

Nick Zedd: An Oasis of Horror in a Desert of Boredom

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New York underground film maker Nick Zedd presented a program of 16mm and Super 8 films, which he titled the Cinema of Transgression, at this year's Ann Arbor Film Festival. Eroticism, violence and shock-value pervade his films. A cross between blue movies and Hollywood silent they parody both genres, dehumanizing the "stars" via the sexual and other acts they undergo.

D.dB. The Cinema of Transgression, where did the title come from

N.Z. I invented that term to describe the films coming out of New York in the last couple of years.

D.dB. How long have you been working in films?

N.Z. Since 1979 in New York, where I made a Super-8 feature *They Eat Scum*.

D.dB. Last night I saw *Thrust In Me*, in which you played a transvestite and also a male who ended up having intercourse with himself. There was a lot of eroticism and a lot of violence attached to that eroticism. Some people say it is connected to work from a previous cycle - like Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*.

N.Z. I would say it is a totally different form, because Jack Smith and the Structuralists were not as aggressive, there was almost no violence in their films. They were in the 1960's and the violent eroticism which one finds in some of the films I've been associated with is a manifestation of our frustration as men. I am politically an anarchist, sexually a fascist - and I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I have experimented with many different styles of sexuality, and I've had personal relationships in which my companion has been equal - that is fine, but I actually prefer to run a sexual relationship into an adventure and so I have adopted a master-slave relationship on occasions.

D.dB. When you were talking about that last night, you commented that the reason you took on those roles was to point out that these systems exist in society and then to subvert them.

N.Z. I like to change my sex, that is why I like to become female sometimes. The character I played in *Thrust In Me* wasn't a transvestite, it was a female. At the time I was making that film I was very depressed and contemplating suicide, and I was interested in expressing these feelings of frustration and despair on film, and I wanted to play a male and a female character. The male character embodies the violence and aggression and the more dominant aspects of my personality, whereas the female represented my vulnerability and despair. And the female who commits suicide in the film is discovered by the male; then, as a total surprise, fucks her in the head, and this was intended to convey poetically the notion that she was fucked in the head for- having committed suicide!

D.dB. But she was fucked in the head *after* she committed suicide!

N.Z. Yes! But she was before. I didn't want to show pity for this creature who had destroyed herself because I think we have a right to destroy ourselves, but it is not something to feel sorry for, because it can be a celebratory act to commit self-destruction. But in her case, I think she was deluded because she stuck up a picture of Christ which would indicate that she had a belief in an after-life, or succumbed to that weakness which allows us to believe in unseen humanoid deities for which there is no physical evidence. The male character who desecrated the image of Christ by using it as a piece of toilet paper is one that I would identify with more strongly. However, I also did that film *King of Sex* where I played both a male and a female character...

D.dB. What was the music in that? The words were quite strong, quite powerful and I thought they worked in with the images very well.

N.Z. The music in *King of Sex* is a band called Killdozer.

D.dB. You have had problems being screened in New York and it's only recently that it has started to emerge from the underground.

N.Z. There has been resistance from certain quarters of the avant-garde establishment, who are essentially as narrow-minded and restricted in their thinking as are the politicians and the mass media, who are emely reactionary and conservative. The avant-garde establishment are geriatric throwbacks to the 60's, they are old liberals who have become conservative culturally and sexually. Some of them are feminists who are hypersensitive to any indication of violent eroticism - they're uptight puritans. They don't realise that they are the dupes of the moral majority when they exclude statements by myself and other film-makers which are essentially liberating sexually in the sense that we attempt to show that highest possible plateau of human development is the awareness of the flesh. We absolutely advocate indulgence instead of abstinence.

D.dB. That is something that has been practiced by a lot of people in the last 20 years, under the label of sex before marriage, free sex, love-ins etc. Why do you think that position has become an oppositional one now?

N.Z. Because the rightward trend in society in which we find statistics being recited ad nauseam on marriage becoming a respectable institution once again, and the divorce rate dropping off - alternative forms of sexual expression are not being explored as much as they were in the 60's. This rightward shift in society which was supported by the mass media due to the trauma of the Vietnam experience in which the U.S. lost the war but few of the politicians learned the lessons of that experience, which was that themacho jingoistic posturings of foreign policy which thwart self-determination - when it takes the form of anti-imperialist aggression - led to a national psychosis which was manifested in a desire to go back 20 or 30 years, to the notions of patriotism and nationalism as a way of controlling populations. The government in America over-reacted when there was violent opposition to the Vietnam war which was a horrendous foreign policy mistake. Instead of recognising the will of the people they massacred students at Kent State...

D.dB. I think we understand this sort of process, that conservatism has come back, and you see yourself as building up a critique against that. You talked about fascism before, and you identify with that, what do you see as the difference?

N.Z. I identify with it sexually, not politically. What has occurred is that individuals such as myself are part of a marginal element in society - the poor, the unemployed, the radical and the creative have found that we have less impact in society in general, due to the blacklisting of our ideas by the mass media. Therefore we feel frustration and we feel that our right to be heard, our freedom of speech has been denied to us. As a result, I personally become a dictator in my own life. I have chosen individuals who are looking for someone to dominate them, and I have formed relationships which are based on a fascist power structure and this gives me a feeling of power. I realise it's an illusory state of existence, but it enables me to continue my existence with self-respect.

D.dB. Apart from your existence, what about your art?

N.Z. I am anti-art I hate everything. My films are propaganda, they are statements, an attempt to break through the conditioning of society which states that abstinence rather than indulgence is a noble state of existence, and I disagree. I believe in indulging in all the seven deadly sins because they are our natural desires, and I don't believe in good and evil.

D.dB. But in a sense you use the fact of other people's ideas about good and evil against them.

N.Z. Yes ... I like to turn ideas around, to turn them back on themselves, or their origins . . . I like to pervert - to subvert traditional definitions. This is what occurs in our lives all the time and people aren't aware of it. Words such as freedom have been totally perverted. The word 'freedom' is totally redefined every day by all sorts of people, by teachers, theologians, politicians and cops, and for a broad definition of the term, I am a nihilist - I reject all traditions out of hand.

D.dB. One thing you spoke about last night was that what you do is not only suppressed by the population at large, but the earlier generations of film-makers or film artists have not let the work you do be shown. Do you think there will be public attention brought to bear on what you're doing?

N.Z. Yes, I think as the scandals increase and word of mouth makes people aware that we represent a new definition of underground films. That we reject boredom, and constitute an oasis of horror in a desert of boredom.

D.dB. Do you think it will get to the point where it is the dominant philosophy in avant garde films for a time, or not? If it got to that point, if it became dominant, would that re define your whole position.

N.Z. You mean we would have to do something else? I don't know. I think it's going to take a long time because the people running the media arts centres and the alternative

newspapers no longer relate to the experiences that we are conveying in our work, because they are too old. Most of them are chronologically and mentally unable to identify with our generation's frustrations, and it may necessitate the actual physical destruction of these individuals before any changes occur. Alternative forms of communications have been developed, like the Underground Film Bulletin and New York Film Festival downtown which shows underground films every year. And nightclubs have become the only place to see radical, exciting new films because the established screening rooms and museum spaces are run by narrow-minded geriatrics who have a vested interest in the past and they resist change. It's foolish for them to do this. Their whole philosophical construct was faulty to begin with. They didn't realise that one must question everything, that you should never be absolutely correct, there will always come an exception to that rule and one must always be open to change.

D.dB. That's what I was getting towards - that if your ideas became the dominant ideas then you would have to change. You said that yourself. Also people might look at some of the weapons you use as something that has been done before in a previous generation, but the thing I find exciting about it is the fact that it is very relevant to what's actually happening in New York now, it's a reaction to what's happening to the American culture in New York. Whereas a lot of the other work I have seen at this Festival has perhaps been aspiring to Hollywood or has been talking about middle-class ideas, but there is this documentary side to what you are doing. I see *The Wild World of Lydia Lunch* as, documentary. How do you react to that?

N.Z. It is. It was designed to convey my deep admiration for her at that phase of my existence and I allowed her to speak for herself by rendering the soundtrack - a verbatim replay, of a cassette tape she had sent me. But the films I have been doing with Richard Kern are also documentary to a certain degree in that, when we portray certain characters, we manifest elements in our psyche which we have always wanted to express but have been unable to because of social conditioning and the disapproval of the people with whom we come into contact. So, by making films in which we enact violent behaviour, violent and/ or erotic behaviour, we are free to express our deepest most passionate desires. I think most people try to forget the fact that they are going to die and they invest a cosmology which includes an after-life, or reincarnation, or mysticism, or a god. Those of us within the Cinema of Transgression have rejected these myths. We have seen death and destruction and realised that all human beings suffer from the same disease - mortality. This awareness of the potential for imminent destruction and total oblivion for eternity makes us enact the most wild, depraved kinds of fantasies which society tries to repress. We want our existence to be an adventure. I have always hated and continue to hate the way I was shackled by convention all my life and the way that authoritarian forces were utilised to...

D.dB. Put you in a certain pigeon-hole?

N.Z. Right. All the teachers and cops and ministers who lied to me.

D.dB. But in *a* sense, what you're saying could be any artist speaking. I mean, the role of the artist is often seen to be the outsider - they have been subjected to all sorts of pressures like that. But what makes the Cinema of Transgression different?

N.Z. That's only ne definition. I would say most artists are complacent, they are attempting to assimilate themselves into society by being acceptable to the bourgeoisie. They don't threaten their values enough, and that is why we are anti-art. Art has become a religion for the bourgeoisie.

D.dB. So you reject the art system, you don't show in galleries, but in clubs.

N.Z. Sometimes in galleries, but mostly in nightclubs. Not that we renounce any segment of the population as a potential audience. We are misunderstood, however, when the artistic segment of the population attempts to include us in their realm. We reject and renounce their complacency and their inability to articulate hatred for the status quo.

D.dB. One thing I find interesting about your work is that previously minimalism and structuralism did not depend on an overt audience reaction at all, but the Cinema of Transgression plays on an audience - sometimes it depends on shock value, but it depends on setting up a sort of oppositional thing to the audience but still the audience is very central to that whole thing.

N.Z. Right. The audience is part of the collaborative experience. They are exposed to torturous experience which will destroy their value systems and emancipate them from the social slavery of conditioning which has rendered them automatons.

D.dB. So you are meeting you audiences head-on.

N.Z. Yes, we are assassinating the audiences' minds and turning them into superhumans if they identify with us!

D.dB. The Structuralists also seem to have been aggressive towards their audience, but they did it by turning away from their audience.

N.Z. I was exposed to the Structuralist campaign of boredom and I thought it was simply a desperate manifestation of lack of talent. I thought that they were lazy and that their whole school of thought led to laziness and sloppiness in film-making. I thought the way they became institutionalised in film schools was a very bad thing in that many film students were taught that it is unacceptable to run out with a camera and flip off a few frames of film, wave the camera around and have a lot of blurry images, the resultant catastrophe on celluloid being an experience to which no-one could relate except the person who made the film. I felt they were not fulfilling the potential of cinema which could be socially subversive - it was an ignorant way to make films. Then theoretical constructs were evolved defending that mode of wasteful film-making and institutionalised by certain critics and film teachers, the result being a monumental fraud perpetrated on potential film-makers. The Cinema of Transgression is all about rejecting that status quo and we say that, if you don't have something to say, you shouldn't say anything. You shouldn't bother. You have to have clarity of thought.

D.dB. You are actually talking about clarity of thought in a very cultural context aren't you? Whereas a lot of this structuralist theo'ry seems to have happened in a very intellectual climate. I think where your films come alive is in the fact that they're talking about e111lotional issues at times. There was also that film about sticking the glue on roach@s with screaming sounds in the background -

N.Z. *Judgement Day* by Manuel Dalandra. He also did the one about Poster Art, changing posters around New York.

D.dB. How do you feel the poster art relates back into Transgression Cinema?

N.Z. There is a statement made within that film, written on the walls, which said "Make your statement on illegal spaces". Trans gression humour is a way of mental emancipation, or the idea that it's good to be an outlaw. That was an important thing about grafitti art - the relevance of that was that it communicated directly to the general public: by defacing public property, you communicate with a public who would otherwise shun the museum spaces.

D.dB. The Cinema of Transgression has been very much centred in New York, and perhaps the fact that you have come to Ann Arbor to show it in a much more middle-class community may be part of the process of this whole area of film-making emerging into a more general American avant-garde culture. Do you think that process has started?

N.Z. The first place we showed was Washington D.C. This is the second. It is better than being stuck in New York and not reaching a wider audience.

D.dB. It's interesting that you are here too. You are trying to make yourself the embodiment of all these things you talk about - as a person, not just as a film-maker.

N.Z. I am. I am the Master of Transgression!

Nick Zedd's *Thrust In Me* was shown at this year's Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals. Oihier films he has made include *Bogus Man*, *King of Sex* (with Richard Kern), *The Right Side of my Brain* (with Richard Kern) and *The Wild World of Lydia Lunch* which was a prize-winner at the 1986 Ann Arbor Film Festival.