

# FRAMEWORK

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**WARREN SONBERT**  
Selected Writings

Guest Editor  
**JON GARTENBERG**



Figure 1. A youthful Warren Sonbert during the time he was a film production student at New York University.

### Sonbert's Career Evolution<sup>10</sup>

Warren Sonbert was born in 1947 in New York City. By the time he was fifteen years old, he was regularly attending screenings at the Bleecker Street Cinema. This theater was owned by filmmaker Lionel Rogosin (*On the Bowery* [US, 1956]; *Come Back, Africa* [US, 1959]), and regularly screened foreign classics, contemporary French New Wave films (including those by Godard and Truffaut), documentaries, and independent American and experimental films—all of which invariably became a center of Sonbert's film education.<sup>11</sup> Sonbert quickly became friendly on all fronts with the theater personnel, attending film screenings, suggesting filmmakers to show, and reading film criticism.

In the basement of the theater, the management published a film journal, *NY Film Bulletin*. As a teenager, Sonbert served as editor-in-chief of a special edition of the *NY Film Bulletin* on Jean-Luc Godard. This special edition includes a one-on-one interview between Sonbert and Godard, which is republished herein. This reveals Sonbert's already precocious insights into artistic expression through visual means, as well as a deep appreciation of the voice of the cinematic auteur.<sup>12</sup>

During the mid-1960s, Sonbert became associated with Andy Warhol's Factory scene.<sup>13</sup> At this time, Gregory Markopoulos, who became, for a brief period, his companion and mentor, befriended Sonbert. Sonbert once remarked in an interview that, "I was his protégé for a while and he did open up the entire new world of films for me . . . he is one of the great film-makers in independent film—really freeing film."<sup>14</sup>

Sonbert began making films beginning in 1966, as a student at New York University. Sonbert's earliest films, in which he captured the spirit of his generation, were inspired first by the university milieu and then by the denizens of the Warhol art scene, including superstars René Ricard and Gerard Malanga. In these loosely structured narratives, Sonbert boldly experimented with the relationship between filmmaker and protagonists through extensively choreographed handheld camera movements within each shot. The mood of these films was further modulated by chiaroscuro effects, achieved primarily through natural lighting (in both interior and outdoor shots), combined with variations in the raw film stock and the exposure, and the use of rock-and-roll music on the soundtrack.

Sonbert's films were shown publicly at the Bleecker Street Cinema, and, by the time he was only twenty years old, Sonbert already had been afforded a career retrospective at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque. He immediately received wide critical acclaim, including reviews in *The Village Voice*, *The Independent Film Journal*, and *The New York Free Press*. A reviewer in *Variety* wrote, in the article "Still NYU Student, Warren Sonbert's Wooster St. B.O. [Box Office]":

Probably not since Andy Warhol's "The Chelsea Girls" had its first showing at the Cinematheque . . . almost a year and a half ago has an "underground" film event caused as much curiosity and interest in NY's non-underground world as did four days of showings of the complete films of Warren Sonbert at the Cinematheque's new location on Wooster Sf. last weekend (Thurs.–Sun., Jan. 25–28). And as before, the crowds (many turned away each night) were attributed to press reports.<sup>15</sup>

In the late 1960s, as Sonbert began to carry his Bolex camera on international trips, his cinematic strategy shifted to incorporate footage from these travels together with sections from his earlier films. (He also relocated from New York City to San Francisco). This process resulted in his first major epic, *Carriage Trade*.<sup>16</sup> He built on his early experiments in camera movement, lighting, and framing to create brilliantly edited masterworks that encompass not only his New York milieu, but also the larger sphere of global human activity. Sonbert developed his own distinct brand of montage, "not strictly involved with plot or morality but rather the language of film as regards time, composition, cutting, light, distance, tension of backgrounds to foregrounds, what you see and what you don't, a jig-saw puzzle of postcards to produce various displace effects."<sup>17</sup>

In Sonbert's montage films, he commented on such contemporary issues as art and industry, news reportage and its effect on our lives, and the interrelationship between the creative arts. *Short Fuse* (US, 1992), for example, incorporates themes from the Strauss opera *Capriccio*, while *Noblesse Oblige* (US, 1981) is patterned after Douglas Sirk's *Tarnished Angels* (US, 1958). Like that film, *Noblesse Oblige* considers themes of flying and falling, and the way media reportage shapes public perceptions of people and events; it also contains shots of *Tarnished Angels* on video monitors and of Sirk himself conversing in a cafe. *A Woman's Touch* (US, 1983) is modeled on Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie* (US, 1964), in exploring the "schizophrenic split between the visualizations of closure and escape."<sup>18</sup>

During this period, Sonbert was developing a finely balanced system of film production. He created his domestic and international travel itineraries based on operas he was planning to review as a professional critic; then he arranged simultaneous showings of his films in the cities he would be visiting. On these extended journeys, often lasting weeks or months, Sonbert shot footage for new projects.<sup>19</sup>

Upon his return to San Francisco, he assembled these shots on large work reels. These often incorporate a succession of shots of the same subject, revealing that he frequently filmed multiple takes, akin to practices in Hollywood cinema. After composing a reel, he created a detailed typewritten shot list recording its

contents. He then selected shots from these large work reels in order to construct his montage films.

At the same time that he was making these films, Sonbert wrote extensively about international opera performances, music recordings, and the Hollywood cinema; these articles were most frequently published by *The Advocate*, *The Bay Area Reporter*, and *The San Francisco Sentinel*. He would often write under the pseudonym of Scottie Ferguson, the character Jimmy Stewart plays in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (US, 1958).<sup>20</sup>

Sonbert was also involved with the work of the Language poets, especially those from the Bay Area, including Barrett Watten, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian.<sup>21</sup> This deep creative connection occurred on a structural level of language itself—the juxtapositions of individual words by the Language poets and the linkage of individual shots in Sonbert's montage practice.<sup>22</sup>

During the years immediately preceding his death from AIDS, Sonbert channeled all of his energy into making his final film, *Whiplash* (US, 1995)—a compelling, multilayered portrayal of the filmmaker's struggle to maintain equilibrium in his physical self, his perceptual reality, and the world of friends and family around him. In the film, Sonbert articulated the ideas and values for which he intended to be remembered. Most important among these is the theme of love between couples, a subject he had explored in his earliest films, such as *The Bad and the Beautiful* (US, 1967).

Sonbert was able to transform, in seemingly effortless fashion, globetrotting diaristic footage into exquisitely modulated visual symphonies of ritual, performance, and suggestion. As he perfected his unique brand of montage from one film to the next, he used this editing technique to engage the spectator in the process of viewing his films. By doing so, to paraphrase Sonbert, he wished to juggle disparate reactions in a struggle against viewer complacency and easily derived judgments.<sup>23</sup> This approach permeated not only his filmmaking practice, but also his writings about life and art—a constantly shifting and perennial tension between disequilibrium and balance. Sonbert's strategy of actively engaging the reader and spectator in this process is perhaps his most enduring legacy.



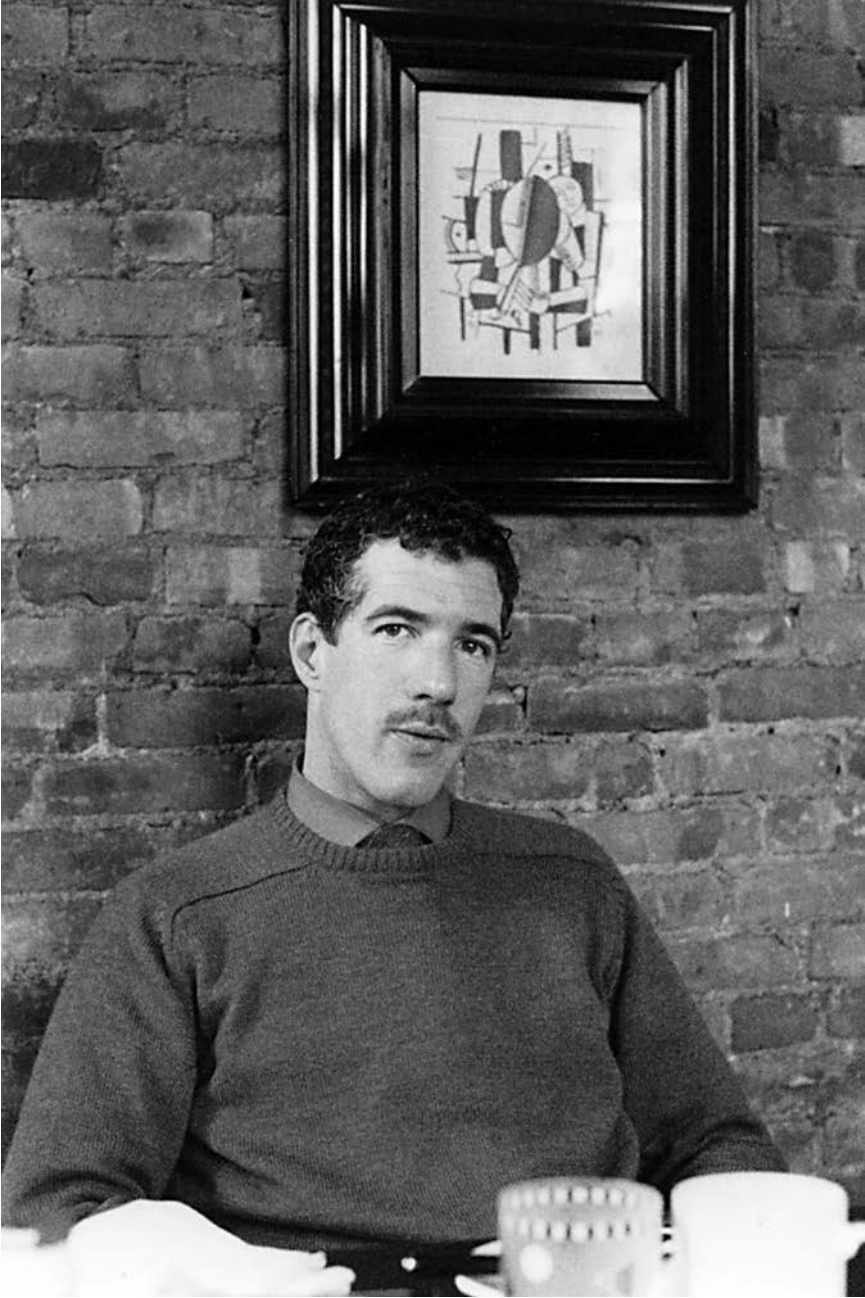


Figure 4. Warren Sonbert.