

THE KITCHEN

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THE OTHER CINEMA

Filmworks 78-79

The Kitchen, May 1

By Noel Carroll

Filmworks 78-79 was a three-evening festival of recent independent films. Sponsored by The Kitchen, each evening lasted approximately two and a half hours. In general, the festival focused on works by younger filmmakers. There is a need for this type of gargantuan screening. It not only gives viewers a chance to catch up on new films and filmmakers they've missed, but such festivals also provide an overview of contemporary work that enables us to see emerging patterns and tendencies that might be obscured in the usual one show/one artist approach. The Kitchen has performed a major service, one that hopefully it will continue on a regular basis.

I attended the first evening of the festival because it presented the largest number of films and filmmakers hitherto not reviewed in *SWN*. What seemed particularly significant about the first night was that half of the filmmakers screened were interested in making narratives, albeit ironic and often metaphoric ones. Considering the disputes that surround the reigning genre of the Structural film, one wonders whether this renewed interest in narrative on the part of young filmmakers is a harbinger of a new movement in avant garde esthetics.

The most successful of these narratives was *Freshkill* by the late Gordon Matta-Clark. Made in 1972, it is not, strictly speaking, a new film, yet its concern with metaphoric narrative makes it an appropriate entry in the first night's program. The notes describe it as "a death duel between modern monsters." It begins with a man driving an old red panel truck. In perfect accord with the program notes, the engine literally "roars" on the soundtrack. For some inexplicable reason, the driver smashes the truck into a bulldozer in a junkyard. The shot is repeated; we note some liquid splashing out of the cabin of the van as if it were bleeding.

The bulldozer is the second monster. Its motor also growls at an exacerbated pitch. It begins to knock the truck to smithereens. This is the best wrecking of an automobile I have ever seen, outstripping (so to speak) those in *Point Black* and *The Getaway*. It alludes to the battle-of-the-dinosaurs scenes in lost world sagas and the Godzilla-and-Friends-Yisit-Tokyo series. Matta-Clark injects the destruction with pathos. The truck doesn't stand a chance against the bulldozer. The dozer flips it over and gas spills from the tank like blood. The side of the truck is torn off its chassis effortlessly. The door hangs off it like a piece of skin, not steel.

The wreckage is staged in a junkyard with mountains of trash on every side. At times, the roar of the engines dims so that we hear the shrieks and squawks of scavenger seagulls and finally the buzzing of squadrons of flies.

Matta-Clark directs his cameraman Burt Spielvogel to emphasize the scale of the cranes, trucks and bulldozers that lord over the slag heaps. The everyday junkyard is transformed into a hellish landscape compounded of organic decay, parasites and inorganic deterioration. The quotation of horror film motifs becomes a powerful means for Matta-Clark to project his terror and disgust with social waste.

We Imitate; We Break Up by Ericka Beckman also evolves a metaphoric narrative. It is a Super 8mm color sound film that allegorically recounts the tensions Beckman sees in male/female relations. The film begins by cutting between the imaginary male protagonist — a pair of puppet legs manipulated by a rope and called Mario — and a young woman dressed as a schoolgirl. At first the girl imitates all of the puppet's movements, as if she too were on a string. The schoolgirl outfit and the imitation motif, of course, are symbols of being dominated. The man and woman play kickball, first cooperatively and then vengefully. In the middle of this symbolic quarrel, the girl takes the ball and comically runs away while the legs, now gigantic and threatening, pursue her interminably. A male figure bowls the kickball into animated household furniture that jumps aside into piles, literalizing the idea that their relation has broken up. The songs that accompany the images are repetitive and intentionally childish while the images themselves are quite simple and easily understood in terms of their symbolic import. Shots, for example of the girl "running away," are repeated endlessly so that they will be comprehended as metaphors but also so that their obsessive recurrence will indicate that they represent haunting fixations that Beckman strives to ironize and distance through comedy and repetition.

Black Box by Beau D and Scott B is also a Super 8 color sound film that traffics in irony. It is an exercise in punk esthetics. A blond boy, probably in his early 20s, is kidnapped, hot from his girlfriend's arms, in front of an apartment building

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somewhere in the East Village. He is brought to a torture chamber where the minions of a secret religious organization plan to purify him using knouts, cudgels, chains and electric shocks. The film looks like an adaptation of Kafka by the Kuchar Brothers in collaboration with George Romero. Available through B-Movies Productions, it is a homage to sleaze and to adolescent images of evil. The villains, portrayed with boisterous local accents, recall shrill parental nagging more than the stage diction of the evil-doers of traditional B's. Mixed with the comedy are typical sado-masochistic fantasies as the boy is beaten by his maniacal neighborhood captors. I suppose that the tortures are meant to titillate but at the same time they are meant to be comic until finally the naked, bleeding, bound captive is thrust into the black box where he and the audience are assaulted at length with abrasive electric sound waves which provide an effective, horrific symbol of totalitarian repression.

The levels of irony and ambivalence in the film are complicated. Banality in both film and life is alternately embraced, celebrated and satirized while the sado-masochistic themes signal an unresolved fascination with sexual repression at the same time that it is attacked. The sophomoric irony itself becomes an ironic disguise for a great deal of pain which is symbolized through the vacillating attitudes apparent in acting out the pop myth of victim and victimizer.

Mrs. Wong by Viktor Vondracek is a parody of a TV news special report. A Hispanic newsman visits Mrs. Wong to interview her about the recent robbery of her apartment, the spectacle of a clumsy news team stumbling through rooms almost as messy as my own is humorous enough, but Mrs. Wong's exaggerated New York monolog — including a complaint about dog piss leaking through her ceiling — is so close to the familiar and yet so incongruous within the framework of TV news that it provokes constant titters. Nevertheless, *Mrs. Wong* is so much like a student film perennial that I wonder why it was included in this group of ostensibly avant garde films.

Klaus Wyborny's *Six Little Pieces on Film* is the type of work that one is more accustomed to see in Soho showcases. It is a Structural film comprised of five or six sequences. Within each, there are a set number of shots or kinds of shots which are repeated with variations in camera speed, shot length and processing. Wyborny's subjects include a harbor; a house, an urban street and industrial sites. At times the images fly by so fast that we struggle to recognize them. When the cutting slows down, we can begin to get a sense of place but then the editing will speed up again and the images are turned into elaborate rhythmic patterns. The kinds of perceptual experiences the film affords are characteristic of the Structural genre rather than innovative, but pleasurable nonetheless.

Similarly, Jack Goldstein's three very short films address themselves to perception rather than narration. Each is technically beautiful, exploring a single idea with elegance. *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer* features the company's leonine logo on a rich red field. The lion roars, but no fiction follows. Instead the animal roars again and again and again. Sometimes it gives two snorts; sometimes three. The repetition calls our attention not only to the quality of the sounds but to how the lion tilts his head with each resonant grumble. Goldstein forces us to look closely at a familiar, usually ignored, cultural symbol while also making a joke about the MGM musical as the king of the beasts delivers his famous aria.

Like *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*, *The Jump* is luminously colored — indeed the intensity and brightness of each of Goldstein's pieces make them very arresting sensuously. In *The Jump*, a glaring yellow rotoscoped figure on a red background dives through the air, presumably into a pool. As the figure completes its fall it disappears into the redness. The abstraction involved is tantalizing — we not only identify the figure but through that identification we are tempted to conceive of its disappearance as it's falling into water. In *Bone China*, a yellow cartoon-bird with red-tipped wings flies around the edge of a white dish on a black field. It flaps its wings slowly — we hear what sounds like a blanket being unfurled in the wind. Then the bird begins squeaking and its pace picks up. As the bird rushes ahead, it appears to swoop down to the dish, momentarily causing the illusion that the dish is a bowl. Goldstein is an excellent craftsman with a delightful talent for provoking delicate perceptual shifts.

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Note: Sheila McLaughlin's *Inside Out* and Ernie Gehr's *Untitled*, both of which have already been quite favorably reviewed in *SWN*, concluded the May 1 program.

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