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AFA "New American
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SIDNEY PETERSON

Widely traveled and educated, Sidney Peterson has studied medicine, been a sculptor, a seaman, a newspaperman, and a draftsman for a naval architect. He has written a novel, *THE FLY IN THE PIGMENT*, and a notable article entitled "Note on Comedy in Experimental Film." Peterson ran the first film workshop at the California School of Fine Arts, founded a film company in Seattle, and ultimately went to Hollywood where he wrote cartoon scenarios for UPA and Walt Disney. Presently, he no longer makes films, instead, writes and lives in New York City.

What is remarkable and worth the attention of the serious film-goer in the work of Peterson is his method of expressing emotions. Like a painter, Peterson uses formal arrangements of objects and images as the "meaning" of his films.

Peterson's use in his three black and white films—*THE POTTED PSALM* (co-directed with James Broughton), *MR. FRENHOFER AND THE MINOTAUR* and *THE LEAD SHOES*—of an anamorphic lens distorts by stretching and elongating figures and trees and other objects so that we see them with new eyes.

The Peterson lens emphasizes textures, faces, folds in garments in a way that turns what is "real" into an expressionist setting. Peterson also plays with speed and rhythms and runs his film backwards in spots. Yet none of it [is] . . . intent on tricks and effects.

Joseph Gelmis, *Newsday*

MR. FRENHOFER AND THE MINOTAUR

Lent by Grove Press, Inc.

1948 black & white 21 minutes
rental: \$25.00 sales: \$175.00

Peterson synthesized for *MR. FRENHOFER AND THE MINOTAUR* Balzac's story, "Le Chef-d'Oeuvre Inconnu," Pablo Picasso's engraving "Minotauromachia," and a Joycean monologue. The surrealist film concerns two real painters, Porbus and Poussin, and one imaginary one, Mr. Frenhofer, in an investigation of artistic sensibilities.

It was my decision to do a thing about the Balzac story, taking seriously as the theme of the story the conflict between Poussin's Classicism and its opposite. So, as strained through my mind, it became really a way of exploring the conflict stated in Rousseau's remark to Picasso: "We are the greatest painters; you, in the Egyptian manner; and I in the modern." In a sense, [I was] taking the quest for absolute beauty in the Balzac character and contrasting that with Picassoidal Classicism, the imitation of the "Minotauromachia."

Sidney Peterson

THE LEAD SHOES

Lent by Grove Press, Inc.

1949 black & white 17 minutes
rental: \$25.00 sales: \$250.00

The most accomplished work of America's foremost surrealist filmmaker. This is a hypnotic, obsessive nightmare of parricide and compulsive attempts to undo the deed. The basic images—the blood, the knife, the bread voraciously attacked—shock by their atavistic simplicity. The hallucinatory effect is reinforced by the extraordinary soundtrack, an enigmatic exploration of two old English ballads, scrambled in jam session style and interwoven with experimental sound.

Amos Vogel, *Film As A Subversive Art*

THE LEAD SHOES and *MR. FRENHOFER AND THE MINOTAUR* are spherical forms with a narrative drift. The narration, such as it is, suggests eternally fixed cycles of behavior; it is aligned with ritual and myth. In both films the vital clues to the visual action are buried in the soundtrack, which also has functions altogether separate from conveying information. The soundtracks dislocate the sequence of events, and through their anticipations of what is to be seen, they magnify the sense of the eternal and the cyclic. These two films are complementary in another way, using the Apollonian myth of Pygmalion and the Dionysian myth of Pentheus in disguised forms.

P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*



SIDNEY PETERSON AND JAMES BROUGHTON

THE POTTED PSALM

Lent by Grove Press, Inc.

1946 black & white 25 minutes
rental: \$25.00 sales: \$250.00

The necessary ambiguity of the specific image is the starting point. From a field of dry grass to the city, to a grave stone marked "Mother" and made specific by the accident ("objective hazard") of a crawling caterpillar, to the form of a spiral, thence to a tattered palm and a bust of a male on a tomb, the camera, after a series of movements parodic of the sign of the cross, fastens on the profile of a young man looking into a store window. All these scenes are susceptible of a dozen different interpretations based on visual connections. The restatement of shapes serves the general purpose of increasing the meanings of the initial statements. The connections may or may not be rational. In an intentionally realistic work the question of rationality is not a consideration. What is being stated has its roots in myth and strives through the chaos of commonplace data toward the kind of inconsistent allegory which is the only substitute for myth in a world too lacking in such symbolic formulations. And the statement itself is at least as important as what is being stated.

Sidney Peterson

... early slapstick in the movies, especially Chaplin's, had been one of Peterson's admirations, and he is well aware that his feelings for it have qualified his most serious work. The pun in the title shows with what vital relevance Peterson was always concerned with the Joycean neologism, which is the linguistic correspondent of Eisenstein's montage. Peterson is one of the most intellectual—or maybe I should say *conceptual*—Experimentalists. In *THE POTTED PSALM*, he and Broughton consciously played with allegoric and symbolic idea while relying mostly on intuition; that is, as in all their creative work, their premises were not altogether reasoned and schematic; the material constantly lay open to inspiration.

Parker Tyler, "Sidney Peterson"
Film Culture