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## Fairytales of New York

by Amy Taubin

LIKE A BOOMERANG hurled across three-plus decades and carrying today's viewer back with it to that fervent, hard-edged but oddly innocent downtown moment when the free-for-all 1970s (free because no one had or was willing to admit to having money) gave way to the more practical and materialist '80s, Ericka Beckman's *Super 8 Piaget Trilogy* (1978–81) arrives on the Anthology Film Archives screen. Its restoration in 16mm was made possible by Anthology's experimental film preservation project, which has recently focused on work from this period. (Two weeks ago, restored movies by Manuel De Landa were screened; on April 15–16, it's Bette Gordon's turn.) I can't remember seeing an actual boomerang in any of Beckman's works, but so many of the trajectories of camera and object movement in her films evoke that kind of kinetic and aggressive back-and-forth that to include the thing itself would be redundant.

Beckman's place in the pantheon of daredevil experimental moviemakers should have been secured in 1983, when *You the Better*, the thirty-five-minute, 16-mm film that followed the *Piaget Trilogy*, caused a riot at the New York Film Festival, where it preceded Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion*. I recall that at the time, Godard, perhaps as a defensive maneuver, anointed Beckman as the most talented young American experimentalist. Two years earlier, Beckman's Super 8 work was lauded by J. Hoberman in his catalogue for "Home Made Movies", the 1981 marathon survey of 8-mm and Super 8 films he organized at Anthology. Hoberman described the films in what would only later be dubbed the *Piaget Trilogy*—they were partly inspired by the learning theories of the psychologist Jean Piaget—as follows: "Filled with images of disembodied limbs, toy-like models, and anthropomorphized furniture, scored to doo-wop mantras and abstract cheerleader chants, Beckman's films suggest the amalgam of Max Fleischer's oneiric *Bimbo's Initiation* and Oskar Fischinger's geometric *Composition in Blue*." Of *Out of Hand* (1981), the last film in the trilogy, he memorably blurbed: "like an Allstate Insurance commercial as it might appear to an autistic child."

Of all the artist-filmmakers who debuted in the '70s, none have shown more consistency than Beckman. That is to say that each of her films is distinct from the others while also being part of a uniquely envisioned oeuvre. (You have to see her films to understand how derivative, clumsy, and vacuous Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* cycle is.) What I wrote in 1979 in the *Soho News* about two of her early films—about their fragmentation, dreamlike displacements, and associative connections; about how clear, diagrammatic, often primary-colored iconography is placed within a shadowy, shifting, ambiguous space; about the incantatory power of her sound tracks with their repeated percussion riffs and nursery rhyme-like chants—applies to her more recent, technically formidable work as well. In the stunning 2006 *Tension Building*—an unfortunate omission from the Anthology program, though it can be found in its entirety on her website—she uses stop-motion, camera movement, and variations of focal length and exposure to transform the Harvard University coliseum into a giant thrashing machine. A mere three minutes, it seems to go on for hours, sucking you in like a black hole. It's the only film that's ever given me motionsickness.

Milking the Surrealist roots of Pop, Beckman creates brightly colored, psychologically threatening, sexually charged worlds in which her avatars are hurled to and fro, trapped inside a game plan whose rules they desperately try to discern. In what is probably still her most narrative-like film, *Cinderella* (1986), her heroine, decked out alternately in baggy overalls and a green bouffant prom dress topped with a blonde flip wig, is shunted between an industrial furnace that she's forced to tend and the ballroom where she dances with the prince until she loses her chance to marry him because she doesn't



Amy Taubin on Ericka Beckman continued...

make it home by midnight. It's not until she realizes that she can come home whenever she likes that she breaks out of the confines of the game. "And that night, I didn't get home until two!" she exclaims, in one of the most thrilling moments of liberation in a Beckman movie. It wasn't until looking at *Cinderella* again, twenty-five years after its debut, that I realized how deeply Beckman's films were lodged in my brain in their entirety, as deeply as the childhood nursery rhymes and picture books that are undoubtedly their sources. They touch down where the wet dreams of girlhood arise.

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