

**Ericka Beckman, *Out of Hand*.
Collective for Living Cinema (November).**

Out of Hand is the third in a Beckman trilogy of Super-8 films based on the ideas of child psychologist Jean Piaget. Like the earlier *We Imitate, We Break-Up* (I have not seen the other film in the series), it uses a subjective camera eye to present what its character *thinks* rather than *says* (as in voice-over) or *sees* (as in point-of-view and reaction shots). This unusual mode of first-person narration, called “mindscreen” by Bruce Kawin in his book of the same name, corresponds neatly to Piaget’s basic thesis that children are active participants in the creation of their reality, not just passive receivers of information. So *Out of Hand* adds a third element—consciousness as narrator—in both style and subject to the more ordinary formula of viewer-to-film relationship.

What does this theory actually look like? Beckman calls *Out of Hand* a “search” film in which a small boy looks for a lost object. We see a series of discrete images and events as if this character was shuffling through them in his mind for clues as to what is being sought. Many of these vignettes are nightmarish: a brightly lit and apparently empty house glows in darkness, doors are barred, boxes and blocks fly in every direction at super-speed, a figure runs hard to stay in the same place, shadowy figures break through a door and carry away another struggling figure, all objects—houses, blocks, doors—constantly shrink and grow in size. These pictures may be dream-like, but the cinematic techniques are hardly dreamy; they are rendered in Beckman’s trademark combinations of fast edits, choppy rhythms, furiously-paced animation, primary colored objects in surrounding black space, and an accompaniment of insistent drumbeats and repeated chants of short

phrases (“where is it?” “gotta get it”).

So goes the first half of the film. To this point, *Out of Hand* exfoliates like Piaget’s insightful, woozy writing, its knotty conceits by turn exhilarating and puzzling. Then, unexpectedly, a sustained focus shows up. The camera fixes on a “boy” (played by adult Paul McMahon) who might have dreamed the preceding sequences. In a world of magically mysterious laws of physics, he looks for “it” in his toy chest, moving with jerky, mime-like movements. A rocking horse pitched over his shoulder hangs suspended in mid-air, bobbing. He throws blocks into the air and they seem to develop their own means of propulsion; a military figure, a kind of stop-and-go traffic cop, is required to direct their flight. Finally, the boy finds “it,” a U-shaped block. “It” becomes the handle for a shield with which he fend off a steady stream of flying blocks. He repeatedly looks through the doorway of a furnace made in the shape of “it.”

Through these various functions, he apparently remembers the name of “it” (for the viewer, “it” remains a versatile U-shaped block), thereby finding “it.”

The film’s extended look at this boy stretches Beckman’s initial method, and we begin to follow a more familiar kind of mixed narration in *Out of Hand*’s second part. Unlike her previous work, this section edges, however slightly, toward dramatic narrative. That move may disturb formalist fans, but *Out of Hand* picks up a sense of play from this interest in performance which fills out the film’s weighty ideas.

One of the last images is of the boy surrounded by animated cubes but sleeping soundly, as if the resolution of his story had quelled their willful tyranny over him. *Out of Hand* ends as the adventure of a boy, not of blocks, and is all the more provocative for alluding to that kind of simple tale-telling among its several complex cinematic strategies.

John Howell



Ericka Beckman