

a confluence of eyeballs the ann arbor film festival

by arwulf arwulf

O wretched times, wretched days of reckless change, we know that change is constant, that there is nothing in this life *but* change—yet still there must be some way to carry the movie theater on Fifth Avenue between Washington and Liberty into the future. Instead a private developer, (one of those investors who are the scourge of Washtenaw County), plans to rip it down and erect *condominiums*, same as the Armory on Ann Street is now condos and the surrounding countryside is fulla condos. Condo the town 'til can't nobody afford to live here no more except the condo-rically wealthy, and wonder what happened to the place we used to live.

The movie house in question has been called the Ann Arbor Theaters 1&2 for quite some time now, but once upon a different time it was the Fifth Forum, also known as Vth Forum. This was a marvelous space, unbifurcated back then, for cutting-edge new cinema. I used to slink in and catch the latest Ken Russell flicks in the mid-'70s; his twisted studies on the lives of Mahler and Tchaikovsky struck me so hard back then I've since obtained video copies in order to be able to traumatize myself at home with reruns of alarming films first glimpsed at the Forum. I'm also recalling Edgar Allan Poe stories done up by different directors—a pleasantly perverse menu of nastiness and splendor. Roger Corman's *Masque of the Red Death* starred Vincent Price; this was double-featured with a cluster of miniatures; *Spirits of the Dead*, which included Fellini's warpo interpretation of *Never Bet The Devil Your Head*—I think it was called *Toby Dammitt*. Great movies at the Forum, just all the time.

Joe Tiboni tells me that there was once a Joe's Diner at 208 S. Fifth Avenue, long before his time or mine. By the time we got here, a movie theater had replaced the diner. So I missed out on scrambled eggs and rye toast at Joe's, and so did Joe. But I did make it to an all-night Festival of Motorcycle Flicks, which took place in the early '70s at the Fifth Forum. Starting with *Wild Angels*, *Hell's Angels* and the like, we dedicated viewers were shown an increasingly seedy series of B Movies centering upon the adventures of chopper-straddling sociopaths. Free coffee was provided for the small but driven pack of stubborn lunatics who braved the lowest of the low—we hung for as long as we could stand it. I think I gave up at about 5:15 AM—ran out of the theater and kept running 'til the police stopped me several blocks away: "*Where are you running from, what did you do?!*" They honestly thought I'd committed a crime somewhere, which indicates how I must have looked. What could I say? *I simply couldn't watch any more biker flicks; I had to run away.*



CROSS TIES, a film by Laura Di Trapani c. 1998



Mind's Eye by Gregory Godhard

There's lots to be said for Film Festivals of any sort; one must submit to the experience and defer all ego-based judgements. The World's Worst Film Festival which took over the Michigan Theater several years ago had a specific *bent* to it, so to speak, and we in the audience knew just why we were there. To see the very worst. I live for such opportunities. Surprise me please with that which is unlikely. No limits to the many ways of seeing—we'll watch it all.

The 16mm Ann Arbor Film Festival is a yearly ritual with famously broad parameters; we go there to see many categories of film, and the entertainment component is less than secondary. Something much more wonderful is happening—it's not about "best" or "worst" but rather questions of form, content, texture and blood type. Yes, the theater becomes a breathing organism through all the days and nights of screenings, and seasoned patrons have learned to take the movies as they come, come what may.

I'm visiting the screening committee sessions in the magical room back of Vicki Honeyman's hair-trimming emporium, where the many weeks of incessant viewing are clearly detectable on the faces of the diehard screeners. This is one tough circle of adherents! Hundreds of entries must be run through the Pageant projector and scrutinized by this confluence of eyeballs. Cinema is hell, and they love it.

All is dark as I tiptoe into the viewing chamber. On screen, a tide of seemingly random street footage. Camera's been left rolling—instantly I recognize this as a cinematic convention taken to its extreme by Godard in the '60s. At least that's my sighting. Everyone's take is different. The other Godard-like element in this innovation-which-has-become-a-convention is the matter-of-fact narration (presently in German with subtitles), in this case describing acts of violence ("Peter Pritz stabbed the youngster with a screwdriver") and retribution. This seems familiar to me, and I say so. Rachel, 25% of the screening committee, agrees aloud that this seems to be a common formula. But nobody offers up any categorical label for it. We're busy watching.

Something tells me this might make it into the festival. But then again maybe not. That is up to the screeners. I don't think most people realize how much effort goes into the process of sifting through all of the entries to decide what will be shown to the public. While the next film is being threaded up, I ask Josh, (a warm, furry benevolent character, whose intelligent eyes are slightly glazed from cinematic exposure) how many films they've seen so far. He consults a notebook: "This is number three hundred and forty." [118 hours of film so far, with an average length of 21 minutes per film.] What criterion does he use? Josh thinks deeply and answers carefully: "I'm trying not to just choose the ones I like, you know what I mean? I'm trying to support the artist. The art. I like the art. I love documentaries. That's how I'm choosing. The creative stuff."

The next flick is obviously a student effort, and while students can produce great cinema, this was surely not it. I liked the soundtrack a lot; incidental radio babble, freeway traffic noise, that sort of thing. But filmically speaking I got the impression that this

wasn't scoring very high. Various types of imported chocolate were passed around, fortifying us as if we were hiking in the Andes. I wanted to change my socks.

We then watched a "film diary" of a San Francisco couple taking care of a pregnant dog, being involved in the birth, raising the pups and sending them out into the world with new owners, one by one. This film grew on me. I was lightly cynical at first (*okay the dog's knocked up, great*) but soon I was wrapped up in the reality of caring for the canines. Josh liked it too; he barked at the screen. I'm glad I saw that one, though I'm a cat person myself; cats are superior even to humans.

Final flick of the evening: A guy shoves a big sandwich into his mouth, then goes and sits on the toilet. Makes faces into the camera close-up. Opens a can of refried beans and lets them slide out of the can like excrement. End titles done in laundry marker. A clear example of the kind of amateur experiments which must be seen by the long-suffering screening committee of the 37th Ann Arbor Film Festival. Everyone agrees: "There's plenty of crud."

Vicki was tired. "I feel *good*—there's some great stuff this year. Really good documentaries, we're excited about showing 'em. Good narratives, too." Ken, a professional carpenter and refreshing wise guy who haunts every moment of the festival sitting front row center, seemed indefatigable. His wry sense of the ridiculous mingled nicely with Josh's joyously irreverent outbursts, while Rachel's comments came softly and not so often. The committee was well-balanced with different temperaments. Vicki's years of experience give her a wonderful air of seasoned levity. Nobody has seen it all, but she's seen a lot.

The woman running the projector is named Sarah. Vicki says Sarah has gotten the procedure *down* and I could see she was happy to have someone so able; the amount of film the young projectionist has handled is staggering, and Vicki's proud of her. It seems I showed up very near the end of the screening process; as of this writing, only about ten more entries are due to come in before the deadline. This will make some 350 films submitted to the festival this year. Approximately 100 of these will actually be screened at the Michigan Theater in front of the public at the 37th annual Ann Arbor Film Festival, Tuesday March 16th through Sunday March 21st.

People will come from all over the world to see the selection of independent & experimental films. A certain portion of Ann Arbor's citizenry will attend. Many former Ann Arborites return once a year solely to watch the flicks. I highly recommend this festival to you. Leave your ego at home; it will only get in the way. Come early and find a good seat, then let yourself turn into an enormous eyeball. It's the only way.