STRUCTURAL AWARENESS: THREE FILMS

by

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ABSTRACT

The films discussed in the following pages are concerned with the theory and aesthetics of film-making. They serve as visual analytical essays embodying my personal attitudes and my development in the field of film production. Throughout the years of study my major concern has been the problem of commercial formula versus experimentation of film sensibilities in regards to the audience/artist relationship. For myself, I have attempted to define those elements inherent in the structure of the celluloid image. I have been interested more in the medium than the message.

The method of approach in this paper has been to take each film and to place it into three categories: PRE-IMAGE, the motivating force(s) behind each film; second, IMAGE, the actual structure of the film; and third: POST-IMAGE, my reaction to the completed product in relation to the original concept. This approach was chosen in the hope of giving insight into the personal motivations, attitudes and changes that occur within an artist and his developing work.
Film revolves around a large body of argumentative aesthetics. I have tried only to clarify my own aesthetics. I would say that my work has moved from alienation concepts to personal involvement concepts. When I speak of alienation, I refer not only to the audience, but also of alienation from myself, that is, self-criticism during actual production.

What I have discovered (for myself) is that it is the actual process of film-making which is most fulfilling and that the final product only serves to develop new problems for an artist. What becomes important is that the audience must realise the final film is not all inclusive in definition. A finished film serves as a record not only to the audience but also to its creator as to the changing social attitudes of all concerned.

Because of time involved in actual production, it is impossible to presuppose the sensibilities of an audience. Film does not always reflect a viewer's tastes. At best it tries to gauge and edify those tastes. Usually, commercial cinema tries merely to condition tastes. This type of attitude presumes far too much and is false. Film should serve the public, not vice-versa.
Although visually, the films discussed herein are quite different, they do share common thematics. The most common of these is that of conceptual structure, the defining of structure and the relation of medium to the audience. This relationship is one of individuality not mass. Participation is a mutual arrangement and therefore an understanding of equality and mutual respect is absolutely necessary in order that we can learn from the experience. Art, and in this case film, is fundamentally an experience, and experience develops awareness. If an experience is to be enlightening it must be honest in scope and defined within the terms of the artist and within the terms of the audience. It is to this end that I have continued making films, in the hope of teaching myself both the awareness of experience and the experience of awareness.
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INTRODUCTION

The three films discussed in the following pages represent a body of work spread across a three-year period. The bulk of the work, the films themselves, in both time and money encompasses many hours of devoted care and preparation resulting in the final products. It is understood that the material (the films) is available on a loan basis upon request to the author.
The source for BACKBONE came mainly from my reaction to the book, "The Painted Bird", by Jerry Kosinski, a book concerned with the life of an orphan boy in Europe during the war. The book stunned me, the horrors described really went beyond comprehension.

At the same time I was deciding how involved with film I wanted to become. As a result the film is a brutal attack upon visual sensibilities. It never lets up for a moment. It literally destroys the concept of participatory cinema on an audience level.

I was extremely interested in the concept of time and how visually one could play and manipulate time with images. I wanted to explore the meaning of time and especially the awareness of time and the degree of change possible between given points in time, in relation to an audience and its self-awareness both as audience and individuals.
WILLOW

WILLOW came about at a time when I was concerned with the problems of actual process in film. I became interested in the idea of construction, the taking of a singular image and working slowly through its development, so that an audience might participate not only in the event of the film, but also the event of the film process. The meaning became the process itself. It attempted to discuss the problems of perception by making the process of perceiving much more tangible to both the eye and the brain.
WIND FROM THE WEST

The basis for WIND FROM THE WEST, comes from three sources: one, a concern with the fundamental concept of a photographic album; two, a concern with the native indians of British Columbia, particularly the older members; and three, reaction to a film entitled WIND FROM THE EAST, by Jean Luc Godard, a work concerned with the cultural evolution of the western myth as opposed to eastern spiritualism.

In the first case I became interested in the essential idea lying behind photographic albums, records of the past containing the thoughts and attitudes that the owners adhered to at a given period in time. An album reflects a past state of mind and of being. There is a tremendous interest in recording the past so that it is not lost, at least not conceptually, more an obsession with information than a concern with what is passing.

Time exists as a linear arrangement no matter what reality one speaks of, past, present or future. It is this aspect of film that fascinated me, the continuity of time as opposed to the continuity of conceptual art. Images of the past allow one to reflect upon changes both within oneself and one's environment. If a person is fortunate enough and capable enough he can incorporate the past as a part of the learning process.
Change and its meaning, its movement is what I was concerned with. Change is both a state of mind and being. My memories of working with the native Indians had taught me the incredible speed with which change takes place. I became polarised by the effects of modern man upon a breed of people living in the past. The loss of identity had never been so apparent to me before this. The images of the film reflect my depression -- the inability of a people to cope with situations constructed and manipulated by modern man, manipulated to such an extent that many are willing to surrender not wishing to adapt to new structures imposed by outside culture, at the same time losing sight of their own cultural awareness -- again the problem of the past and living for objectives that no longer exist.

This led me to considering the film WIND FROM THE EAST, which is very much concerned with the idea of ideological cultural clashes and the development of extremes (archetypes) within dichotomy. Taken a step further the film also discussed film itself as a concept and its responsibility not just to modern man but much more importantly to historical man.
These influences, although never fully realised, led to WIND FROM THE WEST, a film that reflects the attitudes, morality and responsibilities of a west coast artist in terms of his own environment. The film is a personal search, a quest, trying to discover the philosophical effects of change.
Structurally, BACKBONE is divided into three sections. The first section is a series of shots consisting of a soldier at the instant of death, a statue of Mary, a documented burial sequence in loop, a group of decaying buildings, tombstones, some farm animals and a child.

The second section and the longest is a two image loop, first of a soldier raising his arm and screaming and the second, the expulsion of a shell casing from an enormous anti-aircraft gun. Both segments are only half a second in length but are repeated over and over again while the sounds (a musical crescendo half a second in length and a gun explosion half a second in length) slowly change position throughout the loop until the sound of the gun corresponds with the man's open mouth.

The third section is the image of victorious troops walking down the streets of Milan. A woman also stands in the streets, turns and approaches the soldiers with outstretched arms. The frame freezes (becomes still) and she remains standing in shadow reaching out towards a soldier also standing in shadow. The freeze holds for a minute, then breaks and the film fades out.
All the footage, except for a few scenes in the beginning, was taken from documented war footage. It was all optically reprinted for the best possible reproduction.
WILLOW

The image that formed the basis for WILLOW came from a graphic drawing of an old town in New Brunswick, at the turn of the century. The picture consisted of a long view of the town, dotted with old buildings backed by a harbour. Using the original graphic a xerox copy was made of it. Then, I proceeded to xerox the first copy and continued to xerox each successive copy to as far as about forty generations. The optics of the xerox machinery seemed to cause the image to break down into a series of vertical lines, eventually becoming unrecognisable. I then filmed the process in reverse and connected the images by a series of dissolves, so that seemingly, over a long period of time, very little change took place, although over the course of the film the image completely manifested. The sound track consisted of a summer breeze.
The film consists of a series of still images connected throughout by dissolves. All the material, in colour, was taken from personal slides enlarged and projected onto a textured backscreen and rephotographed to give the texture of paintings. The soundtrack consisted simply of the sounds of a summer afternoon. The film kept returning to certain focal images, the most common being that of an old woman, contrasted against the images of a very old Indian village in a state of decay, horses, and old plows. In the final shots of the film an old woman begins a metamorphosis - becoming a projection beam, as the sound of a jet screams overhead. The projection beam retreats from the screen to darkness. The final image passes across the screen and disappears: it is of the old town with some Indian children playing in the street. The psychological implications of aging, death and birth are obvious.
Image bombardment became fascinating. How long could an audience stand a repeated image and through what levels of consciousness, rejection or otherwise, would they go? The meaning of image became all important in itself. The film became extremely definitive, completely exploratory. A message did not really exist -- a message was not important. More important was, does an audience really look for a message and if so why? If not, what do they look for? Would they accept a purely emotional outburst? A reaction to something they did not know existed? Would they allow an artist to express his feelings, not his conclusions? Simply his sensibilities? Would they participate in those feelings or would they be angered?

All these questions revolved in my mind. I had and still have no idea about any conclusion I might have been trying to reach. It is a kind of stream of consciousness film with no beginning and no end. Somewhere between the images are connections, but they are well hidden under the guise of emotional outburst. "I had to do something for myself" was the attitude. Structure and its meaning became self-evident. Revulsion to formula was obvious. The structure of formula versus the formula of structure
became the main and connecting theme throughout. I was questioning attitudes and pre-conceived philosophies of cinema as it existed. More than anything else I was forming definitions of cinema for myself.
WILLOW

WILLOW I found an interesting film in purely structural terms. It is successful as a definition of process both in filmic terms and image terms. One of the secondary effects apparent in the film is the creation of the machine process. The nature of technological process is speed. In WILLOW, this process has been retarded, making it possible to be visually and mentally conscious of machine "thinking". Taken a step further the film separated and differentiated between structural man and aesthetic man.
WIND FROM THE WEST

The film was an attempt to record the effects of change and resigned acceptance to change that can exist. The problem with the film is that it becomes overly involved with fatalism and does not admit that a spirit still exists even though change is taking place. The film is foreboding, melodramatic and conclusive, however it essentially attempted to be honest in expression with relation to how and why it was made.

Again, time had a strong influence. My attitudes concerning the Indians' plight have changed and I find myself much more positive concerning their spirit. I think that the film was an attempt to rejuvenate that spirit at least for myself. The film is confusing because it leaves too many questions unanswered. Its content is too easy to absorb.

In relation to the original objectives, however, the film is reasonably successful. Again, it is a film concerned with structure and its meaning, trying to find the proper structure to express the drives to construct. What is interesting about time is the patterns that exist within
it. It is the problem of discovering and understanding these patterns that is important. Patterns can serve as a basis for reflective thought. And that is how both audience and artist can learn and realise social responsibility.
FILMOGRAPHY

1. BACKBONE
   10 minutes/black and white/sound/1972.

2. WILLOW
   10 minutes/black and white/sound/1972-73.

3. WIND FROM THE WEST