

The Film on Film Foundation, an organization dedicated to encouraging the exhibition of celluloid motion-picture film in the manner it was meant to be screened, presents at the Roxie Cinema the first film of its projected on-going series "Radical Strategies": Jean-Isidore Isou's revolutionary masterpiece, "Venom and Eternity".

The Making of a Messiah In August 1945, a twenty-year old Romanian Jew finished a tortured trek through war-torn Europe, arriving at the Parisian offices of France's most prestigious literary magazine and publisher. Noisily depositing a manuscript of abstruse theory purporting to explain why the development of modern literature led directly from Baudelaire to himself, he declared it a "great work of genius" and demanded it be published.

Several months later, the handsome young Jean-Isidore Isou had recruited a band of followers to his nascent revolutionary art movement, "Lettrism", and, after making the papers with news of the first public declaration of their existence (incidentally interrupting the opening night of a Tristan Tzara play), Isou had his publishing contract.

Isou, and his disciples, frustrated by art's inability to directly express the meat of experience, stripped the formal apparatus of art's various forms to the most rudimentary levels. In literature, the components of poetry became, not words, but letters (hence "lettrism" and "lettrists"). This new avant-garde stance swiftly launched itself into painting, music, and even economics (Isou's tracts in this area amounted to a theory of the economic subjugation of youth, arguably embodying the first salvo of the international youth rebellion movement).

Isou had developed much of his studiously grandiose theoretical framework during an adolescence scarred by the struggle against the vortex of the Holocaust (including a stint in the Romanian Resistance), and the barrage of ideas he unleashed in books and public demonstrations found fertile soil in a Paris riven with open wounds produced by years of Occupation and Resistance. According to author Andrew Hussey, his chief enemies were the reductionist ideas of Reason and the Enlightenment, which he held responsible for the Jewish Apocalypse. Lettrism would "shatter Rationality" with a militant Judaism, a "Judaism on the attack", based on the "elliptical and paradoxical language of sacred truth". Plunging headlong into paradox, Lettrism would also be anti-religious. A member of Antonescu's Iron Guard had told him "God loves everything anti-Yid". Isou adopted this as a motto, declaring that "If God loves all that is anti-Jewish, the Jew, if he is to take his place in the world, must love all that is anti-God." He must create his own world, starting with the destruction and reformation of all in the previous one. At the age of seventeen, Isou had discovered the purpose of existence: it was not, as commonly held, the struggle to survive, but rather the all-consuming urge to create. Lettrists would become their own Gods, and Isou declared himself the Messiah.

Isou and followers considered all proceeding avant-gardes defunct, and they took up the Oedipal task of letting them know this to be the case. Previous generations of provocateurs found themselves at the wrong end of the dagger, and were forced to adjust to the new circumstances as best they could. When Andre Breton attempted to recuperate a Lettrist act into the Surrealist canon, he was brutally rebuffed. "We welcomed Breton's intervention", Isou later said. "But he did not understand that it was he who had to abandon Surrealism to join the Lettrists. And that was his big mistake."

"Let There Be Venom!" In 1950, at the same age Orson Welles had made "Citizen Kane", Isou extended his theory and practice into the realm of cinema with the soon-to-be notorious "Venom and Eternity". Isou decoupled image from soundtrack, making the latter the dominant component, from which he hurled a series of haughty, ironical rants, fractured narratives, and howled primal chants. In the images, he, of course, took the starring role, searing the screen with a smoldering presence evoking the love-child of Marlon Brando by way of Sal Mineo. The cutting pattern was easily the most disjointed up to this point in film history, and he continued his pattern of visual incendiarism via painting on, then scratching and gouging the filmstock itself, or running the images upside-down and backwards. No film had ever been made from such a thoroughly oppositional stance - it was opposed to literally everything save the redemptive power of Isou's ultimate in avant-garde aesthetics.

It is claimed "Venom and Eternity" caused a riot upon its premiere at Cannes. Isou himself says that firehoses had to be used against rampaging audience members. Despite the controversy, Jean Cocteau, who makes an appearance in the film, prevailed upon the powers of Cannes to create the "Prix des spectateurs d'avant garde 1951" especially for this film, which additionally won the "En marge prix", as well as the "Prix St.-Germain-des-Pres" back in Paris.

"Venom" blazed a path of fury and glory wherever its images touched screen. Its Los Angeles premiere was advertised as "The Film the Conservative Press Wants to Stifle!" In San Francisco, it was met by one of a series of riots engendered by screenings of experimental films in this period, although the circumstances in this instance were delightfully forward thinking: the riot was

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For the first time, the English titles become an integral part of a film. No longer are they the necessary evil. On the contrary, American version make it superior to the French in that they help guide the the English titles in the focus of attention. (sic)

-from the program of the Hollywood engagement of Venom and Eternity



reportedly begun by poets Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, etc., to protest a beleaguered Alan Watts, who had been prevailed upon to lecture against the allure of "decadent European art". In the audience was a twenty-year old Stan Brakhage, who kept his eyes glued to the screen, and adapted many of its techniques, later declaring it "a portal through which every film artist is going to have to pass".

Back in France, "Venom" was followed by other Lettrist films by Isou and others, including Guy Debord, the eventual founder of the Situationist International, who upped the oppositional ante to oppose art itself, instead dedicating themselves to drunken hyperactive consumption of experience.

By 1959, the New Wave was in full swing, begun by men in their late twenties of a relative right-wing bent, all of whom more-or-less quickly made their way left, adopting Lettrism as one of their influences. (Jean-Luc Godard, for example, took up the late 60's Maoist refrain calling for a "return to zero", which can be seen as analogous to the Lettrist doctrine of returning to formal origins, and paring down to basic aesthetic components, in preparation for recombination within a new formal language.)

These different movements all had their part in the confluence of forces that exploded onto the streets of Paris in May '68. Isou and his Lettrists, Debord and his Situationists, champions of the New Wave: all have laid claim for their movement being the inspiration for these revolutionary events registered and echoed around the world. Be that as it may, in its rampant egotism, celebration of youth-cult, rhythmically pulsing soundtrack, fractured narrative, and deliriously disjointed imagery, "Venom and Eternity", through its influence on Brakhage and the New Wave, is the true Pandora's Box (Brooks and Pabst notwithstanding) from which all contemporary visual insanity springs.

Christopher Maclaine's "The End": the *other* film Brakhage declared a "portal through which every film artist is going to have to pass."

Little is known about Chris Maclaine. He's one of the many forgotten figures of Beat, sidetracked because his major accomplishments weren't in the literary realm. He was born in 1923, in Oklahoma. He claimed to have fallen out of a tree as a child, seriously injuring his head, and this has often been cited as the cause of what might be called his "imbalanced" view of life, his refusal to "accept things as they are", to accept the "social lie" that "everything is really OK". The other major element from his background we have any record of is his identification with his Scottish Clan Maclaine forebears, and their seemingly eternal feuds and squabbles.

These two childhood influences may have fueled the alternating agony and ecstatic mysticism which flowed through his work. Graduating from UC Berkeley in 1946, he became a major presence in the developing Beat scene in San Francisco, verbally riffing to live jazz performances in coffee houses and bars, and publishing at least two books of verse. Known as the "Antonin Artaud of North Beach", he became legendary for a presence which in itself constituted a rebuke to the insanity of society.

Maclaine brought his willfully naive and reflexively ironic sensibility to filmmaking in 1953's "The End". Featuring deliberately crude acting and photography (although shot by master craftsman Jordan Belson), "The End" deals with a threat whose novelty in the early 50's made it horrifying in a way incomprehensible to later generations (that is, until six years ago): global nuclear annihilation. His response was a naive and charming call for a sexual mysticism, what might be called a Tantric rejoinder to the Bomb. The wise viewer will not be fooled by the film's seeming innocence - "The End" sets up as complex a system of visual metaphor, association, and idea creation via Eisensteinian montage as is to be found in film.

After continuing his filmmaking with "The Man Who Invented Gold"(1957; which deals with alchemy and its pursuit for "inner gold"), "Beat"(1958), and "Scotch Hop"(1959), Maclaine descended into the slow death of speed-addiction, dying in 1975 as a resident of a North Beach asylum. His work, however, refuses to die, and its lessons, like a body of occult knowledge, have passed down through several generations of filmmakers, spreading both heat and light.

Film Series: Radical Strategies

As part of its mission, the Film on Film Foundation seeks to showcase exciting and unusual celluloid motion-picture film works which have rarely been screened locally, unleashing some for the very first time. Our debut series, 'Radical Strategies', represents the opening salvo in this part of our undertaking. Each film in this series of experimental narratives questions the nature of cinema itself, and in its realization, each proffers potential answers to the questions of what cinema is, can, or should be.

A concurrent thematic: the 100-plus years of film's existence have been aligned with dramatic international political upheaval. Experimenters in form have often seen their work as connected to a fundamental recreation of the social/political world, and this adds an additional, sometimes explosive, resonance to the ideas of 'Radical Strategies.'

