

Goodby Alienation, Hello Nudity

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In "Adventures of a Doll," a surrealist short set in a world in which there are no longer people, this doll gets along very well. Made by Germany's Franz Witzentzen, the short was presented at the recent avant-garde film festival at Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium. A noticeable absence of joyful sex or heterosexual love; a festival that wasn't festive.

KNOKKE-LE-ZOUTE, Belgium.

EVERY four years, an exotic, semi-surrealist ritual occurs between Christmas and New Year's at this posh North Sea resort: The International Experimental Film Festival, played out against a dadaist backdrop of fog-bound ocean, bourgeois Belgian vacationers with children and dogs, and a conglomeration of European hippies, radical students, famous film directors, critics, assembled to pay homage to the avant-garde film. The mixture, this year, proved even more explosive than usual.

Together with over 13 hours of screenings daily, it included violent anti-American demonstrations; a spectacular post-midnight mixed-media show (random films and slides projected onto the outside of a huge inflated transparent bubble as naked live girls charmingly cavorted on its inside); experimental music concerts and avant-garde symposia; Robert Breer's self-propelled styrofoam floats and Pistoletto's magical trompe-l'oeil mirror paintings. A final discussion of "Films at the Festival" was marked by attacks on the social irrelevance of the avant-garde (denounced as an agent of American imperialism) and a very unplanned "Miss Festival" contest, during which five hairy young men and two girls shed their clothes entirely, saw the prize going, not unexpectedly, to a male. One contestant, the Japanese avant-gardist Yoko Ono, covered her bosom with her number-plaque while leaving the rest of her anatomy unattended to, a perhaps unconscious association with her 90-minute film "Number 4," which consisted of 365 buttocks of London's artists and intellectuals, each on screen for 20 seconds.

The largest anti-U. S. demonstration, by radical German and Belgian film students, occurred during the horrendous Japanese feature "Embryo," a relentless, sadistic orgy. The unexpected transpositions of huge, Cinemascope-width images of a bound, naked girl being systematically cut with a razor while 50 determined Maoists on-stage chanted that "this is what America is doing to Vietnam" provided the only genuine "happening" of the festival. Fistfights and the toleration by the audience of further demonstrations indicated the unpopularity of our Vietnam policy.

The festival itself, organized by Jacques Ledoux, indefatigable genius of the Belgian Cinematheque, presented close to 200 films from 19 nations. America, center of international experimental cinema, provided by far the largest contingent, followed by France, Germany and Belgium. For over a week, these films incessantly assaulted the optical nerves, attacking taboos, jarring preconceptions, manipulating new techniques.

Of the prizewinners (selected by experimental filmmakers Shirley Clarke, Vera Chytilova, Walerian Borowczyk and Edgar Reitz), the \$4,000 Grand Prix went to Michael Snow's "Wave-length" (USA). This startling

work consists of one continuous "zoom" movement, which takes 45 excruciating minutes to traverse the length of an 80-foot New York loft. During this time, four tiny "human events," none longer than a minute, occur (such as two people walking in); the rest is painful yet (due to certain visual manipulations) poetic contemplation. The film is accompanied by a steadily louder electronic sound, which finally reaches an unbearable pitch.

Noteworthy also were the \$2,000 prizes to "Grateful Dead" (USA), an explosive rock 'n' roll collage; "Hummingbird" (USA), an animated film executed by computer and "read" by a microfilm plotter connected to a camera; "Besocket" (Sweden), an ominous fantasy in which visitors from space find a depopulated earth; the metaphysical "Self-Obliteration" (USA), which ends in a free-for-all, body-painting sex orgy; "Why Did You Wake Me With a Kiss?" (Germany), in which the cinematographer—a nude girl shooting into a mirror—proceeds to hide the camera in a drawer, effectively "ending" the film while its fatuous sound track—a florid critique of an old Russian film—continues in darkness; and "The Room" (USA), in which rapidly flashing images of mothers, lovers, children and aged who have peopled a room over the years are set against the background of its unchanging, stolid reality.

Perhaps most significant at the festival were the paucity of social comment, the emergence of nudity as a mass phenomenon, and the growth of the unblinking-observation-of-reality school of Andy Warhol.

Unlike the festival four years ago, this one offered hardly any films dealing even indirectly with politics, the bomb, alienation; what remained were the formalistic experiments and self-centered probings of personal moods or tensions. The discomfort of the experimental filmmaker vis-à-vis affluent Western bourgeois civilization seems to have ossified into a ritualistic stance; it has not become more radical or analytic but instead has gone "beyond" politics toward a modern mysticism fed by Eastern sources. This development remains largely an enigma to Europeans still enmeshed in more conventional ideologies.

As to nudity, there has never been a more voluminous progression of nudes, assorted genitals and full-frontal shots of both sexes than at this festival. Like all crusades, this one, too, tends quickly to degenerate into a cliché. Yet the acceptance of the human body—with the spectator's shock almost immediately replaced by indifference—is unquestionably one of the few achievements of the current avant-garde, reflecting an attempt to reintegrate overcivilized man into nature and return him to more primitive, less alienated realities.

Significantly, however, the increase in nudity is accompanied by an equally noticeable absence of joyful sex or heterosexual love. The general tenor remains one of "difficulties," "aberrations," auto-eroticism, cold detach-

ment; and the affirmative eroticism of "The Bed" (USA), with its charmingly polymorphous-perverse tumblings of one or more stark naked boys and/or girls into and out of bed, remained a rare exception at the festival. Yet, as in the other contemporary arts, the assault on the last taboos is only too obvious and portrayal of sexual intercourse on the screen (already more or less evident in certain new films) remains only a matter of time.

Andy Warhol, protagonist of the "contemplative cinema" (sometimes referred to as "the cinema of creative tedium"), though himself absent from the festival, provided one of its main ideological trends. The often tiresome, philosophically stimulating, obsessive portrayal of an unedited reality—in which film time equals real time, silence is as significant as talk, and tiny details acquire unsuspected importance due to the absence of larger events—appears not merely in the often unbearable yet strangely magical "Wave-length" but also in "Bolero" (Australia), a fixed, 15-minute "zoom" crawl down a street to endless Ravel accompaniment; and in "Railroad" (Germany) which, from inside a train compartment, presents a fixed view of a passing, monotonous landscape, thoughtfully repeated by the filmmaker every half-minute for 16 minutes to the accompaniment of hypnotic train noises. A similar tendency is evident in the prize-winning "Naissant" (Great Britain), not so much a story as "an involvement in the moments of a person," which for 14 minutes merely shows the troubled face of a young girl.

The importance, necessity and inevitability of the avant-garde are incontestable. Neither the art nor the commerce of cinema can exist without its pioneering, elan and daring. This is precisely why, as the festival progressed, a malaise born of stagnation and unfulfilled expectations could no longer be denied. To those who had attended previous festivals at Knokke, the decline in quality was unmistakable.

The clichés of the avant-garde are every bit as objectionable as those of the commercial cinema; and the endless succession of works distinguished solely by copious superimpositions, multiple screens, single-frame animations, rapid camera movements or fraudulent mythology ultimately proved symptomatic rather than significant.

The de-emphasis of plot and narrative structures is indeed a fundamental characteristic of modern cinema (as of modern art); but it is not necessarily an assurance of quality. And the dogmatic unwillingness of many experimentalists to accept critical standards for the avant-garde, their inability to recognize their ties to and relative standing vis-à-vis the visually-oriented commercial avant-garde of Godard, Resnais, Antonioni, Bresson and Skolimowski, may indicate some of the reasons for the relative stagnation of the international amateur film avant-garde.