

## SAUL LEVINE

Interviewed by Katy Martin in 2008

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The French surrealist poet, Jean Cocteau, said that, “Film will only become art when its materials are as inexpensive as pencil and paper.” In the days before the invention of light video cameras, 8mm film came as close as you could to Cocteau’s dream. Saul Levine adopted the medium in the 1960s and began using the camera to record his daily life, out of which he developed his art.

Levine’s life has included some key events of an era, so his films evoke history from a fresh point of view. For example, his film, *NEW LEFT NOTE*, is based on footage from major anti-war demonstrations in the late 1960s. At the time, Saul played a leading role in a prominent student organization (SDS), so these events are seen from inside. Yet the finished film is edited primarily in terms of color, and it is structured poetically, in large part as a love poem to another student leader in the movement. Over the years, Saul has created a body of work that is, first and foremost, a collection of “cine-poems.” Yet these same films also give us a document, and a formally innovative record of the artist’s life.

Saul Levine’s films have screened throughout the United States and Europe. He has had major retrospectives at Anthology Film Archives (New York) and Harvard Film Archives (Boston) and has been featured in solo shows at the New York Film Festival and the Rotterdam Film Festival. His films and videos have also been exhibited at PS One/MoMA (New York), the Centre Pompidou (Paris), the Institute for Contemporary Art (Boston), the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), Pacific Film Archives (Berkeley) and many other places. His work has also been written about in *The New York Times*, *Artforum Magazine*, and *Cahiers du Cinema*. In addition, Levine is also influential as a teacher at MassArt and programmer at MassArt Film Society (Boston). He holds an MFA from the Chicago Art Institute, where he studied with Stan Brakhage.

Levine is widely considered the master of small gauge (8mm) filmmaking in America, and he also works with 16mm film, video, sound, and performance art. He tends to push each medium to its limits, often through editing, where shots can be as short as one or two frames, or as long as a single 80-minute take. At MoCA Shanghai, we will present a selection of films that are mostly drawn from his ongoing series, *THE NOTES*. In the following interview, Levine discusses some of the ideas that went into the making of these films.

**KATY MARTIN:** *We're showing several films from your series, THE NOTES. Can you talk about your basic concept for THE NOTES? How did you start them? What are the various kinds of “notes” you explore?*

**SAUL LEVINE:** I started *THE NOTES* series in 1968. I had been making films for three or four years, and was starting to have shows. I wanted to have a way of grouping films that would be nonlinear, but would point by title to a set of relationships. I was interested in the idea of using film as a way of taking notes that were visual, nonverbal, and also included time. I had started as writer and was increasingly blocked, even to the point of finding letter writing difficult. So thinking about making films that were notes to particular people, but public at the same time, was exciting. The word, *notes*, also alludes to music. Notes are what songs are made up of, not a musical form, like a sonata. *THE NOTES* series has allowed me to explore, in various film gauges and forms, the ways in which film can function as a note or note or a notice or notations. It has also allowed me to make very different films that are all part of a larger exploration.

*NOTE TO PATI* (1969) is to a friend, Pati Tanaka Blaney, who had joined the Living Theater and was touring with them on the west coast, leaving behind one of her sons and taking the other with her. So I made a film about what she was missing back home – not only her young son, but also a very snowy winter in Boston. I edited the film in rhythms of color and shape to be evocative of childhood memories, and to bring them into a present tense. The film includes footage of her son, her husband, friends and many strangers, shoveling snow and dealing with the rigors and joys of winter in New England.

By contrast, *NOTE: CHICAGO REDS AND BLUES* (1972) is abstract and conceptual. It is made out of two words, *RED* and *BLUE*, which are animated on the screen in ways that explore the basic principles of how film makes motion out still frames, namely image retention on the retina of the eye and the phi phenomenon. The film evolved out of a title for a documentary I had wanted to make (but didn't) about my friends in Chicago who were political radicals (reds) and also interested in Chicago music (the blues). I thought about the connotations of the words, *RED* and *BLUE*, and realized that reading them in white letters on a black screen, the audience would also have many associations with the words, and imagine color where there wasn't any.

At the time, I was already working on the film, *NEW LEFT NOTE* (1968-82), which like *NOTE TO PATI*, was organized in color rhythms. I would repeat these rhythms, over and over, as I edited: yellow red blue red green yellow orange blue etc. So *NOTE: CHICAGO REDS AND BLUES* became a “concrete poem” that explored the tension between language and vision, literal and imaginary, as well as being a formal flicker film. (Flicker films are a genre of avant-garde film that uses the basic on/off rhythms of film in variations to cause the viewer to trance out, while also reflecting her/his own process of vision.) These two films are also different in their gauge, since *NOTE TO PATI* was made in regular-8mm – a small gauge film generally used for home movies - and *NOTE: CHICAGO REDS AND BLUES* was filmed in 16mm.

**KM:** *Can you talk about your main influences?*

**SL:** When I was in college, I loved going to the movies and I would sometimes think about making one myself. But nothing I saw was like what I had a vague yen for until I

happened to see three films: Maya Deren's *AT LAND* (1944), Deren's *CHOREOGRAPHY FOR THE CAMERA* (1945), and Viking Egging's *SYMPHONIE DIAGONALE* (1924). The two Deren films showed me how film could be put together to emphasize association, rather than narration, to create a poetics of time and space. The Egging film discarded figure and perspective, and had development of shape – positive and negative – through time. At last, I had found a cinema that was closer to what was exciting to me about the poetry I loved – Hopkins, Yeats, Stein, Pound, H.D. and Duncan.

I was soon to see Stan Brakhage's films and meet him at Trinity College. A disciple of Maya Deren, Marie Mencken and others, Brakhage was creating a visionary cinema based on seeing with the apparatus of film – camera, viewers, splicers, etc. The early 1960s was a great and turbulent time in American avant-garde film, and in a short time, I also met Jack Smith. I had a private viewing of original roles of his great color film, *NORMAL LOVE* (1963). From Smith, I learned that film could have imaginative sets, costumes and make up without the crutch of story. I am still haunted by the beauty of those images. I was also to see the great films of Andy Warhol and watch an audience riot at Brandeis College, when his film, *BLOW JOB* (1964) was projected. They were rioting because, contrary to its title, the film *wasn't* pornographic, but an in-depth study in screen space, fantasy, acting, and duration. It is a black-and-white film, shot of a young man's face who, over several reels, was lit and framed so the slightest move would make a monumental difference in the screen space. The questions of what was the role and limit of performance, what was going on off-screen, and even if there was another actor outside the frame – those questions, embedded in Warhol's film, changed the way I saw film and thought about life.

Carolee Schneemann was another important influence. Her commitment to a radical rethinking of the erotic inspired me. I also read and became friends with P. Adams Sitney, and met Jonas Mekas, Gregory Markopolus, Peter Kubelka, Kenneth Anger and Robert Frank. I also felt the comradeship of a movement, where I could talk and argue with contemporaries like Sitney, Fred Camper, Andrew Meyers, Tom Chomont and George Landow. Later I got to know Dan Barnett, Marjorie Keller, Colleen Fitzgibbon and Bill Brand, who would become life long companions on the moving image highway! There are so many more I feel blessed by knowing during the forty and more years I've been making and seeing avant-garde film!

**KM:** *You are widely acknowledged as the master of 8mm film. Please discuss your use of small gauge film (regular-8mm and super-8 mm film) and your involvement with the materials of film.*

**SL:** When I started making films, I was aware that my interests were so unconventional that there was very little possibility of making any money. I did study 16mm documentary filmmaking at Boston University, but I found that regular-8mm film was a more compatible gauge for me. Andrew Meyers and George Landow had both made great films in regular-8mm, and Stan Brakhage was just starting his now famous 8mm *Songs* series. I had worked in regular-8mm as early as 1963, and I liked the ease and

mobility of the camera; the inexpensiveness of the film; and the unpretentiousness of a gauge mainly used for home movies. It seemed democratic and working class. It also allowed me to work in my tiny studio apartment. At the time, all the 8mm film cameras were silent, but I wasn't bothered in the beginning by the lack of sound. Later, in 1976, I was to get into "single system" super-8mm, which was one of the first small cameras you could buy, where you could shoot sync sound.

In exploring 8mm, I tried to use what many people saw as its disadvantages. In the 1960s, I shared with many other avant-garde filmmakers the view that the film screen is not a window into another world, but rather, that it is a flat space on which there might be a representation of three dimensions, or not. So for me, splice marks didn't destroy an illusion, but following Marie Mencken's *HURRY HURRY* or Brakhage's *DOG STAR MAN* (1964), they were part of the image, and a rhythmic and graphic element in the film. Like rivets or seams in a pair of jeans, they represented how the film was held together. Actually when I first saw Deren's *AT LAND*, I was struck by and loved both the silence and the visible splices. In some of my films, such as *NOTE TO PATI*, *NEW LEFT NOTE* and *THE BIG STICK*, because I was cutting such short pieces of film, the splice marks are made more prominent, and become a major element in the film image. I tried to use this carefully. There are also films of mine where the splice marks are not so prominent because I bury them in black frames, or I have fewer cuts or the cuts are made in camera. It's a choice! It's true, though, that because 8mm has a very small film frame, little pieces of dirt and emulsion become more prominent when they are projected than they would in 35mm. I tend to favor a rougher sound in music and in film image.

**KM:** *Can you please discuss your style of shooting, the jumpy takes, and the in-camera editing? Can you also discuss your editing strategies and how you splice frames or shots together?*

**SL:** Again, once one decides – as I did – that a film can have a meaning that is not conveyed by a world of narrative continuity, then one has to figure out what technical choices one is making. Since I would also claim to be a formalist, for each film the answer is different. In *NOTE TO COLLEEN* (1974), the title is preceded by an in-camera portrait of Marjorie Keller, who Colleen Fitzgibbon and I had been waiting for one evening in New York. I liked that it had a little portrait, shot in the "magic hour" light (just before sunset) and it had the feeling of arrival. Some time later, on Memorial Day weekend, I shot a street art show in Greenwich Village in New York. I had also shot footage of children, fighting on a lawn in a sunset, that was similar to the sunsets of the landscape paintings in the street art show, so I cut them together and recut the portrait, which I had filmed to reflect the choices made by the sidewalk portrait artist and myself. When looking through the camera, I often impose a grid on what I see, which in this case, allowed me to register the drawn figures with the photographed ones. The film's power comes from the difference between the "real" sunset that's filmed, and the sunset that's in the paintings, the "real" person sitting in front of the camera and the person we see in the drawing. And of course, none of them are real. It's all various forms of representation.

In *THE BIG STICK* (1967-73), I intercut footage drawn from two Charlie Chaplin films, *EASY STREET* and *IN THE PARK*, where Charlie is both a tramp and a cop. Even though these films are classic slapstick comedy, I wanted to explore their darker side – the representation of violence, repression and rage, socially and personally. By cutting faster than the eye can register individual figures, I was able to make a more ambiguous time/space reality than with traditional narrative continuity – one that was more about metamorphosis and one that directly subverted a binary moral/ethical universe. Gender and social roles become unfixed. *THE BIG STICK* allowed me to make a film with a matrix of questions and answers, rather than an essay affirming the social order of the status quo.

**KM:** *Please talk about NOTES OF AN EARLY FALL (1976), one of your first sound films.*

**SL:** Conceptually I always think that any series of film frames can be arranged in any order – not just a linear one. In *NOTES OF AN EARLY FALL*, I use long scenes that contain images of repetition and circular motion. Near the beginning of the film one sees a warped record (a deliberate pun) with a needle bouncing around it in an aleatory (chance or random) manner, and then later on there are the merry-go-rounds and images of bears pacing in their cages. There are also juxtapositions and montages of the kind found in Eisenstein's films – for example, a child looking at a merry-go-round through a fence is intercut with an image of the earth spinning, on TV.

There's been a lot of debate about montage over the years. I use montage to mean a form of editing goes beyond narrative continuity, so the cinematic structure is not about moving the viewer from one place to another. Instead, a variety of images are linked – poetically or intellectually – through association. Each image can be an idea, and the images are related in a visual way to indicate a continuity of thought. And of course, as in poetry, it's a kind of thinking that may or may not be conscious. So in that sequence of the little boy (who could be me) looking through the fence at the merry-go-round, which then cuts to the earth spinning, a caged bird, and the bears pacing around – he's not thinking to himself, oh, that's a metaphor for my life as an adult. And as viewers, we too are thinking and not thinking. Which is how poetry works.

*NOTES OF AN EARLY FALL* also explores the relationship between sound and vision, word and noise, and the role that sounds play in shaping space.

**KM:** *Your film, WHOLE NOTE (2000), is deeply personal, as a kind of eulogy to your father. Can you please describe its making?*

**SL:** In the spring and summer of 2000, my father was in the last days of his life. My brother and my aunts had elected to take care of him at home, and I was able to help them out by staying there from time to time. During this period, I made the silent, black-and-

white film, *WHOLE NOTE*. The title partly refers to a Hasidic saying from the Cabala, "Nothing is as whole as a broken heart." It also alludes to musical notation, as the film moves slowly and is largely made up of shots that are joined by overlap dissolves. There are shots of my father, dozing in front of the TV and playing cards with my aunts; and there are shots of my aunts and brother caring for my father. In the film's last few minutes, you also see my father at morning prayers, putting the *tefillim* on his arm and forehead. The putting on of the *tefillim* is one of the oldest Jewish domestic rituals there is. Every observant Jewish man does this daily. It is a particular duty to teach your son. My father struggles in the film to perform the ritual and read the prayers, as a conscious, unspoken gesture of our making this work together. In *WHOLE NOTE*, you see my father hands tremble – with age but also with congenital tremors. You also see the camera tremble, held by his son whose hands also shake with congenital tremors.

**KM:** *AUGUST MOON AN SEE (1997) seems like a gentle love note. Can you talk about it please?*

**SL:** I like your description of *AUGUST MOON AND SEE* as a gentle love note. I was attempting to make a portrait of a woman I barely knew but was very attracted to. The film is bracketed by shots of Nancy Goldin in my candle lit room with the full moon through the window. We were just getting to know each other and I was very much in love. There is a burst of sea birds in the long summer twilight, reflections of Nancy in pools of water in the sand, and long shots of her photographing the rocks at Singing Beach. Nancy is a great photographer, video maker and light artist. I didn't know her work well at this time, only her passion for it. The shots of Nancy are both concealing and revealing.

**KM:** *NEW LEFT NOTE – perhaps your best-know early film – is stridently political. It's both a document of antiwar activism in the late 1960s, and a diary of your own daily life. Can you give us the back story please?*

**SL:** I don't agree that that *NEW LEFT NOTE* is stridently political. *New Left Notes* was the name of the newsletter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). As the organization grew to become a major national student organization, *New Left Notes* became a mass organizing tool. Because of my ongoing film series, the *Notes*, I was always tuned into any use of the word, *note*, for inspiration. When I became the editor of *New Left Notes*, I knew I would have to use the name in a film. As editor for SDS, I was the vehicle for the organization. I was chosen partly because people knew I had no ambition to make the paper my means of self expression. They trusted me, I think correctly, to serve the organization. When it came to making a film, however, I wanted it to include things that were not appropriate for the paper.

My film, *NEW LEFT NOTE*, is not at all the kind of film SDS would have wanted made. It's not agitational. It's not trying to get people to take specific actions or change their opinions. One of the things included in it is an element of eroticism and physical

intimacy which I think should have been more present in the newspaper but was consciously excluded. The paper was also immediate, made for the “now,” whereas the film was made to be seen over time. It does include political thinking, as it is a conscious note-taking of what it was like to be part of the American New Left movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s (especially if you were me). The film also wound up being a love poem to Marjorie Keller, the main figure in it.

*NEW LEFT NOTE* includes footage from Boston, New Haven, Washington DC, and demonstrations around issues of war, racism and unemployment. Marjorie Keller and other activists are shown writing leaflets, passing them out, giving and listening to speeches, and traveling to demonstrations. There are also some moments of intimacy, some moments of boredom, and some of play. The film is cut formally. Images are associated by patterns of shape and color. Newsreel footage and TV reporting are intercut with footage of our daily lives as political activists in montages grounded in political and social history. Marjorie is seen at a zoo where the caged animals become icons of the social issues we were struggling with. The tints of the colors of the footage are associated with emotion and political iconography. Marjorie Keller asked the National Interim Committee of SDS, our governing body of which she was a member, whether my including shots of the moon with her as an element in these montages was sexist. They debated it and decided it wasn't, and passed a resolution that I should finish the film. If I had been there I would have pointed out that the moon does appear with images of women and owls. It is also intercut with the lunar landing.

Editing the film was an intense process of meditation. By the time I finished it in the mid 1970s, the war was over, the US had withdrawn from Vietnam, my relationship with Marjorie Keller had changed from the romantic to a deep friendship, and I couldn't afford to print the film. In the early 1980s, Marjorie used a grant she got for her own work to have Bill Brand/BB Optics transfer the film to 16mm (a labor of love since it had thousands of cement splices, many of which fell apart with age). So we were finally able to honor SDS's resolution although the organization had ceased to exist! One of the ways its political importance is shown is through all the images of the leading roles that women played in the New American Left.

**KM:** *Now let's talk about another film you made, BOPPING THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA BLUE (1981).*

**SL:** In 1979, Dan Barnett – a friend and colleague at Massachusetts College of Art – went on a tour of China with a group of art teachers. Before he left, he asked me what I wanted him to bring me back, and as I knew he was going to shoot super-8mm film, I just blurted out that I would give him a role of super-8mm film and I wanted shots of him bopping on the Great Wall. (The word, *bopping*, comes from *bebop*, a form of jazz.) Before he left, I had him shoot me doing my other part-time job which was delivering cakes to bars and restaurants, often driving down back alleys. For some unknown reason, as we were sitting, stuck in traffic, I looked at the tail light of car ahead and said, oh maybe, I'll cut this with the footage Dan brings back. So when Dan went to China and

brought back the footage, I intercut it with the shots of me delivering cakes; Dan editing film; Mai Cramer, a disc jockey, playing records; some footage from China; and some Newsreel of the lunar space walk. I cut the sound to the picture in a free jazz style, riffing on the jumps of space from Mai in my living room, down the alleys of Boston, out into space, and the footage from China. I was trying to make all the disparate spaces and times, shapes and sounds into a tune by playing and collaging as intensely as I could.

***KM:** Can you talk about the *LIGHT LICKS* series, which you began in 2000? I'm especially intrigued with the Jewish mystics who inspired you, and their practice of looking at a pool of water and reflections of passing clouds, as a meditative path to a higher state. You've turned your camera into a pool – a pool for catching light. Can you comment please?*

**SL:** *LIGHT LICKS* are a series of films which are made frame by frame, often by flooding the camera with enough light to spill beyond the gate into frames left unexposed. *LIGHT LICKS* are ecstatic flicker films, inspired by improvised music, particularly jazz, and by accounts of mystic visionary practice. In these works, I'm trying to make meaning out of light rhythms and inflections of shape that come out of interior of the camera, but are not usually used as the image.

All films have a basic on-and-off rhythm, according to the projector frame rate, and this on-and-off visual experience is what produces the persistence of vision that creates the illusion of moving pictures. In 35mm, this rhythm is almost always 24 frames per second. In my super-8 films, it is 18 frames per second. The alternating rhythm produces a state of trance in any film experience. Flicker films do this consciously.

You can inflect the rhythm by adding black, but you cannot add more light. So in these works, I'm trying to inflect light. Think about it rhythmically. I point the camera at a bright light, usually the sun. I take a single frame or two or three. The lens is unfocused and the aperture is open all the way. The frames thus exposed are clear, but some light floods beyond the gate and bounces around, making in-camera images, if I then click off some black frames for the light that's flooded beyond the gate to expose. The camera stock and how much I open the aperture and/or unfocus the lens also effects what the image looks like. It also matters how many frames I leave black, and how many I let be exposed directly. There are other techniques I use as well. I find this process meditative and engaging. I am hoping to create an experience for the viewer that is similarly entrancing.

I am aware that filmmaking is a visionary practice. I like very much your comment that I have turned my "camera into a pool – a pool for catching light." Mystics have reflected light as a catalyst for vision using crystal balls, candle flames or water drops. Jewish mystics, called "the riders of the chariot" in ancient times, would gather in circles and look down into pools of waters to have visions and ascents to heaven.



**KM:** *In your art, there is room for radical, political engagement on the one hand, and trancelike mysticism on the other. Can you talk about your work as a whole and the path it has taken?*

**SL:** Since I have been making films for over forty years and haven't stopped, it's a little hard for me to see it as a whole. Not only making, but also teaching and seeing other people's work, have been satisfying ways of engaging with the world. As I said, I am one of a group of people who see film as a paradigm for consciousness of the mind. In my case, it has been a useful way to figure out the world. Making films has been a way to explore and discover. I am not someone driven to tell stories or express myself. So, for example, making *THE BIG STICK* was a way to think through issues of the social violence, from domestic to war. I saw these issues as directly effecting me. It helped me come to terms with anger, and when anger was appropriate, and to become part of a movement for social change.

My filmmaking was most political in trying to see beyond the norms of social prescription. As a political activist, I found that talking and engaging in action to change things directly, was more important than making films with a political message – if political change was the goal. I also think that it is important to make art. If some of my films, like *NEW LEFT NOTE*, *NOTES AFTER LONG SILENCE*, or *DEPARTURE*, have overt references to political action, social change, and history, it is because of how much of a role political activism has played in my life.

My interest, as you term it, in trancelike mysticism grows out of reflecting on my own experience. Even though I am an atheist and a secularist, I find contemporary culture represses many aspects of our psychic life. Film – because of the flicker and the direct path of the eye to the central nervous system – is inherently involved in trance. The filmmakers I admire – Maya Deren, Harry Smith, Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage and Paul Sharits – all thought deeply about dream, trance, vision, magic and myth. I see film and art generally as the modern and appropriate heir to these aspects of human experience. I find organized religion and traditional narrative film embodying a trivialization of these experiences. The representation of what we see and how we put together the world in most movies, television and documentaries is way more limited than my seeing and hearing in my mind's eye. The films I am most interested in seeing or making are ecstatic and inclusive of the whole range human consciousness. I find reading the accounts of mystics close to my experience of making films because they are usually about engagement with processes of concentration and audio visual experience.

I find in avant-garde film a more real representation of the flow of mind. I feel lucky to be part of a global movement of visual thinkers who are blessed with the technology to exchange vision.