

OffOn

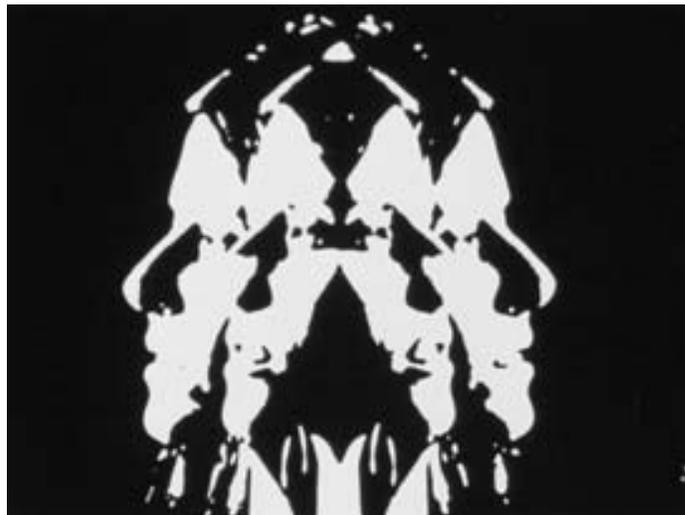
By Scott Simmon

From the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF) Treasures of the American Archives DVD program notes, by permission of NFPF and Scott Simmon

“OffOn” is a landmark avant-garde film, the first to fully merge video with film. Scott Bartlett’s goal was to “marry the technologies” so that neither would “show up separately from the whole.”

The production process also seamlessly married high tech with the hand tooled. In a borrowed Sacramento television studio, Bartlett fed through a telecine a selection of black-and-white, high-contrast 16mm film loops that he and Tom DeWitt had created for a multi-projector light show. Simultaneously Bartlett used a television camera to capture other film loops and portions of a light show rear-projected onto a screen. He mixed and superimposed these two video sources in real time, adding color and often oversaturating the image to give it a burned, halation effect, and filmed the results off a TV monitor (at 30 frames per second to eliminate flicker). This initial process took only three hours. He then optically printed much of this footage frame by frame, while also creating complementary images solely on film. Finally, to intensify the weaker colors of video, he painstakingly dyed the film strips with food coloring. “OffOn” thus also marries free improvisation to systematic craft.

In his mastery of optical printing, Scott Bartlett is heir to a personal avant-garde tradition seen at its origins in America with Watson and Webber’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” However, like those of other northern California filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s, Bartlett’s abstractions grew not from literary narratives but from natural images: faces, bodies, birds, landscapes. “OffOn” opens with a close-up of an eye and demands a new way of seeing. The pulsating visual rhythm implied by the title “OffOn” is reinforced by the hypnotic sound design, beating like an industrial heart. Inherent limitations of video are used to build an abstract pixelated pattern. What Bartlett found even more appealing about video was that it lent itself so much better than film to “metamorphoses,” to transitions from one state of being into another.



A frame enlargement from Scott Bartlett's OffOn. Courtesy National Film Preservation Foundation.

Scott Bartlett’s career as an independent filmmaker, university teacher, and special effects creator for mainstream features was cut short by his death in 1990 at forty-seven. Speaking in the 1960s at the time he made “OffOn,” his second film, he saw a technology on the horizon that would make his innovations simpler for future media artists: “With video plus computers you could do it even better,” he said of his imagery of metamorphosis. He encapsulated his career with deceptive modesty: “There’s a pattern in my film work that could be the pattern of a hundred thousand movies. It is simply to repeat and purify, repeat and synthesize, abstract, abstract, abstract.”

About the Preservation

“OffOn” was donated to the Pacific Film Archive by Scott Bartlett and preserved in 1999 through Treasures of American Film Archives funding. The PFA used an original Ektachrome print to match the film’s vibrant, non-naturalistic colors.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Scott Simmon is Professor of English at UC Davis. His books include The Films of D.W. Griffith (1993) and The Invention of the Western Film (2003). Simmon's informative essays have accompanied the NFPF Treasures DVDs as well as the Foundation's free online release of Orson Welles' recently discovered and preserved film "Too Much Johnson."