

Underworld UCLA

by Scott Macaulay

Much in the same way that contemporary film historians have excavated the Western and the film noir for extended formal analysis, cineastes of the future may well assess the film history of the late twentieth century in light of its most prolific, if not most popular, cinematic genre: the "calling card film." Cinematic resumes designed to exhibit a student filmmaker's Hollywood styled chops, these slick celluloid vessels, made with both Louma cranes and low budgets, are churned out by the hundreds each year. Calling card films may be hard to describe but, to paraphrase a Supreme Court Justice's famous declaration on obscenity, you know one when you see one.

Although these films may seem to be the sole output of today's film schools, a small cadre of filmmakers at UCLA, smack in the middle of Hollywood's backyard, are using their university years to create not shorts but feature-length films with a decidedly off-Hollywood sensibility. Long takes, improvisation, documentary explorations of various ethnic communities, and cinematic role models as diverse as Cassavettes, Ozu, Chantal Akerman, and Eric Rohmer characterize a collection of no less than a dozen features which have emerged from UCLA since 1985. What's especially impressive about these filmmakers is the perseverance they've shown in completing the films. Like most film schools, UCLA forbids students to produce features.

According to the school, this restriction arises out of practical necessity. Large enrollments and financial limitations conspire to limit students' access to equipment. And since the school reasons that a ninety minute feature takes three times as long as a thirty minute short to produce, it's perfectly reasonable that students should be discouraged from making full length films. Right? Wrong. "It's the people who are making a half hour film who are there forever," says Nigel Bezjian, former UCLA

student and director of the feature *Chickpeas*.

While it may seem like a taxing, overly ambitious decision, making a feature while in school has some interesting benefits. For one, you simply learn a lot more about film by doing so. "In theory and criticism classes, 99% of what you are talking about are feature films. But when you make a film, it has to be a short," Bezjian points out. Feature filmmaking while in school is something of a trip outside of the ivory tower, an experience in independent film's real world of low budgets, tight schedules, and unforeseen headaches. But most importantly, the experience can be a crucial moment of experimentation for an aspiring independent filmmaker. With one foot still within that ivory tower, the filmmaker can use the process as a rare opportunity to play to no one's expectations but his or her own. And if the film works, the student tag can be quietly dropped and the film can be marketed just like any other independent production.

For the current crop of UCLA feature helmers, ten or so filmmakers who have made films at the school since 1988, two films provided crucial inspiration. *Border Radio*, directed by Allison Anders, Dean Lent and Kurt Voss, and Nina Menkes' *Magdalena Viraga* were both skillful first features produced while the directors were still enrolled at the school. Both films received festival play, home video distribution deals, and critical praise. *Magdalena Viraga* received the L.A. Critics Film Award for Best Independent Film of 1986, while *Border Radio* was cited by the L.A. Times' Kevin Thomas as "one of the best movies ever made about the world of rock music."

With *Magdalena Viraga*, Menkes used film school to develop a set of working methods as well as thematic concerns, concerns which the director is still exploring in her current feature *Queen of Hearts*. Menkes began work on *Magdalena Viraga*, her thesis film, assuming it would be a short. Working from a twenty-five page script, she shot the film on weekends throughout the fall of 1985. Menkes said she "didn't start cutting until all the scenes were shot. Then I edited it together

right from the script. We looked at it, saw that it worked, and it was ninety minutes."

The film, a disturbing meditation on ostracism, female sexuality, commerce and male sexism, makes good use of its s'ethic of disciplined economy. Working as her own camera operator, without storyboards, Menkes made quick, on the spot decisions and came up with the film's most impressive aspect: it's rigorously controlled, arrestingly poetic use of framing. For Menkes, who lists Antonioni and the Dutch filmmaker Marleen Gorris as among her influences, the limitations imposed by her university situation forced her to make a feature with a blunt directness which served its subject matter well. "In the sex scenes, form followed function," Menkes says.

If Menkes constructed her film from a meticulously organized script, the *Border Radio* team created their film out of the improvisatory energy and impetuous impulses which form the core of the film's subject: rock and roll. The directors, all undergraduates, had just completed their second thesis film when they decided to take a vacation in Mexico. Immediately imagining a feature about a rock musician who flees to Mexico after robbing a club owner, the three co-directors nervously decided to take advantage of UCLA equipment which they felt was just sitting around.

Shot over a period of nine months, *Border Radio's* shaggy dog vitality owes a lot to the directors' decidedly un-film school like philosophy towards directing. "I don't see directing as an issue of control," Anders says. "I hate that concept. We decided to let the actors change whatever they wanted to change." That relaxed policy lead to some of the film's best scenes and most arresting images — like the signature shot of an electric guitar burning in the desert, a vision created by actor/rocker Chris D.

Anders describes the making of *Border Radio*, with its months of shooting and careful tiptoeing around school regulations, as a harrowing experience. Unlike Menkes' work, which grew into a feature with the blessings of the administration, *Border Radio* was always something of an outlaw project. "We had to lie to teachers," Anders said. While *Border Radio* looked towards the then burgeoning L.A. punk scene for inspiration and actors, filmmaker and UCLA student