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Lights up!

A few final words on the festival

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Pairing Manfred Kirchheimer's *Stations of the Elevated* with Errol Morris's *Vernon, Florida* on the same festival program must have been an act of deliberate mischief. *Stations of the Elevated* is a beautifully photographed, jazzily edited ode to subway graffiti, so conceptually banal yet so lofty in approach that it finally debases itself; the very slickness of the imagery becomes symptomatic of emptiness and dishonesty. *Vernon, Florida* is about banality, and its alchemy is the reverse; assuming no role other than that of a straightforward introduction to a dozen or so people living in a backwater town, it transcends itself to become a rich, humanitarian document.

Kirchheimer's miscalculations in *Stations* begin with an erroneous assumption of the knee-jerk liberal variety when he embraces subway graffiti as a social statement — proletarian art, perhaps — with no questions asked (or answered). As remarkable a phenomenon as it is, I am not convinced that subway graffiti isn't vandalism, but even if you accept it as a valid form of self-expression, it seems to me that blindly championing it is an awfully superfluous political gesture. Kirchheimer betrays his own sentimentality in this regard by condemning advertising — billboard art — with equal presumption. Unless you share Kirchheimer's biases regarding graffiti and advertising, his insistent comparisons of these two modes of graphic expression are meaningless, and the film quickly degenerates into an irritating, mindless montage, a "city symphony" painfully out of tune, despite Charles Mingus on the soundtrack. Actually, in this context even Mingus is reduced to a cliché.

Vernon, Florida, Errol Morris's second film (it follows *Gates of Heaven*), achieves its magic mostly by allowing people to talk. Morris must have a real knack for getting people to trust him, because they address his camera without a trace of self-protection. What they talk about are their interests, and what's astonishing is how these interests boil down to some kind of universal experience. One man is obsessed with hunting wild turkeys; a cop passes time lying in wait for speeders; a fundamentalist preacher analyzes the word "therefore." It would be unworthy of the film to label the common denominator beyond calling it metaphysical. Given that much, though, it's astounding that some people think Morris ridicules his subjects. It was no surprise, however, that those who attacked Morris at the press conference following the screening of his film and Kirchheimer's were the same people who thought that *Stations of the Elevated* had something to say about poverty. It comes down to this: either you see yourself as part of the larger Vernon community or you think that somehow you're elevated above it all. ●