

A² Film Fest

Talent will out despite bedlam



(Above) "Make Me Psychic" animated cartoon is by film maker Sally Cruikshank of Berkeley, Calif. (Right) Film "Asparagus," dreamlike rendering of feminine fantasies, is by Susan Pitt of New York City.

By HELEN ZUCKER

Movies

The Old Architecture and Design Auditorium was a scene straight out of Hagarth on Sunday at the University of Michigan. Winning films of the 17th Ann Arbor Film Festival were shown, and the place was packed to the rafters.

T-shirt vendors hawked their wares at the top of their lungs. The atmosphere was sheer do-your-own-thing, and if a fire breaks out, well, just save the celluloid.

Presided over by festival director George Manupelli, the Cinema Guild of U-M sponsors this yearly film-love-in. The festival runs for a week, during that time visitors from the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art come from New York to look at promising films. Canadians entered heavily in this year's entries, and interested people from all over the country showed up.

THE WINNING films of 1979 were chosen by William Farley, an Oakland, Calif., artist; Martha Haslanger, a New York photographer and Harvey Chou, a Toronto film maker.

The judges divided \$4,300 prize money between the winning films, with the singular exception of the Tom Berman award.

Berman was an art/film student at U-M who was murdered in New York. Berman's parents gave the festival "a gift of \$750 to be given intact each year to the most promising film maker."

James Benning, who won the award in 1977, won it again this year for "Grand Opera," a 90-minute work filled with stunning photography and repetitious close-ups.

In it we see different people standing against the same brick wall, telling us to "watch out for the brown statue, two planes will pass overhead, a mushroom cloud will cover the city."

Screams, claspovers of passport photos, little street bands, glorious shots of sagebrush and a math notebook filled with equations that are meant to make us think about eternity and, possibly, the silliness of thinking about eternity are some of the images that flash by in slow motion or in blinding flashes — blips that curiously shut out reality rather than bringing us closer to it.

A bit of the sublime rises out of the ridiculous, however, to an enormous amount of work by manager Woody Sempliner, assistant Ruth Bradley, and other dedicated, knowledgeable movie buffs who chose 110 films out of 301 entries (all were screened several times). Talent will out despite bedlam.

SEMPLINER, who makes recordings for ad agencies when he is not totally immersed in the festival, and Ms. Bradley, a grad student, both deserve an all-expenses paid vacation to Colorado — current home of Stan Brakhage, the non-competitive guru of the 16-mm film world.

Brakhage, who began making films about the same time as conceptualism rose on the art scene, is to film what Christo is to art. Brakhage has been asked to judge festivals many times; he never has.

Sempliner's ability to keep a lid on so massive an undertaking as the Ann Arbor Festival entitles him to see what Brakhage is up to these days, or at any rate, to a rest.

"Asparagus," made by Susan Pitt & Staff at the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts at Harvard, uses new realist, pop and pointillist painting techniques and brilliant special effects reminiscent of the masked ball sequence in the movie "Steppenwolf."

It's a wonderful animated film that tells a moving story about a lonely woman's sexual fantasies. It picks up echoes of Eleanor Rigby in "Yellow Submarine."

It's visually stunning, and it moves seamlessly to the end. Pitt knows how to edit. (Editing seems to be the last thing 16-mm people want to do).

PITT'S FILM was a pleasure to watch. The general public may find some of the images disturbing, but considering the violence on commercial screens, I don't see why "Asparagus" shouldn't find a wide audience among the sophisticated, general public. It has a strange, poetic beauty.

"Reflection," by Richard Barber, is a funny shot at modern inventions. The invention in Barber's film is a two-way mirror strapped to the head that allows you to "see yourself coming and going."

Helpful while crossing the street, not so helpful while doing the boog-a-loo, it seems. A cute, mild piece of mockery that Barber has the sense to end swiftly.

"Mother Goose" by David Bishop is a shot at gory fairy tales and nursery rhymes. The animation is clear, the dialogue funny. I liked the three blind mice tottering out on canes.

"The Santa Clause Action Alias How Beautiful is the Blue Sky Alias Troubles in Paradise," known as "Solavogns," in its original Danish, was an 80-minute, expensive feature that was essentially a wonderful film for a film.

There were interesting shots of missiles, mayors and councilmen playing musical instruments on a beach, and mobs of Santa Clauses marching on Copenhagen, taking over the Stock Exchange, the GM plant, and giving away merchandise in a large department store.

But the sluggish narrative, the heavy, earnest, obvious message failed to carry this film off the ground, into the Danish sky. Santa belonged in the helicopter he arrived in. This film could have been a wonderful flight of fancy.

BUT IT WAS made by a young man who wants to shout radical messages through a megaphone. Tone is everything in art. I hope the makers of this interesting attempt get another crack at moviemaking.

My favorite was "Rapid Eye Movements," a 13-minute, exciting animated film about human relations that went by all too fast. The artwork was wonderful.

It was an excellent, original film by Lambert, from the Carpenter Center. It would hold up in any theater. "Come Back Jones" by the Devo featured singers dressed as boy scouts in dark glasses, playing rock stars. Eventually the stage is taken over by the groups, the boys scout off the stage.

It's 13-year-old funny. Amid the joyous bedlam, a boy raises a sign saying "Devo." Devo stands for de-evolution, a group that wants to get back to "basics like getting fat, getting mellow, getting married, getting real devo."

There are cut-away shots to old cowboys bowling. (No wonder boys can't tie knots or find wood trails anymore).

"FLOOR SHOW" by the highly regarded Richard Myers is a film about making a film. It deals with the complexities of directing, the effects of past film on future films, of dreams versus reality.

I breathed with relief when the 86-minute "Floor Show" ended, despite Myers enormous talent. He asks intriguing questions, but he assures that moviemakers are underdogs who need everything repeated in triplicate.

We get the message the first time Myers begins overlapping scenes from "The Man With a Camera" and "Citizen Kane."

Myers is asking, Shall we now do non-narrative films? How, and about what? Has it all been done? Do we understand anything at all?

We follow him through his tormented searches. We get scenes from "Potemkin," Laurel & Hardy, Bunnell and Dai's early surreal films, "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari," "Blonde Venus" and "Blood of a Poet," as if all this were mixed in the blood of today's moviemakers.

Perhaps it is, but a shorter, less redundant film would have carried the point home cleanly. Neither did I find Myers' family — his cast — as enthralling as Myers does.

It's a rather frightening, anti-parent, anti-people movie that got gales of laughter from the audience, but it isn't really funny. Movies began with the "home movies" of the Lumieres in 1895, and Myers may believe we have come full circle to "home movies" again, but what comes across is "Floor Show" is the feeling that Myers needs a vacation from his home, from movies, from the fence palings he seems fixated on.

The last three winners included some of the images disturbing, but considering the violence on commercial screens, I don't see why "Asparagus" shouldn't find a wide audience among the sophisticated, general public. It has a strange, poetic beauty.

"Punk Rock," a documentary filmed at CBGB's, a club in New York, that features punk-rock groups, was good. It caught the howling sadness of frustrated, bored people whose only source of excitement is loud music. "Grand Opera" was the last film shown. I confess to escaping shortly before the end. I wanted to find my car before a giant asparagus or a mushroom cloud devoured it, before a deo dressed as a boy scout hitched a ride and sang "Boogie" to me all the way home through the sweet, silent night.



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