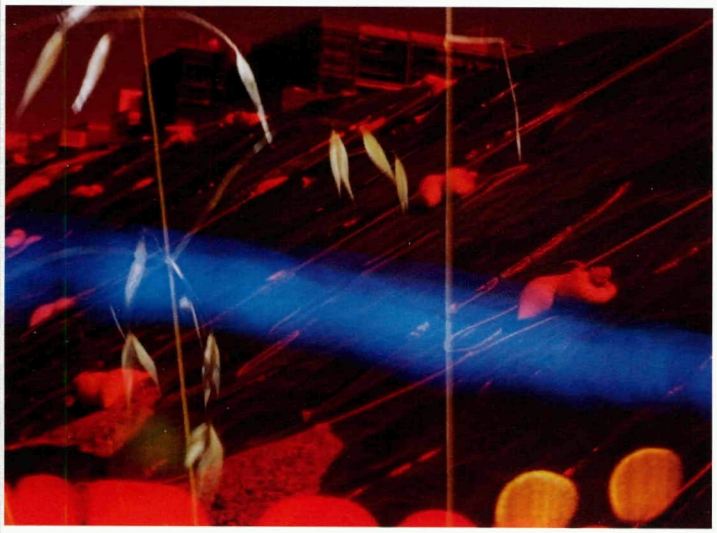
It is very hard for me to analyze how I activated all the influences that were swirling about me in my early years of filming. I can't particularly think of a "Brakhage shot" that I took. Markopoulos' influence returned to me late in life in the musical sequences of *Music Makes a City* and *Words of Mercury*, mainly because of the tripod. After a lifetime of holding the camera, and the difficulty of cutting such footage, I found myself mounting it on a tripod and taking stills. And suddenly there was Gregory.

I think the most overt influences came through Marie Menken and Nathaniel Dorsky. Marie's sense of bodily presence and sculptural envelopment of the scene was very powerful for me. And Nathaniel, well, we were filming for one another. He was the most important viewer for me, and what I saw of his sank in like nothing else. Nathaniel had a way of encouraging me on one hand and correcting any pretentious tendencies I had been developing on the other. To me, he was both a great artist and a sane human being—a rare combination.

Scope: With all these demi-gods, it seems that there was often a strong aura that went along with the actual filming. Was this something you felt you had to live up to when you were younger?

Hiler: I knew I couldn't be anyone but myself, so I didn't worry too much about any particular aura when I went to work. We are most blind to ourselves, anyhow. Nathaniel tells me that I used to feel that I had to do something "original" or else it wasn't worth the effort. I wanted to find myself and was afraid of giving in to imitative impulses. It never works. I now realize that originality is a myth (no disrespect to myth). There are origins to everything. Some artists can conceal their influences for a while but, eventually, their models make marvellous appearances. Originality comes from the arrangement of one's influences mixed with one's personality, which is also an arrangement of influences. I was being egotistical with all my resistance. Ungrateful also. Influences on a creative person don't come through overt channels. If they did, they could be easily mitigated. It's through subconscious channels that influences can arrive disguised as the filmmaker's own wishes. Over time, however, the source of the influence usually reveals itself.

Scope: Nathaniel referred to you as a "filmmaker of occasion" at the Lincoln Center screening of *In the Stone House*. I



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think he was gesturing toward Mark McElhatten's role in motivating your recent work, but it also relates to your preference to screen work in the intimacy of the home. What turned you off from the usual avant-garde distribution channels?

Hiler: When I was young, I had the idea that "someday" I would make a film, have it printed, shown, and distributed—always at some future time. In the meantime, I had a circle of friends who either made films or were enthusiastic viewers. For many years I held regular screenings at home: in New York at my apartment on East Broadway, on Lake Owassa in New Jersey, and in San Francisco. It surprises people to know that I felt satisfied and stimulated with this limited circle, but I was. Naturally, with the same people coming to see films I felt that the show had to be different for repeated viewings. Since I was showing original reversal film, I felt free to edit and re-edit the material, moving shots from reel to reel and "superimposing" shots using two projectors. The trouble with my method should be obvious. I was wearing the film out. And I was occasionally tossing out reels of trims and outtakes, which severely limits what one can do when one is putting a film together. This constriction plagued me when editing *In the Stone House*. What makes me sad is to hear some legend that I have this great storehouse of wonderful films that I keep to myself and don't let anybody see. What a horrible misanthropic thing that would be! I admit that I felt irrelevant to the film scene after a while, but I do love people and want to do my best with what time I have left to share my work.

Scope: What was your aim shooting film during these years at the Stone House? Were you consciously filming for posterity? Or more in the mode of daily illuminations?

Hiler: Certainly not posterity; who thought of the future? I mentioned Brakhage's strong influence, his mythologizing of his home life. This opened the floodgates for many filmmakers to delve into the personal rather than seeking some external subject. Eventually theorists came up with the label "diary films." I certainly did not regard what I did as any kind of diary-keeping. Regardless of the personal subjects, I always hoped that the end result would transcend home movies. Transcend and yet keep that awestruck love of one just discovering the magic of cinema at home.

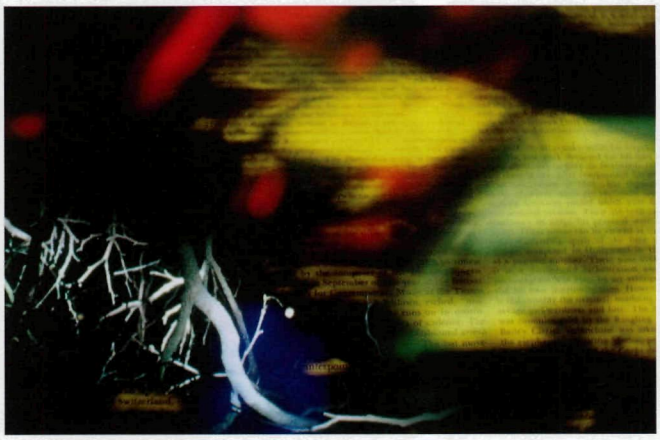
Scope: Do you mean the magic of watching or do you mean actually filming?

Hiler: I mean seeing movies in the home. I still think it's thrilling. Bringing the day into the night. Gathering sights and experiences and savouring them in a quieter, luminous afterlife. Darkness is magnificent—it frees the mind and imagination. When Gregory first lent me his camera, I went right up to St. John the Divine [in New York] to shoot my first rolls in that vast dark space.

Scope: Can you describe what it was like editing *In the Stone House* so long after the fact? When was the last time you had looked at the raw footage?

Hiler: It was emotionally challenging to engage so intensely with scenes of my early life. I longed to turn away and start a new film, but I couldn't escape. It felt as if life and death were vividly present with me as I worked. I was surprised at the good condition of the image, but I could smell vinegar faintly and some of the stocks had shrunk and were not aligning well with sprocket claws. I had been lulled into a false sense of security by using the Bell & Howell projector in Nathaniel's basement that showed the film without any problem. Those big, tough New York projectors were going to tear my film to shreds. Destruction hovered everywhere with this project. I brought something to life, but it might not make it to the screen; how fitting for me, who waited so long to exhibit. At the screening, my film heaved in the gate like a bull in a rodeo pen. Back in San Francisco I found a couple of ripped sprockets near the head of the shots. The film is a tad shorter now than it was in New York.

Scope: It's unusual, having this material experience of the past as something both fragile and tenacious. Were there particular moments, people, or activities you found yourself wishing you had on film when you were editing?



Words of Mercury

Hiler: Of course, I wanted more material when I was editing *Stone House*. I could see the ship tilting one way and wished I had ballast to correct the balance. I especially wanted more still shots. And more calm movement. But I had to deal with the way I was rather than the way I am now. I was always doing something jittery with the camera. Swishing or single-framing or whatever seemed disruptive. I was young! Considering the number of guests we had, there are remarkably few people in the film. I regarded filming as a type of contemplation. What I did not want to do was to be holding the camera up between myself and my friends. Often people seemed frightened or at least changed when the camera came out, and I felt I was being aggressive or exploitive taking a special moment for myself.

Scope: To what extent did the seasons determine the flow of your editing? As a time capsule the film is rather cyclical.

Hiler: The seasons are of supreme importance to me, even in the Bay Area. With one exception, all my films follow a pattern of development from a stark "winter" beginning to a rich, flowering or "summer" conclusion. This is true even of the documentaries *Music Makes a City* and *Seasons of a Mountain Vineyard*. I always stored my footage of East Coast material according to season.

Scope: Can you talk about some of the other considerations that went into *Music Makes a City*, apart from just wanting to convey the remarkable story? Were there any particular documentary pitfalls you were keen to avoid?

Hiler: I'm not conversant with that many documentaries. I knew the story of the Louisville Orchestra and its commissioning activities, and I wanted to learn more. So Owsley Brown and I went into the project with the open-mindedness of novices. We were willing to use the film to discover that history. There was a very challenging atmosphere throughout the whole project. Was there a film there or not? Whatever pitfalls I wanted to avoid and ideas I wanted to bring forth met with the actuality of what material was still available to us, which wasn't much. Our wish list of interviews was an honour-roll of the dead. It was Owsley's patience as a producer that allowed us the time—six years—to gather what we needed to make a great film.

Scope: Were the musical interludes always part of the equation? They're amazingly responsive to the music, and it also struck me that you seemed to be using the classical lyricism of the city symphony to recover an earlier moment of promise that's all but unrecognizable in the current political climate.

Hiler: The musical sequences were there from the first moment. I've often said that a lot of documentaries would have made better magazine articles, but I realized that a film could be powered by music throughout and that we could have interludes to warm people to the music itself. *Music Makes a City* does consciously reflect the values of the mid-century and before. I had a few memories of films like *The River* (1938) and other WPA films from childhood in my mind. As antiquated as it seems, I still have some lingering feeling for this country that is steeped in that heroic attitude. I'm happy when I hear our film's viewers lament the loss of the love of community that was so prevalent in earlier times. To a degree, I wanted the film to shame the politicians of today. I regard it as a contemporary statement without having to say a word.

Scope: *Words of Mercury* is of course literally silent, but here you place special attention on the material richness of the film image itself. Can you describe to me a little of your process for superimposition? How do you anticipate these multiple floating layers when you're filming?

Hiler: *Words of Mercury* came into being as a purely personal exploration of the properties of film and filming. Some of the musical sequences in *Music Makes a City* were shot with the intention of having superimpositions, but these ideas weren't used. Once the film was completed, I felt a freedom to do exactly what I wanted. At the same time, I began to regard an unexposed roll of film as a dormant repository of colourful gems. One simply had to mine the dark rolls for their hidden riches. With this attitude, I began to feel the inexorable urge to superimpose as a true response to the precariousness of film's situation. In the past, I had often tried to superimpose in the camera with disappointing results. But now I felt a strong inspiration to overcome the inherent obstacles as a tribute to film. I often shot four layers. This set up a new relationship between me and my subject. I could no longer become entirely seduced by the film occasion. I had to think in terms of the whole and remember what was shot weeks ago and where it appeared on the

roll. Of course, I didn't always achieve these goals and finally seeing the rolls provided many surprises, happy and sad.

Scope: As literal revelations of the interrelations of different forms, the superimpositions reflect your responsiveness to the natural world. Can you describe your approach to filming outdoors?

Hiler: The phenomenal world isn't that cooperative, in case you haven't noticed. Whatever I might plan to do will inevitably meet with a bigger reality than my wishes. The best I can hope to do is to be faithful to a mental image or instinct. There are times when I encounter something completely unforeseen and go with that. Shooting this way sets up a dance or dialogue between the indifference of external events and the manoeuvrability of an internal choice. It's like a little model of experience that has more to teach us than we could ever hope to impose on it. These churnings of images, which are like a bank of clouds, have to be put into an orderly flow. How does one edit a mystifying bank of clouds? Let the film speak. Arrange the material so that it lives. Keep logical decisions in check. One has to bring awareness to a very subtle point. I don't try to understand my film, just bring it to life. Understanding comes after it is completed.

Scope: Because the dimensionality of the superimpositions is so essential to *Words of Mercury*'s impact, can you talk a little about the challenges of transferring the work to HD for the Whitney Museum screenings? Will you show the film in its original form again, or is that simply not practical with the available projectors?

Hiler: The 16mm film is the original camera reversal, not a print. The Whitney wanted to show my film for a week at half-hour intervals for the Biennial. Showing the original under those circumstances was out of the question, but I also didn't have enough time to make a good 16mm print. So I decided to make an HD transfer. I felt the Whitney offer necessitated a big leap as far as my usual patterns went. Of course, I save the film version for special occasions and don't plan to have it screened too frequently. There are marked differences between the two versions. First and foremost is the quality of the light: the soft, limpid light of a movie projector and the pitiless glare of police-state video projection. This shouldn't be surprising since the world has been experiencing a lighting crisis for a decade or two. Not only is darkness nearing extinction, but the quality of illumination—in the theatre, on film, in museums, and in most public environments—seems oblivious to its purpose or deliberately designed for humiliation. To be fair, the HD version is very sharp and effective. But it's also necessary for me to be present to work with the projectionist on the colour values.

I see film with its swirling emulsion as being akin to something like impressionist painting. I refer to the image quality. It's soft. I'm not saying that I'm interested in being an impressionist, per se, but there's an excitement in the colours. Now, if I might remain loose in my associations, digital imagery is a completely different type of painting akin to super-realism. There are many kinds of filmmakers, and many have been able to make the transition very easily. But for me to change technical formats would be like forcing a painter to change his or her whole world view. I enjoy handling the material of film with my own hands. I edit with rewinds and a viewer. I make my own fades by dipping the film, frame by frame, into a black liquid and squeegee it off with my fingers. I mostly guess how the cuts will work. If I find out that I was wrong, I lose frames in redoing things. I could see how speedy and superior computer editing was when I was working on commercial projects, and I felt that I was living in the Stone Age. But then, we live in the present no matter what tools we use.

Scope: Part of what strikes me about the superimpositions is that in spite of their density you maintain a sense of equilibrium. We first met at a San Francisco Ballet performance of Balanchine's *Theme and Variations*, and I remember you telling me how you have watched this dance dozens and dozens of times and always pick up on some slightly different inflection. I was thinking about the pas de deux watching all these splendid visual interactions in *Words of Mercury*.

Hiler: In high school, back in Queens, I used to tell my parents I was going to the library at night and instead took the E train to the City Center to see *Agon*, *Apollo* and a host of other works. There has hardly been a year of my life that I haven't seen a few of [Balanchine's] ballets. How much of my life, I wonder, has been spent in darkened theatres watching the glowing dancers on the stage? Since you mentioned that, I noticed that *Words of Mercury* is 25 minutes long—about the same time as Nathaniel's films—but, in general, it is the average time of a Balanchine ballet. I wonder if I came to feel that a presentation of visual intensity should last about that long from my ballet watching. If you mixed the influences of Brakhage and Balanchine, you might come up with something like *Words of Mercury*.

Scope: I don't know how to phrase this without being completely reductive, but how does your layering of colour and light in the film medium differ from your work with glass? The volume of your images has a way of articulating the projector's light that's not entirely unlike stained glass, but I'm curious to hear about your sympathy for these different materials.

Hiler: It is easy to see how my glass work affects my filmmaking. Colour is of paramount importance. I use coloured gels in my photography as readily as I would paint on a piece of coloured glass. It's not a "special effect." It's the use of a very primordial element in our consciousness. Even before birth, we are seeing and feeling colour. Now that we are grown-up and civilized, we have good taste and keep colours coordinated. That's okay, too. But we must never forget to give in completely to the overwhelming power and message of total colour immersion, beyond good and bad taste. In glass, the light passing through produces a secondary effect: colourful illumination in the room. Its main effect, though, comes from facing the source of the light and reading the window. As we know, film is read by concentrating projected light into the room with a lens. As for the secondary effect, since smoking has been banned in movie theatres, there are few people who take pleasure in watching the beam of light coming from the projector. I can remember from my childhood the pleasure of watching the bars of light and dark moving like a mobile through the smoky air above the balcony. In this era of computer monitor-centred experience, may there always be shafts of light shining into our living spaces, shining into our lives.