Philadelphia phenom

Andrew Repasky McElhinney takes aim at Bataille's Eye. By Johnny Ray Huston

Call him a true independent and a child of the revolution. Raised in Pennsylvania and based in Philadelphia, 24-year-old Andrew Repasky McElhinney has already completed his third feature film. The movie is his first ambivalent, defiant venture into the digital video realm, an (in his words) "I'll do what I want — fuck all of you" gesture born from stagnant meetings with remake-programmed Hollywood clones who took his joking desire to rebuild Warhol's *Empire* at face value, and skittish independent investors who dashed his celluloid dreams. Porn that disobeys straight-or-gay schematics — a tall black leather daddy fucks a bone-thin and -white tattooed sailor; two gothic girls ride an ice-blue double-headed dildo — *Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye* is a provocation that hypnotizes, a hallucinatory narcotic.

Bataille's presence in the title establishes that McElhinney has appropriation, not adaptation, in mind. Some intertitles and a stream of urine are the sole direct connections to the 1928 novel; the melancholic tone of Bataille's *Blue of Noon* dominates, and the visions of excess in his philosophical writings are pushed to their illogical, postapocalyptic ends. "The sentimental aspect of Bataille's writing is interesting because I think people are drawn to the grotesque and sensational aspects of his work," McElhinney says. "The novel *Story of the Eye* is a fumbling sexual exploration: 'Let's splash in our bodily fluids because we can.' It has a youthful enthusiasm and zeal."
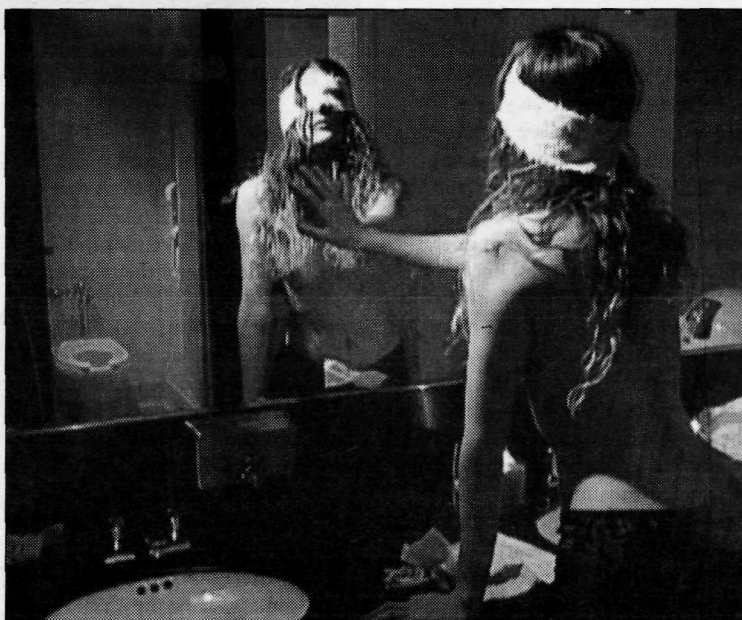
Generated from collaboration with the performers over a month and a half of unholy Sundays, *Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye* is closer to the dark journeys of discovery in Wakefield Poole's *The Bijou* and Stephen Sayadian's dystopian *Café Flesh* than to contemporary porn's tendency to almost surgically remove psychology from physicality. "Which is weird," McElhinney notes, "because I think most people watch films to see if the cast is going to 'get naked.' At an almost primal level, film is about looking and acknowledging where you want to gaze. I've always had a substantial interest in pushing actors toward that kind of self-expression. There's a real honesty and poetry to unsimulated sex acts. I've never seen people have sex that isn't on some level intriguing. Why is it [porn] a less valid genre than the musical or the western?"

I first talked with McElhinney in the spring of 2002, when his previous film, *A Chronicle of Corpses* — which had just been hailed as one of 2001's 10 best by *New York Times* critic Dave Kehr — played the San Francisco International Film Festival. He was then a precocious 22, and his candor countered the cryptic interview manner characteristic of most directors. Movie love motored his remarks. He raved about John Parker's expressionist *Dementia* (a.k.a. *Daughter of Horror*) and discussed the finer points of Douglas Sirk's films starring Barbara Stanwyck as well as the musical romantic comedy *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?*, before placing the better-known *Written on the Wind* in an unconventional canon, deeming it

Mirror, mirror: Melissa Elizabeth Forgione grasps and gropes her way through Andrew Repasky McElhinney's new movie, *Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye.*

"the greatest sci-fi movie ever made."

As we walked up Fillmore Street looking for an open restaurant, the conversation landed on favorite composers ("I'm a huge Wagner person," he enthused. "I like Strauss and Alban Berg and atonal German opera. I don't like Mozart — too whimsical. *Cosi Fan Tutte* is my idea of hell") and sopranos ("Technically, Gwyneth Jones is all over the place — swooping, just terrible — but dramatically, she's fantastic. I saw her singing *Elektra,* and you really believe she's this crazy Greek princess"). Opera was a relevant topic, for the monologue-laden screenplay of *Corpses,* as McElhinney noted, "would make for a good libretto — it should be sung."

Set in an unidentified plantation during what might be the early 19th century, *Corpses* forsakes a definite time and place to focus on perennial, familial American rot. As in McElhinney's new movie (which connects Bataille's surrealism to punk and postpunk sensibilities), the actions — and long stretches of stasis — take place amid a rootless yet heightened atmosphere of decay that seems an outgrowth of the characters. "One genesis for the script came from watching [Bergman's] *Winter Light* and wondering, 'What if this were a slasher film?'" McElhinney said.

That Wes Craven impulse (Craven's *The Last House on the Left* reworks Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*) allows McElhinney to place his nostalgic passion for the *Friday the 13th* series — spearheaded by early Craven collaborator Sean S. Cunningham, though *Final Chapter* director Joe Zito is McElhinney's favorite — into an overtly historical drama framework, exchanging the usual summer camp setting for an equally bygone aristocratic estate. Instead of Jason Voorhees, a mute, bald woman (perhaps a forsaken relative?) kills off the movie's Elliot clan, in one scene showing no mercy to an infant. With one brow high and the other low, McElhinney deliberately courts boredom while pulling off some dazzling displays of technique, including cemetery- and forest-set sequences in which cinematographer Abe Holtz's Steadicam work strives for the tracking-shot finesse of Renoir.

Has anybody seen my movie?

Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye begins with a birth and ends with a salty blast in the eye, yet its peak visual moments are the passages leading to and from what McElhinney calls "the endless

ocean of lesbianism" at its center. The former involves a Cocteau-like many-hued hallway; the latter is a journey up six flights of stairs, rendered with a mix of repetition and variance that's virtuosic. "I love stairs and hallways," the director says during our more recent phone conversation. "My favorite parts of buildings are the lobbies of hotels. You walk up Park Avenue, and people have these entrances to their buildings with more space than you could imagine. You want to say, 'Could I just live in your foyer?'"

These segments are motivated by more than simple love of architecture. Working with City of Horns' sound design and Paul David Bergel's effective minimalist score, McElhinney manipulates transitional interior spaces to tease the audience's knowledge that, as he puts it, "when someone is walking down a hallway, they're eventually going to get somewhere." The stairway sequence leads to a bullet-quick "money shot" that's one of the movie's chief puzzle pieces. The larger riddle involves McElhinney's material and influences, a mystery played out via the title, the characters, and a variety of creative pseudonyms. Is he a gun- and camera-toting Oedipus with links to Bataille, or a Querelle-like subservient thief from the genetically fractured Genet and Fassbinder family line?

The arrogant nerve that prompts such questions might be a mark of youth, but McElhinney's potential is poised to match his ambition. No thanks to squeamish funders and programmers, though. Thus far, his new movie has exposed the faux inclusiveness of film festival paradigms; even the Rotterdam International Film Festival — a nexus of "cutting-edge" and digital video work that showcased Corpses — passed on Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye, a decision the director took as discouraging proof that his use of Brecht's alienation effect can be all too effective. "As I've gotten a little older and a little more aware of how the world works, or doesn't work," he says, "I think it is important to make political films from a vantage point that challenges the dominant point of view."

Needless to say, Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye doesn't fit in the defanged commercial niche of lesbian and gay cinema. "Everyone is so concerned with being able to get married and acquire furniture at Williams-Sonoma that they don't want anything that is different," McElhinney says. "They want goddamn romantic comedies; they want glorified sitcoms with penises. It's ridiculous." Nonetheless, San Francisco — more specifically, Joel Shepard of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and Jacques Boyreau of the Werepad — has provided a home for McElhinney's dissent.

Responding in part to the indiscreet affairs of powerful leaders, McElhinney's interest in "how the political machine and the sex industry operate, together and apart" informs both his unorthodox take on Bataille (which will screen, along with Corpses, at Yerba Buena Center) and his Jukebox/Peepshow, a seven-part video installation recently showcased in Philadelphia. The Werepad is hosting one installment from the series, which begins with loops of 9/11 footage before moving into musicals (where "insiders and outsiders are given voice," McElhinney notes) and pornographic satire. The themes of McElhinney's other Jukebox/Peepshow episodes include Halloween, fairy tales, bathhouses, and a "Thank Heaven for Little Girls" tribute.

"I'm really disgusted with the cowardice that I see on all fronts, politically and artistically," McElhinney says. "We're moving into this bourgeois, middle-class blah-ness. What's being made now is unintriguing and homogenized. There's no risk and nothing being gambled. I can't deal with it. I think back to the Federalist papers and Jefferson's writing and the idea that revolution is not only inevitable but essential." Thomas Jefferson probably didn't have McElhinney's vision in mind when he put quill to paper — though the idea is a funny one. Still, there's no denying this director, detached from contemporary Hollywood and its Utah minor-league kin, is committed to a pioneering independence. ❖

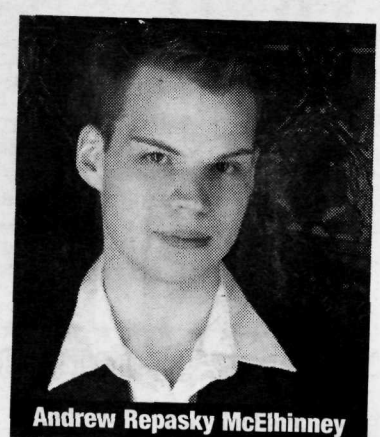**'Janitor of Lunacy: The Films of Andrew Repasky McElhinney'** *screens* Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye, *Thurs/10, 7 and 9:15 p.m.; and* A Chronicle of Corpses, *June 18, 7:30 p.m., Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission, S.F. $4–$7.* Jukebox/ Peepshow: I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy *screens Sat/12, 8 p.m., Werepad, 2430 Third St., S.F. $5. For more information call (415) 978-2787 or go to www.yerbabuenaarts.org*

Andrew Repasky McElhinney