



## SUBVERSIVE MYSTERIES—(II)

by Amos Vogel

**D**iscussing Gary Beydler's *HAND HELD DAY* in my last column, I asserted that this filmmaker, in just two films of less than thirteen minutes, had managed to raise basic ontological questions of cinema.

If *HAND HELD DAY* was his nature piece (Arizona mountaintop and sky), *PASADENA FREEWAY STILLS* is his "city" film. Its *mis-en-scène* and visual composition could not be simpler; its concept and content could not be more profound.

Initially, the screen is empty. In its center, a rectangle is marked off by masking tape. A T-shirted man enters, sits down facing us (his head off-screen), picks up and presses a black-and-white photograph of cars on the Pasadena Freeway into the masked-off area now revealed as part of a pane of glass. The sudden revelation of three levels of reality (background, man before it, the glass nearest us) signifies the first conflict of the film. At the start, we had seen only a single level (the flat visual field); now there is depth and proportion.

After a second or so, the man replaces the photo, in the same space, by another, apparently identical. He continues to exhibit fresh stills for a while. His motions are dynamic; the photos are static. Now the time allotted to each still begins to grow progressively shorter; each placement/removal of a still is separated from the next by a jump-cut. As the speed of display increases, the hands appear to jerk (due to the more rapid cuts); and, disquietingly, one begins to note subtle differences between the stills. When a certain rate of speed is reached, we no longer see the man's handling of the stills; the center of attention has shifted to them decisively; the man's fingers, ever more jerky, appear only as flashes—traces of a human action whose very incompleteness concentrates attention on the photos even more. Due to increased speed of display, the differences between them are now prominent; spatial relations between cars change, as do their backgrounds and numbers.

And then, the moment of magic.

There has been no break in the proceedings, only a continuous increase in the rate of display of a series of slightly different still photographs. Suddenly—before our eyes—they have turned into a *FILM*. the rate of projection of the stills has reached twenty-four images per second—the projection rate of film. We watch (in awed, dumbfounded amazement) as the cars suddenly move—jerkily at first—then smoothly—along the highway, into tunnels, out into the sun again, while we (in the photographer's car) move with them.

Soon the cars slow down. The movement toward the approaching death of cinema is one of almost imperceptible decay. The hands jerk less; the moving images stutter; they are stills once more. The final ones are removed at normal speed. The torso leaves the frame. The screen regains its illusory flatness. The magic show is over. The cycle of creation—birth, life and death (with cinema as its metaphor, the man as its Creator)—has been completed.

Beydler's film thus emerges as a paradigm of the illusion of film and its deliberate destruction. Transforming stills into film (the 1,200 "stills," in fact, are frame blow-ups from a 1,200-frame 16mm film), it reveals, in Vertovian fashion, that film is artificial and "fabricated"; that it utilizes complex technology to create and exhibit itself, shaping its splendid wondrous through light and projection. The torso—Beydler himself ("I wanted to be a human projector") deliberately destroys the illusionist frame by his presence (the same effects could have been achieved without him). Finally, just when we have been trapped into accepting stills as film, they become stills again. We are left with the reality (false reality) of the original film (man, triangle, stills): an illusion, as every film.

Time, too, reveals its relativistic, illusory character. The time frame of the torso coincides with that of the cars only when their speeds happen to be the

same. Otherwise, we watch three "different" and conflicting time frames simultaneously; those of torso, photos, total film itself. Respectively, these times contract, expand, or are normal in inverse ratio to each other, except when they temporarily coincide, at which point the stills become the movie and Beydler the projector mechanism.

Space, too, is doubled; the torso's space (shot by a stationary camera) is stable (though maniacally accelerated as the film progresses) while the "car" film (shot by a moving camera) is unmasked as a discrete succession of individual photographs, implicitly questioning the film experience itself. (Jump-cuts, rather than dissolves, cleverly reinforce this idea.)

In both this film and *HAND HELD DAY*, conflicting dynamic tensions of composition and movement result from two simultaneous universes within the frame, progressing along different lines, at different distances, with different characteristics. Equally deliberate is the use of lowly black-and-white stills as against full color in the film's less important areas.

There is also plot and narrative, however different in form from *THE EXORCIST*; there is romance (the American road, cars, the cinema) though it is that of an acid romanticist; there is structure, rhythm, and even a message. The film is thus different from "Hollywood" as well as from those empty formalist exercises so fashionable today. Instead, Beydler's work represents a historically significant wedding of minimal/structural concerns, modernist/form narrative and philosophy which may—together with that of Jost, Hodgetts, Herbert et. al.—be viewed as a new tendency within the American avant-garde.

(PASADENA FREEWAY STILLS: six minutes, color, silent, 16mm; rental/sale: Gary Beydler, 3724 Wasatch Avenue, Los Angeles, Calif. 90066; or: The American Federation of Arts, 41 East 65th Street, New York, N.Y. 10021) ☼

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