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**Writing on Movies
and Other Media**

79). The former shows New York City as the province of garbage eating derelicts, defecating dogs, garish parades, and assorted blind or crippled beggars. Through frenzied cutting and optical effects, DeLanda transforms this material into a city symphony of terrors. *Ismism*, by contrast, is a straightforward documentary of DeLanda's spray-painted graffiti exhortations and his grotesque revisions of subway advertising posters. Even the extremely formal films of the late Greg Sharits can be seen as a form of *flâneurism*: As much as the Gladstone or DeLanda films, these percussive, edited-in-camera compositions, superimposing the neon lights and illuminated storefronts of downtown San Francisco, could only have been shot off-the-cuff in narrow gauge. The most metaphysical example of urban *vérité* also comes from San Francisco. Joe Gibbons's hour-long *Spying* (1978–79) is a perverse and resonant exercise in applied scopophilia wherein the filmmaker covertly observes his neighbor's daily activities, using porno inserts (crudely shot off the screens of Market Street grind houses) to fill in the blanks.

Super-8 sound cameras went on the market in 1974. A year later, Lenny Lipton (author of the best-selling technical guide *Independent Filmmaking*), released his *Children of the Golden West*. Billed as the world's first super-8 sync-sound feature, it is an episodic home movie in which Lipton interviews a mixture of camera store salesmen, family members, and aging veterans of the Sixties. Wrote *Film Quarterly*'s Michael Shedlin: "The film could almost be considered a parody of the counterculture by anyone who was not wide open to unabashed hippiness."

The availability of cheap sync-sound effectively split the followers of Brakhage into two schools. Although the purists eschewed the new technology, Saul Levine—who was more profoundly influenced by the *Songs* than perhaps any other filmmaker—switched to super-8 sound in 1976. His first talkie, *Notes of an Early Fall*, was a characteristically raw work that parlayed the sound of microphone rumble into a formal element. Featuring a lengthy sequence devoted to the dance of an outrageously warped record, and a cameo appearance by an on-the-blink TV set, the forty-minute film suggests an entropic, melancholy *Ballet Mécanique*. Another early talkie, *Misconception* (1977), by Marjorie Keller, was marked by greater ambivalence, if not explicitness, than many of the birth films which followed Brakhage's 1959 *Window Water Baby Moving*. But Brakhage's birth films were silent, and Keller's use of sync-sound served to criticize their idealizations by grounding her visuals in a grittier, more visceral reality.

(Brakhage himself, inspired by one of his students, briefly returned to narrow-gauge filmmaking. Many of the ten silent super-8 films he released in 1975 resemble the early *Songs* in their in-camera editing, rapid camera movements, and casual or diaristic qualities. Others, notably *Airs* and *Absence*, went far beyond *Songs* in their unsettling, near-abstract consideration of the diffuse, ethereal quality of the super-8 image.)

More innovative uses of super-8 sound began to appear in the late Seventies. Ericka Beckman's idiosyncratic films—*White Man Has Clean Hands* (1977), *We*

Imitate; We Break-Up (1978), *The Broken Rule* (1979), and *Out of Hand* (1980)—used primitive but ingenious special effects to combine dream imagery with archaic movie conventions (e.g. employing a whirlpool of superimpositions as a segue into a flashback). Filled with images of disembodied limbs, toy-like models, and anthropomorphized furniture, scored to a combination of doo-wop mantras and abstract high school cheers, Beckman's films suggest the combination of an oneiric Max Fleischer cartoon like *Bimbo's Initiation* with Oskar Fischinger's Bauhaus-styled animation, *Composition in Blue*. Aspects of Beckman's work recall the psychodramas of the Forties and Fifties; but, with her emphasis on perceptual gameplaying and childhood cognition, they're inspired less by Freud or Jung than by Jean Piaget.

When Joe Gibbons switched to sound in 1979, he invented a new form of psychodrama which might be termed the "confessional." In *Weltschmerz* (1979), the camera sits on a tripod considering Gibbons as he hunches over his kitchen table, slugging vodka, chain-smoking, and toying aimlessly with a half-eaten potato. Morose and giggling by turns, the filmmaker launches into a broken account of his present unhappiness, which is punctuated by extended cutaways to dying plants, freeway traffic, and TV soap operas.

Some of Gibbons's performances are lighter. *Buffalo Film* (1980) opens at a screening of *La Salamandre* but soon reverts to the filmmaker's kitchen where he seeks to divert us by reading from a book entitled *How to Be an Entertainer*. He takes phone calls, scarfs down a piece of cake, mugs while a friend tells a fatuous story, smashes a drinking glass, and finally attempts to juggle. *Confidential* (1979–80), Gibbons' most powerful film and a worthy companion to his silent *Spying*, is a series of unedited three-and-a-half-minute camera rolls in which he speaks to the camera about their "relationship." The most startling aspect of the film is that Gibbons is clearly not talking to the audience—the sequences are mainly midnight *tête-à-têtes* which the viewer self-consciously overhears. Over the period of forty minutes, Gibbons confides in, coddles, apologizes to, berates ("you can't even be objective!"), and ultimately attacks the machine.

The quintessential super-8 filmmaker of the late Seventies and early Eighties has been Vivienne Dick. Her movies fuse the various traditions of urban *vérité*, confessional psychodrama, and home-movie dailiness into an original style that's marked by its political overtones. Dick's *Guerillere Talks* (1978) could be seen as a punk feminist correlative to Lipton's *Children of the Golden West*; *She Had Her Gun All Ready* (1978), in the words of critic Karyn Kay, "speaks the contemporary unspeakable: women's anger and hatred of women at the crucial moment of overpowering identification and obsessional thrallidom"; *Beauty Becomes the Beast* (1979) depicts a world of women where mother and daughter are reciprocal roles in an ongoing chain of victimization; *Liberty's Booty* (1980) uses a matter-of-fact view of prostitution as a means to demystify sex.

All of Dick's films are jagged, sometimes fragmentary assemblages in which the camera appears to be as much participant as observer. Filled with mordant media quotations, they're shot through an ironic ashcan lyricism and an unsen-