

DON LEVY: *HEROSTRATUS*

MARCH 1, 2010 | 8:30 PM

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California Institute of the Arts

CALARTS



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Jack H. Skirball Series

Los Angeles premiere of the HDCAM copy (2009)
UK, 1967-2009, 142 min.

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* (1967, originally shot in 35mm) 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*

ABOUT DON LEVY

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.

Don Levy's 1967 *Herostratus is the greatest movie-masterpiece [most people] have probably never heard of. A young poet (Michael Gothard) decides to commit suicide, but strikes a demonic bargain with an advertising tycoon (Peter Stephens) to give the deed maximum publicity... This notion of a "publicized suicide" echoes the Robert Riskin-Frank Capra film Meet John Doe, but Levy is not an artist interested in "plot." The poet's quest for a public death is instead a melodic line, used the way John Coltrane subverted Rodgers & Hammerstein to explore his own deeper inventory of My Favorite Things.*

Herostratus is named for the Greek poet who destroyed the Temple of Artemis in the 4th Century BC, hoping to secure his immortality... The fable Levy unfolds in his contemporary London is an escalating series of layered confrontations: between the poet and a prostitute upstairs; between the poet and his landlady; and between the poet, the malicious tycoon and his enigmatic assistant (Gabriella Licudi). These mix with documentary images which include London crowds who appear doomed to their anonymity and Hitler at his podium, grinning in a shiver of gratified ego. The implied point is "life as advertisement," of civilization as our self-made hell of self-promotion – but the whole is shot through with humor: 18 year old Helen Mirren has a brilliant three minute cameo in which (as a specimen of the ad tycoon's commercials) she applies off every ounce of carnality in her precocious arsenal to the promotion of rubber kitchen gloves...

In his beauty and transgressive screen presence, actor Gothard is kin to both James Dean and Malcolm McDowell. Stephens, as the tycoon, has a doughboy face offset by marvelously lethal eyes. The young poet may fleetingly believe himself to be in charge of his destiny, but amid the dystopian slums and Cold War futurism of the London that Levy conjures, it is clear this hero has been in over his head since birth, and so are we...

*Herostratus breathes the same ingenious oxygen of Bergman's *Persona*, Antonioni's *Red Desert*, Godard's *Masculin-Feminin*; it fortells Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and Cammell & Roeg's *Performance* with equal vividness. Why isn't it already listed in the canons of best-films-ever?... *Herostratus the poet may have been condemned to anonymity, but the film need not be. See for yourself.**

– F.X. Feeney, *The Los Angeles Weekly*

<http://blogs.laweekly.com/stylecouncil/art/herostratus-suicide-as-self-pr/>

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>

Tax deductible donations toward further restoration efforts can be made by check (for now) and information is available on how to do this at <http://www.ageefilms.org/donlevy.html>

Curated by Beth Block, with Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud. Special thanks to Amnon Buchbinder and James White.

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UPCOMING FILM/VIDEO PROGRAMS

February 27-March 7: REDCAT International Children's Film Festival

March 30: Ross Lipman: Urban Ruins, Found Moments

April 5: Light Echoes Dark: The Films of Julie Murray

April 19: Sharon Lockhart: *Lunch Break with Exit*

April 26: Jennifer Reeves: *When It Was Blue*

May 3: Gregorio Rocha: *The Lost Reels of Pancho Villa* with Edmundo and Felix Padilla:
The Vengeance of Pancho Villa

May 6-8: CalArts Film/Video Showcase

May 10: Starting to Go Bad: New Narratives by Pat O'Neill

May 15: Teen Animation, Photography, Puppetry and Video Screening

May 16: Ring Festival LA: Considering Wagner featuring Villa Aurora Composers-in-Residence

June 2-3: Partch: Even Wild Horses

June 4-5: Dance Camera West

June 4: CAP/ArtsCOOL Program Screening

June 5: CAP/Sony Pictures Media Arts Program Screening

July 8-September 5: Chen Chieh-jen: *Empire's Borders II*