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music. politics. progression.



video reviews:

Style Wars

(Public Art Films)

Style Wars comes into focus with a score straight out of a Hollywood thriller, which is perhaps appropriate; as a city train travels beneath a street light and graffiti is revealed along the entirety of the car, some audience members may gasp and say “Whodunit?” It’s an artful opening shot from the filmmaker. The vitality of the responsible characters, who appear in candid interviews, is almost humorously offset intermittently by a stuffed-shirt narrator who sounds like he’s doing filmstrip narration for a classroom. To be fair, 1982 does often look and sound like ancient history (*Style Wars* originally aired on PBS in 1983—and was way ahead of its time). It was a simpler time, right at the beginning of the Me-First Decade, and the underground took their cues from Reagan on down, as embodied by the brazenly self-promoting and newly widespread art forms like graffiti and hip-hop.

These “bombers” make it their mission to get their names – bold and colorful – up on trains. Obviously, it’s not a bad world when we’re worrying about the sort of subway bombers who carry paint cans and get their jollies from seeing their name on a train instead of blowing holes through a metropolis. It’s not a bad world when rival groups of youth in the city are beefing—albeit beefing hard—over break dancing and graffiti turf. *Break dancing beefs?* This was America?

Director Tony Silver lovingly and triumphantly trains his lens along the walls and subway cars, slowly revealing the street masterpieces. *Style Wars* is well-paced and moves in multiple worlds, from behind-the-scenes with the graffiti writers to inside the mayor’s office (where Ed Koch resided at the time). Koch argues that graffiti is a “quality of life” offense, and while his equation of bombers/writers to pickpockets seems a little extreme (though one writer admits to shoplifting his paint, and using his white skin color to his advantage), it’s only fair to note that not every graffiti artist is an artist; take it from someone who lives in Los Angeles and sees his fair share of artless symbols and letters smudged hastily over No Parking signs. Not to sound like an octogenarian, but you might as well piss on trees.

Style Wars pays tribute to the more creative and community-minded members of the graffiti community, the sort of artists who respect the nuances in one another’s arrows and letter shapes. To drive the point home, the remastered DVD release features a loop called “Destroy All Lines” that shows an endless—well, 30-minute—parade of tagged trains. The bonus features also include some “Where Are They Now?” footage, which should be appreciated by anyone who gets hooked by the characters in the original documentary.

As with any good story, there’s an antagonist: Cap, who puts his own tag on top of others’ more carefully considered pieces, choosing quantity over quality. He’s a compelling presence every time he’s on screen, or even when he’s being bitterly discussed by others.

Another brilliant scene is when Silver cuts to a trendy art gallery, where a legion of NYC faux-sophisticates go ga-ga over graffiti on canvas. Back on the streets, the documentary features groundbreaking music from The Sugar Hill Gang, Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, and Treacherous Three, among others.

— Adam McKibbin

www.stylewars.com

The Red Alert Week of January

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