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Sympathetic Cinema

Noel Carroll

(Chick Strand)
Millennium (Feb. 11)

Chick Strand is a West Coast filmmaker who, along with Bruce Baillie, helped found Canyon Cinema. As an undergraduate, she studied anthropology, an interest intimately related to her major theme — the biography of people from alien cultures. Yet, Strand doesn't pretend to be a social scientist. She is less interested in the place of the individual in the community and more concerned with personal stories, sadnesses and, above all, epiphanies. She gets close to her characters in every sense of the word, often shooting as near as six feet with a telephoto lens.

Cosas Se Mi Vida (175) is the biography of Anselmo. Born destitute and orphaned at seven, he enviously watches other children growing up with the benefits of food, family and education. Fortune deals him only one advantage, music, but he makes the most of it, centering his life and the lives of his children around it. As a father, music is the one skill that he can bequeath his heirs enabling them, by winning scholarships, to achieve both an education and an upwardly mobile future.

Anselmo's is the story of a father passionately dedicated to using his limited means to right the wrong of his own childhood in the lives of his children. He does not love his wife, but will not leave her. His children must not be abandoned. They will use his gift of music to find the sense of self-fulfillment that he can only have through them. We see photos of two sons who play in major symphony orchestras. These are followed by close shots of Indians dancing in multi-colored costumes. The screen is filled with bright, moving reds, greens and feathers, objective correlatives to the father's joy.

Anselmo tells his own story. This is matched with documentary footage, when Anselmo speaks of his adult life, but when speaking of his childhood, we see shots of children and places that are meant to stand for Anselmo's earlier experiences. Strand's style is based on mixing recording and representation. Her camera technique is striking for its intimacy. It is as if she literally wants to inhabit the lives of her subjects. The mouths and fingers of musicians are emphasized in enormous close-ups, a cinematic means for asserting what is key in Anselmo's life. Often her camera gets so close to details that they become abstractions. But these abstractions are not divorced from human emotions; they evoke the richness of felt experience in Anselmo's outwardly simple life.

Celebration is one of Strand's specialties. In *Anselmo* (1967) she captures the musician's euphoria when he is given a tuba. Mythically, he and Strand meet in the desert. Juxtaposed to and superimposed over this are all sorts of traditional symbols of exhilaration: a plane soaring, birds in flight, solarized horses running free, fireworks, in short, a barrage of images associated with joy. Even though the symbolism is commonplace, it is effective just because it is so extreme, overwhelming the screen in torrents of imagery that literalizes Anselmo's overflowing emotions.

In *Mujer de Milfuegos* (1976), Strand shifts from the representation of ecstasy to that of despair. A woman dressed in black, presumably in Mexico, walks through the arcades of her villa like a specter haunting life. Except for a couple of shots of the hand of her lover, we only see her alone. Like Sisyphus, she moves stones from one end of her courtyard to another. Her journey to town ends in a graveyard.

Strand's tight camera style is crucial in conjuring up this image of profound loneliness, the repeated close shots of the woman's black dress expressively emphasizing the darker possibilities of experience.

Initially, *Mosori Monoki* (1969) appears more concerned with social issues than individuals. Shot in Venezuela, it is about the transformation of a native village by Catholic missionaries. The film begins with a nun explaining her vocation and describing with great satisfaction how after 20 years she and her fellow missionaries established civilization in the jungle. She claims that before their arrival the natives could not do anything. Ironically, Strand challenges her by editing in shots of native artifacts — bows and arrows and hammocks. The nun says the Indians were just like animals, but we see them painting their faces, the cosmetics underscoring the fact that they have their own culture, albeit one that the narrow-minded nun fails to recognize as such.

Strand then introduces us to an Indian woman, Carmelita. She speaks of her past, her husband, their children, their meals etc. Strand intercuts footage of native life and ways with footage of the "civilized" life in the mission compound while Carmelita recounts her "primitive" past. Native weaving is compared with sewing machines; medicine men with hypodermic needles. Gradually, neo-colonialism as a general issue becomes less significant than Carmelita's experience. Her voice dominates; the tone is not anger but a sense of disjunction, of loss and dissociation. Strand eschews the obvious political approach and concentrates on what most interests her — the way the world feels to the individual.

Strand is neither a critic nor an observer. She attempts to understand others from the inside. In *Guacamole* (1975) she documents a bullfight. The killing of the bull is especially poignant, projected in slow motion in a way that makes the whole world seem to share in the bull's last, exhausted, lumbering death throes. Yet, the slaughter is not represented as a piece of meaningless brutality. Strand places the fight within the context of a festival in whose colorful marketplace we see foods of all sorts, including fresh meat. Strand weaves the death of the bull into a larger social framework where its significance emerges. We may feel sadness for the bull, but outrage on his behalf becomes impossible once his sacrifice is embedded within the life of the community.

Strand's commitment to understanding extends to self-understanding. In *Elasticity* (1975), the most personal and I think the best film in the show, she turns from biography to autobiography. An old woman, a figure for Strand, climbs a hill. Her silver medallion flashes in the sun. This flash is later identified with a projector beam. It is a symbol for cinema, i.e., cinema conceived of primarily as memory. A life, represented by stock footage and shots of friends, rushes by. An Oriental friend, for instance, seems to evoke Hollywood images of China. Different modes of being a person are imagistically explored — amnesia (not knowing who you are and wanting to), euphoria (not knowing but not caring) and ecstasy (knowing but not caring). Into this welter of personal association, the idea of the future intrudes. Suddenly, the whole reverie reverses itself, each previous shot is reduced to a single frame until we return to the old woman. Here, Strand seems to be invoking the idea of the extended moment, that privileged second Cocteau charted between the toppling and crashing of a chimney. Cinematic time becomes identified with psychological time and montage with memory.