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“Cinema Cyanide” – an Experimental Sound Project from Ireland

06
FEB

CYANIDE IS THE WARMEST WORD

A short interview with Dean Kavanagh, Maximilian Le Cain and Rouzbeh Rashidi

One of the best kept secrets related to filmmaking in contemporary Ireland is the amazing ongoing work that a small and cohesive group of cinema people – mostly experimental filmmakers based between Cork and Dublin – has been doing there for some years, thanks to the support of some local institutions. Now for a foreign observer like me the impression is more or less the following: the similarity of their activities to the mechanisms of an autonomous community, where the practice of making movies – in all the phases, from filming to screening – seems less a simple business or technical matter and more a microcosm of social life, a shared ground of experiences for the multiple subjects involved, around the passions of their cinephilia and a strong sense of cinematic craftsmanship.

Three of them, namely **Dean Kavanagh** (<http://www.deankavanagh.com/>) , **Maximilian Le Cain** (<http://maximilianle Cain.com/>) and **Rouzbeh Rashidi** (<http://rouzbeh Rashidi.com/>) – talented filmmakers, different personalities with their own qualities (Rashidi founded the **Experimental Film Society** (<http://www.experimentalfilmsociety.com/p/about.html>) in 2000, and now through this entity they produce, promote and archive most of their works) – decided to expand their research into the field of music, and so created ‘**Cinema Cyanide** (<http://cinemacyanide.bandcamp.com/>)’, a collective of sorts that has currently released four albums, whose noise sound almost seems a surreal attempt at nemesis of ambient music’s logic.

I asked them some questions about this project...

Why such a title, Cinema Cyanide? What is the story behind it? In speaking of a musical project, the presence of the word ‘Cinema’ within the title may obviously suggest a proximity to the cinematic world somehow. In addition, ‘Cyanide’ may refer to an extreme condition, close to death. We are curious about what is behind this combination.

We prefer to look at words as objects at first and then as carriers of meaning in the second place. For Cinema Cyanide, obviously we are coming from cinema and we wanted to emphasize that important factor. The Cinema Cyanide albums developed organically from what we were doing in our filmmaking and are really a side-project of this. Therefore: 'Cinema'. As for 'Cyanide', we love this word. There is a fascinating chemical side to it and it can also be extremely aggressive. The last reason is that we really enjoy matched abbreviations such as CC.

CC as side-project suggests to us the second question: its link to the 'main project', namely your filmmaking. What are your viewpoints on this? My impression is that the link is both theoretical and practical.

In our films, the image/sound relationship is paramount. Perhaps like a chemical reaction: depending on what the balance of elements is in one, it will effect the other and ultimately the final outcome. It is a living relationship. CC came out of that, it has a very deep connection to our films because it grew from them and became something in itself. There is a biological bond between them...

The main influence of music on our work has been the awareness that, generally speaking, people's expectations of what music can be are far more advanced than what they are prepared to accept from moving image works. Music is allowed to function through an abstract emotional progression, using the power of elements such as mood and rhythm, approaching themes in a lyrical way, treating narrative obliquely or allusively, often very personally. Of course, this isn't always the case, but it is accepted that music can do this. With cinema, on the other hand, people expect hard narrative fact, the rules are far more literal: somehow audiences approach the moving image with a literalness that is very primitive compared to the way music is enjoyed. So we determined early on to make films and videos with the sort of creative prerogatives that musicians can take for granted.

And on the practical side?

We normally don't use much synch sound and create experimental soundscapes to accompany our images. Perhaps some of these could hold up as sound works in their own right, but it's always important to create a balance between sound and image. It's very easy for sound that's too forceful to drown out an image. For us, CC was simply an opportunity to see what would happen to the sound if it were freed from this tight relationship with image.

It should also perhaps be mentioned that in Ireland, it is sound artists and experimental musicians who seem to really understand and appreciate our work and ideas, rather than other filmmakers or even visual artists. This has led to a number of enriching collaborations, particularly in Cork where there is a strong sound scene.

Also, the rather 'underground' way we screen our works, presenting them in small venues and art spaces, has more in common with the way musicians put on gigs than film distribution.

Tell us something about the 'enriching collaborations' that you mention. Who are these sound artists and experimental musicians (Cork-based and not)?

Max is based in Cork, and has been collaborating with sound/performance artist Vicky Langan for the past four years, making an ongoing series of moving image works and co-curating the experimental music/film event Black Sun that ran from 2009 until 2013. Since last year, he has also been working with composer Karen Power on the expanded cinema project *Gorging Limpet*. There have been individual collaborations: Max with John Godfrey (of The Quiet Music Ensemble) and Paul Hegarty (who, as well as being a performer, is the author of *Noise/Music: A History*); Rouzbeh with Mick O'Shea, Cian Walsh, Zulfikar Filandra, Jason Marsh and Bijan Moosavi for number of his feature films and **Homo Sapiens Project** (<http://homosapiensproject.tumblr.com/>); Dean also with Vicky Langan.

There are also collaborations with institutions, right?

Mainly one, which is at the heart of this Cork connection, not just for us three but for the Experimental Film Society in general: our relationship with a wonderful artists' residency/performance space called **The Guesthouse** (<http://www.theguesthouse.ie/>). EFS has a long history of residencies, screenings and performances there. Its director, Mick O'Shea, has always been tremendously supportive and generous towards us. He is an important figure in Irish sound art and has worked to develop this field through The Guesthouse. So that's an important link.

In fact, it was thanks to a Guesthouse residency that our most recent and most important collaboration came about: the experimental science fiction feature film ***Forbidden Symmetries*** (<http://rouzbehshidi.com/news/?p=3523>), which we co-directed and acted in while spending three weeks there. This film is where you can see the trust and sense of being on the same wavelength that had become so apparent doing the albums really come to fruition. I think even we were taken aback by the weirdness and intensity of what emerged. Whether our collaboration continues through films or albums, or perhaps both, remains to be seen. But what is certain is that *Forbidden Symmetries* has taken it to a whole new level.

Gianluca Pulsoni

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