



ERICKA BECKMAN Movies for the New American Adult

by Richard Baim

In the last several years few filmmaker/artists have been as successful as Ericka Beckman in carving out a visual language of their own. Many have relied on parodying historical cinema or using superfluous devices to edge themselves into the critical eye. Beckman, however, started her film career by abandoning the film methods she perceived as encumbering. As far as she is concerned, to follow in the steps of retinal abstraction or structuralist tedium, or to work with the conventions of Hollywood, would be to make just another contribution to film as spectator sport. As a result she has set an enormous task for herself, for by abandoning film language as it is most commonly understood, much of what she puts into a film is passed over, or at best only partly digested. This is a sacrifice that any artist who is truly breaking new ground must be willing to make: in the long run the resultant new language may serve as a basis for future experimentation.

Any material can serve an artist as inspiration, providing insights into both new form and new content. In Beckman's case one important source is the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget. In her own writing she refers repeatedly to her use of Piaget's ideas in her work. But while her films can be said to be concerned with his notions on the structure of learning, these ideas function more directly as the initiators of images. The theoretical psychology is of interest of course, but less so than the visual language Beckman creates out of it and in response to it.

In her first significant film, *White Man Has Clean Hands*, she experiments with the use of the written word in juxtaposition with an image, in order to see which will dominate. We find that we want to and will believe in what we read, but that we retain and give our ultimate respect to the image. What Beckman has learned from Piaget is that the way to make an enduring impression on a human is through the eyes. His discovery that so much of our understanding is developed prior to the acquisition of language reinforces the purpose of her work.

In Beckman's films images come off the screen and strike.

They become luminous and clear only to fade into blackness, in much the same way that a dream which seems vivid on waking soon slips into an inaccessible region. This ocular drama is not a contrivance, but a direct reflection of how Beckman forms her imagery; she dreams it.

In her dreams she is pursued, handles objects, opens doors and makes contact with the occupants of rooms. Nothing particularly unusual. What sets her apart from the common dreamer is her incredible ability to recall the content of her dreams, and the context: the emotions felt as she opened a door or looked back down a river. Much of her non-sleeping time is spent pondering her dreams, enough so that it can be said that the dreams of one night are founded in dreams prior to that. She cultivates her dreams and involves them in her artistic process. As a result the films are a product of dreams fed on a steady diet of Piaget, and more dreams.

The complex images she retrieves from her dreams are put onto film through a simple, direct approach. Chairs bowl over, houses expand, magnets suck bodies across the room: her sets and props, once on film, transcend their minor proportions and assume an extraordinary presence. She uses basic filmic devices to illustrate different qualities of existence: portions of film are animated because their actions cannot take place in a real time mode. She does not invent images to apply to a technique, the method used reflects the nature of the subject being shot. When, in *We Imitate, We Break Up*, a woman is pursued across an endless blackness by a torso-less marionette, the tension builds and is amplified because we can see she is actually going nowhere. In *The Broken Rule* the action is backlit and the silhouetted figures become types rather than individuals.

Beckman's sound tracks work in a similar way. She combines real and stylized sound effects with unsynchronized action, adding an extra depth to the meanings carried by the imagery. As the action unfolds songs chime in, their tone varying from teenage bop to psycho cheerleader chant. A tune from *We Imitate, We Break Up* pulses along,



Ericka Beckman/Richard Baim; Production Still, *Out of Hand*, 1980
Richard Baim: Photograph, 1980

the voice of a kindergarten teacher panting out the lyrics: 'Mario's against me... Oh he's after me... He's after me... He's acting like I have the loot...' In conjunction with the image of a woman being chased by a stringed puppet, the song stirs our anticipation of just what will happen if or when he catches her. The use of sound and music in these films is intrinsic to the action, it is not like so much audial grease applied as an afterthought. The lyrics and music are Beckman's own invention, distantly inspired by Roget's Thesaurus and Nino Tempo.

The latest film, *Out Of Hand*, is actually the final film in a triptych which started with *We Imitate, We Break Up*. Beckman again uses the animated/real time formulization to which she has now added the element of time passed. She has chosen as the theme for this film a quest for something that existed before, something that is now only in the memory of the protagonist. The object of pursuit is security, a quality, not a tangible thing: an appropriate challenge to her style.

Throughout the triptych Beckman establishes her own symbolism, one which varies from childish association (breaking up: chairs bowled over by a ball) to images that require an intense commitment from the audience if they are to be interpreted (memory: white boxes spinning on a black disc). These last images are at the same time the most intriguing and the least successful parts of the films. They command attention as visual signs, but tend to fail in the multiplicity of their symbolism. Often enough the artist will intend a great deal of complex thought to be read into an image, while the audience, in its effort to stay afloat in the film, remains content with the simplest interpretation. The overall communication is compromised by these cryptic representations, and yet it is their mystery which provokes interest in the films in the first place. Beckman does not mean to be confusing, but she does mean to be challenging. It is her intention to create a latent understanding that will, in time, snap into place, making her purposes clear.

Beckman deals with an amalgam of concerns: visual profundity, epistemological quests, and her immersion in her own psychological astonishment. The current trend among American artists can be identified as a search for bewilderment, not to be mistaken for confusion or disbelief. The most desired result to be obtained from a work of art at this time is a sense of mystery. And while mystery of one sort or another has always been popular, it has never before been held in such a state of reverence by quite so many people. Most young artists grew up in a synthetic environment, subject to increasingly complex social structures and the stress of psychological accountability. As a result those interested in spiritual themes have shifted their attention away from divinity, nature and mankind in general to the mystery within themselves. It can now be said that the more puzzled the artist, the greater the universal nature of his experience.

What Beckman has succeeded in creating is a profound sense of perplexity. She uses an imagery that was born in

her dreams and which, as we watch on film, seems to come from our dreams. Her work reflects this evolution of inspiration from external sources to the internal source. Her own evolution has placed her at the right time and place, and has made her aware of the common situation. Her films, while on the surface evoking an almost clinical experience, more deeply reveal to us the psychology that flows as a current through the new American adult.

Not only has she created her own symbolism and style, she has also established a point from which she can extend her own history. *Out of Hand*, though third in a series, is to me the point from which that history will make its most significant step forward. For Beckman herself it is her most concise film, and to judge from the rushes it does contain her most well devised use of props and action. Her filmic realization has become more efficient, and with this new efficiency comes an economy of interpretation.