

SPEAKING FROM THE OUTSIDE

San Francisco / **Barbara Kossy**

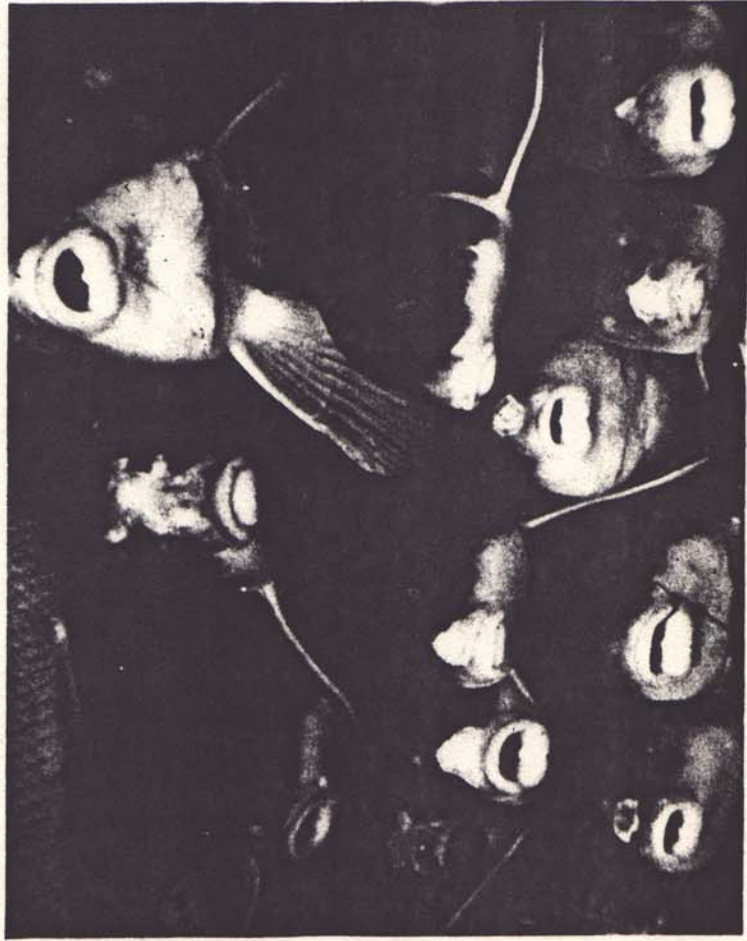
"...the 'truth' of our oppression cannot be 'captured' on celluloid with the 'innocence' of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured. New meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of film," wrote Clair Johnston in 1974—as quoted by Teresa De Laurentis in the introduction to her book, *All/ice Doesn't* (1984), which focuses on feminism, semiotics and cinema.

The visual language of art and film is theoretical, employing a set of agreed-upon symbols such as the conventions of Renaissance perspective or the once-revolutionary language of cubism. Within the language of film, for example, it is understood that a close-up of a face does not represent a huge severed head, but is a restricted view of part of an entire person. This set of filmic conventions was developed within the context of the sexism of Western culture. Although there is no doubt about the sexist content of many Hollywood movies, it is debatable that the conventions and the language of filmmaking (narrative structure, focus, camera angle, cuts and dissolves, etc.) are in themselves oppressive.

In June the San Francisco Cinema-

thèque presented six films by Linda Peckham, Lee Sokol, Su Friedrich, Lawrence Scheinfeld and Leslie Thornton. The program, titled *Different Places/Bad Places*,

"selections of film by (mostly) women engaging issues of gender, voice, pleasure and repression," was curated by Thornton, who recently taught film production in the



Su Friedrich, still from *But No One*, 1982, 16mm silent film, at the San Francisco Cinematheque.

Semiotics Program at Brown University.

In the program notes, Thornton states, "All of the films being shown tonight are somehow concerned with speaking, and speaking from the 'outside.' They resist or reject conventional relationships to language and dominant culture, and to a fixed form or structure." Thornton does not state it directly, but based on other material I have read (*Heresies #16/Film Video*), I assume that she is in agreement with Clair Johnston.

Using jump-cuts, words scratched into the film emulsion and irregular lighting and exposure, these filmmakers speak with the accepted vocabulary of avant-garde cinema, which is by definition nonconventional. As a group, the works possess a high degree of tension, tend toward the unattractive, and wallow in visual and conceptual ambiguity—qualities not inherent in being avant-garde.

Friedrich's *But No One* (1982) is the slimiest film I've ever seen. Darkly underexposed, it slips through the projector gate like old motor oil through a V-8 engine. With its dim streets and crowds of shining, gape-mouthed fish, it threatens like an unlit alley. In a final scene, it jerks to a halt as a dump truck pulls away from a

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Speaking from the Outside continued

rubble pile. I was glad it was over, but was it about more than darkness and fear?

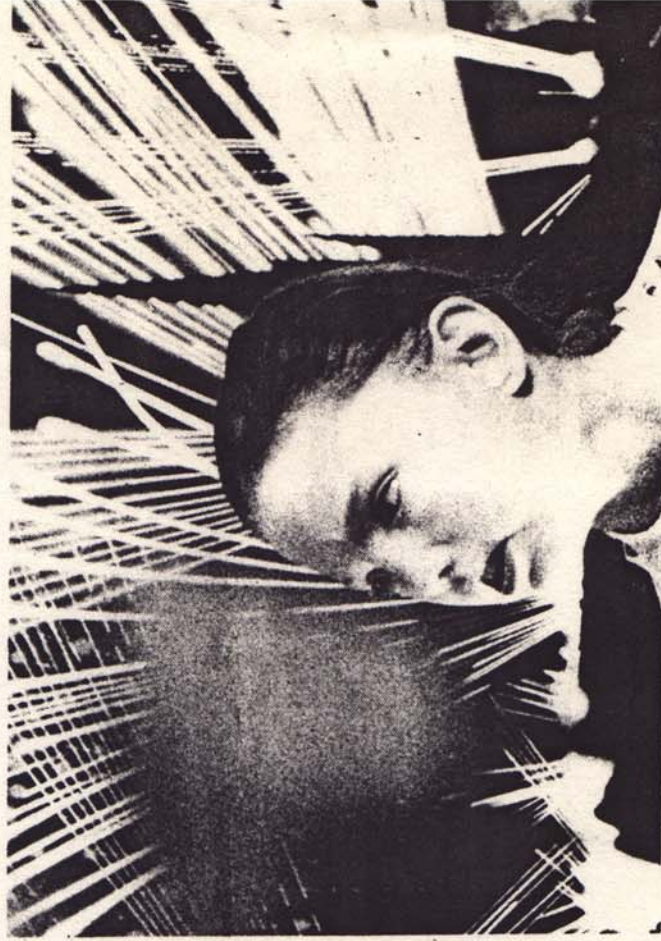
In *How I Got Here* (1984), by Sheinfeld, we witness the inhumanity of "cello torture" framed by unsettling askew shots of lawn chairs and sprinklers. As we see the fingers of a practicing cellist we hear a dissonant sound track. The taut and tortuous groans of a cello overlap the low moaning of the victim, and we see his anguished face. The target of this aural abuse is not restrained. Why does he stay? (Why do we stay in the theater enduring tortuous films?)

In *Aqui Se Lo Halla* (Here You Will Find It) (1982) by Lee Sokol, a Mexican man narrates, in English, the story of his attraction to a childhood teacher. He describes his feelings and the history of his unsatisfied desire for her as the viewer sees the hands of a man performing graceful coin tricks, and silky red cloth rubbing seminude bodies. Beating drums heighten the tension. Since there are no literal connections among the images, these juxtapositions create an ambience of sexual tension which, like the narrator's confession, has no resolution.

Thornton screened her own film, *Peggy*

and *Fred in Hell* (1984), a twenty-minute "autonomous sequence from a feature-length work-in-progress," at the end of the evening. While we hear a collaged sound track of operatic arias mingled with samba music and a spoken scientific inquiry into the nature of the human voice, we see images of vibrating human larynges, fluttering like hungry sea creatures. A jumbled still life with a flickering TV appears. The film cuts to a boy, slightly cross-eyed, who wears a white suit jacket over a T-shirt. With little self-consciousness, he sings a variety of ballads and children's songs. He chomps peanuts for rhythmic emphasis in this charming, yet eerie, performance. After a transition to a second still life, this time obscured by brambles, we meet another singer. She is a slight young girl with tightly braided hair. The boy's gaze was outward, but she is totally self-absorbed as she sings the popular hit, "Billie Jean" by Michael Jackson, but sings it more as a chant or incantation. Although the images have gravity and do refer to the act of speaking, overall the film is disjointed. Thornton speaks from outside my realm of experience, using a language that I don't understand.

All the work presented was disturbing and tense, and filled with unresolved conflict. This work may be successfully "disrupting the fabric of male bourgeois cinema," but I have yet to discover the "new meanings." □



Leslie Thornton, still from *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, film, at the San Francisco Cinematheque.