

TO LIVE

AVANT

Fear and Trembling at the Whitney Biennial



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Ericka Beckman's *Cinderella*: Who will wake the sleeping beauty of the avant-garde?

The French call adolescence the age of film-going, and it may be that the movies you discover then set your taste forever. Certainly, my own life was altered in 1965, when I began frequenting a cruddy storefront on St. Marks Place and the even weirder basement of a midtown skyscraper. I knew movie-movies, but this was another world: oceanic superimpositions and crazy editing rhythms, films made from bits of newsreel and Top 40 songs, "plots" ranging from the creation of the universe to the sins of the fleshapoids, real people (often naked) cavorting in mock Arabian palaces and outer borough garbage dumps. Determined to learn more, I took out a subscription to *Film Culture*. That the first issue was half devoted to the grandiose schemes of a mad beatnik named Ron Rice only confirmed my sense that anything was possible.

The Village Voice of that era was totally committed to these so-called underground movies, and for a long time after I began reviewing films here, my ideal reader was me as an adolescent. Lately, that reader has turned reproachful. It's painful to imagine what he would think, wandering into the 1987 Whitney Biennial to watch the movies—sitting amid an impatient clutch of tourists and a few somber friends of the artist, bombarded by images rendered banal by MTV, reading program notes that could turn you off language altogether. What was once vital and freewheeling now seems sanctimonious, cliché, and worst of all, superfluous. The onetime New American Cinema lives in its own peculiar ghetto—a handful of venues in New York, Boston, and San Francisco, various museums, media centers, and university film departments across the country—and a state of permanent frustration. Individuals persevere, but the movement seems moribund.

For the average film buff, it's the shadow of a shadow.

In New York, the bastions of the '60s have nearly all crumbled: The Anthology Film Archives have been virtually shut since 1981, *Film Culture* has published two issues this decade, the Film-maker's Cooperative has not been able to issue a new catalogue in a dozen years. The Millennium endures but, far from self-congratulatory, the recent 20th anniversary issue of *The Millennium Film Journal* offers several lengthy, pessimistic assessments of the current scene. And the current Whitney Biennial offers the most dismal selection of avant-garde films since the Biennial began including the form in 1979.

It's not my intention to justify those who ignore the achievements of the American avant-garde. (A film critic who takes no account of Stan Brakhage or Yvonne Rainer has as much claim to serious attention as a historian who never heard of the Civil War.) Nor do I wish to discourage those who labor to extend those achievements. Their lot is tough enough: Film is fearfully expensive and hard to get right. The number of labs dwindle as the price of raw stock climbs—and even more than the rest of us, a-g filmmakers are oppressed by the waste and idiocy of most commercial movies. Still, it's clear to even the most sympathetic observer that something has gone horribly wrong.

Denied recognition in the culture at large—years ago, according to Vincent Canby, he and then *Times* art critic Hilton Kramer decided that neither of them was capable of reviewing the crazy movies at the Whitney—avant-garde film further isolates itself from the mainstream, producing work that is increasingly sterile, derivative, and self-involved. Meanwhile, the starvation and squalor of ghetto life encourage a desperate, demeaning careerism—not to mention all manner of backbiting paranoid fantasies (one writer recklessly concocts the notion of a New York cabal, another maliciously suggests

that a modestly successful and extremely gifted filmmaker "needs critical attention as badly as Bob Hope needs real estate"). That work of enduring value continues to be made under these conditions seems all the more remarkable.

In this sense, the film section of the Whitney Biennial is a paradigm for the scene as a whole: a pair of challenging films by first-rate artists (Yvonne Rainer's *The Man Who Envied Women*, Ernie Gehr's *Signal—Germany on the Air*), a few respectable efforts by established figures (James Benning's *Landscape Suicide*, Warren Sonbert's *The Cup and the Lip*), a couple of brash, knotty, on-time films by relative newcomers (Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Naked Spaces*, Ericka Beckman's *Cinderella*), and a score of dreary mediocrities destined for oblivion—all blandly equated in an unilluminating, jargon-clogged catalogue essay.

The weakness of the Biennial selection is amplified, in that the Whitney has become the preeminent institutional force in American avant-garde film and curator John Hanhardt the avant-garde's single most influential programmer. The Biennial selection, which is subsequently packaged as a traveling show by the American Federation of Arts, is the most circulated exhibition of American a-g film. According to Hanhardt, no artist selected has ever refused to participate.

The malaise in avant-garde film is not a unique phenomenon—all movies have suffered in the past 15 years. It's not even singular in the context of the art world. Writing in *The Nation*, Arthur Danto worries that frenzied speculation will supplant the museum with the "private zoos" of wealthy collectors. For Danto, the Biennial's inclusion of 28 film and video artists (nearly 40 per cent of the total) seems "a brilliant counterattack by the Whitney curators against the museum's affluent enemies." Wouldn't it be nice! Never mind that Danto admits to having seen only one video and none of

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BY J. HOBERMAN

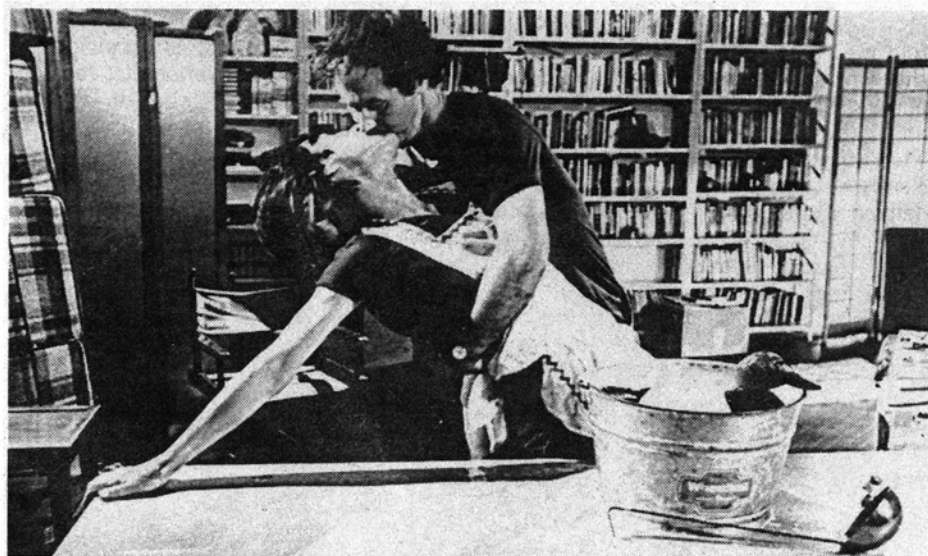
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the films (although that in itself should tell you something), the real irony is that a major reason for the marginalization of an avant-garde film is precisely the absence of a commodity to exploit.

What is this thing, "avant-garde?" The term is European, only recently applied to American-made films. Before, there was the grandiose New American Cinema or the exciting underground, and before that the tentative "experimental" film. "Avant-garde" has the connotation of a revolutionary elite, of subverting the status quo and advancing into some radiant future. Or is it only a pretentious academic label?

That the underground movies of the 1960s were greedily assimilated by TV commercials and rock videos, by porn (straight and gay), by midnight movies, and even by commercial features suggests that, in its heyday at least, the American avant-garde was some sort of literal vanguard: *Scorpio Rising* pointing the way toward *Easy Rider* and *L.A. Plays Itself*, *American Graffiti*, *Mean Streets*, and every MTV video ever made. But just as the militant counterculture of the '60s had little structural impact on the American political system, so the underground failed to transform the economy of American movie consumption. If anything, Hollywood movies are more grossly formulaic than they were 15 years back—and their audience is no less passive.

Thus, as it's currently applied to film, the term "avant-garde" defines movies that are less in advance of than simply other than the commercial cinema—those films that derange conventional codes of representation, that risk obscurity by confounding rigid expectations (including those of the not always tolerant official avant-garde). Is *Naked Spaces* a personal documentary or a Duras-like fiction? Is *Signal—Germany on the Air* an alienated diary film or a structural detec-



Rainer and Bill Raymond in *The Man Who Envied Women*: reason for guarded optimism

tive story? Is *Cinderella* a feminist puppetoon or a new wave operetta? Or are they something else? The avant-garde is the category applied to those films which elude categories. But the term is also deeply nostalgic.

Almost everyone agrees that the late '60s were golden. The era that began with Stan Brakhage's ultra-subjective *Anticipation of the Night*, his birth films, and subsequent epics, continuing through the beatnik underground and the world of Andy Warhol to end with the minimalist, modernist, structuralist tendency precipitated by Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, saw one of the richest, most diversified, and most underappreciated art movements of the 20th century.

Between 1958 and 1972, a disparate band of self-subsidized amateurs succeeded in transcending the Hollywood glitz mystique while opening movies up to formal possibilities that had largely lain dormant since D.W. Griffith designed the straitjacket of conventional narrative. By the mid '60s, the American avant-garde was a true oppositional cinema—support-

ed by a popular base, with its own alternative venues and distribution co-ops, as well as a quasi-utopian ideology. Like the historical avant-garde, the New American Cinema saw itself as a vehicle for social transformation and self-transcendence—it criticized Hollywood, both directly and by example. The underground proposed to change the world by overthrowing the institution of moviedom, and it possessed a superb and irrefutable weapon—namely, the frank representation of eros on screen.

Underground filmmakers were among the shock troops of the '60s social turmoil, and many of them paid the price. But the rise of commercial porn deprived the movement of its greatest novelty, just as midnight movies would usurp the movement's popular base. Meanwhile, a chimerical respectability beckoned. Having attained a sort of apotheosis in 1971 with the establishment of the Anthology Film Archives, the temporary recruitment of an ex-Beatle into its ranks, the installation of regular film programs at the Whitney and the Museum of Modern

Art, and the devotion of an entire issue of *Artforum* to its accomplishments, the New American Cinema retrenched behind academic bulwarks.

By the early '70s, almost all of the major filmmakers and a host of minor ones had come in from the cold to spawn a new generation of university-trained filmmakers. At first this looked like a victory, the creation of a beachhead. The structuralism of Snow and others was particularly well suited to academic film studies. As the celluloid era drew to a close and Minerva's owl took wing, movies produced an authentic, indisputable, Clement Greenberg-style modernism—one that drew attention to its own materials and axioms, that returned to ground zero to reinvent the medium from scratch. The delirious hedonism of the '60s gave way to a rigorous, ultimately punitive concern with "unpleasure." Small wonder the academic film a-g of the 1970s was as concerned with the production of theory as with the production of films.

The '70s were by no means a total loss. Despite the shrinking economy and the challenge of video, the decade saw a dramatic influx of women filmmakers, a welcome internationalization of the a-g scene, and the brief but influential punk neo-underground. Still, tolerated by universities and regulated by grants, pampered by apologists and ignored in the popular press, filmmakers abandoned the beatnik model of an anti-academic independent bohemia. Where once raving madmen became filmmakers, it was now the turn of genteel professors. Students studied avant-garde film in college, made a few in imitation of their teachers, and ventured out into the world to demand one-person shows at the Collective for Living Cinema. Correspondingly pushing the logic of the opening screening to a spurious limit, programmers placated their constituents by promiscuously dispensing shows, rather than championing the work they felt to be strongest.

Films like *Scorpio Rising* and *Flaming Creatures* were neither made for the avant-garde ghetto, nor contained by it; now avant-garde films appeared to illustrate particular doctrines or appeal to specific audiences. The rise of the institution subsidized mediocrity no less than genius.

The aesthetic boundaries in the '80s have been blurred by numerous crossovers. That *The Atomic Cafe* and *Sherman's March* could enjoy commercial runs, that the National Society of Film Critics would name as best films *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Blue Velvet* (rather than *Gandhi* and *Hannah and Her Sisters*) indicate the popular acceptance of at least some a-g work. But the Biennial designates its own avant-garde. According to John Hanhardt, the film section is devoted to "the work of the individual artist who is creating and producing work outside the mainstream of commercial film production, distribution, and exhibition."

Hanhardt's parameters are American "independent" films made over the last two years ("I try to reflect on what's happened in that period") belonging to a "particular culture of opposition." But what exactly is that "culture of opposition?" And why does it apply more to film and video than to painting and sculpture?

Reflecting a major trend of the '80s, the '83 Biennial included one narrative feature, the '85 edition had three, and this year's has five. But the inclusion of independent features puts the Biennial in an untenable position. Is Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (57th Street Playhouse) less experimental than Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (Film Forum, '85 Biennial)? Are Rachel Reichman's *The Riverbed* and Nina Menkes's *Magdalena Viraga* more formally a-g than *Sherman's March* or *Blue Velvet*? "*Blue Velvet* is a film I see in commercial release," Hanhardt

told me. "I feel an obligation to support that work which is not enjoying marketplace support." (Of course—and he's the only curator in the Biennial who has to.) The artisanal modes of the '60s have clearly evolved into something else. But, defined as it is by what it is not, the Whitney's avant-garde can't be anything other than a mode of exhibition. The only thing that makes a film as conventional as *The Riverbed* Whitney fodder is its inability to find a commercial release. Not the media, but the American Federa-

out there. If Hanhardt is suspicious of humor (consistently overlooking Joe Gibbons, George Kuchar, and—in video—Tony Oursler), he has proved responsive to criticism, validating Danto's observation that "the Whitney is open, uncertain, erratic, innocent, friendly and almost Chaplinesque in its readiness to dust itself off after a critical disaster and resolve to do better the next time around."

Consider this. In 1979, the film section was scored for its 17:1 male-to-female

of filmmakers from the Anthology canon. Given the critical support their work has received, a few filmmakers are conspicuous by their absence (Marjorie Keller, Leslie Thornton, Su Friedrich, to name three). But I'm not convinced that their inclusion would have made an appreciable difference. Hanhardt may have missed the boat on a half-dozen or so films since 1979, but he has amply demonstrated his support for new talent—the average age in the film/video section is 38, and over half the artists are Biennial



VIDEO DATA BANK/CHICAGO

Rosler's *If It's Too Bad to Be True*: The controversy continues.



MARTHA GEVER

"Joan Does Dynasty" by Joan Braderman (1986)

tion of Arts package is the message. Just as these features suggest subsidized equivalents of marketplace hits (with Leandro Katz's *The Visit* a sort of sub-Jarmusch punk-passé featurette), the work of Alan Berliner, Paul Glabicki, Barbara Hammer, and Stephanie Beroes are mediocre-to-embarrassing echoes of "established" a-g modes. It would be easy to put the blame for these botches on Hanhardt—and I think he should have held out more doggedly for excellence. But allowing for vagaries of taste, the quality of the Biennial depends on what's

ratio; since that time, the percentage of women has steadily risen until now, when women filmmakers are a majority. In 1981, the Biennial was chided for excluding super-8; in 1983, the format was there. (It has since disappeared, although Hanhardt told me that "if there's strong work in super-8, I'm ready to show it.") In 1983, P. Adams Sitney suggested that Warren Sonbert's *Noblesse Oblige* should have been programmed with Ernie Gehr's *Untitled*; this year Sonbert's *The Cup and the Lip* is matched with Gehr's *Signal—Germany on the Air*, the only show

virgins. Yet for film, the Biennial is a succession of one-night stands: As the number of first-time filmmakers has risen, the number of those asked back has plummeted. Some might suggest that the most serious omission is Stan Brakhage. (Certainly *The Loom* would have raised the level mightily.) But just as the Biennial only occasionally includes Willem DeKooning or Jasper Johns, suggesting in this way that these masters are above mere fashion, so the film section should not have to
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depend on Brakhage. If anything, this omission underscores the cruelest fate that the avant-garde has suffered—namely, the squeezing of successive generations within the same unyielding ghetto walls. In my alternate universe, Brakhage would be turning down dinner invitations to the White House, and Yvonne Rainer would be the subject of ga-ga profiles in *The New York Times Magazine*.

The history of art is not just the history of institutions but the history of individuals. A number of gifted filmmakers who surfaced in the late '70s have simply burnt-out—neither Vivienne Dick nor Manuel DeLanda has released significant new work in a half-dozen years—while, as Sitney observed in a review of the '85 Biennial, "No one has commanded attention since Yvonne Rainer moved from choreography to cinema." Of the younger filmmakers, Ericka Beckman is the closest to a consensus heroine—her stylistically assured, graphically dynamic, relentlessly go-go work has been included in three consecutive Biennials, as well as the New York Film Festival (where it sparked a near-riot), and has been reviewed in *Art in America*, *The Millennium Film Journal*, and the *Voice*. But, unlike Rainer, Beckman (who teaches to

support herself and required two residencies at two universities to complete *Cinderella*) hasn't much of an international reputation, nor indeed any reputation outside her field.

I asked Hanhardt if he agreed with Sitney's assertion that no indisputably strong artistic personality had emerged in the 15 years since Rainer's *Lives of Performers*. "What about Jim Benning?" he suggested. "Or Bill Viola?" Benning's *11 x 14* is a decade old—but what's striking about Bill Viola is that he works in video.

Let us peer into the Radiant Future: This current Biennial is the first in which film and video share a common exhibition space—and it's a significant move. "There's an increasing dialogue between film and video," Hanhardt told me. "For the first time, I've heard avant-garde filmmakers talk about the fact that they're interested in video; and now I hear video artists say they're interested in the theatrical presentation of their work." I've mainly heard filmmakers talk about how much they hate video, but Bill Viola may be a case in point. Not only did he make his stunning, feature-length *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* specifically for projected video, but, with his combina-

tion of Brakhagian visionary-romanticism and structuralist rigor, he extends the New American Cinema by other means.

A credit to his medium, Viola is scheduled for a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art later this year—the first ever given a video artist. In general, however, video brings with it an air of lowered expectations. Whereas film dominates the visual field, the video image is reduced and decentered, typically shown on multiple screens. Several of the Biennial videos, most notably Steve Fagin's *The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel* (a tape as grandiloquent as its title), are would-be films; they cry out for dream-screen presence. Others—ranging from Dan Graham's estimable *Rock My Religion* to Juan Downey's pious *J. S. Bach* (the worst piece in the Biennial, a glossy bit of irrelevance that treats the composer as a subject for *Live From Off Center*)—benefit from avoiding film's weight.

Once the handmaiden of modern times, film (and not just a-g film) seems headed toward its dotage. The technology is quaint, costly, and all but obsolete—although this scarcely spells the end of Cinema (high-resolution, projected video is on the way, and slide-tape shows may yet replace super-8 in the bargain base-

ment). And, even as movies are jostled by related forms, the plastic arts have increasingly merged with the camera-based ones. The '85 Biennial, as many observed, was awash in media-influenced work.

"I don't agree with the postmodern notion of pop culture being a place one can operate in," Hanhardt admonished me, adding that he saw MTV as siphoning off prospective a-g talent. But video, unlike film, is a strictly postmodern development, and the Biennial contains a number of crypto music-videos. Postmodern artists characteristically rework popular forms in avant-garde terms: It's because Jarmusch, Lynch, and Borden emerge from art world backgrounds that films like *Stranger Than Paradise*, *Blue Velvet*, and *Working Girls* challenge the boundaries of the Biennial as well as the marketplace.

This strategy is literalized in two of the most impressive tapes in the video section—Joan Braderman's *Joan Does Dynasty*, in which (shades of Ernie Kovacs, and special effects courtesy of Manuel DeLanda) the relentlessly hammy author is electronically matted into an episode of the prime-time soap to explicate the show's "world of unconscious desire," and Martha Rosler's more staidly formalist *If It's Too Bad to Be True, It Could Be DISINFORMATION*, which uses static to derange commercials and news reports on Nicaragua. As much desecrations as deconstructions, both tapes oppose the totalizing impulse of masterpiece art and the media. Like Hans Breder's slight but elegantly frantic assemblages, they take for granted that, in the postmodern world, TV has supplanted nature.

Although it's been said that the essential characteristic of postmodernism is the absence of vanguards, such guerrilla warfare suggests one valid avant-garde strategy. (The next underground is likely to be founded on the VCR.) In film, we have entered an era of near-instant, if vertical, assimilation. Where, 20 years ago, *Scorpio Rising* influenced everything on the horizon, from exploitation to art

prop, now innovative underground movies are merely remade on a more grandiose scale: Vivienne Dick's super-8 movies are given the Cecil B. DeMille treatment by Lizzie Borden and Susan Seidelman. Indeed, rather than revitalizing the a-g, the super-8 underground of the late '70s had a salutary effect on independent film production.

Now, aspiring super-8 filmmakers do Lower East Side imitations of commercial genres (chiefly splatter and heteroporn). Introducing last year's New York Film Festival Downtown, the organizers proudly announced "a marked shift towards short films emulating or parodying exploitation and cult films." The spectacle of neo-underground filmmakers doing belated, heterosexual imitations of John Waters, or mimicking the industrial barnacles that attached themselves to the original underground, is as pathetic as it is irrelevant.

I expect a few of these filmmakers, among others, firing belligerent protests off to the *Voice*. (And why not? I'm part of the institution, too.) It's always possible that something new and vital may emerge—and from the least likely source. I also hope something does. The impulse to make movies is far from dead, and it may be that the future is percolating at Charas or ABC No Rio or some other East Side emporium. But an authentic vanguard is a necessary vanguard—arising out of some deeply experienced crisis, either personal or cultural. It's worth remembering that, by and large, the underground films of the '50 and '60s were made by misfits, dropouts, borderline schizos, and gays, while the strongest a-g films of the '70s and '80s were overwhelmingly by women.

In 1978, Vivienne Dick made the underground films that could not have been made in 1965—and in that she wasn't alone. Issues of class and race are less resolved than ever: The energy to fuel a new avant-garde will have to come from someplace more marginal and excluded than the petulance of straight suburban white boys transplanted to Avenue B. ■