BRANDY IN THE WILDERNESS

by Paul Schrader

Stanton Kaye's *Brandy in the Wilderness* was made in 1968 and my own critical shortsightedness has kept me from writing about it until now. I saw *Brandy* shortly after it was completed, liked it rather well, but thought it was limited in scope and would age quite poorly.

It was I, not *Brandy,* however, that was limited in scope. I recently had an opportunity to see *Brandy* again and was surprised to find that the film had not been diminished by time, but had grown in every way: in nuance, statement, coherency. I saw *Brandy* again and it was still growing; it had qualities I had never appreciated before. It is always painful for a critic to realize that that flash in the pan he saw several years ago was gold.

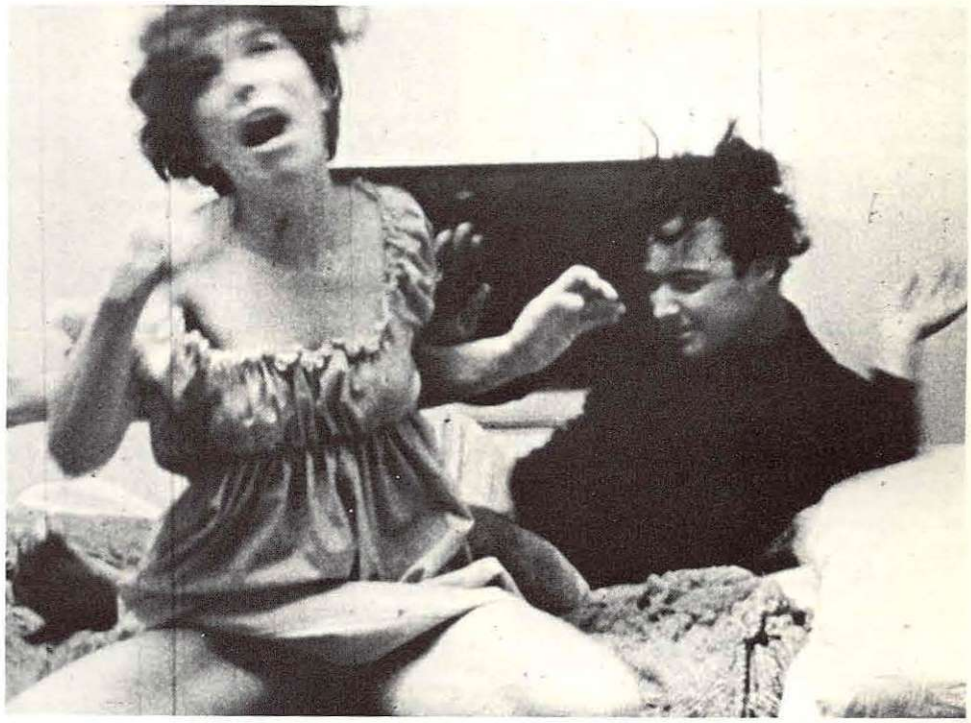
Brandy in the Wilderness is rewarding at several levels. It is aesthetically pleasing, a precise exercise of craft and wit. On the technical level, it is a delight to watch how Kaye, as a craftsman, turns the film's liabilities (nonsync sound, 8 and 16mm stock, lack of covering footage) into assets. *Brandy* also has a rare sociological sensibility: the ability to define and personify what it means to live in a particular place at a particular time. In low-budget, personal films this quality often emerges *despite* the film-maker; in *Brandy* it is fully under Kaye's control. Add to this the fact that *Brandy* is an original; it operates in a field where there are few guidelines and precedents, and for the most part must find its own way.

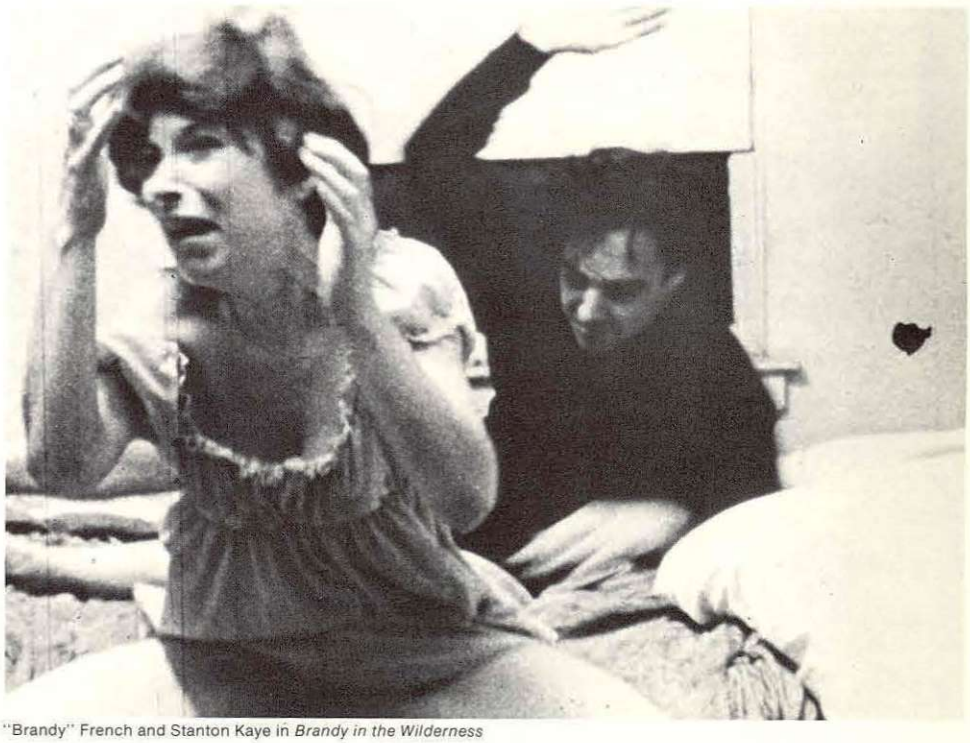
Brandy in the Wilderness is a "diary" film. In this "genre" the film-maker (narrator) records certain events as if he were writing a diary, and later edits them into a finished film. These events may be wholly or partially simulated, but they must in some degree come directly from day-to-day experience if they are to maintain their "diary" credibility.

The diary film is of fairly recent origin, beginning with Jonas Mekas' *Diaries* of the early fifties. The diary film was the direct result of new and easier to handle 16 and 8mm film equipment, and has become a standard film convention among experimental and student film-makers. Precedents for the diary form could be found in Vertov's *Kino-Pravda,* Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* or the subjective camerawork of *Lady in the Lake,* but these parallels are not exact. The film diary did not come into its own until the hand-held camera made it possible for the film-maker to capture (or simulate) unprocessed day-to-day reality.

Beginning with Stanton Kaye's *Georg* in 1964 film-makers have attempted to develop the film diary form into a feature-length drama, and of these Jim McBride's *David Holzman's Diary* (1968) is perhaps the most well known. *Brandy in the Wilderness* is the masterpiece of this subgenre, the "contrived diary film," and uses a free mixture of "pure" film diary techniques and artificial dramatic conventions.

Brandy in the Wilderness follows a tumultuous year in the lives of Simon Weis ("played" by Stanton Kaye) and his girlfriend Brandy (played by Michaux "Brandy" French). Alternating as narrator/film-maker, Simon and Brandy give us their short autobiographies with considerable relish and wit,

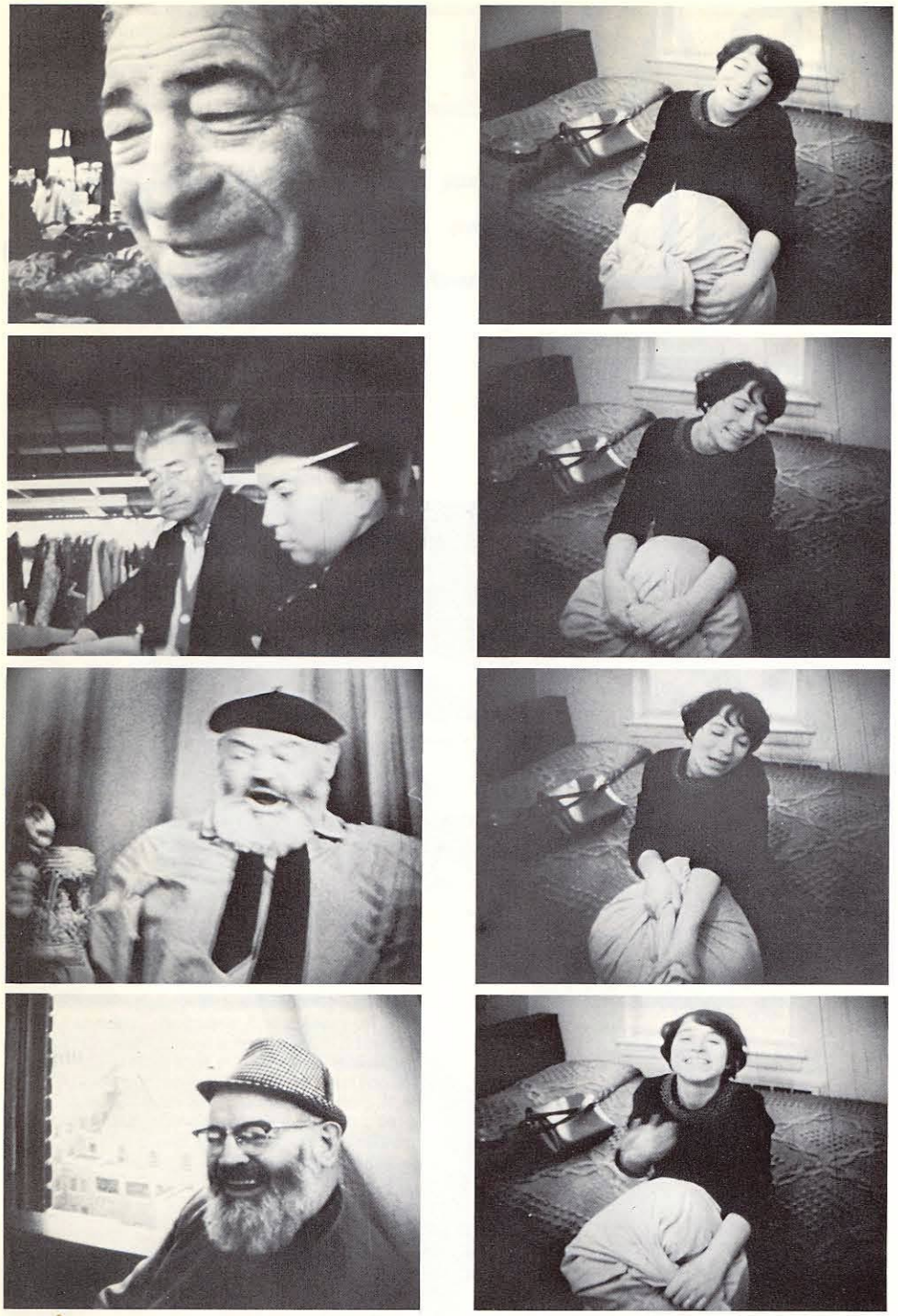




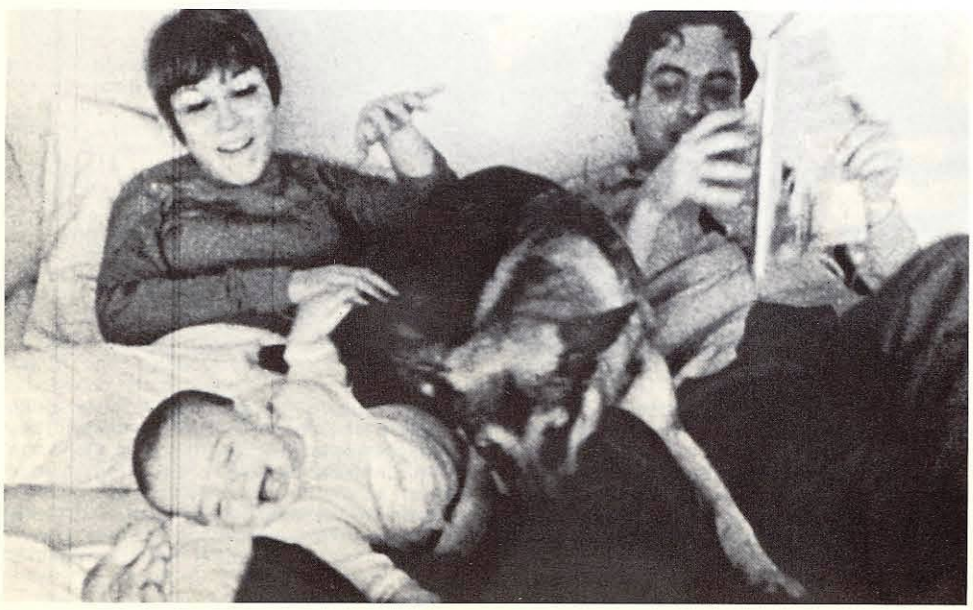
"Brandy" French and Stanton Kaye in *Brandy in the Wilderness*

using old as well as recent footage of their parents and former friends. By fits and starts we follow the progress of their relationship. They first meet in New York, where Brandy asks Simon to help her with a film she wishes to make (which becomes, of course, *Brandy).* Brandy is at the end of her rope and Simon, although putting on an air of confidence, isn't much better off. Brandy is lost and alone, not quite capable of living by herself; Simon, equally lost and alone, is not quite capable of living with someone else. They take turns tugging and slugging at each other until, on the verge of breaking up, they travel across the country to Los Angeles, where they meet each other's parents. Brandy returns to New York by train, but Simon doesn't follow her. Later they are together again, and soon after, Brandy has a child by Simon.

Paul Schrader's book, **Transcendental Style In Film** will be published in January by the University of California Press.



Brandy in the Wilderness. Right column: Brandy. Left column: Simon's father (above) and Brandy's father (below). Below: the final shot of *Brandy.*



Stanton Kaye and Miss French co-wrote the script to *Brandy,* and it is modeled to a large degree on their own lives. The lives of Simon and Brandy are technically fictional, but of course they correspond with the lives of Kaye and Miss French during this period. Simon's parents in the film are Kaye's parents, as Brandy's parents and step-father are Miss French's. The autobiographical detail of Simon and Brandy, told in great detail, is the factual history of Kaye and Miss French; we see their parents, their childhood homes, schools and acquaintances. Simon and Brandy's quarrels, the sequences most obviously restaged for camera, are extensions of their real-life antagonisms and quarrels. And when Brandy, after being noticeably pregnant, bears a child at the conclusion of the film, the child is not just the product of Stanton Kaye's fertile brain, but of his loins as well.

Brandy was loosely scripted at first, Kaye states, but as real-life events began to point the way, he and Miss French were able to more precisely script the film to their intentions. It is probably quite impossible (and useless) to make a distinction between the point at which the film reflects their lives, and the point at which their lives reflect the film. Kaye states he would prefer to have the film evaluated solely as fiction, although this statement is obviously facetious, since the very diary format of the film prohibits this. I suppose the film is much more fiction than fact, but one should not belabor this distinction. In the end, the film is just what it is: an artful and purposefully deceptive blend of reality, restaged reality, fully stated reality which defies any bifurcation into fact or fiction.

The object of *Brandy in the Wilderness* is not to make some cheap coin out of the reality/illusion conundrum. In *Brandy* Kaye uses his own "personal" life as every autobiographical author has, as artistic raw material, and he hopes to mold it and work through it to detached expression or statement. He freely toys with the film's means (his own life), but he never confuses it with its end (an expression apart from himself).

There is no doubt that Stanton Kaye is the active force in *Brandy in the Wilderness.* He does not allow reality to passively reflect off his camera lens, but actively attacks it, working through it at several levels. In *Brandy* there are three such levels of reality. The first two levels are those at which Simon Weis, as the film-maker *in* the film, uses reality, and the third is the level at which Stanton Kaye, as the film-maker *of* the film, uses it.

The first and irreducible reality for Simon is the reality of the camera. Everyday he must go out with his portable camera and confront the commonplace, banal world. It must be recorded every day, simply and objectively, just as there must be a diary entry every day. It doesn't matter whether "anything" happens, in fact, very little ever does. For the most part *Brandy* consists of commonplace day-to-day scenes: traveling own a freeway, passing a truck, watching some cows, stopping for gas, eating lunch, getting back on the freeway, driving some more. At this level Simon takes special pleasure in presenting the stultifying world which surrounds us in its most unadorned form.

But Simon, the camera-crazy protagonist of *Brandy,* is never content to let the "pure" reality of the camera stand alone. To the simple reality of the camera, Simon adds a second reality: that of the editor and narrator. Simon constantly tampers with his diary as he presents it to the viewer. Simon has a droll, self-deprecating sense of humor and over each scene he narrates his own version of what you are seeing. He tells of a former job in which he had to deliver a carton of lobster on the subway. We see a closeup of lobster swimming in a pan; we hear Simon's deadpan narration: "I was lost in the subway. The lobster died, and I lost my job."

Simon is an equally playful editor. He has dozens of editorial tricks and uses them to alter and confuse the daily reality. Simon inserts stock footage (from westerns, newsreels) into his film, uses a diagram in one scene, special effects in two others. Simon

and Brandy's cross country trip is reported twice, narrated once by Simon and once by Brandy. And although much of the same footage is used on both versions of the trip, the narration implies that it is different. A shot of Simon eating a hamburger takes place, in Simon's version, while they are waiting for the fan belt to be fixed; in Brandy's version it is just a usual lunch-time stop.

Gradually an image of our travel-guide and diarist, Simon Weis, begins to emerge. He is a compulsive photographer, and an equally compulsive editor. He must record everything, and having recorded it, tamper with it. He lives in a thoroughly self-conscious world; he is obsessed with his self-image. Simon must record every aspect of his life, but then he needs to make it conform and adapt to his ever-changing self-image.

From this tension between the cameraman and the narrator, the actor and the editor, comes a third level of reality, a level of which Simon himself is not aware. There is a level at which Stanton Kaye separates himself from Simon Weis—which is not as easy as it sounds, since Simon is not simply Kaye's creation, but a very real part of him.

Brandy, in Kaye's hands, becomes the double mirror of a very schizoid personality. Simon Weis, as a cameraman and actor, is quite opposed to Weis the editor and narrator, and these double roles reflect an even deeper conflict. Simon the cameraman is constitutionally honest, a linear thinker, banal and believes in the long take; Simon the editor is compulsively dishonest, a circular thinker, very witty, and believes in the short cut. Neither Simon seems fully aware of his doppleganger, and the split personality flipflops with great ease.

Simon's film technique is only the most tangible example of a schizophrenia that extends throughout his life. Simon's father is a has-been movie actor, and his discontented mother has tabbed Simon as the *wunderkind* who will regain her husband's lost glory. But Simon can hardly cope with normal American society, much less that hyped-up, accelerated version that exists in Hollywood.

Movies, for Simon, become an escape instead of an opportunity. They represent all his contradictory impulses. On one hand movies are "artistic," and thereby feed his mother's jewish intellectual fantasies (as well as his own). On the other hand they are the image of pure wasp normalcy, and he can revel in the nostalgia of Elvis Presley and an All-American childhood. On one hand Simon can face the reality he normally hides from by putting it on film; on the other, he can tamper and alter it. On one hand he can boldly show what a total Nothing his life amounts to; on the other, he can appear to be a witty womanizer.

In *Brandy,* Simon Weis finds the only role for which he is suited: the failed artist. Unable to comprehend his life, he commits to to film; but instead of making art, he creates a case study of the intellectual fifties dropout mentality. He is the Proustian James Dean; the intellectual without a cause. Simon is unable to accept either society or active protest; the drifts about in the new modular society, but his ideas of identity belong to the romantic past.

If Simon Weis is the failed artist, then Stanton Kaye is the artist in which that failed artist lives. Simon compulsively puts his life on film hoping to make some sense of it, he never does; it is Kaye who can both record and understand it. Simon Weis and Stanton Kaye would be the same person, except that Kaye has the ability to define the failed artist in himself (the Weis), extract him, and turn him into art.

There is much to envy about *Brandy in the Wilderness;* its wit and cutting pace are particularly covetable. But what is most enviable about *Brandy* is Kaye's ability to take a detached perspective to his life as he lives it. In the very process of being Simon Weis, Stanton Kaye can separate himself from Weis, analyze him, and make a comment about him. Most artists gain perspective on their lives by distance in time or place; what is unique and very contemporary about Stanton Kaye is that he can gain perspective on his life as he lives it. This, in the final result, separates Simon Weis and Stanton Kaye: Weis is the baffled fifties intellectual and failed artist; Kaye is the contemporary artist of instant turnover from Alvin Toffler's world of future shock.

The fact that *Brandy* is so experimental and futuristic—a filmic representative of instant art—while working within conventional themes has, I think, helped obscure it. The experimental film purists (like Gene Youngblood) thought it was a corruption of the "pure" film diaries of Mekas, Warhol and Taylor Mead. The film conventionalists thought it was a dead-end gimmick. I think I was adversely affected by the rhetorical question which *Brandy* evoked in many film critics, "Yes, but what does he do next?"

Both of these protests are silly. What does it matter if *Brandy* is a deviation? What does it matter if Kaye never picks up a camera again? *Brandy in the Wilderness* stands alone as a unique work of art; it establishes its own rules, and makes them work. The only limitation on the genre of "contrived film diary" is the limitation of the film-maker himself, and Stanton Kaye seems to be a man who can defy limitations. ★

Brandy in the Wilderness, which runs 74 minutes, is available from New Line Cinema, 121 University Place, New York, New York 10003.

Simon Weis' alter ego, played by Stanton Kaye in *Brandy:* "'Most artists gain perspective on their lives by distance in time or place; what is unique and contemporary about Kaye is that he can achieve perspective on his life as he lives it."