

Faux Fur

Joanne Laurier
2 December 2006

Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus, directed by Steven Shainberg, screenplay by Erin Cressida Wilson, inspired by *Diane Arbus: A Biography* by Patricia Bosworth

“Another thing is a photograph has to be specific. ... [T]he more specific you are, the more general it’ll be.” American photographer Diane Arbus (1923-1971)

Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus by filmmaker Steven Shainberg combines real details of the life of famed photographer Diane Arbus with a fictional storyline and invented characters.

In the film’s opening segment, Diane (Nicole Kidman) is requesting permission from a naked, middle-aged couple to photograph their nudist colony. When asked to remove her clothes, she replies, “Give me a minute.” The film essentially takes place in this “minute” as it backtracks to the moment of Arbus’s transformation from repressed and sheltered housewife to celebrated photographer of the marginalized and even grotesque.

Retiring and angst-ridden, Diane is ripe for an encounter with her masked neighbor, Lionel (Robert Downey Jr.), whose face and body are covered with hair due to the disease hypertrichosis. Lionel’s unorthodox appearance and habits inspire her to begin using her Rolleiflex camera, a hitherto unused device bought for her years ago by husband Allan (Ty Burrell). Lionel sets off, then nurtures Arbus’s attraction to the apparently freakish.

Her increasing obsession with the afflicted man and his nether world of dwarfs, giants and other abnormal types alienates Diane from the only existence she has ever known. The consequences are painful—and irreversible.

Fur is praiseworthy if for no other reason than the fact it brings this pioneering artist back into the public eye. Previous efforts to make a film about Arbus’s life have failed. Shainberg had the good fortune to have grown up with Arbus’s work, as she was a close friend of the director’s uncle, Lawrence Shainberg.

Intelligent and sensitive, Shainberg’s film seeks to answer the following question: why at the age of 35 did Arbus leave her husband, break up their successful commercial photography team and turn her back on her parents and a privileged milieu? As an exploration of this period in

Arbus’s life, the film is intended to encourage tolerance for what is often viewed as peculiar and obsessive behavior. It performs the task with a degree of skill and beauty, although talented actors like Downey Jr. bring more of the *spirit* of Arbus’s life and work to the screen than the *letter* of a not always coherent or plausible script would initially seem to offer.

It would be understandable if contemporary filmgoers were intrigued by *Fur* and its rather exotic subject matter. However, the reality only partially revealed by Shainberg’s film is so much more suggestive. (See a number of photos, for example, [here](#).)

Indeed *Fur*’s major shortcoming is its tendency to take shortcuts in its effort to understand the photographer, her period and her life. The director rejects, as he puts it in an interview, the slavish recreation of the “literal biographical narrative,” choosing instead to dramatize metaphorically his interpretation of Arbus’s inner life. Unfortunately, he does so by reductively treating complex artistic problems, primarily through the catch-all character of Lionel.

In an interview with *The Evening Class*, Shainberg describes Lionel as a psychological, emotional and artistic composite of Arbus’s mentors, photographer Lisette Model and painter and editorial art director Marvin Israel, as well as “all the freaks she eventually photographed.” In the first place, employing such a plot mechanism as a substitute for delineating real, concrete influences simply confuses matters. Arbus lived and breathed at a specific moment in history, as well as in a definite cultural milieu. Her art and her psyche were bound up with those phenomena.

Diane’s relationship with Lionel is so all-encompassing, says the director, that it contains the possibility of her future suicide. “One of the things he’s teaching her is that taking the risk that she’s about to take, discovering herself, making this change in her life, requires an experience of a connection to her own potential death.” This is peculiar. It makes Argus the entirely passive recipient of influences, which was hardly the case. What was her role in the development of her own art?

Historical accuracy has never been the *forte* of biographical films—biopics—produced by the American film

industry. *Fur*, although something of an independent work, is no exception in its determined avoidance of the contradictory character of post-war America, the explosive combination of relative economic prosperity and psychic dysfunction so obviously present in Arbus's work.

One does not have to be an expert in Arbus's work to sense the deep and startling intensity of her photos. Such things do not come out of the blue. Arbus came from a highly cultured New York Jewish family. Her brother, Howard Nemerov, became a well-known poet.

Contrary to Shainberg's rather simplistic explanation for her emergence as an artist, Arbus steeped herself in the history of photography. Patricia Bosworth's *Diane Arbus: A Biography* reveals that she began a study of the field at its very origins, the world's first photograph taken by Joseph Niepce (circa 1826). "She liked Balzac's theory regarding the invention of the daguerreotype: that every human being in his natural state is made up of a series of superimposed images which the camera peels away," writes Bosworth.

Arbus studied nineteenth century portraiture and the documentation of Civil War battlefields. "She would read about Paul Strand's switch from pictorialism to Cubist-inspired photographs in the 1920s; she would study Lewis Hines's powerful pictures of children working in coal mines. [Photographer John Szarkowski notes: "Her most frequent subject in fact was children—perhaps because of their individuality is purer—less skillfully concealed—closer to the surface."] Hines's bleak images would impress her more than [Alfred] Stieglitz' gorgeous formations."

Shainberg speaks of "the mystery of her inner life." Everyone's has an element of mystery, but Arbus's becomes somewhat less so when one actually takes a look at her interests and concerns, including this rigorous study of her art form.

A cursory consideration of her life (including her suicide in 1971 at the age of 48) and work suggests that this was someone capable of devoting herself to a great cause, including the cause of art, with determination, self-sacrifice and personal honesty. However, artists don't choose their dates of birth. Arbus came to artistic maturity under difficult conditions: a stultifying post-war boom with its attendant anti-communism, and the rise of a complacent and conformist middle class.

"[S]he responded to the work of her contemporaries Louis Faurer and Robert Frank, who were experimenting with outrageous cropping and out-of-focus imagery. But Diane was even more impressed by Lisette Model's studies of grotesques, especially the grotesques of poverty and old age which she documented with almost clinical detachment," writes Bosworth.

Arbus's attraction to the unusual is not as inexplicable as

Shainberg's film suggests. (This attraction is particularly intriguing in light of her previous engagement in the artifice of fashion photography, with its perfect bodies and faces.) "Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks are born with their trauma. They've already passed it," Arbus famously said. No doubt there were personal traumas in her life, but is it so hard to think of other, generalized traumas that might work on the mind of a sensitive artist in the mid-twentieth century, events that left individuals or entire peoples mutilated, events that she might have felt had left her a 'freak'?

Attracted to the margins of society, Arbus was not in economic or ideological circumstances that permitted her to reproduce the social realist work of the 1930s. Artistic circles had "abandoned Marxism for psychoanalysis," as one commentator has put it. And the population itself had changed. Arbus attempted to respond to the artistic challenges of her day. If there is a one-sidedness in her work, an obsession with the misshapen or bizarre at the expense of other aspects of life, one has to take into account the generally stunted atmosphere in which she worked.

Fur succumbs to filmmaking's present-day tendency toward vulgar psychologizing, particularly pertaining to Diane's childhood. As Bosworth explains, the reality was richer. Far from her photography being an accidental occurrence (within the film's framework, what if Diane had never met Lionel?), Arbus picked up her camera at a time when photojournalism in the 1950s, which was the height of the large-format, mass-circulation magazine, "was a visual medium of immense power and influence, often defining the way people saw the world."

Furthermore, with all its limitations (and circumscribed now by what postwar American society permitted the artist to say), Greenwich Village and Lower East Side in Manhattan offered a varied artistic and intellectual life in which Arbus participated fully. She was acquainted with the important painters, writers and intellectual figures of the day. Among those with whom she became friends was the legendary photographer Walker Evans. About Arbus, Evans wrote, "This artist is daring, extremely gifted, and a born huntress. There may be something naïve about her work if there is anything naïve about the devil."

This side of Arbus's work, along with the impulses driving it, is largely missing from Shainberg's well-intentioned *Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus*.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact