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THE UNTUTORED EYE BY MARJORIE KELLER

Marjorie Keller's intelligent and useful study is especially refreshing for a couple of reasons. Though it is a re-worked doctoral thesis, it carries little of the redundancies and wearisome tone which mar most of that sort of writing. The author is engaged in what she is writing about and thus the style is lively, densely packed with ideas and shrewd insights, all brought forth with clarity and good sense. As the title of the volume suggests, this is a thematic study, but Keller has a hard critical mind too. She can make distinctions among an artist's films, see through his defensive stances, and trace the turns and developments of his creative activity. I want to place particular emphasis on the "good sense," for Keller has rooted the concerns of the filmmakers under scrutiny within the traditions (frequently literary) from which they sprung. Hers is not a method which is overcrowded with the latest of theoretical fashions transforming the actual material under discussion unto an embarrassing impertinence.

One should also applaud Fairleigh Dickinson University Press for publishing a volume on three filmmakers, none of whom, for one reason or another, is exactly a hot topic—and unjustly so. Cocteau's reputation, for example, has always been somewhat eclipsed by his European contemporaries, especially by those with a more socio-political bent, despite (or maybe *because*

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of) the fact that the American avant-garde has long since "taken him in" as one of their own. Indeed,

the underestimation of Cocteau, in part, stems from an aspect of Keller's central focus—Cocteau's ironic masking of meaning behind the seemingly innocuous fairy-tale language of childhood. Keller has done much to re-affirm Cocteau's importance for American independent filmmakers.

And as for Cornell, his films have been (relatively speaking) in circulation only recently and much of his *oeuvre*, discovered posthumously, is ambiguous in terms of its state of completion, and how seriously the artist himself took it. Cornell himself was not one to insist on the importance of his films. On the contrary, he often apologized for them and was reluctant to screen them. This volume continues the case both for the immense interest of the films themselves as well as for the key role they play in understanding Cornell's more celebrated box constructions. (And here one must also credit the groundbreaking essays of Annette Michelson and P. Adams Sitney.) Whatever one might think of his films, cinema was a medium that held a lifelong fascination for Cornell the artist.

This review of Marjorie Keller's *The Untutored Eye: Childhood in the Films of Cocteau, Cornell and Brakhage* (New Brunswick: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986) was written in 1986 for *Field of Vision*, edited by Robert Haller. Since the issue of *Field of Vision* has not yet been printed, Haller kindly released the essay to the *Millennium Film Journal* as part of our tribute to Marjorie Keller.

And hard as it may be to believe, despite the stature of Stan Brakhage as an innovative film artist, a stature which Keller quite rightly assumes, he remains a controversial figure (a form of compliment), adulated by some, barely tolerated by others. Curiously, within the avant-garde film community, young filmmakers often complain that Brakhage gets too much attention, and outside of it, half of those one talks to who profess to know something about film, know Brakhage only as a name. The author's analysis of a fairly recent Brakhage film, *Murder Psalm* (1980), which comes near the end of the book, is easily one of the most penetrating studies of any Brakhage work. Perhaps much to the discomfort of some young practitioners who would feel more at ease with a Brakhage who was passé, part of the originality of Keller's study lies in the fact that she forcefully shows us a master whose work is far from over and who is even capable of deftly moving into new terrain. In *Murder Psalm*, Brakhage has "defied time" by appropriating an age-old form—the found-footage collage film—developed by others (Cornell, for one), and yet has managed to create something fresh which is wholly his own.

Certainly for those already familiar with Cocteau, Cornell and Brakhage, right from the start Keller's theme will seem apt and illuminating. Each of these quite different filmmakers displays what really amounts to an overt interest in childhood on a number of levels. Most obviously, this can be directly seen in terms of content, e.g., Cocteau's retelling of a children's story in *Beauty and the Beast*, the pubescent female protagonists in a number of Cornell films, and the enormous number of Brakhage works devoted to studying his own children. Keller cites many more instances, most of a far subtler cast.

More interesting are the formal concerns each filmmaker manifests which are related to the distinctly imaginative mode of a child's thinking and seeing. One such instance, out of several which Keller discusses, links all three filmmakers and is best illustrated by way of Cocteau's childhood memories of sitting invisibly perched in a staircase and playing "visual games" with adults viewed at a distance in the vestibule of his suburban home, or even more tellingly, simply watching his mother dress for a night out. Coming to terms with this particular kind of passive, secretive and thus quasi-voyeuristic "looking," to a varying degree part of any child's world, especially when he or she is trying to unravel the mysteries of adulthood, helps to define the way each filmmaker views the unique status of cinematic imagery. The celebrated sequence entitled "Hotel des Folies-Dramatiques" in *Blood of a Poet*, in which the protagonist peers into a number of rooms from a hotel corridor seems to give almost a literal illustration of Cocteau's *obiter dictum* that cinema is an experience viewed through a keyhole.

By the same token, the protagonist in Cornell's *Rose Hobart*, while not strictly speaking a voyeur, is noticeably passive and vulnerable in a naive, childlike way. Her one real activity is looking. Vaguely

threatening “adults” surround her in varying configurations in a dream-like chain of suggestive, but ambiguous, non-confrontations. By commencing the film with a metaphoric “framing” image of a group of people “star gazing” with telescopes, Cornell seems to place the typical moviegoer in the position of his filmic protagonist. Perhaps because *Rose Hobart* has been discussed by other writers and because the film doesn’t directly fit into Keller’s theme (the female “lead” isn’t a child after all), she has not offered a detailed study of it in her chapter on Cornell. Justified or not, the omission of the film Keller calls Cornell’s masterpiece, is one reason she mentions but then downplays the theme of “looking” in Cornell’s work. I find this unfortunate, but then again this particular work is emphasized well enough in P. Adams Sitney’s essay, “The Cinematic Gaze of Joseph Cornell.”

Through Keller’s canny reading, Brakhage becomes an interesting variant on this theme of the passive, secretive gaze—for in serving as his own protagonist-behind-the-camera as it were, Brakhage manages to reverse the terms. The filmmaker/gazer identifies with his child subjects (usually his own children) in quest of an imaginative seeing which has not yet been vitiated by a corrupted, conceptual knowledge of the world, but he cannot so easily recreate cinematically the child looking perplexed on the world of adults. Somewhat tragically, he remains stuck in expressing the position of a perplexed and troubled adult gazing on the world of children in a search for self-understanding and self-validation. For Keller, the film which is a real crux here is *The Weir-Falcon Saga*. There, as Brakhage’s camera focuses on his ill son (who between tears gazes resentfully into the lens), we become painfully aware of the father as obsessed “looker” who seeks to understand his son and his illness in such a moment rather than to put the camera down and take a more active, fatherly role in comforting him.

In Keller’s reading, part of Brakhage’s obsession with childhood is rooted in the artist’s knowledge that he was an adopted child who has never learned the circumstances of his own birth. In a similar fashion (I am simplifying the argument) Keller ventures psychological motivations lying behind the other two filmmakers’ cinematic concerns. In a heavily Freudian reading, Keller portrays Cocteau’s work as manifesting elements of a seemingly textbook case of the scopophilic narcissist. By way of the psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel, Cornell’s interest in centering his films on young heroines (whose gender is often expressed in ambiguous terms) can be seen to parallel quite closely the fantasies of a son as he imagines himself in the guise of a rival sister whom he sees as better loved by his parents. Keller relies heavily on the literature of psychoanalysis and the critical works it has engendered. She makes no claim to being a biographer (though at times her readings seem to beg for it), but rather she uses psychoanalytic theory as an interpretative tool which opens up meaning. Herein lies a strong theoretical risk taken throughout the entire volume; thanks to the author’s painstaking and coherent mounting of evidence, she pulls it off.

Perhaps because Brakhage is a living contemporary, and incidentally a friend of the author, who has published his own theoretical musings on the medium, Keller's study of him is less dependent on a psychoanalytic point of view. Rather than employing Freud, Fenichel, et al., she uses Brakhage's own writings. Particularly impressive is the way that she manages to find a wealth of insight in Brakhage's book, *Film Biographies*, which Keller is right to point out is as much (if not wholly) about Brakhage himself, as it is about the various celebrated directors who are the volume's ostensible subjects. For example, Keller catalogues the numerous fictional "births" Brakhage narrates for each of the filmmakers, events he relates with no apology for the total lack of documentary evidence. It seems as if the only birth Brakhage was not present at was his own (in short: who can remember his own birth?). Thus, in retelling everyone else's to make up for this absence, Brakhage relates in symbolic fashion his own imagined traumatic beginning. In Brakhage's mythic scheme, any artist's films are a vast clue towards understanding an unknown, critical moment of genesis. In an ingenious extension of such a line of thinking, Keller notes that Brakhage seems obliged to say that each of his films "[has] been given to him" just as he had been "given to" his parents in adoption. With such a supposedly privileged status, it is no wonder that for Brakhage the cinematic medium serves to track down otherwise unsolvable personal mysteries.

Keller makes no explicit statement to this effect, but the upshot of her psychologizing is to demonstrate that in comparison with Brakhage, both Cornell and Cocteau have a limitation—not a limitation of style but one of sensibility, and thus of artistic achievement in its deeper sense. Cornell and Cocteau become case studies, brilliant ones—but case studies nevertheless. Both seem a little dishonest in their treatment of childhood—for they remain untroubled by the act of regression implicit in their idealization and recreation of a child's imaginative activity. True, there is a tremendous irony in the works of both filmmakers; for them, "childhood" is perhaps merely a marvelous dissembling rhetorical guise for hiding penetrating or forbidden truths. Nevertheless, we are left with two stories of repression. One is the anti-intellectualism of Cocteau, who denounced Freud and other rational "interpreters" in the name of the mysterious creative process in all its sanctity. Here is the other story in Keller's compact exposition:

Cornell sought to reveal himself through the veil of childhood. His sexuality was massively repressed; nevertheless, it often shone through when he chose images of and for children. It was as if in the safety of fantasies and amusements surrounded by innocence, one would not notice the libido that drove them. And by and large Cornell was right. Although it has become commonplace to point to hidden motives for his work, no one has made a systematic analysis of how sexuality operates in his boxes, collages, or films. Exhibitionism, voyeurism, and

their repression are consistently at work when he presents children. They are equally at work when he makes things for children. In the films, both the quality of images and their juxtapositions to one another reveal his desire. At the same time, they also defend against it. It is not the intention here to make a detailed analysis of Cornell's sexuality. It is important, however, to point out those places in the films where a sexual analysis seems inevitable, and those unifying images which illuminate Cornell's sexual motivation, which extends beyond an individual film.

What follows is the author's complex, compelling analysis along these lines. But isn't there only half a story here? Where in this scheme does Cornell ever really consciously confront the ramifications of what he is doing? In her chapter on Cocteau, appropriately entitled "Concealed Admissions," a phrase which could have served equally well for Cornell, Keller suggests that there were things Cocteau as artist would just as soon not face as well. For both, childhood was a cloak of "safety." Indeed, Keller's thesis is so convincing that she has managed to show us the price Cornell and Cocteau had to pay for their particularly witty manner of expression, namely the shutting out of a whole range of so-called adult realizations.

Since Keller frequently cites the complex role of childhood imagination in Romantic literature, it is only fair to make a couple of qualifications which I think she misses. There is no doubt that the Romantics viewed childhood as a moment of fecund imaginative creativity which is nostalgically mourned as a lost paradise. But the major Romantics ultimately faced adulthood as a place in which the imaginative life could be re-won on stronger, more meaningful terms—for there the imagination is coupled with the supposedly antithetical value of reason and critical understanding. Since it faces head on that which threatens to destroy it, the imaginative life of adulthood is a riskier business. But by the same token the rewards are richer, one reward being a kind of freedom the child really never has, i.e., the child is trapped by his comparatively febrile imagination in which the world is read egocentrically. And at any rate, the Romantics saw a highly active imagination, whether for child or adult, as a mixed blessing, since with it can come isolation and sullenness as much as vitality.

Perhaps it is unfair to compare Cornell and Cocteau to the great Romantic tradition (Keller mentions Goethe as a possible influence on Cornell), but the relation helps to put Brakhage's own achievement into relief, since of the three filmmakers, it is he who more honestly faces the dilemma that regression (symbolic or otherwise) is neither a possible answer nor desirable. Like countless other writers on Brakhage, Keller quotes the famous opening of *Metaphors on Vision*, "Imagine an eye unruléd..." but stops the citation just short of a line worth emphasizing as much as what has gone before: "But one can never go back, not even in imagination. After the loss of innocence, only the ultimate

of knowledge can balance the wobbling pivot.” Keller herself demonstrates Brakhage’s unswerving stance on the side of knowledge, as it were, since she astutely notes the pervasiveness of “fear” or “terror” in Brakhage’s concept of childhood. Thus Brakhage faces the fact that a child is often the “victim” of his imagination and thus hardly “unruled.” Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, that important film in Keller’s analysis, *The Weir Falcon Saga*, shows Brakhage’s relation to his child subject as being a troubled one. In *Soldiers and Other Cosmic Objects* (1977), a film which Brakhage has cited as being related to *The Weir-Falcon Saga*, the same son as in the earlier film (as far as I can recall) comes to a sense of his own individuality by way of a critical confrontation with the uniformity (a Brakhage pun) of school life. The son’s new-found awareness of self, certainly a Romantic desire (and curse) is part of his “fall” into the world of reason. Or, to put it in other terms, despite his egocentrism and imaginative energy, can the unself-conscious child, strictly speaking, be considered a true individual? Reason must be a part of any notion of the Romantic imagination, which is why, in his notes appending this particular film, Brakhage rather ironically says, “I think of it as a work that Ludwig Wittgenstein might have found more than enjoyable.”

But it is in Keller’s excellent analysis of *Murder Psalm* that we see Brakhage’s lifelong theme taking a major turn:

By using the psalms for his title, and by publicly announcing the origin of the film as a nightmare of murdering his mother, Brakhage directs our inquiry into the film in specific ways. **Murder Psalm** is a film made when most of his children were grown. By the time of **Murder Psalm**, Brakhage’s interest in child observation had waned. No longer does he have their presence before him, to carry the burden of his self-discovery through his observation of their own. He can now see the result of his own child rearing. His children were raised according to an ethos radically different from that under which he grew up. They are now grown. The rage of the film seems to be an outgrowth of his inability as a parent to break the cycle of sociological heritage and convention. The rage is directed against his mother who taught him the conventions he despises.

Here, Keller has convincingly demonstrated Brakhage’s capability for a genuinely tragic vision of life—a vision absent in Cocteau and Cornell’s ultimately more timid, perhaps self-deceiving films. I assert this despite, say, the disillusioned sorrow of the heroine at the end of *Rose Hobart*, or the chain of suicides which comprise the continuity of *Blood of a Poet*. I don’t wish to downgrade their achievement (I revere the films of both Cocteau and Cornell), nor do I wish to turn their films into something they were never meant to be, but all told, given the theme which Keller has shown to be so central to all three filmmakers’ works, Brakhage has the richest vision. I find this a meaningful distinc-

tion, despite the fact that obviously Cocteau and Cornell were anything but *naifs*, and Brakhage's defensive postures are legion. Least childlike in their surface language, Brakhage's films are actually more about childhood than Cocteau's or Cornell's. Although Brakhage uses childhood as a powerful metaphor, he is able to treat it in such a way that it avoids being merely a trope or disguise. Maddening as it might be, Brakhage-as-artist radiates a confidence missing in his repressed compatriots, to whom, one must nevertheless admit, he owes a lot. Keller doesn't directly assert what I have stated above (in fact she may vehemently disagree), but after closing the volume, this is one of the surprising and valuable impressions I came away with. It underscores the brilliant depth of her interpretation of Brakhage, a filmmaker to whom she could easily have devoted an entire book.

Actually, there are enough possibilities for a book on each of the three artists, such is the richness of Keller's ideas and the value of her theme. In her concluding chapter, Keller opens up the field to survey briefly the similar role childhood might play in several of the major American independent filmmakers: Deren, Peterson, Broughton, Anger, Jacobs, Smith, Mekas etc. I list the names because it helps to demonstrate just how useful Keller's volume can be even in coming to grips with several filmmakers who are not under discussion. One filmmaker not mentioned by Keller is the author herself, and I have no doubt that the very concerns Keller evinces here might prove a clue to some of her own films—most specifically *Daughters of Chaos*, which contains extensive footage of a pair of pubescent girls as well as home movie excerpts of Keller as a child. Will Keller's own critical observations be turned on her one day? In any event, the unique sensitivity of Keller's study must in part lie in the fact that she is one of those rare individuals who is both a practiced scholar and a practicing filmmaker.