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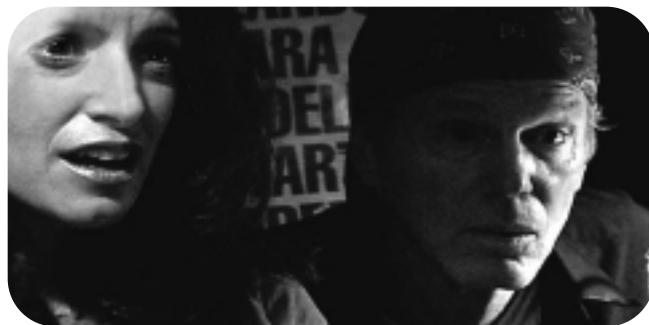
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ROB NILSSON'S NINE-FILM PANORAMA OF URBAN ANOMIE

BY DENNIS HARVEY

Sometimes, size does matter.

If pressed, many cinephiles would admit a magnetic attraction to truly magnum opuses: whether crafted by Tarr, Rohmer, Rivette, or Syberberg, the mere existence of such titanic features or multi-film cycles suggests an important artistic event. There's nothing quite like the exhilaration of discovering a huge project that in cinematic terms reaches for the extra-wide narrative/thematic embrace of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Proust, even *Infinite Jest*. But does anyone work with that kind of scope in contemporary American cinema?

Meet Rob Nilsson, who with very little self-promotional zeal has spent the last dozen-plus years creating a fascinating collection of exquisitely shot digital features under the umbrella title 9 @ Night. Since 2000, this San Francisco-based filmmaker has premiered the features individually at the Mill Valley Film Festival, which has been programming his work for nearly three decades. More attuned to process than publicity, Nilsson has largely kept them away from public view. Last November, however, the Harvard Film Archive premiered the cycle in its intended order (individual features were finished and premiered out of sequence) in a three-day marathon. Currently, four Bay Area repertory houses are showing all or part of the series, with bookings farther afield in the works.

What is "9 @ Night"? A sprawling, beautifully shot, black-and-white tapestry of separate but overlapping feature narratives that encompass a broad character scroll of homeless, hustling, and bourgeois types in San Francisco and environs. Nilsson developed the series over a 12-year-plus haul with the Tenderloin yGroup, a mixed, ever-evolving company of thesp/crew pros and streetwise amateurs attracted by the multitask on-job training and opportunities for creative self-expression. The films range from striking quasi-vérité (*Stroke*, 00; *Scheme C6*, 01) to Fellini-esque dark-night-of-the-soul-dom (*Singing*, 00); from poignant drama (*Used*, 07; *Pan*, 06) to character-based suspense (*Attitude*, 03; *Need*, 05). There's even room for self-referential meta-cinema (*Go Together*, 08) and startling experimentation (*Noise*, 02).

The central characters span a fair swath of San Francisco society. *Singing* sees a dour yuppie scientist (Jim Carpenter) yanked through 12-odd hours of unplanned, sometimes perilous adventures; *Attitude's* Spoddy (Michael Disend) is a rageaholic boxer-turned-auto-repairman who really flies off the handle upon discovering he's HIV positive; *Go Together's* protagonists are a squabbling middle-class couple trying to keep their sinking rep-cinema afloat.

But there are also representatives of the city's underclasses populating the busy margins of these films, and occupying center stage in the others. In the riveting *Stroke*, it's two older Tenderloin residents (Teddy Weiler and Edwin Johnson) whom pitiless luck pushes out of an already dicey residential hotel into homelessness. The equally fine *Scheme C6* features Cory Duval as an angry young hunk rebelling against his "respectable" organized-crime family by living on the streets and deliberately pulling the pettiest of scams. In *Pan*, the tough-loving leader of a scavenging quartet has his street-hardened defenses softened by friendship with a fatherless boy—though the latter's mother

doesn't trust his good intentions. *Need* finds an estranged mother and daughter (Brette McCabe and Marianne Heath) facing separate crises, the one a junkie prostitute and the other a stripper and robbery accomplice. *Used* at last lends primary attention to haunted drifter Malafide (played by former veteran Hollywood actor Robert Viharo), the series' closest thing to a Greek chorus, as he goes on a spiritual quest to sort out his shambles of a life.

The 9 @ Night films are full of ambiguity and ambivalence, character relationships often cloudy, their backstories usually absent—as seems natural for people living moment to moment by necessity, often cornered by debt, grudges, or ill fates that can't be begged off by explanatory excuses. In the series' tangled, nonchronological web, even a familiar face can bring mystery: in the striking, fragmentary *Noise*, Viharo plays "Ben," fresh out of prison after 20 years. Maybe he's Malafide under another name, maybe not.

The films do occasionally succumb to Methodish indulgence—as in the work of Nilsson's inspirational role model John Cassavetes, the director's truth-seeking, actor-centric process can sometimes encourage histrionic excess. But at their frequent best, they have a raw emotional authenticity that does not, for once, come at the expense of aesthetic appeal.

While each feature can be viewed separately, the films gain in intensity when seen in sequence, revealing the way in which recurring major characters (particularly Malafide) as well as myriad subsidiary ones are pushed, pulled, and punished as this epic narrative mosaic is pieced together. Or as Nilsson puts it: "You get to feel the impact of a whole society, a world of the marginalized, a purgatorial cross-section of the forgotten with unexpected thematic links and threads running through like strands of DNA weaving a whole creature together." If you just guessed that he's also a poet, you would be correct. (He also paints.)

SPEAKING RIGHT AFTER HIS ENTHUSIASTIC IF SMALL RECEPTION at the HFA series, Nilsson was well aware that 9 @ Night isn't like anything else out there in contemporary American film. He dubbed it a "people's cinema of the streets," its creation "a miracle of grassroots art." "I've always believed they were the most important cinema made in America in this era," he said.

If the latter statement were made by someone working closer to the mainstream—or even in its same general biosphere—it might be accompanied by the squeal of a slowly leaking balloon. But Nilsson's healthy ego is fueled by missionary zeal, not vanity. Calling current American filmmakers "either lost, confused, or irrelevant," he has zero interest in Hollywood product made by "venal careerists" that serves solely to distract people from their "boredom" without feeding their souls.

His own films have always been about real people—the ones usually left out of the picture. Raised in Wisconsin and the Bay Area, the Harvard grad first toyed with the medium "as a lark" while teaching English lit to Nigerian high school students in the late Sixties. He then worked briefly as a Boston cabbie before making his way back to San Francisco. There, helping to organize The Filmworker's Union, he met like-minded others and in 1972 founded the collective Cine Manifest, a "political group making films" as opposed to artists making political films.

Clockwise from top: *Need*, *Chalk*, *Scheme C6* (x2), *Go Together*, *Used*



Rob Nilsson. Below: *Chalk*

Over an eight-year haul the six members produced numerous labor-focused, leftist documentaries and two features. Of the latter, Nilsson and John Hanson's *Northern Lights* (78) made the biggest splash, winning a Camera d'Or at Cannes and firing an advance flare for the next decade's explosion of American independent filmmaking. Set in the North Dakotan Norwegian farming communities of its co-directors' ancestors, the powerfully spare drama remains Nilsson's only period piece. But it otherwise set in place many of the constants in his art, most notably the mixture of professional and nonprofessional actors. (He prefers the all-encompassing, nonjudgmental term "players." "The toughest part [is] to keep the actors from 'acting' . . . I emphasize honesty above all.")

Despite all the acclaim and exposure, *Northern Lights* didn't bring the money train to Nilsson's door. Moreover, his one experience working in more conventional commercial circumstances—*On the Edge* (85), the story of a marathon runner starring Bruce Dern—was "traumatic," teaching him that "you can't work with people you don't trust, or who don't trust you."

Fed up waiting for elusive funding for his preferred projects, he created that scenario's antithesis: a one-man school of filmmaking dubbed Direct Action Cinema.

LARS VON TRIER'S DOGME 95 MANIFESTO MAY HAVE received all the ink, but Direct Action got there first—and on even lower budgets. Shooting on analog videotape meant "the mastering medium went from being the most expensive element on the set to the cheapest," enabling him to "loosen up the process." Which was, as he puts it: "Building drama by developing players through workshop exercises. Evolving script scenarios designed for specific workshop members. Creating character through backstory improv with cameras on location. [Which] leads to a production method with handheld cameras shooting from a roadmap/script scenario—a cinematic jazz ensemble stating themes and improvising around them. Then, finally, finding the miracles of the ordinary through editing."

The first fruit of this philosophy was *Signal 7* (85), a gritty fiction about a cab driver, shot in three days. (He wanted to make it in a single day, but "couldn't get anyone to work that way. So we compromised.") It was the first-ever small-format movie to be

blown up to 35mm and shown around the world. The similarly executed *Heat and Sunlight* (87)—in which Nilsson himself played one half of a stormy romantic couple—copped the Grand Prize at Sundance (when it was still the United States Film Festival).

Nilsson's output slowed for the next several years, as he set into motion projects that have occupied him for almost two decades now. While editing *Heat and Sunlight*, he drove daily through San Francisco's rough Tenderloin district—a locus of homelessness, drug dealing, prostitution, and street violence, but also a vibrant lower-class multicultural neighborhood in a dauntingly expensive city. His own brother, a diagnosed schizophrenic, had been MIA for several years, presumably on the street somewhere.

Half-hoping to find him in the ranks of street people, Nilsson "saw the rogue-elephant men brown-bagging on corners . . . the shopping-bag ladies, the screamers, the scammers, the dealers, the prostitutes and the crack monsters on the prowl. Who were they? I decided to find out." He checked into a transient hotel and started writing a screenplay about "a homeless Vietnam vet and a lottery ticket." Danny Glover, Whoopi Goldberg, Samuel L. Jackson, Peter Coyote, and Armand Assante all signed letters of intent pledging to participate in the project.

Meanwhile, Nilsson also founded a "street-level acting troupe" with two of his erstwhile San Francisco State students, Rand Crook and Ethan Sing. The Tenderloin Action Group (which later morphed into the Tenderloin yGroup) was originally a weekly drama workshop for local halfway-house denizens. Nilsson had hoped to use them as "auxiliary characters" for his star-supported screenplay. When funding again failed to materialize, they became "the whole show." He abandoned his original idea for a new script co-written with poet Don Bajema, albeit one that was even more of a rough "roadmap" for performer improvisation than *Signal 7* or *Heat and Sunlight* had been.

"We set out with ideas taken from the Method, Lee Strasberg, Reichian therapy, and karate—emphasizing relaxation, concentration, and emotional experience," he says. The cast came from the workshop—save for professional-actor lead Kelvin Han Yee, who was hired only after Nilsson lost one amateur "to trucking school, then a second to heroin."



The result was *Chalk* (96), a visually arresting tale of pool-hall hustling. It won some recognition on the festival circuit but was too tough, too uncompromising, too averse to standard melodrama to find distribution. "I've always felt that *Chalk* is one of the great ignored works of this century," Nilsson says. Actually, that would be the last century—and without debating whether *Chalk* is "great" or just good-but-uneven, it certainly was ignored.

Still, it served as what he calls his "proof-of-concept film," laying the path that would carry the 9 @ Night series through its many years of development, filming, and postproduction. The Tenderloin yGroup now consisted of the "homeless and ex-homeless, street people, inner-city residents, professional actors and all comers. Every race, every sexual orientation, every class, every affliction, every talent from every corner of society showed up—some for a day, some for years." Among key long-term contributors were producer Chikara Motomura, cinematographer Mickey Freeman, and numerous performers both "pro" and non. But the entire breathing mass of a shifting collective is felt in each film.

H AIR-RAISINGLY PROLIFIC, NILSSON FINISHED NUMEROUS other DV features as the 9 @ Night cycle wended its way to completion. Most were collaborations with cultural institutions that invited him to teach, spanning the globe from Japan (*Winter Oranges*) to Jordan (*Samt*), from South Africa (*Frank*) to Berkeley (*Security*) and Kansas City (the delightful Altman-esque ensemble piece *Opening*). He even strayed back into "commercial" territory as a for-hire director on *A Town Has Turned to Dust* (98), a postapocalyptic

psychodrama from an original Rod Serling story idea that is surely the most Cassavetes-influenced piece ever to premiere on the Sci Fi Channel.

At present, Nilsson—whose energy level at age 70 suggests he'll still be making films when the rest of us are having our bones examined by archeologists—is finally focusing on steering the hitherto hard-to-see 9 @ Night features into appropriate venues such as cinemathèques and indie rep houses. Yet he's already got at least three more feature-length projects in mind. By now no one can doubt his ability to get such things done, quickly, cheaply, and artfully. Typically, at the 2007 Mill Valley Festival, he premiered three features—the final two installments of 9 @ Night plus *Presque Isle*, a dreamlike film made in collaboration with the San Francisco School of Digital Filmmaking.

Nilsson's sheer productivity these days might recall the exploitation-film maestros of yore. But where they were providing grist for a fast-buck, diversionary mill, his agenda might seem visionary if not downright foolish in American cinema's dumb-and-dumber landscape. He calls his efforts nothing less than a meditation on "what are we as men and women. What is a complete life—animal, psychic, mental, spiritual?"

"It's an important job to be a filmmaker. It doesn't have to look like a Hallmark card . . . It does require open eyes, avid minds, and a determination to try to present the unique, the burr and serrated edges of something observed, something thought and recognized. What I say is, don't lean back. Lean forward." □

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