

THE AVANTGARDE FILM TUESDAY SERIES AT THE JEWISH MUSEUM 1969  
arranged and conducted by the Film-Makers' Cinematheque

Tuesday, February 11th:

WARREN SONBERT: WHERE DID OUR LOVE GO?; TUXEDO THEATRE

The two new tendencies in avantgarde film-making of the last two or three years, which can be seen with especial clarity among the youngest film-makers, are the structural film and the diary. The former I discussed in some detail in the notes for a program of George Landow's films in this museum: in short, it is any film of minimal imagery whose overall structure is its primary content. The diary film, on the other hand, is overflowing in the diverse molecules of content; so many events, in fact, that the shape of the film tends simply to follow the course of occurrences, which is the journal or the diary structure. Often these films are unedited in the conventional sense of post-structuring: the film-maker usually photographs with the idea in mind that the reel will enter the film in the precise manner in which it was shot, and thereby pre-edits or "composes" the rhythms in the filming. Even those diarists who cut their films, like Jonas Mekas, tend to trim, rearrange chunks of film, and organize the "rushes" or rolls of film as shot, rather than compose in the editing process. Perhaps it can be fairly said that Taylor Mead and Ken Jacobs launched the diary film. Mekas is certainly its arch exponent and practitioner. Recently Andrew Noren, Harry Smith, even Brakhage and Markopoulos to a limited degree, and Warren Sonbert have developed and extended the form.

The two films of Warren Sonbert that we shall see tonight exemplify the poles of diary activity: WHERE DID OUR LOVE GO? (1966) is composed serially with entire rools of film attached to one another. A visit to a Tom Wesselman show precedes a visit to Andy Warhol's "factory" which precedes a party, a walk through the Museum of Modern Art. From one point of view they are the daily rounds of the film-maker, from the other the activities of the coterie of young people, his friends, whom he is filming.

In all of Sonbert's work to date there is a transparent love for everything and everyone he films. James Stoller is responding directly to this extreme of sentiment when he writes of Where Did Our Love Go?: "...a hyperactive and uncommitted camera gives us fleeting views of a number of favored Manhattan scenes and the beautiful and vacant-looking children who inhabit them. The latter appear and reappear in various combinations and alignments that reportedly make reference to their real life at the time the film was shot. If its 'in' aspect were not hopelessly lost on me, I might like this lovely small film less. As it is, I'm grateful for it: largely craftless and undemanding, it has the consistency and sureness of a sustained, endlessly surprising, intuitive perception.

A series of meetings in the city (a New York seen magically in color, reminiscent of the New York of Frank O'Hara's poems) is wedded to a series of unfulfilled chases, not only the people but the camera following repeatedly through doors, down corridors, across streets, after what must be gone, or lost, or never was. Sonbert's restless, rushing fragmentation of incident frees modish gestures and attitudes from their temporal context and freezes them in an immutable past tense, so that everything we see seems to have happened long ago. The pervasive camera-consciousness contributes to this effect by giving whatever anyone does the look of having been done precisely to be

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ded on film, and the wonderful dreamy old rock'n'roll songs on sound track - the Shirelles, the Ronettes - already sound like signals of a bygone time. Clips from movies and manifestations of cal painting become continuous with the "real" life of the film, setting its tone and its color and creating a lively interplay.

Where Did Our Love Go? feels like both a valentine and a farewell to a generation, as well as being simply a portrait which is tender, distant, accurate, somewhat high, and sad. In one brief and emblematic image near the end, a group of kids huddles in a semi-circle on a sofa, neither really touching nor completely apart, and you can feel all the ambiguity and uncertain liveliness of the teenyboppers in the street - the generation which no one, probably, understands but which Sonbert, in a series of tender and moving moments, has revealed to us. I could watch this film a hundred times; it made me feel older than I am, but it also opened my eyes and my heart."

Nowhere is this anti-formal form and its emotional thrust more apparent than in The Bad and the Beautiful (1967) which is not included on tonight's program. Here the film-maker visits a number of married and unmarried couples; to each he devotes one reel of color film, about four minutes, and at the end of each he allocates one shot to the girl to film the boy and vice versa. Again it takes an extension of the imagination to see this as a film about the couples, the presence of a film-making eye so predominates.

TUXEDO THEATRE (1969) is Sonbert's newest and best work. He has abandoned the scores of rock music that accompanied all the earlier films; and he has clearly placed the perspective in the first person singular. This film is edited, obviously so. Yet it preserves in tone and developement the sense of a diary. The montage creates parallels and illusions (such as the television butterfly cut into the line of sight of the young man looking up in the park) and above all, radical displacements. For instance, the film-maker approaches an airplane, up the gangplank, there's a take off (logically of a different craft), a shot from inside of the flying wing, a landing, and we are in a southern climate, perhaps California. Then suddenly after a few shots we are in a Moorish market, or overlooking a skyline of minarets. So the Tuxedo Theatre evolves a juxtaposition of traditional cinematic logic and ellipsis.

-- P. Adams Sitney