

Experimental films

Local curtains usually down

Graham Weinbren

There are experimental filmmakers in Los Angeles, although it is hard to hear them above the racket made by the studios. There is a small but growing community of Southern California artists whose medium is film, and a distinctive style of independent cinema is emerging in this area.

L.A. filmmakers frequently receive national recognition and are screened internationally (Check Strand won the major prize at the Ann Arbor film festival this year, Pat O'Neill won it last year and the year before). However, few residents of L.A. know of the existence of the local non-commercial filmmakers.

FILMEX, in its highly publicized "Masters of the American Independent Film" program, managed to omit any film made around here, even though American independent film has its roots here. The work of Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger and others provided the inspiration for the movement which grew into the New New American Cinema. FILMEX included an Austrian (Peter Kubelka, who is overrated to my eye) in its program of American masters, but the only film by a Southern California artist shown (Kenneth Anger) was made in Europe.

A paranoid mind would find other indications of a plot to destroy local non-feature film production. One sign is the ap-

parent programming policy of the Theatre Vanguard. The Vanguard (on Melrose Avenue in West Hollywood) has been screening independent films every Tuesday for about three years, and in the last twelve months it has concentrated almost exclusively on filmmakers with an East Coast reputation. (Even the name of the series "Cineprobe" is borrowed from the New York Museum of Modern Art). In April, the Vanguard has two evenings of work by New York heavies — Ken Jacobs on April 20th; Michael

Graham Weinbren is an experimental film buff who hails from England.

Chasing the Chief

The plot thins

Karen Stabiner

"All the President's Men" is really a chase film, although this time the bad guy wears a sweaty upper lip and the good guys pursue him with, of all things, the printed word. Except this time the good guys are not merely two unknown Washington Post reporters — they're Dustin Hoffman as reporter Carl Bernstein and Robert Redford as his cohort Bob Woodward.

Combine their box office draw with that cleaner-than-thou feeling you always get talking about Watergate, and you've got an assuredly popular film about how two unknowns from the Post's lower echelons tracked and bagged a president.

If you take the film at face value, as a chronicle of how the boys got at the truth, it's a gratifying experience: people attending the press screening applauded at the end, at that final dramatic upsurge of righteous triumph. The story is one long crescendo which is all the more involving because it is familiar to us, because we know that justice will have its day. We can vicariously enjoy the small setbacks, the disappointments and mistakes, because we are secure in our knowledge that Woodstein will be rewarded in the end.

The presence of Hoffman and Redford — backed up by Jason Robards, Martin Balsam, and Jack Warden — will draw yet another segment of the filmgoing public into the theatre, the star-gazers who would pay \$3.50 to see them in anything. On the face of it, maybe that's a good thing, because it expands the number of people who will be reminded, once again, of the grim human fortress which surrounded Nixon and executed his paranoid fantasies.

But beyond the most superficial attributes of the film — that it moves quickly and thoroughly through a series of exciting events, and that it reminds us of the formidable gap between the people who are being represented and the representatives themselves — looms a question of mammoth proportions: what were the people who made "All the President's Men" actually trying to achieve? When you consider it carefully, there seems to have been a lot of attention paid to self-congratulation, and very little devotion to a more considered definition of the project.

The very nature of the concept is confusing. "All the President's Men" can hardly be called a documentary: you've got big-name actors playing the roles, and director Alan Pakula working from William Goldman's adaptation of the original book. In fact, given that all the information in the book could never be wedged into a film, the people involved in this project were really fashioning their own story with every decision on whether to omit or include material.

But "All the President's Men" does not stand up as a fictionalized account, either. Once the decision is made to include or exclude material, the question becomes, which way do you go? What are you using your information to say? Why not develop material that reflects a larger context for the events, or at least define a perspective?

It appears that everyone chose, consistently, action over attitude: the result is that, while the film tells us a great deal about what happened, it short-changes us on the explanations of why things happened, or on how people related to what they were doing. In fact, the material being presented is almost dry, embellished by the illusory substance of the actors involved rather than by a well-developed contextual foundation. Costa-Favras, in "Z" and "Special Section," also addresses contemporary issues, but always with an eye for action and reaction, for the minute complexities of an issue. Goldman opts for a more linear approach. It's an ironic homage to that bastion of newspaper respectability — objectivity.

The problem is that Pakula never leads his actors beyond the shallowest of interpretations. He seems to believe that dressing Redford up in Woodwardian corduroys and splashing coffee stains on Hoffman's shirt ends his responsibility to character development. Redford, never one for extracting a deeper sense of character (except in "The Candidate") goes along with this comic-strip mentality.

Hoffman tries to break from the severe attention to storytelling that keeps "All the President's Men" rolling along, but it's a futile fight. He's reduced to doing Bernstein impersonations because nobody's

given him the time or space to do anything but play reporter.

It won't matter much. As far as contemporary political adventure goes, "All the President's Men" succeeds in being a slick, engrossing, fast-moving film, one that will probably pick you up and carry you right along to that oh-so-satisfying ending.

But it's a cheap thrill. The sure-fire entertainment has been extracted from Woodward and Bernstein's book and presented in exciting fashion; the people involved have been lost. The style of the film is grand; the scope, confusingly enough, is pretty small.

Karen Stabiner is a film critic formerly with the Santa Barbara News and Review.

CROSSROADS, an experimental film by Bruce Conner at HAYMARKET.

Snow on April 27th; one evening with a New York middleweight (Larry Gotheim, who will be present to screen and discuss his film on April 6th); and the screening of a feature by an A.F.I. fellow, David Morris and Victoria Wozniak's "Loose Ends", April 13th.

Don't misunderstand me — I like New York. I like New York's so-called "structural" films, and I would be the first to complain about not being able to see them. The problem is that if local filmmakers have to go out of town to have their work shown, if local filmmakers do not receive local recognition, with public screenings, discussions and reviews of their work, they will cease to be local filmmakers.

Things are changing, though. Two new screening series have been initiated recently. The Pasadena Film Forum shows films once a week at the Neighborhood Church on North Orange Grove, and the Independent Film Oasis operates once every two weeks at the Haymarket in downtown L.A. (715 S. Parkview; 387-0432).

The Pasadena Film Forum has been featuring underground classics (including Anger's

"Scorpio Rising", Bailey's "All the Life", and Kuchar's "Hold While I'm Naked"). The atmosphere is pleasantly informal, the seats are comfortable, the projection system is not the best. The Film Forum also has open screenings, and is very responsive to audience requests. Call 358-6255 for complete schedule.

The Independent Film Oasis is a collective of filmmakers, critics, historians and teachers. The organization was formed solely for the purpose of screening recent and historic works of independent cinema, with a particular focus on the West Coast. On April 8th a program of new West Coast works is scheduled including two films by artist Bruce Conner, films by Los Angeles filmmakers Tim Sheperd and David Wilson, and a film by David Rimmer who lives in Vancouver. All of these films have their Los Angeles premieres at this time, and two new world premieres. On April 22nd, Oasis presents a program of independent films by women, including work by pioneer Mary Menken and by Coleen Fitzgibbon, who won a major prize at the Belgian Independent Film Festival at Knokke-Heist.

Politics and Art Sacramento draws the lines

Continued from Page 15

(which Brown abolished) were about to be cut off, the Commission discovered that it could give \$31,000 in last-minute grants. Three new Brown appointees were on the lame-duck Commission — poet Gary Snyder of Nevada City, painter Suzanne Jackson of Los Angeles, and San Anselmo's William Mathieu, director of the Sufi Choir (an organization Brown personally patronizes). According to Dan Walters' article in the Sacramento Union, this is what happened:

"In a decision largely influenced by the Brown appointees, the commission bypassed regular application channels and appointed a four-member panel — the three Brown appointees plus actor Brock Peters, who was appointed last fall by Reagan — to select four projects they considered worthy."

"Upon the recommendation of the four, grants were awarded to the Planet/Drum Foundation for an anthology of writing about Northern California, to the Watts Prophets for recordings of original poetry and music, to radio station KPFA for an anthology of public music in California and to the Fillmore/Fell Group Home for art materials for the home's young girl residents."

"The four projects, virtually everyone connected with them agrees, were the pet projects of the four members who chose them." (Emphasis mine.)

One incident, in retrospect, seems to catch perfectly the worst tendencies of those who favor an arts program run by experts. Martin Bernheimer, the witty and learned music editor of the Los

Angeles Times, wrote mocking of the Gregorio legislation that was like giving starving children the money to buy their own food — great for the candy business, lousy for nourishment.

That is a stupefying remark to the adult citizens of California children who must be told what is good for them and forced to eat their vegetables? Bernheimer words reek with elitism and contempt for the public. In people's right to make their own choices whether those choices are "right" or "wrong." They are paternalistic and potentially dictatorial. (Even if many of our adults are naive about the arts, tell them what's good for them is objectionable and impractical approach to their education.)

Brown's actions to date tend to confirm, terribly, the Joint Com-

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Theater

The Creeper

Ben
Pleasants

Small theater is flourishing

The Creeper

Pauline Macaulay
produced by Hilda Hoffe
scripted by Jane Franklin
costume & lighting by Robert Zentis
production Paul Bis
Edward Kimberly... Iam Abercrombie
James... Harvey Vernon
Maurice... Chris Winfield
Michel... Thao Penghis
an in Raincoat... Laurie Main

Beverly Hills Playhouse
18 Robertson Boulevard
Beverly Hills, Calif.

While major theatre productions in this city seem to shamble along, the sure step of a paralytic, the small theatre is flourishing, expanding and evolving; more, it is attracting excellent acting talent.

Take a curious play like Pauline Macaulay's "The Creeper," a tightly abstracted mystery evolving around an eccentric British gentleman who hires male companions to fill his boring hours. The play is as comforting as a good novel by Agatha Christie, just right, snuggly up with on a windy April night (and the seats are comfortable). The current production at the Beverly Hills Playhouse is impressive, well acted, well staged and perhaps one of the best lit shows I have ever seen.

Ian Abercrombie, a little stiff at first, works his way into the role of Edward Kimberly with grace and elegance; one senses the chilled English gentleman in his last

phase before obsolescence sets in. He is haughty, arrogant, and perhaps wistful. Harvey Veron as Holmes is properly stiff and starched as the manservant, but we feel a trace of finality (the end of the road) in him too. The most difficult role is that of Maurice, played winningly by Chris Winfield (no pun intended). The character of Maurice deepens from that of a naïf to that of a... but that would give it away. Needless to say, it deepens and darkens at the same time and Winfield is skilled in expanding and widening the scope of the character as the play unfolds. Not nearly as skillful is Thao Penghis, who plays the part of a former male companion. Penghis seems to be spraying his speeches out in rapid bursts so as to rid them from his mind. The flaw is not fatal but it does hurt the play. Laurie Main is perfectly hilarious as the man in the raincoat, a police inspector whose demeanor is properly menacing, suspicious and, in a British way, Columbo-like.

In sum this is an enjoyable way to spend an evening: the theatre is inviting; the acting and the coffee are good; and the staging and the theatre itself are delightful fun. One must give credit to director Jane Franklin for a full and pleasing evening.

Poetry

Sartan's poems

Ben Pleasants

Forty years of excellence

Collected Poems, by May Sartan (Norton; \$10.00)

The reader will find in the poems of May Sartan an exactness of language and rhyme equalled only in recent times by Auden and Galway Kinnell. Rarely forced — though she plays with the net up as Frost has said of verse writers — the student of modern poetry will find her immensely readable. Spare in wordage, never ornate, Sartan does not intellectualize, nor has she entered the arena of the avant garde; but instead exhibits finished portraiture and landscapes in an accomplished and

classic manner. The experiments (all wonderful) of Berryman, O'Hara, Clark, Cummings and others excite, enrage and challenge — Sartan's poems engage.

"Here are the peaceful days we never knew.

Here are the leaves. Here are the silent flowers.

And you are reading poems while I sew.

The hours are light. We do not count the hours.

There is no need of words

The lines are strident and tight. There is in all her work a persistent echo of the excellence of Eliot and Yeats as though she had held them up to emulate, not imitate. Never a copyist, her art is of a high order, to be taken up, put down and taken up again by the reader who loves the flow of language and ideas as expressed *sotto voce*, through the heart as well as the head. Yes, this is a fine gathering of more than forty years of work, to be honored as the Greeks did with boughs of laurel. I loved it.

Plekhanov Selected Works

Ben Pleasants

Airing out the mausoleum

Georgi Plekhanov: *Selected Philosophical Works* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, USSR; \$8.60)

There is a character in the film version of Dr. Zhivago, who, chained to the waste bin of the train, proclaims "I am a free man! I am the only free man on this train." In a certain sense, all Russian literature, philosophy and

history for the last 50 years has been about such men. Georgi Plekhanov was one such being.

A Menshevik, and the chief Marxist theoretician in Russia during the epoch of revolution from 1905-1918 (when he died in exile), Plekhanov was despised by the Bolsheviks and yet he died a free man writing what he wished, thinking what he wanted. He continued to work on Hegelian and Marxist theory up until his death, spending much of his last years studying and analyzing aesthetics.

Now, 50 years later, Progress Press of Moscow has issued a mammoth five-volume edition of his collected works in English (only one volume available to date) and it has to make us wonder what is going on in the USSR when an advocate of Menshevism is now being published and translated for the world.

Volume One includes Plekhanov's masterpiece *DEVELOPMENT OF THE MONIST VIEW OF HISTORY*, a complete and ultra-excellent account of the growth of socialism from the time of Babeuf down through Marx and Engels.

Very little is left out of this scholarly account written with a heavy Marxist bent. There are excellent chapters on the Utopians Fourier and St. Simon, a complete account of Hegel and his relevance to Feurbach and Marx, loving descriptions of Marx and Engels and some discussions on whence this all shall go. One has to wonder if Edmund Wilson did not see this volume some years ago; it certainly parallels the central chapters of *TO THE FINLAND STATION*.

Also present is a lengthy account of Marxist theory as opposed to humanist socialism entitled *OUR DIFFERENCES*, which purports to explain the errors of socialism

as opposed to the "correct thinking" of Marxism.

"It is obvious that socialist society is unthinkable without people who work, but it can be said in all probability that there can be no workers under socialism; for a worker presupposes capitalist employers, etc. What Mr. Tikhomirov says boils down in this case to the amazing proposition that the modern workers are at a lower level of development than the workers in a society in which there are no workers at all."

There is an excellent essay on the role Hegel played in developing the dialectics of materialism and some curious notes on Feurbach.

But why the publication of Plekhanov now? Could the Russian intellectuals (such as they are) have grown tired of the rigidity of Leninism and longed to let in some fresh air?

I do know that Lenin is awfully stodgy, very rigid. I sense the man on the waste bin rattling his chains is being heard, though only through memory (he long since perished in some prison camp). Perhaps the Russians at last are turning away from that pale and frozen corpse in the Moscow Museum who led them into a Marxist straightjacket. Anyway, this volume is good reading for the serious student of socialist thought. Hopefully, other volumes will follow.

(Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had a tumultuous historical alliance based on tactical unity. They differed significantly over who should rule and how: workers (Bolsheviks) or petty bourgeoisie and small landowners (Mensheviks). When Trotsky left the Bolsheviks to join the Bolsheviks over differences on how to approach WWI, the Bolsheviks sustained the upper hand and soon led the 1917 revolution).

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