

Barthelme, John
1970s
1980s
1990s
2000s
2010s
2020s

BARD COLLEGE



Wingseed (1982, 1997)

THIS AND SUBSEQUENT IMAGES FROM *WINGSEED* ARE FRAME BLOW-UPS.

© ROBERT BEAVERS

ROBERT BEAVERS : OBSERVING AND DIRECTING WINGSEED

Robert Beavers (b. 1949) is one of the most talented and certainly the most mysterious of his generation of American filmmakers, although the designation American refers exclusively to his place of origin; for he has made almost all of his films in Europe, i.e. Belgium, Switzerland, Greece, Italy.

The decisive influence on Beavers' cinema has been Gregory Markopoulos, whom he met in 1965. For twenty-seven years they were constant companions, until Markopoulos' death in 1992. They lived for the most part in Switzerland, each making films but never, to the best of my knowledge, in collaboration. Shortly after emigrating to Europe, Beavers and Markopoulos withdrew their films from distribution. Although they have on occasion sold some prints to film archives and private collectors, they preferred to show their works in an annual presentation at the "Temenos" (located in an isolated village in the Peloponnesus in Greece). The name they have given to this extraordinary Wagnerian alternative to the conventional dissemination of films, suggests that they conceive their conjoined cinematic projects as a sacred enterprise, most suitably approached through a pilgrimage; for a *temenos* in ancient Greek was a precinct set apart for the worship of one of the gods; within it a temple would be erected.

From Markopoulos' films Beavers derived his predilection for montage, meticulous and often static compositions with clean, geometrical modeling and deeply saturated colors, and the rhythmical use of isolated sounds. Yet from the very start of his career, Beavers manifested a style and an atmosphere wholly his own: rigorous intellectual detachment, disdain for all anecdotal or narrative development, and an unwavering confidence in the

P. ADAMS SITNEY

truth of details and the poetic power of metonymy. Custom-designed masks and partial color filters were often central to his self-representation – the filmmaker as reframer and colorist of empirical observation – in his work of the 1970s.

After making eight impressive films between 1967 and 1970, Beavers attained a new level of assurance with *From the Notebook of...* (1971). Inspired by Da Vinci's notebooks, and Valéry's *Introduction à la Méthode de Leonardo da Vinci*, he filmed undramatic views of Florence with marginal glimpses of the filmmaker crafting his images. Here Beavers declares an abiding theme of his work, the examination of the creative imagination. In his subsequent films, *The Painting* (1972), *Work Done*

ROB
ORSEMI

(1972), and *Ruskin* (1974) a Flemish triptych, a “book of hours,” and the Alpine and Venetian studies of Ruskin, mediate between the contemporary perceptions of the filmmaker and the aesthetic past. In his films of the Eighties and Nineties the self-reflexive gestures become more oblique and subtler as evocations of the filmmaker’s gaze and directorial manipulations.

Within the projected Temenos his films would be shown in three cycles under the rubric “Winged Distance/Sightless Measure.” The first cycle would consist of five or six of his first films, the second of *From the Notebook of ...*, *The Painting*, *Work Done*, and *Ruskin*. The third cycle includes works not yet completed together with *Sotiros Responds* (1975), *Sotiros (alone)* (1978), *Amor* (1980), *Wingseed* (1984), *Efpsychi* (1983), and *The Stoas* (1992)*.

In two of his rare polemical broadsheets, the filmmaker has defined his relationship to viewers and to language:

The spectator must discover why an image was chosen to be represented; the silence of such a discovery becomes a moment of release. It is not the film maker’s work to tell you: his work is to make the film and to protect what he does, in the serenity of a thought without words, without the quality in words which would destroy what he intends to represent.¹

The point from which to begin . . . then, is with the eye of the spectator, the first sense, and proceed to the others, as he recognizes the presence which becomes awareness. This is not a matter of understanding a film’s content in one way or another; rather the viewer creates an order within himself, and this order is as conscious as Language.²

This sounds more like Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s “word-skepticism” than Brakhage’s well-known imagining of preverbal seeing. For Beavers the Orphic film artist isolates an image as an autonomous entity of thought, pointing to the filmmaker as well as to the object of contemplation, and also displacing verbal elaboration with an intuitive optical intensity – “Sustained by the awakening of emotion united to



* Most of these films have been or are being re-edited so that each of the dates provided here should be followed by a second as follows: *From the Notebook of ...* (1998); *The Painting* (1998); *Ruskin* (1997); *Efpsychi* (1997); *The Stoas* (1997).
– Ed.

1. Robert Beavers, “Em.blem,” Temenos, 1984.

2. Robert Beavers, “Hautprobe for a spectator,” 1978, Temenos.

WINGSEED

strength, I reach beyond the life-likeness of the actor and the shadow of performance to the figure gathering the light – the life, itself, of the image”³ – to the end that the viewer must reimagine the film in all its musical tensions and qualifications, at times bringing this subjective order into being through language. Thus, Beavers anticipates the limitations and inevitability of such efforts as this



3. Robert Beavers, "Editing and the Unseen," *Temenos*.



essay to tease into critical language the style and implications of his films.

Nevertheless, in an attempt to sketch the character of Beavers' cinematic signature and to take a stab at "disclos[ing] its 'emblematic meaning' which is equal to the entire film,"⁴ I shall concentrate on *Wingseed*. Its lustrous, rich images of a Mediterranean landscape with sheep, goats, and a male nude and its intricate rhythms openly acknowledge the filmmaker's debt to Markopoulos, but even more emphatically stake out the ground Beavers has painstakingly secured as his own territory: the fusion of images and image clusters that resolutely maintain their autonomy. One might even see this film as a restatement of his relationship to his lover and teacher.

Beavers has mastered the Markopoulos still-life shot: an open suitcase in a beautiful humble room, the details of a youth-

4. "Em.blem"



5. "Hautprobe for a spectator."

ful male body – ear, knees, feet, a leg – the light falling from a window onto a crude rug. But around and between such static metonymies he has orchestrated a wide range of movements: the nervous vibration of a pod shot in closeup with a handheld camera; fast panning back and forth over the landscape; abrupt vertical tilts; the trembling hairs on a man's leg. For the most part these movements terminate abruptly, unexpectedly, carrying

their charge into the shots which follow them. When those subsequent images are still, the suddenly arrested propulsion accents and intensifies their richness and "harmony," soliciting our attention to their connotations. Beavers wrote: "I have emphasized the idea of harmony because one sees in Film not just an image but the unity of image and its interval while simultaneously hearing the sound and its interval."⁵ The effect of this montage is of extraordinary restraint as if his rhythmic inspiration allowed a distillation and crystallization, impeding viewers' anticipation of a figure of cadence, while again and again surprising us with a new variation from the repertoire exhibited in the first moments of the film.

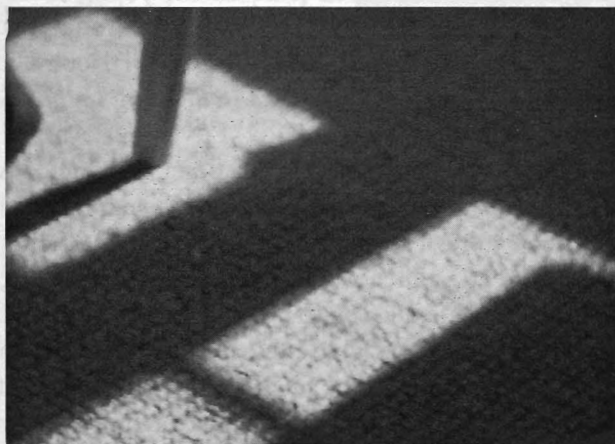
The cutting on varieties of camera and object movement is so sophisticated that I might be tempted to say that Beavers has learned as much from Brakhage as from Markopoulos, and that his style is a wonderfully urbane synthesis of the two. But Beavers, working solely in Europe and sharing Markopoulos' disdain for most American avant-garde cinema, probably had less contact with Brakhage's art than any other major American avant-garde filmmaker of his generation. In fact, it is actually the difference between Brakhage's sense of moving visual "poetry" and Beavers' poetics that can help us in our quest to define Beavers' style. Brakhage's chosen affinities in literature are largely American, Emersonian, with a predilection for modern poets who stress the rhetoric of energy and dynamic renewal: Stein, Pound, Olson, Duncan, Johnson. But Beavers has self-consciously shuffled off his native Muse and disciplined his sensibility with an intense reading of modern European poets: Valéry, George, Cavafy, perhaps Hofmannsthal and Rilke. Their aesthetic nostalgias, negating arrests, and epistemological ironies – which portray poetic craft as an inspired construct to transform things and events into acts of the mind – inform his poetics of the cinematic image as the fusion of observation and action, seeing and directing: "One is aware of the way in which

'observing' becomes 'directing,' aware of the power that exists in Seeing. The making of a film is within the boundaries of an art which allows the film maker to move back and forth, observing-directing."⁶

6. "Em.blem"

Whereas Brakhage's moving camera usually represents the unseen bodily presence of the filmmaker (virtually synonymous with the empirical Brakhage), so that in the film we see what he sees as he moves through space, Beavers' rhythms, isolating images as nodes of thought and memory, goad us to give as much weight to their disparities as to their fusions. His images are monads, irreducibly simple and real, yet their author's mental images as well, loaded with the history of poetic iconography. The poets to whom he seems closest all substitute masks or ventriloquize voices to compensate for a felt discontinuity of identity. In the films that show him manipulating filters or masks Beavers sketches the persona The Filmmaker without pushing its identification with the empirical self. In the later films, the images and the harmonic editing bear the burden of the evoking of that persona.

Wingseed is patently an eclogue: amid some sheep and many goats we encounter a naked youth, alone aside from the implied attentions of the filmmaker, who observes and directs him: the static, elegant compositions of rooms, clothes, books might be the latter's or the former's. The first glimpse we have of the boy lowering his head on a bed, as if kissing or embracing it, suggests that in this eclogue he plays the traditional role of the unsatisfied lover, but the cinematic fixation on his body gradually confirms him as an object of erotic fascination, rather than (or perhaps as well as) the subjective core of the film. It is not surprising, then, that one reviewer saw more than one man in this film, unwittingly simplifying its troubling ambiguity. The relationship of the filmmaker to the young man is both intimate and



distanced; it is as if he casts a cold eye on the nature of his desire, and by implication, his own youth.



Even the Pan pipes we hear intermittently on the elegantly minimal sound track, foster the ambiguity typical of Beavers. As an iconographic gesture the pipes represent the presence of a Poet, of the poetic afflatus. Virgil's Second Eclogue (to which I shall return at the risk of erecting a house of library cards around a film so immediate and simple) follows the bucolic tradition in identifying the shepherd as a poet under the protection of Pan:

mecum una in silvis imitabere Pana canendo
[Together with me in the woods you will imitate Pan in singing]

But here Beavers encourages us at one stroke to recognize the young man as the persona of a shepherd poet and yet acknowledge that behind him, the filmmaker as the poet-magician is crafting the whole auditory rhythm: muted goat bells, the wind, a shepherd's guttural call, and Pan pipes.

In the representation of sexual longing Beavers took over, and scaled down, the mannerist direction Markopoulos has used since his origins in the trance film genre of the later 1940s. The most florid example of his Bronzino-like mode of filming bodies was his portrait of Beavers himself as the incarnation of the nude lover, *Eros o Basileus* (1967). More than twenty years later, Beavers seems to have the earlier film in mind, as he in turn films the young eromenos of *Wingseed*.

I use the Classical Greek term for the young lover guided by a hint embedded in *Wingseed*. In the bedroom there is a momentary pause on the red cover of Gundel Koch-Harnack's *Knabenliebe und Tiergeschenke: Ihre Bedeutung im pädagogischen Erziehungssystem Athen* [Boy Love and Animal Gifts: Their Meaning in the Pederastic Educational System of Athens]. Koch-Harnack examines the numerous vase paintings in which an older teacher (erastes) gives an animal – most often a hare – to his pupil-lover (eromenos), arguing that the exchange symbolically acknowledges the instinctual drives that bind the pair.

Apparently, Beavers conflated the themes of homoerotic teacher-pupil compact with the bucolic shepherd's lament, traditionally both homosexual and heterosexual, importing from the

latter a domesticated animal, a goat, in the place of the wild gift. In Virgil's Second Eclogue the shepherd-poet Corydon bewails his hopeless infatuation with the boy, Alexis. Dying Daemotus gave Corydon his Pan pipes,

et dixit morientes: 'te nunc habet ista secundum
[and he said as he died, "Now you will have this as a true successor"]

Beavers' mantle as a *second* Markopoulos is never so explicit. The bucolic title, *Wingseed*, alone suggests the regermination of poetic – wind borne – inspiration. The elaborately artificial conventions of pastoral poetry (here massively imported into cinema) emphasize the continuity of tradition, the succession of poets, and the priority of desire over satisfaction, as if the purpose of desire was to inspire and feed the crafted artifact.

Along with the seductions of poetic song, Corydon offers Alexis gifts of suckling fawns, flowers, and fruit, in vain. But Beavers' young protagonist appears to cherish and make a pet of a goat, which according to Koch-Harnack would signal the welcome proffering of the instinctual erotic drive of the erastes. With the acceptance of the gift, if indeed it is a gift, the scene subtly shifts from the rustic landscape to what may be the grounds of a villa.

The musical structure of Beavers' film sustains its fecund ambiguities in a careful balance. The poem of the mature filmmaker celebrating a perhaps aristocratic youth in the guise of an Arcadian shepherd, and the eclogue of the shepherd at once the object of desire and suffering from frustrated desire, keep pace with the more submerged, historical resonances of the origins of the filmmaker as eromenos. For, even if in some ways *Wingseed* corresponds in Beavers' corpus to *Eros O Basileus* in Markopoulos' oeuvre, it constitutes a chastening of the passionate declaration of the earlier film, as it turns the power of erotic observation and direction into an examination of the inspired continuities of filmmaking and filmmakers.

