

# Psychological Seduction

by Tony Whitfield

There is an intelligence at work in Gary Schneider's films that transforms their visual beauty into the arresting structures of occurrences that must be reckoned with. *Peripheral Intercourse* (1979) and *Salters Cottages* (1981) are his first films. Both are quite short in length (18 and 14 minutes respectively) but the territories they cover expand far beyond their actual time frame.

*Peripheral Intercourse* opens with black and white, almost clinical, shots of a nude man and woman, turning slowly, focusing on the genitals — a basic visualization of gender. In a voiceover a man recounts repeated encounters with another man on a wharf — an obvious pick up. The male figure ejaculates and the scene cuts quickly to a circling color shot of John Erdman, the original speaker, in the process of writing about the difficulties of maintaining a relationship (with a male lover.) "...the inevitable connection between the self and the lover, even though the lover is not aware of the connection..." As we hear Erdman continue to compose his essay the scene switches to a grainy black and white sequence of stills of Erdman entering a room. A woman's voice begins to echo his over the sound of a running shower. These scenes are the prelude to a treacherous dialogue between Erdman and Kate Parker in which Parker assumes the role of friend/confidant/analyst/would-be sycophant and object of Erdman's games of psychological seduction, a game which precludes any real consummation. Schneider, again, fragments this section of the film with abrupt cuts which compress time and isolate the range of Parker's emotional reactions from detachment to

rage to sympathy. The result is an extremely astute examination of sexual ambiguity and ambivalence and the machinations of emotional autonomy mediated by a discourse on the nature of the love relationship.

In *Peripheral Intercourse* Schneider also confronts the edgy reality of the sexual politics that exist between gay men and heterosexual women. In the last scene of the film Parker tells Erdman, "You are a lover in the sense that you attract people in need of intimacy." The question it raises is where does that attraction become manipulation when sexual intimacy is denied?

In *Salters Cottages* limited seduction is also a theme, but this time it is discussed completely through gestures, settings and props. In its opening scene the cigarette smoking ritual becomes the correlative of enticement used by Suzanne Jolson to attract Erdman's attention. Erdman is not responsive.

Brought together in a community of vacation cottages, Erdman, Jolson and



Gary Stephan, and Peter Hujar are involved in the process of establishing intimate relationships with one another. A silent film, shot in black and white, *Salters Cottages'* milky atmosphere and muteness give the work a dreamlike quality that undermines the expectation

## FILM

of narrative convention. Relationships are established through structural devices. Hujar's character becomes sexualized through his adjusting of his penis in his underpants as he stands in front of a mirror. Erdman is seen frequently adjusting his position in front of a camera lens. A sexual relationship is implied between the two men when Hujar happens across Erdman photographing himself in the woods and Erdman moves to the side to catch Hujar in his photograph. Suddenly wind passes through the leaves causing the entire film image to shimmer with reflecting light.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the means by which Schneider defines complex interpersonal relationships in *Salters Cottages* is that their revelations are dependent on the use of familiar cultural symbols whose significance is as much a part of the film's narrative order as it is metaphoric. This reevaluation of narrative order is the subversive base of Schneider's films and therein lies their promise. ▽