

Why Man Creates

By Sean Savage

How unlikely that one of the least definable films from the last half-century would also be one of the most beloved. A favorite of classroom AV diversions, and an abridged presentation on the very first episode of “60 Minutes” helped make it the most viewed educational film of all time. “I don’t know what it all means,” Saul Bass himself admitted, and his “Why Man Creates” (1968) is far more loose and playful than the rigid thesis its title might imply. In fact, it is the searching and open-ended nature of the various vignettes that perhaps makes the film resonate so strongly with viewers. Though an Oscar®-winner for Documentary Short Subject, the film is almost entirely invented, apart from recollections of old masters like Edison, Hemingway and Einstein, and brief encounters with scientists striving to innovate for the betterment of mankind. Creators invariably encounter problems, and have no choice but to persevere in the face of discouragement. If the film argues anything, it is that the unbridled pursuit of new ideas makes us uniquely human.

Bass actually resisted the title of the film, one that was imposed on him by the film’s sponsor, Kaiser Aluminum, which evidently wanted the prestige project it had backed more authoritatively defined. Perhaps an extension of his previous short film, “The Searching Eye”—one of two he produced for the 1964 World’s Fair—the journey can often be more gratifying than the arrival, and this is especially true of the mind of the artist. The phrase “Why Man Creates” never appears, rather the film begins with the more generous promise in Bass’s own handwriting of the “explorations, episodes & comments” to follow, and for the rest of his life he referred to the best known of his own films simply as “the creativity film.” Perhaps he simply had an aversion to on-screen titles. His later “Notes on the Popular Arts” (1977) opens with similarly casual musings, and there’s nothing didactic about the vague “Notes” of the distributed title, which again, never appears onscreen. And “A Short Film on Solar Energy” reads the main title card of that film (1979), but it is popularly known, on the posters and other publicity, and recognized in its Academy Award® nomination



Saul Bass suggests how the voice of creativity fills our heads. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

even, simply as “The Solar Film.”

Throughout the 1950s and 60s Bass had served as a “visual consultant” on the films of others, designing a slaves vs. Romans battle for Stanley Kubrick’s “Spartacus” (1960) and an auto racing montage for John Frankenheimer’s “Grand Prix” (1966). Perhaps the most hotly contested of these contributions was the shower sequence of Alfred Hitchcock’s “Psycho” (1960). But there’s no disputing the authorship of the main title sequences Bass created for Otto Preminger (“Carmen Jones” 1954; “The Man with the Golden Arm” 1955) and Hitchcock (“Vertigo” 1958; “North By Northwest” 1959) and other directors (in many cases Bass also designed the theatrical posters and ad campaigns for these and more films). These standalone works are intriguing in their own right, so it’s no surprise that this master of the short form would smartly conceive of his “creativity film” as a series of short sketches. Bass said,

I was trying to demonstrate in both the content and form of the film the nature of the creative process. And,

in passing, to celebrate the variety, the richness and importance of the creative vision. The intent of the film is to give those who look at it, and who are probably not working (as a life-commitment) in creative areas, a sense of what it “feels” like to work creatively... the agony, the frustration, the discipline, the pleasure, the messiness, the orderliness, the failure (and in the case of the scientists), the aberrant nature of time when you are engaged in the process.

Scriptwriter Mayo Simon, who would later collaborate on Bass’s sole feature film “Phase IV” (1974), said that they were inspired by the energy of the television hit “Laugh-In” (1967). “We were very impressed with that show,” Simon said, and they aimed to emulate the same jerky, comic rhythms. The original bookends of the film—known as the “Countdown Version” which survive at the Academy Film Archive—were apparently “too eye-popping” for the film’s sponsors, who encouraged a more sober approach. Sent back to the drawing board, the creators elected to go quiet instead, which Simon described as more “like opening a door” and taking a look around. Though often fruitful, the creative process can’t be all “fooling around” (as one segment is gleefully titled) and these reconceived and more introspective sequences also served Bass’s themes, particularly “The Mark” section that concludes the film. Bass again:

We say that the creative act has to be understood as having its sources in two urges which exist simultaneously

or individually. Man creates to leave his mark on his time, as a denial of mortality, to say “Look at me... I was here...”. He also creates out of a need to identify himself, to himself... to say, as we say at the end of the film, “I am unique... I am here... I am.”

With “The Creativity Film” (I’m honoring the favored directness and preferred title of the director here), the most enduring of his own short films, Bass made his mark. While it remains his grandest if loosely defined statement, he was careful not to take himself too seriously (an early version title card promised at best “free-wheeling guesses on the nature of ideas”) and the most memorable moments include a cartoon elevator ride through civilization, an angry mob rejecting an unseen (by us) work of art, and a renegade bouncing ball making its own way in the world—the last accompanied by goofy sound effects voiced by Bass himself. For Bass, the work of directing a sponsored film (as all of his shorts were) was not going to get in the way of play.

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Sean Savage is an archivist at the Academy Film Archive, and wrote extensively about Bass and Simon’s next collaboration, “Phase IV” (1974) for the 14.2 issue of The Moving Image.