CINEMASCOPE #58

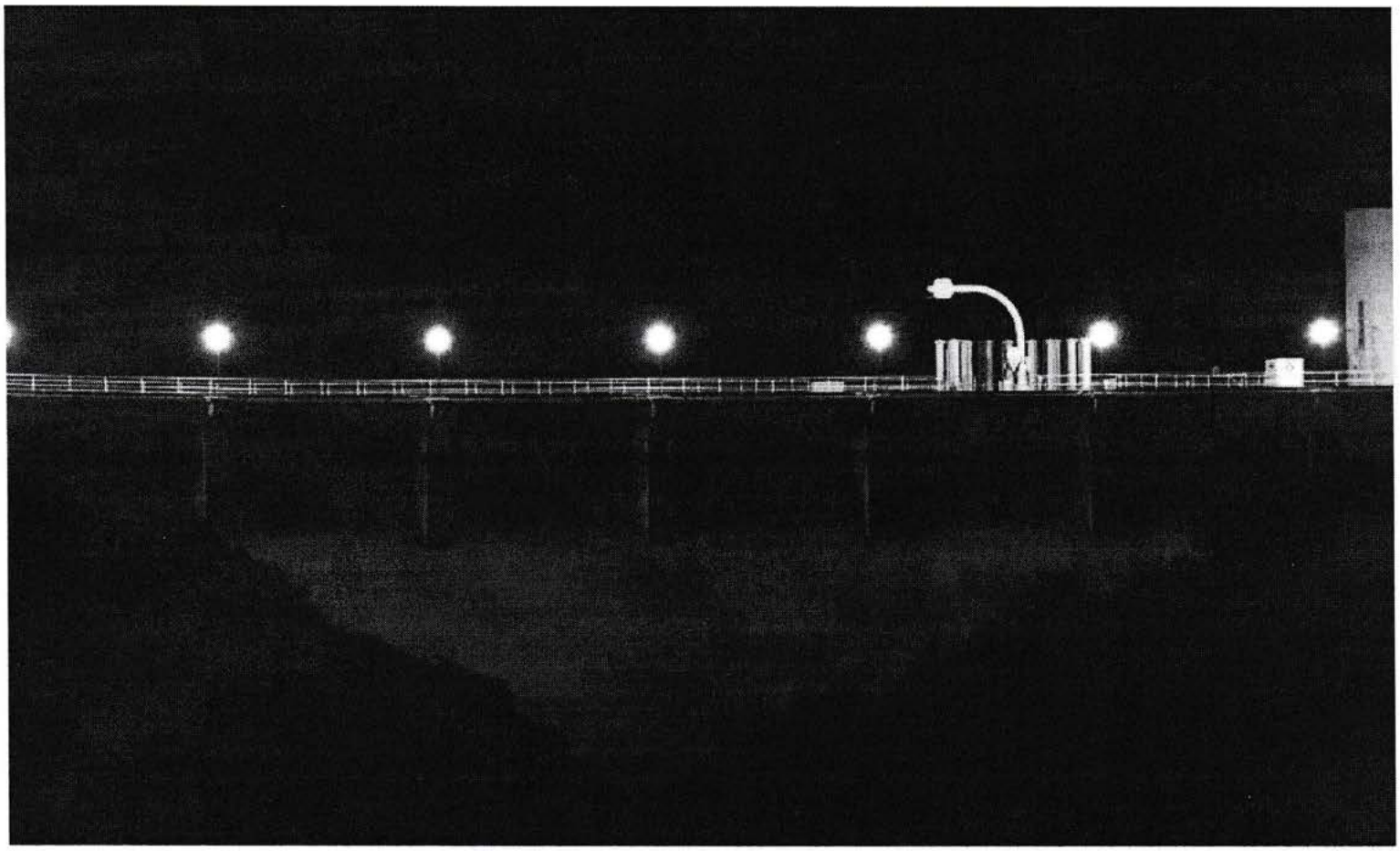
SITREPS

THE CINEMA OF JOHANN LURF

BY DANIEL KASMAN

I first encountered the work of Johann Lurf with a screening of the Austrian filmmaker's 2012 short *Reconnaissance* in the Wavelengths section of the Toronto International Film Festival, and viewing this oblique and ominous video in ignorance of the rest of Lurf's oeuvre I didn't quite know what to make of it. Resembling CCTV footage as shot by David Fincher, *Reconnaissance* is made up of a series of long shots of a massive concrete superstructure whose purpose, location and inhabitation (if any) remain undisclosed. The shots are so uncannily still, the images so empty of life and movement, that the behemoth takes on a solemn, unearthly gravity even as Lurf's manipulation of the zoom lens from shot to shot confounds the viewer's sense of scale: in some shots the building seems truly colossal, almost uncontainable by the frame; in others, an effect akin to tilt-shift photography makes it seem as if it were merely a toy playset, an impression Lurf accentuates at one point by tracking the camera ever so slightly. The overall effect is as if one were witnessing some shadowy, unseen presence playing with his (or her) spooky military-industrial miniatures, or as if the structure were about to spin about on an axis and reveal some Ken Adam-designed supervillain lair straight out of a Bond film—an unsettling impression that is only heightened by the program note's revelation that the site is in fact the Morris Reservoir in California, which was used for decades as a US Navy weapons-testing facility.

As was revealed by the Viennale's tribute program, *Reconnaissance* would be an apt title for every one of the films and videos in Lurf's decade-young career, and the retrospective provided an ideal occasion to study the intense specificity of each while creating a more comprehensive map of Lurf's allusive oeuvre. A structural miniaturist for our suspicious and cynical age, Lurf goes out into the world and observes from afar, gathers intelligence and retreats to the editing room to undertake a comparative analysis that is at once precise and cryptic. Akin to Cezanne's proto-Cubism in his numerous canvases depicting the Montagne Sainte-Victoire close to his home in Aix-en-Provence, Lurf takes a supposedly singular, solid, fundamental thing—a space or place, an entity or event—and refracts it through a multitude of differing views, a kind of semi-fragmentation of his subjects that hints at a multiplicity of the singular or, conversely, the singularity of a multitude.



Reconnaissance

Lurf's first video, the conceptually cute but experientially unsatisfying *(untitled)* (2003), extracts scenes from 12 different films—each of which contains a single gunshot—and gradually lays them out side by side in a grid pattern across the widescreen frame, until all 12 scenes are playing simultaneously and seemingly independently of each other. However, the starting points of the scenes have been so timed that the gunshot in each cracks simultaneously with all the others—a sudden, split-second alignment of these disparate sequences before they are once more dispersed along their respective narrative trajectories. Flattening, containing, and arranging each scene on a single widescreen plane, Lurf correspondingly reduces the organizing action of each to merely one angle of incidence on a single ur-action—a hypercubist fantasy that suggests that the immeasurable, ever-swelling sum of cinematic gunshots is but the same event viewed from different "angles" (i.e., films).

A linear analogue to *(untitled)*'s spatial juxtaposition, the tumultuous, 35mm *The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Lazy Dog* (2009) takes a single frame from several different films and reproduces them completely, sprocket holes and all. Lurf then runs the frames together sequentially to create a ruffling, rapid-fire three-minute montage that speeds by so quickly that any precise differentiation between the disparate sources is thwarted, creating the cognitive illusion of a vaguely discernible narrative movement (complete with opening titles and closing credits). Although not exactly reproducing the experience of viewing a single film in "fast forward," *Quick Brown Fox* effectively homogenizes *all* films—not only its own sources, but also a potentially limitless expanse of others—into a warp-speed metanarrative, as if proposing that, given enough vantage points (shots) and enough time (speed), one can simulate a fixed, stable view of a seemingly illimitable object, a kind of cinematic gestalt.

In *pan* (2005), Lurf simplifies this grand ambition into a tiny little visual poem. A 360-degree pan around a park is replicated three times and laid out as a triptych across the widescreen frame. The panel on the right begins playing first, followed after a slight pause by the middle, and then finally the left, the minute disjunctures between the independent but identical pans creating an illusory but serendipitous matching of colours, shapes and movement from one image to the next, as if the three panels were in fact a single, elongated shot. In *VERTIGO RUSH* (2007), a long-take showstopper to counterpose against the montage frenzy of *The Quick Brown Fox*, Lurf combines Hitchcock's oft-imitated dolly-zoom perspec-

tive trick from *Vertigo* (1958) with a time-lapse technique to create a series of pulsating, image-warping views of a light-dappled forest. Moving forward and back and zooming into and out of space as the camera's exposure times are increased with each successive shot, Lurf additionally times the tracks and zooms to fall into and out of sync, sometimes lurching, sometimes shuttling smoothly back and forth. Even as we remain confined within the camera's ceaselessly yo-yoing trajectory, the irregularity of the synchronization and the sensory derangement it creates gradually aggregate into an attempt to transcend that delimited space: Ernie Gehr going through *2001*'s Star Gate.

The "trick" or "gimmick"-like quality of these studiedly structuralist shorts is most pronounced in the dozen one-two punches that make up *12 Explosions* (2008), in which a nocturnal shot of an eerily still, unpopulated urban space (an underpass, a parking lot, a fenced side path) is followed by another of the same location from a different angle, the cut between the two views oriented around an explosion—suggesting both a fireworks display and a bombing—that occurs in the middle of each location. Sometimes the blast begins a few frames before the end of the first shot, leading directly into its completion in the second; sometimes the first shot plays out undisturbed and the edit occurs a micro-beat before the explosion goes off in the second shot, as if the cut itself had triggered the detonation. An eerie suggestion indeed, that the detached, analytic eye of the surveyor can in fact cause or create the events it espies, and in its conflation of clandestine yet seemingly objective observer and sinister, obscurely motivated actor, *12 Explosions* feels like something of a dry run for Lurf's more subtle and sophisticated treatment of that same dynamic in *Reconnaissance*.

Despite their respective frissons, *(untitled)*, *VERTIGO RUSH*, and *12 Explosions* are afflicted to varying degrees with one of the perennial problems of much structuralist cinema: the extended playing-out of a single (and perhaps overly neat) idea, often absent a more open dynamism or narrative through which systematic variation can become something greater. By contrast, Lurf's stronger shorts, such as *Reconnaissance*, *Endeavour* (2010), and his latest work *Picture Perfect Pyramid* (2013), feel less beholden to their originary concepts. *Endeavour*—a dizzying diptych made up of footage recorded during two launches of the space shuttle *Endeavour*, one during the day (with sound) and one at night (silent), each sequence cutting in nearly real time between the views of six separate cameras fixed to the shuttle's booster rockets—was, along with *VERTIGO RUSH*, the program's other sensory powerhouse, providing Lurf's structuralist concepts with a forceful

Far left: *A to A*
Left: *Picture Perfect Pyramid*
Bottom: *The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Lazy Dog*

and directional energy. While the sheer awesomeness of the original footage might seem to overpower any later manipulations, Lurf's staccato, real-time editing pattern between the camera views creates a unique cognitive collision: the action (the launch) retains its temporal linearity even as the space of that action (the views from the shuttle) is fragmented, creating an effect of diverging and overlapping temporal and spatial continuity. That fragmentation becomes literal when the booster rockets explosively separate from the shuttle halfway through each sequence, our already tentative comprehension of this overwhelming experience blasted into incoherence as the cameras, no longer held together on the same object, tumble madly through space, yielding some of the wildest images in all of Lurf's cinema.

Retaining the theme of surveillance and the imposing architecture of *Reconnaissance* but foregoing its predecessor's perceptual tricks, the 16mm *Picture Perfect Pyramid* presents 24 fixed-camera views of a strange, pyramidal building on the outskirts of Vienna—which, like such dubious structures as the Luxor Las Vegas and Pyongyang's Rugyong Hotel, gives the impression of some bizarre ancient monument nestled inappropriately within another civilization's modern landscape. Each shot is taken from a different vantage point one hour later over the course of a single day, presenting the monolith from two dozen differing angles, light conditions, and distances: sometimes it looms imposingly over its surroundings, sometimes only its extraterrestrial peak is visible above the surrounding foliage. Yet despite the multiplicity of perspectives, the day passes inexorably by, so Lurf's systematic surveillance is hardly complete by the time it reaches its temporal terminus, his attempt to truly "capture" this anomalous structure ultimately unfeasible.

As with *Endeavour* or the 2011 short *A to A (Kreis Wr.Neustadt)*—in which a camera mounted on a motorbike circles and re-circles a series of roundabouts, surveying their respective centerpieces (lawns, sculptures, billboards)—Lurf's seemingly comprehensive circumnavigation in *Picture Perfect Pyramid* is riddled with gaps, his terrain never fully reconnoitered. Given that much structuralist or faux-structuralist cinema can so often seem sealed in its own hermetic worlds, it's one of the special pleasures of Lurf's work that his narrow focus and strictly delimited conceptualism so generously allow for the incomplete, the uncontainable and the uncontrollable. Yet even as his films deny the possibility of perfect vision and comprehensive knowledge, they ennoble the efforts of the scout, the surveyor, the private eye, the covert op, the very precision and thoroughness of his reports only further attesting to the mysteries of our modern world.