

## *Echo's Bones*: Peter Emanuel Goldman on DVD

There are quite a few films that have become legendary for cinephiles, almost-impossible-to-see, like Duras' *L'Homme Atlantique* or Yvan LaGrange's *Tristan et Iseult*. Peter Emanuel Goldman is one of a very select group of filmmakers who have produced three such mythical works. We've been waiting decades for *Pestilent City* (1965), *Echoes of Silence* (1967) and *Wheel of Ashes* (1969) to become generally available and finally they have, thanks to Pip Chodorov and his video/DVD publishing house Re-voir (which surely has the finest back catalogue of any label in the business).

We almost brought Goldman to Galway for *Different Directions Film Festival* in 2010 but finally it proved impossible due to funding cutbacks. It would have been incredible to screen these three films together on 16mm but we can be happy with the quality of the Re-voir presentation of the films on DVD, accompanied by an excellent essay and an exhaustive interview with the filmmaker by Emeric de Lastens.



### *Pestilent City*

Over the years, based on what I'd read about Goldman and the worn-out VHS copy of *Wheel of Ashes* I possessed, he felt like the missing link between the American underground and the French post-nouvelle vague but also, thematically, he appeared to be one of those filmmakers whose work is in line with and on a par with the literary and philosophical ideas of his time. If Allen Baron's *Blast of Silence* (and Goldman's title surely echoes it) captures the misanthropic consequences of a standardized and streamlined American culture at the turn of the 60s and Perec's *A Man Asleep* diagnoses the general atmosphere of post-68 failure and

lethargy, also employing a misanthropic hammer-blow technique, then Goldman lays bare little seen aspects of the '60s counter-culture and the world of the lumpen proletariat that hovered menacingly beneath it, ready to swallow up anyone slipping through the self-experimental net. In this sense the short film *Pestilent City* contains the answer to the question of what haunts the characters of the two feature films: the black hole of the wraith-like existence that awaits you beyond the pale of a society you wish to reject. The lovelorn Miguel wandering around New York in *Echoes of Silence* or Pierre Clementi's would-be Vedic monk in the Paris of *Wheel of Ashes* are a mere footstep away from becoming the ghostly figures disappearing into negative in the shorter work. Whether you imagine the 60s as swinging or as a time of heroic ant-establishment politics this trilogy will come as quite a shock but it must surely be how many people remember the decade: a slow-motion nightmare of overpopulated city streets and of endless wandering, the aimlessness of which was interrupted only by the occasional image-cliché that caught the eye and drew you indoors. Above all, Goldman explores the decade as a time 'sick with eros' (as Antonioni put it). The great Italian filmmaker defended his early '60s films and the seeming disjunction between character and environment by diagnosing the sexual ills of the epoch: a deadlocked subjectivity created by the collision between a rapidly changing

modern society and a populace for whom emotional conformity and aging morality reigned supreme. Goldman's characters, in negotiating this blocked situation, are literally exploding with frustrated desires and sexual cravings, not at all stymied by the 'fear of the moral unknown' (Antonioni) of the silent majority.



### *Echoes of Silence*

If one can't help but think of *Taxi Driver* while watching *Pestilent City*, not only in the slow motion shots of New York streetlife but even in aspects of the music which seem Herrmannesque, in terms of the broad influence and cultural clairvoyance of these

three magnificent works *Wheel of Ashes* must be the standout. So much seems to follow in its wake, not only cinematically (Garrel in particular) but philosophically. It's impossible not to see Clementi's attempt to construct a technology of the sexual self as a precursor to Foucault's 70s and 80s work on the history of sexuality.

'Each morning I ask myself how I am going to live.' In the opening lines of the film Pierre lays out his stall of possible ways of living, and perhaps there is too much possibility here for sanity's sake. But this question of 'how to live' is the ethical question in a nutshell; in a post-Antonioni world wherein morality is (mercifully) abandoned how can one construct a set of immanent principles that will help you to live life to the maximum? Foucault traced the question back to the Greeks and discovered there the beginnings of a history of sexuality which was intertwined with rules of sociopolitical behaviour: "According to Socrates, to know oneself one must know both one's body, one's sexuality, and how to participate in the sociopolitical world." Both Christian and many Eastern religious developments would come to reject the Greek formulation and instead to posit a radical separation between self and society in the pursuit of 'truth'. In line with the massive investment in Eastern thinking of a sizeable element of the 60s counter-culture *Wheel of Ashes* belongs within this problematic. Clementi sees his sexual desire as something that can only be

governed, not through integration in the socio-political realm, à la Socrates, but by cutting off from society and living a completely hermetic existence of abstinence and deprivation. Goldman's dramatization of the self v society split as a series of encounters between the individual and the crowd is brilliantly Baudelairean; the rhythms of the artist's desire and creativity following the rhythms of the city and the varied modes of movement of its passers-by. Stylistically, and an extension of his obsession with crowds and movement, progress and blockage, one of the filmmakers most notable (and still fresh) inventions is to integrate a variety of methods of stoppage (including the use of still images in *Echoes* and *Pestilent*) within the films' narrative and temporal development.



### *Wheel of Ashes*

Inevitably, in *Wheel of Ashes*, the three-way split in the subject between raging desire, stifling feelings of everyday banality and the thirst for pure mystical truth becomes confused and it is sex that becomes the ultimate mystical experience. In his isolation he is overcome by an hallucinatory paranoia and an autistic inability to react, even to the death of his only friend.

To cite Antonioni again:

“Here then is another fallen myth, the illusion that it is enough to know oneself, to analyse oneself minutely in the most secret places of the soul.”