



***Efpsychi* (1983, 1997)**

THIS AND SUBSEQUENT IMAGES FROM *EFPSYCHI* ARE FRAME BLOW-UPS.

© ROBERT BEAVERS

# BETWEEN THE PLACE AND THE ACT: EFFPSYCH

In an interview in *Time* magazine on the occasion of the re-release of *Star Wars*, George Lucas questions the ultimate value of his own commercial success, asserting the need to return to a more “controlled,” formal idea of cinema “on the fringes . . . of what is aesthetically acceptable.” He declares, “I like pushing the language of film to see where the limits are.” The aspiration expressed here is, of course, familiar, even if its source seems incongruous: to create something of value that transcends the “merely” popular or profitable, to contribute to an ongoing creative dialogue on the defining terms and experiences of the medium. The language employed by Lucas constitutes a sort of credo for the contemporary film *artist*, and it performs roughly the same self-validating function for a Hollywood director as it would for an experimental filmmaker. Ironically, if *Star Wars* warrants any aesthetic appreciation, it is probably at the level of craft, the technical skill with which specific images were fabricated, and it is just this realm of activity that Lucas takes for granted, if not disparages altogether. Arguably, despite the presence of endless documentary spinoffs on the making of this or that industrial epic – enough books, tv specials, and related projects to keep *Titanic* afloat in perpetuity – it appears as if only those artists working outside the mainstream, “on the fringes,” are capable of understanding and imaginatively engaging the complex relations between the *artisanal* and the aesthetically integral.

Within the avant-garde tradition, the celebration of the artisanal begins with Stan Brakhage, most eloquently in *A Motion Picture Giving and Taking Book* (1966). For Brakhage, the consideration of material limits and the unsounded possibilities for the individual maker to counter corporately-imposed

uses of filmstrip, light ring, focal setting, and so on, have been central to his extensive exploration of filmic subjectivity. There are, however,

## PAUL ARTHUR

other approaches, other ways of framing the reciprocity among cinematic tools, objects, and events in the phenomenal world, and image construction. Without in any way suggesting a necessary divergence in the aims or the internal figurations of craft and artistic invention, a concern with process can draw attention to aspects of the local and historical, as opposed to the timeless and universal. In this sense, to address directly or, more typically, to allegorize through images and patterns of filmic organization the transformation of prosaic materials into aesthetic products is to prompt insight into how those materials are situated in

cultural, economic, time-bound, and even geographical contexts. Moreover, for a filmmaker to adopt metaphorically the mantle of craftsperson is to acknowledge a sense of continuity with the past, not just technical innovations or moments in film history but broader paradigms of “artifice” and industrial labor (as distinct from “vision”) inscribed in Western aesthetics.

No one in contemporary cinema has more consistently or productively addressed the poetics of craft than Robert Beavers. As P. Adams Sitney commented twenty years ago in the revised edition of *Visionary Film* (1979), “Beavers is engaged, and would engage us, in the ‘work’ of film-making and film-viewing; the acts of mind that his films describe have been represented through meticulous labor within a venerable tradition, and the viewer must be prepared to perform an analogous creative act when ‘entering’ the film.” In several recent short films, especially the ravishing *Efpsychi* (shot in the Eighties and completed in 1997), Beavers creates remarkably intricate, demanding, and original conceits for the operation of skilled, site-specific labor in the continuum of recording, editing, and reception. In doing so, he implicates a set of cinematic tools – composition, camera movement, acting – in spectral dramas of social-mercantile exchange taking place in locations which function not as neutral or abstract containers of meaning but which actively shape the work’s themes along with its conditions of production. Part of a

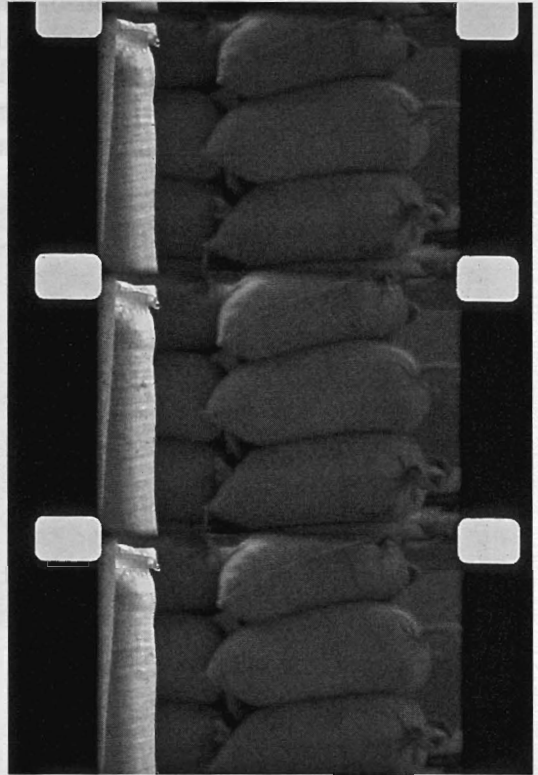


cycle of nine films, five of which were shot in Greece, the other four in Italy, *Efpsychi* is set in one of the oldest quarters of Athens, an area where every street is named for a Greek playwright, and history, in various guises, haunts the facades and

narrow passageways of surrounding buildings. A meditation on artisanal labor, it is anchored by the rhythms and visual idioms of the city symphony or, given its compact structure, city "fugue."

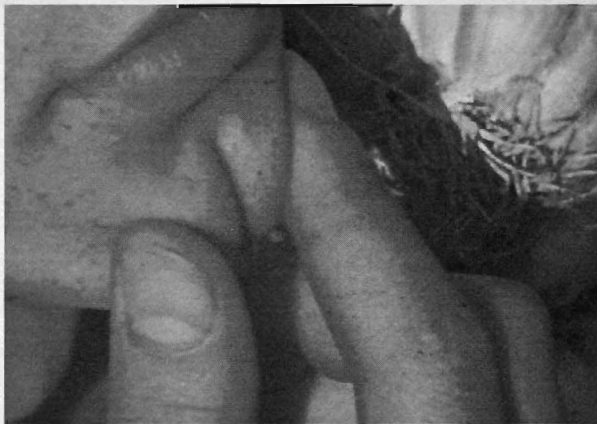
As with many other filmmakers ensconced within the avant-garde tradition, a prominent theme in Beavers' career is the nature of cinema as image, apparatus, and syntax. Like others of his generational cohort, Beavers has recruited a wide range of cultural texts and material artifacts – including books (e.g., *Ruskin*, 1974, 1997), paintings (e.g., *The Painting*, 1972), and architecture (a motif in a number of films) – whose visual-audio presentation either implicitly or explicitly grounds analogies with cinematic process. Images drawn from nature also play a role in the formation of reflexive tropes, although less frequently and with a different focus than in, for instance, Brakhage's oeuvre. In *Ruskin*, close shots (or sounds) of a book being ruffled, closed, smacked onto a surface and otherwise manipulated are rhymed with the movements, shapes, or sounds of falling snow, leaves, wind, lapping water, the shadows of buildings. Intense scrutiny of the book as object simultaneously generates a comparison between a cascade of pages and the successive layering of shots.

At first glance, this description recalls strategies employed in Structural Film of the 1970s. There are, however, important distinctions between Beavers' method and that of, say, Sharits or Gehr. In *S:TREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:S:ECTION: S:S:ECTIONED* (1971), water currents are analogized with the filmstrip passing through the projector, yet the location or "context" of the photographed stream is largely irrelevant; the same is true for the institutional corridor in *Serene Velocity* (1970) made to conceptually mirror a camera lens. In these films, images which spark metaphoric associations to properties of cinema are stripped of any local or historical significance in order to secure the equation of process/representation. Similarly, although the source of vision is crucial to the combinatory impulse in *Dog Star Man* (1964), when Brakhage compares tree chopping to film editing, the species of tree, its geographic location, or the role of logging in the settling of Colorado are scarcely at issue. This is not the



case with Beavers, for whom images taken from the external world, regardless of their potential power as cinematic ciphers, register as inseparable from their enveloping circumstances; they are fragments of a teeming reality, not just reified procedures or states of consciousness.

A second distinction, evident in *Efpsychi* and *Amor* (1980), entails specific objects and human activities enlisted by Beavers as technical corollaries. In the former, the agile handiwork of



binding and trimming small brooms, like the rolling of paper tubes for candle-making, evokes a repetitive labor-intensive domain of shaping fragmentary images into coherent patterns. In *Amor*, the hand-tailoring of a man's suit, shown at various stages of completion in isolated closeups – basting pieces of cloth, snipping thread, applying paper cutouts – suggests the process by which editing creates a “fabric” of harmonious elements. In both cases, Beavers initially suspends recognition of the end-product in order to concentrate attention on the elegance and precision of the tasks being performed. Thus, our accelerating ability to grasp the materiality of that which is fabricated is matched by a gradual assimilation of overarching filmic rhythms and linkages. It is significant that ostensibly mundane crafts, the residues of venerable and pointedly European traditions of artisanal manufacture, are ele-

vated by insertion into a framework of aesthetic practice, while, conversely, cinematic techniques are reattached to a wider ambit of utilitarian labor. To be sure, this analysis is far from complete; it traces but a single vector of correspondence while ignoring the further imbrication of manual labor in architectural construction, in the performance of scripted gestures, and in hints of mythological allusion (e.g. shots in *Amor* of a scissors cutting a length of cord).

*Efpsychi* begins, as it were, on an empty stage with Beavers unfolding a matrix of images and sounds, a series of latent motifs connected as yet only by a sense of shared space: early morning streets and facades, signs, a man walking, a pair of eyebrows, sounds of a motorcycle, of midday commercial bustle, the word “teleftea” (“the last one”). In a manner similar to the opening of Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera*, Beavers describes the varied coordinates of his urban location in relative stasis before developing and intensifying connections among them through visual rhyming and contrast, accelerating tempo, and sound/image displacements. Although *Efpsychi* does not strictly adhere to a diurnal progression, as in the classical city symphony, images and sounds of heightened workday activities, such as crowd noise and scattered bits of hectic street life, become more prominent as the film continues. Three basic categories or polarities of material are apparent: ambient sights and sounds of the physical setting, mostly exteriors but also repeated shots of a narrow cafe; travails of broom- and candle-making; and extremely close views of a young male actor’s face doing exercises, such as arching his eyebrows, tensing his neck muscles, stretching his mouth into circular shapes. Due in part to the fact that all these sound/image elements are meticulous-



ly, indeed gorgeously, lit, composed, and edited – save for a few instances of street bustle which have a slightly rougher, “documentary” quality – even the actor’s movements and speech (“teleftea”) seem consonant with the wider spatial field. Moreover, since the vast majority of shots and sounds are at once quite brief, asynchronous, and strongly synecdochic, their ability to mesh with adjacent elements is greatly enhanced. At times, then, it is possible to infer an identity between actor and broom-maker or conflate a building exterior with a specific commercial function.

If the gestures of the actor are correlated with the dexterity of the artisan, so, too, are the architectural details of neighborhood buildings meshed with the architecture of the human face, and in turn with perceived cinematic structures. For

instance, consecutive tilt shots of a window and the actor's eye generate a rhyme between the two orifices. Yet the simple comparison also engenders a palpable contrast between the ancient, decaying "face" of the building and the actor's flawless skin and ripe mouth, indicative of youthful energy. Further, each shot, as well as their accompanying disjunct sounds, creates the impression of a single tile contributing to a larger mosaic landscape. In addition to direct metaphoric connections formed by montage, there are also implicit bonds occurring across an interval of several shots. In the context of exploring the actor's features, a street sign with the Greek letters "omicron-delta-omicron" suggests a configuration of two eyes and a nose. Color motifs, especially the use of red, can summon a comparison between a mouth and a piece of wall poster shown in a later sequence. The sound of footsteps on a stone sidewalk can seem to engender a response in the actor's arched eyebrows.

Besides providing a densely articulated picture of an urban scene, Beavers infuses the exchange among disparate elements with an undertow of muted drama. It is as if the actor's face, as hub and relay for perceptual-emotive anticipation, partakes of a shadow mystery play in which isolated representations of artisanal labor acquire an affective weight that prods the viewer's desire for discursive, if not narrative, coherence. Mechanisms of abstract, formal affinity serve to mask, as they progressively limn, the terms of a unifying principle going beyond internal metaphor to engage with historicity, the temporal course of change within continuity. In this light, the reciprocal performances of craft manufacture and acting are displayed as vestiges of an earlier cultural moment that is not so much "redeemed" by the modern technology of film as graciously recalibrated via the medium's penchant for juxtaposition. As embodied in the textures and rhythms of *Efpsychi*, the meeting of cinema with traditional craft equally bypasses romanticized myths of a Fall, the Machine in the Garden, in order to reconcile old and new.

Without considerably more study of the film, and of Beavers' work in general, it is impossible for me to render the kind of nuanced, architectonic analysis that *Efpsychi* deserves. It must suffice here, by way of closing, to speculate on the double-edged meaning of "teleftea," the single word spoken at intervals throughout the film, presumably by the actor. Judging from the intonation, it is delivered not as a question but as a statement or, perhaps more forcefully, a directive addressed to the viewer. Referring at once forward and backward in time, it cues us to remember "the last one," a prior instance of similar image or sound or their separate or mutual collisions. Alternatively, it

announces that the present moment of seeing and hearing is the "final" one, after which a particular motif or pattern of development will cease, giving way either to something else or to a stoppage of movement, an ending. In its fullest context, "telefta" constitutes a vibrant encapsulation of History as labyrinthine design. It is difficult to imagine a more appropriate stage for this idea than the heart of Athens.

## **BERKS FILMMAKERS, INC**



**P.O. BOX 6160  
READING, PA 19610  
610.987.3129**

**CONTINUOUSLY SCREENING IN-PERSON AND  
RENTAL SHOWS OF EXPERIMENTAL  
FILM AND VIDEO SINCE 1975**

**JERRY ORR  
ADMISTRATIVE DIRECTOR**

**GARY ADLESTEIN  
PROGRAM DIRECTOR**