

TWO EARLY VIDEO PORTRAITS

By John Minkowsky

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***One-Eyed Bum* by Andy Mann (1974, 6 minutes, b/w, sound)**

Andy Mann's chance video dialogue with a nameless 'one-eyed' bum raises issues of economic and personal freedom on several levels. These issues are directly addressed as the subject philosophizes about his environment (The Bowery) and the interrelationships among money, power, and freedom. *One-Eyed Bum* also exemplifies a freer, more spontaneous mode of observing, engaging and recording the world through video, and this freedom is a direct function of the economics of videotaping.

One-Eyed Bum is not overtly the product of an electronic medium. Mann uses no video special effects or techniques of electronic image manipulation, nor does the tape refer directly to other properties of the medium, such as its live-time representation or immediate information feedback. Mann's approach is most closely related to the cinema verite documentary, and could have been shot on film were it not for Mann's method of portapak taping. As Lizzie Borden wrote in "Andy Mann" for *Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films*, Vol., No. 1 (November 1974):

The content of Andy Mann's tapes cannot be divorced from the way he works: he has integrated shooting into his activity, so he makes tapes wherever he happens to be. He doesn't go on special trips for the purpose of taping, but allows the sites and subjects to involve him, the unity of location determining the unity of the tape.

The opening of *One-Eyed Bum* is representative of this approach. Mann follows an airplane, settles on a street scene, and seems to be simply looking and waiting for something or someone to interest or engage him, as the bum then does, shouting “Hey, TV!” Similarly, the tape concludes with the camera turning again down the street and waiting, and what we have seen in the six unedited minutes is simply an extract from a much longer process. Such a casual interactive approach to documentation would be prohibitively expensive in cinema, with a half-hour of sound-sync, black-and-white 16-millimeter film costing at least \$500. By comparison, a half-hour reel of ½-inch videotape is about \$12 and can be recycled, or recorded over, numerous times. It becomes obvious how Mann and other videomakers can afford to let the camera run, and approach video as a medium through which to interact with and gather information about both new and familiar environments and situations.

Andy Mann’s work and his method of taping, while exceptional, should be considered within a broader context of work by documentarians who have found the relative inexpensiveness of video conducive to freer, more personalized, approaches to television reportage. Among the aims of such makers has been the presentation of alternative views regarding sociopolitical issues, at times directed toward very specific audiences, with the concept of video as a tool for social change. Such works range from intimate portraits of individuals as spokespersons for broader cultural concerns (as in Cara DeVito’s *Ama L’uomo Tuo* described below) to tapes concerned with issues of importance to small grassroots communities or subcultures. As a social tool, cheap, reusable video has also made its impact in hospitals, schools and other institutions, providing immediate information feedback in therapeutic and educational contexts. In any case, the spontaneous exchange of *One-Eyed Bum* is a direct by-product of the relative freedom afforded by the economy of taping with small format portable video.

The verbal exchange between Mann and his subject is itself founded upon an economic exchange: the bum requests a quarter for allowing himself to be photographed, and Mann offers him a dollar for his (Mann’s) being “a pain in the ass.” The bum’s immediate association of Mann with commercial television (Eyewitness News) is an association

with money and power, and these themes weave their way through his street philosophy. As he speaks of the “messed up” but economically well-off Bowery inhabitants who accomplish nothing, he asserts that “If I had a million dollars, I’d still be in the street.” Wealth is presented as a potential source of psychological confinement, and while it might provide him the power to “do what I wanna do,” the bum acknowledges that he has nevertheless attained, in extreme poverty, that which is most essential: “...the best thing in the world – just being yourself.” He speaks of his role in the Korean War:

He say, “Now what do I have to do because I’m in your company and you’re a sergeant? I say, “You don’t got to do nothing. I don’t even know you.” Just like I don’t know *you*. I don’t give a fuck what you doin’ with that camera there, I don’t give a fuck.

This brief soliloquy seems to summarize the bum’s philosophy: that freedom is more important than power, and the ‘irresponsibility’ of freedom is best achieved through a low-budget lifestyle. Throughout, he suggests that he is more a bum by choice than chance.

There is an obvious analogy to be drawn between the one-eyed bum and the “one-eyed” cameraperson. The artist, a virtuoso videographer, has opted for a low-budget style of working that has allowed him the freedom to integrate shooting into everyday activities. To return to an earlier association, an Eyewitness News Team would be less free and thus less likely to take Mann’s casual approach because of expense and “responsibility.”

Much of the strength of *One-Eyed Bum* derives from this sense of a spontaneous, undirected exchange occurring between two street people. Not to be overlooked as elements that make this tape a compelling work are Mann’s direct, unaffected camerawork and the overall appeal of his subject. The one-eyed bum, as captured by Mann on videotape, at times overpowers us with manifestations of a charming naïveté intermingled with self-consciousness, an embarrassment at his own profanity or the cataract over his eye, and a revealing openness of expression and gesture.

***Ama L'uomo Tuo (Always Love Your Man)* by Cara DeVito (1974, 20 min. b/w, sound)**

Like *One-Eyed Bum*, *Ama L'uomo Tuo (Always Love Your Man)* is a portrait in video, but unlike Andy Mann, Cara DeVito is the biographer of someone familiar – her own grandmother. Both tapes, like other documents of non-celebrities, reflect the economy of small-format videotape. Andy Mann was able to let the portapak roll until he happened upon an interesting subject, aware that the videotape could be erased and used again. DeVito, and others attempting in-depth portraiture, can afford to tape their subjects at length, selecting and assembling passages of the greatest intensity later. Long, uninterrupted tapings, coupled with the capability to immediately play back one's image and voice help to make the subject more comfortable and intimate in the presence of video technology. *Ama L'uomo Tuo* is evidence of the range and depth of emotion and expression that can be captured on tape in this process. *One-Eyed Bum*, a single continuous take of a chance encounter with a unknown quantity, is casual and non-dramatic – a real-time conversation. *Ama L'uomo Tuo*, by comparison, is heavily edited, developing the theme of feminine oppression which the subject's life exemplifies in a dramatic mode that builds to the climactic description of a forced abortion.

The power of *Ama L'uomo Tuo* arises from the strength of the subject and her story and from DeVito's accomplished methods of structuring this material, three aspects of which will be considered. The first is the thematic linkage of each shot to the next, often resulting in smooth, subtle transitions between sequences. The transition from the first dinner scene, where the family is engaged in conversation around a table, to the woman's account of being beaten for refusing to clean the bathroom is an intermediary scene in which the subject speaks of telling her mother she'd never eat food prepared by hands that scrubbed the toilet. This intermediary scene, however, is more than simply transitional; it also serves as a comic counterpoint and as an expression of lost innocence central to the tape.

A second aspect is the dramatic and increasingly charged emotional material that is introduced as the work progresses. *Ama L'uomo Tuo* begins lightheartedly, with cheerful music accompanying rapid montage sequences establishing DeVito's grandmother in a contemporary environment. Her initial references to her husband, Benny (his description of her as "lost bread," his training her to prepare dinner in advance), portray the figure of a rather minor tyrant compared with brutal victimizer he later becomes. Three incidents of violence by Benny are also presented in order of increasing intensity. The woman's punishment for refusing to clean the bathroom is a single blow (perhaps – a frozen frame accentuates her utterance "...Bang!"). For dancing without permission, she receives a beating until she faints. For an unwanted pregnancy, she is forced to undergo a dangerous abortion from which she nearly dies. Each successive description of violence sharpens the focus on the central issue of the tape: the degree to which cultural codes permit and reinforce the oppression of one individual or group by another. In *Ama L'uomo Tuo*, the recounting of the abortion is the longest and most affecting, in both its specific callousness and the larger principles it represents. Benny has made decisions affecting his wife's body, her health, and her life.

The grandmother's last statement, dubbed over a freeze frame of her face, is ironic:

In Italian we say "ama l'uomo tuo." Love your man and don't matter what. Love him with all his faults. And I think it's very wise words.

It is one of several such ironies by DeVito that constitutes a third aspect of her method. Ironic juxtapositions are most pronounced in her placement of the dinner scenes with DeVito's Uncle Tommy. His description of Americans as "too cold" as compared with Italians has been immediately preceded by the woman's account of a beating and will be followed by a description of "old world" custom – the rejected suitor cutting the face of his former loved one. DeVito uses other pronouncements by Uncle Tommy about the naturalness of a son taking after his father, and about "aggravation" to others being her grandfather's formula for long life to underline social reality – the continuance of the

cultural values and beliefs that permitted the unjust and harsh impositions that the grandmother has described. Even her expressed belief in the “wise words” of the title and in their transmission – a belief that seems blinded to the example of her own life – bespeaks the strong grip of despotic cultural codes.

“Always love your man.” It is the only time the word love is uttered in relation to Benny. Yet the tape is about love in another way, the woman’s love for her children revealed as a primary reason for her courageous endurance. While DeVito has fashioned a work with broad social implications, she never forgets that it is a work about one person’s life, her values and her strength. In that sense, *Ama L’uomo Tuo* expresses the artist’s love for her subject, and is one of the strongest and most moving video portraits to date.

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