



FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS

Mon Mar 1 | 8:30 pm

\$9 [students \$7, CalArts \$5]

Jack H. Skirball Series

Don Levy *Herostratus*

Los Angeles premiere of the HDCAM copy
UK, 1967, 142 min., HDCAM

Though Australian-born Don Levy taught and inspired generations of filmmakers and artists at CalArts in the 1970s and '80s, his own underground masterpiece *Herostratus* remained largely out of public view. Now, more than 40 years after the psychedelic shock Levy delivered to a British film industry steeped in kitchen-sink realism, *Herostratus* is screening once more, digitally remastered by the British Film Institute. In this coruscating work, Michael Gothard astonishes as the eponymous young poet who hires a PR firm to turn his planned suicide into a media spectacle. Bursting with psychological and aesthetic urgency, *Herostratus* proved as prescient about the failure of the '60s counterculture, as it was inspirational for the likes of Stanley Kubrick and Nicolas Roeg. "[S]een by virtually every filmmaker then working in the British film industry.... *Herostratus* must now certainly rank among the most influential of unknown films," according to Amnon Buchbinder.

"Rarely has the camera, backed by extraordinary acting, been used to give such objective form to a man's inner anguish. The world of *Herostratus* is cold, stark metallic, expressed with an imagery as succinct and evocative as anything in Antonioni at his best."

– Kevin Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*

Don Levy was born in 1932 in Bathurst, N.S.W., Australia. A student in Theoretical Chemistry at Sydney University, he was also active as a painter, founding the Sydney University Art Group. Awarded a



research scholarship at Cambridge University, he completed his PhD in Theoretical Chemical Physics in 1960. He became active in the leadership of the Cambridge Film Society, and made his first films. During this time he also married and became the father of twin girls, Leopi and Olynxa.

He was then awarded the first scholarship in film at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College in London, where he studied closely under the noted British filmmaker Thorold Dickinson. In 1962 Levy created the film branch of a research unit at University College, for which he directed several remarkable films.

Awarded a modest grant from the British Film Institute's Experimental Film Fund, Levy set to work on what was to be the first feature film funded by the BFI, and in some respects the first truly independent British feature film: *Herostratus*. The film was shot between 1963 and 1965, with frequent interruptions, as Levy had established his own production company, iFilms, which produced a range of sponsored works for government and corporate clients. Post-production took two additional years.

Following a series of festival screenings, *Herostratus* had one of its only theatrical runs as the inaugural exhibition at the ICA Cinema in London. In 1968, Levy took up a position as a Visiting Artist/Professor at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, where he stayed for two years. He was invited by to be part of a three-member advisory committee that was to lay the foundation for the American Film Institute's Centre for Advanced Film Studies. Offered a position in the new program thus created, Levy declined but accepted Alexander Mackendrick's invitation to be his Associate Dean at the School of Film/Video at the California Institute of the Arts. He moved his family to Los Angeles and continued to teach at CalArts for the remainder of his life. There he mentored and inspired a generation of filmmakers and other artists, teaching several of the institute's most popular courses. Don Levy passed away in January, 1987. He left behind an extraordinary and little-seen body of work distinguished by its intense beauty, challenging poetic spirit, and original vision.

Herostratus, which was released in 1967 to very limited audiences, is one of the unsung masterpieces of the British underground cinema. A film about the desire to escape from the trap of social institutions, especially in a capitalist society, Herostratus opens with an extended



sequence in which the protagonist, the young poet Max (Michael Gothard), trashes his living space and runs off with a tape-player and an axe through the streets of London. Levy's stylistic choices express Max's mounting hysteria and anxiety. Herostratus is edited according to a cyclical pattern: the narrative scenes are regularly punctuated by allegorical images appearing in short flashes that are sometimes less than a second. Shots of a female stripper are combined with images from a slaughterhouse where a cow is being disembowelled; still shots of Max's shaking figure in a black space recur as references to Francis Bacon's paintings of melting figures in impersonal boxes. Levy also inserts black-and-white documentary footage: images of the Holocaust and of the victims of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and footage from Peter Whitehead's Wholly Communion (1965), which documents a public reading by several Beat poets.

The editing of Herostratus became time-consuming because Levy was very precise about the length of individual shots, sometimes making them almost subliminal for maximum psychological effect. This makes the film an interesting addition to Eisenstein's theory of the 'cinema of attractions'. – Christophe Van Eecke

Technical description by the British Film Institute:

"Herostratus was transferred to High Definition from the original 35mm negative. The audio was transferred from a 35mm print. The picture was restored using HD-DVNR and Phoenix restoration systems, removing dirt, scratches and warps, torn or missing frames and improving stability issues. Audio issues such as pops, crackle and noise/hiss were also improved."

Technical Producer of Mastering and Restoration: James White, BFI

Technical Mastering Assistant: Douglas Weir, BFI

Important note from the Don Levy Project:

"'Restoration' has been used by all of us at the Don Levy Project for lack of a better term. The vocabulary of digital media is still being developed. The technology is more advanced than the language coined to express it, so it must be noted that while we are now able to see a digital copy of the film, the original negative still awaits preservation. It is our hope that the REDCAT screening will generate new and continued interest in Don's work."



Those interested in learning more about the Don Levy Project efforts may do so at [_<http://www.donlevyproject.com/navigation.htm>](http://www.donlevyproject.com/navigation.htm)

Curated by Beth Block, with Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud.
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