Pablo Ferro

Pablo Ferro (b. 1935, Antilla, Oriente Province, Cuba) is the creator of some of most famous movie titles and editorial innovations in film history. Collaborating with directors such as Stanley Kubrick, Norman Jewison, Hal Ashby, and Gus Van Sant, he pioneered the quick-cut edit—used extensively today in advertising and film—and introduced the use of multiple screens to mainstream cinema. In a rare interview Ferro discusses the origins of his radical techniques and what it took to survive four decades as an art director and designer in Hollywood.

Doug:
Pablo, we're sitting here in your house looking at hundreds of storyboards on your walls. I can pretty much look at any of these sequences of images and get a feeling for each film. It seems like the unifying idea behind your work is to compress narratives down to their essences. You can really see this in the title sequences you did for Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb *(1964),* The Thomas Crown Affair *(1968),* Bullitt *(1968), and* To Die For *(1995). In* Dr. Strangelove, *for instance, how did you and Stanley Kubrick come up with the idea for the famous "mating" scene, where the B-52s are being refueled?*

Pablo:
Stanley asked me what I thought about being on set in general, and I told him, the one thing I find interesting is that every mechanical model that's being made for the movie is turning out to be sexual.

Doug:
Sexual?

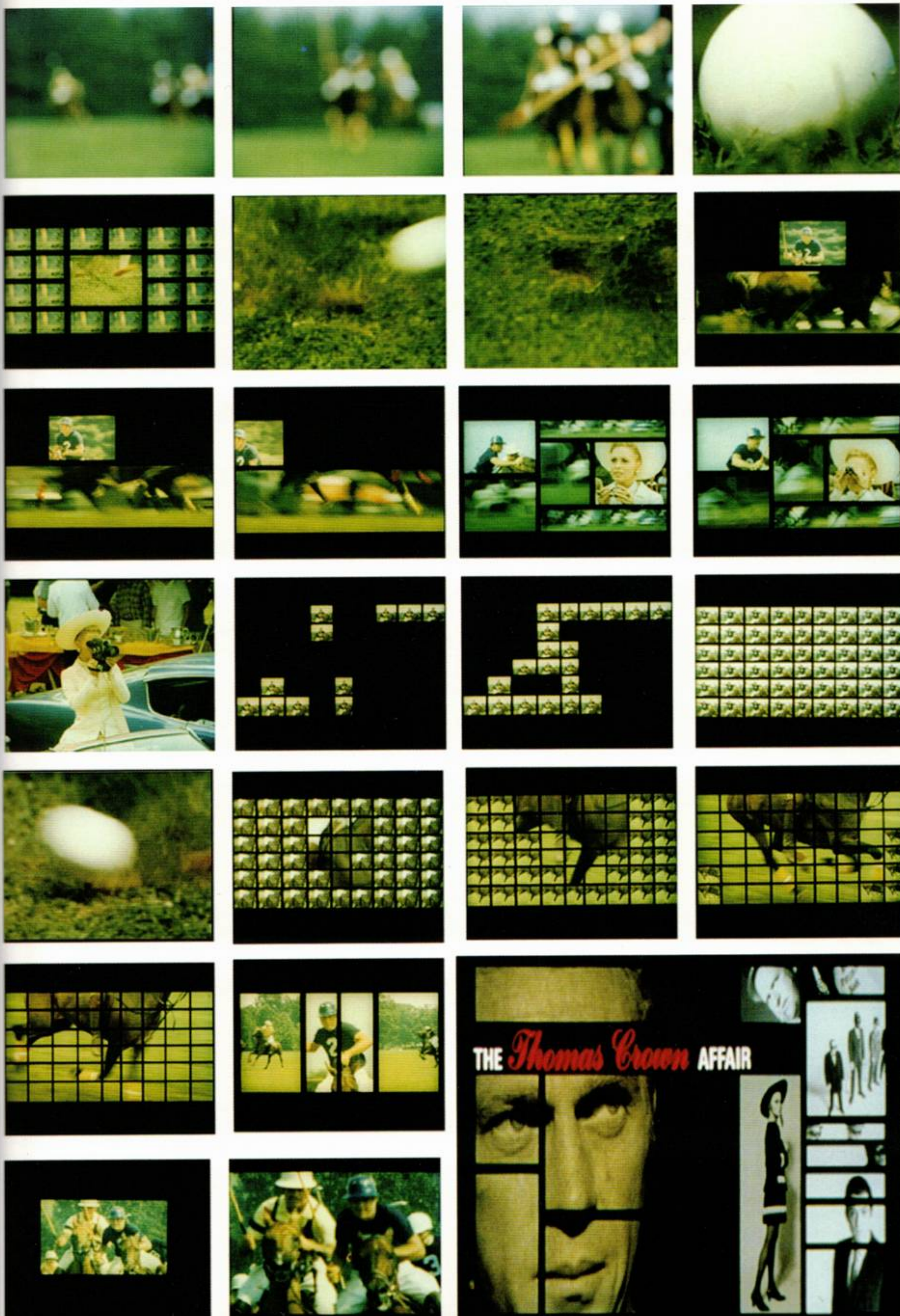
Pablo:
Yeah. There's always something going in and out. You know, in *Dr. Strangelove* it's everywhere. And we looked at each other and said, "We're doing a movie with B-52s refueling in midair!" You know?

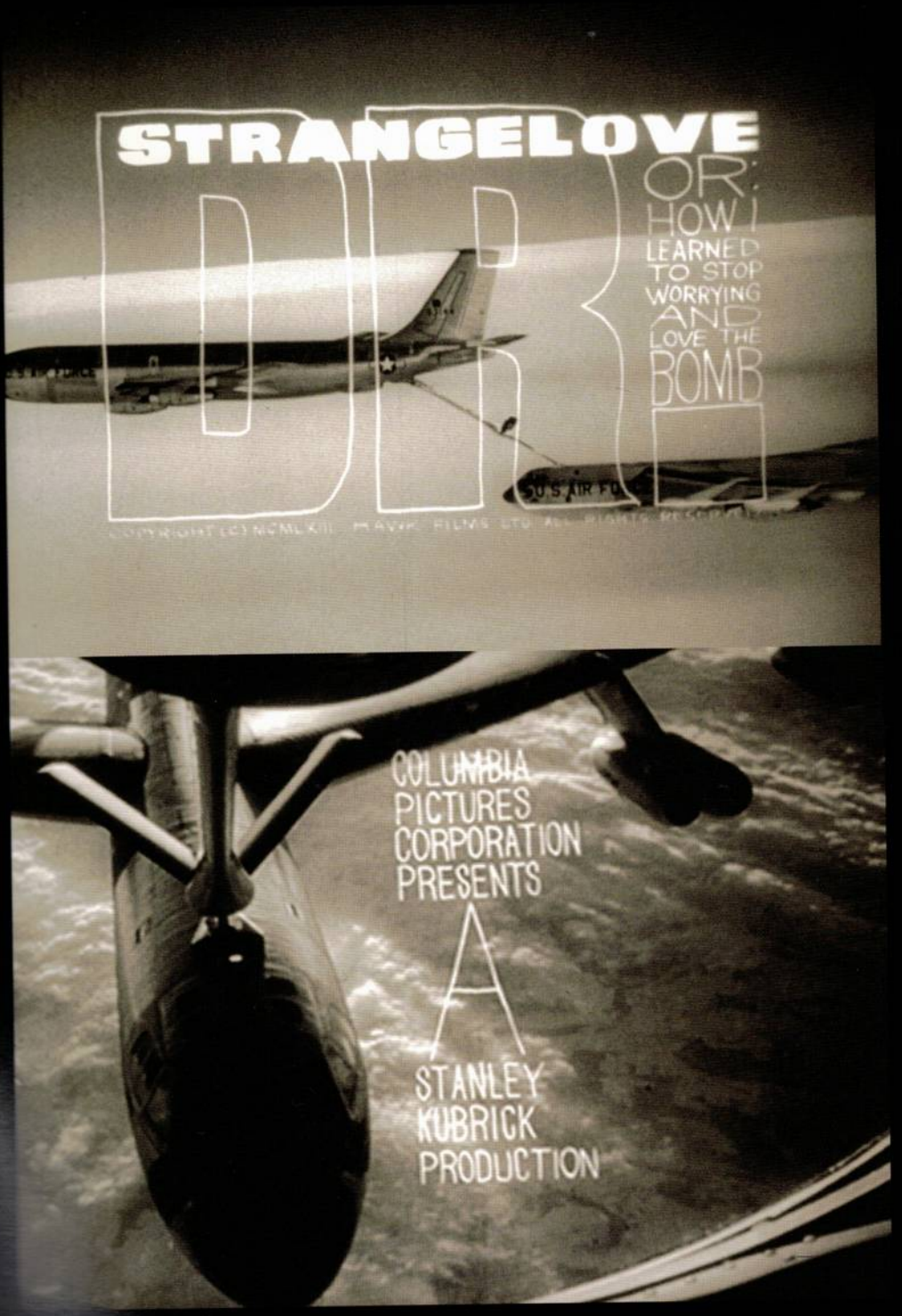
Doug:
How much more sexual can you get?

Pablo:
Yeah! And I still feel that way. I saw it and Stanley saw it. Stanley got so excited about the idea. So when I finished cutting the montage for the title sequence, he came up with the idea to use the instrumental music track "Try A Little Tenderness" along with it. We put it together and it worked. The track was meant for it. It fit just like a glove. One or two adjustments had to be made, but everything else—Boom! —was right on. We couldn't believe it.

Doug:
You made hundreds of edits for this montage, which makes me really surprised to hear that you did the editing without having any music as a guide. Do you normally edit without sound?

THIS CONVERSATION TOOK PLACE IN SAN FERNANDO, CALIFORNIA.


THE Thomas Crown AFFAIR


STRANGELOVE
OR:
HOW I
LEARNED
TO STOP
WORRYING
AND
LOVE THE
BOMB
COLUMBIA
PICTURES
CORPORATION
PRESENTS
A
STANLEY
KUBRICK
PRODUCTION

Pablo:
I do. It gives you a chance to take things out that are unimportant. I always have my own version in my head. That's why I'm able to edit without sound. Some editors hear that and they go crazy. They say, "What do you mean? You don't know what you're doing?" No, I know what I'm doing. After I'm done I say, "OK, let's put a piece of music in there," and the thing works. The train of thought that you need to follow is there. The music can't get you there. You can't depend on that, otherwise you become crippled. It has to stand on its own like it belongs together.

Doug:
When you made those titles for Dr. Strangelove, *movie title sequences had only been around since 1954, the year Saul Bass did the titles for Otto Preminger's* Carmen Jones. *The titling for* Dr. Strangelove *is handwritten, something no one had done before. How did this come about?*

Pablo:
We were trying to put titles over a certain shot of the planes and it wasn't working. You didn't know whether to watch the titles or the film. So I thought, why don't I do my handwriting thing. We put it in and it was great. The whole thing worked. I had always fooled around with it, but nobody accepted it. Stanley was the only person who ever accepted it.

Doug:
I love the layering of the text over the images. The line quality of your handwriting makes me think of Saul Steinberg's work or some of Warhol's early illustrations.

Pablo:
Yeah, well, you have to thank Stanley for that. He forced me to do it that way. I wanted to clean it up. I did it on tracing paper so I'd be accurate with the people's names. And, of course, when you do it on thin tracing paper with ink, it will wrinkle. But I showed it to him anyway and he loved it. He said, "Oh, yeah, that's what I want," and I said, "You got it."

Doug:
It sounds like a lot of what you did happened through trial and error.

Pablo:
Right. Those are things you need to solve a problem. You have to come up with something very unorthodox. There's no such thing as bad footage, just a bad idea.

Doug:
So how do you usually approach your projects?

Pablo:
I don't think about the problem, I just think of an idea and I let it tell me what to do. Necessity is always the best solution. It's amazing—you can do lots with an idea after it's formed. Very important, storytelling and all that, but I've spent a lot of time in the cutting room. When I first had my own production company in the 1960s, I did everything, so I see things differently than other people.

Doug:
Were the quick cuts that you pioneered in TV commercials in the 1950s and the film titles and trailers you did in the 1960s a way of condensing information, or were you trying to create a different experience of the moving image?

Pablo:
I started using quick cuts as a way to make people remember something. I told the commercial agencies, "No, you guys are doing it all wrong. By making it seem longer, you think that people will remember more." You could hardly remember what you saw when it was all together, especially if you were seeing it only once. So I told them they had to do the opposite. It's about turning something really big into something really simple.

Doug:
The irony is that this often takes longer because you're making more edits overall. When it's so short, you can't even consider packing in more scenes. Rather, you have to come up with triggers for memories or emotions by way of the edit. It has to be something that's simple so it will cut deep into the subconscious. But it is amazing too because one of your works might be only thirty seconds long.

Pablo:
Or ten seconds!

Doug:
It seems that you were really able to run with your natural instinct for compression in the trailers you made, like the one for Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange *(1971), where you edited a two-hour feature down to sixty seconds. You were basically turning the whole story into a high-speed strobe light of images.*

Pablo:
I remember Stanley saying, "Pablo, this looks better than the movie," and I said, "No, this is the movie!" He loved it so much, he used it for everything.

Doug:
I remember feeling very liberated when I saw it. The quick cuts were an incredible revelation—the way the images are fragmented yet still so powerfully communicative of an idea and a feeling. I felt that way about your title sequence for Woman of Straw *(1964) too, where you used high contrast photographs and color changes to create a moving-image portrait of the main character.*

Pablo:
I did the same thing for Gus Van Sant in *To Die For.* I went into Nicole Kidman's eye in these faux press photographs we made, then kept zooming into her eye in increments so the dot matrix got smaller and smaller and smaller, eventually dissolving into specks. I wanted to keep you on your toes!

Doug:
It worked! My toes were very sore after watching those scenes. Tell me, what were you thinking about when you made these experimental sequences?


WELCOME!!


GINA LOLLOBR
SEAN CONNER
RALPH RICHAR
MICHAEL RELPH AND BASIL DEA
PRODUCTION
WOMAN OF STRAW
WOMAN OF STRAW
WOMAN OF STRAW
WOMAN OF STRAW
ALEXANDER KNOX
JOHNNY SEKKA
LAURENCE HARDY
PETER MADDEN
DANNY DANIELS
NOEL HOWLETT
ROBERT MULLER
STANLEY MANN
SINFONIA OF LONDON
MUIR MATHESON
KEN ADAM
DIOR

Pablo:
You see, you suffer. At first most clients don't think it's going to work. But if you talked to Stanley Kubrick or Hal Ashby or people like that, you didn't get that reaction. They'd say, "Okay, so how do you think you're going to do it?" instead of saying, "Hey, get out of here. You're fired."

Doug:
What kind of content do you look for when you're working on a project?

Pablo:
With everybody it's different. When I did the title sequence for Steve McQueen in *Bullitt*, I took a photograph and cut out the word "Bullitt" so you could see through the letters—an idea that we ended up using in the title sequence where each name is gradually cut away to reveal a new scene underneath. I remember bringing the photograph right up to Steve's face to show him and hearing him say, "I love it! Let's do it!" He was really open. He was an angel, that was great. You see, I've done that with other people and gotten kicked out!

Doug:
You're not only known for your title sequences and quick cuts, you're also known as one of the first to experiment with split screens. What made you want to multiply the number of screens?

Pablo:
I've always been fascinated by magazine layouts. I like seeing all those pictures together you find in *Vogue*, *Life*, *Pose*, and all that. I thought that was so interesting and I wondered if I could translate that into film. I wanted to do a multiple but a different kind of multiple. For the film about the Singer Corporation that I did for the 1964 World's Fair in New York, I used two film projectors, each projecting twelve individual images at once so it looked like different screens. I did that for a commercial that year too. I laid it out on-screen using six multiples.

Doug:
What was being advertised?

Pablo:
Beechnut Gum.

Doug:
So, a split-screen chewing gum commercial? How do you guide the viewer through so much information in such a short period of time?

Pablo:
You have to design it with the right composition and movement so your eyes go to the right place, otherwise you don't know where to look. You have to tell the viewer.

Doug:
Was it at the 1964 World's Fair that Norman Jewison saw your work before directing The Thomas Crown Affair *in 1968?*

Pablo:
No, Norman Jewison and Hal Ashby, who was the editor of *Thomas Crown*, saw something similar at the Expo 67 in Montreal, but they couldn't afford the guy. That was the first time Jewison had seen that technique, but I'd already been doing it. Hal told him, "Look, Norman, you want to do some split screens, Pablo's done that already. They're copying Pablo." Norman was shocked. I showed him what I'd done and got the job to do all the multiples throughout the movie. When I had finished doing all the split screens, though, the film ended up being too long. I was like, "Oh, fuck," and Hal said, "Wait a minute, what are you talking about? Treat the multiples like they're rushes. Don't get rid of them, cut them up." So I took the multiples and did quick edits with them. To show off, I took the six-minute polo sequence and I made it into forty seconds. It blew them away. Then Hal said "That's amazing, but can you make it longer?"

Doug:
Clients!

Pablo:
I know! The multiple screens saved the movie. It put everything into perspective. It wasn't just another movie with pretty clothes. It made it something else. It makes something very complicated look easy and simple.

Doug:
It's a spectacular effect. Even though there were people using multiple screens before you—like Abel Gance for his Napoleon *in 1927, Charles and Ray Eames for their seven-screen film installation* Glimpses of the USA *at the 1959 Moscow World's Fair, and in underground films like Warhol's* Chelsea Girls *(1966) which used two screens*—Thomas Crown *takes it to an entirely different level. You used multiple frames on one single screen. No one had used this in a feature film before. Even Michael Wadleigh later used split screens in his documentary film* Woodstock *(1970). And you can still see its influence today in the mainstream television show* 24, *which uses split screens regularly.*

Pablo:
Everybody wanted to see the film when it came out. You know, everybody copied from *The Thomas Crown Affair.*

Doug:
To me, what really sets Thomas Crown *apart from these other films is the way the split screens exponentially expand the story at the same time that they compress the sequences of the images. It's not just about showing events simultaneously. It's that you've created a way to communicate psychological and emotional three-dimensionality. When I first saw it, I remember being really surprised to see split screens used in a mainstream film.*

Pablo:
Yeah, it's amazing when people are out there on the edge like Jewison was. He would go for anything. He'd say, "Get me out of this corner. They got me cornered, Pablo." Hal helped him a lot too.

Doug:
At the same time that you were making your work in the 1960s, there was a whole psychedelic movement going on in graphic art. There was the psychedelic poster art of people like Victor Moscoso, Rick Griffin, and the Kelly/Mouse Studios, who were all using electric colors and dense compositions full of as many references as possible. They represented a side of visual culture in the 1960s that was very maximal. But your work is almost minimal by comparison, trimming things back to the core ideas.

IT'S ABOUT AN EMOTION YOU GIVE OUT. AFTER DEALING WITH A LOT OF IMAGES, YOU KNOW WHICH ONES THEY ARE. YOU CAN FEEL IT

Pablo:
That's why I like René Magritte. He influenced me that way.

Doug:
Who else?

Pablo:
Jean Cocteau. *The Blood of a Poet* (1930), *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), *Orpheus* (1949)—all those amazing films.

Doug:
You were born in Cuba, then moved to New York City when you were twelve. It must have been a huge change to suddenly be inundated with American pop culture. What would you say were your early influences?

Pablo:
In high school I got this book called *Animation: How to Draw Animated Cartoons* (1942) by Preston Blair, who animated the segments "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" and "Dance of the Hours" in *Fantasia* (1940). I drew all the time in school, and I was an usher then too in a foreign film theater on Forty-Second Street and I saw a lot of classics, so I was influenced by that also. Then I got a job from the legendary Stan Lee, who was an editor at Atlas Comics before it became Marvel Comics. I took the money from that job, bought a camera that took single frames, and started animating.

Doug:
Do you think animation changed how you approach film?

Pablo:
When you do animation, you know each of the twenty-four frames per minute. You know how time changes and what kind of speed you need. That's what led me to do the quick cut, actually. I was really interested in the process. And animation

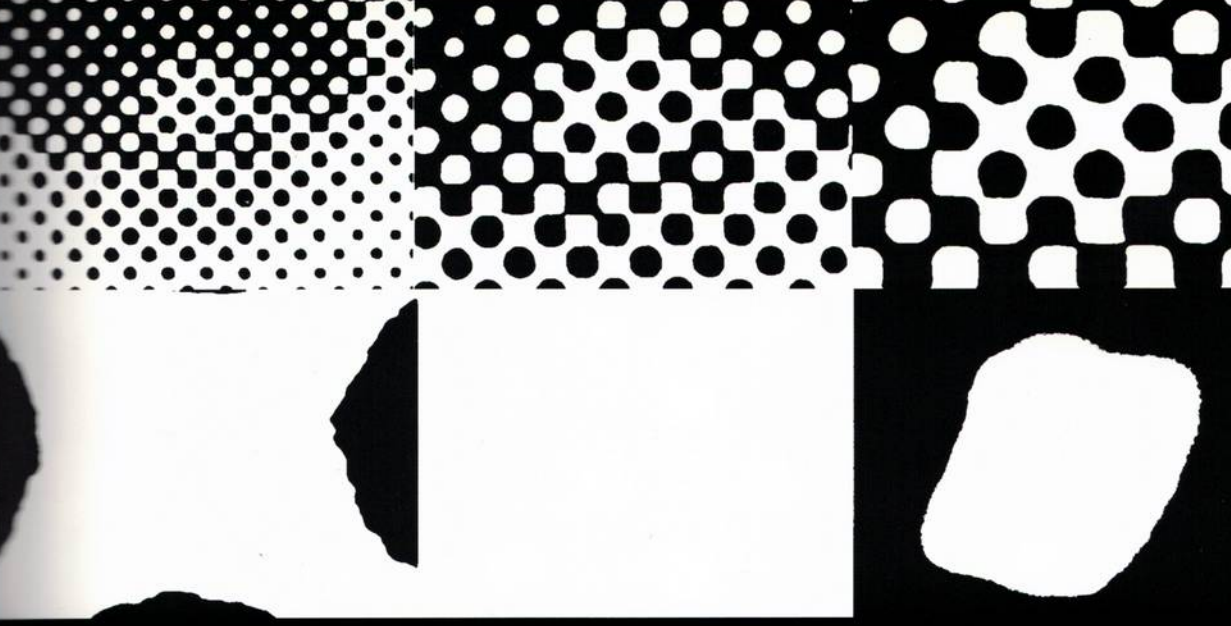
taught me how to take the audience where it needed to go. See, when you animate, you have to become all the different characters. You have to know how they're going to react to each other. It's not a joke, drawing a character. You have to treat it like it's a real person. That's what Preston Blair teaches you: "Here are the rules. Now go break them."

Doug:
How do you know when you've made something that will touch others?

Pablo:
It's an emotion—an emotion that you give out through certain images. After dealing with a lot of images for a while, you know which ones they are. You can feel it. I always tell people that if you want to show emotion, keep the camera moving. You have to contain the emotion, not stop it.

Doug:
It's remarkable how ten seconds of images with no introduction or conclusion can evoke an emotional response.

Pablo:
Film is amazing—all that it can do to you and to your mind. I like to see things that I've never seen before, even though I know there's nothing really new, only what has been forgotten. You know, I can do something and think I created it and realize it was done back in the 1800s or something. And then I say to myself, geez, it took me this long to get it?



Doug:
It sounds like you work very instinctively. What drives you to create?

Pablo:
It's amazing to create something. There's that moment that happens when you see something and you become aware that you are the first person ever to see it. But I'm too embarrassed to work in art! It's a great feeling, though, to say, "Wow, that's amazing. Wow!" Better than anything else we do for enjoyment.

Doug:
That's what keeps me going too.

Pablo:
Yeah, for that moment. I still try to stick to that because they always try to talk me out of it. Clients, they're amazing. They just don't know. They used to always come up to me and say, "You come up with an idea." So I'd do a drawing with four lines, and they'd say, "Your price is ridiculous. To charge so much for four lines!" And I'd say, "Well, if I had gotten it in two lines, I would've charged you more." It just illustrates that it takes time to do things, you know, to get it right—to be SHAKABOOM!