

VISIONS OF INSANITY

★★★THE ACCURSED MAZURKA

Directed by Nina Fonoroff.

By Fred Camper

Near the end of Nina Fonoroff's immensely moving new film about mental breakdown, *The Accursed Mazurka*, an older woman is seated at a table. Earlier in the film she obsessively polished the table, and now, with a book in front of her face, she is visible to us only in her clear reflection on the surface. When her head drops in apparent despair, her insubstantial image disappears, replaced by reflections of two new faces. As the newcomers lead her away in a later shot, we infer that they are attendants, and she a patient, in a mental hospital.

In this film mental illness is seen as a loss of self-image. We see images of the several women depicted superimposed over other images of them; other kinds of images are laid over their faces; movies are projected onto their bare skin. These women's bodies seem in danger of being swept away by a flood of pictures. But early in the film a recitation of Fonoroff's personal recasting of the Narcissus myth prepares us: "Narcissus wasn't drowned in her own image. Rather, the more she looked at her reflection in the water, the more it seemed to fade away."

Fonoroff's film, playing this Saturday with several of her shorter works at Chicago Filmmakers, is disturbing in part because of the way it constantly undercuts itself. The imagery is constantly changing—from sharp to fuzzy, from color to black and white, from positive to negative, from well-composed to tilted, from single pictures to various kinds of superimpositions. The subject matter is almost as diverse—we see women in institutions, images from TV, home movies, trees and bushes, written texts. The sound track is a dense collage of music, voices, and diverse sound effects.

This is not a case of a filmmaker flood-



ing her work with everything but the kitchen sink just because—as so often seems the case—it's the postmodern thing to do. Much of her imagery has a vital, strange, poetic beauty—white leaves starkly outlined against a dark forest background, empty rocking chairs moving back and forth on a porch, the water-smear words of a confessional text suddenly, in reverse motion, losing their blur and becoming sharp once again. Each image and sound seems loaded with potential meanings, as it

articulates the ways in which a woman can feel absurd, hear herself judged, or feel her identity vanish before the onrushing stream of the world.

Though *The Accursed Mazurka* presents itself as the stories of many women, the women resemble one another: fragile, almost immobile bodies covered by light and shadows not their own or replaced by other objects and bodies. Much of the imagery also has the directness of a first-person confession: we see faces looking into the cam-

down—are possessed of their own strange beauties. The standard models for the mind are as ridiculously reductive of life itself as the physical model of the brain is of the woman whose face it accompanies in the earlier image. Indeed, near the film's end a voice offers this description of mental illness: "We feel every nerve ending within us is so alive. Never again will we be so alive—and so dead."

But Fonoroff has one more reductive explanation of women's troubles to demolish. The shot of the actress on the couch looking worshipfully at the psychiatrist offscreen is followed by a matched cut—a rarity in this film—to a shot of another woman on a couch, apparently watching home movies; we see a projector running beside her, and the screen is apparently in the same offscreen position occupied by Dr. Davenport. Obviously Fonoroff is comparing the powerful, therapeutic role of the psychiatrist with the presumably revelatory possibilities of watching home movies. Except that she's just finished mocking the reverence with which psychiatrists are regarded.

There is a point here worth explicating. In a number of recent films—Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* is one of the earliest and best-known examples—the filmmaker presents her family's home movies as a way of unmasking, for example, the way that the daddy/filmmaker objectified his young daughter. Such filmmaking is at least potentially in the Freudian tradition, if only in the sense that it seeks the source of one's present state in the dynamics of family history. That Fonoroff means to reject this explanation for her breakdown is made clear near the film's end, when we see a long section of her own family's home movies. As we see children happily playing, holding hands in a circle and dancing around, a voice intones with unqualified self-assurance: "But the search for the cause is every bit as urgent, and just as futile, as the search for the remedy. . . . No clues or explanations are forthcoming. So let these people dance in peace. They've done nothing wrong. There's no culpability to be found in these shadows."

This moment is the film's emotional climax. Throughout, the movies projected on

women's bodies—some of them apparent "love stories," like a ridiculous scene in which a man is clutching a woman in front of a flaming pyre—in fact hint at possible external causes; one woman comments that her breakdown began soon after a relationship ended. We see the woman on the couch watching home movies with the moving shadows of the rotating film reels on her body, similarly suggesting that these films are somehow impinging on her. While the home movies' absolution carries with it a certain surprise, the ultimate denial of causes is inherent in Fonoroff's constant stylistic shifts.

There are three different kinds of superimposition used. We see double exposures made in the camera, double exposures made in the optical printer (a rephotographing device that allows precise control over what images are superimposed in each frame), and biphacked optical printer superimpositions, in which the effect is of looking through two strips of film at the same time, one blocking light from—rather than adding light to—the other. We see hand-printed first-person texts on paper, but also one on transparencies, the light coming through from behind. Sound/image combinations sometimes reinforce, sometimes undercut one another. The unstable world that results from these shifts suggests the impossibility of determining cause and effect, or even of making any hierarchical judgments at all.

The imagery offers no refuge from the film's unspooling image traps, each seeming to build ever-more-confining cages for its characters. Early on, it seems that nature might offer a slight respite—leaves and branches, though presented in high-contrast black-and-white as well as color, seem a bit quieter than the images projected on the bodies. Later a few shots of trees seen from a moving car are followed by a rather beautiful shot of white flowers on a bush or tree, but the music suddenly grows grotesquely high-pitched, as if a record or tape has suddenly been sped up—a mocking, howling climax to this little pastoral.

The most obvious meaning of these representational shifts is that they depict a mental illness in which the mind is so oversensitized to external stimuli that it races off

era, we read pages from their diaries. And in fact Fonoroff acknowledges that the work was inspired by her own breakdown and hospitalization. (Since recovered, she is now teaching film at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and will be present at the Saturday show.)

If the film's several characters stand for a single, divided self, a metaphor for the fragmented consciousness of the filmmaker, the metaphor succeeds because each moment in the film is profoundly fragmented, even at war with itself. Near the middle of the film we see almost lyrical pans around the circular benches of an empty outdoor stone amphitheater. The stone is crumbling; plants are growing in the cracks. On the sound track a series of piano chords is accompanied by weird, almost demented "singing"—the voice crazily zooms up and down the scale. As the chords grow higher in pitch, the voice executes the glissandi at successively higher ranges. This "performance" seems at once passionate and absurd. While the stone benches invoke a performance tradition that goes back to ancient Greece, the contemporary "singing" becomes a kind of self-mocking howling.

Soon after, one or more women—it's hard to tell—are seen in quick shots standing beside windows whose venetian blinds open and close, repeatedly covering their bodies with horizontal slats of light. The women are seen from several different angles, further fragmenting the sequence. Then we see movies projected onto a woman's nude upper torso—dancers in straw hats, who seem to mock the intensity of the film's melancholy confusions. A voice announces, "A woman who is going insane feels her body rapidly withdrawing from her," and suddenly the films on the body seem less absurd. A dense montage of women's faces, several of them screaming, many superimposed on others, reminds us that the body hasn't completely withdrawn—these women still feel the agony of removal.

in a variety of directions, and each time the very nature of reality itself seems to shift. But the film's style has another, almost opposite meaning, one that contains Fonoroff's answer to our current culture of blame, and one that I found personally quite moving: here's a film that really does contain suggestions about how to live, and how to see the world. Inherent in her rejection of explanations and causes is a kind of nonhierarchical democracy of seeing, in which every lived experience is meant to be felt and tasted for its own uniqueness, as its own first cause.

Late in the film a woman writes at a table in a diary; nearby are three plates with blue patterns on them, one of which rests at the diary's edge. A movie, apparently of the floral pattern on one of the plates, is projected on the diary as she writes. One could take this as another depiction of an insanity in which something as ordinary as a china pattern becomes weirdly important. Soon the woman pulls the plate onto the diary page; her action echoes the eccentricity of the image she is in. But there is also a tradition in our century's art of finding significance in the ordinary, and here as elsewhere Fonoroff's surrogate appreciates things for their visual beauty rather than their possible meanings.

The film's stylistic shifts make each image a surprise, even when the subject of the image is being repeated. The amphitheater we see with the crazy music is seen earlier—superimposed on itself, accompanied by a romantic song. The children's circular dance in the home movie is also seen earlier, almost obscured by a blue flickering light. Each newly defamiliarized image is possessed of an unaccountable strangeness—perhaps representing the irrational perceptions of the mentally ill. The onrush of bewildering forms the world presents to the mentally ill can also be seen, by the film's end, as an artist's vision of an ever-new, poetically transformed world. Fonoroff's "answer" to mental illness is to try to find in it a possibility for a richer lived experience, one in which each sight is not analyzed for what it might reveal, or classified in some hierarchy of cause and effect, but savored, like some new kind of fruit, for the experience it offers in the present.