

# SANCTUS: X-RATED X-RAYS

Motion Pictures by James Sibley Watson, Jr., M.D.; Sidney A. Weinberg; Stanley M. Rogoff, M.D.; & Raymond Gramiak, M.D.

by Barbara Hammer

In March of 1989 I attended a National Alliance of Media Arts Conference in Rochester, New York. One evening we were invited to the George Eastman House where Director Christopher Horak presented an evening of films from the archives. I saw, for the first time, *Fall of the House of Usher* (1929) by James Sibley Watson, Jr. and was astounded to find an American avant-garde filmmaker of the twenties who was so little known to me. The use of prisms, filters, sets, optical design without reliance on a narrative background furthered my interest in learning more about Watson and his work. Furthermore, Chris had mentioned x-ray film shot by Watson in his later years when he worked in the Department of Radiology at the University of Rochester Hospital.

The next day several filmmakers and I asked for a tour of the archives. As we were passing through shelves of film cans I saw several metallic cans labeled "Watson's X-Rays" on a shelf labeled "to be catalogued". I lifted the lid of one of the cans and saw that the film was 35mm. I very much wanted to see all of this footage on a screen. The desire to see what hasn't been seen or is forbidden to be seen has been a long-standing compulsion for me, even to the point of selecting the optical printer as a tool of choice, providing possibility for study of each individual film unit, the frame. Dr. Watson had a personal optical printer with a 70mm camera mounted on a lathe bed designed and constructed for his second film *Lot in Sodom*. When I saw that printer I knew I wanted to rework the original x-ray footage using my own optical printer.

Luckily for me I received the necessary consent to use the footage, as well as grant monies for the project. In September of 1990 I sat for three days in front of a 35mm flatbed and looked at can after silver can of medical and artistic moving x-rays. Some of the footage had not been seen in twenty years as determined by the antique cores from which I had to respool the footage before I could screen the nitrate film. I took short notes of the images describing interior organs with slow movements, side views of swallowing motions, fluids flowing through intestines, joint movements, and torso rotations. Then in a large can containing smaller rolls I found images of men shaving, playing instruments, someone putting on lipstick and another skeleton sensuously rubbing a hand over a face. There was a skeleton with a camera! Surely Dr. Watson had used the cinefluorographic processes of photographing the image formed by x-rays on a fluorographic screen for other than scientific purposes. I found some x-rays footage that recalled Moholy-Nagy's 16mm experiments of

light reflections of moving sculptures.

Still, Dr. Watson was not working alone and although credited as a person who could bring a team together, working successfully to the project's completion. He remains one of a group of men who worked together to discover and perfect the cinefluorographic process.

From my interviews with friends and family of the late Dr. Watson I began to piece together a recollected personality of the man. I could easily imagine that Dr. Watson photographed x-rays of himself during the late night sessions he worked at the hospital. I knew that Dr. Watson died of cancer of the prostate in 1982 at the age of 94, and that he was diagnosed with cancer of the kidney 25 years earlier. The uses and abuses of radioactivity, the slow and often incorrect nature of scientific information and the danger of working with unknowns came to inform my investigation.

I began to research the work of Marie and Pierre Curie and saw the debilitating effects of abnormally hardened fingertips and the slow, fatigue of what was undoubtedly radiation sickness working insidiously on Madame Curie, who believed in the harmless nature of her inquiries. I interviewed cancer patients who had both survived and been damaged by radiation. I turned to Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* and began to see the surface gaze of the visible and the invisible made visible as one of many possible constructions for medicine, but the unitary one selected by scientists and philosophers of the Western world.

The clinical x-rays shift in meaning according to the use of the medical gaze, a nineteenth century phenomenon that privileges pathological anatomy. Not only was the cinefluorographic process and the resulting x-rays not the result of one man's work, but also the manner in which the x-rays were "read" was limited to a more singular rather than multi-perceptual approach. In my "workings" of the footage by making multiple passes through the optical printer and electronic processing of the film image transferred to video as well as in juxtapositions of varied textual fragments within the image (medical, scientific, philosophical text), I am attempting through a language of multiplicity to raise a questioning voice addressed to the unitary concept of creation, as well as the epistemology of knowledge and the scientific method.

*Sanctus* will show at San Francisco Cinematheque on February 28, 1991  
and at Chicago Filmmakers' on March 29, 1991.