On the Origins of the Robert Beck Memorial Cinema

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ON THE ORIGINS OF THE ROBERT BECK MEMORIAL CINEMA

BRIAN L. FRYE

After graduating from the San Francisco Art Institute with an MFA in filmmaking, I moved to New York in the summer of 1997, and began an MA in cinema studies at NYU. I immediately started volunteering at Anthology Film Archives and meeting people in the New York film community.

San Francisco had introduced me to microcinemas. I was a regular attendee of Craig Baldwin's Other Cinema and David Sherman and Rebecca Barten's Total Mobile Home. But New York microcinemas were at a low ebb when I arrived. I wanted to start my own, but didn't have a venue and didn't really know enough people.

Eventually, Amy Greenfield mentioned that Collective Unconscious, a performance space at 145 Ludlow Street in the Lower East Side, just a few blocks from Anthology, was looking for someone to show films. I walked over there and spoke to Jamie Mereness, one of their volunteers. We agreed that I would show films on Tuesday nights at 9pm. Collective Unconscious would take the first $50 at the door, I would take the next $50, and we would split the rest.

While paging through the New York Times indexes doing research for a paper on amateur cinema societies, I came across an unusual story about a WWI serviceman named Robert Beck, who was struck deaf and dumb by an injury, but recovered his faculties when he started laughing during a movie. This “miraculous cure” perfectly captured the spirit in which I planned to show movies, so I dubbed my nascent microcinema The Robert Beck Memorial Cinema, or RBMC.

On May 12, 1998, I presented the first RBMC show, a double-feature of Emile de Antonio's Underground (1976) and a kinescope of Nixon's Checkers speech, which I had borrowed from the Donnell Library film collection. The audience was not large, but it was enthusiastic - not necessarily about my film selections, but about the new microcinema. After the show, Bradley Eros volunteered his help on future shows, which I readily accepted.

Bradley knew a ton of people and had a lot of exciting ideas about how to expand the experience of watching movies, so RBMC programming improved immensely as soon as he got involved. A few weeks later, we presented “Subterranean Science Night,” in which Bradley added smell, touch, taste, and performance elements to an assortment of science films. That program defined the character of the RBMC. Our most memorable shows usually involved turning a movie into an interactive experience.

In any case, word soon spread. New York filmmakers came to shows, and then did their own. When filmmakers visited New York to show new films at other venues, we asked them to show their older films at the RBMC. We encouraged filmmakers to show films in 8mm, Super 8, and any other oddball format they wanted. The idea was to show movies that no one else could or would.
MOVIES CURE DEAF-MUTE.
Wounded Soldier Recovers Faculties at Entertainment in Liverpool.

LONDON, Aug. 31.—Robert Beck, of Chicago, who was made deaf and dumb by an injury sustained while fighting with the British army, suddenly recovered his speech and hearing today.

Beck, who was a motor-cycle policeman on the Chicago force when the war began, became a dispatch bearer with the British troops and was struck down by a sniper’s bullet in Flanders. He was taken to Liverpool.

From the day of his injury he had been unable to hear or speak, until he was taken with other convalescents to a moving picture entertainment in Liverpool. While watching a comic picture he suddenly burst out in laughter. The next moment he found that he was able to talk and hear normally.

TIED OF KILLING,
WRITES AMERICAN
Chicagoan Tells of Experiences in Armored Car That Turned His Hair White.

CHICAGO, Sept. 11.—From Robert Beck, former owner of a taxicab business here, has come to his friend, Charles Grand, a vivid letter on his war experience. Beck joined the Allies as driver of an armored automobile.

"I am glad to have the chance to tell you that I am alive, and that is all," the letter says. "My hair is nearly white now. I am sorry to tell you that I am deaf and dumb through shock and wounds. I am a motor-cycle dispatch bearer and armored car driver.

"I was driving a sixty horse power armored car. I could not drive fast enough through the dead bodies, because the dead bodies and horses were so thick that I could not get through. All at once a shell hit my car and blew it up.

"When they got me from underneath the wrecked car I was deaf and dumb, with my ribs crushed and spine hurt. The other three men I carry with me in the armored car were blown to bits.

"This was a month ago. The doctors have tried to bring my speech and hearing back, but they cannot. The doctors say they will come back in time, because now my nerves are shattered through hardships.

 Comic Movie Restores Speech and Hearing

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"Charlie, I am tired of killing people. I have been driving an armored car with three Maxim guns inside of it and three men working the guns. They fire 500 shots a minute, and I carry 10,000 rounds inside the car. The car weighs four tons, so you can see what fun we have on the battlefield. I have seen times when I drove my car forty miles an hour into a regiment.

"We have crushed men to death by the mad driving. I have had my radiator thick with blood, and pieces of arms and legs stuck out of my wheels. Many a time in a charge I have been so weak that I could not pull my bayonet out of bodies that I had bayonetted.

"This Summer has been bad for flies. There were millions of flies around us, because there are thousands of dead bodies of men and horses not buried properly. The bodies are thrown anywhere."

During the first year, we hosted Scott Stark, Phil Solomon, Martha Colburn, Zoe Beloff, Jon Moritsugu, Luis Recoder, Julie Murray, and many, many more. Every week we made calendars, posters, and program notes on the copy machine. At the end of the first year of programs, I collected all of that ephemera into a comb-bound book, which is now available on the Internet Archive.¹

Amusingly, when I named the RBMC, I was unaware of the New York video artist Robert Beck. For quite some time, I would occasionally get phone calls from distraught people, wondering what had happened to Bob. Of course, we made sure to include a Robert Beck video in one of our programs.

Bradley and I continued to present weekly RBMC shows for three more years. Bradley was the MC and I ran the projectors. The waggish referred to us as “Batman and Robin.” Eventually, the ticket price increased to $5, but we stuck to the rule that proceeds from the door went to the artists. Which meant that the RBMC always ran at a loss – albeit a manageable one, because Collective Unconscious was so generous and charged so little for the use of its space.

Eventually, in 2002, I left New York to start law school at Georgetown. I was replaced by a group of people, including Joel Schlemowitz, Marie Losier, and Ghen Dennis, among others. At about the same time, the owner of the building that Collective Unconscious rented decided to knock it down and turn it into an apartment complex. Bradley moved the RBMC to Participant gallery, a couple of blocks away, and Collective Unconscious moved to a new location in Tribeca. The new RBMC team continued to present shows for several years, on a somewhat less regular basis.

I’m really happy I had the opportunity to help run the RBMC. It was an honor and privilege to present films and videos by so many amazing artists, who were so generous with their time and talent. Many people have told me how much they enjoyed the shows and how the RBMC inspired them to start their own microcinemas, all over the world. Nothing could make me happier than to know that I helped other people have the same inspiring experience that I had as a young student, going to microcinemas in San Francisco and realizing that all it takes is a projector, a room, and a movie that you truly believe other people ought to see.

NOTES
The Robert Beck Memorial Cinema Presents

Abjects Anonymus

Tuesday July 27 at 9pm

"The eye is a carnal thing, ingesting death, decay & destruction." Extreme works from the threshold of the reviled. Degraded subjects from secret collections of the damned & the banned.

at Collective Unconscious
143 Ludlow St
Roberta Beck Memorial Cinema

the Underground Pump of Experimental Film
MAGIC LANTERN PRESENTS
"EXPERIMENTAL AND POLITICAL VIDEO ART FROM INDIA"
THE
INDIA SHOW
CABLE CAR CINEMA
9:30 PM
WEDNESDAY
MAY 21ST
FUNDDED BY RISCA AND THE MALCOLM S. FORBES CENTER FOR MEDIA AND CULTURE
MAGIC LANTERN CINEMA

FEST DESTINY SHOW

THE MAN

FILMS BY
BILL BROWN (IN PERSON)

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 15TH
9:30 P.M. AT
THE CABLE CAR CINEMA IN PROVIDENCE, RI
The Museum of Natural History presents

**Curious Magic**

A multi-media performance curated by

7:30 pm Showtime

Featuring vintage magic lantern slides and 16mm film and a Zeiss Star Projector

And presented in the Cormack Planetarium

Museum of Natural History
Roger Williams Park
Providence, Rhode Island