

Document Citation

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| Title | Films from underground |
| Author(s) | Richard Whitehall |
| Source | <i>Publisher name not available</i> |
| Date | |
| Type | article |
| Language | English |
| Pagination | |
| No. of Pages | 1 |
| Subjects | Belson, Jordan (1926-2011) |
| Film Subjects | Samadhi, Belson, Jordan, 1967 David holzman's diary, McBride, Jim, 1967 Masculin-féminin, Godard, Jean Luc, 1966 Moon 1969, Bartlett, Scott, 1969 Visions of eight, Clark, Jim, 1973 |

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FILMS FROM UNDERGROUND

Documentary, to the public, has always been something of a dirty word, something to be avoided. And I can't say I blame them much. A catalogue of stock shots held together by a gummy commentary is what one expects and, all too often, gets. Even the spread of hand-held cameras and the shift to cinema-verite haven't helped much, since cinema-verite has just as quickly bogged down in the cliches as the older, more impersonal forms of documentary. Cinema-verite has become almost the film-maker's excuse for mediocrity. Leacock and Pennebaker, the Maysles Brothers, it's almost become a case of, if you've seen one of their movies you've seen them all. The best cinema-verite seems to be that in which fiction is disguised into a close approximation of reality, Godard's *Masculine-Feminine*, Andy Warhol's *Bike Boy*, Stanton Kaye's *Georg and Brandy in the Wilderness*, James McBride's *David Holtzman's Diary* and *My Girlfriend's Wedding*.

The best cinema-verite I've seen in many months is certainly Bill Henderson's *Zelenka*, the study of a madly avant-garde composer who has become a pop rock star. Entirely spurious, but put together with all the skill and certainty Donn Pennebaker brought to that monstrously inflated study of Bob Dylan, *Don't Look Back* (which comes in for some sharp and well-placed knocks), Henderson and company kid the pants off the genre. Many of the new breed of documentarians remind me of nervous visitors who never know quite where to put their hand-held cameras. Henderson gets all the cliches off to a tee, and with such a deadly accuracy I'm sure *Zelenka* could be passed off on some unsuspecting audiences as the real thing.

The most interesting movement, though, coming out of the underground is the use of actuality as a means of penetrating to the consciousness. The greatest movie so far in this genre (and, for me, it was by far the finest film of any kind to be shown in 1968) is Jordan Belson's *Samedhi*, a Sanskrit word which means "that state of consciousness in which individual soul merges with the universal soul." The description may sound highfalutin, but the film is not. It is composed from shot of sunspots and nebulae — micro-photography of color — and becomes, in its final form, a mystical contemplation of the universe in which Belson communicates, more graphically than any other 20th century seer, the glory and wonder and glowing beauty of natural phenomena in infinite space. Much as I admire the work of men like Doug Trumbell, there is no doubt in my mind that Belson, working in his tiny studio-home in San Francisco, hardly allowing his films to be shown (since he thinks of them as records of their own discovery and is reluctant to have them treated as public amusements), is one of the supreme artists of this century.

Belson has been a great influence on the younger San Francisco film-makers, diffused into Scott Bartlett's *Moon '69* and Will Hindle's *Watersmith*. Both of these movies start on a note of actuality, from recognizably documentary footage, but they take the reality into surrealism and abstraction. The drug culture gave us "head" movies, meant to be looked at while high on something or other (and pretty awful most of them were with their psychedelic side effects of loose thinking and formless technique), but the new "mind" movies — seeking to penetrate, through an outer shell, the appearances of reality — are the first stirrings of a completely new form of documentary.

Samedhi began with a huge explosion of crimson-yellow cloud, natural and uncontrollable forces unleashed, to wind noises on the soundtrack. *Watersmith* opens to the throb of an electronic score, with the diffusion of aquatic green light over the locker-room of a swimming pool. Hindle turns his film into a celebration of the mystery and freedom of bodies moving through water, the implacable grace of human forms freed from gravity. There hasn't been a movie quite like this since the swimming and diving sequences from Leni Reifenstahl's *Olympiad*. But Hindle brings a sensuousness of color and a mastery of new visual techniques to his work. The actuality of a swimmer diving into the water will change to an abstract form as the body becomes waterborne; sometimes the abstraction is in the angles, looking straight down on swimmers churning a surface; and often a body will move through water, rippling between reality and abstraction. Hindle's last movie, the highly-regarded *Chinese Fire-Drill*, was filmed in four days (although editing took eight months), runs 24 minutes, and cost \$280 in actual expenditure of cash. *Watersmith* was over a year in the making, cost considerably more, but is his best movie to date, and one of the loveliest of the year.

These movies are aiming at more than film journalism. And it is, perhaps, wrong to use them to beat film journalism over the head. But the documentary and the cinema-verites seem to be getting scrappier and bittier by the movie. *Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music* explores none of those things, and remains a superficial record of a remarkable singer. The only recent film of this type I can think of that added considerably to one's knowledge and understanding was 1968's *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger* — a bust theatrically, but a non-theatrical success — which explained the black position to whites more succinctly than any other film on the subject. Michael Wadleigh, largely responsible for that movie, is now busy on the forthcoming Warner film of the Woodstock Festival. By last week they had a five-hour rough-cut. And I hear it's pretty remarkable.