

Notes on Four Films by Rudy Burckhardt

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Most histories of the avant garde cinema neither discuss nor make mention of Rudy Burckhardt's films. Burckhardt has made approximately 50 films since 1936 and, by choice, maintained relative anonymity. His films, *Haiti* (1939), *Montgomery, Alabama* (1941), and *Looking at Trinidad* (1942), have been shown in 1978 with one of his latest films, *Good Evening Everybody* (1977). While some critics insist that the American avant garde film is in a state of stagnation, *Good Evening Everybody* stands as an example of remarkable vitality.

Many of Burckhardt's films are meticulously constructed through the organization and juxtaposition of street scenes, people, and buildings. Photographs of Paris rooftops, done in 1934, are Burckhardt's earliest examples of architectural landscapes. His images are best described as straightforward and simple. For instance in *Haiti* the composition begins with stationary long shots of empty streets, accompanied by Eric Satie's piano music, evoking a sense of starkness and isolation. Medium shots of building facades from street level follow, as people walk through the frames' space. The subject of this initial section is the steady movement of people and cars, and the different architectural structures. The film's next section starts with medium close-ups of doors and store fronts, then proceeds to close-ups of columns, railings, corner brick sculptures, and stone designs. In *Haiti*, it's immediately evident that Burckhardt foregoes any cultural or political perspective. Rather, he constructs the film in sections or categories, with each section presenting a specific structure in terms of subject, shot distance, and composition. The formal qualities of each section are the primary concern of editing, foregoing a linear cause and effect relationship between shots. Burckhardt has stated that the subject matter of his films is:

... everybody just the way they are at the moment... There is no connection to anything but what is there at the moment... Whatever happens in the frame is the subject.

Visual stimulation is derived from the precise and unpretentious nature of images—a simple representation of what is.

Haiti's next major section postulates the filmmaker as a conscious observer, a witness of people, places, and things. In medium shot, the camera confronts

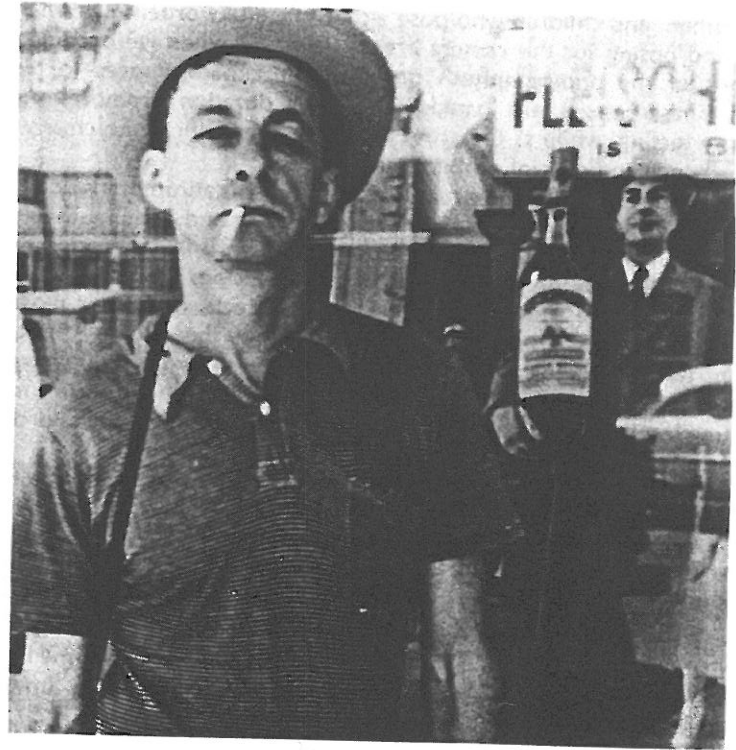
men, women, and children who pose either gracefully or tensely. When their staring and posing for the camera breaks down, or when we become overly conscious of the photographer's presence, Burckhardt moves to his next subject. These images are paradoxical. Their duration promotes a gentle revelatory feeling, while at the same time the compositions are clearly under the dominance and control of the filmmaker.

Developed sectionally, the structure of *Haiti* resists abrupt transitions. Some sections overlap to varying degrees, slowly asserting and defining their forms. For *Haiti*, *Montgomery, Alabama*, and *Looking at Trinidad*, hesitance within the sections' transitions is the primary form of visual tension. Burckhardt allows just enough time for the viewer to recognize the objects, design, or movement within the frame. Each image enters and develops the category through its duration. The succeeding images then support the unity of the framework in which we recognize and understand each shot in the section. In this manner, the editing instills the ordinary with an expressive dimension which Burckhardt believes to "come naturally out of the scene."

Burckhardt made *Montgomery, Alabama* in black and white and color while serving in the Army. Two of the film's major sections are the rapid movement of cars and people in the city, and billboards, painted signs, and store windows. In the second category, Burckhardt develops subdivisions. For example, a series of images will depict window signs advertising merchandise or signifying what race is allowed in a store. The film ends with a segment of medium shots, then close-ups, isolating those parts of walls where brick color changes from one building to the next. The Ragtime music played throughout the sections furnishes a rhythmic background for the pace of editing.

Looking at Trinidad is formally constructed in sections like the previous two films, but possesses a more distinctive unifying structure. The alternating rhythms of Calypso music supply assorted frameworks for editing, with the opening and closing sections comparing the urban and rural landscape. Relying on long and medium shots, Burckhardt starts with images of populated streets, crowded rows of shacks and narrow walkways. Increasingly broader long shots of open fields and mountain ranges conclude the film. The middle sections develop precise patterns. Signs of different colors and shapes advertising "Chinese and English Goods" are intercut with advertisements for specific goods. At some point, the viewer suddenly realizes Trinidad's dependence on buying and selling. The succeeding category is developed in counterpoint as Burckhardt presents a series of signs reading, "Stick No Bills". The duration of this section reveals the precision of sectional editing. Shots of "Stick No Bills" escalate until the comic opposition and variety of images contrast effectively with the preceding section. The next to last group of images are close-ups of exterior building walls, where an irregular line divides one color brick from an adjoining different color brick. Unlike the section in *Montgomery, Alabama*, the camera pans slightly left or right over the dividing line, adding movement to the abstraction of line and color.

Looking at Trinidad has a spatial design analogous to the structure of a vortex. Long shots start the film with a relatively open space and become more diminishing as the camera frames individual people. A progressively flatter space dominates with close-ups of signs and walls. Then a rapid opening up of



Rudy Burchardt, 1961

image depth in long shots concludes the film. This structure runs parallel to passing the center point of a vortex where perspective is immediately seen as global and direction in space expansive.

In the past, Burckhardt's films have been misclassified as travelogues and travel slides. Although these films are not radical, assertive editing differentiates them from simple travelogues. In these films, sequential causality and narrative space is ignored in favor of categorical structuring. Sectional editing gives the subject matter a formal meaning while refusing the intrusion of narrative circumscription.

In *Good Evening Everybody*, the sporadic appearance of a young woman eating, working, arguing and socializing provides a temptation towards a narrative reading of events. Her activities are juxtaposed with other events and images such as circus acts, a trip to Hollywood, a country fair, Alex Katz painting in his studio, a baseball game, and urban and nature imagery. It becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to infer or read a coherent narrative between the sporadic appearances of the woman and other events and images. The film's highly disjunctive editing consistently subverts a narrative reading. Burckhardt's editing functions primarily in a manipulative mode through the expressive qualities of image associations. Burckhardt never veers from the observation of people, objects, and events. His emphasis on the filmmaker as conscious

observer is a doubling of his characters' desire to observe (in such places as the circus and Hollywood's back lots).

Even before the first image appears, the film's title establishes a narrative expectation. When the opening shot of a sunset appears, an expectation of oncoming evening is automatically assumed. Burckhardt subverts this expectation by having the sun rise in fast motion. The creation and defiance of expectation is an ironic tool utilized in the film. A series of autonomous images follow with no apparent structural/content relationship. The fast pace of editing regulates how the viewer reads each image, e.g. reducing viewer attention to object recognition.

A delay in this quick process of seeing and identifying is caused by a lengthy shot of three branches with their leaves fluttering persistently against the sky. The prolongation of the shot bypasses a quick identification of the image and makes the viewer recognize the image's expressive importance. This contrast between a fast editing pace and a delay or slower pace indicates Burckhardt's total control over the viewer's reading of images.

Burckhardt's evolving position as observer of events makes his camera appear intrusive at times. In the country fair sequence, members of the audience are invited to participate in a weight-lifting contest. Burckhardt humorously presents the contest by observing the audience observe. The scene ends when one person, uninterested in the weight-lifters' hopeless attempts, turns away from the stage, noticing immediately the camera directed at her. She quickly changes direction, evading its intrusion.

Burckhardt considers different perspectives on seeing or observing throughout the film. In one sequence the young woman is naked, examining herself with a hand mirror. While she innocently looks at herself, the camera takes a voyeuristic perspective, viewing her from various angles and at times moving slowly up her back. Her act of looking is a reflexive gesture on Burckhardt's role as voyeuristic observer. Observing events is the film's basic subject and is intercut with the filmmaker's voyeurism. For instance, the montage of the woman naked is expanded by intercutting reactions of an audience at a baseball game. By juxtaposing images of the pitcher, ballplayers sliding and bunting, and the audience staring in suspense and cheering, with close-ups of the woman's face, hips, and breasts, multiple associations are created along the sight lines or movements of the players, audience and the woman.

Manipulative editing takes the form of associative patterns which regulate the viewer's overall reading of images. A disjunctive comparison between events serves to consistently subvert narrative causality. For example, shots of Alex Katz working in his studio preparing paints, drawing outlines on a large canvas, and applying paint, are edited with the woman going to a refrigerator, taking out and cutting up vegetables and cooking. Her actions are understandable, in this part of the film, only within an associative context, whereby the final outcome, a meal, is juxtaposed to another creation, Katz's painting. The concluding images, occurring at different times, present an ironic contrast of the aesthetically pleasing painting and the repulsive bowl of food. Both creative acts engage the viewer as they are being made, just as the editing directs the viewer's position toward the specific associative elements.

Because of Burckhardt's role of observer, representational images always have a direct reference to a specific reality. He humorously employs this type of representational imagery by having a newspaper cut-out of ex-Mayor Beame's head walk past images of New York's slums, Lincoln Center, and the World Trade Center respectively. In front of the slums, Beame mumbles disapproval; at Lincoln Center he states "That's better"; and in front of the Trade Center he expresses pleasure at the magnificent site, and announces his running again for mayor.

Like the beginning of the film, the ending evokes a narrative expectation. Over haunting Wagnerian music a car mysteriously follows a bus on a highway. The camera's angle from the back seat of the car heightens suspense. As the audience begins to anticipate the car's next move, it speeds up as if to pass the bus. The music reaches a crescendo and the camera rapidly pans up only to present a view of the Grand Canyon. Expectation quickly dissipates. A narrative event is shunned in favor of observing the Grand Canyon. The Canyon is presented as Burckhardt's most spectacular "sight", which he parodies with a shot of a sign indicating that we are positioned at the highest peak. Men, women, and children are seen looking down, drawn to this magnificent view at sunset. From this image, Burckhardt cuts to the woman's bed, connecting the perspective of the tourists and the film viewer from the Canyon site to a man lying in her bed. She joins him and the film ends. Uninterested in constructing a linear narrative out of the events from the woman's life, Burckhardt further reinforces his stance as observer. Burckhardt's manipulative editing organizes his observations into complex associative designs, regulating how the viewer is to interpret images. This obsessive observation can even be understood as a metaphor for the role of the film spectator himself.

Note

Quotes by Burckhardt taken from "Rudy Burckardt", by Lucy Lippard, *Art in America* March/April 1975.

ERRATA

On pg. 20, line 19, of the Peter Gidal interview (MFJ Vol. 1, No. 2) "one can't" should read "one can".

AUTHOR'S ADDENDUM

Dominique Noguez has asked MFJ to print the following changes regarding his essay *The Experimental Cinema in France*, (MFJ Vol. 1, No.2). 1. By the end of the sixties, the young French filmmakers were more interested in subverting narrative (in disnarratives, to use Robbe-Grillet's term) or in developing a political and militant cinema than in making purely experimental films. 2. Among the painters involved with film, Christian Boltansky and Jacques Mondry, above all, have created an outstanding work. 3. The filmmaker of *Sensitometrie I, II, III*, etc. and *Chromaticite I and II* is Patrice Kirchofer.