

**CANYON ONCE AGAIN. INTERVIEW WITH JON JOST**

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American filmmaker Jon Jost (Chicago, 1943) is known for his essayistic fictions. In 1970, he made his short film *Canyon*. It consists of a permanent framing of the Grand Canyon (Colorado), and comprises the plastic changes of a whole day in 5 minutes time. Jost made a new digital and longer version of *Canyon* in 2013 -he has been using digital technologies since their emergence. In this interview, Jost talks about the older and powerful *Canyon*, the differences between the two films, how he values the aesthetic particularities of them both or his opinions on technology. As a project, *Canyon* is still ongoing.

**1**

-Which were your intentions in making *Canyon* (1970) and how did you come up with the idea? Why were you interested in such an aesthetic?

I had gone to the Grand Canyon the previous year, hiked all the way down with 16mm camera and tripod, and taken a fair bit of footage. When I returned home and processed it I realized it was all garbage, and that I had nothing to say and no way to say anything about the Canyon. I thought about it, and then decided how to make the film and returned the next year. I had nothing to say about the Canyon, but it had a lot to say about itself. And I thought I had figured out how to do that.

-The location is not just any location...

It is Yaki Point, one of the many viewpoints overlooking the Canyon. I don't recall why I chose it, or if I went and looked at many others before.

-I meant the Canyon itself, as a location...

Because I had been there, been defeated by it, and well, it is "grand".

-How did you select the exact framing?

I think I saw the evening there and knew where the sun would set, and set the camera up and slept beside it, getting up in the morning before sunrise.

## **2**

-How was it technically made?

I think I was shooting with a Beaulieu that could hold 200 ft. I took a shot of 10-15 seconds at 18 fps every time I thought the light had shifted enough to warrant another shot. This meant many shots during sunrise and sunset periods, and only one shot an hour or so at midday. It was all by eye, not clock. The shots were then dissolved into one another in editing, I believe 72 frame dissolves as that was the maximum possible at the lab. Though maybe they are 49 frames.

-So they are real time images?

All real time, 18 fps.

-There aren't any freeze-frames? The film could indeed look like a series of slides fading out...

No freeze frames, all real time.

-So the image-taking was irregular... And, what determined the length of each segment?

As said, judged by eye, approximately 10-15 seconds a shot. I couldn't shoot too much as the film time was limited (10mins) and I could not change rolls without moving the camera.

-There would seem to be moments of higher activity -though the proposal is subtle, changes in the image can be harsh. Before you explained your system, one could have wondered whether these moments were "objective"? That is, once a filming system had been established, whether they were neutrally produced?

As said, I did a shot each time I thought the light had shifted enough, so more shots during sunrise and sunset.

-Did you have any aid during the filming?

I played my guitar.

## **3**

-What overall duration does it compress?

It was all day, and ten minutes of film edited into I think 5 and a half mins.

-In his film *Hand Held Day* (1975), Gary Beydler accelerates a day. Instead, *Canyon* would seem to condense it...

Beydler, as did the *Koyaanisqatsi* guy [Godfrey Reggio, 1982], used pixillation, which I also could have done but I felt the skittering sensibility it gives was counter to what the Canyon did. Pixillating is like a popsong; the dissolves work symphonically. It was a very conscious choice.

-In *Canyon*, change is subtle, at least very much compared with conventional films. Conceptually, it could seem to be a unique image (not as easily as Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964) can be thought as a unique shot, but in the same way Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967)-- [interrupts]

*Wavelength* is not a single unique shot - it has many (needless and stupid in my view) cuts and things inserted into the seemingly single zoomshot.

-Neither is *Empire*, but it is sometimes taken for a unique zoom-in. There could seem to be some relationship between *Canyon* and *Wavelength*...

I don't see any relationship beyond both were shot with cameras and film.

-Do you think *Canyon* is related to the temporality of Photography? How is it related to "the photographic"?

Photography and cinema are very different: one asks and requires that you take time, its time, to see; the other allows you to set the time - a half second or half hour. The psychological effect is very different.

**4**

-To what degree is there an interest in color in *Canyon*?

I didn't shoot it in B&W. The Canyon is color, ergo... I was trying to let the Canyon speak for itself, and it speaks in color.

-Sometimes, the film looks really tridimensional... It even looks like a zoom...

I think that is because it entices you to concentrate and in doing so you sort of "zoom in" but it is all in your brain.

-Why is it silent? Could you imagine a sound for *Canyon*, or could it admit any?

The Canyon itself is silent; the only sound I would consider is the natural sound there - a little wind. Though these days it would also be the chatter of tourists, airplanes, a bus going by....

5

-Which cinematographic or artistic referents did you have?

I was very young then and had little knowledge; in hindsight I would say in keeping with some of the 19th century American landscape painters, but I likely did not know them then.

-As to a cinematographic context, how did the film relate with Larry Gottheim or Barry Gerson's films of the time? Were you aware of them?

I had never seen. And since have only maybe seen one Gottheim film which I did not like (*Barn Rushes* [1971]). While my films are formalist in some senses and could be thought of as structuralist, they are not actually structuralist films - the structure is a skeleton to stick meat on.

-How could it relate to Peter Hutton's cinema?

I might have seen a Hutton film or two, though I think I did not see any of his work until around 1973 or 4. I loved his early work. Not so much the stuff of the last 15 years - he has no sense for color.

-Is there any relation between *Canyon* and what John Hilliard or Jean Dibbets could do in photography?

I don't know them so I can't say anything.

-What's *Canyon*'s place among your short films? And among the rest of your oeuvre?

It was an exception, as usually I work in narrative or sometimes in essay forms. However aesthetically it is consistent with other work - and its experience can be seen in passages of other films, especially those since I shifted to digital where one can get much better (and longer) dissolves and overlays - *Muri romani* [1999-2000] is a variant on *Canyon*; *Passages* [2006] has many related segments; in *Coming to Terms* [2013] there is a sequence of the Berkeley Pitt

which is very closely related.

## 6

-In 2013 (late May), you made a new digital *Canyon*. Why? Why *Canyon*?

I wanted to use the advantages of digital media - clarity, capacity for using time, stability of the image, etc.

-How is it different from the original?

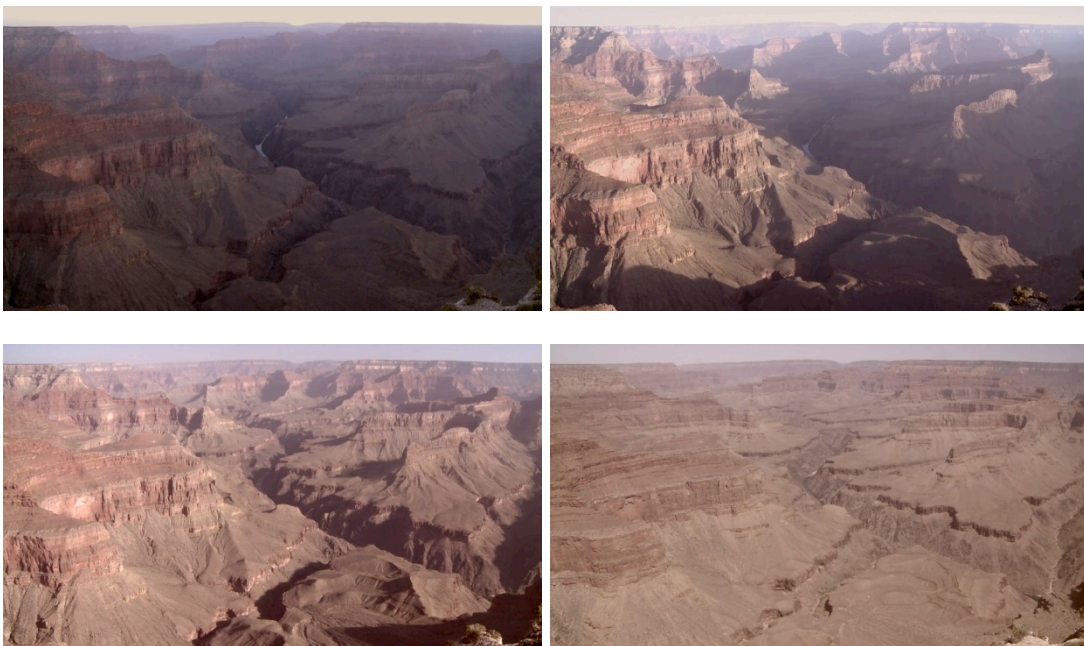
The one I shot (I hope to go back and do others, and if I can arrange with the Park, one that would cover a day that is a year - to get the weather changes) is from a different viewpoint, a hazier day, and runs 76mins though I have a short version of 22mins of same material.

-Is it the same technique of fragmented registration and dissolves?

Yes, but longer individual shots and very long dissolves.

-The difference in duration between these new two (76 to 22mins) relates to the length of the shots or is it that there are more shots in the longer one? Do you think of them independently, or is it like one film is a more detailed or complete version of the same landscape, of the same idea?

I made the short one simply by running the longer one on the time line at 300% speed - just for those who I doubt would sit through the long one...



Images 1 to 4: Canyon (2013, short version)

-About that new project, what do you mean with "covering a day that is a year"?

To set up a camera and shoot over a year, doing the same thing in principle as with the one day, but morning spring, midday summer, afternoon autumn, late afternoon winter - so you see the changes in seasons weather as you go through a day. The film begins at sunrise and ends at sunset, but it also traverses a year, paced so a shot is done each, say, week, through the year.

-You suggested that you are still planning some other versions?

Yes, I hope to go back, perhaps with a residency, and set up a camera to work for a year, and take during my stay a number of single day shots from different viewpoints.

-The new film is longer. Why that long? Digital technology would virtually permit an infinite length, so when to stop?

Well one could do a Warhol *Empire* [1964] version that is real time, a whole day. Perhaps better as an installation. Though art is about something else - it is about bringing a concentration, about compression. I wouldn't do a whole day version since I think it would be a bit pointless.

-What implications does the change of technology have? Also, what aesthetical consequences do you appreciate and how do you evaluate them? Do you feel economic constrains are lesser now?

I already mentioned the technical changes. I switched to electronic forms as soon as DV came out as an affordable medium both for its aesthetic qualities - very beautiful and very elastic - and because it essentially eliminated economic constraints.

-How can the new *Canyon* dialog with contemporary cinema?

Since my work is hardly ever shown anywhere to anyone, it can't very much. I feel to a great degree that contemporary films are catching up with me. If you look at a lot of contemporary stuff it looks suspiciously much like things I did in 1976 on (*Last Chants [for a Slow Dance (Dead End)*, 1977], *Chameleon* [1978], *Slow Moves* [1983]...) But I have moved on.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- Barn Rushes* [short film, 16mm] Dir. Larry Gottheim. USA, 1971. 36mins.
- Canyon* [short film, 16mm] Dir. Jon Jost. USA, 1970. 6mins.
- Canyon* [feature film, HD video] Dir. Jon Jost. USA, 2013. 76mins.
- Canyon* [short film, HD video] Dir. Jon Jost. USA, 2013. 22mins.
- Chameleon* [feature film, 16mm to 35mm] Dir. Jon Jost. USA, 1978. 90mins.
- Coming to Terms* [feature film, HD video] Dir. Jon Jost. USA, 2013. 89mins.
- Empire* [feature film, 16mm] Dir. Andy Warhol. USA, 1964. 8hrs 5mins.
- Hand Held Day* [short film, 16mm] Dir. Gary Beydler. USA, 1975. 6mins.
- Koyaanisqatsi* [feature film, 35mm] Dir. Godfrey Reggio. USA, 1982. 86mins.
- Last Chants for a Slow Dance (Dead End)* [feature film, 16mm] Dir. Jon Jost. USA, 1977. 90mins.
- Muri romani* [feature film, digital] Dir. Jon Jost. USA, 1999-2000. 80mins.
- Passages* [feature film, digital] Dir. Jon Jost. USA, 2006. 62mins.
- Slow Moves* [feature film, 16mm] Dir. Jon Jost. USA, 1983. 93mins.
- Wavelength* [feature film, 16mm] Dir. Michael Snow. USA, 1967. 45mins.

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