

Making is Choosing: A Fragmented Life: A Broken Line: A Series of Observations

by Willie Varela (1989)

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Making is Choosing: A Fragmented Life: A Broken Line: A Series of Observations (1989), by Willie Varela; Super-8mm, color, sound, 104 minutes.

The creation of Super-8mm (and before it, Regular-8mm) was predicated on its viability as a home-movie format: it was cheaper and less technically cumbersome than 16mm, and its smaller image size was analogous to the domesticity of home movies which localized experience as opposed to the worldlier project of Hollywood movies in 35mm or the industrial and educational usages of the 16mm format.

One of the many cultural shifts concurrent with the Reagan 80s was the displacement of Super-8mm as the format of choice for making home movies. The increasing affordability of video cameras, commingled with video's sense of instant gratification and its use of that domestic mainstay, the television set, for its "projection" have all served to render Super-8mm an endangered species.



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Yet Super-8mm remains alive and kicking as a format for personal filmmaking, and for filmmaker Willie Varela, a format still viable for portraying one's home life. Yet, *Making is Choosing...* is not an innocent or naive "return" to an outmoded or outdated practice: it is an ironic attempt to come to terms with its own jaded existence as an artifact of the Reagan 80s. Varela's use of Super-8mm and sound is an idealistic choice, but one which co-exists with and informs what comes across as an overwhelming sense of inefficacy.

Making is Choosing... is ostensibly a diaristic portrait of six years of Varela's life, a time marked by the birth of a daughter to he and his wife, and a move of the Varela home from San Francisco to El Paso, Texas. The film is not a linear diary but rather is made up of impressionistic observations organized in a way that testifies to the "fragmented life" of the film's full title. Separated by crude "home-made" titles which are at turns descriptive ("Colma, CA"), cryptic ("FDIC Insured") or bitterly ironic ("The Merry Month of May"), the sections of *Making is Choosing...* reflect a struggle for completeness in life which inevitably results in the antithesis of such, "a broken line."

Much of the struggle of the film seems to revolve around a tension between representing everyday familial life such as Varela's wife's pregnancy, the birth of their daughter, and family trips on one hand, and a more subjective, less representational view of the filmmaker's life on the other, the latter by necessity an abstracted vision more concerned with ephemeral imagery and light and shadow. Both of these modes of expression are played against what emerges as the center of Varela's domestic life, the television, which pervades the film with its own set of ways of representing and infiltrating domestic life.

Snake handlers, New Age hucksters, professional wrestlers, and of course, Ronald Reagan —these mix with images from both commercial and "art" films (*Rollerball*, Godard's *Alphaville*, Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*) to form a melange of scan-lines and video static that exudes an inescapable malaise. The television set is constantly being re-framed by Varela's Super-8mm camera so that its imagery does not function as a body of reference points on a map of popular culture that beg to be appropriated or subverted, but rather as a solid entity which must be grappled with whole. Varela's



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re-framing is an attempt to wrest control at the same time as it documents TV's own domineering frame.



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To label *Making is Choosing...* a “feature” is part of the film’s ironic status as a personal statement. With connotations of “Hollywood,” “narrative” or “first-run,” the term “feature” carries with it an economic and cultural base at odds with the film’s identity as a document originating from the hearth/heart of home life. However, Varela is not so much concerned with his film’s place vis-a-vis dominant cinema as he is with his own place as father and filmmaker within a home life that is constantly being exteriorized and enlarged, but not fulfilled, by the outside world.