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Motive

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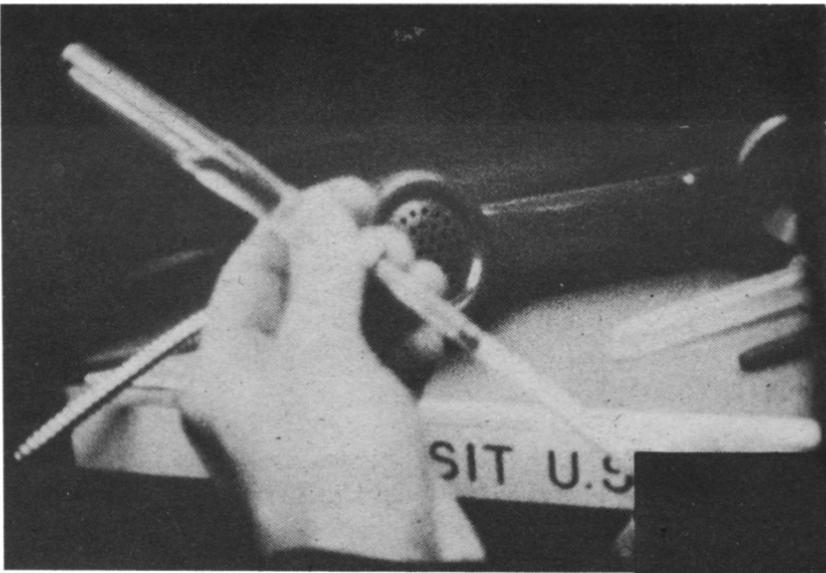
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Jimmy DeSana/S8 Still, *Motive*

Michael McClard

Interviewed by Kathy Acker

A. Ahh, Michael, what was your motive in making *MOTIVE*?

M. That's really a terrible question Kathy.

A. (laughter) That's my one planned question.

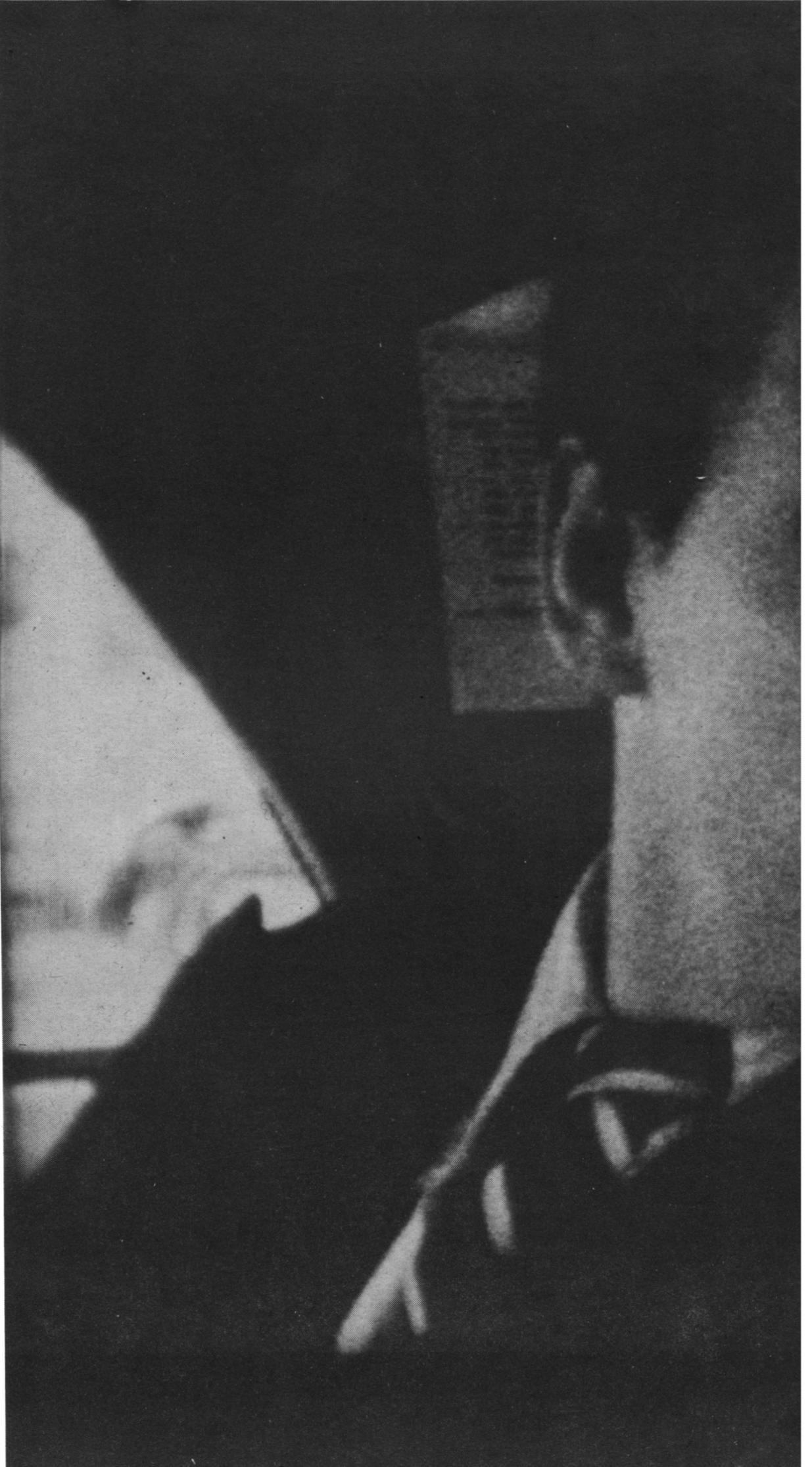
M. Ummm, that's pretty hard to answer. I'm still having this problem because I don't think *MOTIVE* was ever really finished.

A. Well, when I saw the film I noticed that on the one hand the main character who Jimmy DeSana plays, a business man, umm...the point where he was a mass murderer and there was no reason given in the film why he committed these murders, he just did...There was this whole quandry about that, and because the question was never even asked...why he did it, on the other hand the film sometimes was very straight narrative and sometimes was...not artsy but decorative in a way especially the focusing of the camera and everything was very pretty. So there seemed to be a repetition of his lack of motive in the way the camera wobbled between genres.

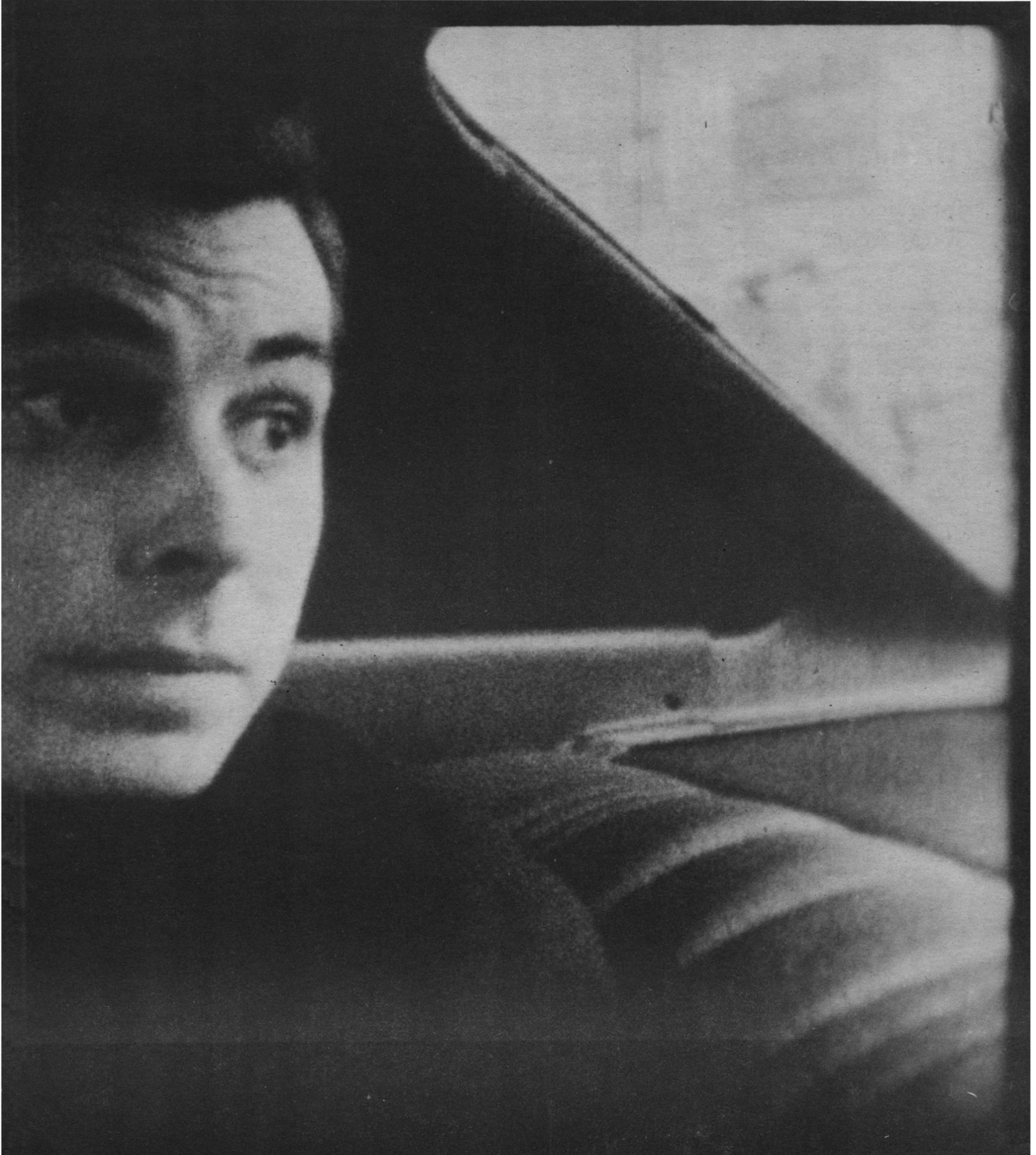
M. I wanted to make something that was nice to look at, or maybe I wasn't even thinking about that at the moment of looking through the camera and trying to shoot a scene, I wanted to make...I wanted to *see* something that looked beautiful through the camera, but in terms of having a purpose to this beauty or having a strong statement to make about cinema or life...I mean, I did have an idea about...a *general* idea about what this character was up to. I had an idea about *why* he would be committing these crimes, right, but I didn't want to make it really obvious in terms of the film because I thought the film should be about the obscurity of that motive, you know, that the film shouldn't supply the answer, that if there is a solution the viewer should be able to extract it from the film with whatever degree of acumen the viewer extracts any other conclusion from the rest of existence, without being told that he's going through this therefore he's doing that. Or that this is what's happening now and that's why this is... You know, all those kings of narrative conventions. Like the way language is used to close the plot, in order to make it hang together...

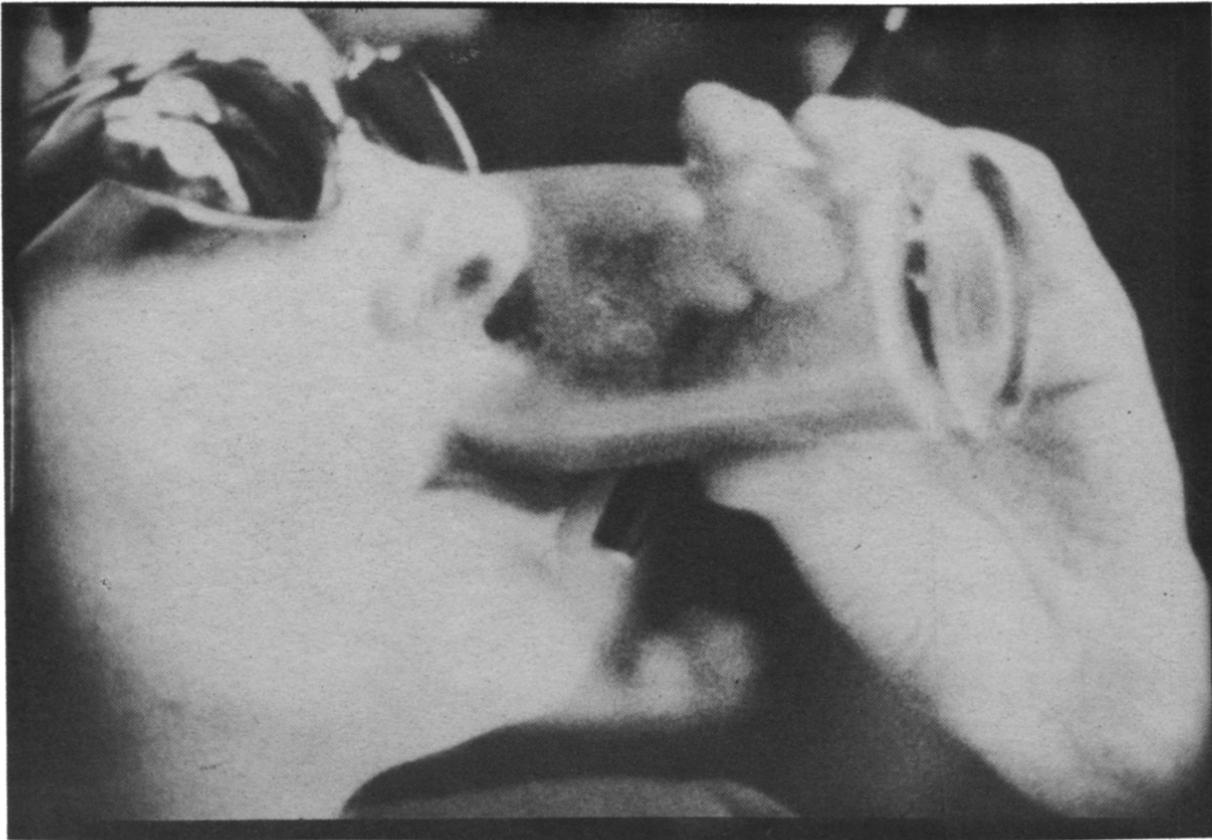
A. Right, so in a way it was seeing that...there was almost no psychology in the film. That's what was one of the most striking things and the absence of psychology was a freeing sort of movement, or felt as such...

M. Well, I felt like dealing with the activity of murder, but I knew it would invite this heavy psychological analysis, and that would be the most obvious approach to analyzing the film, and so I tried as much as possible to strip the film of anything that would lend itself to that kind of analysis, which meant in certain ways keeping the character very flat and...well, in some ways I think that that flatness also reveals other aspects...thematic aspects of the film.



MOTIVE





MOTIVE is a S8 Feature Film Produced by Liza Bear and Michael McClard/Written and Directed by Michael McClard/Starring Jimmy DeSana with Paula Greif and Tim Collins, John Lurie, Rae Spencer-Cullen and Betsy Sussler. *MOTIVE* premiered at The New Cinema in April of 1979.

Rae Spencer-Cullen
Betsy Sussler
Paula Greif

A. Could you say what those other aspects are?

M. Well, now it seems a little naive maybe. Just that by taking away all of the psychological handles, the moral handles or whatever, you end up with a character who's compelled rather than motivated and that's part of what I was trying to get at. The character really didn't believe in anything or wasn't really driven by anything, so this was the extreme that he was resorting to in order to have a sense of identity or have a sense of being.

A. Well, there's this French novelist, Pierre Guitat, who says the main thing he wants to get beyond in his books, in his novels, is to get beyond human psychology or what he calls neurosis so that he can get at, again, what he calls biological reality or reality, and that the one thing that inhibits it is this neurosis or idealism.

M. Yeah...

A. Which he attacks very much from a leftist point of view.

M. I haven't read...

A. Yeah, right, I'm just saying that it seems similar.

M. It sounds similar except it sounds more high-minded.

A. Yeah, he is a little high-minded and very theoretical (laughter).

M. But it was weird because...I mean it made for a very unglamorous film in a certain way and...I'm not sure whether it was memorable or not. I tend to think it was kind of unmemorable.

A. I remember it.

M. It just seems like it was so flat and...

A. That's why I find it memorable, because I found it absolutely unremitting, it never gave you a second-to...the most memorable thing is how you were really hard-edged about what you were doing, you never lapsed for a minute.

M. Which, in its own way, is a very formal thing.

A. It's a very formal film.

M. Yeah, it was, it's true, and it was hard to do because the tendency is to want to do all of the other things that make it bearable.

A. Yeah.

M. I mean the things that you know will make people want to pay attention.

A. Like the scene where Betsy's (Sussler) in the phone booth and she dies. That could have been a very funny scene...It was pretty funny.

M. It was funny yeah, but it wasn't comic.

A. The tendency could have been to make it extremely comic.

M. Or melodramatic or tragic...

A. Yeah.

M. I think we're going to continue working on the film though. We've talked about it. We haven't really done it, but Jimmy is interested.

A. What do you think the film needs? To be longer or...

M. Yeah, maybe to make it just a little bit more extreme, like add another...it's absurd, maybe it's black humor, it's a humor that you can't...

A. Blackest black, because black humor always went back to this idea of normal. It is just what it is.

M. In retrospect I also feel like there are kind of political connotations that I would like to make more emphatic or somehow a little bit clearer.

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the only stipulation for myself was that three people would be in a struggle for power, no matter how ludicrous the scale seemed. So you get one where two girls are discussing this boy who's standing right next to them. That sort of gossip happens a lot and while it's not on the same level of intensity as two people murdering a third... Yeah, so back to the answer to that question, I stopped thinking about Myra and Ian. I was thinking much more about New York. After I shot those scenes I found that they were such banal and common occurrences in our lives that there wasn't enough to sustain my interest. I needed something more dramatic. So that's when I started shooting those scenes that were scenes from everyday life off the t.v. so to speak. I mean they were more overt. For instance Annie Oakley shoots Mae West for trying to steal her boyfriend. But VERY deadpan.

CG: So how do you think they relate to Myra and Ian?

BS: They don't. (laughter) I mean we all have a common history, a common religion (Judeo-Christian) and, even though in the vignettes people are from different classes, a common culture. I think in the sources of any sort of power struggle you have some common ground. And some that isn't but I never even tried to explain this to myself in a logical way. I picked up things that were quite blatant—sexual relationships, monetary relationships, friendships that were ambivalent, class relationships and juxtaposed them with another narrative that literally ran along side them on the sound track. These narratives seemed to coincide at times...

CG: It was ambiguous.

BS: Yeah, and paradoxical.

CG: The ambiguity is reflected in the title MENAGE as well. The title has implicated within it menage a trois which involves three elements but it also has menagerie, like packs of wolves or tribal elements, sexual elements which are about tribes, menageries, a lot of people.

BS: That's why I chose it. In any sort of scene, for instance in an art scene where the people are socially, economically and emotionally dependent upon each other, you do develop tribal habits and that exists in lower classes as well. In the upper classes, it's a more insular family sort of tribalism. In the latter it's an extended family.

CG: You basically used that family in making the film as well. There are a lot of filmmakers or people who are "on the scene" in the film.

BS: Well, I don't know if I'd want to put it that way.

CG: Well, it all goes back to a social and professional familiarity.

BS: When I write a scene I usually have someone in mind but it wasn't necessary to cast with those same people, but I have to think of someone even if it's nothing like them in the end. I have written scenes for people, but then it's because of how I think they could act in them.

CG: What relationship do you think MENAGE has with your own work in the theatre collective, Nightshift?

BS: Well, it's a theatrical film. And Caz and Lindz had a great deal to do with the prologue. They were the only two actors in it besides a brief appearance by James Shuvus who was working with us on the whole play. But the film was shot as if it were theater in a proscenium arch and the acting...

CG: The acting was very broad, theatrical acting. It wasn't naturalistic.

BS: No, I hate that. I like it to be as fake as possible. Sometimes the faker I'd have people do things, the more natural it looked. Which was a bit of a surprise.

CG: Your videotape, TRIPE, also concerned elements of three.

BS: Right—a man, a woman and a dog.

CG: So what is it about three?

BS: Two is so boring. And once a third element comes in the situation is immediately activated. It becomes less clear as to who is fucking who or who is friendly with who. The possibilities become greater.

There's not a one-to-one ratio anymore. Things shift, especially power plays, in a matter of seconds. Which is what happens in the film.

CG: How did you direct the acting?

BS: Well, I would choose two or three gestures and one attitude for each character knowing that when the script was actually acted out these attitudes would come into conflict with each other and have to change.

CG: So do you think the actor has to know the motivation?

BS: No, I hate that. And it wasn't that sort of script. Well, that's not entirely accurate. There was a subtext in some instances, but we never dwelled upon it.

CG: That film collective... what was it called... a long time ago... where the films were shown on St. Marks Place?

BS: You mean The New Cinema?

CG: Yes.

BS: It wasn't all that long ago. Two years maybe not even that. It wasn't a collective, by the way, even though it may have seemed that way. It was run by Becky Johnson, James Nares and Eric Mitchell. Period.

CG: Well anyway, all of those people surrounding that, I was wondering how or what about that scene had changed.

BS: Well, it was great because they had all these people with all this talent—acting, directing, making music, etc., and no one is making it yet but everyone thinks that they will and they have some time to give to other people and so what becomes possible is almost anything given the economic conditions, which of course dampen it a bit but also make it exciting. For awhile. And then you make a film that takes an enormous amount of time for everyone involved and you're still broke and there's no way to distribute it in a large way. And you can't make a film without thinking of how to distribute it which was why New Cinema was begun in the first place. Also, making films under those economic conditions... O.K., you don't have to spend three years trying to get the money, but you don't necessarily want to get tied to the aesthetics that a low budget film force upon you—one-to-one shooting ratio, no rehearsals, long shots, etc.

CG: But you knew those ideas back then and you know them now. What changed? The approach?

BS: But back to the point. One would like to spend more time on a film. I mean, Film, like Literature, like Art, is a very serious medium and anyone would like to spend a few months developing a script. Which means they have to have money to eat while they are doing that. They would like to work with people over a solid period of time which means that you have to pay them... things like that. So making a film in a big way means channelling all your energies into that and that does not include working on someone else's film.

CG: MENAGE was shot on a very low budget and yet the acting and the camera work are very sophisticated but not precious or arty...

BS: Halfway through the film I developed this thing against beauty and shot a few scenes and then decided that beauty had its place along with pleasure, etc., and got back into it. Did you think that the film was about a particular milieu? Because it wasn't.

CG: No.

BS: I mean I do write from my life but then again I don't write just from my life. There was one instance which was my private joke and that's where Lindz Smith and Duncan Smith are talking to Babs Egan who is playing a whore. Lindzee is being obnoxious and Babs says if you don't like it go home and do it with your wife. Lindzee tells her to leave his wife out of this and then Duncan tells her that his wife is really a wonderful woman. That was a private joke.

CG: Not so private anymore.

BS: It's no fun if it's too secret.



(continued from p. 10)

A. That's partly what I wanted to ask you about next, what do you feel the political implications are that you want to make more prominent, that you want to enlarge upon?

M. Well, there is this parallelism in terms of the main character's daily activities. It's all kind of business related. He deals with his broker, and he takes trips, he's a boss man. The decisions that he makes in his office or at his desk effect possibly thousands of lives, millions of lives, or at least parallel decisions being made by thousands of people like him do every day. In some ways it's very similar to his making these deathtraps for people that are like logical constructs or things that he sets up and then walks away from and the mechanism continues until somebody is killed by it. His obsession is with making things, making the traps. He's obviously not interested in who the specific victim is. Which is something I also wanted to remain as an ambiguous point in the film—whether or not his victims were deliberately selected or random.

A. What happened that you didn't expect... I mean, because the film is so much about what you expected. It's such a logical film and it's so hard-edged and given that very heavy set-up, what happened, or did anything happen? Was there any process is what I'm asking. Or was the process almost nil?

M. Oh no, there was process, but I mean the pre-conception I think really... it was an *a priori* thing... I knew there would be a lot of unexpected things and such, a lot of the film was set up so that there was no possible rehearsal, there was no way to decide in advance what or how... Liza (Bear) and I would meet Jimmy at the place where we were going to shoot, and it was just pure projection, separate, independent projection. We'd talk the day before and if Jimmy was, ah, had business someplace and it was convenient...

A. Really?

M. I didn't want to get into writing dialogue.

A. So it was mainly improvised?

M. It was almost totally improvised by everybody who was in the film.

A. Oh really?

M. Yeah, I provided the concept and almost everything else was improvised.

A. How was... who did the camera work?

M. I did most of it, but not in a vacuum. Jimmy did the point of view shots in the scene with Paula Greif at the end of the film and Liza did some of it in the scene where the guy gets pushed off the building. But when it was time to do a shot I would consult with Liza and Jimmy about it.

A. So it was very much in a way a product, after the initial conception, it was very much a product of everyone who worked on it.

M. Absolutely, it was basically improvised. It was a matter of agreeing on what the films should be, and everybody was subject to the same quandary.

A. Oh, that's interesting, yeah.



Haoui Montaug and Michael McClard

Michael McClard and Leslie Schiff

