

Herostratus

I AM CONVINCED THAT MOST unseen underground masterpieces are masterpieces because they are unseen. I had been looking forward to Don Levy's 1967 two-and-one-half hour underground feature *Herostratus* for many years, after having seen Levy's *Time Is...*, a tour de force educational short. When I finally had an opportunity to see *Herostratus* (which will be screened Nov. 17 at Filmex) I received a disappointing shock second only to the sight of George McGovern serenading Lyndon Johnson. *Herostratus* fails to make contact at any level: through technique, ideas, or characters.

Herostratus concerns an Adonis-like failed young poet (Michael Gothard)—shades of Cocteau—who “sells” his suicide to a public relations firm. Levy freely juxtaposes live action, animation, newsreels, opticals and fantasy sequences to explore the poet's disintegrating psyche. After an orchestrated PR buildup Gothard's suicide turns out to be a flop, not only because nobody shows up, but because the still photographer ends up going over the rooftop by mistake.

The first problem with *Herostratus* is that its highly-touted experimental techniques have now entered the mainstream of filmmaking. The once innovative techniques are now unusual only in their prolonged use; in fact, one can often predict upcoming sequences—surprising in an experimental film.

In addition, Levy, a montage and composition-oriented director, is unable to make the traditional conventions of screen acting and dialogue work for him. Gothard plays a pouting, egotistical, obnoxious bum poet—but he's insufferable as an actor and as a character. It is understandable that Levy on his shoestring budget (\$25,000) was unable to rehearse and reshoot his scenes with live actors, but that still does not forgive the corny, obvious dialogue they are required to speak.

Herostratus represents not only an enormous effort (five penny-scraping years in the making), but also a great deal of thought, passion and ingenuity, and I only wish I could say it deserved a better fate. Through it all, Levy, now on the faculty of Cal Arts, remains a personal and ingenious filmmaker; I still look forward to whatever he does.

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