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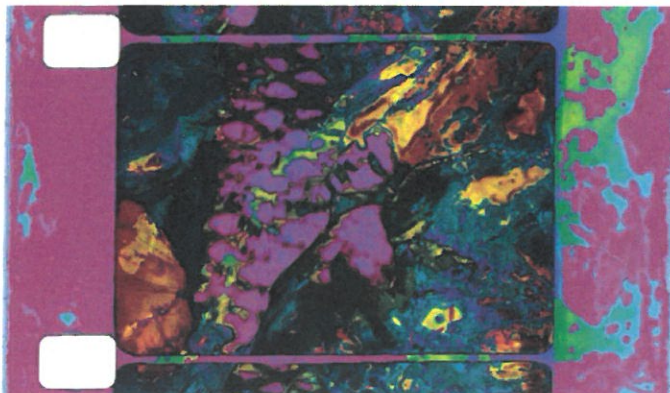
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The Depths Described: Lawrence Brose's *De Profundis*

Gary Morris July 1, 2000



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Wilde's infamous letter from prison becomes a springboard for a surreal queer experience

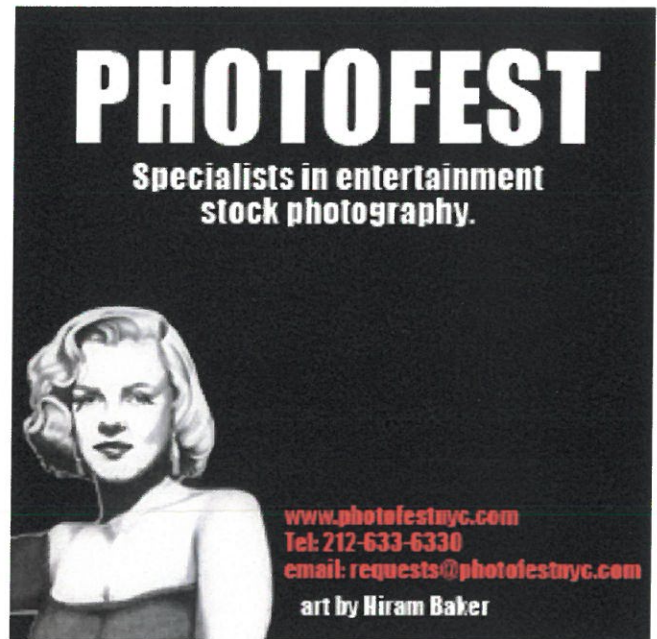
De Profundis was the closest Oscar Wilde ever came to a queer apologia and defense, written as a letter from Reading Gaol over a three-month period in 1897. In it the imprisoned author laments the mask of bourgeois heterosexual he wore for so long: "Those who want a **mask** have to wear it" is his brief, bitter assessment. This idea of **queers** and the masks society forces them to adopt is also one of the driving themes of Lawrence Brose's 65-minute experimental film, also called *De Profundis*, a surreal exploration of homo identity.

This difficult film (sensitive viewers may want to pop some Dramamine beforehand) is a stroboscopic collage of 1920s queer home movies, old gay porn loops, Radical Faerie hoedowns, and drag queen performances, images the director stretches, flattens, reverses, recolors, and degrades in a heady attempt to render the shifting queer persona and the many assaults on it. Wilde "appears" as the film's patron saint in passages read from *De Profundis*, many of them pungent aphorisms that speak volumes not only about his wretched experience in jail but about the intense desirability of prying off that mask and living authentically.

Director Brose is known in the **avant-garde film community** for his meticulous hand-processing of found footage, but he takes the technique to unsettling extremes here. Sometimes half-hidden, sometimes overt in the hammering rhythms of the film's multi-colored images are scenes from a wide range of queer mythologies: bodybuilders cavorting through the woods, gay sailors giving each other blowjobs, drag queens

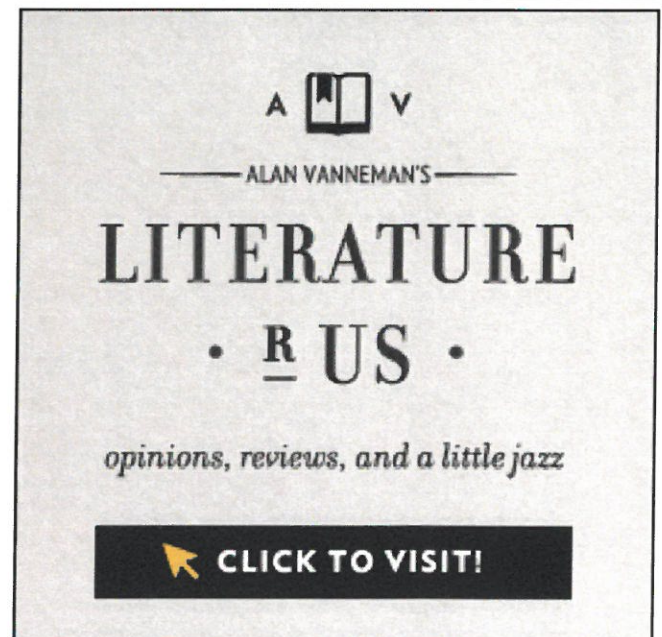
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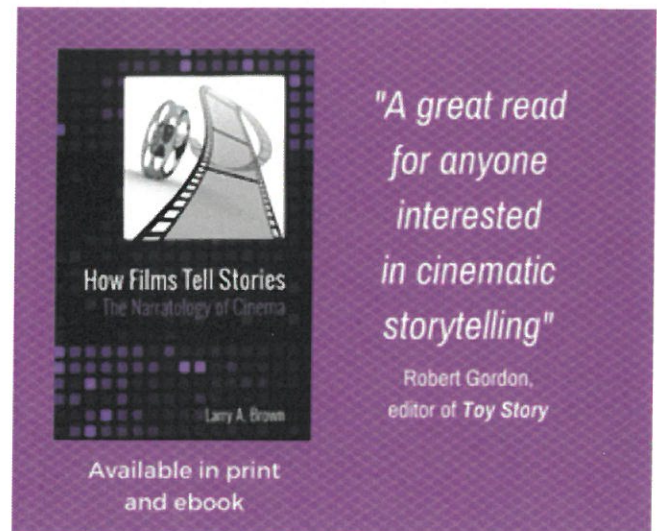
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prancing across a stage. Brose's processing strategies represent a kind of physical assault on the film that's analogous to societal threats on the gallery of queer characters shown. The effect is sometimes striking and sometimes stupefying, as the director repeats some of the same footage to numbing effect, often varying only the soundtrack.

In the opening scenes, the director introduces what appear to be autobiographical accounts of one gay man's attempts to carve a space for himself in a world not inclined to accommodate him. The narrator describes an evocative scene: stripping naked in a New York movie theatre during a rainstorm. The theatre provides a haven that's physical, psychic, and sexual when he meets another urban wanderer: "This was my first time having sex in a public space that wasn't a queer space." This story is recounted over a screen teeming with nervous, almost punishing images of queer encounters of all kinds, both soft- and hardcore.

While the visuals are jittery enough to induce vertigo – and Brose compounds the chaos with multiple, competing voiceovers in some sections – the film is anchored by Wilde's insights, read in a mostly calm, reassuring voice. Who can argue with such succinct summings-up of the human experience as "The faith that others give to what is unseen [religion] I give to what one can touch and look at," or "The final mystery is oneself," or "We measure time by throbs of pain" and the even more sweeping and sorrowful "Men live by pain."

Sections of *De Profundis* the film are devoted to images of the kind of homosexual ecstasy Wilde must have dreamed of (particularly during his



imprisonment), e.g., Dionysian revels populated by the Radical Faeries. But they're not without alloy. There's a level of distance imposed by Brose's powerful manipulations – color tints and stretched frames that confuse the action – that shows the pleasures of queer celebration under siege, fragile and fragmented, but somehow, in spite of it all, ultimately intact.

— **Gary Morris**

Gary Morris founded *Bright Lights Film Journal* as a print publication in 1974; it became a web-only magazine in 1996. He is the author of the monograph *Roger Corman* (Twayne Publishers, 1985) and the editor of *Action! Interviews with Directors from Classical Hollywood to Contemporary Iran* (Anthem Press, 2009).

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