TV-Radio

Robert Lewis Shayon

"Can This Be America?"

ESTABLISHMENTS tend to overreact when confronted by challenges of the younger generation. It happened in Chicago; it happened more recently when the nation's television critics reviewed *Can This Be America?* – a package of five short films presented by the Public Broadcasting Laboratory (PBL). Independent film-makers were invited to contribute personal statements about America during the 1968 election campaign; they represented clashing political views, from revolutionary to ultra-conservative. Each camera artist also exhibited a sharply different cinematic technique.

The critics (to generalize from a dozen newspaper reviews in major cities) were, with one exception, intellectually and emotionally repelled. Among their epithets were "psychedelic field-day with no redeeming features," "stupid," "distorted," "tedious," "flip-flop hodgepodge," "eye-strain," and "throbbing headache." One critic accused the film-makers of "downright dishonest intentions"—"they didn't merit such a nationwide video soapbox for their chintzy wares." Each critic merits his own peculiar soapbox, a perch he cannot escape; but in encounters with the new and unfamiliar in the arts, the burden of openness, at least of respectful curiosity, ought to rest more heavily upon the critic than upon the artist, our friend the explorer. Maturity, in its own way, takes care of most rebels, although in that taking care, small measures of progressive light and freedom may be made manifest.

All six film-makers (two worked as a team) were given generous budgets, adequate lead time, and complete freedom. Begin your film on the Capitol steps—that was the only request made (a stricture honored by all save one). The major failing of the critics was their reaction to the film by Jonas Mekas, movie critic of *The Village Voice,* editor of *Film Culture,* self-described "promoter of the Underground Film (Minister of Propaganda, Defense, and Finances)." This iconoclastic film-maker, who has such an enormous knowledge of film that he can turn it on its head when he wants to, sassed his subject and the audience. He found more of importance to show at a gaudy, rich Newport society wedding than he did in Washington, using his frame-by-frame technique reminiscent of old newsreels. Subject and style recalled to one viewer the classic footage of the court of Czar Nicholas II in the days before the Russian Revolution. The critics missed the history and the jest. They complained that the film was jerky, fragmented, made from within the punch bowl. They failed to perceive Mekas's lack of anger: his young couple was lovely; their decadence delightful; his irony loving. The critics were kindest to LeRoi Jones, poet-playwright-novelist, and not an established film-maker, who contributed a segment showing black militants organizing in Newark.

The craftsmanship was poor, but Jones communicated a sense of real power as he brought viewers very close to the consciousness of revolutionary blacks. Complained the critics: he never came close to penetrating journalism; rather, he raised questions that he didn't answer. Ricky Leacock's film was also attacked as "biased, unfair, savage." He attempted to convey the mood and preoccupation of police chiefs at a convention in Honolulu – their professional minds on new Mace weapons and riot-control guns, while their wives funned in the sun. It was reliable film-making, neither hot nor innovative. But one critic said that it lacked balance – it did not make plain that the police were merely agents of higher authority, the public.

Wendell Niles, Jr., a right-wing film-maker, answered the question—Can this be America?—with an unabashed idolization of H. L. Hunt, the very rich man, narrated by Walter Brennan, the actor. The latter called the former, "the greatest living example of what our free enterprise system can produce." It was standard, old-time film-making with incredibly bad structure—its ideology and technique probably embarrassing even to conservative-minded viewers. Still, it was valuable as an insight into an important part of the national mentality. The critics accused it of leaning too far to the right.

Ed Pinkus and David Newman made a film about a McCarthy supporter (Pinkus's father-in-law). It showed generally where film is at among the independents these days – snappy cutting, some freedom, but only a slight break with tradition. The subject, a wealthy fabric manufacturer, was exhibited as a smug, hypocritical liberal – demonstrating that meaningful change is impossible within the system. One critic said the film was "superficial . . . with a modicum of awareness of today's economic and social problems."

Can This Be America? was not a reassuring exhibit: the independents spared no point on the ideological map. Perhaps this is why the critics overreacted, and their professional faculties were dulled, for they faulted the films on two unsupportable grounds – lack of technical adequacy and journalistic balance. Three of the films, had their makers wished, could easily have been drawn to acceptable technical specifications. But these people are scouts, exploring the medium's potential, not quartermasters dealing out general issue cinema. As for "journalism," did the critics forget that the film-makers were invited to contribute "personal statements," which are not judiciously balanced analyses, or even editorials? A personal statement is an expression of how one person feels about a subject, without reference to anyone else's feelings. Have we all been so conditioned by television's dance of "objectivity" that we are uncomfortable in the presence of any viewpoint that does not come to us agreeably honed down to a balanced blandness?

Analysis is one good part of the forest; personal statement is another. The latter affords viewers the opportunity to develop their own sense of freedom and openness to different attitudes by seeing the same subject treated freely and differently by film-makers of divergent styles and philosophies. As for "art vs. journalism," who can any longer draw hard boundary lines between the two? Their worlds are moving closer to each other all the time under the impetus of the avant-garde: barriers are being broken; limits are being pushed back. We are in a period of self-examination in every way—condition fractious but healthy for society.

Young film-makers are very vulnerable; it is hard to trust oneself when moving against the grain of tradition. They need a sympathetic environment, encouraging, characterized by the respect and open-mindedness that ought to mark the democratic society.

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End of a Mission?

THERE'S NOTHING like a bicentennial celebration to make a person aware of his origins. Those of us who were living the lie that California derived from the Gold Rush of 1849 or the first Rose Bowl game in 1892 or the advent of Disneyland in 1955 are learning this year to our considerable benefit that it all started with the building of a mission in 1769.

In July of that year Father Junípero Serra, a plucky Franciscan missionary, planted a cross in the hills of what is now San Diego—an event that was pretty well lost on California historians until San Diego 200th Anniversary, Inc. decided that 1969 was high time to give Father Serra his due. Accordingly, there will be cause to celebrate nearly every day of the year, whether your bag is fiestas, trade fairs, boat races, parades, golf tournaments, historical pageants, or a quiet stroll through Mission San Diego de Alcalá, whose five-bell campanile rang in the 200th birthday on New Year's Eve.

By a sad quirk of history, this very mission, the *raison d'être* for San Diego's bicentennial party, may fade into oblivion before the year is out. Missions, like Broadway shows and baseball teams, depend on box-office clout, and in the last months of 1968 San Diego de Alcalá was drawing no more than a few visitors a day, down from a peak of 1,000 per week just a year and a half ago. There is no doubt that progress, the most important product of forward-lunging California, contributed to the decline. When San Diego Stadium, home of the football Chargers and baseball Padres, was built just west of the mission, it was necessary to lay down some new roads and realign some old ones to ensure easy access to the stadium. Thus penned in by bars of concrete, the mission all but lost its address.

"I don't know how long we can afford to stay open," a young mission guide told me, his voice sounding as hopeful as a death knell. "For 198 years we were on Friars Road, and then when the stadium was built, the city put in a New Friars Road 300 yards behind the mission. They decided they couldn't call the old road Friars Road any longer, so they renamed it San Diego Mission Road. Which was all right, except when the maps were redrawn, the mission was left out. Now the tourists have to rely on the wisdom of gas station attendants or hotel clerks to direct them here."

Father Booth, the mission pastor, proved with the publication of a new brochure that he hasn't lost his sense of humor. In careful detail the brochure describes three routes from downtown San Diego to the mission five or six miles east—the easy way, the confusing way, the hard way. Pursuing the easy way (Interstate 8 to Mission Gorge Road, north to Twain Avenue, and left on San Diego Mission Road), this unseasoned freeway voyager arrived without so much as a wrong turn or a gas station interview.

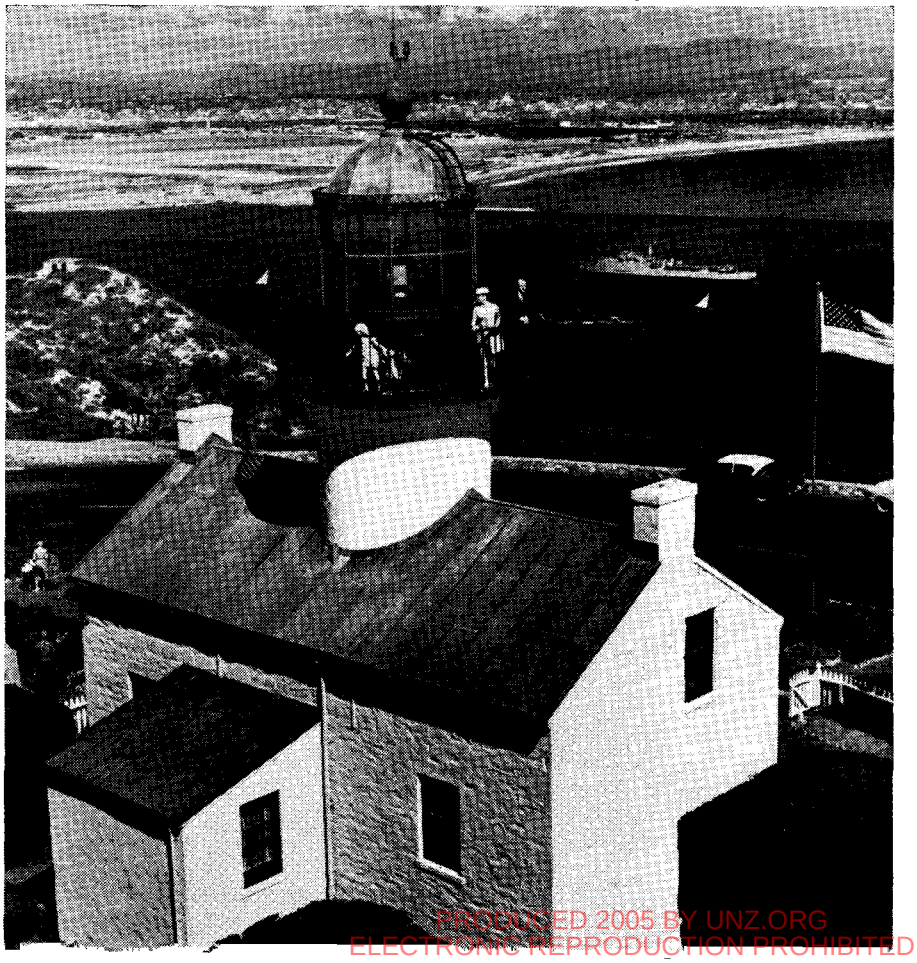
It is painful to think the mission is doomed, because it is a classic inside and out, redolent of its eighteenth-century derivation in spite of a full restoration completed only thirty-eight years ago. With its freshly whitewashed walls, red tile roof, and handsome campanile, the mission looks strangely misplaced in such close proximity to freeway and stadium. Inside, the chapel is cool and still, footsteps resounding like echoes of antiquity on the red flagstone floor. From the dimness of the chapel one steps into a courtyard alive with sunshine and birdsong, aflame with bougainvillaea festooning ponderous date palms. It is only when one climbs the bell tower and looks down the hill to the freeway and stadium that the sights and sounds of 1969 return.

If Father Serra was the first white man to settle in California, he was not the first to see it. Fleet Admiral Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, a Portuguese who sailed in the service of Spain after working his way up from crossbowman in the conquest of Mexico, made a landfall at Point Loma in 1542, a few miles out of San Diego. There is a statue of Cabrillo looking out from Point Loma and a small museum describing his find, but the reason most people show up is to watch whales. If that sounds like a euphemism for clandestine necking, it's not. Each winter, the California gray whale plows its way down the coast from the Bering Sea to mating and calving grounds off Baja California, as true as the swallow returning to Capistrano. On a single Sunday in early winter, some 28,000 people have been counted counting whales at Point Loma. There, an official census-taking station operated by the U.S. National Park Service—totting up whales, not people—has recorded as many as eighty-seven in a day.

Three commercial whale-chasing boats take tourists to within spouting distance of the 50-foot mammals every day of

Cabrillo National Monument—"totting up whales."

—San Diego Convention and Visitors Bureau.



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