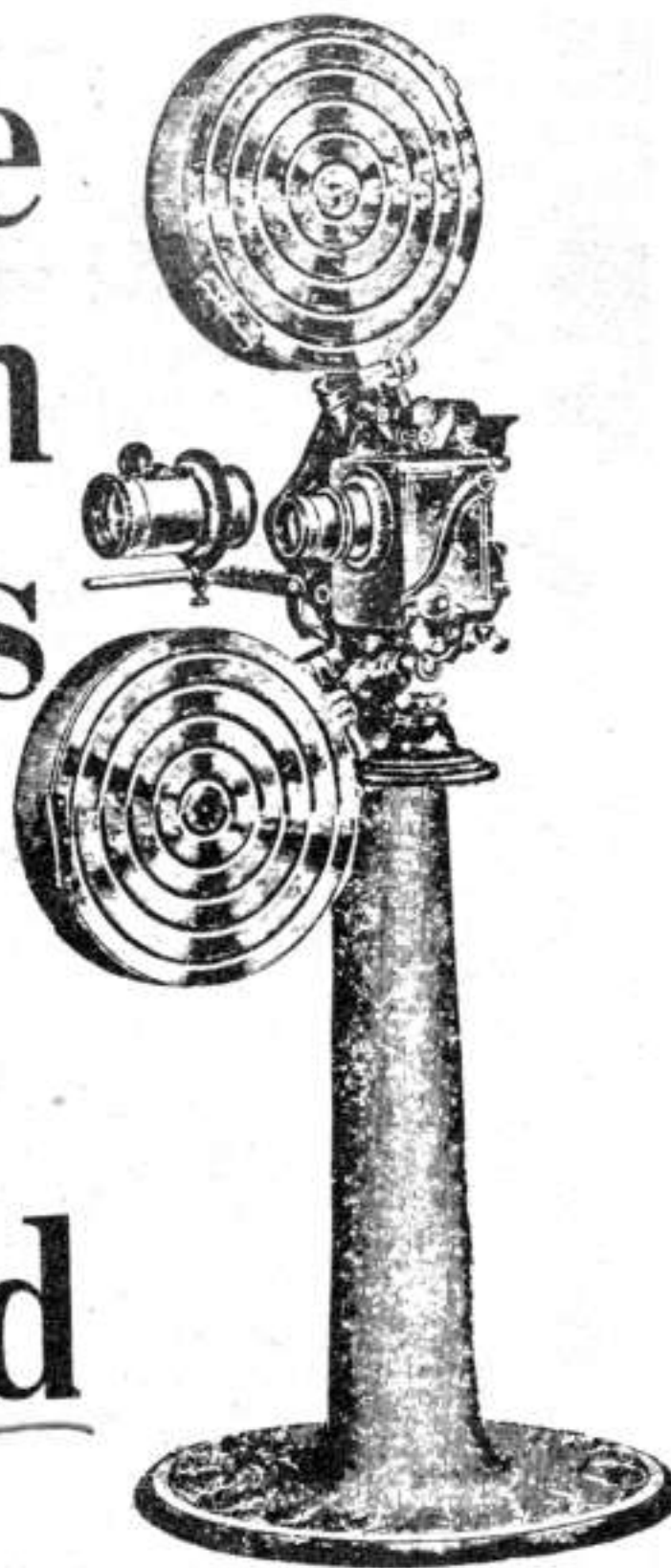


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Off the Beaten Tracks With Chick Strand



By Jace Gaffrey

The Film Forum (15 Vandam Street), which recently showed what is perhaps Werner Herzog's most interesting and invigorating film, *The Great Ecstasy of the Sculptor Steiner*, began a program of Chick Strand films December 9 which ended December 19. The concluding work, *Elasticity*, made in 1975 and running 22 minutes long, is in my opinion avant-garde cinema at its gaudiest and most obscure (I leave it to those more expert in the field to make final judgment), but the rest of the show I liked.

The first five Strand films represent the culmination of 10 years of filmmaking in Mexico. The first work on the program, *Anselmo* (1967), is dedicated to a Mexican friend, Anselmo Aguascalientes, who confided to Strand that his greatest wish was to own a tuba. A year later, Strand returned to Mexico and presented her friend his heart's desire. *Anselmo*, a four-minute film "in celebration of magic and tubas," is both a testament to that dream and a lyric on the dream's cultural and emotional implications. The fourth film, *Cosas de Mi Vida* (1975), presents us with a much fuller portrait of Anselmo and shows that his obsession for a tuba has since mushroomed into an obsession with acquiring all the various accoutrements of middle-class life: stereo, television, refrigerator, a modern-style mistress, etc. Hardly scabrous, but not altogether a happy story. The second film *Mosori Monila*, is a documentary on the deadly, deadeningly well-meaning efforts of a group of Franciscan missionaries to "civilize" a tribe of Venezuelan Indians living on the Orinoco River delta.

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Throughout the five Mexican films, Strand shows a fascination with the primitive, occultly mysterious aspects of Spanish-American life. The point of view is Rousseauist, sometimes tritely so, but the overall effect of the five films is one of photogenic power and evocative flavor. For instance, in *Mujer de Milfuegos* (*Woman of a Thousand Fires*) there are moments that border on being as dumb as the worst of Maya Deren, yet the film has a strong erotic undertow that keeps one fascinated.

The best sequence in the program is also in the best film, *Guacamole* (1975, 10 minutes). The scene, an eerie, hypnotic one, takes place in a corrida, between a matador and his bull. It is here that the two sides of Spanish-American culture are presented and paired off: the showy Europeanized opulence of the matador versus the primitive power of the bull. And it is here in the program that the five films crystallize, the drama reveals itself, the conflict resolves itself, and Mexico bleeds.

Sam Fuller's *Dead Pigeon on Beethoven Street* (1972) was shown at the Collective for Living Cinema (52 White Street) on December 4, and I'm wondering why the film hasn't found a general release. Some smart enterprising distributor ought to combine this crazy West German policier with Orson Welles's fascinating new film, *F for Fake*. *Dead Pigeon* has its share of problems, most notably a crippling self-awareness that invariably creeps into an American's work when he makes films abroad, but if there were only two reasons for seeing it they would be Christa Lang, Fuller's young wife, and the movie's chief femme attraction. Not since the days of Kate Manx in Leslie Stevens's *Private Property* has blowsiness been shown to such breathtaking advantage. □