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Personal Video and Observation of the Ordinary

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While studying Greek and Latin literature in the 1960s, I was quite taken by the poetry of Catullus. Stepping far away from the epic works on Gods, heroes, grand themes, and great deeds, Catullus produced highly crafted, very short, and utterly personal pieces. In many ways these works steeped away from the norm just as the “underground” and experimental films of “beatnik” artists – Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger – very closely worked, personal, and short.

In 1973 I set about making a portfolio of films inspired by these poets and artists. My intent was to make four films, each made with 10 minutes of original material and edited to about six minutes final running time. It is perhaps not remembered these days that 16mm film was costly by comparison with digital video, so short films were often born of cost considerations; yet, the exercise was often rewarding. The first of the portfolio films was *Horse Pulling*, a personal vision of a horse draughting competition. This was ordinary and personal for me – I grew up on the edge of a large city, near working farms, and my mother had been raised on a farm and had used horses for ploughing and transportation. Nearly every September we would attend horse pulling competitions at county fairs. These were rather intimate affairs of, perhaps, a couple hundred audience members and a dozen pulling teams.



Photo by Irene Klaver

The plan for the film was to produce a piece of visual poetry representing my observations over the years of the dancerly relationship between drivers and horses (the smallest class of which was usually 3,000 pounds) engaged in precision pulling of weights up to 10,000 pounds. There were to be few “establishing shots” showing the whole arena, and little in the way of explanation of the events except for what might come over the public address system. The sound would be a collage of drivers talking, announcer, tack and gear clanking, and atmospheric sounds of barkers at the fair.

The film received lovely accolades and confused complaints in nearly equal measure. Farmers and artists almost all liked it, while many others felt as if they were too close to the action, that the topic and the editing were too “challenging” to be artistic *or* too well-crafted to be “documentary.” It did garner some festival awards and showings on public television and was shown at the Canyon Cinema founded by Bruce Baillie in San Francisco and well-received by the beatnik crowd.

Without saying much more, I invite viewing of a digital version made directly from the camera-original film and sound track. I welcome thoughts and comments that might seed more discussion.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KI2-110DYoY&t=98s>