

REVIEW OF THREE ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS

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The Chopi Timbila Dance. Directed by Andrew Tracey, produced by Gei Zanzinger for the University of Pennsylvania Museum. (40 minutes)

Oral Narrative by Venancio Mbande. Directed and produced by Gei Zanzinger. (20 minutes)

Audrey Bronson. Directed and produced by Gei Zanzinger. (88 minutes)

Gei Zanzinger is filmmaker-in-residence at Temple University, Philadelphia and an Associate Fellow of both the University of Pennsylvania and Rhodes University. He has been making ethnographic films in Southern Africa for the past 15 years and the six films that he and Andrew Tracey made on the Mbira, the hand piano of the Shona of Zimbabwe, are important documents that trace the interrelationship between oral and musical narrative modes and the social, political and religious structure of the community.

The Chopi Timbila Dance deals with the Chopi xylophone in much the same way. In fact, the technical quality is much higher, with Cliff Bestall's camera-work contributing to the clarity of the exposition. Andrew Tracey's explanation of the musical strategies employed is clarified by excellent graphics and animation, and the sound quality is excellent. Any student of African music will derive a great deal of information out of the film, as well as enjoyment of Venancio Mbande's mastery of the instrument.

The shorter film is an experimental attempt to recreate the multi-layered complexity of a narrative that Venancio Mbande sings, while accompanying himself on the xylophone. The narrative involves the accidental death of Venancio's sister in a complicated web of intrigue, suspicion and family feuds.

Parts of the narrative are recounted by a commentator, parts are sung and parts are enacted. Although the enacted parts do suggest the memories and thought-processes of the singer, they tend to remain obstinately literal and detract from the main theme of the film. This is an interesting attempt to try to solve the problems in reproducing a complex narrative, but does not succeed completely.

Audrey Bronson is a fascinating, compelling and authoritative record of the life and activities of a Black woman preacher in West Philadelphia. As a piece of urban ethnography, it is totally successful. It is both moving and informative. It is a social document as well as a personal history and it shows the integrity of the five years of research and filming that went into the making of this film.

The film is set in the Black ghetto of West Philadelphia and the subject is a middle-aged Black woman, born in America's South in pre-civil rights times. Frustrated and many times humiliated by social values entrenched since the

times of slavery, she moved North with her family to find a situation that was hardly any better. The tensions arising from a social situation in which discrimination is practised in a covert form result in both psychic and physical injury to Blacks. In order to combat this injury she, Audrey Bronson, set up a church in which she runs Bible classes on Wednesdays and full-scale church services on Sundays, thereby hoping to deflect some of the injury away from individuals and into the religious rites.

The film juxtaposes interviews with Professor Bronson (for she teaches psychology at Cheney College in Philadelphia) in which she rationally explains her strategies, with sequences of her preaching in church, producing states of altered consciousness in her congregation. Ironically, she herself becomes part of her strategies as the techniques she employs (chanting, singing, praying) seem to invade her as well. This ambiguity of professed rational planning as extrinsic scheme and intrinsic succumbing to the scheme herself gives the film an extraordinary insight into the behaviour of a community alienated from the greater society.

The film also contains the testimonies of a number of her parishioners which range from the outrageous remarks of a fellow psychologist to the insightful comments of a mother and her three daughters who manage to articulate clearly what they experience at the Sanctuary.

The film is a quite brilliant record of the trauma the Black community suffers from in the United States and of one attempt to heal the trauma.

TO BE REVIEWED IN A FORTHCOMING ISSUE

GODARD: IMAGES, SOUNDS, POLITICS

By Colin MacCabe with Mick Eaton and Laura Mulvey
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Price: Approx. R11.60

Jean-Luc Godard: the most influential film maker alive. Coppola and the Hollywood superbrats; the European and American avant-gardes; Third World film makers - wherever there is work on the image, Godard's images are at work.

And yet, for most filmgoers, many of Godard's most important images are invisible. Since 1968, in a break which crystallised around contemporary political struggles, Godard has been engaged on experiments in image and sound beyond the institutions of cinema and television. The results are rarely seen on the commercial cinema circuit.

Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics is an important step in making those experiments visible. It reads the earlier films through the more recent work, focussing on politics, technology and sensuality. These insistent themes dominate Godard's investigation of our representation in the image, a representation always inflected by the sound. These terms enable us to understand more critically the circulation of money and images in which we participate, a circulation which Godard's work cuts across.

Godard himself, in a series of interviews, comments on the analysis of each chapter.
