

# ARTFORUM



Ericka Beckman, *You the Better*, 1983, still from color film in 16 mm, 30 minutes.

tion. This film, in brilliant, Pop Art, primary color, and with an editing and rhythmic aplomb combining Sergei Eisenstein's montage with the exhilarating kinesthesia of pro sports, is a wholly original work about games. The symbol: a stylized roulette wheel around which competitors bet against "the house." We see the whirling wheel superimposed over human contenders. We hear the evocative sounds of money jingling and chips falling. The game-players are concrete, entering a basketball-like competition to get the ball into the roulette slot of choice. The overheated atmosphere of competition and the choreographic grace of the athletes is measured by the tattoos of a cappella song Beckman composed and chants. The kinesthetic manner in which she edits movement and synchronizes it with music could easily get her a job with ABC Sports.

More compelling than *Monday Night Football*, Beckman's *You the Better* situates the viewer as challenger of "the house," or "establishment." It's a brisk (half-hour) meditation on competition, jealousy, and probability. As one of the protagonists, against all odds, repeatedly wins at the wheel (of fortune), his adversaries grow hostile and jealous—the very moods provoked in Beckman's Film Festival audience, who were busy feigning not to understand. Beckman's was the one truly vanguard achievement in the Festival, and the only analysis and indictment of the competition that keeps the wheel of fortune spinning. Beckman made an art movie; the audience clamored for Art.

#### **Passion: Against Impotence**

For my generation—which he aptly dubbed the children of Marx and Coca-Cola—Godard's stature would seem unimpeachable. He makes grown intellectuals cry (Manny Farber: "... no other filmmaker has so consistently made me feel like a stupid ass"). Though no other filmmaker has so systematically and sensually objectified women, some feminists (viz. the *Camera Obscura* collective) find this—in his work—critically significant. His intimidation of the filmmaking and film-going community is total. Why? You don't just watch a Godard movie—you watch the restless journey of a daring pilgrim who has repeatedly given shape to an

Applebroog's serial works (à la *Rear Window* voyeurism), Alexis Smith's movie posters and abbreviated collages telegraphing a scenario, and Cindy Sherman's incarnations of glamorized starlets are all telling examples. What all these artists have in common, as do art movie-makers and Art Movie-makers, is a dual allegiance to art and culture.

The difficulties of demonstrating this allegiance were clear at the New York Film Festival in a number of films struggling with the contradictions. What is the museum of modern Art Movies? Now that cable stations broadcast popular new movies via TV, the Art Movie museums are the international film festivals catering to the refined sensibilities of the carriage trade. The latest Art Movie exhibition had on view a variety of offerings, worth looking at in close-up for the way they embody filmmakers' divided loyalties and assumptions about their role as artists. (These may not have been the crowning achievements of the Festival—the faultless *L'Argent* by Robert Bresson and Di-

ane Kurys' perfectly realized *Entre Nous*, both 1983, towered over all comers.)

#### **You the Better: Avant-en-Garde**

Cobilled with Godard's lifeless *Passion* (which received such clamorous ovation in advance that Godard admonished, "Wait until you see the movie first"), Ericka Beckman's excellent 16-mm *You the Better* was received at the outset with impatience, then with rude catcalls, and finally with abusive hostility. If the fate of all great art is to be at first misunderstood, then Beckman's film, hands down, was the greatest film at the festival. What the audience, conditioned by the Godard personality cult and their nostalgia for his elegant pessimism (which matches today's zeitgeist even better than it did that of the '60s, when he was a vastly superior filmmaker), refused to see is that Beckman is a more "accessible" moviemaker than Godard.

Beckman is obsessed by behavioral theory—Jean Piaget is a favorite—as a metaphor of social interac-



## POPCORN AND CANVAS

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