

success on the job. (He remarks, in an English-language comment of the kind Ray's over-educated, under-paid characters tend to use with barbed self-consciousness: "Exit husband, enter wife.") These are in reality telling human events; what *Mahanagar* lacks is a fit telling of them.—ERNEST CALLENBACH

Short Films

PHENOMENA and SAMADHI

By Jordan Belson.

It was unfair to write about Belson's new films when, because of his resolute resistance to ordinary theatrical presentation, only his earlier *Allures* (Janus "New Cinema" program) could be seen by the public. But, like some remarkable diamond sequestered by a millionaire, they deserve discussion even if they cannot be inspected. And now we hear that *Phenomena* will be included in the "Kinetic Art" programs of shorts Brant Sloan has collected for Universal.

Re-Entry was the beginning of the looser style which has followed *Allures*; its images are suggestive of space travel, cosmic forces, rebirth, mystical or drug states. *Phenomena* (1965) carries this kind of imagery to what seems a more systematic level. It begins with relatively mundane matters: there is even—unique in Belson's work—a recognizable though distorted image of a singer, with rock on the track; this is followed by a section of garbled *Lieder*, and evidently they constitute Belson's consideration of culture, Pop or Official. The utterly nonverbal nature of the films, which of course is one of the chief signs of Belson's immense skill as an artist, makes them impossible to render on paper. *Phenomena* contains dots of color, fluted shapes suggestive of organ pipes, multiply repeated small arch-like shapes, cloudy intermixing forms melting into one another like visible gases, flame-like sinking shapes; its sounds are hisses, shrieks, whirs. But such a description cannot hope to call up

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the uncanny emotions the films arouse, which are those of some kind of mystical experience.

What are the films "about"? Belson emphasizes that the films are the record of their own discovery; making them provides the focus of his extraordinarily ascetic life. The films are at once the results and the devices of contemplation. Hence Belson's reluctance to have his films treated as public amusements, even within the so-called underground cinema. The films have nothing to do, I hastily add, with the "psychedelic" films now current; they are very carefully structured, impeccable in craftsmanship (Belson has even designed his own leader for focusing), and magical in their effects. Belson is not using the medium as an exhibitionist plaything; he is interested in what makes the soul reverberate at its deepest levels; and films with this aim, he believes, should be seen privately or not at all.

It turns out that many of the images (and sounds) in Belson's films have counterparts in the descriptions of mystical experiences reported, for instance, in Hatha Yoga. And *Samadhi* (1967) is Belson's most direct approach to such forbidding material. "Samadhi" is Sanskrit for "that state of consciousness in which the individual soul merges with the universal soul." This ultimate condition of consciousness is hence nonsensorial; the film is about approaches to it. It begins with a blast of red-yellow cloud, with huge wind noises—the turmoil of creation? Blue cloudy shapes emerge, revolving in space. Slowly a strong central orientation develops in the images: holes which transform into spherical shapes, whirls of filamented gaseous forms. A globular mass of light, insubstantial yet solid, liquescent, with boundaries yet impossible of definition, slowly and majestically revolves. This echoes

the last image of *Phenomena*, which was, Belson says, what gave him courage to attempt *Samadhi*. This magical shape is perhaps the world, or is it an atom or some other elemental particle? It spins with an implacable grace . . . Then it is surrounded by a blazing ring of unbearably intense red; flames and pulses of movement pour out, with loud shrieks and gong-like noises on the track; the colors become incredibly delicate and lovely, and we see through a hole—the eye of the world? Then the whole screen is in huge movement, turning. Belson says the film is structured by the breathing movement of inhalation and exhalation crucial to yoga disciplines. At several points, the screen grows brighter and brighter, with light yellow tones, like looking into the sun—a strange and powerful experience. (In yoga, *Samadhi* is prefaced by blinding white lights; light perceptions, “tattvic lights,” are thought to be produced by energies flowing through certain nerve centers or “chakras.” And the thunderous roaring, bell-sounds, hums, and so on of Belson’s tracks have explicit yoga counterparts too.)

It needs emphasizing that Belson is an abstract film-maker but *not* an animator. His images derive entirely from live photography, which he does himself. (He is by now a formidable technician, though his studio-living quarters are plain and inexpensively equipped; he entirely controls his light intensities in shooting, for instance, rather than relying on imperfect lab techniques.) Belson is not “making things up”—he is searching *in reality* for the elements to comprise the finished films. No matter how complex the transformational process, this contact with the world strongly affects the films. Viewing *Samadhi*, you might take it to be the fantasies of a disembodied dream-state. But what is most remarkable about Belson is his ability to connect such apparently abstract material with our feelings—which must, on some level, mean our experiences as well as his. It is this which makes him our greatest abstract film poet: he has found how to combine the vision of the outer and inner eye.

—ERNEST CALLENBACH

NOW THAT THE BUFFALO'S GONE

By Burton Gershfield. Distribution: Theater Arts Dept., UCLA, Los Angeles 90024.

As originally conceived, *Now That The Buffalo's Gone* was to have been a visual interpretation of one of Buffy Sainte-Marie's Indian songs, “My Country, 'Tis Of Thy People You're Dying.” In a way it still is. In form and atmosphere, in its hauntingly sad elegy to the lost heritage of the plains Indian, the film still has a structure taken from the music. But somewhere between conception and completion Burton Gershfield went beyond a visualization of the song (not used, incidentally, in the completed film) to compose his own beautiful requiem to the Indian.

“Compose” is here used advisedly, since it is the way Gershfield, a student film-maker at UCLA, has composed his visuals, rather than the intrinsic value of his basic material, that gives the work its glowing originality. Using stills, superimpositions, live action, passages from old westerns photographed from the television screen, Gershfield has woven myth, ritual, history, actuality into something approaching that form of epic-documentary of the American scene evolved by Bruce Baillie for *Mass* and *Quixote*.

As with Baillie, the images possess a symbolic meaning above and beyond their actual values as record; they exist simultaneously on several levels in much the same way the one-dimensional figures in prehistoric cave paintings exist as both reality and symbol. Through the techniques he has utilized Gershfield has been able to present an outline of history that, while it runs a mere seven minutes, still covers all the salient mythic and historical points, and divides naturally into three sections: the freedom of the Indian before the coming of the white man . . . the battle for survival against settler and soldier . . . the defeat and degradation of the Indian peoples.

The first section, scored to an Indian chant and to the natural sounds of wind, water, and the hunt, uses color footage contact-printed onto a color negative stock. This not only re-