

movie JOURNAL



by Jonas Mekas

For more than two years now I've been admiring and enjoying the works of Ernie Gehr and Robert Beavers. It seems to me that they are among the few truly original film-makers that the art of cinema has gained recently. But they are also among the least known or the least appreciated. The main reason for this, of course, is that their work is not seen. The showcases of the independently made films in New York are either too conservative in their tastes, or financially set up in such a way that some of the

film-makers do not want their films screened.

For instance, the Whitney Museum will screen a film 25 times (in their weekly series) and will pay the film-maker \$400. Since this price is often much less than the cost of the print which is being screened, the film-maker doesn't want to risk eventually losing money on the show, publicity or no publicity. Still, the Whitney Museum is at least making an attempt to pay the film-maker. Many other museums and institutions pay nothing. And the film-makers, in recent years, have been banding together and insisting on being paid for their work.

Another reason why these films are not known is that there are few repeated screenings of avant-garde films these days (as compared with four years ago), so that one doesn't have a chance of re-seeing them and gaining perspective. Anthology Archives, of course, recycle all their films every six or seven weeks—but I am talking about new works, not "classics."

Reason three: some of the new works of Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, Ken Jacobs, Robert Beavers, Paul Sharits, and others, escape any conventional scrutiny. To discuss these works one needs a new critical vocabulary, a new key, which I myself haven't managed to find yet. No writing can really indicate what these films are like. Still, one begins to see more and more attempts to understand these films and write about them intelligently—particularly, I have to bring to your attention the writings on cinema published in Art Forum magazine.

The case of Robert Beavers has been further complicated by his own choice, by not joining other avant-garde film-makers, by not allowing the film-makers' cooperatives to distribute his films. And

since he has been living and working most of the last three years in Europe, his work is practically not available to the viewer. For that I can blame nobody but Beavers himself. And it has to be regretted, because Robert Beavers is one of the original voices in cinema today.

I recently saw Beavers's most recent film, "From the Notebook of . . ." his 10th to date. The film (about 60 minutes long) is in the form of a notebook with references to Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks and with references to itself—to the film medium. It is a self-referential film, an inquiry into the reality of itself, into its own language and its own image. The formal key to the film, as in all Beavers's work to date, is the use of a matte, a blocking device by which an area of image is blocked out during the shooting so that another image can be placed in it. The second key is his use of filters. He has perfected the formal manipulation of these two devices to such a degree that they have become the doors, or the keys, to a totally new experience of reality: the reality that is the imagination, the thought movements, the perceptions of Robert Beavers.

There is this thing about art and about language and about perfection, that no matter how urgent your content is, you can reach the uniqueness or the essence of that content only through the utmost precision of your language. Anyway, while some other film-makers may shift from one subject to another, from one technique to another, Beavers (like Michael Snow of the Walking Woman period) has stuck to these very limited, very focused means and techniques with such a concentration of energy that instead of delimiting him, they became a diamond knife which he can use to cut the eye of reality any way he wants, with the utmost ease. With utmost ease and clarity he meditates now on the medium of cinema, on the cinematic image, on the aesthetic transformation of reality, on the language of cinema—the dominant theme of all his films to date.

Ah, cinema is alive! Cinema is not dead! Cinema is babbling a new language.

Some of you will say: Yes, but you are talking again about the abstract, non-narrative film. It is a very special film, for the elite!

mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward that order and form. . . and only those who have won their own discipline in secret and without aid, in a world which offers very little assistance to that end, can be of any use in furthering this advance."

SUGGESTIONS: Film-makers' cable television programs which will be on Teleprompter Cable TV, Channel C (under the direction of Charles Levine), from 8 to 9 p.m. December 15, Barry Gerson; December 22, David Devenski; December 29, Sarkis Simonian; January 5, Jonas Mekas; January 12, Bob Cowan. Videotapes on Public Access Cable TV presented by E. A. T. (Teleprompter C, 9-10 p. m.): December 14, Joan Jonas and Richard Serra; December 21, John Chamberlain; December 28, Bridget Polk, Richard Serra.

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FRI. DEC. 17	6 PM ROBERT BRESSON 8 PM BUNUEL & DALI LUIS BUNUEL 10 PM JEAN COCTEAU	LE JOURNAL D'U UN CHIEN ANDA LAND WIT' LE SANG D'UN
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new language.

Some of you will say: Yes, but you are talking again about the abstract, non-narrative film. It is a very special film, for the elite! What about the people's movies? Yes, I am an elitist! I am for the greatest things man's spirit can produce. That is the politics of art. That's how we'll lift man up from the mediocrity of his politics. You, you can stay with the democratic, people's art, the popular cinema. I prefer the peaks, the high flights, the ecstasies.

Talking about narrative and non-narrative: I have been guilty of overstressing these two extremes. Because, really, what I mean, that's what they are: two extremes. But some of the greatest modern cinema has happened where the narrative and non-narrative merged, like Brakhage's "Dog Star Man," like Markopoulos's "Twice a Man," like Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures." The other day I was throwing out some old papers from my files, and I came upon this quotation from T. S. Eliot (from his essay "Ulysses, Order and Myth"): "I am not begging the question in calling 'Ulysses' a 'novel'; and if you call it an epic it will not matter. If it is not a novel, that is simply because the novel is a form which will no longer serve, it is because the novel, instead of being a form, was simply the expression of an age which had not sufficiently lost all form to feel the need of something stricter. . . . Instead of narrative method, we may now use the