

Robert Frank makes It happen—now

Film Comment
by GARY HILL

For a campus whose mini-factions of activists find meaning in artificial gestures of protest over a 30-year-old Hollywood flick, the experiential now must mean little.

When white property owners won't rent to blacks, to Indians, to Mexican-Americans, to hippies, in our very own Lincoln City, political protest over Tarzan and the Apes comes off

as camp and meaningless as the film itself.

The experimental now. Me and My Brother.

University of Nebraska students and instructors who attended Refocus 70, a photography-film conference in Iowa City last week, saw a 3-year-old film more immediate than the current protest, and much more worth fighting for a chance to see than any three films on this year's Union schedule.

Me and My Brother by Robert Frank.

The central figure is Julius Orlovsky, the catatonic schizophrenic brother of Peter Orlovsky, Allen Ginsburg's lover.

The film was shot and edited over a three year period during which Julius was released from a mental hospital, lived with his brother and Ginsburg in New York, accompanied them on a reading tour to Kansas, lived with them in San Francisco, drifted off by himself several times, was

rehospitalized and again released.

But the film is not so much about Julius as it is about Frank's process of establishing cinematic relationships between himself and Julius, between himself and his own world (New York) of which Julius is a part.

The film is a problem-solving, a getting-at the essence of a process called life. Julius is spending himself. He is alive and dying. So is Frank. So is Ginsburg. So is the psychiatrist who asks silent Julius an hour-full of questions as he projects upon the patient symptoms of his own guilt and fear.

Take your medicine, he says, it will make you less afraid.

And Frank slams the round-shouldered psychiatrist, tie-less now, glasses off, a tiny round bandaid like a badge of vulnerability at the corner of his mouth, into an elevator the size of a closet with a black man the size of a tree.

The black laborer stares. The white professional fidgets. He pokes at the board of buttons, tries to turn his back, to open the door on any floor. A frozen gesture of fear. The door opens, the black man grabs him, lifts him from the floor by his collar, the door closes, the black man puts him down, and with a swipe at his sweaty bald head, the psychiatrist is back in his office chair, Julius to his right,

the tour over, his face still twitching.

Frank's scenes serve not as story-form accounts of a sequential progression of events making literary sense, but as reflective surfaces, back and forth against which the essence of the film bounces.

The truth of the film, the truth of Frank's life, the truth of Julius, exists somewhere in the sensory crossfire set up by these surfaces.

Watching him sit silently amid the ruckus and the words, it is tempting to judge Julius a sage. At a poetry reading in Kansas, Peter Orlovsky and Ginsburg chant and wail and hammer finger cymbals and, when the crowd shouts for it, they try to make Julius, sitting with them onstage, say something.

Say something. Say something. Finally, from Julius: "Say something."

Does he mean for the poets themselves to stop for once and really say something, that is, say something important, something meaningful, something that will get us all out of this mess, that will relieve our pain? Or is he simply, dumbly, mouthing the words he hears?

With Julius, you can't tell. That's clear. He is sick, a schizoid.

But having Julius around puts everyone's behavior in question. As the character

playing the part of Frank puts it: "If you stripped anyone of their style, they'd be where Julius is."

Styleless. And yet, the best an actor (brought in to play Julius in a film being made in this film) can do, is to assume a verbal style and set of gestures approximating his own idea of how it is to be Julius.

Ideas are word-bound. And so the actor's portrayal of a man whose principal puzzle is his silence, is primarily verbal. Consequently, this second-surface Julius provides a rich dimension of sensory speculation which shapes more com-

ENTERTAINMENT

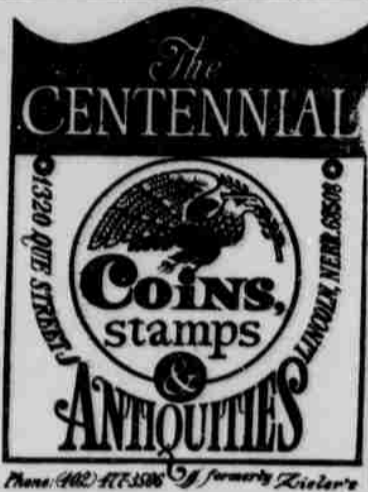
pletely the schizoid realm and Frank's relation to it.

One cannot know the experience of another man's behavior. And, as Julius' motives cannot be known, neither can those of anyone else. Things happen, that's all.

A social worker questions Julius about his life and urges him to reach out with his hand to touch hers, and we think we know her intentions. Later, the woman makes the same gesture, the same plea, to a lesbian actress who obliges her. We were mistaken.

What did you mean by that?

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