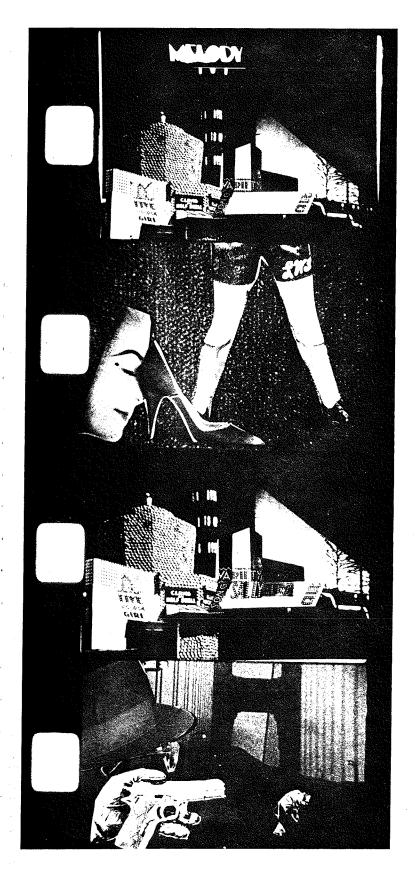


AMERICAN MUSEUM 能 MOVING IMAGE



# INDEPENDENT AMERICA:

**NEW FILM 1978 - 1988** 

American Museum of the Moving Image
October 7 – November 11, 1988
Organized by David Schwartz, Associate Curator of Film

In the Month of Crickets by Lewis Klahr

American Museum of the Moving Image 35th Avenue at 36th Street Astoria, New York 11106 (718) 784–0077

©1988 American Museum of the Moving Image
Catalogue copyeditor, Georgette Hasiostis
Catalogue cover design, Della Femina, McNamee WCRS Design Group

The American Museum of the Moving Image occupies a building owned by the City of New York. The Museum's film and video screenings, exhibitions, and education and interpretive programs are supported with funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historical Preservation), the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, corporations, foundations, and individuals.

### INDEPENDENT AMERICA: NEW FILM 1978 - 1988

#### **CONTENTS**

A Word From the Director	v
Introduction By David Schwartz	1
Myths of the New Narrative (and a few Counter-Suggestions) By Jonathan Rosenbaum	3
The Avant-Garde, into the Eighties By Steve Anker	9
Difficult Language: Notes on Independent Cinema by Women in the Eighties By Berenice Reynaud	16
Documentary Meets the Avant–Garde by David Schwartz	24
Program Notes	30
Index of Films by Filmmaker	91

#### A WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR

Though the films in this retrospective may be independent in spirit, it is also true that to reach an audience, many of them depend on an exhibition network outside of the commercial arena.

New York is a center for personal and experimental filmmaking, with such established showcases for independent work as the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Public Theater, the Collective For Living Cinema, Millenium, the Film Forum, and Films Charas. The existence of these important venues has helped sustain and encourage a growing audience for work that is both challenging and exciting.

The films gathered in Independent America: New Film 1978-1988 have yet to be viewed in context, or seen together during a single series of showings. Here is a chance to explore the relationships among an enormous diversity of forms and styles, from animated shorts to fiction and documentary features, all with the common denominator of artistic innovation. This survey is evidence of the continuing vitality of filmmaking as a forum for personal expression, and we at the American Museum of the Moving Image are pleased to demonstrate our commitment to independent film with a survey of such scope and quality.

Rochelle Slovin
 Director
 American Museum of the Moving Image

### INTRODUCTION By DAVID SCHWARTZ

Independent America: New Film 1978-1988 is an overview of personal, experimental American filmmaking of the past decade. Though some of these films have achieved modest theatrical success, most are distinctly non-commercial. Many are hard to categorize, ignoring established boundaries within "fiction," "documentary," "avantgarde," and "animation," labels that have had the harmful effect of creating ghettoes within the larger ghetto of independent film. There is enormous diversity among the 147 films included in this survey. They range in length from Keith Sanborn's thirtysecond Something Is Seen but One Doesn't Know What to Anne Robertson's forty-hour Five Year Diary: in cost from George Kuchar's fifteen-dollar Cult of the Cubicles to Shirley Clarke's Ornette: Made in America, made for more than a million dollars: and in approach from Nathaniel Dorsky's meditation piece Alaya to Scott B. and Beth B.'s super-8 serial thriller The Offenders. What the films do share is a spirit of formal inventiveness. and a desire to create new modes of cinematic expression. Their very refusal to fit into existing formats, in everything from style to running time, has afforded them a limited audience up till now. It is tempting to call these films "avant-garde," but even that phrase is inaccurate, because it has come to connote a certain kind of film that is neither fiction nor documentary, and also a certain moment in American film history that began in 1943 with Maya Deren's Meshes of the Afternoon, and ended with the structuralist movement of the seventies. The label "independent" has also become virtually meaningless, referring to everything from experimental films made by one person to commercially successful films like Platoon, a large-budget feature made outside of the studio system.

For the most part, the films in this retrospective are independent in spirit and they celebrate not only the individuality of the maker, but of the viewer, who is asked to respond personally. Unfortunately, it remains true that without a large audience, a film has little commodity value. Timeconsuming and expensive to produce, a film cannot be sold, like a painting or a sculpture, for hundreds

of thousands of dollars. Thus, Ken Jacobs and Stan Brakhage, artists as influential in their own field as, say, Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg, can barely afford the expense of making their films. Without a social context such as the sweeping counterculture movement of the sixties, experimental filmmaking is more and more a luxury few artists can afford. Yet the aesthetic rewards for filmmaker and viewer alike are great. Few art experiences can match the intensity of perception and concentration in the viewing of a truly expressive film. This fact alone has helped to keep personal filmmaking alive.

Independent America is a sort of first draft of recent film history, a selection from an enormous body of work. Many outstanding films were not included, simply for lack of space. Works such as Jim Benning's Landscape Suicide, Andrew Noren's Charmed Particles, and Jonas Mekas's He Stands in a Desert... are among the notable omissions. The intention of this survey is not so much to canonize a specific group of films as to encourage discussion on the current state of affairs. Each of the four essays in this catalogue provides a specific entry into this abundant subject:

- Jonathan Rosenbaum's "Myths of the New Narrative" is a valuable clearing of the air. Refuting five theories that underlie much writing about narrative and experimental film, Rosenbaum demonstrates that these modes of filmmaking needn't be considered mutually exclusive.
- The emergence of women's filmmaking in the past decade has been a great source of vitality to the independent movement. Berenice Reynaud's analytical overview "Difficult Language: Notes on Independent Cinema by Women in the '80s" explores this area. Her essay contends that there is no single "feminist" style, and that the search for new modes of expression is at the core of most of these films.
- Steve Anker's "The Avant-Garde, Into the Eighties" charts another path. Detailing the cultural and historical forces that led to the feeling among scholars that the avant-garde died in the midseventies, Anker draws upon his experience as programmer for the San Francisco Cine-

matheque to refute this position by citing the vitality of the current avant-garde scene and pointing to its central tendencies.

 "Documentary Meets the Avant-Garde," my own essay, is a further attempt to break down boundaries, and to demonstrate that the nonfiction film can be a form of subjective and personal expression. I also wanted to show that there is an "avant-garde documentary" actively engaged with the complex aesthetic issues involved in making films about "reality."

It is the nature of the films in this retrospective to call for the viewer's active participation. Since they do not follow formulas, it is only in the exchange between filmmaker and audience that these films truly come to life. This catalogue is offered in the same spirit, as part of a dynamic process of discussion that is best experienced at screenings of the films.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

For their invaluable help in bringing these films to light, I am enormously indebted to the following filmmakers, curators, critics, distributors and enthusiasts around the country.

- David Schwartz

Steve Anker (San Francisco Cinematheque)
Caroline Avery

Bob Brodsky and Toni Treadway (The International Center for Super-8)

Fred Camper

Terry Cannon (Los Angeles Film Forum)

Margaret Cooper (New Day Films)

Eduardo Diaz (Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center)

Robin Dickie, Jack Walsh (Collective for Living Cinema)

Linda Dubler (High Museum of Art)

Nancy Gerstman

Kathy Geritz, Steve Gong, Edith Kramer

(Pacific Film Archives)

Martha Gever, Larry Sapadin (Association for

Independent Video and Filmmakers)

Ada Griffin (Third World Newsreel)

Howard Guttenplan (Millenium Film Workshop)

Robert Hawk (Film Arts Foundation)

J. Hoberman (Village Voice)

Warrington Hudlin (Black Filmmakers Foundation)

Ken Jacobs

Larry Kardish (Museum of Modern Art)

Lewis Klahr

Susan Leonard (South Carolina Arts Commission)

Saul Levine

Marian Luntz (Southwest Alliance Media Project)

Mark McElhatten

Robin Reidy

Berenice Reynaud

B. Ruby Rich (New York State Council on the Arts)

Jonathan Rosenbaum

Deac Rossell

Jon Rubin

**Paul Smart** 

Tom Smith (American Federation of the Arts)

Steve Soba (Public Theater)

Anne-Marie Stein (Boston Film/Video Foundation)

Leslie Trumbull (Filmmakers Cooperative)

Brenda Webb (Chicago Filmmakers)

Debra Zimmerman (Women Make Movies)



The Influence of Strangers (Genealogy) by Mark Daniels

# MYTHS OF THE NEW NARRATIVE (AND A FEW COUNTER-SUGGESTIONS) By JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

In one of his earliest "Movie Journal" columns for the *Village Voice*, published January 26, 1961, Jonas Mekas wrote a defense and celebration of the virtues of "personal, plotless cinema:"

It is an important point, this plot business. It almost makes the whole difference between entertainment and art, between purely commercial cinema and author's cinema...The critics prefer plot, the artists prefer the regions beyond plot.

Two and a half years later, in a now legendary symposium entitled "Poetry and the Film" held at Cinema 16 (and reproduced in *Film Culture Reader*1), one finds Maya Deren formulating a more rigorous non-narrative position by distinguishing between what she calls the "vertical" attack of poetry and the "horizontal" attack of drama:

It seems to me that in many films. very often in the opening passages, you get the camera establishing the mood, and, when it does that, cinematically, those sections are quite different from the rest of the film. You know, if it's establishing New York, you get a montage of images, that is, a poetic construct, after which what follows is a dramatic construct that is essentially "horizontal" in its development. The same thing would apply to the dream sequences. They occur at a moment when the intensification is carried out not by action but by the illumination of that moment. Now the short films, to my mind (and they are short because it is difficult to maintain such intensity for a long period of time), are comparable to lyric poems, and they are completely a "vertical," or what I would call a poetic construct, and they are complete as such.

If we leap ahead to the second half of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies, the importance of non-narrative as a badge of identity in American experimental cinema has become much more pronounced. In the interim, a number of important and mainly non-narrative works had appearedincluding Brakhage's The Art of Vision (1965). Scenes From Under Childhood (1970), and his Songs cycle (1964-69), the camera movement trilogy of Michael Snow, and major works by Andy Warhol, Robert Breer, Ken Jacobs, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, and Ernie Gehr. In addition, the popularity of hallucinogenic drugs during this period and the meditative and "nonlinear" forms of consciousness associated with them all helped to militate against the notion of narrative serving an important or relevant role in vanguard film practice. The fact that narrative did play significant roles in some of these films-including Snow's Wavelength, 1967, (which included both a man's death and the subsequent discovery of his body, as well as other narrative events), Frampton's Nostalgia. 1971, (which took the form of an illustrated autobiography), and some of the Warhol works-was less important than the fact that much of the interest of these works lay in the degree to which

they subverted and/or moved away from their initial narrative pretexts.

All these developments played a role in the coining of the term "new narrative"—a defensive concept in some respects insofar as it sprang from a period when "narrative" had taken on some of the attributes of a dirty word, a noun that in certain quarters was taken to be almost synonymous with "Hollywood," "commercial," and "mainstream." At the same time, the journalistic origins of the term "new narrative" are worth bearing in mind, even if this term and certain variants of it (e.g., "the new talkies," as formulated in *October* #17) have been seriously adopted by various curators and academic journals.

Like many other journalistic labels, "new narrative" is less a critical category or the naming of a new artistic phenomenon than an expedient packaging label designed to give a common interest to a group of otherwise fairly disparate works. Yet the term was needed in order to bring attention to certain films that were either being studiously avoided or polemically misrepresented by critics and curators of the American avant-garde. There is some justification in provisionally adopting it here because it points to a new trend in the ways that certain independent and experimental films are being packaged and perceived. The term "new narrative" is useful less as a critical skeleton key than as a loose means of charting some of the tendencies to be found in recent work, as well as some of the ideas that have already accumulated around them.

In an attempt to clear the air, I have concentrated on the latter in order to shape the remainder of this essay—outlining five notions that have assumed the dimensions of mythical constructions in relation to experimental and independent filmmaking in the United States. I have also attempted to outline certain trends that these constructions tend to overlook or obfuscate. In a sense, to sketch these notions is to construct a metahistory of the reception of narrative in these branches of filmmaking.

### 1. Experimental or avant-garde filmmaking equals non-narrative filmmaking

As indicated above, resistance to narrative as avant-garde strategy has probably been around in one form or another for most of this century. Yet narrative and non-narrative modes have coexisted

in all periods of experimental filmmaking, often within the work of the same filmmakers (e.g., Luis Buñuel and Germaine Dulac in the twenties and thirties, Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger in the forties and fifties. Stan Brakhage in the sixties, Hollis Frampton in the seventies, James Benning in the eighties), and sometimes in a context where non-narrative forms are generated through a deliberate subversion of narrative signifiers, such as the intertitles in Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel's Un Chien Andalou (1928), or the woman climbing the steps in Fernand Léger's Ballet Mécanique (1924). To a much lesser extent, it is also possible to find traces of non-narrative throughout the history of commercial narrative cinema, even though they are seldom identified as such.2

Given the polemical identification of the avantgarde with non-narrative, it was understandable, if nevertheless confusing, to find the 1972 New York Film Festival program describe Jonas Mekas's remarkable and unmistakably narrative film Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania -a basically chronological filmed autobiography—as "nonnarrative," apparently on the basis that it clearly situated itself within the experimental tradition. Insofar as the New American Cinema was at pains to distinguish itself from the (then more commercial) narrative experiments of the French New Wave (leading Mekas himself to attack Alain Resnais's Last Year at Marienbad, 1962, as an inadequate rehash of Brakhage's innovations) and Anthology Film Archives was to exclude rigorously from its film-as-art pantheon all of the New Wave filmmakers with the exception of Marcel Hanoun-"non-narrative" was generally seized upon as a badge of authenticity.

The most extreme expression of this position can be found in the writings during the seventies of English filmmaker Peter Gidal, in such essays as "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film"<sup>3</sup> and "The Anti-Narrative."<sup>4</sup> The controversial value of these arguments partially rests in their determination to combine a case for non-narrative with a Marxist materialist position. By contrast, most American defenses of non-narrative have rested on romantic and individualistic notions about art and transcendence, which have implicitly turned the filmmakers themselves into autobiographical narrative texts that have tended to govern the readings of their non-narrative films; the receptions in the U.S. of non-narrative and quasinarrative films by Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage,

Maya Deren, Hollis Frampton, Yvonne Rainer and Marjorie Keller provide some of the most obvious examples of this.

"Experimental" work constitutes, of course, only one branch of independent filmmaking represented in this retrospective. Some of the most significant independent narrative films in the program either parallel or popularize certain areas in this branch of filmmaking: minimalism (Impostors, Stranger than Paradise, Chan Is Missing), domestic portraiture (An Evening at Home, Bell Diamond), the diary film (Seventeen, Poto and Cabengo, The Ties That Bind, Sherman's March) and what P. Adams Sitney has called the "trance film" (You Are Not 1). In Impostors, for instance, there are a number of ingenious "equivalents" to Hollywood special effects: moving backdrops, front projection, etc. The use of toys and various domestic objects in the kitchen and living rooms of Bell Diamond are as telling as the lengthy household chores in Chantal Akerman's Jeanne Dielman... (1975). The filmmaker as ambiguous hero serves as an organizational device for both Poto and Cabengo and Sherman's March, and the two films of Sara Driver, You Are Not I (1981) and Sleepwalk (1986)—both narratives which constitute private journeys with mysterious, offscreen agendasecho hallucinatory patterns found in Jean Cocteau, Buñuel, Deren and Anger.

### 2. Old Narrative with a low budget equals "New Narrative"

Without mentioning any names, we know that there are a certain number of figures associated with the avant-garde who regard that branch of work as a way-station, who are fundamentally interested in making commercial narrative films. But because they are not (yet) in positions where they can sign Hollywood contracts or their equivalents, they need the support of the avant-garde in order to enlarge their reputations. For filmmakers of this persuasion, a term like New Narrative is a veritable godsend because it allows them to plant each foot in a separate camp and be, in effect, in two places at once. It provides a theoretical pipeline or conduit leading from the margins to the center—or such, at any rate, is their apparent assumption.

But a more generous reading of the same phenomenon might point out that generic labeling that differentiates "serious" experimental work from "unserious" commercial work often has more to do

with the institutional structures that support both kinds of work than with the films themselves. Categories play a major role before and after the making of a film—when the filmmaker is trying to raise money to finance it and when the critic or curator is seeking to situate it within a larger body of work. The expediency of these categories for institutions shouldn't, however, mislead the spectator into assuming that the work can only function in relation to its generic descriptions. In my experience as a teacher of experimental film, I have often discovered that certain films regarded as "difficult" according to institutional discourse, such as the films of Leslie Thornton, offer fewer problems to students than to most "professional" film critics, who have to locate or rationalize their interests differently.

It's a truism of filmmaking in general that the historical conjunctions that conspire to make certain works accessible and popular to audiences and other works esoteric and marginal are largely outside the control of filmmakers, critics and curators alike, however much they may strive to make things otherwise. The commercial success of Stranger Than Paradise, Chan Is Missing, Sherman's March, and Working Girls, and the relative commercial failure of My Brother's Wedding, Impostors, and Bell Diamond in the U.S. are partially a matter of luck and circumstances rather than simple audience appeal. Chan Is Missing, for example, received little attention before an enthusiastic review in the New York Times catapulted it to success. My Brother's Wedding, which was not much noticed when it was shown in the New Directors Festival, might have reached a much broader audience if it had been shown at the New York Film Festival. A remarkably detailed and textured portrait of family and neighborhood life in Watts, with a gallery of densely realized and warmly observed characters, My Brother's Wedding probably has more to say about everyday life for blacks in the U.S. than any film to have hit the mainstream.

# 3. Narrative filmmaking is necessarily linear; non-narrative filmmaking is necessarily non-linear

The problem, really, is that different traditions of representation, description and analysis stand behind narrative and non-narrative. Literary criticism depends largely on plot synopsis, while art criticism traditionally focuses on less linear ele-

ments. Since all films contain linear as well as nonlinear elements, neither tradition is wholly adequate for film criticism.

A further caveat, which has particular relevance to the branch of filmmaking loosely known as "new narrative," is the difficulty of describing certain narrative structures in the form of a synopsis. A number of important narrative and quasi-narrative films have been ignored by critics principally because they haven't figured out a coherent way to describe them. (Some filmmakers have managed to facilitate this work somewhat by offering their own descriptive synopses, but this carries a distinct disadvantage as well—a tendency to limit future readings of a film to a single slanted interpretation.)

As a step toward clarifying a large body of recent experimental narrative, the terms "multiple narrative" and "reduced narrative" might be useful, at least if we can agree on certain norms of conventional narrative that exist outside these classifications. Insofar as the double plot is a standard feature of the nineteenth-century novel, there is nothing intrinsically unconventional about its use in narrative films; examples of the double plot can easily be found in commercial cinema. Some better examples of "multiple narrative" might include the following:

- The use of several actors to portray the same character —a feature of Yvonne Rainer's work especially apparent in *The Man Who Envied* Women, and also operative in the various interchangeable couples in Manuel DeLanda's *Incon*tinence.
- Interspersing or accompanying a narrative line
  with diegetically unrelated material, a practice
  that can readily be found in many different forms
  in such films as Lee Sokol's Aqui Se Lo Halla,
  the works of Leslie Thornton, and Mark Daniels'
  The Influence of Strangers, which merges fiction
  with documentary and essay. The effects of
  such mixtures are often ambiguous; whether they
  extend or curtail the narrative is partially a matter
  of how the spectator chooses to synthesize them.
- The implied existence of one or more universes parallel to the visible and audible narrative on the screen, an effect that can be arrived at through very different means. In Sara Driver's You Are Not I, it arises directly from the ambiguities in the Paul Bowles short story it adapts and the schizo-

phrenic mind of its narrator and heroine; in Owen Land's *On The Marriage Broker Joke...*, it comes from the Sterne-like digressions and the wayward routes defined by the screwball interpretations of the initial premise.

The co-existence of separate tenses in the unfolding of a single narrative, as in Manuel
DeLanda's Raw Nerves, which alternates giddily and systematically between present, past and future while developing its hyperbolic film noir/sci-fi plot.

"Reduced narrative," by contrast, is arrived at by removing or refusing certain properties of conventional narrative affectivity, whether this be transparency (Mark Rappaport's Impostors), continuity and chronology (Ken Jacobs' The Doctor's Dream, 1978, which systematically rearranges a conventional "educational" story film to highlight certain latent or repressed aspects of the original text, such as sexuality), denouement and closure (the open ended finale of Wayne Wang's Chan Is Missing), editing continuity (Jim Jarmusch's Stranger Than Paradise, which alternates autonomous lengthy takes with stretches of black leader to eliminate conventional narrative linkage), and psychological motivation (Jon Jost's Bell Diamond, which consistently distances us from its characters' problems without providing any facile or condescending formulae to account for them).

### 4. Documentary is necessarily distinct from narrative

While this axiom is literally nonsensical, the traditional segregation of documentary from other kinds of filmmaking has often given this proposition the force of law. One of the intellectual achievements of the French New Wave—especially by Godard, but also Chris Marker, Jacques Rivette, Marcel Hanoun and Agnès Varda—was to break down some of the conventional distinctions. Godard, with his love of paradox, urged us to appreciate the fictional side of Lumière and the documentary side of Méliès. Still, the persistence of a critical strategy that tends to isolate fiction and documentary in separate categories has had many regrettable side effects.

The popular confusion of the documentary with the informational or "educational" film, like the popular equation of animation with the Hollywood cartoon, is largely a function of the degree to which domi-

nant commercial film practices have continued to call the shots. The fact remains, however, that contemporary American independent film is much too varied to be neatly subdivided into generic categories.

If we begin to analyze the various fictional, dramatic and narrative techniques that regularly go into the composing of the evening news, it quickly becomes apparent that the rigid distinctions we tend to make between fiction and nonfiction are more a matter of viewing etiquette than anything else. The continuing growth of other media hybrids, such as the docudrama, nonfiction novel and fictional essay, highlights the more general tendency of mixing fictional and documentary codes in all branches of the media and culture, so that at present they infect this country's presidential politics as well as its more overt forms of entertainment. In the face of such massive interpenetration, the continuing references to documentary as a distinct and separate category suggests a certain nostalgia and Platonic idealism.

If we consider documentary films that use strategies of fiction filmmaking to develop characters such as Sherman's March, Poto and Cabengo, Soldier Girls, and Vernon, Florida; documentary hybrids that employ "avant-garde" techniques, such as Signal-Germany on the Air, and Reassemblage; and fiction films that exhibit documentary impulses, such as Peggy and Fred In Hell, My Brother's Wedding, The Man Who Envied Women, and Born in Flames—the traditional categories plainly become inappropriate.

### 5. New narrative necessarily means better and improved narrative

A besetting limitation of much recent independent narrative is a rather limited and conformist notion of the "new," which is paradoxically tied to some version of recycling the old, an impulse that ironically duplicates and seemingly emulates a similar tendency in contemporary Hollywood.

The self-conscious references to film history that marked the early years of the French New Wave probably originated this trend, but it is important to bear in mind that these references initially carried a certain critical (i.e., analytical and interpretive) power. Allusions to the low-budget Hollywood crime thriller in Godard's *Breathless* (1959), to *Metropolis* in Jacques Rivette's *Paris Belongs to* 

Us (1960), and to Hitchcock and Gilda in Alain Resnais' Last Year at Marienbad (1961), were above all critical readings of these works, not simple attempts at pious duplication, as were the allusions to Bringing Up Baby and silent slapstick in Peter Bogdonavich's What's Up, Doc? (1972), or the recreated images and incidents from Triumph of the Will, various World War II epics, and The Searchers in George Lucas' Star Wars (1977).

In the decade that has passed since the most recent of these films, the proliferation of allusions and remakes in Hollywood has reached such proportions that its significance must be read as an ideological closure—an ostrich-like refusal to confront the present or any reality other than the "world of cinema" that makes even the most timid forays beyond this limited terrain register as bold departures. Noel Carroll has dealt with certain aspects of this phenomenon in "The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond),"5 and while he concludes by noting an analogy between this allusionism and "certain tendencies of...the Althusserian-Lacanian 'new talkie"-and sees both as "works designed for a particular kind of criticism," he might have added that the parallel between contemporary Hollywood and contemporary independent filmmaking goes even further, pointing to a depressing reluctance or refusal by many of the latter to offer a genuine alternative.

Indeed, it might be argued that allusions to Wavelength are almost as plentiful in independent films of the seventies and eighties—Scott and Beth B.'s The Offenders, Rappaport's Casual Relations (1973), Benning's Grand Opera (1978), and, more recently, Jost's Bell Diamond, among many others—as allusions to Potemkin, Citizen Kane, and 2001 are in commercial films of the same period; even the phenomenon of remakes and spin-offs echoes in such things as Owen Land's Institutional Quality (1969) and New Improved Institutional Quality (1976), Jost's conception of Uncommon Senses (1987) as a counterpart to his Speaking Directly (1974), and DeLanda's plans to make a sequel to Raw Nerves (1980).

A more general tendency can be found in references to Hollywood genres in the American independents: much as political vampire movies became a staple of certain European and Latin American undergrounds in the seventies, Freudian

detective stories and film noir thrillers have become the coin of the realm in *The Offenders, Raw Nerves, Chain Letters* (1985), *Chan Is Missing,*Jost's *Angel City* (1980), Erroll Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), and countless others. References to other films and/or filmmaking in general provide much of the substance of *Flying Fur, Standard Gauge, Illusions, On the Marriage Broker Joke...,* and *Caligari's Cure.* 

A major limitation of the "new narrative," in other words, is a matter of content. It could be argued, in fact, that in spite of the dominance of formalist criticism that accompanied the American experimental film since its beginnings, it is largely the introduction of new kinds of content to film that has marked the major achievement of independent filmmaking. One example of what I mean can be found in the opening sentence of Manny Farber's 1969 article, "Michael Snow:"

The cool kick of Michael Snow's Wavelength was in seeing so many new actors—light and space, walls, soaring windows, and an amazing number of color-shadow variations that live and die in the window panes—made into major esthetic components of movie experience.

In like fashion, much of the interest and excitement in the newer films discussed in this essay, including Chan Is Missing, Reassemblage, The Man Who Envied Women, My Brother's Wedding and Leslie Thornton's Peggy and Fred cycle, is bound up with their proposal of new and unexplored areas of film content.

Because new subjects necessarily entail new ways of perceiving and thinking, the formal achievements of these works can't be denied. We have to remember, however, that form is a verb as well as a noun. And it is when "new narrative" forms new areas of interest and discovery—as many of these films unquestionably do—that it most lives up to its name.

Jonathan Rosenbaum is currently the film critic for the *Chicago Reader*. He has written for *Cahiers du Cinema*, *Sight and Sound*, and *Omni*, and was formerly the film critic for the *Soho Weekly News*. He is the co-author, with J. Hoberman, of *Midnight Movies*, and author of *Film: The Front Line*, 1983 and *Moving Places: A Life at the Movies*.

- <sup>1</sup> Film Culture Reader, ed. P. Adams Sitney, Praeger Press, New York, 1970.
- <sup>2</sup> For several examples, see my discussion with Raymond Durgnat and David Ehrenstein in the July-August 1978 *Film Comment*, "Obscure Objects of Desire."
- <sup>3</sup> Published in *Structural Film Anthology*, British Film Institute, 1976.
- <sup>4</sup> Screen, Summer 1979.
- <sup>5</sup> October #20, Spring 1982.



Light Years by Gunvor Nelson

### THE AVANT-GARDE, INTO THE EIGHTIES BY STEVE ANKER

There now exists a body of independent films made in the last decade that equals and often exceeds the vitality of works from any comparable period in its diversity of concerns and radical expression. The ongoing originality of the American avant-garde stands in sharp contrast to claims that little of value has been produced during this time. That few of these films are familiar to a wider audience reflects both the cultural malaise of the times and the neglect by critics and curators who claim that they have fully represented the important cinematic art of this era. Despite its tarnished appeal, the idea of an "avant-garde" is now more critical than ever. It functions as a continuous challenging and rupturing of complacent cultural attitudes and forms. The term itself is problematical because it has come to connote a specific set of assumptions, yet "avant-garde" is a concept that refers to a relationship to mainstream culture, one not tied to any specific historical moment.

Independent America is a first effort to come to terms with this extraordinary body of work. By juxtaposing relatively accessible films that have had some critical and commercial success with more obscure and, fundamentally, more daring films, this retrospective gives a sense of the depth of achievement by independent American filmmakers. In the brief remarks that follow, I will discuss qualities common to many of these films and the circumstances that determine their position in this culture.

ı

American avant-garde film, as a movement, had a brief and dramatic history. Jonas Mekas's seminal 1959 manifesto, "A Call for a New Generation of Filmmakers," (see *Film Culture Reader*, edited by P. Adams Sitney, p. 73, Praeger Press, NY, 1970) called upon all who were working against the sterile commercial industry to band together and revolt. Nothing of this kind had ever happened before in the history of America's most popular art form. All manner of filmmakers were linked together, the common denominator being that they "all mistrust

and loathe the official cinema and its thematic and formal stiffness" and "seek to free themselves from the over-professionalism and over-technicality that handicap inspiration and spontaneity in the official cinema."

Within two years, the New American Cinema group was established. Participants included such diverse filmmakers as Lionel Rogosin, Peter Bogdanovich, Robert Frank, Shirley Clarke, and Gregory Markopoulos. The structure of the group proved short-lived, but served as the impetus for the formation, in 1962, of the Filmmakers Cooperative (the first distribution company run by the filmmakers themselves), and the re-focusing of the journal *Film Culture* into the group's lively house organ. More importantly, it gave form and validity to the independent movement in American cinema.

Mekas, who wrote regularly for the Village Voice from 1959 through 1971, became the self-described "raving maniac of the cinema." Partially in response to the impassioned writing of Mekas, the writings of the young P. Adams Sitney, Ken Kelman and others, and partially in response to the radicalizing energies of the early sixties, this new underground gradually developed a focus and definition far removed from the original scope of the New American Cinema. More emphatic in their divergence from mainstream forms, a large and extraordinary group of filmmakers pushed as hard as they could at the edges of the medium's potential for pure expression. By the late sixties, in both the ethical and the aesthetic sense, an alternative cinema had blossomed which had seen the emergence of several mature artists who had contributed significant bodies of distinctive work.

In retrospect, it seems natural that in 1970 Mekas, Sitney, Kelman, Peter Kubelka and others defined the achievements of the movement through the creation of the Anthology Film Archives. In this collection, the films of Marie Menken, Michael Snow's La Region Centrale (1971) and Stan Brakhage's The Art of Vision (1965) stand side by side with Orson Welles's Citizen Kane (1941), Robert Bresson's Pickpocket (1959), Buster Keaton's The General (1926), and films by Georges Méliès, Yasujiro Ozu and Sergei Eisenstein. The formation of the Anthology Film Archives marked the canonization of what had begun as a loosely formed but fiercely determined movement of artists. Although some have lamented it as an entombment, the Anthology Film Archives

represents the most significant recognition of the movement's achievement to date, and stands as an unsurpassed vision of the history of the medium as an art form.

No one foresaw the tightening of the culture and the conservative forces that would increasingly rise to dominance. The "Movie Journal" column ceased to appear in the Voice in 1971, and reappeared only briefly in the Soho Weekly News during the mid-seventies. With cultural energies in retrenchment and the afterglow of the Anthology achievement still being felt, no successor to Mekas arose to help promote interest in new work; in this vacuum the fragile sense of community that had given sustenance to many filmmakers during the sixties faded. The Filmmakers Cooperative's last catalogue was published in 1975, making it even more difficult for filmmakers who came after to make their work known. The movement was formally acknowledged within the cultural firmament as the avant-garde; however, along with this came an erroneous perception that the canon had been closed and no worthwhile new work was being made. This fallacy was reinforced by the growing disinterest in new avant-garde work by a tired establishment (exemplified by the traveling exhibition, "A History of the American Avant-Garde," circulated by the American Federation of the Arts in 1976, but concluding its survey in 1972).

Nevertheless, although the movement itself may have come to an end, strong new work was still being made. While some of it was shown at such venues as the Collective for Living Cinema or Millenium in New York, and was even occasionally presented in exhibitions at the Anthology Film Archives, none of this later work attained the widespread acceptance accorded to the films associated with the movement. In addition, many institutions that had previously been supportive ceased to promote these works, and critical writings on the subject vanished from the mainstream press. The superficial extent to which these films had opened the culture to new forms of film experience had become clear.

It is no surprise, then, that few of the avant-garde films that have been made over the last ten years have gained much attention, whether they are by recognized masters or relative newcomers. Yet while little of this work has penetrated the screen of silence that replaced the "movement" by the early seventies, great numbers of filmmakers have continued to work in original ways.

II.

Nothing characterizes the last ten years more than the dissolution of the idealism and purpose behind individual action. The romance with self-exploration and actualization evidenced in the late fifties and sixties by various rebellious political and artistic movements has been replaced by a hardened resistance to those same ideals, a pragmatic toughness seemingly necessary simply to survive. Mass culture has asserted a new control over individuals that has been realized with intimidating precision during the Reagan era. Faced with an ever more resilient popular culture that has gradually absorbed most of the individuals and ideas who had challenged it only years before, a culture promising financial reward and emotional reinforcement, it has become increasingly difficult to justify making art that doesn't have broad appeal and/or topical relevance. The conviction that what matters most is one's own "vision" is gone, as is the sense that this vision can be genuinely transformative in relation to the world.

Filmmakers working privately, whose aesthetic concerns remain peripheral to the mainstream, have had to accept many new hardships. The cost of materials has continued to escalate and the availability of film stocks has dwindled. Moreover, the medium has hardly established its artistic legitimacy apart from its commercial aspect, and now seems poised on the edge of extinction from the threat of video.

In an age when authenticity is in question in all fields of endeavor, filmmakers are still attracted to the unique qualities of the medium which have become cultural anachronisms. Film is a physical medium, a product of the Machine Age. Based on the mechanical projection of photographs, it was conceived as a direct analogue to the visually experienced world. Film demands a total physical commitment on the part of the viewer to appreciate its riches. Projection in a darkened room with a centralized screen is critical, resulting in a concentrated (and in some respects disarming) sensual experience. By working in unfamiliar modes that test the openness of the audience, these filmmakers position the viewer as an active participant, countering the demoralization and alienation of a mass response. Both the beauty and difficulty of such an experience is that each viewer is

confronted with himself in darkness, sometimes in silence, in a public setting.

Despite pressures to conform or to give in to the futility of equaling past achievements, filmmakers continue to rely on their own resourcefulness and consciousness, developing their own social networks and apparatus for dissemination. The flamboyant public energy in the fifties and sixties of Mekas, Brakhage, Markopoulos, Jacobs, and others, has given way to more guarded and innerdirected uses of artistic will and determination, an appropriate response in a time when perhaps the most radical act may be to withdraw from cultural hyperbole and hard sell. And so it is that these filmmakers embody a paradox, using an outmoded technology for the creation of new forms reflecting individual consciousness. In a medium whose very nature is transient, these filmmakers work in opposition to values that are strictly temporal.

#### 111.

Radical filmmaking, as with all art, cannot be categorized without simplifying the intentions of the filmmakers and the works themselves. With this in mind, the next section is an attempt to articulate some of the significant tendencies apparent in the work of many filmmakers during the past decade. What remains most important is the full experience of the individual works and the viewer's response to them. Focusing on filmmakers and films included within this exhibition, I will consider these currents evident in recent work:

- Using the medium to create intense modes of perception, to challenge or expand human consciousness
- Using film to explore memory and history, a subject particularly appropriate for a time-oriented medium
- A fascination with fragmentation through nonlinear and discontinuous form, frequently expressed by types of collage, or juxtaposing fragments from many sources and styles
- The creation of interior psychological landscapes, sometimes overtly as autobiographical portraits, sometimes as metaphors of emotional states
- The continued activity of super-8 filmmakers, whose desire for informality and immediacy counter the sterile codification of technique so dominant in American culture

Many of the most significant avant-garde filmmakers of earlier decades not only have continued to be productive, but have gone well beyond their own past work and beyond the expectations and active engagement of past audiences. Because their work continues to break new ground, further challenging already familiar artistic voices, I would like to begin by describing the work of a few who have been most productive and who seem most emblematic of these tendencies.

In the past ten years, Stan Brakhage has produced an astonishing three dozen new films. With his final embrace of total abstraction in the Roman Numeral Series, the Arabic Numeral Series, Unconscious London Strata and the Egyptian Series, Brakhage has explored rhythmic imagery and tonal nuance in its most distilled state. In a sense, this is his most triumphant act. At his best, as in Unconscious London Strata, Brakhage creates a textured emotional and psychological experience comparable to his earlier "psychodramas" or autobiographical masterpieces, and has indeed given pure cinematic form a meaning comparable to music. The Dante Quartet is his most concentrated and complex hand-painted film to date, each frame exquisitely composed with several layers of different pigment. Murder Psalm represents a new direction for Brakhage, weaving pre-existing footage into a brooding meditation on childhood and death.

Ken Jacobs's art continues to expand in depth and range even as it remains stridently non-marketable. By devoting most of his creative energies to live performances since the early seventies and by resolutely refusing to compromise his own fascination for extending and distending time and focusing on minutae and subtle detail, Jacobs has assured his own neglect in an era where attention span has shrunk. The maker of Blonde Cobra (1962) and Tom. Tom. the Piper's Son (1969) continues to tap the mystery behind moving picture images, whether through a re-examination of turn-of-thecentury material as performance, by exposing a melodramatic formula (The Doctor's Dream, 1978), or by releasing a discarded reel of news footage as Perfect Film. With The Nervous System series Jacobs employed a 3-D process that works through pulsating alternation between two identical prints of the same found footage. The final installment of this series. The Whole Shebang, is a breathtaking

display of control by Jacobs over his material—footage of death-defying acrobatic stunts. In each of his film works and in his improvisatory 3-D performances, Ken Jacobs responds to recorded images as a living tissue, at once historical yet also brimming with untapped meanings.

Yvonne Rainer's dance and choreography work during the 1960's startled the art world with its capacity to depict emotional states and complex character interactions. With Lives of Performers (1972) and Film About A Woman Who (1974), Rainer made the transition from live theater to the plastic world of film. Journeys From Berlin/1971 (1980) continued her shift away from incorporated dance as a principal tool, to a fusion of different kinds of film material (including home-movie footage, dramatized theatrical scenes, stock footage, and a sharply defined political metaphor) to construct a drama of an individual struggling to maintain identity and responsibility in an increasingly fragmented world. Fragmentation is also at the root of Rainer's most recent film, The Man Who Envied Women (1986), but here she directly addresses our responses to media and the classic film-viewing experience. In an age consumed by multiple possibilities of information and expression, Rainer finds levels upon levels of meaning in a collage of material from many different sources.

Ernie Gehr became known in the seventies for a group of meticulously realized films that explored the most fundamental components of cinematic perception. With several major films completed during the eighties. Gehr carried his fascination with pure film forms-color, movement, nuances of light and texture—into a new arena, integrating these concerns with issues of cultural dislocation. In Untitled, 1981, Gehr carries his fascination with film forms—color, rhythm, changes in light and texture-into a new arena. Limiting himself to the gestures of old people filmed from the window of his Brooklyn apartment, Gehr orchestrates a swift montage of facial expressions, body movement and richly observed textural details. He thus creates a multi-dimensional flow articulating both the frailties and idiosyncracies of these people and the wondrous visual world their figures present on film. Signal-Germany on the Air is Gehr's vision of the culture his parents had been forced to leave during the Nazi regime. Through a heightened use of film's artificial colors, Gehr's Berlin is a depersonalized landscape divorced from its own history.

The early films of Gunvor Nelson did not suggest the astonishing growth in style and control that her recent work demonstrates. With the completion of Red Shift (1983) and the trio of Frame Line (1984), Light Years (1987), and Light Years Expanding (1988), Nelson's work has gained a new concentration and visual mastery in its exploration of autobiographical themes. Red Shift (1983) is a portrait of mother-daughter relationships, a tapestry of memories and reflections that positions Nelson as the central figure between her daughter and her mother. Through a densely textured series of extreme close-ups of skin, fabrics, ornaments, and precious objects, Nelson weaves multiple strains of dramatized fantasies that elaborate upon these relationships. The complex sound-track is composed of folk sayings interspersed with narrated letters written by Calamity Jane to her daughter in the 1890's. Frame Line began a series of films, including Light Years, that mix collage and animation techniques with landscape imagery, and deal with Nelson's sense of displacement from her native Swedish culture. Nelson's recent films glimpse an interior world, inhabited by haunting memories and filled with richly expressive textures.

One of the most exciting developments in recent years has been the explosion of new work by George Kuchar. For more than thirty years, Kuchar has created his own brand of lurid and highly personalized B-movies, spoofing and deranging such popular genres as the soap opera, science fiction, and the Western. Kuchar has also made more overtly personal portrait films, such as Mongreloid, a delightful home movie of and for his dog. It is this intimate form of portraiture to which Kuchar has increasingly turned during the last two years, working with a humble Sony 8mm video system. As the cost of filmmaking continues to climb, Kuchar has adapted consumer technology as a means of giving himself the greatest freedom to record and edit a stream-of-consciousness response to the flood of events in his life. In little more than two years he has completed thirty pieces, including portraits of friends and other filmmakers, and diaries of travels. Each tape is intricately edited in-camera and splendidly photographed, utilizing the video medium to its fullest while maintaining Kuchar's truthful, sharply humorous ability to react to the world around him.

For reasons described in the first two parts of this essay, it has been extremely difficult in the past decade for filmmakers little-known before this time to establish credibility. Although their names may be unfamiliar, they are making strong and original works that reflect a passionate involvement with the medium. The presence of younger filmmakers whose work is vital and challenging is as important to a living art form as are the continued efforts of established figures. Most exciting about this retrospective is its embrace of recent film history as a living and changing entity. The risks inherent in making choices within such a field are clear. Possibilities for emphases and inclusions may change even as the exhibition unfolds and we enter into critical dialogue with each of the works. With this in mind, I would like to point to several of the films I know best and how they reflect the directions I've described earlier.

A probing of history and the function of memory, often expressed through openly political themes, forms the underlying impulse for many of these films. In The Ties That Bind, Su Friedrich examines the relationship between her mother's subjugated childhood in Nazi Germany and her own perspective as daughter and political activist. Daniel Eisenberg's Displaced Person and Cooperation of Parts both deal with European uprooting, and through a distilled reshaping of images and narrated texts, raise questions about how knowledge and consciousness are transmitted. Cooperation of Parts is Eisenberg's reflection of his own voyage to his parents' former homeland. Comprised of footage shot on the trip, seen in counterpoint to spoken or printed proverbs, Cooperation of Parts suggests the ambiguous relationship between Eisenberg's own understanding of history, and his sense of the Europe he encounters as a culture frozen in time. Glimpses of concentration camps, defiled Jewish cemeteries, and children playing in decaying urban settings reappear as though in a dream, suggesting a searching consciousness stifled by forms that only vaguely represent the past. Memory also forms the jolting backdrop of Richard Levine's War Stories. Straightforward, horrifying recollections of Vietnam veterans are positioned against stock combat images (themselves part of a universal memory bank), which are then ruptured and hypnotically repeated.

Filmmakers have increasingly turned to found footage (pre-existing images) as primary sources of material, drawing upon film history as well as their lifelong experiences as moviegoers (a continuity particular to the twentieth century). Morgan Fisher's Standard Gauge is a narrated autobiography of the filmmaker's love affair with the professional 35mm format. The film's only visuals are strips of saved or discarded film, which accompany Fisher's anecdotes. Phil Solomon's The Secret Garden is a dreamlike transformation of his childhood movie experiences. In it Solomon takes images from The Wizard of Oz (1939) and other film fantasies, and gives them new radiance while suggesting childlike fears of the unknown that lurk underneath. Caroline Avery's films create worlds of fragmentary moments in which pre-exisiting images are reduced to mysterious gestures. In Big. Brother, Avery creates a startlingly sculptural effect as images of limbs and torsos are literally cut into the middle of other images and given new movement. Midweekend employs a different kind of hand-manipulation, as short passages from found films are isolated and overwhelmed by a barrage of color blobs painted directly onto the film strip.

Breaking continuity has been a natural compulsion in an era preoccupied with fragmentation, especially as a means of revealing the illusions of narrative film conventions. Manuel DeLanda's films are assaults on the senses that jerk us into new relationships with narrative idioms. Incontinence is a manically fractured fragment from Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, and Raw Nerves is a hallucinogenic dramatization of psychoanalytic theory, in the form of a gutteral recollection of film noir conventions. Something Is Seen but One Doesn't Know What by Keith Sanborn condenses dozens of shots taken from Hollywood movies and science films into a disjointed narrative flow. Making ludicrous and sometimes painful new connections, Sanborn underscores the knee-jerk tendencies of narrative montage and the potential for any image to be made absurd.

Abigail Child has developed her own approach to fragmenting continuity. Is This What You Were Born For? is a series of films that link gestures and sounds into rapid-fire montages. Beginning with Prefaces (1980) and Mutiny (1983), Child constructs linear flows pieced together from truncated moments of people moving, reciting, or in some other way creating an action in both picture and

sound. We are pulled in an almost infinite variety of directions, even as Child makes links from shot to shot based on simple rhyming technique. Changes of pitch, texture, location, activity, and personality of subject all whiz by in a frenzy of alternating impulses. In *Perils*, Child links, in jolting succession, tableaus of stylized silent-movie characters threatening violent actions. *Mayhem* mixes a great variety of material, including stylized posturing (as in *Perils*), images suggestive of a noirish thriller, and pornographic footage from the '30s. Fusing metaphoric and suggestive imagery with blunt sado-sexual fantasies, *Mayhem* is a dark meditation on the evocative power images can gain when joined as part of a larger narrative flow.

Nina Fonoroff fractures her own footage in *Department of the Interior*, creating a palpable expression of the psychological terror latent in a world where even the most familiar and comforting objects have dual meanings. In harsh contrast black-and-white, Fonoroff's images form their own vocabulary of memory as shots of windows, trees, a watch, and even images of her mother, are wrenched from their original context.

One of the strongest currents in the work of many women filmmakers during these years has been the exploration of feminist issues central to their lives. Gunvor Nelson, Yvonne Rainer, Su Friedrich, and Leslie Thornton [discussed in Berenice Reynaud's essay] all have created highly individuated and private blends of fantasy and other kinds of material that deal with motherhood, love relations, and the self-images of women. Marjorie Keller's Daughters of Chaos deftly juxtaposes footage of herself as a child, a pair of pre-teen girls' natural awkwardness, and images she recorded at her sister's wedding, to express her ambivalence towards social conventions. Janis Crystal Lipzin's Other Reckless Things is a disillusioned interpretation of a true case of self-inflicted Caesarean childbirth, mixing snatches of newspaper stories with graphic and de-romanticized footage of an actual childbirth. With this synthesis, Lipzin forces a new appreciation of the pain and isolation of childbirth. Peggy Ahwesh uses the informality of super-8 sound equipment to help women reveal their thoughts and sexual fantasies in From Romance to Ritual. Bluntly and effectively cutting between people speaking directly into the camera, Ahwesh questions attitudes about the mythology of romance, childhood innocence, and experience.

Implicit in all of the films discussed so far is a challenging of filmmaking values and expectations. For some filmmakers it is the nature of perception itself that is probed and enlightened through the basic elements of cinema. Nathaniel Dorsky's recent films create a visually intense meditative field in which the viewer is an active participant. *Pneuma* is a shimmering montage, whose imagery is limited to the endless flow of grain patterns created by different film stocks. *Alaya* captures granular movement in the "real" world, filming infinitely luminous seas of sand from many vantage points.

Larry Gottheim's *Elective Affinities* tetralogy (begun with *Horizons*, 1973, and *Mouches Volantes*, 1976) concluded with *Four Shadows* (1978) and *Tree of Knowledge* (1980). In all of his films since 1973, Gottheim has expanded on his fascinatation with repetition, recombining the elements of each film in different ways so that each becomes an emotionally and perceptually complex experience.

Perhaps the simplest expression of the aesthetic values I've described can be found in the varied work produced by super-8 filmmakers during the past decade. Often relegated to curatorial and critical neglect, and faced with the shrinking availability of materials, super-8 filmmakers have embraced the medium's intimate scale of production and exhibition. A full range of the directions I've noted can be found within the super-8 work in this retrospective, but with a character specific to this medium.

Saul Levine has devoted more than twenty years to making 8mm and super-8 films that have the rough-hewn immediacy and vulnerability of home movies, but that are in fact expertly crafted. Levine's films are widely divergent expressions of a singular cinematic voice. New Left Notes is both a lyrical diary of a love affair and a record of radical political actions of the late-sixties. A Few Tunes Going Out zigzags with staccato precision between a flood of diaristic motifs, devilishly veering beyond the comfortable limits of sound and image cutting. Joe Gibbons, another devotee of Super-8, is the central character of his darkly comic and autobiographical films. In Confidential, Gibbons speaks directly into the camera, tensely confronting the viewer, and through his perverse wit and anecdotal frankness keeps us riveted throughout each of the film's thirty-minute sections. Living in the World is a mock narrative charting Gibbons' inability to hold a job or find an avenue into social respectability.

Ellen Gaine creates a luminous granular universe in her No. 3. With jazz-like spontaneity, she hones in on fragments of home movie images through rephotography, isolating ghostlike and abstract patterns and rhythms. Peter Herwitz, in films such as Mysterious Barricades (1987) and Roses of Isfahan (1984), has amplified the relative murkiness of the super-8 image to create a world of fleeting glimpses in which the world is apparently beyond reach. Herwitz uses an array of vivid handdrawn colors directly applied to visual motifs that are broken in mid-stream and repeated (birds in flight, friends, and home life), creating an emotional landscape of longing and an ambiguity toward beauty. Lewis Klahr's super-8 universe collages figures cut from comic books, magazines, and old movies, into a mythological kingdom reminiscent of childhood fantasies. Like Phil Solomon, Klahr is interested in the strangeness revealed in these seemingly innocent images when stripped from their original contexts.

The wealth of exciting films included within this retrospective makes discussion of each impossible within a brief overview. Radically new approaches to ethnographic and political documentary (Daniel Barnett's *The Chinese Typewriter*, Trinh T. Minhha's *Reassemblage*, Mark Lapore's *Medina*, and Jeffrey Skoller's *Nicaragua: Hear-Say/See Here)*, narrative fiction (Jon Jost's *Bell Diamond* and Vivienne Dick's *She Had Her Gun All Ready)*, cultural portraits by Willie Varela (*Recuerdos de Flores Muertas*) and Ken Ross (*Blessed in Exile*), major new films by key figures such as Chick Strand, Robert Breer, Warren Sonbert, and many more attest to the remarkable fertility of the past ten years.

The selection in choices and emphases will understandably shift over time and according to each viewer's taste, but *Independent America* forcefully asserts the continued vitality of the art of filmmaking as an activity by individuals working defiantly outside the mainstream who have had the courage to be themselves and the vision to investigate exciting new forms.

- With thanks to Susan Thackrey

Steve Anker is Program Director of the San Francisco Cinematheque. He has written for *Film Quarterly* and *Cinematograph*, and has taught film at the San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco State University, Tufts University, and the Massachusetts College of Art.



Magdalena Viraga: Story of a Red Sea Crossing by Nina Menkes

#### DIFFICULT LANGUAGE: NOTES ON INDEPENDENT CINEMA BY WOMEN IN THE EIGHTIES BY BERENICE REYNAUD

Should a film whose main project is to restore the voice and subjectivity of a previously ignored or suppressed person or segment of the population...contain argument, contradiction, or express the director's ambivalence...? Obviously, we can't afford to be prescriptive about this.

-Yvonne Rainer<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean, in 1988, to be writing about films by women? And what does it mean, in the context of this retrospective, to be writing about "independent cinema?" One can be certain, in both cases, to run into a set of unresolved contradictions. To answer the first question—after having mentioned that, of 117 filmmakers represented in the retrospective, forty-two are women (a rare

occurrence in this sort of event)-I will say that films by women do not necessarily mean "feminist movies." To answer the second question, I will assume the word "independent" is used to signify the loss of consensus on phrases like "avantgarde," or "experimental," or "new cinema:" they seem to have become as passé as the word "feminist" itself, which is indicative of a double crisis. "I am not making avant-garde films," or "My movies are not feminist" is a form of denial often heard coming from filmmakers who are fighting just to be able to continue to make movies. It is not only that "making avant-garde work" or "being a feminist" is a position untenable at a commercial level, but also, and maybe more importantly, that traditional avant-garde and middle-class feminism have solidified into institutions and practices that are more repressive than liberating.

One of the ironies of the American avant-garde has been that, while acknowledging Maya Deren as its origin and/or main source of inspiration, it eventually became a field of expression for the male self—if not the macho artist. No matter how "wild" the experiments of the traditional avant-garde filmmakers, they always pre-supposed a "locus classicus," an unquestioned center, a subject that precluded "otherness;" and so it is no wonder that women felt excluded from the movement.<sup>3</sup>

It is within this context that the revolutionary aspect of Yvonne Rainer's cinema should be perceived. While her dance work was clearly embedded in a solid avant-garde tradition, she came to the conclusion that "dancing could no longer encompass or 'express' the new content of [her] work, i.e. the emotions." Instead of promoting a straightforward "exploration of the female self," Rainer introduced shifts in meaning, even when she was handling "what at first seemed like blatantly personal and private material." (ibid). Later she commented:

One way [my work] is saved from being autobiographical, or *merely* personal, however, is by being so frequently pushed into the realm of fiction. Which is where cliche comes in. The degree to which I can interject the familiar—in language, artifact, and reference—is the degree to which the purely personal factor in the work can be offset and distanced.... References to others' work function in the same way... [and] relieve *my* work of the danger of insularity and solipsism.<sup>5</sup>

With such "manipulations," she introduces the question of "Who speaks?" as well as notions of "split subject" and "intertextuality," which are at the heart of the avant-garde.

The extreme modernity of Rainer's work, the sense of risk that keeps it constantly on the cutting edge, is exemplified by her openness to the currents of contemporary thought: her films are a direct—if highly mediated—version of her readings and, in the last fifteen years, her intellectual interests have grown to encompass a growing social awareness (Kristina Talking Pictures, 1976), advanced leftist politics (Journeys From Berlin/1971, 1980), semiotics, feminist film theory and social activities in New York (The Man Who Envied Women, 1986). The particular strength of her movies, however, lies in

an original blending of formal strategies and "content." Expanding the critical approach of "character" and "performance" she had developed as a choreographer, Rainer has, in all of her films, split her main character(s) into several performers, destroying the illusion of realism and inviting the spectator to find his/her own context to relate to the words on the sound track. In The Man Who Envied Women, the burden of representing the title character, Jack Deller (for "tell her ... ") is shared by two actors. Moreover, the man's discourse is almost entirely made up of quotations: from Raymond Chandler's letters, Michel Foucault's texts, speeches of various New York intellectuals, and classic American movies of the 1940's. To the redundant visual presence of this self-satisfied man, Rainer contrasts the discourse of an invisible woman. Taking literally (but with a grain of salt) feminist film theories that, in narrative films, woman's position is constantly reinstated for the consummation or frustration of male desire,"6 she does not show her heroine. The latter, remaining a disembodied voice "pursuing, nagging, questioning....is never caught with her pants down" (ibid, p. 15), which puts her, paradoxically, in a situation of power. With The Man Who Envied Women, Rainer continues to make a feminist questioning possible within an avant-garde film setting.

No small feat. For feminism itself has been criticized as oppressive. By lesbian filmmakers, who feel rejected by the "heterocentrism" of "the paralysing paradigms of a feminist cultural theory in which historical diagnoses have tended to harden into prescriptive dogmas (e.g. that the gaze is inevitably voyeuristic, exploitative and male, that fetishistic modes of producing meaning are absolutely unavailable to women, at any rate, to femininity, etc...)."7 By women of color, who are aware that "feminism is still predominantly a white movement and, as such, unfortunately still subject to racism."8 By younger women, who do not find in traditional feminism an articulation of their concerns and professional interests. And even among filmmakers still claiming to be feminists, who represent a large diversity of theories, beliefs, and ideologies.

It would be interesting, for example, to compare Nina Menkes's *Magdalena Viraga* to Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986). While both filmmakers are interested in using prostitution as a metaphor/metonymy for the "impasse" created by sexual difference, Menkes anchors her fiction in her search for a spirituality that is not male-dominated:

As a woman, if you are situated as "other" in reference to the main culture, you have to reach for different, more spiritual things. In a way, you're enriched by that quest, but at the same time it brings a terrible loneliness.9

Menkes's quest for the "locked voice" of women leads her to look for new, truly experimental modes of expression. Magdalena Viraga, her first feature, is structured around nine harrowing scenes in which the heroine, Ida, is in bed with her various iohns. Her face is shown in close-up, while the man's head, neck and naked torso rhythmically enter and leave the frame. The static shot is held for a quasi-unbearable length of time, communicating to the viewer Ida's boredom, discomfort, and despair. During one of the sessions, Ida looks up at the ceiling. On the plaster of the cheap hotel room is painted an icon of a smiling Christ; an ironic reworking of a worn-out cliché, but also a witty reminder that the real plot is played between Ida and Christ, Ida and God, not Ida and the pathetic man who crushes her body. Like a visual poem, alternating static shots of breathtaking composition and moments of violence, Menkes's film presents the condition of prostitute—the "bad girl," guilty of being born a woman, the bitch, the witch, the repentant sinner in the Christian iconography, the perennial victim—as a vehicle to express female alienation.10

Although Leslie Thornton's work is informed by a more classical feminist film theory (she teaches in the Semiotics Department at Brown University), she shares a similar pain of being a woman, a similar difficulty in communicating this pain. Significantly, the title of her major completed film to date, *Adynata*, denotes a "confession that words fail us"—and I will add that, in Thornton's world, images fail us, too, as they simultaneously entrap and seduce us. So it will be *between images*, in the silence between words, in the gaps created by her impressive accumulation of collaged material, that the filmmaker will look for new ways of expressing her voice, her "otherness."

Adynata starts with two black-and-white photographs of a Chinese dignitary and his family; taken

in 1861 by an English traveler, we are led to question the way the mandarin's wife is portrayed: a "China doll" with bound feet and modest gait, staring silently at nothing. Described by the filmmaker as "vulgar tourism of the Other," Adynata is a meditation on the linguistic and physical codes (exotic make-up, feminine garment, bound feet, embroidered slippers, metaphorical equation between women and flowers, fascination for the enclosed world of Japanese gardens, Turkish harems and despotic labyrinths, etc.) which construct "the woman" 11 as an Other in a position of subjection. The film suggests women's ambivalence (repulsion/complicity) for these embellished representations of their own oppression. The sound-track is an imaginative potpourri of onomatopoeias (the language of a mythical "madwoman"the ultimate Other), Chinese operas, music lifted from The Bride of Frankenstein (1935) and TV shows, Latin American songs, Betty Boop's voice, etc. This collage of exotic quotations weaves ambiguous figures both hiding and revealing the true meaning of "otherness," encompassing its own alienation and banality in cultural clichés. To quote Marguerite Duras, Adynata attempts to "translate darkness" into seductive images of an unattainable—and fake—Orient, to give words to a hitherto unspoken silence.

Shot in black-and-white, Chick Strand's Soft Fiction begins with beautiful, sensual images of a woman in extreme close-up. An attractive woman in her forties reads a letter addressed to Strand by another, unnamed woman, who relates with frankness, humor, and a bit of bashfulness an erotic episode with four cowboys at a rodeo. Then, while a younger woman in the nude is seen cooking and eating breakfast in a sunny kitchen, the radio plays a female voice whispering an erotic confession. A third woman talks about her "promiscuous youth" in Paris, her painful involvement with a man in New York, and her subsequent drug addiction. After a soprano's rendering of Strauss's Death and the Maiden, a fourth confession follows. Shot in close-up, a middle-aged woman tells of growing up in Jewish Poland as a girl during the war, and how soldiers came to get her with her entire family and her kittens. She recalls climbing a hill, "and then, there is a blank." There is a cut, followed by the image of yet another woman playing with water, walking barefoot on the beach, and dancing. The film successfully creates an atmosphere where the voices of these women can be heard, not only in relation to images of the

female body (which has become a cliché), but also to a social space and history.

Su Friedrich's The Ties That Bind is an "experimental documentary" about the filmmaker's mother. For Lore Bucher, born in 1920 in Ulm, Germany, the clash between her personal life and the movement of history was brutal: declaration of war; arguments with teachers when she kept her friendship with Jewish schoolmates; throwing her Nazi piano teacher down the stairs to indicate her refusal to join the Hitler Jungen; being barred from the University, then "drafted" in the middle of the night by soldiers who took her to a labor camp; experiencing the hatred of the "liberating" American army; then, the lure of the American dream. Having ended up married to an American soldier, she takes typing jobs to pay for his tuitions, and raises three children by herself. Friedrich's interest as a filmmaker does not lie in the unravelling of her mother's memories, but in the shifting relationship between the speaking subject and her discourse. Like all her previous work, The Ties That Bind refuses the conventions of realism; it is shot in black-and-white without sync sound, which allows for an imaginative juxtaposition of image and sound. As a counterpoint to the mother's recorded voice we see shots of her swimming in a lake; shots of Friedrich's trip to Germany, old family photos and stock footage from the war, along with sensationalist headlines from the New York Post, references to the contemporary anti-nuclear movement, and hands building a toy house that is eventually smashed under a boot. The presence of the filmmaker is marked by letters scratched directly onto the emulsion, i.e., subtracting something from the image—this void signifying the place of the filmmaker/child in relation to her parents' discourse: Where do I fit in all this? What position am I supposed to take? How does she want me to react? So, from this point of view en abyme, not only does Friedrich ask herself some critical questions ("Could my mother have done anything?"), and correct some of her mother's statements ("In Dachau killings started in 1933, not at the end of the war"), but she also examines her own life —as a feminist, as an anti-war militant—in relation to her mother's experience.

Maria Marewski's *In The Name of the Father* is similarly haunted by memories of the war. Her father was drafted into the German army, while her mother was, for unexplained reasons, sent to a

concentration camp where she served as a maid for the Nazi officers. The rich visual texture is composed of family photos (often reframed, colorized, and reworked like expressionistic canvases), pictures from traditional German children's books, and shots of churches and religious paintings with the everpresent vision of a suffering Christ. The sound track is made up of excerpts of conversations with the filmmaker's father, and readings from her mother's diary that describe her experiences in the camp as well as her relationship to her daughter. German nursery rhymes, the smiling faces of little girls on family snapshots, the aloofness one sometimes senses in the mother's portraits—all function as a reminder of the fragility of conventional happiness.

Lizzie Borden's Born in Flames still maintains the legendary status it reached even before its completion. Four years in the making, shot by a half-dozen cinematographers on a shoestring budget, using "real people" (who age and change hairdo from one shot to the next) and real locations, and mixing pop music (black rhythms and "new rock"), improvised acting, political speeches, humor and violence, the film had a cult following as soon as it was screened in Berlin, Paris and New York.

The inspiration for the film came from an article Borden was writing in 1977 for Heresies (see footnote 8). While doing historical research, she discovered that women participating in revolutionary struggles (whether the 1917 revolution or the Algerian liberation war) were always sent back to the kitchen once victory was achieved. She imagined a similar situation in the United States, ten years after a peaceful socialist revolution. While an aging President talks benevolently about "wages for housework," young socialist editors are asked by Party militants to put their feminist requests on hold while "more urgent matters" are being dealt with, and women are still exploited at work, hassled in the streets, and victims of various forms of discrimination. The women's movement is divided between white liberals and working class blacks, between sophisticated political militants and a "Women's Army" that wages war on wouldbe rapists, and between two underground radio stations-that of black singer Honey and that of punk rock musician Adele Bertei. Borden conceived the parts and the dialogue through improvisation with her (mostly non-professional) performers, hence the fascinating variety of language in

the film. Through the use of various disjunctive techniques, mixing semi-documentary footage with more narrative sequences, the film draws a challenging, humorous, multi-faceted portrait of the life-style and culture of under-represented groups of women in New York and raises political issues rarely addressed in the feminist movement.

While living in New York in the seventies, Irishborn Vivienne Dick became one of the most influential—if most idiosyncractic—filmmakers involved in the New Wave super-8 movement,12 which was thought of at the time as the starting point of a new filmic avant-garde. It was not, but the freedom allowed by super-8 allowed some directors to indulge in wild experiments. Such was the case for Vivienne Dick, whose nasty, witty, anarchistic vignettes defy all conventions of "proper filmmaking" and narrative verisimilitude. Dick experimented with lighting (hence a lot of green backgrounds in her films, which, instead of appearing to be "a mistake," create an interesting visual contrast with the violent pink or oranges of the performers' clothes), framing (her frequent use of oblique angles creates nightmarish, expressionistic effects) and editing (goodbye narrative continuity!). Like Borden (the two are friends), she also mixes "documentary" and "fictional" footage, as in the Coney Island sequence of She Had Her Gun All Ready. And contrary to the films produced by the New Wave (that were often sexist and macho), her work is about relationships among women. She Had Her Gun All Ready describes a mysterious and ultimately violent conflict between Lydia Lunch and Pat Place, which unravels in various locations in Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Ericka Beckman's films also express a sort of feminine playfulness, blended with meticulous avant-garde techniques. Informed by a visual arts background, she deconstructs the filmic space in a quasi-cubistic manner by multiplying camera angles. She builds, with a Méliès-like imagination, brightly colored abstract sets and objects, which she animates, or interacts, with performers who are treated like puppets or players in a game whose rules are indecipherable to the spectator. We Imitate, We Break Up, the film that revealed her to the New York film world, is one of my favorites. A young woman in a short skirt (the filmmaker), parodying teen-age femininity, is shown with a puppet called "Mario." They try to imitate each other, throw balls in an abstract space (where animated objects react "out of sync" to the passage

of the ball), and race against each other. Sometimes the puppet appears as a manly boxer, sometimes Beckman is alone, running after an invisible object, showing her legs (and her rear) as a naughty cheerleader, or playing with her image duplicated on a matte. Only thirty minutes in length, the film (shot in super-8) is extremely dense, with a quick pace and a highly rhythmical sound track. During a series of jumps towards the end, Beckman sings "I think about you," then adds: "I don't want to think. I'm just creating you."

Sara Driver's *You Are Not I*, and Zoe Beloff/Susan Emerling's *Nightmare Angel*, are both black-and-white narrative featurettes, adapted with talent (and very little money) from pre-existing literary work: a short story by Paul Bowles in the first case; a science fiction novel by J.G. Ballard in the second.

The first images we see in You Are Not I are of Ethel, a young woman with a strange, intense face (Suzanne Fletcher, later cast as Nicole in Driver's first feature, Sleepwalk, 1986). She is seen quietly slipping away from an unidentified place, only to find herself on the site of a multiple car accident. Discovering rows of burnt bodies along the road. wrapped in white sheets, she proceeds to uncover their heads and stick a stone in their mouths. A member of the rescue, mistaking Ethel for a badly shocked accident victim, has her taken home. During the long drive, Ethel, who has given her sister's address, pursues an unceasing inner monologue, counting the gas stations on the road. Gradually, we come to understand that Ethel is a schizophrenic who has just escaped from a mental institution, but the film, instead of constructing her as a pathetic "other," keeps viewers on her side. The battle of wills between the two sisters (Ethel silent, cool, aloof and completely self-assured, her sister painfully uptight and uneasy) ends with Ethel sticking a stone in her sister's mouth and taking her place in the house. As night falls, Ethel is still sitting motionless in the living room, uncapable of going upstairs, for she cannot "remember the layout of the rooms." Until this last image, Driver maintains the ambiguity of the narrative: did this really happen, as in a fantastic tale, or has Ethel imagined it and, if so, when does reality stop, when does schizophrenic delirium start?

Nightmare Angel is a post-modern, politically ironical adaptation of J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, in which the hero is turned on by car wrecks. The filmmakers' intelligent reading objectifies this self-

enclosed universe of male sexual obsession into a complex, visually compelling meditation on the role of media and the status of representation in the post-industrial world. The sexuality of the protagonists, Jack and Diana Weston, is mediated not only by Jack's fascination for William De Freis, a scientist who introduces him to his research on car crashes, but by a constant flow of images and sounds: TV ads, newsreels, movie clips, newscasts, etc. A questionnaire on car accidents initiates their lovemaking, while footage of President Kennedy's assassination is shown on TV. Next, we see the Westons in a stadium, about to witness a crash demonstration by a stunt man impersonating Liz Taylor. The sequence's last image fades on the TV monitor, while a panning shot brings us back to the couch, where the couple is interrupted by the click of a still camera, which "freezes" the action on the screen. Jack runs to the balcony, to discover De Freis and his telephoto camera pointed at their living room window. The film plays brilliantly with these different layers of representation, until the moment when Watson identifies completely with De Freis's gaze and obsessions.

The use of black-and-white in Julie Dash's Illusions is justified by its subject matter: blacks passing for whites, fantasy posing for reality, and independent cinema quoting/parodying/subverting the codes of forties' Hollywood. In a central scene, a young black woman, Ester, is seen in profile, drenched in light, singing to a microphone. The image of a blonde actress, lying on the sofa of a luxurious drawing room and voicing the words of the song, is projected on a screen. Then the camera reframes the scene, centering on the studio screen and eliminating Ester, producing the illusion that the blonde is actually singing. Later, in a conversation with Mignon, the young studio executive who supervised the session, Ester comments on how Hollywood has been using her musical talents: "Sometimes, when I'm in a movie theater, I sit and listen to my voice coming from one of those movie stars. I just close my eyes and pretend that it's me up there wearing that satin gown."13

If Ester is one of the casualties of the "dreamproducing machine," Mignon is another, and her dilemma, brought to a crisis by her meeting with Ester, is finely explored in the film. The war has made it possible for Mignon to reach a certain

status in Hollywood, but she owes her professional success to the fact that she "passes for white," and, as a woman, the limits of her "executive power" are strictly defined by studio bosses. The war transforms Hollywood into a powerful propaganda tool. hence the presence of the lieutenant stationed in the studio, and if it is as a woman that she is exposed to his obnoxious courtship, it is as a black woman that she is insulted by him. Dash deals masterfully with these different levels of struggle, alienation and misrepresentation, and draws a complex and appealing portrait of what it means to be a black woman in white America: neither a total victim, nor a total heroine, but someone who has to be constantly on guard to deal with endless, often painful contradictions.

Some documentaries in this retrospective find original ways of representing "otherness." Camille Billops and James Hatch's Suzanne, Suzanne looks at a "black middle class family in trouble with itself"14 from the inside; Suzanne is Billops' niece. The project initially intended to document the young woman's struggle against drug addiction, but, through conversations between the aunt and her niece, an uglier truth appeared: that of Suzanne's abuse by her father. The film is a landmark documentary by and about black women, because of the courageous involvement of the filmmaker: "We kept saying, 'How could this happen to us?'... From my mother's point of view, you didn't fight your way out of the cotton fields and white folk's kitchens to see your granddaughter become a dope fiend. Through the film, I think the family arrived at some important discoveries about itself...." (ibid).

Christine Choy and Renee Tajima's Who Killed Vincent Chin? turns the tables around: the Other is not us (Asian-Americans), but them (the white males). In Detroit, during a crisis in the automobile industry, metal workers blame layoffs on Japanese imports and assaults on Japanese-Americans are reported. A few days before his marriage, a young Chinese engineer, Vincent Chin, goes for a drink at a topless bar. There, he is mistakenly thought to be Japanese by a blue-collar worker and his son-in-law. Later, the two men attack him with baseball bats and smash his skull open. Brought to trial, they are convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to three years' probation and a \$3,000 fine. Outraged, Asian-Americans file a civil rights suit. The

murderers, first found guilty in court, eventually win in appeal.

To make sense of what happened between Chin and his murderers, the film weaves a complex tapestry of the different social forces in multi-racial Detroit. In particular, it tries to describe and deconstruct the mentality and social habits of the white blue-collar milieu, and interviews at length Ronald Ebens, one of the murderers. Sitting on a couch next to his silent wife, he expresses no remorse, only indignation at being tried in a federal court. "This was an accident, I was drunk that night, it could have happened to anybody, it has nothing to do with racism," he keeps saying.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's ways of positing the Other is the result of a complex process. As an American resident making a film in Africa, she could objectify her "subjects" as "the Other." As a Vietnamese woman expatriate in the United States, she herself has been constructed as an Other in relation to mainstream Western culture. So, in her first "antianthropological documentary," Reassemblage, her mode of access to the "real" involves a re-examination of her position as an observer, an assertion of her difficulties in comprehending aspects of village Senegalese life, and a clear definition of the role of her first-person voiceover. "I do not intend to speak about. Just speak nearby. "This magisterial shift (decentering) in the placing of the subject joins the research of Rainer, Dash, Friedrich, Menkes, Thornton and other filmmakers "trying to write (in) the 'interstice,' the banned place that remains unheard, opaque, uncomprehensible to the dominant's ear." At the same time, these filmmakers are aware that "identity is this multiple layer whose process never leads to the True Self, or to Woman, but only to other layers, other selves, other women."

Berenice Reynaud is a film curator and critic whose writing has appeared in *Cahiers du Cinema*, *October, Screen*, and *Afterimage*. She has programmed American independent films for the Montreal International Women's Video and Film Festival. With Yvonne Rainer, she recently organized "Colonialism, Sexism, Misrepresentation: A Corrective Film Series and Conference" at the Collective for Living Cinema. She is currently writing a book on independent film for Arden Press.

<sup>1</sup>Yvonne Rainer, "Thoughts on Women's Cinema: Eating Words, Voicing Struggles," *The Independent,* April 1987, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>David Ehrenstein, *Film: The Front Line, 1984*, Arden Press, Denver, Colorado, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup>Not only was it a male subject, but it was a *white male* subject, which explains the relative indifference of "minority" filmmakers to avant-garde pursuits, and the importance of the newly coined concept of "Third Cinema." See, for example, Paul Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflexions," in *Framework*, No. 34, London 1987, pp. 5-38, and Kobena Mercer, "Third Cinema at Edinburgh: Reflections of a Pioneering Event," *The Independent*, op. cit. pp. 20-24.

4"Letter to Nan Piene" in Yvonne Rainer, Work 1961-1973, Halifax, The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and New York University Press, 1974, p. 238.

<sup>5</sup>"Performance, Autobiography, Fiction, Media," in *Yvonne Rainer*, op. cit., p. 276.

<sup>6</sup>Yvonne Rainer, "Thoughts on Women's Cinema: Eating Words, Voicing Struggles," op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>7</sup>Alison Butler, "She Must Be Seeing Things, an Interview with Sheila McLaughlin," in Screen, London, Autumn 1987, p. 20. Cf. also Su Friedrich (whose work is discussed below): "Part of my difference with feminist film discourse is that so much of it seems to be pre-determined: you have this set of problems and then you apply them to films in a very deliberate, one-to-one way. And if I had been more rigid as a feminist, I wouldn't have made all the films [I made], or I wouldn't have put all these things in them because I wouldn't have thought they were acceptable images...And certainly with Gently Down The Stream (1981), it was more a matter of speaking directly about my own dreams or my own experiences, and being very frank about sex. In the early years I was working with Heresies ("A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics," published—albeit irregularly—in New York by a collective of women) and doing a lot of feminist work, when we talked about sex, it was mostly to complain about patriarchy, not to be informative about our own sexual experiences. And I felt,

particularly when I made that film, that it was a way in which I could finally say what I thought and experienced. And with my new film, Damned If You Don't (1986), discussion of sex is again the real issue for me because certainly there are a lot of women that posit the idea that you can't show naked women on the screen because it's exploitative." (author's interview with the filmmaker, Spring 1987).

<sup>8</sup>Julie Dash, quoted in Kwasi Harris, "New Images: An Interview with Julie Dash and Alile Sharon Larkin," *The Independent*, December 1986, p. 19. In the same interview Alile Sharon Larkin expresses another black woman's ambiguity in relation to feminism: "Black men have no power in this country. They're powerless. So how can I say that they are oppressing me?" (Ibid). In her *Ain't a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (South End Press, Boston, 1981) Bell Hooks disagrees with such a position, and argues that black women have been oppressed by black men too, and that a specific form of feminism has to be created to answer to their specific situation.

<sup>9</sup>Nina Menkes, author's unpublished interview with filmmaker, October 1986.

10"...For Magdalena ... I had absolutely no cinematic reference point. And I think in terms of women beginning to give expression to their (our) own consciousness and experience, we really do not have much of a reference point in terms of form... Magdalena is syncopated, uneven, "rough" because that is the very nature of something that has NOT been worked in "through the ages...of cinema..." (Nina Menkes, letter to the author, October 27, 1986).

<sup>11</sup>In *Encore* (Paris, Le Seuil, 1976), Lacan systematically writes "the woman," to signify that, in so much as she is the Other, woman exists only as a gap within male discourse, being "not wholly" within the symbolic order.

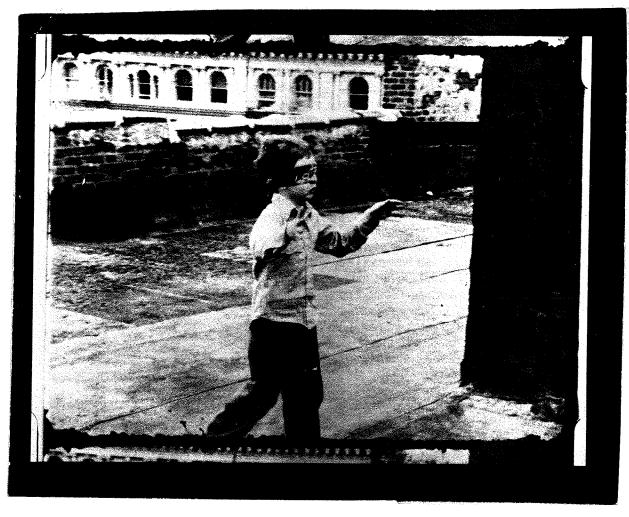
<sup>12</sup>The "movement" also included Charlie Ahearn, Scott and Beth B., Becky Johnson, Eric Mitchell, James Nares, etc. Certainly, Scott and Beth B.'s *The Offenders*, along with Dick's films, is the best example of that ephemeral "school" of filmmaking.

<sup>13</sup> Illusions was shot when Dash was a student at UCLA. At the time, a number of black filmmakers

(Billie Woodberry, Charles Burnett, etc.) made some landmark movies and collaborated together, in what scholar Clyde Taylor was to term "The LA Rebellion." ("The LA Rebellion: New Spirit in American Film," *Black Film Review*, Spring 1986, Washington DC). Julie Dash now lives in Atlanta, and is completing her first feature film, *Daughters of Dust*.

<sup>14</sup>Camille Billops, interview with George C. Wolfe, *Issue*, No. 6, Spring 1986, New York, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup>Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Introduction," *Discourse*, No. 8, Fall-Winter 1986-8, p. 7.



Born to Film by Danny Lyon

#### DOCUMENTARY MEETS THE AVANT-GARDE By DAVID SCHWARTZ

The labels "documentary" and "avant-garde" have come to represent opposing styles of filmmaking. In this scheme, the documentary is rooted in the reality of the external world and uses the camera as a scientific tool, while the avant-garde film springs from the filmmaker's imagination and uses the medium as an art form. The documentary is seen as objective, impersonal, and authoritative, while the avant-garde film is seen as subjective, personal, and open to interpretation. In *The Cinema Book*, critic Pam Cook offers this description of the documentary:

Documentary film presents the truth of its argument as self-evident, unified and non-contradictory. Most often, an authoritative

voice-over commentary is used to frame and contain the images which are seen as unmediated recordings of "the real world"....1

This position is, of course, purposely overstated. Documentary history is filled with creators who have "mediated" their "recordings of the real world" for artistic ends. Robert Flaherty's romanticized and obviously staged adventure movies, Dziga Vertov's flamboyantly formalist city symphony *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), and Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda masterpiece *Triumph of the Will* (1934) are some examples. Still, the evolution of documentary practice has been towards a purported invisibility of style. During the sixties, the goal of the *cinéma vérité* filmmaker, with his lightweight camera equipment, was to be a "fly on the wall," unobtrusively recording reality. The presence of the filmmaker was always, some-

how, to be ignored. (Which is why it is such a refreshing moment in *Seventeen* when Lynn Massie, a girl in the film, acknowledges the filmmaker in the room, and says "Good night, Joel.")

As cinéma vérité became unfashionable in the seventies, a different form of documentary proliferated. Tackling a wide range of social issues. movies such as The Times of Harvey Milk (1984), Rosie the Riveter (1980), In the Name of the People (1984), and The Trials of Alger Hiss (1980) emerged. Blending archival footage. talking head interviews, and voice-over narration, these works presented specific readings of history, generally from a liberal viewpoint. While these films were often thought to be too controversial for network television, they were strikingly conventional in style, striving for seamless professionalism. They were often nostalgic in tone, in their search for heroes and their unquestioning use of archival footage. Frequently, they were narrated by celebrities to add a patina of respectability.2

The cinéma vérité film and the archive-and-interview film both were predicated on their supposed neutrality. The term "cinéma vérité" posits the movie camera as a conduit of truth. Similarly, the archive-and-interview film uses a lawyer's methodology, making its case through a steady stream of supposedly incontrovertible evidence. Both forms mask the presence of the filmmaker, and attempt to hide the fact that a documentary film is an encounter between the maker and the subject.

This notion of encounter is at the heart of the documentaries in this retrospective. Rather than simply collecting and arranging data, these films transform the documentary into an open, probing form. The process of making the film becomes a part of the subject. In these films, seeing is not simply believing; rather, to see is to question. If these comments seem too general, it is because the films they refer to defy categorization into a unified style and set of rules, like the Direct Cinema group of the sixties (Richard Leacock, Robert Drew, D.A. Pennebaker, the Maysles brothers, et al.) In terms of funding, production, and distribution, the avant-garde documentary (for lack of a better term) is something of a misfit. Though a handful are released theatrically, such as Ross McElwee's Sherman's March and Erroll

Morris's current *The Thin Blue Line*, the prime marketplace for documentaries is TV, which favors traditional journalistic standards. To be broadcast, documentaries must meet certain unwritten criteria in terms of content (*Seventeen*, a notorious example, was censored by PBS for its unabashed depiction of teen behavior<sup>3</sup>), length (the standard running time of a documentary these days is fifty-eight minutes, tailor-made to fit a TV time slot.; because of this, *Variety* now reviews documentaries in its TV section), and style (Dan Eisenberg was told by a PBS programmer, "We don't show films with that kind of photography," in reference to his use of probing hand-held camerawork in which the image often comes in and out of focus).

The "avant-garde documentary" is a loosely definable tag that can be placed on a wide range of films, from Shirley Clarke's million-dollar high-tech *Ornette: Made in America* to Mark Lapore's extremely low-budget super-8 film *Medina*. There is no established tradition for this genre, no "master" figures such as Maya Deren or Stan Brakhage to serve as paragons. As a result, many of these films convey a sense of reinventing the wheel, and employ a startling range of forms and techniques. In the hope of identifying some common concerns among them, here are some of the strategies that filmmakers in this retrospective have used in attempting to invent new documentary forms:

### Radical camera styles that express singular, personal visions

"Most of what happens cannot be photographed" writes filmmaker Allen Ross.<sup>5</sup> In making *Papa*, part of his *Grandfather Trilogy*, Ross felt that he could not convey his relationship with his subject in an alienating filmmaker/subject relationship. As a result, he shot much of the film without even looking through the viewfinder, often placing the camera on its side:

The film's form consists of long static takes combined with extreme camera angles. The camera angles are problematic for many people. For me, it was not an affectation but the only possible way I knew to approach the problem of filming my grand-father....

- Allen Ross

Ross's style is jarring at first, but soon establishes a respect for the mystery of his subject. Simple details, such as the way Papa places his hand on his belt or the way his shadow falls, take on great resonance in these off-center compositions. Similarly, Jeffrey Skoller in Nicaragua: Hear-Say/ See-Here has developed an oblique visual style, with the camera never settling on a solid, classical composition. Skoller conveys his personal response to the reality of daily life in Nicaragua. As he explains in the film, "The news media has created a Nicaragua where there is only war, random violence, and political conflict. Their images are devoid of all the elements that give a place its beauty and humanity." In a purposefully tentative visual style, using a reflexive voice-over sound-track. Skoller constantly questions his place as a filmmaker, and expresses guilt at invading the privacy of the people he meets by filming rather than simply interacting with them. An acute political awareness informs the act of seeing in Skoller's film.

The same is true with Trinh T. Minh-ha. As a Vietnamese emigré, Minh-ha is well aware of the biases and assumptions that control most ethnographic documentaries. In such films, the Third World is seen as the exotic Other. Typically, a dry, scholarly voice intones the "essential" facts about, say, an African tribe, and in a mere thirty minutes, the film has capsulized an entire culture. Minh-ha's poetic film essays directly challenge this practice. Reassemblage, shot in Senegal, employs a visual style that respects the complexity and difference of the "Other" culture and explores the filmmaker's status as an outsider. On the sound track, Minh-ha describes her camera style:

Jump cuts; jerky, unfinished, insignificant pans; split faces, bodies, actions, events; rhythms, rhythmized images, slightly off the beat, discord, irregular colors, vibrant, saturated or too bright; framing and reframing, hesitations; sentences on sentences, looped phrases, snatches of conversations, cuts, broken lines, words; repetitions; silences; chasing camera; squatting position; a look for a look; questions, returned questions; silences.

Mark Lapore's Medina, filmed in the Sudan, uses

the immediacy of the super-8 sound camera to create a subjective, intimate study of village life. With his inquisitive camera style, Lapore does not pose as a Romantic explorer, nor is he on a scientific or educational mission; he simply offers a personal response to a village he visited.

Chick Strand makes documentaries, as well as narrative films, animation, abstract visual studies, and found footage films. The title of her film *Soft Fiction* implies a malleable approach to categories. Indeed, this is not fiction but a personal portrait of five women. The visual style is extremely flexible, ranging from static long-takes to near-abstract imagery, and follows no rules of standard documentary practice.

### The image is manipulated *after* filming to explore its meaning *as* image

In the sixties, independent filmmakers treated the filmed image idealistically. For *vérité* filmmakers, the camera was a window onto the world: what you saw was what you got. Similarly, for experimental filmmakers, the filmed image served as a direct window into the imagination, or at least into the filmmaker's subconscious. The key avant-garde movement of the seventies, Structuralism, helped bring an end to this idealism: the film image was demystified as its material qualities were brought to the forefront. The texture, boundaries, and two-dimensionality of the image were explored in films by Ernie Gehr, Hollis Frampton, and George Landow.

A number of important documentary films from the past decade question the nature of the image by directly manipulating the image itself. Using graphic and optical printing strategies common to avant-garde practice, these techniques draw attention, almost literally, to the filmmaker's hand. They also emphasize the artificialty of the image, and strip away the illusion that when we watch a documentary film we are watching reality.

Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Poto and Cabengo* explores the nature of language by investigating the case of a set of twins who supposedly developed a private vocabulary. Gorin, a former collaborator of Jean-Luc Godard and a newcomer to America, was interested in issues of communication, language, and exile. During a long editing process, he transformed his *vérité* study into a complex essay. Some images are frozen and others are repeated.

Subtitles frequently roll across the middle of the screen, making us aware of the texture of languages floating in the girls' environment. At times, Gorin eliminates the image with black leader, to draw attention to the sound track.

Similar strategies are used in Su Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind,* a portrait of the filmmaker's relationship to her mother, who grew up in Nazi Germany. In this, her most overtly "documentary" film, Friedrich employs a number of her trademark techniques to explore changing perceptions about her own identity: she scratches questions directly onto the film surface, and augments her interviews with black—and—white images that spring from intuitive connections with the subject matter.

Daniel Barnett, in *The Chinese Typewriter*, uses an optical printer to meticulously rework images from a trip to China. The title of the film is a metaphor for Barnett's filmmaking process. Just as the Chinese typewriter creates text with nearly 3,000 characters, Barnett uses the optical printer to turn his images into units of meaning that are elaborated through repetition and recontextualization.

Richard Levine's powerful War Stories has a sound track composed entirely of the testimony of Vietnam veterans. We never see the men, for the imagery is composed only of disturbing newsreel footage that has been optically printed and solarized with a chemical process that casts the images in garish greens and oranges. Stripped from their original context, these images, as well as the words of the soldiers, take on a hallucinatory power.

### A "theatrical" style is used, rather than false "realism"

The physicist Heisenberg proved that the mere act of observation changes what is being observed. It follows that there is a certain amount of pretense in the notion of the "candid camera." Ironically, a documentary can sometimes gain authenticity by addressing its artifice and style. Erroll Morris, in Gates of Heaven (1978), The Thin Blue Line (1988) and Vernon, Florida (1981), has perfected a highly theatrical style for talking heads interviews. His subjects are framed in tableaus, with the camera frozen at a fixed distance. The frame becomes a stage set, with the interviewee quite obviously posed. In this unabashedly self-conscious fashion, Morris turns his subjects into performers, a style far more credible than the feigned naturalism of

most documentaries. Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines describe the artficiality inherent to traditional methods:

All the while your "subjects" participate in your artifice. They ignore the production people hiding behind sofas and doors. They make believe 4,000 watts of light equals midnight at home. They avert their eyes when a guy in the corner with a zoom lens, and another fellow with a mike on a boom, start shooting. Why? The subjects must pretend, see, that they're unaware a camera and tape recorder are present. They continue to act out the illusion—until everybody tires of "real life."

In Camille Billops' Suzanne, Suzanne, an interview between a mother and daughter is set against a black background, with dramatic lighting, and the subjects looking straight ahead. There is no pretense of trying to capture a candid conversation between the two in this highly controlled tableau. The resulting confrontation acknowledges the presence of the camera and feels remarkably honest.

#### The filmmaker becomes a character in the film

A landmark of the autobiographical genre is Ed Pincus's Diaries, completed in 1978, and not included in this retrospective. Pincus filmed himself, his wife, children and friends during a fiveyear period, often with remarkable candor. It is clear, however, that Pincus uses the camera as a weapon, often to turn attention from himself toward others. By playing the role of "cameraman," Pincus often becomes a passive observer, avoiding the necessity of explaining himself in uncomfortable situations. As fascinating and as valid as the film is (and it stands as a haunting record of the decay of sixties idealism), Diaries raises some questions. How does Pincus feel about his dual role, as filmmaker and as participant in the world around him? What are the dangers in being a passive observer?

Ross McElwee's Sherman's March raises these same questions. McElwee draws an ironic analogy between himself and William Tecumseh Sherman, the notorious, introspective general who pillaged

the south during the Civil War. McElwee retraces Sherman's march to the sea, but turns the project into a romantic quest, using the camera as a ploy, a way to meet women. Filming as a one-man crew, with frequent monologues, McElwee creates a reflexive, resonant exploration of the film vs. life issue, in the guise of a screwball *cinéma vérité* travelogue.

Similar irony suffuses George Kuchar's wonderfully funny diary videotapes. Best known for his ultracheap homemade B-movies, this avant-garde mainstay has perfected a spontaneous no-budget style of filmmaking, using consumer video equipment. Kuchar carries the camera wherever he goes and provides a running commentary, meant only for the viewer's ears. This ribald narration, with all of Kuchar's scatological and sexual obsessions, makes clear that there is a real person behind the camera. Without any pretension, he humanizes the filmmaking process. In documentary practice, where the filmmaker is more often supposed to be nonexistent, the effect is quite liberating. The soundtrack of Danny Lyon's Born to Film, which weaves home movie footage of Lyon as a boy (taken by his father) with Lyons' footage of his own son, is the filmmaker talking directly to his son. Here again, both the filmmaker and the process are personalized.

Joel Demott and Jeff Kreines do not appear on screen in their film *Seventeen*, an intimate portrait of a year in the life of a group of working-class high school kids in Muncie, Indiana. But the people in the film acknowledge the presence of the filmmakers. DeMott and Kreines have mastered a style of one-person shooting (they work separately: in *Seventeen*, Joel, a woman, filmed the girls; Jeff filmed the boys), using a lightweight camera and sound rig that eliminates the need for a large crew and lights. The goal is to break down the normal boundaries between filmmaker and subject. In an unpublished essay, "Notes on One Person Shooting," they write:

Shooting one-person restores the possibility of kinship. The filmmaker doesn't carry on with "his people" in front of "his subjects." The dichotomy those labels reveal, in the filmmaker himself, is gone, along with the crew...The filmmaker becomes another human being in the room. He

participates without awkwardness in the society that surrounds him. He responds autonomously.

### Documentary and fictional techniques are combined

"Documentary" and "fiction" are styles, brands of filmmaking with their own distinct sets of precepts and presumptions. A number of films attempt to break down the boundaries between these two disciplines. Shirley Clarke's Ornette: Made in America is a collage portrait film, in which the life and pioneering music of Ornette Coleman are explored through computer-animated sequences, playfully manipulated interviews, concert footage, and fictional scenes. Clarke's documentary and fiction techniques are united through the film's overall sense of improvisation. Mark Daniels' The Influence of Strangers, Tom Palazzolo's Caligari's Cure and Yvonne Rainer's The Man Who Envied Women are other examples of documentary and fiction material being collaged or combined into one film.

In Anne Robertson's super-8 marathon epic *Five Year Diary* the line between fiction and reality is perversely and wonderfully unclear, as the two are organically combined. This filmmaker from Boston has literally turned her life into a performance, and she is simultaneously an actor and a "real person" in her films. It is always clear that she is aware of and performing for the camera, and that she draws no distinction between acting and being. In Robertson's film work, categories are useless, since she makes it impossible to find the dividing line between art and life, reality and performance, documentary and fiction.

Some call it Documentary. i call it No Art, No Experiment, No Fiction, No Documentary. To say some thing, no thing, and allow reality to enter. Capture me. This, i feel, is no surrender. Contraries meet and mate and i work best at the limits of all categories.

-Trinh T. Minh-ha, from Reassemblage

David Schwartz is the Associate Curator of Film at the American Museum of the Moving Image. He is a filmmaker and journalist whose writing has appeared in the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, Newsday, and the Independent. His film Deadhead was selected for the 1986 Global Village Documentary Festival in New York.

<sup>1</sup>Cook, Pam. *The Cinema Book*. Pantheon Books, New York, 1985. p. 191.

<sup>2</sup>Some prominent celebrity narrators include Martin Sheen (In The Name of the People, 1984, The Real Thing, 1984), Ed Asner (Americas in Transition, 1982), Anne Jackson (Are We Winning, Mommy?, 1986), Ossie Davis (Dawn of the People, 1983), and Harvey Fierstein (The Times of Harvey Milk, 1984). Rocketkitkongokit, in this retrospective, is a send-up of this approach, with a hopelessly dense narration breathlessly intoned by an African voice. Blending historical fact about Congo history with paranoid speculation, the film brilliantly undercuts the conventions of documentary filmmaking.

<sup>3</sup>A number of other documentaries, such as Mira Nair's 1985 *India Cabaret*, wear the badge "Banned by PBS" as a mark of honor as well as a marketing device.

<sup>4</sup>As a result, categorization often becomes a problem. How does one label Ken Jacobs' *Perfect Film*? Clearly, this discarded reel of news footage filmed the day of Malcolm X's murder is a document, a newsworthy collection of eyewitness accounts. But does the recovery of the film, and the artistic gesture in its naming, make this an avant-garde found footage film? Its name draws our attention away from the "relevant" content to such elements as visual style, and filmic structure; we search the frame to find just what makes this film "perfect," and in the process, the labels "documentary" and "avant-garde" fall apart.

<sup>5</sup>From program notes entitled, "Notes Regarding the Use of the Camera," for a showing of three of his films, November 11, 1983.

<sup>6</sup>Taken from program notes by Ross, November 11, 1983.

<sup>7</sup>From an unpublished essay on *Seventeen*.

The following section consists of the program notes distributed during the **Independent America** retrospective, October 7 – November 11, 1988. The notes are organized in chronological order according to show date.

#### Program 1

PERFECT FILM (Ken Jacobs, 1986, b&w, 16mm, 25 mins.)

**THE WHOLE SHEBANG** (Ken Jacobs, 1982, two-projector "Nervous System" presentation, 16mm, approx. 75 mins.)

Ken Jacobs, a pioneer of the American avantgarde, has constantly found new ways to unleash the latent power of cinematic imagery. Jacobs explores the essential quality of film, its epheméral, ghostlike nature, by pointing to the fact that a movie is always a record of the past as well as an "organism" brought to life through projection. Filmed the day of Malcolm X's murder, Perfect Film is a discarded reel of unedited news footage that Jacobs found on Canal Street. This Duchampian gesture enables the film to work on a variety of levels; as we actively search the frame for a justification of the title, we pay attention to every element of the film, and this string of eyewitness accounts, peppered with establishing shots of the Harlem surroundings, becomes a rich and oddly beautiful time capsule.

In the past decade, Jacobs has devoted most of his creative energy (aside from teaching at SUNY/Binghamton) to live performance and 3-D. His homemade "Nervous System" is an elaborate handmade projection system employing two projectors "played" by Jacobs as an unprecedented brand of film performance. In *The Whole Shebang*, Jacobs transforms old newsreel footage of death-defying carnival stunts into a mesmerizing series of still images that seem to sputter to life.

#### Jacobs on Perfect Film:

TV newscast discard; 1965; reprinted as found maybe in a Canal Street bin, I guess, with the exception of boosting volume second half.

A lot of film is perfect left alone, perfectly revealing in its un or semi-conscious form. I wish more stuff was available in its raw state, as primary source material for anyone to consider, and to leave for others in just that way, the evidence uncontaminated by compulsive proprietary misapplied artistry.

"Editing," the purposeful "pointing things out" that cuts a road straight and narrow through the cinejungle; we barrel through thinking we're possibly going somewhere and miss it all. Better to just be pointed to the territory, to put in time exploring, roughing it, on our own. For the straight scoop we need the whole scoop, no less than the clue entire and without rearrangement.

#### Jacobs on The Whole Shebang:

Phantasmagorical monstrosities pull from the screen. Time doesn't stand still but runs in place. A strident elegy to crazy people.

First performed in 1982, *The Whole Shebang* follows a "score," making a statement beyond phenomena-display, with room for improvisation. The *Nervous System* consists, very basically, of two identical prints on two projectors capable of single-frame advance and "freeze" (turning the movie back into a series of closely related slides). The twin prints plod through the projectors, frame...by...frame, in various degrees of synchronization. Most often there's only a single frame difference. Difference makes for movement; often, three-dimensional space is created via a shuttling mask or spinning propellor up front, between the projectors, that rapidly and repeatedly alternates



The Whole Shebang by Ken Jacobs

the cast images. Tiny shifts in the way the two images overlap create radically different effects. The throbbing flickering (which takes some getting used to) is necessary to create "eternalisms:" unfrozen slices of time, sustained movements going nowhere unlike anything in life (at no time are loops employed).

The aim is neither to achieve a life-like nor a *Black Lagoon* 3-D illusionism, but to pull a tense plastic play of volume configurations and movements out of standard (2-D) pictorial patterning.

## **Family Portraits**

t. and the small picture frame (Phil Weisman, 1986, b&w, 16mm, 12 mins.)
Produced, directed, and edited by Phil Weisman. Early footage supplied by Weisman's aunt,
Fritzie Pasternak. Music recorded and arranged by Noy Gorodinsky and his Gypsy Ensemble

BEGINNING PIECES (Alfred Guzzetti, 1986, color, 16mm, 40 mins.)

AN EVENING AT HOME (Gail Camhi, 1979, b&w, 16mm, 13 mins.)

With a deceptively spontaneous, casually "amateurish" style, Phil Weisman's *t. and the small picture frame* is an artful homage to his parents. From the loving nature of the compositions, to the gently faded "old-fashioned" look of the film stock, Weisman has skillfully captured the magical quality of home movies. The film blends footage of family and friends posing for the camera, old home movies, and a resonant image of the filmmaker in his father's dentist chair. There is something sweet about seeing father and son "work" on each other; the father doing his dentistry, the son the filming. Fittingly, Weisman made the film fairly quickly, in about two months, a change of pace from his meticulously labored earlier films.

Alfred Guzzetti, who teaches filmmaking, theory, and criticism at Harvard University, brings the skill of an accomplished cinéma vérité filmmaker to his beautifully made Beginning Pieces, the second in a series of films about his own children. (Scenes From Childhood was made in 1980). In a respectful, uncondescending manner, Guzzetti concentrates on his daughter Sarah's development from age two to five, as she plays the piano, interacts with friends, mothers her dolls, and learns to express herself. Beneath her playfulness and experimentation is a budding awareness of sexuality and death.

For her "musical," An Evening at Home, Gail Camhi filmed her father in "three vignettes of his own fabrication. He had requested and suggested and insisted that I film such a portrait of him." We see Mr. Camhi in his living room, lip-syncing to Al Jolson's "Swannee," conducting a record of "Flight of the Bumble Bee," and dancing to "Spanish Eyes." There is a gentle blend of awkwardness and release in this cheerfully modest document of a show business fantasy come true.

## Films by Stan Brakhage

CREATION (1979, color, 16mm, 16 mins., silent)

UNCONSCIOUS LONDON STRATA (1982, color, 16mm, 22 mins., filmed in super-8)

THE EGYPTIAN SERIES (1983, color, 16mm, 17 mins.)

THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS (1981, color, 16mm, 3 mins., silent)

LOUD VISUAL NOISES (1986, color, 16mm, 3 mins.)

Collaborative sound track compiled by Joel Haertling with sound contributions by Die Totliche Doris, Zoviet France, Nurse With Wound, The Hafler Trio, Joel Hartling, and I.H.T.S.O.

THE DANTE QUARTET (1987, color, 35mm, 8 mins., silent)

Stan Brakhage, who began making films in 1952, long ago established himself as a key figure of the American avant-garde. Using an enormous array of techniques and styles to forge a mode of personal (often abstract) expression, and to create cinematic metaphors for perception and consciousness, he has opened up the medium. Moving from Freudian psychodrama to a more Jungian form of what P. Adams Sitney, in his book Visionary Film (Oxford University Press, New York, 1979), labeled "major mythopoeia," Brakhage has consistently ventured into uncharted territory, introducing an encyclopedic variety of aesthetic innovations. He remains prolific: with more than 100 films to his credit in the past decade, a single program offers little more than a sampling of recent work.

Creation is one of his most pictorial films, with breathtaking photography of the Alaskan land-scape. Brakhage films the glaciers, mountains, trees, and sky in the spirit of romanticism, as if they comprised a metaphor for all creation on Earth. His expressive filming style treats the act of seeing as an act of creation.

The vividly titled *Unconscious London Strata* was filmed in super-8 during a trip to London in 1979. The highly impressionistic footage captures the feeling of being in a city that is steeped in history.

The Egyptian Series, inspired by hieroglyphics, approaches complete abstraction, and is one of Brakhage's most lucid and distilled works.

The Garden of Earthly Delights is an ode to plant life, inspired by Hieronymus Bosch. Reviving a technique used in his 1963 film Mothlight, Brakhage packed plants and flowers between strips of film. A lush, continual flow of green, orange and

yellow organic forms, this is one of Brakhage's most seductively beautiful films.

Loud Visual Noises, a short, intensely luminous hand painted film, with sparkles of color against a dark background, has the concentrated energy of Brakhage's best work. The film will be shown with a newly created experimental sound track.

The Dante Quartet, six years in the making, is an ambitious multi-layered hand-painted film created on IMAX-size film frames, inspired by *The Divine Comedy*. Each frame of this spectacular work is an expressionist painting on a celluloid canvas.

## Brakhage on The Dante Quartet:

This hand-painted work... demonstrates the earthly conditions of "Hell," "Purgatory" (or Transition), and "Heaven" (or "existence is song," which is the closest I'd presume upon heaven from my experience) as well as the mainspring of/from "Hell" (Hell Spit Flexion) in four parts which are inspired by the closed-eye or hypnogogic vision created by those emotional states.

#### Brakhage on Unconscious London Strata:

While visiting London (dream of my youth) and wishing to be simply camera-tourist (taking pictures of exotic architectural arrangements imagined since earliest Dickens, etc.) I found myself forced, yes forced (!) to photograph, rather, the nearest equivalent to the NON-pictorial workings of my mind which these London scenes, before my eyes and camera lens, would afford—each scenic possibility distorted from any easily identifiable picture to some laborious reconstruction of the mind's eye at the borders of the unconscious.

STANDARD GAUGE (Morgan Fisher, 1984, color, 16mm, 35 mins.)

ON THE MARRIAGE BROKER JOKE AS CITED BY FREUD IN WIT AND ITS RELATION TO THE UNCON-SCIOUS, OR CAN THE AVANT-GARDE ARTIST BE WHOLED? (Owen Land, 1979, color, 16mm, 20 mins.)

Cast: T'one Gray, Keith Anderson, Morgan Fisher, Larry Moran, Herb Graham, Kevin O'Connor, Rodney Kagewana, Karen Seriguchi, Minoru Maeda, Sam Hiona, Andre Rideau, Yoshi, Willy Lee, Paul Sharits, Adelaide Donnelly, Eliot Donnelly, Bonita Lei, Norah Robinson, Liz Mamorsky

"What game shall we play? Let's pretend we are avant-garde filmmakers making a film about marriage broker jokes."

-A panda, in On The Marriage Broker Joke...

When Morgan Fisher moved to Los Angeles in 1970, he supported his experimental filmmaking by editing low budget features, educational films and industrials. His own films are wry, minimal works about the medium, including Projection Instructions (1976), a performance piece for the projectionist, and Production Stills (1970), comprised of Polaroid shots of a movie crew at work. Standard Gauge is a deceptively simple, enormously rich, and humorous meditation on movies, a 35-minute monologue about 35mm film. Historical, personal, and professional ruminations about the gauge are accompanied by scraps of film collected by Fisher throughout his career: Technicolor footage saved from destruction at a film lab, images of women from color tests on film leader, scenes from a Roger Corman film, and so on. Rather than projecting these images, however, Fisher lays them out, as objects, on a light table, filming them with a 16mm camera in a single uninterrupted take. Fisher sustains a witty counterpoint between moving and still images, and between 16mm and 35mm, and he creates a world in which all movie images are equal, and in which the medium itself is celebrated.

Owen Land (formerly George Landow) also provides a comical critique of film practice. Made in 1979, On The Marriage Broker Joke... parodies two of the avant-garde's obsessions at the time: structuralism and psychoanalysis. The film is an intuitive stream of sight gags, malapropisms, and non-sequiturs (Two pandas are in the film only because of a misreading of the word "pander," an Oriental man explains the difference between "large-small" and "small-large" cans of fruit, and Morgan Fisher delivers an ode to the sprocket hole). A running thread of religious imagery suggests a similarity between the irrational nature

of a joke, and the mystical nature of religious enlightenment.

## Morgan Fisher on Standard Gauge:

Although the film is one continuous shot, each piece of film fills the frame and so inflects the embracing shot, creating within it the effect of a succession of shots. So the film combines two conventions usually held to be mutually exclusive, or even antagonistic: editing—the construction of a film through montage—and the long take, the impassive recording of a scene that has been arranged with some purpose in mind.

Just as Standard Gauge amalgamates the two great conventions of film composition, it also brings together narrative and non-narrative filmmaking. By examining shards of the industry frame by frame, it discovers some of the means and themes of experimental film living, so to speak, in Hollywood. And at the same time, the film engulfs and usurps the material of the commercial motion picture industry, turning it into its subject.

Thus Standard Gauge proposes a kind of mutuality or interdependence between two kinds of filmmaking that by conventional standards are thought to be divided by an unbridgeable chasm. By means of a mutual interrogation between 35mm, the gauge of the industry, and 16mm, the gauge of the independent and amateur, Standard Gauge proposes to unify film of every kind.

## Films by Leslie Thornton

ADYNATA (1983, color, 16mm, 30 mins.)

PEGGY AND FRED IN HELL (1987, b&w, 16mm, 21 mins.)

PEGGY AND FRED IN KANSAS (1987, b&w, video, 11 mins.)

Leslie Thornton is a painter turned filmmaker who teaches semiotics at Brown University. Her lush, complex films explore the mechanisms of desire and meaning while probing past the boundaries of language. Difficult to categorize, Thornton's movies are steeped in theoretical interest, but filled with imagery too rich and intuitive to be defined by words. In an interview with Laura Thielen in *Cinezine* (Fall 1984), Thornton said "I'm not a provocateur but I want to get under the skin, to instigate this strange process of feeling/thinking as inseperable. A gut response can't be separated from a cerebral one but we do it all the time."

Adynata is a collage film whose title is a rhetorical term defined as "a stringing together of impossibilities, sometimes a confession that words fail us." Thornton uses an enormously diverse, suffusive array of images and sounds to explore, and explode, the notion of the Orient, and Femininity, as the Exotic Other. Thornton unleashes the sort of visual and aural pleasure that is usually contained and ordered by the narrative process.

Peggy and Fred in Hell and Peggy and Fred in Kansas are the first completed sections of a continuing series. Filmed in documentary style, with occasional use of found footage, these works place their boy and girl heroes in a densely cluttered, undefined technological-consumer wasteland, strewn with Wonder Bread packages and accompanied by the incessant drone of a TV set. As the boy and girl mutter limericks and songs (the girl performs Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean"), there is a haunting, palpable sense of language as an entity that speaks through the subject's body, rather than expressing the person's individual consciousness. Though shot on film, Peggy and Fred in Kansas was edited on videotape, a format that gives added resonance to this unsettling work. Thornton has adapted well to video; her hour-long tape There Was an Unseen Cloud Moving (1987). a collage biography film about nineteenth-century poet and writer Isabelle Eberhardt, expands upon the techniques and concerns of Adynata.

## From "Culture as Fiction" by Leslie Thornton:

In [Peggy and Fred in Hell] I'm attempting to establish a timeless, voiceless place, outside of everything we can conceive and know, but still uncannily familiar, at hand—it's probably easiest to describe this place as "madness"—or to be more specific, as the point where the human organism resides outside the functional structures of Language, the Social, the Political. While I'm not holding madness up as a positive condition—it does have the problem of being non-productive, static, an arrestment—it is compelling for what it may reveal, for instance, madness as a stubborn reminder of the body as a site, non-functional, living/breathing, incomplete, vulnerable—a potentia.

Excerpt from a letter published in *Unsound*,
 Vol. 2, No. 1



Peggy and Fred in Hell (Prologue) by Leslie Thornton

**SEVENTEEN** (Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines, 1982, color, 16mm, 120 mins.)

Co-produced, directed, photographed, recorded, edited by Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines.

Assistant editor and production assistant, Peter Esmonde

Seventeen is a startling and candid depiction of American adolescence that received notoriety when rejected by PBS, which had commissioned it for their 1982 "Middletown" series. Rather than offering a sanitized view of middle-class America, Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines serve up a frank, vivid picture of a year in the life of a rebellious, aimless, racially mixed group of teenagers at a working-class high school. The filmmakers lived in Muncie, Indiana, for two years, allowing them to achieve an intimate rapport with their subjects. There are more than thirty "characters" in the film and a multitude of subplots and storylines. We see how social values and class conflicts operate at all levels of interaction, and how the goal of schooling is less to impart knowledge than to instill values. (A home economics teacher tells her students, "I'm not here to win a popularity contest, I am teaching you to be a citizen." To which a boy responds, "Well, you sure ain't teaching us how to cook.") Most of the film's action, however, takes place outside of school; education neither begins nor ends in the classroom.

By filming at close range, without the intrusive presence of a film crew, DeMott and Kreines break down the usual barriers between filmmaker and subject. Lynn Massie, the central figure in the film—a spirited, foul-mouthed white girl who flaunts her relationship with a black boy—shows off and plays for the camera. She acknowledges the presence of the filmmaker, rather than trying to pretend that the camera isn't there. DeMott and Kreines give their subjects a chance to be themselves, and in its candor *Seventeen* is an equally disturbing and exhilarating portrait of American life.

## **Excerpts from Filmmakers' Statement:**

A film about coming of age. We decided to follow a group of working-class teenagers—girls and boys, white and black—whose lives intertwine during their last year in high school. By filming for more than a year and by living where we were filming, we covered a wide range of adolescent experience. A white girl has a cross burned in her backyard because she has a black boyfriend. A pal of hers from the neighborhood loses his best

friend, who is killed in a car accident. Another classmate fathers an illegitimate baby.... From the beginning we mixed easily with the kids, because we each use only a one-person rig-a camera/tape recorder combination that allows the filmmaker to work by himself, unhampered by sound people, lights, crew, or crates of paraphernalia. It helped, too, that one of us is male, the other female. We could film those moments of high girlishness and boyishness that arise only out of earshot of the opposite sex. The result is a freeflowing intimacy with the teenagers' world... The authorities demanded excision of four-letter words. and excision of scenes where the romantic nature of interracial relationships becomes explicit, scenes where there's sex talk, scenes where kids get high. We refused to make cuts, because the film reflects. quite precisely, what we saw. We respected the kids' complexity, celebrated their liveliness, despaired of their future. And we loved them dearly. But it was impossible to oblige America's notion that, to be worthy film subjects, the working class should be saintlike—and, to be televised, cinéma vérité must falsify daily life. So Seventeen will never be seen by large numbers of people in this country.

WE IMITATE, WE BREAK UP (Ericka Beckman, 1978, color, super-8, 30 mins.)

FROM ROMANCE TO RITUAL (Peggy Ahwesh, 1985, color, super-8, 20 mins.)

SUPERSTAR (Todd Haynes, color, 16mm, 43 mins.)

Directed by Todd Haynes; written and produced by Cynthia Schneider and Todd Haynes; collaborators, Barry Ellsworth and Robert Manenti

Voices: Merril Gruver (Karen), Michael Sean Edwards (Richard), Melissa Brown (mother), Rob LaBelle (Mr. A & M / Father), Nannie Doyle (Cherry), Larry Kole (announcer), narration by Gwen Kraus and Bruce Tuthill

Dolls are a recurring motif in the three films on this program, all of which are playful yet seriousminded studies of the socializing process. In her abundantly inventive films, Ericka Beckman uses children's games as a metaphor for the construction of social identity. In We Imitate, We Break Up, Beckman plays a puppet-like schoolgirl who mimics and, ultimately, quarrels with the male figure, Mario (a set of marionette legs). In Beckman's world, filled with brightly colored props and set pieces, the actors play elaborate games whose rules are unclear. The sense of society-asgame is heightened by the use of repetitive childhood songs, and the artificiality is heightened by combining live action with superimposed images and optical tricks. Beckman's metaphorical films push the aesthetic possibilities of super-8 to their limit.

Peggy Ahwesh's pseudo-amateur super-8 films incorporate the style of home movies, with spontaneous, improvised scenes of family and friends. As in traditional home movies, the filmmaker's presence is always felt, through the actively searching camera. Ahwesh, however, demonstrates an ironic sensibility that skillfully exposes layers of social role-playing. From Romance to Ritual begins with scenes at Stonehenge, invoking not only the standard tourist movie, but a sense of history and ritual that informs Ahwesh's viewing of domestic scenes. As we watch a young girl play with dolls and show off her ability to spell, we see how social conventions are adopted.

Todd Haynes' audaciously inventive docudrama Superstar chronicles Karen Carpenter's tragic life with a cast made entirely of dolls. This Bunraku Barbie approach is modeled on the distancing techniques of Fassbinder, who showed how social analysis could be combined with absorbing melodrama. The film's thesis is that Karen Carpenter's anorexia and self-destruction came from the double-objectification of being a woman and a celebrity. Using evocative, minimal sets, and a sound track that includes all of the Carpenters' hit songs, Haynes has fashioned an unexpectedly moving, hard-edged study of American culture.

## Todd Haynes on Superstar:

Ultimately, playing with dolls is the first way we assert our identities, creating stories in which we play out our inner conflicts and desires.

## Ericka Beckman on We Imitate, We Break Up:

By making a film that combines the "real" with the "constructed" (rear screen projections or animated props combined with live action in the same frame), I proved for myself that these aesthetics could not fuse, but remained to work as a relationship having, within its meaning, competition and cooperation.

## Peggy Ahwesh on From Romance to Ritual:

The film is organized around the interlocking themes of women's sexuality, memory, growing up and storytelling and how they are at odds with the dominant history. Through my camera style I hope to maintain the privileged intimacy of home movies with me behind the camera instead of "daddy."

CALIGARI'S CURE (Tom Palazzolo, 1982, color, 16mm, 70 mins.)

Produced, written, directed and edited by Tom Palazzolo; photographed by KevinSmith; sets by Bernard Beckman; costumes by Lee Ann Larson; music by Paul Gartski; choreography by Ellen Fisher Cast: Carmela Rago (Mother), Andy Soma (Francis), Dave West (Allen), Paul Rosin (Cesar), Heather McAdams (Allen's Mother), Ron Kantor (salesman), Ellen Fisher (Dream Girl), Ed Pino (Mr. Bat), P. Adams Sitney (Dr. Arthur Vision), Tom Jerumba (chairman of the board), Bob Loescher (Dr. Caligari), E.W. Ross (man in the boat)

Shortly after receiving a Master's degree in painting from the Art Insitute of Chicago in 1965, Tom Palazzolo began making films. Drawn to the bizarre side of American culture, he developed an off-hand cinéma vérité style and, frequently collaborating with Jeff Kreines and Mark Rance, made a number of films documenting such diverse subjects as circus performers, wet T-shirt contests, wedding parties, and, in the chilling Marquette Park II (1978), the American Nazi Party's preparations for a rally in Chicago.

Caligari's Cure marks a shift to narrative for Palazzolo, while maintaining the freewheeling style of much of his documentary work. Filled with references to film and art history, Caligari's Cure is an autobiographical fantasy that quotes a wide range of styles, moving between documentary-style footage and expressionistic scenes played out on lavishly painted cartoon-like sets. Palazzolo loosely follows his life story, from childhood memories of Catholic school to his career at the Chicago Art Institute, which is equated with a psychiatric institution. A sense of playful appropriation holds this autobiographical collage together.

#### Palazzolo on Caligari's Cure:

My work has always depended on outside sources, whether it's an artwork from another period or people, events, and places from my own past or present. I use this material as a springboard.

The combination of these interests and a growing concern with narrative forms led me to *Caligari's Cure*. This is my first film dealing with both performance artists and my own background. Recently I've become interested in performance art through my teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (my paintings since the midsixties have been concerned with performers in posed, artificial settings). I chose performance artists from the Art Institute community because their physical appearance or personality in some

way reminded me of my first and perhaps strongest associations.

Both as a student and a teacher I have spent most of my adult life in an art environment. This present work combines formative memories of Catholic school with the other half of my life—the museum and school of the Art Insitute of Chicago. I have always wanted to do a remake of Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, both because the film is very interesting to me in a psychological sense and to reflect my interest in art and film history.

From a statement for New American
 Filmmakers Series, The Whitney Museum
 of American Art, February 1983

WILLIE (Danny Lyon, 1986, color, 16mm, 82 mins.)
Filmed and edited by Danny Lyon. Sound by Nancy Lyon, additional sound by Ed Hugetz and John Foley

BORN TO FILM (Danny Lyon, 1983, b&w, 16mm, 33 mins.)
Filmed and edited by Danny Lyon. Sound and assistant editing by Nancy Lyon

Danny Lyon, an acclaimed photographer and underrated filmmaker, is a passionate heir to the social documentary tradition. Far from being a distanced observer, Lyon literally befriends the people he photographs, who include street children in Colombia, motorcycle gangs, illegal aliens, migrant workers, and a Houston tattoo artist. As art critic Pamela Allara has written, "Perhaps more than any documentary artist since Agee, Lyon has been concerned with identifying with rather than simply identifying his subjects." In the past few years, Lyon's work has become increasingly reflective, engaged in exploring the relationship between his fascination with social outsiders and his own role as an artist. In his 1981 book Pictures From The New World, Lyon wrote: "The subject which I once so energetically sought outside myself I now pursue within myself. When I was 25, I wanted to know what the subject had to say. Now, for better or worse, I am becoming more interested in what I have to say."

Willie, made in Bernalillo, New Mexico, Lyon's former home, is a portrait of a twenty-seven year-old anti-social ex-convict whom Lyon filmed at age twelve for a documentary called Llanito (1971), and later as a troubled teenager in Little Boy (1976). Lyon poignantly intercuts footage of the playful child with images of him as an aimless, recalcitrant grown-up. We feel the change in Lyon, too, who has grown away from his former friend: while filming Willie in prison, where he has landed again, Lyon abandons his subject and starts talking with other inmates. One feels Lyon's disillusionment with the boy he once portrayed so romantically.

In Born to Film, Lyon intercuts footage of his own son, Raphe, with home movie footage made by his father some thirty-five years earlier. The film is a vivid demonstration of the continuity of the family legacy. We watch Lyon learn about death by seeing a family friend decapitate a chicken; years later, Raphe is filmed watching a snake devour a rat. Though Lyon has called Born to Film "mythol-

ogy for the middle class," we see him impart to Raphe his compassion and humanity. In a jarring scene, Raphe and his friends romp naked through the back yard, while Lyon talks about children with his ex-convict friend Billy McCune. The film ends with Raphe walking blindfolded, in an attempt to learn what it is like not to be able to see. In this deeply resonant reflection on filmmaking and growing up, Lyon teaches his son to see, looks at his own past, and discovers his roots as a filmmaker.

IMPOSTORS (Mark Rappaport, 1979, 16mm, color, 110 minutes)

Written, directed and produced by Mark Rappaport; edited by Mark Rappaport and Meri Weingarten; photographed by Fred Murphy; associate producers, Joanne Mallas and Steve Miller; sound by Rick Patterson

Cast: Peter Evans (Peter), Ellen McElduff (Tina), Charles Ludlam (Chuckie), Michael Burg (Mikey), Lina Todd (Gina), Randy Danson (Stephanie). Also with Kevin Wade, Shelley Desai, John Brockmeyer, Betty James

"All bourgeois dreams end the same way. Marry royalty and escape."

-Chuckie (Charles Ludlam) in Impostors

Working in his Soho loft, Mark Rappaport creates low-budget versions of Hollywood studio productions. His intricately plotted features are distinguished by an artificial visual style that uses painted backdrops and projected slides as scenery. The most recognizable feature of Rappaport's style, however, is the acting, with the players declaiming their lines in ironic, self-conscious soap opera fashion. Steeped in the traditions of the nineteenth century Victorian novel and the Warner Brothers forties tearjerker, Rappaport's movies filter melodramatic conventions through a sophisticated sensibility that exposes the clichés and mechanics of melodrama while allowing us its pleasures.

Impostors is vintage Rappaport, featuring a hilariously arch performance by the late Charles Ludlam as Chuckie, one of a pair of phony twins who perform a traveling magic act. Mikey, the other twin, is in love with their assistant Tina (played by Ellen McElduff), while Chuckie is in love with Peter, Tina's jealous lover. This merely suggests the web of complications of love, deception, and revenge.

Rappaport demystifies and deconstructs the melodramas that he loves (he has cited Buñuel and Hitchcock as among his favorite directors), and exposes the process of the Dream Factory, the way in which soap opera ideals become romanticized and ingrained. Rappaport is, in a sense, doing what Douglas Sirk did in the fifties: he expresses a critical, ironic sensibility through Hollywood conventions, forcing us to examine the disparity between our own lives and the imitation of life up there on the big screen.

# Rappaport on his approach to melodrama:

I once described the entire script of *The Scenic Route* (1978) to someone (not the truncated version that I put on the screen), and he thought it was very dry, very dehydrated. But there's enough material there for *five* of the melodramas that Warner Brothers used to do! Only with all the melodramatic juices pumped out. The elements of melodrama (and of theatre) that I like have more to do with painting: it's the gesture, the *mise en scène*, the lighting, the arrangement, the pregnant moment right before something happens or right after it has.

The emotional tenor is not parody. If I'm parodying anything, it's the fact that we can only respond to emotional situations in certain prescribed ways. They're the only ways we have to respond to trite elements in our lives. I guess it's more a matter of irony than of parody. I rely on associations to previous things as a kind of shorthand. It's not that audiences have to know which films I love, and I'm not interested in *hommages*. But it's all retreads—human relationships have been explored, reexplored, de-explored, and yet we still respond to the grain of truth that we recognize at the heart of these situations when they're represented on a screen. One wants the falseness to be true.

 from an interview with Tony Rayns, Monthly Film Bulletin, February 1979

SHERMAN'S MARCH (Ross McElwee, 1985, color, 16mm, 155 mins.)

Directed, written, photographed, recorded and edited by Ross McElwee
Introductory narration by Richard Leacock

Sherman's March is a non-fiction documentary story in which I shape narratively the documentary footage I've gathered during a serendipitous journey through the South. My film is a story in so far as it adheres to the autobiographically narrative line of a return home followed by a mutedly comic quest in which, repeatedly, boy meets girl, boy chases girl, boy loses girl. It is a documentary in so far as the people, places, and situations appearing in the film are all unscripted and unplanned.

-Ross McElwee

Ross McElwee journeyed to his native South in 1981 to make a movie about the lingering effects of General Sherman's devastating Civil War campaign. His initial idea was to explore the modern South as an entity in the shadow of the Civil War, but just before he was to begin filming his girlfriend left him and his romantic dilemma soon outweighed his historical concerns. McElwee decided to deal with his personal life in the movie, combining his odyssey with a quest for a new love. While following Sherman's path, he would scour the South in search of a new mate. Acting as a one-man crew, he recorded his generally frustrating encounters with a variety of Southern women including: Pat, an aspiring actress desperately seeking Burt Reynolds; Wini, a doctoral student living alone on an island; and Joy, a rock singer he met by chance in a Sears parking lot. With this simple framework, McElwee has created a reflexive and ironic diary film that constantly plays on the relationship between McElwee as detached observer and as self-absorbed, active participant. The central dilemma is expressed by Charleen Swansea, McElwee's friend and mentor, who advises him on camera, "Forget the film and listen to me! Put down your camera! This is not art! This is life!" Yet McElwee does not put his camera down; instead he turns it on himself, providing a running series of monologues. In an interview with the author, McElwee said: "In making a film you have to be an outsider, in Joyce's image of the artist as somebody who pares his nails and observes the world. But can you live your life and film it?"

The central idea of the outsider-exile is expressed by McElwee's continuing identification with the similarly red-bearded, introspective General Sherman, who reportedly loved the South and its people. Despite all of his self-analysis, McElwee creates a vivid portrait of the South. Like a modern-day Flannery O'Connor, he captures a region that seems caught in a twilight zone between Civil War desolation and nuclear paranoia.

ILLUSIONS (Julie Dash, 1982, b&w, 16mm, 34 mins.)
 Written, produced, directed, and edited by Julie Dash
 With Lonette McKee (Mignon DuPree) and Roseann Katon (Ester Jeeter)

JOE'S BED-STUY BARBERSHOP: WE CUT HEADS (Spike Lee, 1983, color, 16mm, 60 mins.)

Written, edited and directed by Spike Lee; photographed by Ernest Dickerson; music composed and conducted by Bill Lee; produced by Zimmie Shelton and Spike Lee; art director, Felix DeRooy; sound recordist, Mark Quinlan; musicians, Joe Chambers, George Coleman, Mickey Tucker, Ted Dunbar, Bill Lee

Cast: Monty Ross (Zachariah Homer), Donna Bailey (Ruth Homer), Stuart Smith (Teapot), Tommie Hicks (Nicholas Lovejoy)

We would meet again, Ester Jeeter and I. For it was she who taught me to see beyond the shadows dancing on a white wall...to define what I have already come to know, and to take action without fear...Yes, I wanted the power of the Motion Picture for there are many stories to be told, and many battles to begin.

-Mignon Dupree in Illusions

Julie Dash's Illusions is an ambitious student project, a period piece set in Hollywood in 1942. and filmed in the style of an old studio movie. The story is about Mignon Dupree, a light-skinned black studio executive who has been able to succeed by passing as white, and Ester Jeeter, a black performer whose singing voice is dubbed for a white star. *Illusions* shows prejudice operating on a number of levels, all based on the creation of false images. Dash demonstrates the way Hollywood is able to perpetuate prejudice through its control of the cultural image-making factory. Mignon's statement above refers not only to her own plight, but to the independent filmmaker's responsibility to tell new stories and create new images.

Spike Lee is a rare success story, a filmmaker who has been able to enter the Hollywood system while making films solely about black life. Before making School Daze (1988) for Columbia Pictures, and before his surprise hit She's Gotta Have It (1986), Lee began his career with an auspicious student project entitled Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads. In an interview with the Daily News, Lee said, "I wanted to make a film about a barbershop. It's a place I've always found interesting, and it's second in importance only to the church in the black community." With a barbershop as the center of action, Lee paints a comical and richly

detailed portrait of a Brooklyn neighborhood. The owner of "Joe's" is confronted by gangsters who inform him that his newly acquired shop is the center of a numbers operation. Lee shows ambivalence towards this gambling racket, which is referred to as "the poor man's stock market." One of the gangsters explains, "I've sent kids to college and enabled families to move out of here—I make dreams real." Like Charles Burnett in My Brother's Wedding, Lee draws a heartfelt and complex picture of a working-class black community.

SOLDIER GIRLS (Nicholas Broomfield and Joan Churchill, 1981, color, 16mm, 87 mins.)

Directed, produced, and edited by Nicholas Broomfield; photographed by Joan Churchill; sound by Nicholas Broomfield

With Joann Johnson, Jackie Hall, Clara Alves, Sergeant Abing, Sergeant Bertling, Sergeant Taylor

Soldier Girls is a riveting example of truth being stranger than fiction. Following four women recruits through basic training at a U.S. Army boot camp in Fort Gordon, Georgia, this cinéma vérité documentary bears amazing resemblance to the boot camp section of Full Metal Jacket (1987). As in the Kubrick film, sadistic sergeants dehumanize the recruits through unceasing verbal abuse, and a private gets into trouble because she can't stop grinning. When one woman is forced to spend the night digging a ditch, she has a nervous breakdown. After she is hauled away screaming, a sergeant tells her, "You haven't functioned as a human being, I doubt, since you were about fifteen. You stopped being a member of the human race." These words are echoed poignantly later in the film, when the sergeant reflects on his military career, and tells the filmmakers, "A part of your humanity, a large part of it, your soul or whatever the hell you want to call it-it's never going to be there again. It's gone. And you don't know it...until it's over. And then, long afterwards, as you grow older, you start missing it."

While Soldier Girls has many qualities of the best vérité documentaries of the sixties, including a dramatic intensity and powerful psychological nuance, it also has an intimacy due, in part, to the filmmakers' close bond with their subjects. The film is also notable for the fact that it was photographed by a woman, allowing for a perspective that was virtually non-existent in documentaries made before the seventies.

## Churchill and Broomfield on documentaries:

We have always been most interested in the documentary, not as a stepping stone to features, but because it can be much more powerful than fiction.... We try to provide information on a subject without being polemical about our own points of view. Both of us believe quite strongly that reality is never as simple as it's portrayed in documenta-

ries which often take a sort of tunnel-view. Our films have sometimes been criticized for this, but we continue to feel that in simplifying matters one is not really being true to reality.

OTHER RECKLESS THINGS (Janis Crystal Lipzin, 1984, color, 16mm, 20 mins.) Sound-text by Ellen Zweig

DAUGHTERS OF CHAOS (Marjorie Keller, 1980, color, 16mm, 20 mins.)

YOU ARE NOT I (Sara Driver, 1981, b&w, 16mm, 50 mins.)

Directed and edited by Sara Driver; screenplay by Sara Driver and Jim Jarmusch, from the story "You Are Not I" by Paul Bowles; photographed by Jim Jarmusch; music by Phil Kline Cast: Suzanne Fletcher (Ethel), Melody Schneider (Sister), Bea Boyle (Mrs. Jelinek), Evelyn Smith (Mrs. Schultz), Luc Sante (man at accident), Anthony Crisafulli III (2nd man in car)

#### Dear Abby:

Isn't anything sacred anymore? Don't tell me that the sight of an unwashed baby still attached to her mother by an umbilical cord is a beautiful sight.

- seen in Other Reckless Things

The films in this program venture into rarely explored areas of female experience, and in the process suggest that the repression of such material is a function of the socializing process.

Janis Crystal Lipzin's Other Reckless Things is a poetic study of an elemental yet taboo subject: childbirth. The film was inspired by a news account of a woman in Ithaca, New York, who performed a Caesarean section on herself. The abstract, fragmented sound track serves as a distancing counterpoint to the compelling visuals, which include documentary footage of a conventional hospital delivery.

Marjorie Keller's provocative collage film *Daughters* of *Chaos* is a study of lost innocence, comparing the freedom of childhood (with home movie footage of Keller, and scenes of two pre-teen girls giggling on the deck of a boat) with the institution of marriage (Keller's footage of a wedding). Elaborately combining a handful of elements (a recording of "Darktown Strutter's Ball," a trip to the Statue of Liberty, a naked woman bathing in a river, and the scenes mentioned earlier), Keller creates a meditation on womanhood in a meticulously photographed and edited film.

Sara Driver's You Are Not I is an extremely accomplished student project, with assured direction by Driver and exquisite black-and-white photography by Jim Jarmusch. The film, adapted from the Paul Bowles story, is about a psychic transference that occurs when a young woman named Ethel is taken to her sister's house after escaping from a mental

hospital. The film brilliantly views the story from Ethel's schizophrenic perspective, and in its use of landscape and mood to express internal drama, it is comparable in style to Antonioni.

## Sara Driver on You Are Not I:

The story intrigued me because of its strangeness and subtle detail. The reader is swept into the mental state of Ethel and must view the world from her "abnormal" perspective. This left me with a haunted feeling, a feeling I wanted to convey on film while maintaining the beauty of Bowles' language...

# Marjorie Keller, from her "Journal of Daughters of Chaos":

May 2

Obviously a new section. I have come from girlhood obsession with mother-figure (absent) through muteness (accented with giggles)—drowned out words (like times I can't remember). The horse enters. A liberation of the world (image) from sync relationships. The face begins to be important and hidden. More giggles. Many things are hidden behind many other things. Hands brush back.

- published in Cinematograph, #1

Film, video and performance by Peter Rose

THE MAN WHO COULD NOT SEE FAR ENOUGH (1981, color, 16mm, 33 mins.)

DIGITAL SPEECH (1984, color, video, 13 mins.)

PLEASURES OF THE TEXT (1983, video and performance, 17 mins.)

BABEL (1987, film, video and performance, 16 mins.)

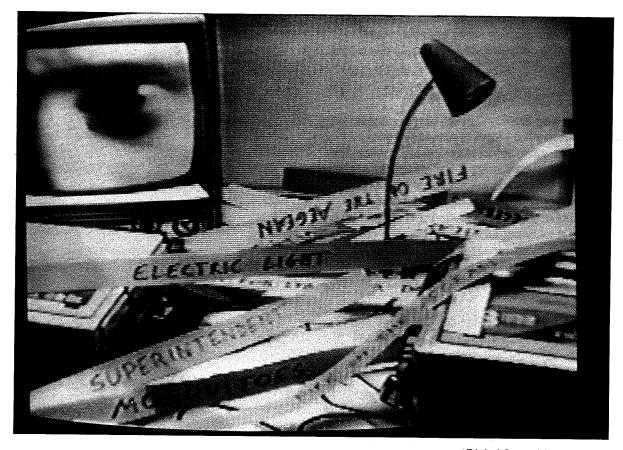
"Often he had the sense Not so much of looking at But of seeing beyond things."

> from prologue of The Man Who Could Not See Far Enough

In his film, video, and performance work, Peter Rose often charts a course from order to chaos, from sense to nonsense. He pushes at the boundaries of language and vision, creating complex, elaborate systems that gradually disintegrate, exposing themselves as mere surfaces. Frequently engaged with current intellectual concerns, such as structuralism and semiotics.

Rose parodies these forms, seeking to expose them as artificial. There is a sense of humor in Rose's work, an acceptance of the absurdly quixotic nature of his quest for a transcendent form of meaning.

The Man Who Could Not See Far Enough is comprised of six distinct sections, moving from the autobiographical to the mythical. After a prologue delivered in a nonsense language but accompanied by subtitles, there is a scene in which the filmmaker walks onto a pier by the Throgs Neck Bridge, and reflects on his childhood in Queens. By the movie's end, Rose takes the role of transcendent visionary, with a hand-held filming of an



Digital Speech by Peter Rose

ascent of the Golden Gate Bridge. The movie uses a dazzling array of visual styles and techniques as it explores the nature of cinematic language, space and time.

Digital Speech features a performance by Rose as a sort of intellectual vaudevillian. In a monologue for the camera amid the high-tech clutter of a video studio, Rose performs a traveler's anecdote, telling the story of a trip to Turkey in an increasingly frantic and meaningless barrage of language and gesture. A similar voyage into linguistic chaos is offered in *Pleasures of the Text*, a parody of semiotic criticism. In Rose's lecture, accompanied by sign language, phrases such as "the ontological vortices of desire" give way to a made-up language that Rose teaches the audience in a live performance.

Babel is an ambitious "media opera," using film, video, and performance in an aptly titled work that ranges in content from a pseudo-documentary about an African tribe that has developed a Third Nostril, to altered news footage of congressional hearings on "Star Wars" technology. In exposing the insidious side of political double-talk, and demonstrating the increasingly chaotic and absurd nature of information in today's media-saturated world, Rose's concerns take on a distinctly topical resonance.

## From an Interview with Peter Rose:

I am interested in mystification, or more accurately, in mystery, in what I think is a healthy sense of the term. At the same time I don't usually conceal the techniques that I am using. The structures are fairly evident. The means are usually fairly simple. The Man Who... is really a text about objectivity and subjectivity and participation and alienation, and I see a lot of my recent work trying to cover both sides of those issues at the same time, to offer identification and experiential depth—to create new experiences—while self-deconstructing on some levels.

 Interview with Al Razutis, Tony Reif and Carolyn McLuskie, Opsis, August 1984

IS/LAND (David Goldberg and Michael Oblowitz, 1982, color, 16mm, 20 mins.)

ROCKETKITKONGOKIT (Craig Baldwin, 1986, color, 16mm, 30 mins.)

NO NO NOOKY TV (Barbara Hammer, 1987, color, 16mm, 12 mins.)

Each of these films is concerned with language as a source of social control. Both *Is/Land* and *Rocketkitkongokit* make inventive use of found footage while providing revisionist readings of African history. David Goldberg and Michael Oblowitz have reworked a South African propaganda film into a penetrating analysis of political oppression. Using video techniques to build a complex matrix of images, text and mathematical formulas, *Is/Land* charts the history of a penal colony, and shows how enslavement begins with language.

The brashly iconoclastic *Rocketkitkongokit* takes the found footage film into uncharted territory. With rapid-fire narration by a robotic African voice, the film traces the history of the Congo (now Zaire) and its puppet dictator Joseph Mobutu, who is linked to both the CIA and German arms merchants. Though rooted in fact, the narration quickly veers into the speculative realm, ending with an apocalyptic vision of Third World militarization leading to nuclear war. The barrage of found images come from newsreels, army films, Hollywood sci-filmovies, and Star Trek episodes. The effect is disorienting, since the layer of historical truth makes it impossible to write the film off as an aesthetic exercise.

The prolific Barbara Hammer, with twenty-six films to her credit in the past decade, has attempted to find new cinematic forms to express a lesbian sensibility. No No Nooky TV, made with the use of an Amiga computer, is a playful critique of sex in the post-industrial age. Hammer takes the computer monitor into taboo regions of subject matter, even dressing it up in panties, to explore the disparity between sexual experience and social images ("dirty" words and pictures).

## Barbara Hammer on her filmmaking:

I believe that a conventional cinema such as classical narrative is unable to address the experiences or issues of lesbian and gay perceptions, concerns and concepts. When an audience awaits the image on the screen it expects heterosexual

narrative to unfold and...the audience is usually not disappointed. Even if the characters are lesbian, the script dominates and projects lesbian characters within a heterosexual world of role-playing, love-making, and domestic and professional life.

 from "Some Thoughts on Institutional Support by a Media Artist," unpublished

## The Appropriated Image

DA FORT (Rob Danielson, 1982, b&w, video, 22 mins.)

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE (Mary Filippo, 1987, b&w, 16mm, 11 mins.)

LOUISE SMELLS A RAT (Anne Flournoy, 1982, b&w, 16mm, 5 mins.)

"D" AS IN DYNAMITE (Anne Flournoy, 1982, b&w, 16mm, 10 mins.)

BEDTIME STORY (Esther Shatavsky, 1981, b&w, 16mm, 6 mins.)

SOMETHING IS SEEN BUT ONE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT (Keith Sanborn, 1985, color, 16mm, 30 seconds, repeated 3 times)

MURDER PSALM (Stan Brakhage, 1981, color, 16mm, 16 mins.)

SAPPHO AND JERRY (Bruce Posner, 1978, color, 16mm, 6 mins.)

The seven artists on this program use images from educational films, television shows, cartoons, Hollywood movies, and other sources to probe the hidden layers beneath the slick surfaces of popular culture. It is a revelatory process akin to the unraveling of a dream to discern its latent meaning.

Rob Danielson's *Da Fort* combines footage from fifties educational films about discipline and authority with commentary by contemporary film theoreticians. The tape works ironically, undercutting the dogmatic tone of academia, while demonstrating the mechanism of repression.

Playing a woman who wants to quit smoking, Mary Filippo takes a reflexive look at the social construction of identity in *Who Do You Think You Are*. After being told how to behave by TV advertisements, Hollywood movies, patronizing psychiatrists, and even men in the street, the heroine attempts to find her true identity.

Anne Flournoy's brashly funny films satirize Hollywood imagery. Louise Smells a Rat features images of a Latin American woman repeatedly rejecting Leslie Howard's advances, juxtaposed with military footage edited so as to appear to be just off-screen, in a witty metaphor for colonialism. "D" as in Dynamite is a hilarious mock-psychological profile that constructs the hero's paranoid identity from an assortment of movie scenes.

Esther Shatavsky's *Bedtime Story* is a painstakingly crafted short film. Using footage from an old epsiode of *Bonanza*, a woman awakens as a man appears at her window. Shatavsky literally dis-

sected and collaged the individual film frames, to create an evocative sexual nightmare.

Something is Seen but One Doesn't Know What is a brief but dense compilation film. In just thirty seconds, found footage of male icons (from Fred Flintstone to Adolf Hitler), sci-fi scenes of UFO's, and disturbing medical imagery are combined to create a disorienting study of male iconography.

Murder Psalm, a rare found footage film by Stan Brakhage, is one of his strongest works from the past decade. A recurring image of Mickey Mouse dressed as a policeman, running down a hallway, is the eerie refrain in this haunting flood of violent images from popular culture.

The program concludes with a 35mm Cinemascope treat: Bruce Posner's Sappho and Jerry is an extremely kinetic tour de force that uses hand-crafted optical techniques to turn a variety of movie and TV imagery (including Gilligan's Island) into a Pandora's Box of visual energy and excitement.

#### Esther Shatavsky on Bedtime Story:

A damsel in distress is caught inside the film frames. Each frame has been cut apart, rearranged and taped back together again—a tidy mess that draws attention to the parts that make up what there was before the mess began. This just might be the repetition of an earlier situation—a glimpse into some unconscious trauma.

CIAO BELLA (Betzy Bromberg, 1979, color, 16mm, 13 mins.)

TURNER (M. Serra, 1987, color, 16mm, 2 mins.)

MAGDALENA VIRAGA: STORY OF A RED SEA CROSSING (Nina Menkes, 1986, color, 16mm, 90 mins.)

Produced, directed and written by Nina Menkes; including poetry by Gertrude Stein, Mary Daly.

Anne Sexton; sound recorded by Duane Dell'Amico Cast: Tinka Menkes (Ida), Claire Aguilar (Claire)

Nina Menkes labels her first feature film, Magdalena Viraga, "inner-space fiction," describing it as "a hallucinogenic journey through the boundless vortex of unadulterated Female space." What is remarkable about this poetic narrative about a prostitute's spiritual evolution is the assured manner in which Menkes expresses her heroine's internal drama. Films about prostitution have generally fostered the misconception that the prostitute is acting out an erotic fantasy (Catherine Deneuve in Belle De Jour, 1966), or the reverse notion that the prostitute is simply doing a job and that her work involves no psychic oppression (Godard's Vivre sa Vie, 1962, or even Lizzie Borden's Working Girls, 1986). For Ida, the heroine of Magdalena Viraga, prostitution is a psychic prison; its deadening effects are registered on her face during the film's remarkably intense long-take closeups during the sex scenes. Contrasting these scenes are Ida's meetings with Claire, her "sister who is not her sister," with dialogue and acting inspired by Gertrude Stein's poetry. Menkes charts Ida's "Red Sea crossing," her symbolic journey towards spiritual catharsis. The film is set in an unidentifiable city of the nearfuture, and the action moves freely between brothel, nightclub, and prison, all of which take on metaphorical resonance. Magdalena Viraga is a powerfully disorienting film, with rare spiritual intensity, an austere visual style, and cool, distanced acting. In 1983, Menkes made a fortyminute film, The Great Sadness of Zohara, which depicts another mystical journey, that of an alienated young Orthodox woman in search of Judaic spirituality.

The two short films are lyrical works by Los Angeles filmmakers. The poetic styles of Menkes, Betzy Bromberg and M. Serra all owe a debt to Chick Strand. Serra makes short, impressionistic collage films, with lush imagery and evocative sound tracks. *Turner*, her most recent and strongest film to date, creates a sensual Los Angeles

dreamscape. Betzy Bromberg's *Ciao Bella* is a self-described "study of love and mortality," a raunchy and tender city symphony reveling in New York's subculture.

# From Menkes' publicity material for *Magdalena Viraga*:

Red Sea: In alchemic symbolism "crossing the Red Sea" is symbolic of the most dangerous part of an undertaking or stage in one's life. To leave Egypt for the Promised Land implies the act of crossing this sea bloodied with wounds and sacrifice; hence the crossing signifies spiritual evolution and also death, seen as the threshold between worlds of matter and of the spirit. The one who sacrifices him/herself, in a sense dies.

-J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols

## **An Evening With Joe Gibbons**

SPYING (1981, color, super-8, 30 mins., silent)

CONFIDENTIAL, PART 2 (1981, color, super-8, 20 mins.)

LIVING IN THE WORLD, PARTS ONE-THREE (1985, color, super-8, c. 55 mins.)

"There's something wrong with the world when you have to work and you don't want to."

-Joe Gibbons in Living in the World

Joe Gibbons is the bon vivant-rebel of the avant-garde, cinematically "researching" life on the fringe. His super-8 films are chronicles of daily life, humorous acts of transgression in which Gibbons skirts both social and art-world conventions. He once wrote that "the social significance of avant-garde filmmaking lies precisely in its inconsequentiality, its triviality, its marginality." Perhaps to reinforce this statement, Gibbons has never made a print of any of his films. Existing only in original form, the films, too, live a life on the fringe.

In Spying, Gibbons insolently and obsessively turns his filmmaking into pure voyeurism. Filmed while he was living in San Francisco, Spying begins with shots of people in their backyards—gardening, sunbathing, and relaxing. Steadily raising the stakes, Gibbons begins a roof-hopping escapade, eventually peering into bathroom and bedroom windows at night, taking the film far beyond Jimmy Stewart's snooping in Rear Window (1954).

Confidential is Gibbons in a confessional mode, in a series of soulfully funny, unedited late-night monologues to his camera. What is amazing is the sincerity with which Gibbons addresses the camera as a person, as the other half of a relationship. He reminisces to the machine, but ultimately berates it for being so cold and unresponsive. Gibbons' climactic outburst walks a fine, dangerous line between comic performance and self-revelation. He toes the same line in his quintessential film Living in the World, which could perhaps be called a vérité docudrama about the filmmaker's day-today life. Though Gibbons tries to have a normal routine (we see him in his apartment, going through the motions of shaving, eating cereal, and going to work), he is bored with his job, and quits. This

raises the question: how is he to continue living in the world, and continue his "research" (his euphemism for filmmaking)? Throughout the film, the viewer constantly feels an odd tension between knowing that everything has been, to some degree, set up for the camera, and knowing that it is all quite authentic. Gibbons successfully achieves his goal of erasing the boundaries between domestic reality and movie entertainment.

## Gibbons on Living in the World:

I wanted to make a dramatic film with integrity, a narrative film without selling out to fiction. It occurred to me that daily life is full of drama, packed with small-scale suspense: Will the swordfish turn out OK? Will I get mugged on my way through the park? Will my car make it to New York without breaking down? Will I be able to pay the rent this month? Will I be arrested and sent to prison? How much longer can I get away with it? What kind of future have I got? What have I done with my life? And so on....

Living in the World is pretty much true-to-life.
Certain obvious chronological liberties were taken, but nothing in the film was staged, or faked. The phone conversations are real, the psychiatrist is real, the bill collector is real, the circumstances I speak of are real—my persona in the film may be a little unreal, but I think I'm allowed some ironic distance from myself.

from program notes for the Boston Film/Video
 Foundation, March 1985

JUNTOS EN LA VIDA, UNIDOS EN LA MUERTE (Willie Varela, 1985, color, super-8, 10 mins.)

RECUERDOS DE FLORES MUERTAS (Willie Varela, 1982, color, super-8, 9 mins.)

NEW LEFT NOTES (Saul Levine, 1982, color, super-8, 26 mins., silent)

A FEW TUNES GOING OUT (Saul Levine, 1979 – 84, color, super-8, 30 mins.)

Part 1: Bopping the Great Wall of China Blue (1979, 5 mins.)

Part 2: Groove to Groove (1979, 12 mins.)

Part 3: A Brennen Soll Columbusn Medina (1984, 13 mins.)

"For hundreds of people like myself around the country, 16mm production, though cheap, was not cheap enough."

- Saul Levine

Saul Levine, who began making films in 1964, is a prolific filmmaker whose super-8 movies are boldly frenetic, dissonant, and energetic. Levine's work is liberating in its disavowal of lofty aesthetics. He has turned splice marks, microphone noise, and disjunctive sound into artistic signatures; a musical equivalent of his approach might be Klezmer music as performed by Ornette Coleman.

New Left Notes reveals Levine's roots in the radical movements of the sixties (he was editor of New Left Notes, the SDS newspaper). Cutting between footage of political demonstrations and meetings, and news footage of Nixon speeches and the Vietnam war, Levine creates a freewheeling kaleidoscope in which radical content meets radical form. Levine's aesthetics express his politics, and his style is at its most musical in A Few Tunes Going Out. Whether cutting between an astronaut floating in space and a group of Chinese women exercising, or between a Jewish family get-together and a Ray Charles rendition of "America, The Beautiful," this three-part film is a lyrical exercise in collage, finding links between rhythm and feeling in widely disparate material. Though Levine has not been canonized in the manner of Stan Brakhage. Hollis Frampton, or Michael Snow, he remains a vital force in the avant-garde scene, as a filmmaker, and as a teacher at the Massachusetts College of Art.

Willie Varela, another prolific super-8 filmmaker, creates poetry through his subjective impressions of daily life. *Recuerdos de Flore Muertas*, Varela's first sound film, is a study of a cemetery in his hometown of El Paso, Texas. The casual film

style, with in-camera editing and the hum of automobile traffic in the background, creates a lively and oddly effective counterpoint to the imagery. Juntos en la Vida, Unidos en la Muerte, a lyrical portrait of life and death in a Mexican town, makes vivid use of saturated super-8 color, to convey a memorable image of a mustachioed skeleton.

## Willie Varela on super-8 filmmaking:

To be a super-8 filmmaker is to be like a poet, able to work alone, to evolve highly personal, even idiosyncratic visions that can still, by their directness and honesty, move those who are open to the unique visual worlds these little films can bring. With super-8, the gap between art and life can be closed a little, thereby making it possible to engage in a more intense visual dialogue with the world.

 from "For a Cinema of Possibility," Foreign Correspondence

## Films by Dan Eisenberg

DISPLACED PERSON (1981, b&w, 16mm, 13 mins.)

COOPERATION OF PARTS (1987, color, 16mm, 45 mins.)

Directed, photographed and edited by Dan Eisenberg; second camera, Mark Lapore

THE RESIDENCE OF THE PARTY OF THE PARTY.

#### history:

often gives us more than we bargained for, always more than we're looking for. a private understanding of how specific historical moments and characters have shaped my life. my initial impulses: if no conclusions are to be drawn perhaps because history has too long been a domain for experts while we allow ourselves the comfort of explanation, resolution.

## - Dan Eisenberg

Dan Eisenberg's films attempt to explore history not only as a series of long-past events, but also as a dynamic presence that creates one's identity.

Displaced Person is made entirely with archival footage taken from The Sorrow and the Pity (1972), of Hitler during the occupation of Paris. Unlike other uses of newsreel footage, Eisenberg is not simply presenting historical fact; he contemplates Hitler's image and the issues of complicity and identification raised by this footage. Eisenberg studies the images on an optical printer, juxtaposing them with a Beethoven quartet and a radio interview with Claude Levi-Strauss, who talks about his childhood in Paris and his fascination with the Irrational. The inquisitive tone of the film is conveyed by Levi-Strauss's voice, as he actively grasps for a theory that will make order out of absurdity. There is a lyrical, seductive quality to the images that gives the film an unsettling, delicate sense of paradox.

Eisenberg's ambitious Cooperation of Parts, five years in the making, is a meticulously crafted film structured around a 1983 trip through France, Germany, and Poland (where Eisenberg's parents lived). Eisenberg searches for traces of history, for a link between the past and present. The vibration of a tuning fork is a recurring motif on the sound track; this is matched visually by camerawork that

is panning and probing constantly, often coming in and out of focus. The innovative visual style is a metaphor for the filmmaker's search, his desire to clear away his preconceptions, and re-tune his vision. The carefully composed sound track is filled with proverbs, inspired by Eisenberg's father, who, according to the filmmaker, would always speak in riddles and paradoxes. These riddles become part of the film's continual quest for meaning. "The longest road is from the mother to the door," says one, expressing the personal significance of this journey. Another statement on the sound track expresses a central theme, that identity is not forged alone, but by a complex cooperation of forces that lie in the past: "If left to invent myself I could wind up with a clear case of mistaken identity."

## Eisenberg on Cooperation of Parts:

I tried to use the camera not only to record what I was seeing but also to register my physical response to what was being seen. The camera is truly a medium here—a giving back takes place; automatic, unrehearsed, irregular, a hyper-vérité so to speak...

With the visual field as a touchstone for a complex set of narrative associations, the film spins a tight web of memory, history, and experience. And it is in this web that the film finds its wider significance: as a model for how daily life, history, first-hand and second-hand experience bind, through purpose or chance, to form identity itself.

ORNETTE: MADE IN AMERICA (Shirley Clarke, 1985, 16mm, color, 85 mins.)

Directed and edited by Shirley Clarke; with photography by Shirley Clarke and Ed Lachman; music by Ornette Coleman

With: John Giordano and his Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra, William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Robert Palmer, John Rockwell, Viva, Demon Marshall, and Eugene Tatum as Young Ornette

There's a change going through the art form that's called film, and there's a change going through video, which is that when you link them together, they make a third thing. They're not one or the other, they're something else. We really don't know how far they're going to go, and we're very much at the beginning of looking at what this is all about.

- Shirley Clarke, quoted in "Saxophones in Space," Theatre Crafts, May 1986

Shirley Clarke has been a film and video pioneer for more than thirty years, extending the boundaries of established categories and experimenting with new technologies. She has made experimental shorts (Skyscraper, 1959, Bridges-Go-Round, 1958), fiction features (The Connection, 1961, The Cool World, 1963), documentaries (Robert Frost: A Lover's Quarrel With the World, 1964) and she was an early proponent of video art, helping to form the T.P. Videospace Troupe in 1970. More recently, she has made tapes with Joseph Chaikin and Sam Shepard (Savage/Love, 1981, and Tongues, 1982).

Ornette: Made in America, a project intermittently in the works since 1969 and completed in 1985 is a playful, enormously energetic synthesis of Clarke's many styles and concerns. In attempting to find the cinematic equivalent of Coleman's vanguard music, Clarke has broken open the standard biography format, creating a tapestry-like blend of documentary, fiction and experimental scenes. Using a wide range of film and video techniques, Clarke interweaves a performance of Coleman's Skies of America symphony with an amazing variety of source material. There is film footage shot by Clarke in 1969 and 1970 for an earlier unfinished film about Coleman, new scenes photographed by Ed Lachman, archaic video imagery by Coleman and Africans selected by Coleman, Italian television footage, scenes of old concert performances, impressionistic "music video" scenes inspired by Coleman's music, and

fictional scenes with a child actor portraying Coleman as a boy.

The painstaking post-production process called for the most advanced editing technologies currently available. Yet Clarke created the film in a spirit of improvisation. She edited a version of the film in her suite at the Chelsea Hotel, using two old 3/4" video decks. Frequently, she would cut between the two decks in rapid-fire style; it was up to the editing crew to match Clarke's improvised edit to the original footage. The film includes a number of sequences inspired by Coleman's music that were created on computerized animation equipment. Throughout the film, Clarke uses her machinery in the spirit of a jazz player.

CHAN IS MISSING (Wayne Wang, 1981, b&w, 16mm, 80 mins.)

Produced, directed, and edited by Wayne Wang; production manager, Sara Chin;screenplay by Wayne Wang, Isaac Cronin, Terrel Seltzer; photographed by Michael Chin; additional photography by Kathleen Peeler; editorial consultant, Rick Schmidt; music by Robert Kikuchi-Yngojo; Chinese pop music by Sam Hui; sound recorded by Curtis Choy; additional sound by Sara Chin. Narration by Wayne Wang and Isaac Cronin

Cast: Wood Moy (Jo), Marc Hayashi (Steve), Laureen Chew (Amy), Judy Nihei (lawyer), Peter Wang (Henry), Presco Tabios (Presco), Frankie Alarcon (Frankie), Ellen Yeung (Mrs. Chan), Emily Yamasaki (Jenny), George Woo (George), Virginia R. Cerenio (Jenny's friend), Roy Chan (Mr. Lee), Leong Pui Chee (Mr. Fong)

Wayne Wang's breakthrough movie *Chan is Missing* is the first Asian-American feature to reach a wide theatrical audience. After being rejected by the San Francisco Film Festival, (even though it was made in that city's Chinatown) and turned down by distributors, it was chosen for New Directors/New Films, where Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* called it "a matchless delight" in a review partially responsible for the film's commercial success.

Chan is Missing is an elliptical mystery-comedy, ostensibly about a cabbie's search for a friend who has disappeared with \$4,000. But the story is a red herring, as the heart of the film lies in its comical digressions, its memorable parade of bit characters, and its complex study of cultural assimilation and identity. Above all, the film gives us a realistic portrait of Chinatown, which is traditionally portrayed in movies as a dark, exotic, netherworld. As the title suggests, Chan is Missing is a rejection of "Charlie Chan" stereotypes, and a rare view of an "outside" culture viewed from the inside. The tension between its noir plot and its casual realism is an expression of Wang's desire to explore the discrepancy between movie exoticism and real life.

Wang's own background contains numerous cultural contradictions. Born in Hong Kong, he was named after John Wayne by his father, who loved American movies. Wang's religious upbringing was Baptist, not the traditional Buddhist, and he attended Catholic school. Wang has gone on to make another Chinatown feature, *Dim Sum* (1985), and a modestly budgeted Hollywood thriller, *Slam Dance* (1987), with non-Oriental characters.

Chan is Missing, made for just \$20,000, shows great aesthetic ingenuity. The inexpensive black-and-white stock is exploited for its atmospheric

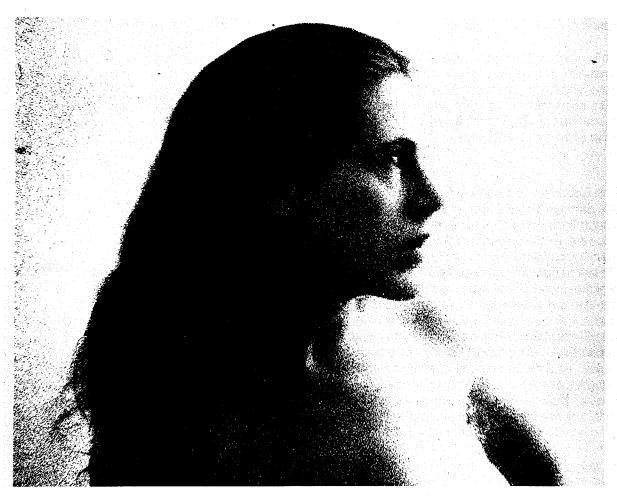
tonality and graininess. Wang also gains mileage from such cost-cutting devices as covering non-dialogue scenes with narration, using lengthy talking scenes to develop characters, and employing real locations and natural lighting to give the film a rich semi-documentary feel.

## Wayne Wang on Chan is Missing:

Chan is Missing is about how Chinese people perceive themselves as "Chinese living in America," "Chinese-Americans," and "Americans." These complex perceptions are distinct sensibilities that are often at odds with Western values. It is this dynamic humanism in Asians that Hollywood moviemakers have depicted as being inscrutable and docile.

I wanted to make a film or dispel or at least to relate to stereotyping. I didn't want to make something like *Hito Hata: Raise the Banner* (1980), which is good in its own right, but which is like an Asian John Wayne, where all the characters are good. The problem is deeper. How do we perceive information? How do we perceive images and sound? *Chan Is Missing* is the story of a missing immigrant. We never find him, but we get different perceptions of him and Chinatown....

FIVE YEAR DIARY (Anne Robertson, 1976-1988, color, super-8)
Including the following films, along with the ongoing diary film: Spirit of '76, Subways, Suicide, Dawn,
Snoozalarm, Locomotion, Out a Window, Going to Work, Lonely Streets, Magazine Mouth,
Windows, Talking to Myself (1985), Apologies, Rotting Pumpkin, My Obsession, Kafka Kamera,
The Nude, With Clothes, Fruit, Weight, Fat Talks to Thin, Talking to Myself (1987), and new films,
to be announced



Anne Robertson, self-portrait

#### Filmmaker statement:

Five Year Diary consists of all the films I've ever made and includes a film diary dating from November 3, 1981. It is a huge home movie in super-8, forty hours long by October, 1988, including audiotapes, readings from written diaries, live voice-over narration, and films made for interactive performance with myself. The intermissions are filled with tapes from diaries and showing of Regular-8 diary loops on a small rear screen projector. Manic letters will be given away.

The title, *Five Year Diary*, refers to the small diaries with locks and keys which give a person five lines each day for five years, only enough for a glimpse of a life, which this is. This is my trousseau. It's true, so...

Signs of the times include: vegetarianism, large weight gain/loss, exercise, nakedness and unisex clothing, spinsterhood and disastrous relationships, mental breakdowns and hospitalizations, the impact of father's and cat's deaths, going to graduate art school, work/unemployment/agricul-

tural self-employment, flower and vegetable gardening, crush on a film/tv actor, sun and moon and mysticism, Buddhism and Christianity, the acceptance of family and "home in the country" as essential, self-therapy films, melancholy and ecstasy: "manic-depression."

Included in the show are photo albums, souvenirs, artworks, favorite books, manic writings, and a vegetarian/anti-animal abuse environmental display.

Ideally, my happy ending would show me slim, vegetarian, employed, off medications and to-bacco, and happily married. You are invited to guess when these conditions shall exist for me. I have made this film in such a way as to encourage you to examine your life also.

- Anne Robertson

Anne Robertson is a performer and filmmaker who uses the medium as a form of self-therapy. Though her work incorporates many key concerns of current avant-garde filmmaking (autobiography, feminism, psychoanalysis, and the union of film with live performance), these topics are couched in a unique, monumental home movie that is both candid and entertaining. There is a fascinating tension in Robertson's work. She seems introverted-we almost always see her alone-and extroverted-willing to turn her life into a public display. As a performer, she is generous and engaging, and her movies display an intuitive sense of showmanship. Robertson walks a tantalizing line between being in and out of control. The diary chronicles her many nervous breakdowns and manic episodes, but the act of filmmaking seems cathartic. (She claims to have been cured of self-destructive impulses as soon as she saw her film Suicide projected.) The neuroses confronted in this remarkable work generally stem from the power that social values and expectations can have over a woman's self-image: weight loss, bodily appearance, and the desire to find a husband are among Robertson's main obsessions. Her film, and her life, show an ongoing battle between her inner self and her social self. Robertson intends to continue making Five Year Diary for the rest of her life.

## An Evening with George Kuchar

MONGRELOID (1979, color, 16mm, 10 mins.)

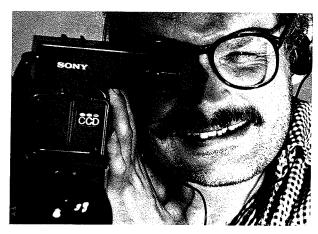
THE ONEERS (1982, color, 16mm, 10 mins.)

YOLANDA (1981, color, 16mm, 22 mins.) Starring Michelle Joyce

THE CULT OF THE CUBICLES (1987, color, 8mm video, 45 mins.)

George Kuchar, best-known for his outrageously funny Bronx melodramas, has championed a lowbudget, home-made aesthetics since the fifties. With his brother Mike, he has made such poverty row classics as Hold Me While I'm Naked (1966) and Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof (1963). These lavishly inventive yet purposefully amateurish homages to Hollywood were often made in 8mm film. George Kuchar, who now lives in San Francisco and teaches at the Art Institute, has adapted his artistry to the consumer medium of 8mm video, and is currently involved in creating diary video albums. Edited and crafted in-camera, and layered with Kuchar's narration, these tapes are drawn from day-to-day experiences and are made at a cost of about fifteen dollars. While Kuchar's movies were camp melodramas with autobiographical subtexts, his diary tapes are the opposite: overtly autobiographical, these works blend compassion and humor with a B-movie mentality formed by a life of watching trashy celluloid spectacles.

Though his primary focus in the past few years has been video work, Kuchar has also made some vintage films in the past decade. Monareloid chronicles the relationship between Kuchar and his dog Bocko. As the filmmaker states: "A man, his dog, and the regions they inhabited, each leaving his own distinctive mark on the landscape. Not even time can wash the residue of what they left behind." The Oneers was made by Kuchar and his students at the Art Institute. Described by Kuchar as "a sentimental essay on the noble and pioneering spirit that pushed westward on this continent...everything that \$650 could buy," The Oneers is a campy treatment of nineteenth-century pioneers that ventures into a study of UFO's and the exploration of space, a favorite Kuchar obsession. Yolanda is one of Kuchar's lushest



Portrait of George Kuchar, courtesy the artist

productions, using only music and lurid color photography, to tell the story of a repressed housewife who becomes infatuated with a large, hairy bigfoot creature.

The Cult of the Cubicles is part of Kuchar's video album series. The chronicle of a trip back to New York, complete with visits to old high-school friends and his old apartment in the Bronx, the tape is one of Kuchar's most personal and revealing works, and one of his funniest. Beneath the humor, however, lies a poignant reflection on the past and of growing old.

## George Kuchar on video vs. film:

Underground film audiences today are made up of politically oriented watch dog groups clamoring for Pollyanna-like representation. With video, the viewing event can have sort of a Tupperware party flavor, as you sit around, munch, and savor the intimacies emanating from the so-called "boob tube." With these formal film showings you always have to appear and stand in front of a bunch of unknown beings to explain every blotch and stain

on the personal laundry you just made public. The underground film audience today (some of them) want cultural heroes endowed with super humanism and not degenerates possessed with obsessive perversions...elements of vital necessity in many works. This of course is not true with John Waters' fans. They have developed a different aesthetics. So where underground filmmaking is becoming more and more like TV by trying to plugup anal fixations...let's hope home video pulls that plug to let the anal material fixate on the fan.

George Kuchar, "Shooting in 8mm Video,"
 Motion Picture, Winter/Spring 1987

THE CUP AND THE LIP (Warren Sonbert, 1986, color, 16mm, 20 mins., silent) SORTED DETAILS (Charles Wright, 1980, color, 16mm, 13 mins.)

UNDER THE MACHINES OF FIRE (Gary Adkins, 1981, color, 16mm, 20 mins.)

BLESSED IN EXILE (Ken Ross, 1979, color, 16mm, 15 mins.)

CRISIS IN UTOPIA (Ken Ross, 1981, color, 16mm, 25 mins.)

All of these non-narrative films bear a certain formal similarity to music, creating a rhythmic play among diverse images linked by texture and motif. They can all be called "montage films" because it is in the juxtaposition of images that they create meaning.

For Warren Sonbert, the proverbial slip that occurs between cup and lip takes place when some excess element of an image (a color, a movement, an identifiable person or action, etc.) remains undigested by the narrative process. Sonbert edits his imagery in a style that constantly redirects the viewer's attention towards these "slips." The Cup and the Lip is one of his most overtly political films, with images culled from all over Europe and America.

Charles Wright's Sorted Details is a city symphony, a dense, rapidly edited clash of shapes, sounds, and colors filmed in New York and San Francisco. Shot in extreme close-up and edited in quick staccato style, the abstract images become musical notes in Wright's playful vision.

Gary Adkins' Under the Machines of Fire is an ominous blend of militaristic and idyllic elements: a toy airplane, footage of jet fighters, images from weather satellites, a shot of a girl holding a flower, Mexican music, Mayan ruins. A sense of global concern informs this mysterious, sensual film. Similarly, Ken Ross's films convey religious. cultural and political themes. Blessed in Exile, filmed in Brooklyn and Jamaica, juxtaposes Jewish and African cultures. In a moment of transcendence, a Jamaican woman's ecstatic baptism dance is accompanied by joyous Yiddish music. Crisis in Utopia is an even more ambitious montage film, suffused with a sense of apocalypse in today's world, that captures a quality described by Ross as "being-on-the-verge."

## Charles Wright on Sorted Details:

Shared shape, color or movement links each of these varied fragments of urban landscape with the next. Each sight has its own naturalistic ambient sound. As the film yanks you from spot to spot and from moment to moment, don't take for granted the direction of gravity, the direction or speed of time, or the brightness of vision.

## Warren Sonbert on narrative:

The strengths of narrative as well entail its limitations. On one level narrative could be defined as the eventual resolution of all elements introduced. This classical balance is always satisfying when the various strands are climactically tied together. But this also implies a grounding that may often enough be a deadening.

Warren Sonbert, "Narrative Concerns,"
 Cinematograph , Volume 1, 1985

## Ken Ross on Blessed in Exile:

Seeking the common dynamics of two seemingly disparate cultures and unifying them through a textural image and sound weave. A powerful emotional quality is apparent in the religiosity, ritual, and search of these peoples. They share an eternal state of homelessness (and longing for home/heaven) and a bittersweet state of being (cries of ecstasy or pain?). Emotive and textural qualities of language, song, and prayer outweigh the importance of literal meaning.

NIGHTMARE ANGEL (Zoe Beloff and Susan Emerling, 1986, b&w, 16mm, 35 mins.)

Written, directed and edited by Zoe Beloff and Susan Emerling; produced by Susan Emerling; photographed by Zoe Beloff; music by Bruce Tovsky

Cast: Audrey Matson, Bill Moseley, James Selby

BORN IN FLAMES (Lizzie Borden, 1983, color, 16mm, 90 mins.)

Produced, directed and edited by Lizzie Borden; photographed by Ed Bowes and Al Santana; additional camera by Lizzie Borden, Chris Hegedus, Peter Hutton, Johanna Heer, Gary Hill, Michael Oblowitz, Greta Schiller; editing and story consultant, Ed Bowes; music by The Bloods, Ibis, The Red Crayola

Cast: Honey (Honey), Adele Bertei (Isabel), Jeanne Satterfield (Adelaide Norris), Flo Kennedy (Zella Wylie), Pat Murphy, Kathryn Bigelow, Becky Johnston (Socialist Youth Review Editors), Ron Vawter, John Coplans (FBI agents), Hilary Hurst, Sheila McLaughlin, Marty Pottenger (Women in Army), John Rudolph, Valerie Smaldone, Warner Schreiner (TV newscasters)

Lizzie Borden's Born in Flames is an inventively ragged science fiction feature whose subject is the clash of different brands of feminism. The film is set in the future, ten years after a "Social-Democratic cultural revolution." Varying women's groups fight for control: a militant, racially mixed Women's Army calls for protests and vigilantism; a Black underground radio station plays soul, gospel and reggae, calling for "the liberation of all through the freedom of life which is found in music;" a white underground station plays nihilistic punk and rock music; and a group of intellectuals attempts to formulate theoretically correct positions in their Socialist Youth Review . Adding to this melange of voices is a flow of TV news reports, and scenes of FBI surveillance of the feminist groups. Largely about communication, Born in Flames is an open-ended film in which varying cinematic styles, as well as political theories, vie for power. By making the future look just like present-day Manhattan, and by addressing the newscasts directly to the audience, the film involves the viewer in an active, open dialogue. Borden made the film with no shooting script, and a cast of non-professional actors and people recruited on the streets. As she said in an interview in the November 1983 Independent, "I wanted to make a style that looked shot-off-the-hip, like anyone could shoot it, so that it wouldn't be an alienated voyeuristic thing." Born in Flames had a strong impact on the art-film circuit, and Borden reached a wider audience with her next film, Working Girls, a demystifying look at middle-class prostitution that packaged its unconventional ideas in a polished sit-com style.

Nightmare Angel, an accomplished first film, is an adaptation of J. G. Ballard's 1972 novel Crash.

The car crash as fetish of consumerist society is the central metaphor of this moody study of media seduction. Beloff and Emerling use the story of a crash-obsessed photographer to probe the manner in which images such as the Kennedy assassination and the Challenger explosion become cultural icons. Despite its extremely low budget, *Nightmare Angel* uses the environs of New York City to create a memorably alien landscape.

#### Lizzie Borden on Born in Flames:

The narrative of the film is disjunctive, cutting between various groups of women who represent various conflicting ideological/cultural positions within the women's community. The ideas for the script were developed in collaboration with the women in the film who, to various degrees, play themselves. The title of the film is meant to suggest that even though an armed revolutionary movement may be impossible to sustain, it would survive as a thorn in the side of the culture. The armed activities are directed primarily against the media in order to appropriate the language, even temporarily. The film also expresses the hope that women will be able to work together, that the bitter conflicts that have existed within the women's community —between lesbians and heterosexuals, between women of different races—will one day disappear.

MONEY (Henry Hills, 1984, color, 16mm, 15 mins.)

Starring John Zorn, Susie Timmons, James Sherry, Arto Lindsay, Fred Frith, Jack Collom, Charles Bernstein, Diane Ward, Sally Silvers, David Moss, Pooh Kaye, Alan Davies, Yoshiko Chuma, Carmen Vigil, Ron Silliman, Mark Miller, Peter Hall, Tom Cora, Abigail Child, Bruce Andrews and more

NEW YORK PORTRAIT: CHAPTER ONE (Peter Hutton, 1979, b&w, 16mm, 16 mins., silent)

STRANGER THAN PARADISE (Jim Jarmusch, 1984, b&w, 35mm, 95 mins.)

Directed and written by Jim Jarmusch; produced by Sara Driver; executive producer, Otto Grokenberger; photographed by Tom DiCillo; edited by Jim Jarmusch and Melody London; music by John Lurie; sound by Greg Curry and Drew Kunin Cast: John Lurie (Willie), Eszter Balint (Eva), Richard Edson (Eddie), Cecilia Stark (Aunt Lotte), Danny Rosen (Billy), Rammellzee (man with money)

The surprise hit Stranger than Paradise struck a responsive chord with a mainstream audience and won the National Society of Film Critics "Best Picture" award. In this stylized road movie, John Lurie and Richard Edson play a duo of New York drifters, something like Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble as imagined by Samuel Beckett. Inspired by the arrival of a cousin from Hungary, they hit the road to see America, driving to Cleveland and then to Florida. The joke is that there is no "paradise" out there; instead it's a vapid wasteland where everything looks the same. While two-thirds of the movie is set outside of New York, the film's mentality is clearly Soho, and the affected cool of its characters is reminiscent of films from the super-8 punk movement. While its success was due largely to its deadpan vaudeville style, the film was also notable for its bold visual style and editing, with austere black-and-white photography by Tom DiCillo, long takes (each scene is a single-shot tableau), and blackouts between each shot.

It is possible that Jarmusch's visual style was influenced by Peter Hutton's silent black-and-white films. Like Jarmusch, Hutton separates his images with curtains of black leader; the difference is that Jarmusch's blackouts have the impact of a comic punchline and Hutton's are meant to enhance his film's meditative quality. Hutton's films are reminiscent of Atget's photographs of Paris, as he wanders through the city with a hand-cranked Bolex, capturing images that are simultaneously austere and revelatory.

While Hutton's films are imbued with a wonderful quietude, Henry Hills' hyperkinetic montage film *Money* captures the real-life chaotic flavor of

Gotham. Rapidly edited shots of musicians and performers from downtown are intercut with street footage. Nearly every shot is broken down to a single gesture that is on screen for less than two seconds and becomes a phrase in a dissonant jazz-like cinematic performance.

## Henry Hills on *Money:*

As population increases, movement increases; increased movement causes greater visual density; just to walk down the street (& certainly to drive down the street) we need to be able to see & react faster & in a more sophisticated manner than our grandparents (& we do ! think of the unsophisticated nineteenth-century attitude towards photography, people running out of Lumiere's theater from the approaching train, etc.) If we're going to survive we have to learn to think even faster & concentrate even harder (fortunately we have the computer to help us with the drudgery-new forms of composition in access patterning). I see Money primarily as an exercise in concentrating. All perception is fragmented—only memory makes it seem linear & memory is a liar (a fiction). To simplify things is to lose what is important about them. I want to be able to tell the truth truthfully.

## Films by Gunvor Nelson

LIGHT YEARS (1987, color, 16mm, 28 mins., silent)

RED SHIFT (1983, b&w, 16mm, 50 mins.)

Assistant: Diane Kitchen

With: Carin Grundel, Oona Nelson, Gunvor Nelson, Regine Grundel, Ulla Mober, Gunnar Grundel

When Swedish emigré Gunvor Nelson moved from painting to filmmaking in the sixties, she developed a strikingly graphic approach that emphasizes surfaces and textures in order to express emotional truth. In subject matter, Nelson's films tend to be deeply personal. If they contain any universality, it is through their sharp focus on specific details. Nelson describes her visual tour de force Light Years as "a collage film and journey through the Swedish landscape, traversing stellar distances in units of 5878 trillion miles." Using footage from a train journey through Sweden, the film is part of a trilogy (along with Frame Line, 1984, and Light Years Expanding, 1988) on her homeland. Nelson's vision and her impressions are expressed through the use of optical techniques, including painting on the images and combining them with mattework.

An exploration of mother-daughter relationships is at the heart of Gunvor Nelson's masterful Red Shift, filmed at her parents' home in Kristinehamn, Sweden, and punctuated by readings of letters from Calamity Jane to her daughter. An impossible film to categorize. Red Shift features Nelson, her daughter, and her mother as "performers," with the action lying somewhere between fiction and documentary, and the lived-in family house assuming the role of main character. The scenes may be staged, but there is close attention to real-life observation—the skin on an old woman's thighs as she puts on stockings, the play of light through a curtain, the resonance of an empty room in an old family house. There is no narrative line to tell us what to expect, but there is a strong sense of weight and impact with each image. The film seems to have been created intuitively, with an extraordinary use of black-and-white photography.

Gunvor Nelson on Red Shift:

A film in black and white about relationships, generations, and time. The subtitle is "All Expectation." The movement of a luminous body toward

and away from us can be found in its spectral lines. A shift toward red occurs with anybody that is self-luminous and receding. There is uncertainty about how much observable material exists.



Signal-Germany on the Air by Ernie Gehr Courtesy of Whitney Museum of American Art

## Films by Ernie Gehr

UNTITLED, 1981 (1981, color, 16mm, 30 mins., silent)

SIGNAL-GERMANY ON THE AIR (1985, color, 16mm, 45 mins.)

## New film to be announced

Most films teach film to be an image, a representing. But film is a real thing and as a real thing it is not an imitation. It does not reflect on life, it embodies the life of the mind. It is not a vehicle for ideas or portrayals of emotion outside of its own existence as emoted idea. Film is a variable intensity of light, an internal balance of time, a movement within a given space.

 from program notes by Gehr for the Museum of Modern Art, February 1971

Ernie Gehr's meticulously crafted films find their means of expression in the articulation of cinema's fundamental elements. His best known film, *Serene Velocity* (1970), made entirely with abrupt shifts in the focal length of a zoom lens focused on

an empty hallway, is a classic study of cinematic space. Gehr has frequently been cited as a leader of structuralism, a movement in the early seventies in which the medium turned in on itself, and the material nature of film became the subject. Historical and personal concerns, however, underlie Gehr's recent work, with no lessening of formal rigor.

Untitled, 1981 was filmed entirely from the secondfloor window of Gehr's Brooklyn apartment. An
oddly voyeuristic film, it is a telephoto study of
street life, focusing on the gestures and interactions of elderly Jewish people doing their shopping.
We see just fragmented close-ups; a piece of
clothing, a hand gesture, the back of a neck, an
exchange of coins. Gehr has choreographed
these elements into a lush cinematic dance. The
colors are extraordinarily rich, and each gesture
and piece of visual information has significance.
As is true of Gehr's other work, the effect is hard to
translate into words, because it is so purely cinematic. Yet the viewer can not help but read
historical and ethnic associations into the imagery.

A sense of history as a haunting, undefinable presence is also felt throughout Gehr's masterful Signal-Germany on the Air, a study of modern-day Berlin, the city his parents were forced to flee during World War II. The Holocaust provides an absent but underlying structure to the film. As with all of Gehr's films, the imagery is at once mundane and loaded with significance. Gehr filmed at a number of intersections and at an empty lot with a sign that announces "You are standing on the grounds of the former torture chamber of the gestapo." This is the most overtly political image in an oddly sterile cityscape marked with traffic signs. trash barrels, storefronts, passing cars, and strangely empty sidewalks. As with Serene Velocity, the viewer is constantly being repositioned, as Gehr abruptly cuts from location to location. The sound track is a collage of street sounds and radio transmissions, a seemingly random barrage of multilingual noise. The most overt "clue" is a gangster melodrama with the dialogue: "You were responsible, it's your fault." "Don't blame me. You can't accuse me of that." "Can't accuse you? Who else can I accuse?" The film becomes increasingly ominous, especially

during the unsettling final section, in which a thunderstorm covers the city. The effect of this film is not so much disorientation as *re* -orientation. Gehr, in struggling to situate himself in relation to history, teaches us to see anew.

**THE MAN WHO ENVIED WOMEN** (Yvonne Rainer, 1985, color, 16mm, 125 minutes) Written and directed by Yvonne Rainer; edited by Yvonne Rainer and Christine Le Goff, photographed by Mark Daniels

Cast: William Raymond (Jack Deller #1), Larry Loonin (Jack Deller #2), Trisha Brown (Trisha), Jackie Raynal (Jackie)

Formerly a dancer and choreographer (she co-founded the Judson Dance Theater in 1962, and was one of the first performers to integrate film in her work), Yvonne Rainer has made five feature films since 1972, in a distinct collage style in which a network of narrative and conceptual elements are combined. A Rainer film is a puzzle that must be put together by the viewer in an active process of synthesis. One of the hallmarks of this style is its disavowal of the singular, centralized authorial subject. Like much strong feminist work of the past decade (i.e.,the films of Lizzie Borden, Nina Menkes, Chick Strand, and Leslie Thornton), Rainer introduces a multiplicity of voices through a decentered narrative style.

The Man Who Envied Women can be described as a movie about power, set in present day Manhattan. The scope of the film is enormous, but always revolves around the theme of control and domination in personal and political relations, whether in the real estate wars of Manhattan (incorporated through documentary video footage of city housing hearings), an analysis of U.S. involvement in Central America, the attempts of the male protagonist to seduce a woman with a stream of intellectual babble, or the overheard comments in the candid-camera street scenes that run throughout the film. (A man tells a woman, "How can you be angry with me? I'm simply a product of social forces beyond my control.")

In this engaging, comical, and profoundly feminist work, the woman protagonist gains a certain power by never being seen on screen, appearing only as a voice-over. The main on--screen character, Professor Jack Deller, is played by two actors. While Luis Buñuel used two actresses to play one woman in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), his goal was to create a sense of mystery and erotic allure; Rainer's aim is roughly the opposite, to demystify and deconstruct the male identity.

#### Rainer on The Man Who Envied Women:

The Audience is once more perplexed after viewing my last film, *The Man Who Envied Women*. Some of them are once again asking, "What does *she* believe? Where in this welter of ideas, aphorisms, opinions, quotations, ironies, rhetoric, collisions is *her* voice? Are there really no arguments to follow, no resolutions or conclusions to be gleaned from this overload? Are the meanings so embedded in ambiguity that even the most assiduous concentration is unable to dredge them up, with the various discourses eventually neutralizing each other?" (The audience of my daydreams, like the voices of my films, is very gabby.)

I hope not. I am not an iconoclast bent on destroying all vestiges of "authorial discourse." (As a "lapsed" anarchist, I am only too aware that when it comes to authority our choices are merely better or worse compromises.) On the contrary, I would like to believe that I subject such discourses to pressures and tests, or dislocations, e.g., a removal from their ordinary contexts—the printed page, the classroom, or the formal lecture—to unexpected physical and psychic spaces. The space of real estate profiteering, for instance, or the space of seduction, or the space of sexual (mis)representation.

 excerpted from "Some Ruminations around Cinematic Antidotes to the Oedipal Net(tles) while Playing with DeLauraedipus Mulvey, or, He May Be Off Screen, but...," The Independent, April 1986

WHO KILLED VINCENT CHIN? (Christine Choy and Renee Tajima, 1988, color, 16mm, 87 mins.)

A film by Christine Choy and Renee Tajima. Produced by Film News Now Foundation & WTVS/
Detroit Public Television; edited by Holly Fisher; executive in charge of production, Robert
Larson; executive producer, Juanita Anderson; associate producer/production manager, Nancy
Mei-Yu Tong; cinematography by Christine Choy, Nick Doob, Kyle Kibbe, Al Santana; sound
editor, Ira Spiegel; sound recording, Mark Rance, Sylvie Thouard

During the height of the automobile recession in 1982, Vincent Chin, a young Chinese-American man, was beaten to death in Detroit by a Chrysler foreman named Ronald Ebens and his stepson Michael Nitz. Chin was apparently mistaken as Japanese (hostility against Japanese imports was running high at the time). The killers were convicted of manslaughter, sentenced to three years probation and fined \$3,750. The light sentence provoked nationwide protest, and the federal government responded by prosecuting Ebens and Nitz for violating their victim's civil rights. Five years after the murder, the killers were freed, never having spent a day in jail.

Choy and Tajima's riveting, kaleidoscopic report, set against the backdrop of Detroit's auto industry, exposes the tensions and contradictions lurking beneath the surface of a distinctly American landscape. The tapestry is colored with cultural icons: McDonald's, topless bars, bachelor parties, baseball bats, Labor Day parades, Motown music, political rallies, and the everpresent media. In a stunning interview, Ebens confesses on camera, shrugging off the incident as a forgiveable outburst. Meanwhile, the victim's mother searches for justice; she is bewildered by the tangled judicial process and the cruel outcome of the case. One of the film's most poignant details is her futile attempt to pronounce the word "justice."

While the trajectory of the murder case gives the film a relentless narrative drive, Chin and Tajima have a broader goal: to paint a disturbing canvas of American life. The notion of a homogenous "melting pot" is dispelled in this portrait of a multiracial society in which whites, blacks, and orientals struggle for a piece of the American pie.

Choy and Tajima have been key figures in the rise of an Asian-American independent film movement. Choy has been a prolific documentary filmmaker for the past fifteen years, (Mississippi Triangle,

1984, Loose Pages Bound, 1978, and From Spikes to Spindles, 1976, are some of her films), and was a founder of the distribution company Third World Newsreel. Tajima is a film/video maker who has worked with Choy since 1983. She is a former director of Asian Cinevision, and a founder of the Asian American International Video Festival.

MY BROTHER'S WEDDING (Charles Burnett, 1983, color, 35mm, 120 mins.)

Written, directed and photographed by Charles Burnett; produced by Charles Burnett and Gaye-Shannon Burnett; edited by Thomas M. Penick; music by Johnny Ace, John Briggs; assistant photographers, Omar El Aide, A.J. Fielder, Lynn Smith; assistant directors, Julie Dash Fielder, Ronald Hairston, Camelia Frieberg

Cast: Everett Silas (Pierce Mundy), Jessie Holmes (Mrs. Mundy), Gaye Shannon-Burnett (Sonia), Ronald E. Bell (Soldier Richards), Dennis Kemper (Wendell Mundy), Sy Richardson (Sonia's father), Frances Nealy (Sonia's mother), Angela Burnett (Angela)

My Brother's Wedding is a tragic comedy that takes place in South Central Los Angeles. The story focuses on a young man who hasn't made much of his life and is at a crucial point in his life, but is unable to make the proper decision, a sober decision, a moral decision, because he has not developed beyond the embryonic stage, socially. He has a distinct romantic notion about life in the ghetto and yet, in spite of his naive sensitivity, is given the task of being his brother's keeper; he feels rather than sees, and as a consequence his capacity for judging things is limited. This brings about circumstances that weave themselves into a set of complexities that Pierce Mundy, the main character, desperately tries to avoid.

- Charles Burnett

Director, cinematographer, and screenwriter Charles Burnett is a key member of the group of black independent filmmakers that came out of UCLA in the mid-seventies. Burnett's grittily realistic Killer of Sheep (1977), about a Watts slaughterhouse worker, is generally regarded as the masterpiece of this movement. Yet his next film, the vastly underrated My Brother's Wedding, showed a remarkable shift in style. Shot in 35mm, the images have a handsome, almost burnished quality, foregoing the raw Neorealism usually associated with the films of the black independent movement (a style exemplified by Billie Woodberry's Bless Their Little Hearts, written by Burnett). With the pacing and tone of a European film (it was, after all, co-produced by the German television station ZDF), the movie has an austere style, closer to Robert Bresson than Roberto Rossellini.

One of the film's boldest strokes is the subdued, sensitive performance by Everett Silas as Pierce Mundy, the passive protagonist. Mundy reflects

Burnett's own ambivalence about the Watts ghetto, unwilling to abandon his background for what he sees as the empty promise of the American dream. Pierce's conflict is dramatized by the impending marriage of his upwardly mobile brother to a lawyer, and the simultaneous return to Watts of Soldier, an ex-convict friend. Pierce sees his brother's aspirations to affluence as a form of selling out. On the other hand, Soldier's return shakes Pierce's idealistic view of ghetto life. Much like Chan Is Missing, but with more subtlety, the plot of My Brother's Wedding is fleshed out with digressions that create a warmly observed portrait of daily neighborhood life. Contrasting this compassionate naturalism is Burnett's satirical portrayal of the upper-middle class family. Its sharp classconsciousness, leavened with an understated realism and sense of humor, makes this one of the most compelling American independent features of the past decade.

## Films by Larry Gottheim

FOUR SHADOWS (1978, color, 16mm, 64 mins.)

MNEMOSYNE: MOTHER OF MUSES (1986, b&w and color, 16mm, 18 mins.)

THE RED THREAD (1987, color, 16mm, 15 mins.)

A frequent complaint about the American avantgarde of the past decade is that it has been producing work that is studied and academic, rather than truly personal and innovative. An elegant rebuttal of this charge may be found in the increasingly intuitive, open-ended films of Larry Gottheim. Four Shadows seems, at first, to fit P. Adams Sitney's description (in Visionary Film, Oxford Univeristy Press, New York, 1979) of "structuralism," as a cinema "in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film." Gottheim's film is comprised of sixteen sections, with four sound and image segments juxtaposed in every possible combination. The visual segments include footage of apes at a zoo, a close-up of an art history text, a scene of two men surveying a meadow, and a semi-narrative episode filmed in a snowy industrial setting. The sound sections include music from a Debussy opera, readings from Wordsworth's The Prelude, monkey noise. and the burbling of a stream. Once the structure is gleaned, the viewer begins to anticipate the imagesound combinations, and the film unfolds like a puzzle. Working in opposition to the film's mathematical framework, however, is its evocative quality, evidenced both in Gottheim's beautiful landscape photography, and in the manner in which the different combinations take on mysterious meanings. As the punning title suggests, the combinations may be foreshadowed by the structure, but the images and sounds are shadows, given shape and meaning only in the viewer's mind.

In his two most recent films, Gottheim has developed an increasingly autobiographical style. *Mnemosyne: Mother of Muses* and *The Red Thread* are beautiful films on a purely visual level. The former is a rich, high-contrast black-and-white work, the latter is in vivid, saturated color. Both films offer a dense flow of images and sounds. *Mnemosyne*, largely a meditation by the filmmaker on his father's death, includes *film noir* dialogue in

which a gangster asks: "What's the big idea?" The Red Thread includes a running dialogue in which the filmmaker questions his own methods. Gottheim's cinema reflects a desire to move away from a cinema purely of ideas. His recent work marks him as one of the premiere personal filmmakers.

# Gottheim on Mnemosyne: Mother of Muses:

Finally a body of rapidly changing material, so emotionally resonant for me, seemed to hold out universal cinematic possibilities. The title, recalled from a passage of Heidegger, released a form that allowed compositional play while the implications of the form itself led one further into issues such as thought as *reflection*, and the relationship of the machine (with its motifs of repetition and reversibility) to landscape and human existence. The film was completed as a silent visual work to which a further stage of composition superimposed the sound elements, including Toscanini rehearsing *Die Walkure*, the diner scene in Siodmak's film *The Killers*, Keaton, Bartok....

#### Gottheim on Four Shadows:

Of course I was increasingly aware of the meaningimplications of the procedures I was following with this material, developing thoughts around issues of romanticism, nature, desire and guilt, language, etc... all finally hovering around the idea of freedom. In spite of the tendency for certain meanings and feeling to coalesce at certain points in the film, I am very pleased at how open the film remains, continuing to lead me on.

SUZANNE, SUZANNE (Camille Billops and James V. Hatch, 1982, b&w, 16mm, 26 mins.)

Produced and directed by James V. Hatch and Camille Billops; photographed by Dion Hatch; edited by Michael Kirchberger; sound by David Brownlow. Song "Suzanne, Suzanne" written by Christa Victoria and performed by Christa Victoria and Camille Billops

BLESS THEIR LITTLE HEARTS (Billie Woodberry, 1984, b&w, 16mm., 80 mins.)

Directed and produced by Billie Woodberry; screenplay and cinematography by Charles Burnett; additional camera by Patrick Melly; sound by Richard Cervantes; edited by Billie Woodberry; made in consultation with Alan Kondo, Tom Penick, Nate Hardman, and Kaycee Moore Cast: Nate Hardman (Charlie Banks), Kaycee Moore (Andais Banks), Angela, Ronald and Kimberly Burnett (the Banks children), Eugene Cherry (Gene), Lawrence Pierott (John), Ernest Knight (Duck), Ellis Griffin (Pasquale)

In the mid-seventies, a group of UCLA film students and graduates banded together to forge a small but vital black independent film movement. Their commitment to dramatic features was, in the words of film historian Clyde Taylor, "fired by the discomfort of dwelling in the belly of the beast." While Hollywood, just minutes away, was churning out "blaxploitation" pictures, these filmmakers were creating low-budget, aesthetically daring movies that reflected real-life concerns. Bless Their Little Hearts is one of the strongest films to come out of this movement. Billie Woodberry's first feature (with screenplay and cinematography by Charles Burnett, director of My Brother's Wedding) tells the story of Charlie Banks, a Watts factory worker who loses his job and spirals into an emotional crisis. While Charlie goes on a hapless job hunt, his wife becomes the family breadwinner. Charlie begins to feel displaced and worthless, and seeks reassurance through an affair. The inner drama, subtly portrayed through the accretion of small details, explodes during the movie's centerpiece, a confrontation between husband and wife. Filmed in an uninterrupted ten-minute take, this scene is a tour de force of improvisational acting. The effect of this sharply observed, brilliantly acted film is hardly the same as watching "real life:" the film has a distilled poetic intensity.

Suzanne, Suzanne, is a personal documentary which, like Bless Their Little Hearts, shows the disruptive effects of a father's emotional crisis. What was intended to be a portrait of the filmmaker's niece became a more ambitious and disturbing project as the subject, Suzanne, revealed stories about her abusive father. In her first film, Billops, a sculptor, intuitively experiments with documentary form, effectively incorporating home

movie footage, and breaking traditional taboos by talking from behind the camera and using a highly theatrical set-up for the climactic confrontation between mother and daughter.

# From Woodberry's publicity material:

Bless Their Little Hearts is centered in a tradition of black American independent filmmaking. Since the early part of the twentieth century there has been a continuing attempt to produce what historian Thomas Cripps calls black genre films, those attempts within American cinema to "respond to the artistic and mythic needs of a black audience." These films include efforts from a variety of sources, from the early, crude works of Oscar Michaeux, to the interracial efforts of New York independents such as Shirley Clarke, Robert Young, and John Cassavettes, to the more contemporary films of Melvin Van Peebles, Ossie Davis, and others.

Bless Their Little Hearts represents a new current in this tradition; one informed by new sensibilities and possibilities. Many of the new, young directors of independent black films studied at film academies and were influenced, not only by the racial tenor in their own country, but by works of film art from around the world. These filmmakers learned from Italian Neorealism, the French New Wave and, perhaps most importantly, the vibrant work of filmmakers in Cuba, Brazil, India, and Africa.

TO A RANDOM... (Michael Burlingame, 1986, b&w, 16mm, 24 mins.)
Written and directed by Michael Burlingame
With Robert Drew and Walter "Killer" Kowalski

SCREAMPLAY (Rufus Butler Seder, 1984, b&w, 35mm, 90 mins.)

Directed and edited by Rufus Butler Seder; produced and photographed by Dennis M. Piana; screenplay by Ed Greenberg and Rufus Butler Seder; music by Basil Bova and George Cordeiro; art director, Cheryl Hirshman; production manager, Catherine Shaddix; sound recorded by Flip Johnson

Cast: Rufus Butler Seder (Edgar Allen), Katy Bolger (Holly), George Kuchar (Martin), Eugene Seder (Al Weiner), Cheryl Hirshman (Harriet Weiner), James McCann (Sonny Weiner), Cliff Sears (Busdriver), Johanna Wagner (coffee shop waitress), George Cordeiro (Sgt. Joe Blatz), Lonny McDougall (transvestite), Bob White (Lot), M. Lynda Robertson (Nina Ray)

Rufus Butler Seder's sustained comical tour de force *Screamplay* is a B-movie thriller set in Hollywood, filmed in the expressionistic style of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919). A thoroughly entertaining homage to old movies, with a supporting performance by George Kuchar as an obnoxious landlord, *Screamplay* is the sort of movie that either finds a cult following or fades into oblivion. It fits comfortably into neither the art film circuit nor the horror movie mass market, and since acquiring the film in 1985, Troma has not been able to open the film theatrically in New York.

The story, which justifies the film's expressionist style, is about the hyperactive imagination of a newly arrived young Hollywood screenwriter, played by Seder in a hilarious rendition of Conrad Veidt's Cesare from Caligari. Screamplay was made entirely in the small studio of the Boston Movie Company for about \$200,000. Hollywood is evoked through slide projections, painted sets, and bold optical tricks. In the style of a Kuchar film, the hammy but expressionistic acting is part of an aesthetics that embraces old movies while rejecting Hollywood gloss and glamour. Remarkably, Screamplay maintains its high level of inventiveness throughout its entire ninety minutes, ending with a wonderful punch line that achieves the movie's stated goal of taking Hollywood by the throat...and strangling it.

Michael Burlingame's *To a Random...* is a surreal narrative mood piece, in an original style somewhat reminiscent of both Luis Buffuel and David Lynch, and described by its maker as "torpid slapstick." Filmed entirely on sets built in Boston lofts, *To a* 

Random... is a memorable short film that defies synopsis, and is filled with vivid images, a bizarre cast that includes famed wrestler Killer Kowalski, and an inventive use of video effects. The music, in keeping with the intuitive spirit of the project, was created by the experimental quartet Birdsongs of the Mesozoic, who prepared for the recording session by viewing the film in a completely disordered version, and then improvised the sound track as they saw the real film for the first time.

AQUI SE LO HALLA (Lee Sokol, 1983, color, 16mm, 18 mins.)
SOFT FICTION (Chick Strand, 1979, b&w, 16mm, 54 mins.)

"I had a warm feeling, a wave of desire went through my body to become this railing, to become this piece, to become those curves, that shape . . . I could feel it in my cells...like the warmth of desire that makes you feel your bones are soft."

- Beverle Houston in Soft Fiction

The title of Chick Strand's Soft Fiction evokes a gentle blurring of the line between fiction and reality, as well as a storytelling style that emphasizes texture and feelings. Strand is a Los Angeles filmmaker who moves freely between genres, even within the same film, adapting her techniques in the service of an intimate, sensuous style. Soft Fiction, a film about female experience, does not separate inner or psychic experience from bodily experience. Nudity is used to express women's strength, a notion which may sound like a relic of the sixties, but which is expressed by Strand with simple conviction.

Soft Fiction is an intimate, experimental documentary portrait of five women, each of whom recounts an extremely personal experience. In each case, psychological resilience helped the women deal with varying forms of victimization. A photographer recounts being coaxed into a series of sexual adventures at a rodeo. Another woman describes an incestuous girlhood relationship with her grandfather. Another describes a masochistic relationship based on drug addiction. Most dramatic is the reminiscence of horrifying childhood experiences in Poland during World War II. These stories are framed by near-abstract lyrical sequences that feel like something from a Maya Deren dream film. Strand frequently films the women in extreme close-up; the intimacy is remarkable, as is the film's expression of feminine strength, both psychological and physical. Soft Fiction undermines the negative, passive connotations that often accompany the word "feminine."

Lee Sokol's *Aqui se lo Halla* is a purposefully ambiguous, sensual study of desire that provokes a confusion of gender associations. Sokol inter-

weaves a number of recurring elements: super-8 footage of a bullfighter waving a red flag at a bull; and images of a young, shirtless Mexican man crossing a room, a man making a coin disappear, and a woman's pubis, draped by a red scarf. On the sound track, a young man with a Hispanic accent recounts his memories of being sexually aroused by a convent school teacher who wore brightly colored clothes. All of the film's elements are edited in fluid, suggestive style, tantalizing the viewer while ironically exploring the way that desire is shaped by cultural codes.

# Lee Sokol on Aqui Se Lo Halla:

While riding in a bus across a barren, harsh, and uninhabited Mexican desert prairie I passed a rundown shack. The front yard was piled high with a huge array of discarded debris: hub caps, machine parts, threadbare tires. The crumbling adobe walls facing the road were painted bright turquoise, and printed in large black letters on the front of the shack out in the middle of nowhere, were the words "Aqui Se Lo Halla." Here you will find it.

## **Movie Magick**

LUCIFER RISING (Kenneth Anger, 1980, color, 16mm, 29 mins.)

Produced, directed, written, photographed and edited by Kenneth Anger; suggested by the poem "Hymn to Lucifer" by Aleister Crowley; music by Bobby Beausoleil; music performed by The Freedom Orchestra (Tracy Prison)

Cast: Mryiam Gibril (Isis), Donald Cammell (Osiris), Haydn Couts (The Adept), Marianne Faithfull (Lilith), Kenneth Anger (The Magus), Sir Francis Rose (Chaos), Leslie Huggins (Lucifer)

THE SECRET GARDEN (Phil Solomon, 1986, color, 16mm, 20 mins., silent)

MIDWEEKEND (Caroline Avery, 1985, color, 16mm, 8 mins., silent)

BIG BROTHER (Caroline Avery, 1983, color, 16mm, 8 mins., silent)

1966 (Lewis Klahr, 1984, color, super-8, 8 mins.)

IN THE MONTH OF CRICKETS (Lewis Klahr, 1988, b&w, super-8, 15 mins.)

THE NIGHTINGALE'S FISTED WAVE (Lewis Klahr, 1986, color, 16mm, 13 mins.)

HER FRAGRANT EMULSION (Lewis Klahr, 1987, color, 16mm, 10 mins.)

Kenneth Anger calls his lifework "Magick." Though raised in Hollywood, he pioneered a brand of personal filmmaking that attempts to "cast a spell over the audience," through invocations of magic, ritual, popular icons, and mythology. This spirit of "magick" informs all the films on this program, which might also be labelled "Picture Books for Adults," to borrow a title coined by Lewis Klahr. Kenneth Anger is best known for Fireworks (1947), Scorpio Rising (1963), and his book Hollywood Babylon . Lucifer Rising, his first film in eleven years, is a lush mini-epic about the forces that control the universe. Isis (the male deity) and Osiris (the female deity), communicate by causing thunder, volcanoes, and earthquakes, and Anger plays The Magus, frantically summoning Lucifer. As always, Anger undercuts his own grandiosity with ironic humor. Still, Lucifer Rising fulfills a goal stated by Anger at age twenty-one: "Angels exist. Nature provides an inexhaustible flood of beauties. It is up to the poet, with his personal vision, to 'capture' them."

Phil Solomon, who studied at SUNY at Binghamton under Ken Jacobs, is a self-described "second-generation" avant-gardist. His shimmering optically printed reworkings of discarded films and Hollywood classics are inspired by the work of earlier experimental filmmakers, from Jacobs's energizing

use of old footage to Anger's interest in Hollywood fantasy to Stan Brakhage's expressionistic use of film stock. *The Secret Garden* uses footage from two MGM fantasies; the original film of the same title (1949), and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Decaying, crackling old color footage is transformed into a vibrant, exotic world.

Caroline Avery's kaleidoscopic, exhilarating films use a wide variety of techniques, including painting on film, optical printing, and actually cutting out and combining individual frames of film. In *Big Brother*, disembodied lips dance across the screen, and ominous headlines float on a Times Square display, during a torrential flood of imagery. More dazzling is *Midweekend*, whose haunting found image of children swarming out of a school is just one memorable aspect of an elaborate, beautiful film that moves in and out of complete abstraction.

Lewis Klahr is a versatile and inventive artist whose films delve beneath the comic book surfaces of popular culture to uncover subterranean layers and explore feelings about sex and death. Fittingly, his best-known work is a series called "Picture Books for Adults." 1966, from this series, is a deeply personal exploration of footage taken from cutdown super-8 versions of Hollywood films. In The Month of Crickets, Klahr's latest film, cut-outs of

magazine ads from the '40s and '50s are used to create a noirish world, and a mysterious narrative about sexual blackmail. *The Nightingale's Fisted Wave* demonstrates Klahr's fascination with cartoon heroes in a surprisingly affecting combination of "superhero" footage and somber landscape imagery. *Her Fragrant Emulsion* pays homage to a B-movie actress, through an intricate optically printed veil of cut-up celluloid. Klahr brilliantly expresses an erotic obsession while also evoking the dreamlike allure of watching movies.

BELL DIAMOND (Jon Jost, 1987, color, 16mm, 96 mins.)

Produced, directed, edited and photographed by Jon Jost; sound recording by Alenka Pavlin; original music by Jon English

Cast: Marshall Gaddis (Jeff), Sarah Wyss (Cathy), Terri Lyn Williams (Haley), Scott Andersen (Scott), Pat O'Connor ("Boss"), Kristi Jean Hager (Laura), Dan Cornell (Danny), Hal Waldrup (Mick), Ron Hanekan (Mick), Alan Goddard (Alan), Anne Kolesar ("the counsellor")

Jon Jost is a maverick filmmaker whose low-budget features have their aesthetic roots in Brecht and Godard. Jost has said that his goal is to "make essay films for mass audiences." Though some of his strongest films literally are essays (including Speaking Directly, 1974, and Plain Talk: Uncommon Senses, 1987), Jost has primarily been concerned with reshaping narrative filmmaking by using real settings, non-professional actors, and improvised dialogue, and by telling stories in a way that exposes the social and political forces controlling the characters' lives. The real-life pacing and deliberately "unexciting" plots of his films challenge our expectations, and propose that movies should not be a form of escape, but rather a revealing mirror-image of reality.

Jost made Bell Diamond in Butte, Montana, for \$25,000, using a local cast (with the exception of Marshall Gaddis) of non-professionals. Gaddis plays a Vietnam veteran whose marriage is on the rocks. He passes his days watching baseball and drinking beer, and his wife, angry at their lack of communication, moves out. The slender plot seems to unfold in real-time, as in a scene where we watch Jeff watching TV. Jost fuses realism with a purposefully distanced aesthetics. An expressive use of the Montana landscape and domestic interiors, some surprising optical effects, and one overt essay-style scene, all serve to remind us that the film is an artistic creation. By denying the illusion of pure realism, Jost encourages us to think about the process of filmmaking, as well as the characters' lives.

#### Jon Jost on Bell Diamond:

The filmmaker's own most direct interests were: First, to address the realities of persons who are under stress from large-scale social/political/ economic pressures, and to do so *in terms which ordinary people do*.

Second, to work directly with people in such a situation so as to allow expression to arise from and through those people. This was desired both to obtain a more fully honest depiction, and also to provide through the process of making the film, a small lever which those involved might use in some positive way in their own lives.

Lastly, in deliberately working only with nonprofessionals, it was hoped that a demonstrationby-example would help deflate the mystique that surrounds the production of media, especially of "acting," and of fictional, narrative film.

A final comment: for the filmmaker a major stricture of the work on *Bell Diamond* was that the film be such that those who made it—Sarah, Hal, Terri, Kristi, Dan, Ron, Alan, Pat, Scott and Marshall—that *they* would see it as "a film." Aesthetically then, the film was circumscribed by what I felt to be acceptable forms for them. The film was, quite consciously in my own mind, made with and for those who helped make it.

SILVER VALLEY (Michel Negroponte, Peggy Stern, Mark Erder, 1984, color, 16mm, 45 mins.)

VERNON, FLORIDA (Errol Morris, 1981, color, 35mm, 60 mins.)

A film by Errol Morris; photographed by Ned Burgess; edited by Brad Fuller; sound recorded by Maria Heritier

With Claude Register, Albert Bitterling, Henry Shipes, Snake Reynolds, Roscoe Collins, Coy Brock, Joe Payne, George Harris, Ray Cotton, and Mr. & Mrs. J. W. Martin

There is more than a touch of the surreal in both of these documentary portraits of rural American towns. The makers of Silver Valley learned cinéma vérité from Richard Leacock and Ed Pincus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and, in many ways, their film is an exemplary "fly-on-the-wall" study of a family in the depressed mining town of Kellogg, Idaho. But the film has an almost fictional quality that is best described by Ross McElwee, another MIT alumnus who (before making Sherman's March) collaborated with Negroponte on Space Coast (1979), an equally bizarre study of Cape Canaveral during its own ghost-town years of the late seventies:

"With Silver Valley, the filmmakers have achieved a complex and fascinating film that is, on one level, a report on the recession's devastating impact upon a family and a town. But even more provocative is the way the film reveals the unraveling of a once tightly knit family and the sad surreal textures of their daily lives: Delmer's gunslinging frontier bravado as he roams the hills for deer which seem to have long since deserted the Silver Valley: Jerry, whose gentle litary of 'Thank you. God and Jesus' echoes throughout the film as he scavenges dumpsters; and young Carrie, who jello wrestles at the local night club to earn pocket money. Silver Valley has many of the qualities of a James Agee/ Walker Evans inquiry into economic hardships in America, while exhibiting a fascination with the sometimes bizarre life styles of Americans living on the fringe."

In three documentaries to date, Errol Morris has turned the talking heads interview into an art form. Whether his subject is pet cemeteries (Gates of Heaven, 1978), a murder investigation (The Thin Blue Line, 1988), or the eccentric citizens of a rural town (Vernon, Florida, 1981), Morris employs the same matter-of-fact style, framing his subjects in frozen tableaus and simply letting them talk. Vernon, Florida, probably Morris's quintessential

film, presents the citizens of a seemingly unassuming rural town: a preacher sermonizes on the word "therefore," a man details his obsession with turkey hunting, a policeman describes sitting and waiting for crimes that never happen, and a couple show off a jar of sand. Morris seems to be simply listening in wonderment.

POTO AND CABENGO (Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1979, color, 16mm, 77 mins.)

Directed and narrated by Jean-Pierre Gorin; photographed by Les Blank; assistant camera, Greg Durbin; sound by Maureen Gosling; edited by Greg Durbin; produced by Gorin and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen

"What are they saying, what are they saying?"

 Jean-Pierre Gorin in Poto and Cabengo

Shortly after Jean-Pierre Gorin, a former collaborator with Godard, moved to America to teach film in San Diego, he became interested in the widely publicized story of two local twin girls who reportedly developed their own private language. The media had publicized the case as a "Wild Child" story. Gorin's initial fascination was in the notion that "these two girls were foreigners in their own language," an idea that had obvious significance for an exile from France trying to find a place in American society. Gorin's first-person documentary about the case, Poto and Cabengo, is an outsider's voyage through a distinctly alien Southern California landscape. The girls, Grace and Ginny, who have eighteen different ways of saying "potato salad," are enormously appealing and charismatic. Yet their environment is another story. The twins are exploited by the media, fussed over by scientists, and they have what might-at bestbe called an odd home life. Their father is an inept real estate salesman who sees his daughters as little more than an added expense, perhaps offering the faint promise of a Hollywood movie deal. Their mother describes the girls as "two dinga-lings who are pretty much alive." Gorin quickly discovers the cause of the girls' linguistic confusion: their family converses in a Katzeniammer-like hodgepodge. Their mother was born in Germany and speaks fractured English. Their maternal grandmother, who lives in the house, speaks only German. Their father, a Southerner, speaks a slurred English. "There was a ring of Ellis Island to the story," states Gorin, whose interest in language and exile is central to his open-ended exploration. This rich, multi-layered film contains more questions than answers, as Gorin struggles to make sense out of what he finds. At times, he freezes an image during an interview or repeats a shot, for emphasis. With such devices and the use of titles and black leader, Gorin frequently interrupts the flow of the investigation to raise questions. His probing style is in marked contrast to the media's portrayal of the girls, which is one of the film's subjects. A fascinating tension arises between Gorin's analytical, intellectually rich essay style and the loose *vérité* photography of Les Blank.

GRANDFATHER TRILOGY (Papa, Thanksgiving, Buriels) (Allen Ross, 1981, b&w/color, 16mm, sound, 60 mins.)

NICARAGUA: HEAR-SAY/SEE-HERE (Jeffrey Skoller, 1986, color, 16mm, 64 mins.)

While these idiosyncratic personal documentaries are different in subject matter, they are similar in their attempts to find a cinematic style that expresses the filmmaker's subjectivity. In both of these films, the filmmaker is not positioned as an outside observer, but as a part of the film's subject.

Allen Ross's Grandfather Trilogy is not a traditional family portrait, but rather a searching, unsettling. and extremely moving film about the filmmaker's relationship with his dying grandfather. In Papa. Ross visits his grandfather in South Carolina. The film is composed of long static shots, and extreme camera angles. Ross's approach is both deferential and sensitive. Rather than pointing the camera at his grandfather and looking at him through the viewfinder, Ross keeps the camera at his side, using it obliquely and unobtrusively, in the process drawing our attention to gestures and details rarely photographed; Ross has found a way to express Papa's sense of space and time. Thanksgiving was filmed at Ross's parent's house in Illinois. Beginning with an obligatory posed family portrait, Ross captures the mood of a family gathering that seems more an act of duty than a joyful reunion. Buriels, filmed on faded blue color stock, is a poignant, impressionistic study of Papa's funeral.

Though Nicaragua: Hear-Say/See-Here has some of the content of a traditional non-interventionist documentary, including chronologies of U.S. military involvement, and documentation of the effects of the Contra war, the film expresses its politics through a personal account of a journey to Nicaragua. Skoller narrates: "Arriving in Nicaragua from New York City, I am confronted by all my preconceptions... what was once the down there. gives way to the physicality of here. I am confronted by the place...." With a probing camera style, Skoller creates a vivid diary of daily life, with an ironic awareness of how different this is from the government and the media's sensationalized portrayal of Nicaragua. Skoller also attempts to relate Nicaraguan life to his own experience, with a reflective, open-ended collage style that uses surprising combinations of image and sound.

# From "Notes Regarding the Use of the Camera," by Allen Ross:

The film reveals what has been thought: a mental schematic.

It is not necessary to look through the viewfinder to film the subject. What is important is that you see or feel that something is happening and creating a charged space. The camera will take care of itself. This allows the camera to get ahead of the mind. It should get there before the mind does, without thinking, so you will not be filming what you already know. There is only so much you can know about what it is you are filming. If you exercise too much conscious control you will lose the image.

Fiction films are made. They are built. Documentary must rely on what has been found. You must go there in person to get it. What you get are discrete moments taken from something alive. They are marks that a person leaves. A human being is far too complex to be contained within a 16mm frame.

# Jeffrey Skoller on *Nicaragua: Hear-Say/* See-Here:

This film is a modest attempt to better understand a situation that my own country's government and media have mystified and depersonalized. Using the process of making the film as a starting point for my own engagement with my subject, a world so different from my own, I begin with a question: As a North American, what is my relationship to Nicaragua?

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER (Maria Marewski, 1987, color, 16mm, 20 mins.)
THE TIES THAT BIND (Su Friedrich, 1984, b&w, 16mm, 55 mins.)

Su Friedrich, who began making films in 1978, has developed a unique collage style that makes the screen a mirror of her consciousness. Her films, all of which are black-and-white, have a distinct style, combining images that seem to have been filmed intuitively, with passages of black leader and text scratched onto the emulsion. While the emphasis on the surface nature of the medium gives the films a reflexive feeling, the free-flowing nature of the imagery and a graceful editing style that creates a sense of internal rhythm and order gives them a strong feeling of intimacy. The Ties That Bind is Friedrich's longest film to date, and her first to incorporate documentary material. The film's subject is Friedrich's relationship to her mother, who grew up in Nazi Germany and moved to the United States with her GI husband after World War II. Friedrich confronts her mother about her past, while constantly reflecting on her own present. Her questions are scratched directly on the film's surface, and the interrogation is accompanied by a stream of metaphorical images (a toyhouse being shattered by a soldier's boot), and images representing Friedrich's own life, (shots of fund-raising letters from Jewish groups, and apocalyptic headlines from the New York Post ).

Maria Marewski's first film, In The Name of the Father, explores the relationship between history and identity. The film is made largely of family photographs, accompanied by an interview with the filmmaker's father, who served in the German army, and entries from a journal kept by her mother, who worked as a maid for Nazi officers at a concentration camp. Exploring the photographs with an expressive collage style, Marewski raises questions about the nature of her parents' legacy. On the sound track, she tells her father: "Papa, when you were small, you were a boy...and then you became a Papa."

### Su Friedrich on The Ties That Bind:

Before I made The Ties That Bind I had such bad feelings about being German, being the daughter of a German; and my father is half German, too. I don't think I really trusted the material I had. When

I was working on the film, I told myself to stop worrying, to stop thinking I shouldn't be doing it, to stop disbelieving her, to trust her. I figured if the film was a failure in the long run I just wouldn't show it. At some point I just stopped carrying on about it. It was strange to suddenly be thinking of my mother in this respectful way, to really be admiring her for what she did, for surviving. I had never thought of *her*.

Interviewed by Scott McDonald,
 Afterimage, May 1988

#### Maria Marewski on In the Name of the Father:

On one level this film, using the time and place of Nazi Germany, is about fascism. However, because the adult voices are not only man and woman, husband and wife, but also father and mother, the film constructs a series of relationships which go beyond that particular time and place and beyond the personal narrative. In many ways these parental voices function as the voices of our archetypal past, and in this capacity they establish the boundaries of what is possible in the world, not only in terms of individual and gender identity but future human history. The film essentially examines and questions the patriarchal authority structure and the ways it organizes relationships on all levels: public, interpersonal, and with one's self.

# Films by Manuel DeLanda

ISMISM (1979, color, super-8, 8 mins., silent)

INCONTINENCE (1978, color, 16mm, 18 mins.)

HARMFUL OR FATAL IF SWALLOWED (1982, color, super-8, 8 mins.)

**RAW NERVES** (1980, color, 16mm, 30 mins.)

JUDGEMENT DAY (1982, color, super-8, 7 mins.)

I found noir a great model for my thinking about power. I love the psychologically unbalanced noir hero; you never know what to expect from him. He doesn't get involved in the plot because of his thirst for Justice or anything like that. He's not really a hero; he's more an anti-hero. But he's stubborn, and everybody around him gets killed, the girlfriend gets kidnapped—just because he's real nosey. In the best noirs, he doesn't even win, and he may get killed. But what's great about it is that he's able to infiltrate the Big Plan in the process. Mr. Big is always surprised to see this stupid asshole coming from nowhere, fucking up the whole thing. He's been protecting himself from the other Mr. Bigs, and all of a sudden this little guy comes out of nowhere, moves in sideways, infiltrates, and destroys the whole scheme.

 DeLanda, in an interview with Scott McDonald in Afterimage, January 1986

Like the *noir* hero he describes above, Manuel DeLanda is an infiltrator. His raucous experimental films are engaged with the codes of commercial filmmaking, only to turn them upside down in a funhouse style marked by disjunctive visual tricks, outlandish graphics, and convoluted plots. Raised in Mexico, (his father was a cartoonist) DeLanda came to New York in the mid-seventies to study under P. Adams Sitney, Joan Braderman, Richard Koszarski, and Amy Taubin at the School for Visual Arts. With a distinct flair for contradiction, he supports himself by designing computer software and graphics for advertising firms, while creating transpressive films that subvert corporate mentality.

Ismism, made at SVA for a P. Adams Sitney course, documents DeLanda's own graffiti, and his disfiguration of cigarette billboards. This vandalism and the playful reworking of the advertisements typify DeLanda's style. Through editing, DeLanda constructs a graffiti message that could be his

motto: "Let the slang of your desires drive language crazy."

Incontinence employs a dazzling use of jump cuts, wipes, and other tricks, to destroy the spatio-temporal continuity of a narrative scene involving a couple in an Edward Albee argument.

Raw Nerves, formerly subtitled a "Lacanian thriller," is an even bolder narrative experiment. The story of a detective trying to decode a secret message written on a bathroom wall becomes a symbolic encounter with Language. All continuity of space, time and identity crumble, amid a wild dayglo color scheme that seems inspired by DeLanda's roots in Mexican expressionist art.

Harmful or Fatal if Swallowed is an irreverent "city symphony," filled with intricate optical effects created by hand-scratching and painting on super-8 frames. The closing tirade by Professor Mamboozoo, DeLanda's notorious sometimes-collaborator, is restored here after having been cut for the film's showing at the New York Film Festival in 1982.

Judgement Day is the first of a planned series of films made in DeLanda's apartment. Here, in a purely DeLanda apocalypse, cockroaches living in candy-decorated roach motels are mutilated by weapons such as multi-colored toothpaste.

# **Altered Landscapes**

CHUCK'S WILL'S WIDOW (Bill Brand, 1982, color, 16mm, 13 mins., silent)

SCROLLS (Vicki Z. Peterson, 1978, color, 16mm, 22 mins., silent)

L'ACADIE: AN ALBUM OF 16MM EKTACHROME SKETCHES (Robert Russett, 1978, color, 16mm, 15 mins.)

SLANT OR SLUMBER (Chika Ogura, 1987, color, 16mm, 8 mins.)

diary of an autistic child / part two / the ragged edges of the hollow (Edwin Cariati, 1984, color, 16mm, 6 mins., silent)

Each of these films is an example of artistic transformation, featuring naturalistic imagery altered with a variety of optical printing or camera techniques. The effect is to create an experience that is purely cinematic, based on the two-dimensional nature of the medium and its reliance on the rapid projection of still images.

Bill Brand's Chuck's Will's Widow is the purest distillation of his trademark optical-printing style in which two images are collaged together in the same frame through mattework. Lush forest imagery is turned into an intensely kinetic and cubist flow of organic imagery, with a constant play between foreground and background.

Vicki Z. Peterson's mesmerizing Scrolls is made entirely of horizon shots of the Maine sky and sea. After placing her camera on its side to create vertical images, Peterson used an optical printer to create frame-by-frame oscillation between shots, creating a dynamic visual experience that works through persistence of vision.

L'Acadie is one of the most visually elegant films in this retrospective. Robert Russett has transformed a series of nine impressionistic scenes from Acadian Louisiana by rephotographing them in a frame-by-frame style that turns the moving imagery into a hypnotic flow of still, painterly images. The sound track is made up entirely of insect noises from the region, altered into an exotic percussive symphony.

Chika Ogura also displays a painterly eye in *Slant* or *Slumber*, an evocative montage of personal and landscape imagery reflecting her Japanese-American background.

Edwin Cariati's diary of an autistic child/part two/ ragged edges of the hollow is a mysterious, resonant film that purposefully uses shaky, out-ofregistration imagery to creates a ghostly landscape. Cariati's goal is to create a cinematic equivalent to the visual perception of his autistic daughter.

#### Robert Russett on L'Acadie:

Each of these reflections, or what I term "Ektachrome sketches," consists of a single subject, which undergoes a series of ongoing structural transformations. These transformations substantially alter the field of vision by adding a subjective layer of meaning to the dramatic content of recorded reality. Basically, then, my aim is to investigate, within a purely artistic context, the cinematic potential of themes and subjects that are indigenous to this region. L'Acadie is also, in part, a reaction against the stereotyped imagery that is so often associated with French Acadiana and that has contributed to reducing the iconography of the area to picturesque tableaux and nostalgic symbols. [These stereotypes] have created a real need for a renewed sense of vision and a fresh approach to imagery.

THE CHINESE TYPEWRITER (Daniel Barnett, 1983, color, 16mm, 28 mins.)

REASSEMBLAGE (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1982, color, 16mm, 40 mins.)

MEDINA (Mark Lapore, 1983, color, super-8, 20 mins.)

In a recent interview in *Millenium* (No. 19, Fall/ Winter 1987-88), Trinh T. Minh-ha rejects the notion that her films are "anti-documentary," preferring the notion that she is *extending* the documentary form, pushing the category to its limit in her poetic, experimental films. The three films on this program could all be said to extend the ethnographic documentary. Rather than adopt the traditional stance of the objective scientist, the filmmakers offer subjective visions of foreign cultures in an effort to open up the form.

The Chinese Typewriter is an impressionistic collage of images and sounds in which the filmmaker uses an optical printer to meticulously transform footage filmed during a trip to China. Scenes filmed in classrooms, in print shops, and in the streets, have been transformed into a poetic essay about education and the way society is controlled by language. Filmmaker Daniel Barnett offers a distinctly idiosyncratic reading of Chinese life.

Mark Lapore's elusive *Medina* is a super-8 sync-sound documentary of a Sudanese village. The searching, hand-held quality of the camera work, which alternates between intimate close-ups and distanced long-shots, expresses a style of searching and observing. There is no narration, no attempt to explain or translate what we are seeing. This simple, visually delicate film preserves the sense of mystery and otherness experienced by Lapore during his journey to North Africa.

A similar respect for the complexity of cultural difference informs the cinematic practice of Trinh T. Minh-ha. For Minh-ha, the ethnographic film traditionally expresses cultural imperialism through its scientific methods, presumed objectivity, and authoritative voice-over narrations. In her studies of the Third World, Minh-ha has forged an aesthetics that presents the encounter between cultures in a relationship where neither side is privileged. Reassemblage, a study of life in rural villages in Senegal, is a reflexive and poetic film that introduces a remarkable array of aesthetic strategies in

order to bring the very practice of ethnographic filmmaking into question. The hand-held camera work, much like Lapore's, is constantly probing, with the compositions often decentered and fragmentary. Sound and image are separated, and recombined in a dissonant collage, to destroy any attempts at illusionistic realism. There is a strong use of negative space, with occasional blackness, silence, or seemingly "empty" images. The narration, in an inquisitive whisper, is poetic and questioning, rather than declarative. To borrow from its narrator, *Reassemblage* offers us "images and words that defy words and commentary."

#### Trinh T. Minh-ha on her films:

The relationship between images and words should render visible and audible the "cracks" (which have always been there; nothing new...) of a filmic language that usually works at glueing things together as smoothly as possible, thereby banishing all reflections, supporting an ideology that keeps the workings of its own language as invisible as possible, mystifying hereby filmmaking, stifling criticism, and generating complacency among both makers and viewers.

 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Questions of Image and Politics," The Independent, May 1987

SHE HAD HER GUN ALL READY (Vivienne Dick, 1978, color, super-8, 30 mins.)

Cast: Lydia Lunch and Pat Place

THE OFFENDERS (Scott B. and Beth B., 1979, color, super-8, 85 mins.)

Directed, written, photographed and edited by Scott B. and Beth B. Music composed and played by Bob Mason, Adele Bertei, Lydia Lunch, John Lurie, Scott B., Beth B., Terry Burns, Ed Steinberg, Alley

Cast: Adele Bertei (Laura Moore), Bill Rice (Dr. Moore), John Lurie (The Lizard). Also with Johnny O'Kane, Robin Winters, Pat Place, Laura Kennedy, Judy Nylon, Marcia Resnick, Evan Lurie, Walter Lure, Anna Sui, Barbara Klar, Cynthia Womersley, Diego Cortez, Lydia Lunch, Kristian Hoffman, Bradley Field, Edit De Ak, Robert Smith, Terry Robinson, Clio Young, Harry Spitz, Gerard Hovagimyan, Kirsten Bates, Scott B, Kristof Kolhofer

In the late seventies, the independent film movement was infused by the raw energy of the New York super-8 underground. Paralleling the punk movement, filmmakers such as Vivienne Dick, Scott B. and Beth B., Eric Mitchell, and James Nares took advantage of the accessibility and spontaneity of super-8, creating poverty-row movies in the bohemian spirit of Jack Smith, early works by Ken Jacobs, and the Kuchar Brothers.

Vivienne Dick's She Had Her Gun All Ready is a mood piece set in the Lower East Side and at Coney Island. The narrative revolves around the relationship of two friends, the brash Lydia Lunch and the zombie-like Pat Place. Dick turns the properties of the small-gauge medium into a gutbucket aesthetics, with an evocative visual style made of lurching hand-held shots, garish color schemes, and abruptly framed compositions. Seen today, this moody neo-noir, neo-feminist fable which documents Soho just before a huge wave of gentrification, has a time-capsule quality.

The Offenders was made to be shown in weekly serial episodes at Max's Kansas City nightclub. "Crime Wave Hits New York City" screams a real newspaper headline incorporated into this campy pseudo-violent tale about the kidnapped daughter of the Medical Examiner and a crime gang led by The Lizard. Though a sense of punk nihilism pervades the film, what comes through most vividly is a spirit of playful homage to Hollywood B-movies and melodramatic serials. The Offenders, with its cast of underground musicians and actors (Bill Rice, Lydia Lunch, Adele Bertei, John Lurie), achieved some commercial success, and played at the Film Forum and at the Eighth Street Playhouse.

# Scott B. and Beth B. on super-8 filmmaking:

Super-8 is essentially like rock 'n' roll. A lot of people can make rock 'n' roll music because it's simple and direct. It's important that a lot of people participate within the culture. In Africa, almost everyone within a given society is a musician, a dancer, a medicine man, or a performer. They participate in the culture of their society, whereas in the United States, at this point, there are very few outlets for that kind of involvement. People sit at home and watch TV or listen to records instead of actively involving themselves in something.

from an interview with Scott B. and Beth B.,
 by Gina Marchetti and Keith Tishken, in
 Millenium Film Journal, Fall/Winter 1981-82

**VESTIBULE** (Ken Kobland, 1978, color, 16mm, 24 mins.) With Nancy Campbell and David Warrilow

THE INFLUENCE OF STRANGERS (GENEALOGY) (Mark Daniels, 1986, color and b&w, 16mm, 76 mins.)

Produced, directed, written, edited and photographed by Mark Daniels; assistant director,
production manager, Robin Kormos; production designer, Andrea Dorman; sound editor,
Toby Shimin

Cast: Sande Zeig, John Hagan, Yolanda Hawkins, James Robinson, Eleanor Moreland, Joseph Scott. Chorus: Terry Hopkins, Sheila McLaughlin, Mark Daniels

These innovative quasi-narratives use urban imagery in a poetic manner, and both synthesize a variety of cinematic forms to look beneath the surface of objects and interior spaces.

Ken Kobland describes *Vestibule* as a film "about buildings and emotions." In the first of its three sections, a tenement street scene becomes a stage set, and Kobland accompanies the subtitled visuals with narration ranging from descriptive to mock-intellectual. The eerie final section features the distorted image of a nude man in a vestibule bending to retrieve a letter. This mysterious film is composed of oddly choreographed gestures, optically transfigured imagery, and an incongruous use of language, sounds, and narration.

Mark Daniels also follows a dream logic in his first film, The Influence of Strangers, a rich, philosophical feature-length experimental narrative. Though there are recurring characters and fictional elements, the film is an audacious blend of essay, documentary, and stylized narrative. It is a constant source of surprise, filled with unexpected images and juxtapositions. Daniels, a former cinematographer for Yvonne Rainer and Mark Rappaport, has clearly staked out new territory in this extremely promising debut.

# Mark Daniels on The Influence of Strangers:

Choosing a beginning (genealogy). Let's try a couple of quotations: Heidegger (in either "What is Thinking" or "What is Poetry") describes his method to be "to follow the movement of a showing through illuminated rooms." A clue to my choice of the house as an organizing metaphor. Each sequence a "room." Doors and windows giving on to other rooms and balconies; vistas and closets. An interior described through a passage of gatherings. The house = the relation of its rooms.

And Herman Melville through Charles Olson: "By visible truth we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things." A house furnished in banality (the familiar)—the arena of the flesh; where belief resides in gesture. Attention turned to the voice of things; organs of historical being. An exploration of the life of things in the life of humans and the life of humans in the life of things. Genealogy (choosing a beginning).

# Ken Kobland on Vestibule:

In one sense, Vestibule is simply three distinct experiments, or more accurately, meditations on a few, very familiar city "landscapes." The kind of image/places that I have, literally, lived within all of my life. For me, these spaces can often have a "stillness," which makes them quite abstract. But they are also fraught, involved; that is, always on the verge of becoming inhabited. It is this sense of impending (then actual) human presence, that interests me most about the images.

The images set off other things; more specific narratives. The places are evocative. They are overlayed with personal, internal architectures (histories, dreams, and fantasies) that demand a straightforward presence. I intend these stories, which are told in the subtitles and voice-overs, to stand both inside and outside; to both complement and contradict the film image.

NO. 3 (Ellen Gaine, 1980, b&w, super-8, 28 mins., silent)

A FAIRY TALE (Jim Jennings, 1984, b&w, 16mm, 9 mins., silent)

KRISTALLNACHT (Chick Strand, 1979, b&w, 16mm, 7 mins.)

**DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR** (Nina Fonoroff, 1986, b&w, 16mm, 9 mins.)

PERILS (Abigail Child, 1987, b&w, 16mm, 5 mins.)

Conception, direction, camera, sound, editing, Abigail Child; additional music by Charles Noyes, Christian Marclay; production assistance by Jim Biederman.

Cast (in order of appearance): Diane Torr, Sally Silvers, Plauto, Elion Sacker

MAYHEM (Abigail Child, 1987, b&w, 16mm, 20 mins.)

Conception, direction, camera, sound, editing, Abigail Child; additional music by Charles Noyes, Christain Marclay, Shelley Hirsch, Zeena Parkins; second camera, Jeff Preiss; production assistance by Jim Biederman, Sandra Ensminger, Ricardo Nicolayevsky, Mark Kogan, Victoria Stogryn, Tom Kincaid.

Cast: Ela Troyano, Diane Torr, Rex West, Elion Sacker, Penelope Wehrli, Plauto, Stasia Micula, Alina Troyano

Beginning with close-up shots of fingers rushing over a piano keyboard, Ellen Gaine's silent *No. 3* is a dazzling visual evocation of music. The images become increasingly abstract, using the graininess of super-8 to create an impressionistic study of shadows, light and form.

Jim Jennings uses city imagery in his short, exquisite silent black-and-white films. While some of his films take the form of geometric, cinematic studies, *A Fairy Tale* is a mysterious, dreamlike work that evokes its chimerical narrative through the use of grainy black-and-white photography. The title of Chick Strand's *Kristallnacht* refers to an episode of the Holocaust, and the film is dedicated to Anne Frank. Strand creates a fragile vision of unearthly beauty in this lyrical study of two women in a swimming pool at night. The play of starlight off water and the animal sounds create a pervasive sense of longing for a lost Eden.

Nina Fonoroff's *Department of the Interior* is a haunting transformation of domestic, suburban imagery, with a sound track of carefully asbtracted opera music, and a powerfully unsettling use of negative images.

Abigail Child's *Perils* and *Mayhem* are the latest installments in her continuing series, *Is This What You Were Born For?* Based on the aggressive montage style of Dziga Vertov and Segei Eisenstein, Child's raucous films subvert narrative

tradition in a playful attempt to liberate film from its own history. *Perils* pays perverse homage to silent films, as a group of actors, dressed for a Mack Sennett comedy, strike a series of violent poses. The fractured narrative of *Mayhem* flows with nightmare logic in what seems to be a *film noir* world, with occasional interruptions of New York street scenes and an increasingly overt layer of sexuality. As the repressions of narrative logic fall apart, the film becomes increasingly liberating. *Mayhem* is marked by a particularly inventive use of sound.

#### Abigail Child on her films:

I had long conceived of a film composed only of reaction shots in which all causality was erased. The isolation and dramatization of emotions through the isolation (camera) and dramatization (editing) of gesture. What would be left would be the resonant voluptuous suggestions of history and the human face.

Some of my love for found materials must in part lie with this sense: of the value of the half-formed, the incomplete. An artist who seeks a classic unit, a formed whole, a balanced vision or harmonious work is looking for a different landscape. My topography demands negative capability.

Abigail Child, "A Motive for Mayhem,"
 Motion Picture, Fall 1987

MYSTERIOUS BARRICADES (Peter Herwitz, 1987, color, super-8, 8 mins., silent)

LIMN (Konrad Steiner, 1987, color, 16mm, 20 mins., silent)

PNEUMA (Nathaniel Dorsky, 1983, color, 16mm, 29 mins., silent)

ALAYA (Nathaniel Dorsky, 1987, color, 16mm, 28 mins., silent)

These mesmerizing visual studies can be described as "materialist," with an emphasis on the physical qualities of film: its grain, splices, and emulsion. Dorsky, Herwitz, and Steiner explore fundamental issues of cinematic perception to create new ways of seeing, and they exemplify the vitality of San Francisco's experimental film community.

Mysterious Barricades is the last in a series of films, In Blue and Far Away, that Peter Herwitz describes as being "concerned with capturing glimpses of a world, sometimes imaginary, sometimes day to day, but always behind evocative barriers of surface, grain, color, splices." With a rough-hewn hand-made aesthetic inspired by Saul Levine, Herwitz draws attention to the tactile quality of super-8. He accurately describes the film's effect as seeing the world through a stained-glass window.

Konrad Steiner's improvisational *Limn* is made up of diaristic imagery, filmed at parks, street corners, and train stations. The incorporation of words, usually scratched onto the film, suggests the subject is the disparity between thought and vision. As with Herwitz, Steiner constantly draws our attention to surfaces, to the nature of different film stocks and emulsions.

Materialist cinema is pushed to its limit in Nathaniel Dorsky's two masterpieces of pure cinema. 
Pneuma is composed entirely of unexposed pieces of outdated color film stock and Alaya is made solely of shots of sand, in motion, filmed in long-shot and in extreme close-up. A description can barely suggest the rich meditative experience of watching these two films. Pneuma is anything but minimalist. The frame, filled with swarming grain and stunning colors, is completely energized. Without a centered, perspectival composition to focus on, the entire screen comes to life, in overwhelming fashion. While Pneuma creates a paradoxically biomorphic world out of its chemi-

cally-altered film stock, *Alaya* has almost the opposite effect. There is a sparkling play of light and movement, as wind constantly transforms the sand, which takes on an abstract quality. We feel as though we are watching grains of emulsion rather than sand. The experience is constantly disorienting, moving between abstraction and representation, with our sense of scale and perspective constantly being upended. Dorsky, like the other filmmakers on this program, creates a new form of cinematic experience in which, to borrow his phrase, "the viewer is the star."

# From a letter by Stan Brakhage to Nathaniel Dorsky, on *Alaya:*

At first, watching, I found myself worried by the cuts, that there was no plastic cutting, nor any other form of technique visible to me which would alter these shifts-of-sand as more'n one-thing-afteranother, each utterly spectacular in itself, but... Then, after about three minutes, I began to be aware of the subtlety of rhythm, within each shot and shot-to-shot, which carried each cut, causing each new image to sit in-the-light of those several previous, affecting my sense of them via each instant's rhythm. THEN the subtlety of FORM shifts began to be apparent to me: and I was fairly much in ecstasy from then on. Near end you bring on those dark-sparklers (metaphoring stars to me) at JUST the instant I began wondering "How does this 'world' round out?" and thereby subtletied my sensibilities into a near perfect ending (maybe even "perfect," which I'd know if enabled to see the film many times.) BRAVO! . . . beautiful.

**TOM GOES TO THE BAR** (Dean Parisot, 1985, b&w, 35mm, 10 mins.) Directed by Dean Parisot; written by Michael Taav; photographed by Yuri Neyman; edited by Sally Jo Menke; produced by Joey Forsyte; executive producers Jay Lesselbaum and Susan Smith; music by Erik Satie Cast: Tom Noonan

LAST NIGHT AT THE ALAMO (Eagle Pennell, 1984, b&w, 35mm, 80 mins.)

Directed by Eagle Pennell; written by Kim Henkel; produced and edited by Kim Henkel and Eagle Pennell; photographed by Brian Huberman and Eric A. Edwards; associate producer, production manager, Tina Brawner; sound by Philip R. Davis; art director, Fletcher Mackey; music by Chuck Pinnell, Wayne Bell

Cast: Sonny Carl Davis (Cowboy), Louis Perryman (Claude), Steven Matilla (Ichabod), Tina-Bess Hubbard (Mary)

We didn't know we had no right to be doin' this, with no credentials at all. And, you know, there's not a whole lot to do in a picture. Mostly stand around. So I figured, Hell, why not be a movie actor?"

 Louis Perryman, star of Last Night at the Alamo, American Film, September 1984

Texas director Eagle Pennell reportedly claimed that his first feature film, The Whole Shooting Match (1978), inspired Robert Redford to create the Sundance Insitute, whose prime goal is to promote regional filmmaking. Though this may be a tall tale, regional filmmaking has been a vital branch of the American independent movement for the past decade, with films such as Northern Lights (1978), A Flash of Green (1984), Desert Hearts (1985), Desert Bloom (1986), Smooth Talk (1985). Stacking (1987), Belizaire the Cajun (1985), and Heartland (1981). Unfortunately, there has been a tendency among many of these regional features to offer sanitized visions of "Americana." Last Night at the Alamo is a refreshing alternative, a sharply funny low-budget feature about the regulars at an old-time Houston bar. The tone is set in the opening scene, as one of the main characters, Ichabod. delivers a torrential flood of vulgar invective as he drives his jeep through Houston, with the city's increasingly sterile modern skyline looming in the background. Set the night before the seedy Alamo bar is to be demolished, the film is a sort of Texas Iceman Cometh. Pennell affectionately, but critically, charts the decline of the stereotypical macho Texan. The central figure, Cowboy, is a "good of boy" with illusions of going to Hollywood to make westerns. (He wants to bring along his pal Claude

as a "sidekick.") As in *The Whole Shooting Match*, Pennell makes the most of a small budget, shooting in black-and-white, and crafting the film like a well-structured play, using lengthy takes and extended dialogue scenes to create a memorable group of characters.

Dean Parisot's *Tom Goes to the Bar* is a gem, set in a New York bar. The title character "hangs out" while delivering a rambling monologue. As he speaks, the action in the bar becomes increasingly bizarre. Photographed by Yuri Neyman (who shot *Liquid Sky*, 1982, and *DOA*, 1988), *Tom Goes to the Bar* is an offbeat mood piece, with crisp black-and-white photography, a delicate Erik Satie sound track, and an engagingly eccentric screen-play.

**THE GARDENER OF EDEN** (James Broughton and Joel Singer, 1981, color, 16mm, 9 mins.) Written and narrated by James Broughton; photographed by Joel Singer

FOREST OF BLISS (Robert Gardner, 1986, color, 16mm, 90 mins.)

Directed, photographed and edited by Robert Gardner; sound recordist and assistant camera,
Ned Johnston

"Everything in this world is eater or eaten. The seed is food and the fire is eater."

- W.B. Yeats, from the Upanishads

These lines from Yeats, quoted at the beginning of Forest of Bliss, are the only English words in the film. Dispensing with voice-over narration and translations, Gardner immerses the viewer in a poetic study of the sights and sounds of Benares, India, a city along the Ganges River in which death is seen at every turn, from the sight of dogs chewing apart other dogs, to vivid images of cremation rites. Gardner's vision is ultimately Romantic, finding beauty in horror, and affirming the primacy of the artist's subjective vision. His camera work is extraordinarily intimate, with an eye for lyricism amidst squalor. With death and its attending rituals always present, spirituality is a constant, nonabstract presence. Because he has been labeled an ethnographic filmmaker, Gardner has not received his due as a visionary artist. Yet Gardner is just as much a poet in The Forest of Bliss as James Broughton and Joel Singer are in The Gardener of Eden.

Broughton and Singer offer a more idealized, utopian vision of paradise-on-earth. Indeed, Sri Lanka's economic and social turmoil, and growing dependence on Western capitalism, are hardly present in this intensely lyrical study of "nature's sexuality." This is one of the strongest recent films by Broughton, a poet and filmmaker who has been a driving force in the West Coast avant-garde since his first film, *Mother's Day*, made in 1948. *The Gardener of Eden* was a collaboration between Broughton and Joel Singer.

### Robert Gardner on Forest of Bliss:

These journeys to Benares over the past ten years have been connected to an idea I had that religion, which always perplexed me with its abstractness, might be more easily understood as a way to cope with certain elemental matters, in particular with

death or with what my sister Isabella called in one of her poems, "IT." "IT" is a prevailing presence in Benares and is sedulously, even crassly, cultivated in both myth and reality.

Forest of Bliss might be thought of as a ninetyminute compression of my most recent ten-week visit to Benares. But I think it more accurate to see it as a ninety-minute expansion on a split second of the panic dread I felt on turning an unfamiliar corner onto Manikamika Ghat (The Great Cremation Ground) and finding my way blocked by "IT."

# James Broughton on The Gardener of Eden:

In the midst of his fertile garden, while he awaits Adam's return, God tries to keep his eye on all the flowering exuberance he has seeded.

WAR STORIES (Richard Levine, 1979, color, 16mm, 45 mins.)

War Stories is a powerful union of documentary content with experimental form. Richard Levine interviewed seven Vietnam veterans about their war experiences, and their chilling comments form the sound track that accompanies a montage of chemically altered newsreel footage. The images, which have been transformed into a garish combination of green, orange and red, are superimposed and optically repeated. These visual devices give the casualty and combat footage a hallucinatory quality and grant a necessary distance to the images, so that the visuals do not overpower the veterans' testimony. Sound and image work in counterpoint, and Levine succeeds in forcefully evoking the surreal quality of war: a soldier exclaims, "It's like recalling things in a movie. It's like it never really happened."



Fluke by Emily Breer

#### **Animation**

DIAGRAM FILM (Paul Glabicki, 1978, color, 16mm, 14 mins.)

MAKE ME PSYCHIC (Sally Cruikshank, 1978, color, 16mm, 8 mins.)

ASPARAGUS (Suzan Pitt, 1978, color, 16mm, 19 mins.)
Music by Richard Teitelbaum.

ACE OF LIGHT (Dennis Pies, 1984, color, 16mm, 9 mins.)

FLYING FUR (George Griffin, 1981, color, 16mm, 7 mins.)

72 (Robert Breer, 1982, color, 16mm, 6 mins.)

TRIAL BALLOONS (Robert Breer, 1982, color, 16mm, 6 mins.)

FLUKE (Emily Breer, 1985, color, 16mm, 7 mins.)

The artists in this program use the freedom of animation to create surreal, anarchistic, or mystical visions. These lovingly and painstakingly hand-crafted films exemplify the artisan tradition in a form that has increasingly relied upon computerization. Paul Glabicki uses live action footage (including the Odessa Steps sequence from *Potemkin*, 1925) and still photographs, re-interpreting these images in a

complex, rapidly changing series of geometric diagrams. As Glabicki has written, "the animated sequences become a vehicle of entry into an alternate viewing space."

Both Flying Fur and Make Me Psychic are raucous revisions of the Hollywood cartoon. Using a Tom and Jerry sound track, Griffin's Flying Fur, his most

chaotic film, is a breathlessly kinetic animal cartoon with a cast of mice, cats, coyotes and robots chasing and devouring each other. Sally Cruikshank's half-human, half-animal characters inhabit a thirties-style deco world in which adult concerns creep into childhood fantasies. Make Me Psychic stars Cruikshank's stock characters, the boorish Quasi and his girlfriend Anita. A novelty shop machine gives Anita new-found psychic powers, and she wreaks havoc at a nightclub.

Lush, more mysterious worlds are created by Dennis Pies and Suzan Pitt. Pies's luminous films tell spiritual tales through a radiant use of light. A hypnotic interior drama, *Ace of Light* resembles an avant-garde "trance" film.

Suzan Pitt's Asparagus is described by its maker as "an erotic allegory of the creative process in which a woman views and performs the passages of sensual and artistic discovery." Pitt creates a theatrical, dreamlike inner landscape through an elaborate use of cel animation, lush watercolors, and an evocative electronic score. The film's heroine, a magician, is clearly a stand-in for Pitt as animator.

Robert Breer, formerly an abstract expressionist painter, has explored the domain between motion and still pictures, depth and flatness, and abstraction and representation, in a prolific career that has carved a niche for animation in the American avantgarde. In TZ, he animates his living and working space in a fantasmagorical mix of painting, drawing, Polaroids, movie footage and words. Trial Balloons, one of his most lyrical films, makes extensive use of home movie footage.

Emily Breer is a fresh new voice in avant-garde animation, as demonstrated in *Fluke*, a punning, playful film that puts its found footage into new contexts through surprising combinations of image and sound and an array of inventive animation and optical printing techniques.

#### INDEPENDENT AMERICA: NEW FILM 1978-1988

#### index of Films by Filmmaker

Program number in parentheses.

Gary Adkins Peggy Ahwesh Kenneth Anger Caroline Avery

Scott B. and Beth B. Craig Baldwin **Daniel Barnett** Ericka Beckman Zoe Beloff,

Susan Emerling Camille Billops

Lizzie Borden Stan Brakhage

Bill Brand **Emily Breer** 

Robert Breer

**Betzy Bromberg** James Broughton,

Joel Singer Michael Burlingame **Charles Burnett** Gail Camhi **Edwin Cariati** 

Abigail Child

Christine Choy, ReneeTajima

Joan Churchill, Nicholas Broomfield

**Shirley Clarke** Sally Cruikshank Mark Daniels

Rob Danielson Julie Dash

Manuel DeLanda

Joel DeMott, Jeff Kreines

Vivienne Dick **Nathaniel Dorsky** 

Sara Driver

Under the Machines of Fire (26) From Romance to Ritual (7)

Lucifer Rising (38) Big Brother (38) Midweekend (38) The Offenders (47)

Rocketkkitkongokit (16) The Chinese Typewriter (46) We Imitate, We Break Up (7)

Nightmare Angel (27) Suzanne, Suzanne (35) Born in Flames (27) Creation (3)

The Dante Quartet (3) The Egyptian Series (3)

The Garden of Earthly Delights (3)

Loud Visual Noises (3) Murder Psalm (17)

Unconscious London Strata (3) Chuck's Will's Widow (45)

Fluke (54) Trial Balloons (54)

TZ (54) Ciao Bella (18)

The Gardener of Eden (52) To a Random... (36) My Brother's Wedding (33) An Evening at Home (2)

diary of an autistic child/part two/ragged edges of the hollow (45)

Perils (49) Mayhem (49)

Who Killed Vincent Chin? (32)

Soldier Girls (13)

Ornette: Made in America (22) Make Me Psychic (54)

The Influence of Strangers (Genealogy) (48) Da Fort (17)

Illusions (12) Harmful or Fatal if Swallowed (44)

Incontinence (44) Ismism (44) Judgement Day (44) Raw Nerves (44) Seventeen (6)

She Had Her Gun All Ready (47)

Alaya (50) Pneuma (50) You Are Not I (14) Dan Eisenberg Cooperation of Parts (21) Displaced Person (21)

Mary Filippo Who Do You Think You Are (17)

Morgan Fisher Standard Gauge (4) Ann Flournoy "D" as in Dynamite (17)

Louise Smells a Rat (17)

Nina Fonoroff Department of the Interior (49) The Ties That Bind (43) Su Friedrich

Ellen Gaine No. 3 (49)

Robert Gardner Forest of Bliss (52)

Ernie Gehr Signal-Germany on the Air (30)

Untitled, 1981 (30)

Joe Gibbons Confidential, part 2 (19)

Living in the World, parts 1, 2, 3 (19)

Spying (19)

Paul Glabicki Diagram Film (54) Jean-Pierre Gorin Poto and Cabengo (41) Larry Gottheim Four Shadows (34)

Mnemosyne: Mother of Muses (34)

The Red Thread (34) Flying Fur (54)

George Griffin Alfred Guzzetti Beginning Pieces (2) Barbara Hammer No No Nooky TV (16) Superstar (7) **Todd Haynes** 

Mysterious Barricades (50) Peter Herwitz

Henry Hills Money (28)

Peter Hutton New York Portrait: Chapter One (28)

The Whole Shebang (1) Ken Jacobs

Perfect Film (1)

Jim Jarmusch Stranger than Paradise (28)

Jim Jennings A Fairy Tale (49) Jon Jost Bell Diamond (39) Mariorie Keller Daughters of Chaos (14) Lewis Klahr Her Fragrant Emulsion (38) In The Month of Crickets (38)

1966 (38)

The Nightingale's Fisted Wave (38)

Ken Kobland Vestibule (48)

George Kuchar The Cult of the Cubicles (25)

The Oneers (25) Mongreloid (25) Yolanda (25)

George Landow On The Marriage Broker Joke... (4)

Mark Lapore Medina (46)

Spike Lee Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads (12)

Richard Levine War Stories (53)

Saul Levine A Few Tunes Going Out (20)

New Left Notes (20)

Janis Crystal Lipzin Other Reckless Things (14)

Willie (9) Danny Lyon

> Born to Film (9) Sherman's March (11)

Ross McElwee Maria Marewski In The Name of the Father (43)

Nina Menkes Magdalena Viraga (18) Trinh T. Minh-ha Reassemblage (46) **Erroll Morris** Vernon, Florida (40)

Michel Negroponte,

Mark Erder, Peggy Stern

Gunvor Nelson

Silver Valley (40) Red Shift (29) Light Years (29)

Slant or Slumber (45)

Tom Goes to the Bar (51)

Last Night at the Alamo (51)

The Man Who Envied Women (31)

Caligari's Cure (8)

Is/Land (16)

Scrolls (45)

Ace of Light (54)

Sappho and Jerry (17)

Asparagus (54)

Michael Oblowitz,

David Goldberg

Chika Ogura Tom Palazzolo Dean Parisot Eagle Pennell

Vicki Z. Peterson Dennis Pies Suzan Pitt **Bruce Posner** 

Yvonne Rainer Mark Rappaport Anne Robertson

Peter Rose

Allen Ross

Ken Ross

Impostors (10) Five Year Diary (24) Babel (15)

Digital Speech (15)

The Man Who Could Not See Far Enough (15)

Pleasures of the Text (15) Grandfather Trilogy (42) Blessed in Exile (26) Crisis in Utopia (26)

Robert Russett L'Acadie (45)

Keith Sanborn Something is Seen... (17)

Rufus Seder Screamplay (36) M. Serra Turner (18) Esther Shatavsky Bedtime Story (17)

Jeffrey Skoller Nicaragua: Hear-Say/See-Here (42)

Lee Sokol Aqui Se Lo Halla (37) The Secret Garden (38) Phil Solomon Warren Sonbert The Cup and the Lip (26) Konrad Steiner

Limn (50) Kristallnacht (49) Chick Strand Soft Fiction (37) Leslie Thornton

Adynata (5) Peggy and Fred in Hell (5)

Peggy and Fred in Kansas (5) Willie Varela Recuerdos de Flores Muertas (20)

Juntos En La Vida, Unidos En La Muerte (20)

Chan Is Missing (23) Wayne Wang Phil Weisman t. and the small picture frame (2) Billie Woodberry Bless Their Little Hearts (35)

**Charles Wright** Sorted Details (26)