

Joseph Strick's
The Savage Eye and Muscle Beach
Wednesday, February 18, 2009 – Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Uniquely intersecting the realm of documentary and narrative cinema, *The Savage Eye* pairs three innovative filmmakers (Joseph Strick, Ben Maddow and Sidney Meyers) with three stellar cinematographers (Haskell Wexler, Helen Levitt and Jack Couffer) to create a snapshot of late-1950s American life in transition. This masterpiece of *vérité* filmmaking, culled from discordant materials yet remarkably unified in a fictive context, remains as compelling today as the year of its initial release. We present *The Savage Eye* with Joseph Strick's earliest documentary short, *Muscle Beach*, both beautifully restored by the Academy Film Archive. (Jonathan Marlow)

Muscle Beach (1948) by Joseph Strick and Irving Lerner; 35mm, b&w, sound, 9 minutes, print from the Academy Film Archive

"In 1948, Joseph Strick and co-director Irving Lerner cast a more benign eye on a then-disreputable civic landmark, Muscle Beach, an outdoor gym on the sand with bleachers for spectators, just south of the Santa Monica pier. In those days, weight-lifting and gymnastics were sports for freaks and queers, but Strick and Lerner make them look wholesome, helped along by a buoyant, kitschy talking blues composed and sung by Earl Robinson, with lyrics by Edwin Rolfe. *Muscle Beach* captures a brief moment of innocence and optimism before the Korean War and the politics of hysteria it engendered." (Thom Andersen)

The Savage Eye (1959) by Joseph Strick, Ben Maddow and Sidney Meyers; 35mm, b&w, sound, 67 minutes, print from the Academy Film Archive

"Our first idea was Los Angeles as seen by Hogarth. The appurtenances have changed, but life is not so very different." (Joseph Strick, interviewed by Judith Christ, *New York Herald-Tribune*, June 5, 1960. Cited in Jonathan Rosenbaum: "*The Savage Eye / Shadows*," *The American New Wave: 1958–1967*, Melinda Ward, ed. 1982)

"An arresting, sometimes shocking illustration of the immutable fact that love or the absence of it is what makes everyone in this age of anxiety go round is starkly exposed in *The Savage Eye*, which opened at the Fifty-second Street Trans-Lux Theatre yesterday.

"Although it is clouded by an overabundantly lush, consciously poetic narration and it is as cold as a scalpel in its dissection, this dramatized documentary of a year in the life and thoughts of a young divorcée is obviously a labor of love and a forceful display of cinematic pyrotechnics.

"The independent, dedicated triumvirate who made it—Sidney Meyers, Ben Maddow and Joseph Strick—appear to be devoted more to truth than to the commercial advantages of gentle fiction, and in their photographic essay they have come up with a raw, Daumier-like commentary on the disenchanting, the disillusioned, the hopeless and the lost people of contemporary society. Their hearts are in their work but they emerge as dispassionate research scientists rather than poets with stars in their eyes.

“Let there be no doubt that they are artists. Produced for about \$65,000 over a period of approximately four years of week-ends, or whatever time was available for all concerned, *The Savage Eye* represents the efforts of a variety of professionals. Mr. Maddow has written the scripts for such noted films as *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Intruder in the Dust* and *The Unforgiven*. Mr. Meyers has directed many documentaries and is known especially for his work on *The Quiet One*. And Mr. Strick has directed such caustic fact films as *Muscle Beach* and *The Big Break*.

“Their present view of life is focused on Los Angeles, to which our soul-tortured, mind-weary heroine has fled for surcease from an explosive end to more than nine years of marriage. Needless to say, this teeming cosmopolis is an iridescent mine of faces that obsessed both the aforementioned film makers and their many able photographers, including Helen Levitt, Jack Couffer, Haskell Wexler, Sy Wexler and Joel Coleman.

“This human panorama has stood them in good stead. The array not only points up their somber, Gothic tale but also gives it a large part of its basic drama. In the urgent, strained, stream-of-consciousness dialogue between the narrator (Gary Merrill), who is never seen, and our pained, groping heroine who is living on ‘bourbon, cottage cheese and alimony,’ an observer is given a startling editorial on hopelessness that slowly evolves into a semblance of hope.

“She is a drifting type, who attempts a telephonic reconciliation with her former husband, learns that he is happy without her, and then wanders through a succession of empty diversions. The diversions include a liaison with a married man she loathes, vacuous nights and days in poker parlors, strip-tease joints and, finally, a blatantly crass faith healer’s congregation that drives her away from this ‘nothingness’ in a wild ride that ends in a near-fatal automobile accident. But, in recuperating from her injuries, she begins to have ‘the courage to say no to nothingness’ and accepts a positive view on living.

“Barbara Baxley, as the strained, weary and confused lady of sorrows, is the center of attention. An actress who has seen service in *East of Eden*, the theatre and many television dramas, she speaks her lines in narration but not directly. She does so with enough restraint and sensitivity to register both the poignance and tragedy of her situation. Mr. Merrill’s narration as her inquisitor and conscience is also quiet, but pointed. And, Herschel Bernardi, as Miss Baxley’s lustful swain, is simply direct and obvious.

“However, it is from the photographic and sound-track concentration on the Hogarthian faces of Los Angeles that *The Savage Eye* derives most of its ferocity. The rabid wrestling-match audiences; the middle-aged and elderly ladies seeking improvement of gross bodies in beauty parlors; the sensuous writhings of Jean (Venus the Body) Hidey as she strips and teases in a burlesque joint, and, most effectively, the matter-of-fact faith healer who doles out wholesale blessings on the afflicted (done with a direct voice and sound track) are the most striking glints in *The Savage Eye*.

“The unloved who are the ‘heroes’ of *The Savage Eye*, like its driven heroine, are seen coldly and scientifically but, sadly enough, without warmth.” (A.H. Weiler: “Essay on Love: *The Savage Eye* Bows at Trans-Lux 52d,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 1960.)

“A bona fide modern hero—the female—has emerged in motion pictures.

“Her distinguishing characteristic is the aspiration to love. In this aspiration she is not only participant and partner, but protagonist. When she assumes tragic grandeur she is a heroine, not according to the restricted definition, ‘the principal female character in a story’ but in the larger sense, ‘a woman of heroic character, a female hero.’ In these respects she is different from all other film conceptions of woman; her distinction might be properly fixed with the label, ‘nongenie.’ And

she is different from all other screen conceptions of the hero in that she is thoroughly modern, a brave new woman.

“Her appearance on the dramatic scene is significant for a number of reasons. As a modern hero, she is unique in fact and in fiction. In films, she is probably the most original and the most genuine article ever created.

“Seven film released from England, France and the United States within the past two years have contributed salient strokes to her portrait. Her fullest expressions have been *Room at the Top*, *The Fugitive Kind* and *Hiroshima, Mon Amor*. But early stages of her development may be traced in *Private Property*, *The Savage Eye*, *The Lovers* and *Look Back in Anger*.

“[...] *The Savage Eye* is the most literate vehicle of the nongenie. Here she realizes what narration calls ‘the agony of comprehension.’ Barbara Baxley goes through the mill and wails with both real love, which ends in divorce, and with ‘loveless love... masturbation by proxy,’ which ends in disgust. Waiting out her year of divorce, she scratches the depths of loneliness and disillusion. Her conscience, a male voice, tells her that she is on the wrong track, that she wants to be ‘beautiful, anaesthetized and happy,’ that she expects ‘love without pain.’ Her enlightenment arrives, too patly, through the catharsis of a near-fatal automobile accident. Despair turns to ‘the courage to say no to nothingness,’ and chronic misanthropy is transformed to indiscriminating brotherhood with mankind. She has not found love, but she has acquired the capacity for it. ‘How are you?’ she is asked, and she answers, ‘Alive.’ She is indeed conscious.” (A.J. Alexander: “A Modern Hero: The Nongenie,” *Film Culture*, vol. 22 & 23, Summer 1961.)

“Death, Birth, Sickness, Sex—everything acquires the color of a wax-museum. Even Sidney Meyers’ *The Savage Eye*, as it is, with its cynical detachment, can be explained only by the fact that it was shot in California.” (Jonas Mekas: “Cinema of the New Generation.” *Film Culture*, No. 21, Summer 1960.)

The prints for this screening are provided courtesy of the Academy Film Archive.

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