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A different angle on moving images—past, present, and future



The Sparrow Dream

By [Phil Coldiron](#) | March 18, 2023

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Signs of Progression

Phil Coldiron on Robert Beavers's *The Sparrow Dream*

The Sparrow Dream and Other Films by Robert Beavers screening Sunday, March 19 at Museum of the Moving Image's 2023 First Look festival.

A landscape, deep and wide, toned the flat yellow-blue unique to noonday on certain 16mm stocks. The valley below, dry fields strewn with low, shrubby trees, fills the foreground and middle distance; beyond this, a cooler palette of olive and teal as the earth rises in a range of hills and mountains. Shadows fall from the clouds overhead, creating calm pools of deeper greens. The camera attempts to match the scene's stillness, but falters—a subtle, handheld tremor, or maybe the wind, which we hear beneath birdsong, imposing itself on a light tripod. Such compositional scale is unusual in Robert Beavers's work; this opening shot lasts five seconds, just long enough for the viewer to notice two golden spires dotting its lower edge. Then the first of the many cuts to black which set the rhythm of *The Sparrow Dream*.

Beavers is a uniquely formal lyricist, and his films typically consist of the rhythmic analysis of a narrow band of content, spiraling out from a core of significant people or objects to examine their immediate environment. This structure extends beyond the individual films. In 2002, he completed the revision of nearly his entire extant work, 18 films, into a single cycle, *My Hand Outstretched to the Winged Distance and Sightless Measure*. In the two decades since, he has produced three longer films—*Pitcher of Color Light* (2007), *Listening to the Space in My Room* (2013), and *Sparrow*—and three shorter ones: *The Suppliant* (2010), *Among the Eucalyptuses* (2017), and *"Der Klang, die Welt"* (2018). *The Sparrow Dream*, his most recent work, and at 29 minutes among the longest he's ever made, draws together nearly all the themes and motifs elaborated across the previous five, and with its summary quality, suggests the completion of an as-yet-untitled second cycle.

The sound of wind and birds continues in darkness. With the rustle of a turning page, the image returns, an in-progress pan, adagio, curving left to right around the interior of a typical bohemian flat. While its surfaces are too charmingly cluttered to enumerate all the objects that appear in the course of this 20-second shot (one of the film's longest), a brief inventory would include: an odd rectangular structure in emerald ceramic tile, which appears to have a grated opening on one side; an electric lamp, hanging from one of these open grates and also rectangular, with a shade of saffron cloth; a framed painting or drawing, its image obscured by the light reflecting off its glass, as well as a number of framed photographs, more legible; a mirror (the camera appears to have been positioned in one of the few available places where it would not be caught); an armoire and two chests of drawers, in blonde wood; a scroll of Japanese text, pinned vertically; several cans of film; a table of pressed plywood bearing a MacBook, a paper attaché case, boxes of pills and prescription papers, and various other everyday items; an open window.

We might now think of the opening view as an epigraph and this panning study as an overture or introduction, setting the two-note pattern of landscape and domestic interior which Beavers will perform variations on across the rest of the film. With this established, the pace of the editing speeds considerably. For the next dozen shots, around 50 seconds in total, Beavers weaves between handheld close-ups on the turning pages of an illustrated Homer (the source of the earlier rustling); alternate views, both panning and still, of the same room; and exterior scenes in a birch forest, bright greens and white, in which we come to study the ruined columns of a stone structure.

This passage, with its alterations of movement and stillness on three levels—the content of a

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shot, the camerawork of a shot, and the montage—elaborates the harmonic structure of the film as a whole. Put in plainer terms, we quickly learn how to engage it formally, to see the logic in its balance of action and serenity, and to see how this logic allows for delightful surprises when it departs from our expectations. A cut in from a medium shot on the columns to a tight detail is all the more compelling for coming at the moment one expected to return to a whipping interior pan.

The subsequent passage, an early crescendo of 21 shots across nearly three minutes, introduces a kind of narrative relationship between and among images in which cause and effect occur at the level of association. (Despite the vast distance between their sensibilities, Beavers is, in this regard, one of the few peers of Armenian filmmaker Artavazd Pelechian.) So, for example, through an initial trio of shots which make use of classical narrative editing—establishing frame, close-up on relevant detail, then action—we see that the odd green structure in the apartment is, in fact, a ceramic furnace. This knowledge radiates in both directions. We're now retrospectively obliged to consider that what we earlier took for wind may have been the closely miked sound of fire; this free modulation of the elements remains a key theme.


Beavers continues here by cross-cutting between the growing fire and the shadow of a figure, cast on a dirt road, performing a number of simple actions—taking steps, raising an arm—with the ritual solemnity of modern dance. This sustained passage of parallel montage, which occasionally returns to previously seen images (the illustrated Homer, interior pans), suggests both that the sun resides in a small Berlin apartment and that a humble furnace sits in the heavens. With the exception of *Among the Eucalyptuses*, the films in the current cycle can all reasonably be described as portraits. Here, the subjects are Beavers himself, his mother (her second portrait, after *Pitcher*), and the filmmaker Ute Aurand, with whom Beavers lives in Berlin. It's the latter who is introduced via shadow in this passage; her profile, stern and high-browed, is striking enough that if one doesn't recognize her from shadow alone, they surely will when she returns in the flesh some minutes later.

With another cut to black four minutes into the film, Beavers introduces a final element: his own voice. "In one place, speaking of another. In one time, speaking of another," he says, even more solemn than Aurand's shadow. Then appears a brick-red armchair and ottoman, a worn icon of American middle-class comfort. The light is markedly different from the previous interior, a rich yellow, almost creamy, in contrast to the earlier flat white. The camera seems suddenly uncertain, tilting up and down as if unsure of the proper framing, debating whether the polished wood floor is relevant to the composition. Subtle foreshortening threatens to collapse the scene into a play of line and color: the dots on the furniture's fabric brought out by the off-white walls; the geometric pleasure of the play between a pair of vertical curtains and the stark horizontal of a baseboard heater (further complicated by the vertical line of what seems to be a cabinet running the length of the left edge, so close as to be rendered out of focus).

Viewers familiar with Beavers's work—specifically, those who have seen *Pitcher of Colored Light* will recognize that we have jumped from Berlin to the home of his mother near Cape Cod. As with Aurand, we encounter her first as an indirect image, the chair's faded armrests presaging the many shots of her hands which later appear. The overarching structure of *The Sparrow Dream* is now in place: it will spend its remaining 24 minutes studying these two locales, flowing between them more or less harmoniously, carried along by a passage of time which ranges from the shift of a shadow to the turn of the seasons. Given that its components are now largely accounted for—the only formal gesture missing is Beavers's signature move of "cutting" into and out of a shot by rotating the lens turret on his Bolex, drawing a curve of darkness over the image and allowing him to develop intricate visual rhythms; this will emerge in another minute or so, and remain dominant—I'll accept the chair's invitation to rest and reflect, pausing such strict adherence to the film's progression and turning to less immediate levels.

Returning to the idea of *Sparrow* as finely braided summary, a brief inventory of the motifs which it takes up from the previous films would include: the Germanic and the Northeastern, statues and monuments, gardens and apartments, music performed and recorded, and the appearance of age, to name only the most prominent. If a significant line can be drawn between the "early" Beavers (i.e., a period of work which ran from his 17th to 53rd years) and the "later," it is a softening or loosening of the bonds forging, as Ken Kelemen had it in the context of *From the Notebook of...*, "the identity of life process with film process." (I'm obliged to speak somewhat speculatively here, given that I've seen only a small portion of the work comprising the initial cycle.) While that identity has not been disavowed in his later films, its expression, the feedback mechanism by which art and sensibility shape one another, has grown more casual. His prodigious talent—the earliest material included in *Winged Distance* dates from around his 18th year—once seemed to aim for an almost inhuman perfection, a cold and shimmering logic of geometric form. But now his seriousness is worn with the offhand elegance of a man warm and inviting enough to make turning his microphone over to the audience gathered for a Q&A and requesting their opinions seem like an act of grace and generosity, as he did at least year's instance of the *Temenos* (for three decades, much of Beavers's time has been given to overseeing the restoration and presentation of *Eniaios*, the 80-hour life's work of his long-time partner, Gregory Markopoulos).

In Beavers's case, this shift is all the more remarkable because his formal signatures have

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stayed so squarely intact. He remains as rhythmically sophisticated as any filmmaker working today, his pans, tilts, and turret turns reliably syncopating into the gentle whorls of a genuinely new music. If the effects he now produces are somewhat less severe, it may be because he tends to order his films around humbler, less iconic objects of late. That is, we are now invited into the texture of lives in progress, rather than encountering their sediment in the form of built monuments. Historical significance is no longer a given.

Consider an extraordinary sequence, around a third of the way into the film, which begins with the camera beside a porch's recliner on which his mother rests. It sits roughly level with her waist, and shows her legs and red-sandaled feet, past which can be seen the cul-de-sac of the retirement community in which she resides. We can see five rather ugly cars, a number of trees and bushes, and an American flag. The camera tilts smoothly up one of these trees, the lens turning into place as it goes (rising from the bottom, it stops short of full alignment, leaving a slight curve across the top edge of the frame), and then back down. This rising and falling acts as a wave which carries us into a closer view of her feet, held for several beats before an inversion of the previous gesture—the lens now turning in the opposite direction as the camera tilts up—causes the image to blink shut. Beavers uses this blinking rhythm throughout the subsequent shots, which move first to his mother's left hand on the chair's arm, then to a pair of nurses attending to a resident at their car, then back to her feet, then to a woman in a wheelchair scooting herself across the road, and then, finally, back to the hand.

It's not difficult to see this flickering awareness as a classic instance of perspectival filmmaking, binding us close to the vision of his mother, almost always asleep. The clarity of these frames, the attention paid to signs of age on skin, make Whistler's famously cold portrait of his own mother look sentimental. And yet despite this intensity of form, the tone remains serene, almost childlike: "To be thinking of one place, while being in another, what does it mean? What holds it together? Is it like reading a book as a child, or like being read to while enjoying the images?" A son, aged himself, imagines how his mother sees herself at the same time he imagines how he used to see. "Traveling back and forth, reflecting," as he says at another point. While such language is useful for the critic trying to describe the film's intellectual and emotional tenor, these verbal comments feel redundant in their quasi-poetic statement of ideas and moods readily available within the film as a whole.

There is, however, one exception to this dynamic. He begins, as usual, against a black frame, "Sleep..." In the time of a dramatic pause, the image appears, a soft, indeterminate bundle, like a rumpled fleece blanket or a ruined stuffed animal—in any case, an object of gentle ruin—sitting on a dusty floor, a chiaroscuro still life in golden light. He continues, "...thought and memory." These words could be three relevant terms or an imperative sentence. His cadence renders it unclear, although the latter would be appropriate: an invitation to the appearance of a dream. This phrase is alone in being repeated exactly a second time. On this occasion, it introduces his mother's sleeping face. Our lives, inevitably, dissolve. Beavers's attention to the stark beauty of aging has allowed him to arrive at an appropriately memorial expression. 