



Sightsurf and Brainwave

Blake Williams' *PROTOTYPE*

BY MICHAEL SICINSKI



Blake Williams is a multi-dimensional character. A writer whose work has frequently graced the pages of this magazine, he is also an academic and a film artist. And, as a filmmaker, he has no time for flatness. No filmmaker since Ken Jacobs has been so consistently committed to exploring the aesthetic potentials of 3D technology. From earlier works such as *Coorow-Latham Road* (2011), which played with the gentle space-warping effects of Google Maps' 360-degree cameras, to his suite of anaglyph films—*Many a Swan* (2012), *Baby Blue* (2013), *Red Capriccio* (2014), and *Something Horizontal* (2015)—the instability of screen space, and the points at which it encroaches into our own, has been one of Williams' driving concerns.

Leaving anaglyph behind in favour of polarized 3D technology, Williams has embarked on his first feature film. *PROTOTYPE* is a work of speculative fiction that takes its starting point from the 1900 hurricane that destroyed the town of Galveston, Texas. Galveston, a thriving port city at that time, never entirely recovered from the storm, and while it remains a popular resort location, one senses that it might have been a major US city—on par with New Orleans, and instead of Houston—had the hurricane taken a different path. From here, Williams explores the contem-

poraneous birth of cinema, counterfactually juxtaposing it with television, whose early arrival almost seems like the work of alien intervention.

PROTOTYPE begins with stereoscopic images from turn-of-the-century Galveston, including pictures taken in the wake of the hurricane. These introductory shots, with their shallow depth, soon give way to far richer, more abstract polarized imagery. In one key segment, a curling ocean wave seems to slowly emerge from the screen, although on close inspection it is actually concave, bent inward like a parchment scroll. One major motif of *PROTOTYPE* is a recurring image of television screens suspended in space, some broadcasting faint pictures from the 20th century, others simply emitting a cold blue-grey light. Eventually, Williams' film breaks apart into indistinct geometrical shapes in a kind of Russian Suprematist after-hours sign-off, until finally ending with an epilogue that re-establishes our most (stereo)typical ideas about the joys of sand and surf.

Wesley Morris has said that movies choose their moments, but that's not always the case. I first saw *PROTOTYPE* in a preview screening Williams held in late June. Later that summer, the film had its world premiere in Locarno. Alas, between then and its North American premiere at TIFF as part of the Wavelengths slate (where it met with universal praise), Hurricane Harvey devastated the Gulf Coast, submerging much of the greater Houston area. I live in Houston, and Blake, who now makes his home in Toronto, grew up here as well. Many streets, particularly in the poorer neighbourhoods, are still littered with debris from homes that have been mucked out, in what are assuredly total-loss situations. So although we don't discuss *PROTOTYPE*'s unanticipated new subtext at great length, it's something of which we are both acutely aware.

Cinema Scope: Why did you initially become interested in the material related to the Galveston hurricane?

Blake Williams: I always start my film projects by acquiring footage, based on certain possible projects that I have in mind. And I became aware of the fact that the house that my mother grew up in, in Fairchilds, Texas, was on the verge of collapse. It had been flooded several times, no one had been inside for months, the furniture was moulding, and it was all on the verge of folding in on itself. So I decided to go and film the house with a dual GoPro [3D parallax] set-up I'd made. I spent a day there filming in and around the house and parts of the village, and afterward I did a bit of Wiki-research into the community there, which is about an hour outside of Houston, towards Fort Bend County. So I was learning about the foundations of this village, the man who established it as a town, and the Mennonites who populated it until it was practically wiped clean by the hurricane that hit Galveston in 1900.

At the time, Galveston was the considered "the Queen City of the Gulf" and had the largest population in Texas, so it was also very devastating for the entire region and state. I was reading about the storm, its history, looking at images, and thinking what else was happening around that time, in 1900. Not only culturally or geographically, but also socially, technologically,

and so on. You had the transition into modernism, the development of cinema, the rise of the auto industry, and broader industrialization and globalization. So the storm itself became a kind of central foundation, an event that could be happening while the film was playing through.

Scope: So in a sense, the storm wipes the slate clean to prepare for modernity and these other changes?

Williams: I don't know if it's a matter of wiping the slate clean, but it represents the last of a certain way of life. Radio and wireless telegraphy were still in their infancy when that hurricane hit, which essentially is why a third of the city was killed. If it happened two years later, thousands of people would have been saved. So the storm itself is this matter of fact, something that couldn't have been prevented or stopped, but the technicity of that time was dependent on so many factors leading up it, and became this kind of failure to provide security and protection. Same thing with lighthouses, a few of which appear at a couple of different moments in *PROTOTYPE*. They can be thought of as proto-cinematic light projectors, but their purpose is to protect people and guide them to safety. And I became interested in this benevolence of technology.

Then I was also considering the art world, and the developments of modernism that were also already playing out. There are a number of shots in the film at the Musée Rodin in Paris, with Rodin of course being a key figure for the transition into modernist sculpture, and what would eventually happen with Dada and Surrealism and Futurism in the early 1900s. His work feels like some sort of calm before the storm of modernism, looking back at it now. But I guess these storms, literal and figural, are kinds of monoliths, or tentpoles that mark a time period and became ways of thinking about a time period within the context of an event or a person or movement. In some ways this is what's already happened for Texas and Harvey, which is this new monolith that stands over the summer of 2017. We start to think about other cultural events that were happening at that time as somehow related or in response to that.

Scope: So given 1900 and the storm as a "tentpole," how do you see television entering that orbit?

Williams: I wanted to have a way of depicting early cinema in a way that was at least, from our perspective, obviously factually incorrect—something that would look unfamiliar to us but also *somewhat* familiar. And I wanted to create this disjunction between where we're told the film is set in time and space, and break away from that in a very obvious way. Because I was thinking about early cinema, to have this device that would show motion pictures technologically in a way that was not historically accurate was a way to think in two places at once. The device is a virtual televisual object I created out of a 1959 Philco Predicta television. The shape of that object really embodies the aesthetics of the Atomic Era of industrial design, when people were really into the Space Age, the actual space race, and living in fear that earth was not such a safe place. Space became a place for possible escape in some way, from the threats of the Cold War. But also I quite like the shape, because it's an egglike object from which images almost "hatch" or are born.

Scope: And the images hover.

Williams: Yeah, they don't have a base, and they sit in front of one another without any sort of grounding. For us to look at these antique Philcos now, there's already something fantastical and retro about them, but also something futuristic. And they just become even more alien when they are depicting impossible images, these 3D video clips playing on CRT monitors, which never existed in our technological history, and objects seeming to come out *from* them and go *into* them in a three-dimensional way. They're displaying these images in an aesthetic that may evoke both nostalgia and confusion, because they appear to us in a way that we know is not a part of technological history. It sits just outside of what we sense and know to be technologically possible, and so it may feel uncanny.

Scope: You've spoken about *PROTOTYPE* as tracing an alternate technological history, as if other devices had appeared at different times, or become dominant.

Williams: It's a way of acknowledging this process of looking back at a time period, and projecting onto it a sensibility that's specific to where you are, and what is going on for you in your own era. This is part of what a lot of historians have been critiquing over the past few decades, this way of tracing a line from the event that you look at to yourself in a very determined and teleological way. Whereas now you have historians developing new ways of looking at the past, adopting Foucault's archaeology metaphor, following alternative paths that could have happened, but just *happened* to not happen. They follow whatever threads those questions might lead down. It's always conjecture.

But at the same time it's rooted in certain facts of what *did* happen. It might just be dealing with certain technologies that were experimented with but didn't take off, or certain films or shows that weren't popular, so they didn't become part of the canon that would influence other films. But if you can grab onto those objects that are buried by less careful historians, then you can imagine how the present might have been shaped by it. So, yes, having this televisual object is in a way kind of leading that moment in 1900 in a different direction. Inconclusively, but, still, somewhere else.

Scope: Your discussion about technologies that have been picked up and dropped at various points in history seems like a natural segue into talking about 3D. Could you maybe say a bit about how *PROTOTYPE* relates to your previous experiments in 3D, and how you perhaps see *PROTOTYPE* as relating to the history of 3D in film more generally?

Williams: Part of the appeal of 3D for me is that it's a kind of perpetual infant. It's always young and beginning, because it keeps repeating a similar cycle: it becomes popular, and almost as soon as it becomes popular it's fading out again—unlike sound, unlike colour, unlike CinemaScope, which all had their so-called “immature” modes where they're demonstrating their effects much more than being incorporated into a film's narrative. But with 3D, it seems that it always has to demonstrate itself to us in a very...I wouldn't say “immature” way, but in a very childlike way.

Scope: It's always a gimmick.

Williams: Or at least it's always an *attraction*, in the Tom Gunning sense. It's always easy to say it's not necessary, whereas that attitude goes away for other formats that are also usually not necessary. If you go to a colour film today, I don't think you'd ever come out of it saying, “that didn't need to be in colour,” even if it's not doing anything particularly interesting with colour. It's just kind of understood that it's in colour.

But 3D never became an institutional standard. So any time it comes it has to defend itself, justify its presence. “Did it need to be in 3D?” “Did the 3D enhance what was going on?” It's always new, so it's always subjected to medium-specific demands: “Do what a 2D movie can't do or go away.” But I like to think that when you're working with a format that's in this young mode, it just gives you more freedom to play, and discover things that haven't been done yet. If it had become popularized, and more people were working with the format, playing around with it, and developing it, there'd be less mystery surrounding what it can do and how our bodies respond to it.

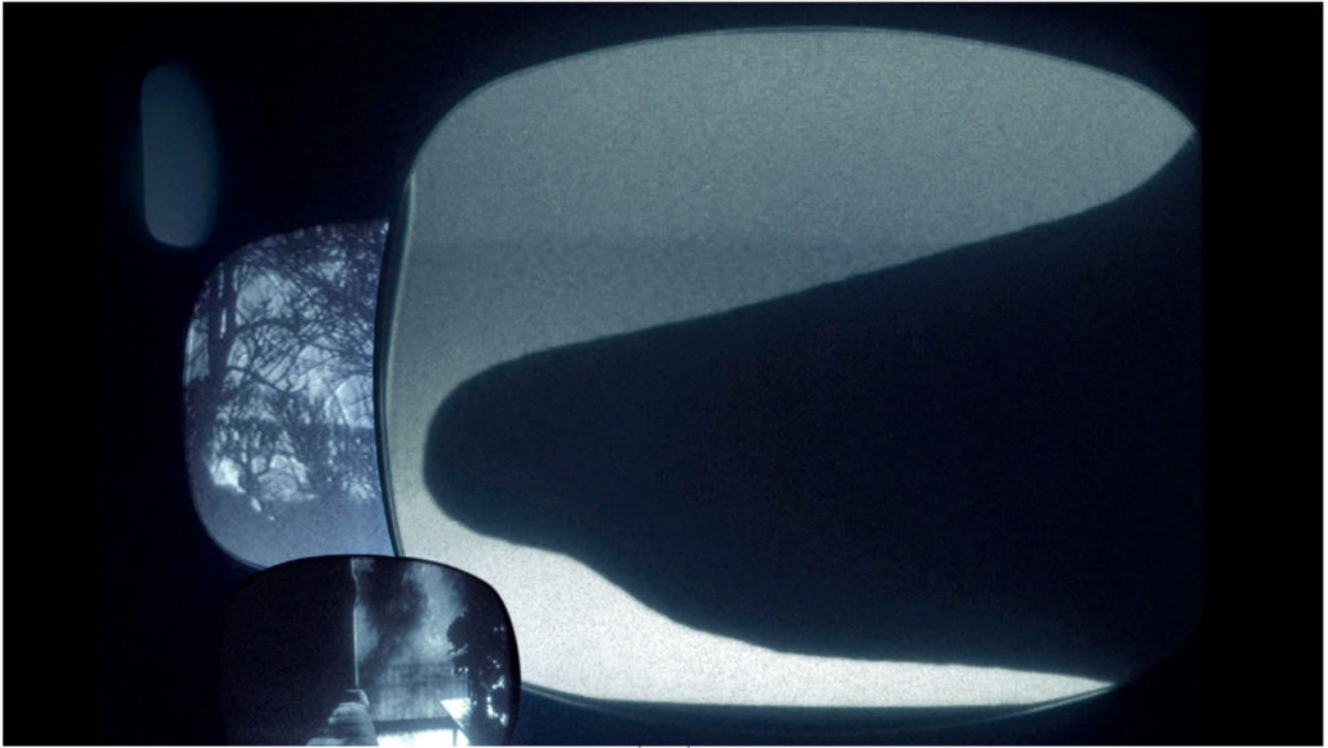
Scope: 3D doesn't quite have a vernacular yet.

Williams: Right. It seems like every new 3D film that comes out—or at least every artist's 3D film—does something totally unique and unexpected with the format. It was only three years ago that Godard's *Adieu au langage* (2014) had the cameras move away from each other and split the screen apart. That was totally radical and unheard of, but also an incredibly simple thing. Why did it take 70 years of 3D filmmaking for someone to finally do that? Moving the viewer's eyes around should have been one of first things we played with.

Scope: But most commercial films stick to the basics. Like how *Despicable Me 2* (2013) uses the end credits to have the Minions construct various 3D jokes, such as balancing a ladder and sending it out over the audience. It's not that far removed from SCTV's “3D House of Beef.” As you say, it's an attraction, and audiences paid extra for the ticket.

Williams: I think it's just because that's what people think they want from a 3D movie, until they're given that and then they complain about the format just being a gimmick. There have been studies of audience reactions, like targeted CinemaScores of 3D films, and positive scores are dependent on how much negative-parallax there is in a 3D film. So if the film has a lot of objects coming out at the screen and into the theatre space, the audience will have found value in that experience. But if it's a milder demonstration of it, or most of it is positive-parallax, folding into the screen, then audiences tend to be more critical and dissatisfied.

There were actually some early shorts that were shown at the beginning of the 1920s up through the '50s that they would play in conventions, these mini 3D demonstrations. There would be someone onscreen talking to the audience about how to properly put on their glasses, meanwhile poking various objects out at them. There were people firing guns, playing ping-pong and paddleball, baseball—a wild pitch that goes through the screen.



It's that momentary sense of danger you feel that was very unusual and exciting. Your body sees something flying at it and feels threatened, while your mind works to put that part of you at ease, reminding you that it's an illusion that can never actually reach you.

Scope: *PROTOTYPE* is your fifth film in 3D. Do you see it as a kind of culmination of the work you've been doing, or the start of a different kind of project?

Williams: It's hard for me to think of it as a culmination, even though I'm sure it is. I'm sure it reflects certain things that I learned while making the other shorts. It's also the first film that I made that's not in anaglyph. The short films were all made with the red and cyan filters of the anaglyph, so with each successive film I would film and edit in a way that was increasingly conscious of that format. Eventually it became part of the thematic material of the films.

But with every new film that I make I find myself actively avoiding repeating myself. Many artists and filmmakers, including many of my favourites, work in series, developing sometimes dozens of short films around a similar theme or subject. I have trouble imagining myself doing that, if only because I tend to exhaust certain visual ideas or themes within a single particular film to the point where I don't really feel like I have anything else to add. The films are crammed with every variation or tangent I could find.

PROTOTYPE is maybe the first of the 3D films I've made that didn't originate as a project that was self-reflexive about the film's 3D-ness. I was thinking less about the image than I was about time and historical narratives. Which isn't to say I didn't

always intend for it to be in 3D. I would say that I do seek out ideas and projects with the idea in mind that they will be in 3D, but I never really force the 3D-ness onto the idea once it finally comes. They always arrive kind of naturally as stereo projects. So far, anyway.

Scope: Right. *Many a Swan* is very much about the screen folding in and out. *Red Capriccio* is about the red and blue of anaglyph. *Baby Blue* seems to be in part about anaglyph's ghosting problem...I'm not so sure how I would characterize *Something Horizontal* within this framework.

Williams: *Something Horizontal* is a bit of a transitional film—I even made it in both anaglyph and polarized versions. With that one, I was getting away from the specificity of the anaglyph format. The main thing was trying to think about 3D images that were flashing across the screen for such a brief amount of time that our eyes wouldn't have enough time to bring the two images together into one. So as the images flicker by, your eyes are kind of dancing with it and never quite creating a stable 3D image for many parts of that movie.

That was the central phenomenon that I was thinking about when I was developing it, as well as also questioning narrative forms and the temporality of the narrative film experience. So there are these title cards, which I carried over into *PROTOTYPE*, that kind of suggest a temporal line of thinking, before and after, things moving on from one to the next, even though the actual subject matter is not really building in any sort of cumulative, temporal way.

Scope: Were the title cards ("Earlier," "And Then...," "Some weeks later") an homage to *Un chien andalou* (1929)?

Williams: When I did it in *Something Horizontal*, it wasn't a conscious homage to Buñuel, although I'd seen the film many times. But once someone mentioned that film to me, I was like, "Oh yeah, of course that's where I got it from!" In *PROTOTYPE*, though, the title cards definitely *are* a conscious homage, but to *Something Horizontal*.

Scope: If you're going to steal, steal from the best! But what you say about *Something Horizontal* is interesting. One of the things that I hadn't really thought about with respect to 3D is that the combination of the two images, in the eye and the mind, is a temporal experience. So you can slow that process down. You can pull that time apart.

Williams: It's funny, but that's precisely what James Cameron believes he was being very mindful of when he was making *Avatar* (2009)—slowing down the editing during certain action sequences. He didn't want this frustration of being presented with a 3D image and not being able to look at it long enough for it to become pleasurable to you *as* a 3D image, with depth that you could luxuriate in.

But at the same time, he's making a contemporary action film that's dependent on intensified continuity. And so he had to negotiate between having lower interaxial distances in his 3D when he was doing a more rapidly edited sequence versus the leisurely narrative pacing where he's a bit more indulgent with the depth perception that he's creating. Cameron talks a lot about not wanting to have the 3D onscreen for such a short time that our eyes couldn't put it together. So you could also think of *Something Horizontal* as a kind of reaction against that—an intentional breaking of that rule.

Scope: So when people like Cameron, Christopher Nolan, and the Wachowskis claim to be making big-budget experimental films, you're not buying it.

Williams: I don't have a negative reaction to them saying that. Within a certain blockbuster vernacular, they're probably doing some relatively radical or experimental things, and it's great that they're able to do some of the things they do for such large audiences. Nolan, for example, is playing with time in a way that's not *so* far off from how I think about time in my films—like with what he's done in *Dunkirk* and *Inception* (2010), creating narrative structures that bend and curlicue through timelines, or create a Russian doll effect. But there are obviously distinctions between what they do and what the avant-garde does, with regards to cause-and-effect tension, empathy, and the legibility of their images. I still need to see *Speed Racer* (2008) though, which I hear is just pure plastic imagery.

Scope: Oh, it's something. Now, I wanted to loop back to your discussion of research and how it fed into *PROTOTYPE*. You're a critic and a scholar as well as an artist, and I was wondering if you saw the film as related to your pursuits as a writer and researcher.

Williams: I'm writing my dissertation on contemporary experimental stereo films, so I've been thinking about what other practitioners are doing with the medium recently. I'm looking

at the differences between how industry filmmakers are using it and how experimental filmmakers are working with the format. So that of course includes Ken Jacobs, but also Jodie Mack's prismatic film, certain Chromadepth films, and trying to figure out a way to find a commonality among them.

One thing that I think is unique to these filmmakers who are working with 3D, myself included, is a kind of reaction against the ostensible hapticity of 3D imagery. I'm interested in and also suspicious of the idea of haptic visuality, the kind that builds off, for example, what Laura Marks was talking about in her discussion of "intercultural cinema," that's situated by close-ups and the video image—how you aren't just gazing at the film but you're *grazing* it with your eyes. So it's the difference between looking at something from a distance and seeing the form, versus being put into some form of contact with the texture of that form, and actually feeling like you're touching while seeing. It's talking about a certain kind of embodiment with films, creating this bodily experience where you feel yourself *in* your body. You get this with *Gravity* (2013), and even with *Avatar*, a film that's narratively structured around someone having their consciousness placed in another, alien body.

But the stereo experimental films I'm studying are doing something different. A lot of these films, including *PROTOTYPE*, are removing the sensation of even *having* a body at all. They form a direct link from the film's consciousness to the viewer's. I don't have a sense of embodiment when I experience these films. Looking and my experience of time become a kind of matter that is able to scatter and be a bit more free-floating and uncontained. This sensation, though maybe that's the wrong word to use, comes up in the relatively abstract second half of *PROTOTYPE*. You have this experience of losing your sense of the objects and forms that you're looking at from a distance, and you become not so much immersed in a space or time, not just a mode of vision, but in this arena of matter that is coming into you and folding around you. And the sense is that there is no distinction in this moment between here and there, inside and outside.

I think you get this with a lot of contemporary 3D because the effect is not so much on the screen. A lot of it is in the glasses, or in your own head. So like with Ken Jacobs and *Eternalism* or with his "Cross-Eyed Views," there's no actual 3D effect on the screen. Your brain pulls the illusion out of itself. And this is also my fascination with the "split" shot from *Adieu au langage*. Our binocular vision of the world is disrupted in this moment, and our mind has to begin processing the world in a way that's outside of an able-bodied person's view of the world. How we see in that moment and how our bodies are built to see are incompatible, and so they separate. So I feel like it's a lot more about having the film experience not be a kind of shape or object that is before you in a sculptural way, but actually something that kind of moves into your system and places you outside of yourself. It's a way of no longer having a sense of where your skin ends and the rest of the world begins.