

# Anger and Poignancy of Gutter Punks in 'Decline'

## Movie Review

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It's a tradition for documentaries to explore inaccessible, even dangerous locales, mounting voyages of discovery to places few people have been. "The Decline of Western Civilization Part III" fits that definition, but instead of going to the headwaters of the Orinoco or the far reaches of the Kalahari, it unveils a disturbing world that's just down the street.

Shot on and around Hollywood Boulevard over a span of 11 months, "Decline" focuses on the subculture of gutter punks, the elaborately pierced and tattooed young people with kaleidoscope hair shaped into skyscraper mohawks. They're a familiar local sight, but until this intelligent, provocative and sympathetic film by Penelope Spheeris, it's unlikely that most people have given them much thought.

"Decline" (playing for one week at the Nuart in West Los Angeles) is the 12th feature on Spheeris' widely divergent filmography. She's made both Hollywood ephemera like "Wayne's World," "The Beverly Hillbillies" and "The Little Rascals" and a series of honest, groundbreaking documentaries on rock 'n' roll themes of which this is the third.

The first "Decline," which focused on the early L.A. punk scene, was made in 1979 before most of the punks in "Part III" were even born, and Spheeris uses interviews



JOHN GOLEAUD

"The Decline of Western Civilization Part III" captures a side of Hollywood street denizens that is rarely seen.

with some of the old-timers to try to put the new kids into perspective.

Rick Wilder of the Mau-Maus, now a sepulchral presence with long flaming red hair, calls punk "a shrieking siren" conveying "anger at everything." And today, says Keith Morris, formerly with Black Flag and the Circle Jerks, "there's more people, more crime, more corruption, more reasons to be angry and upset."

"Decline" features performance footage of current punk bands with names like Final Conflict, the Resistance and Naked Aggression, as well as interviews with the members of that last group, who turn out to be politically aware individuals with musical backgrounds in classical guitar, piano and French horn.

The heart of the film, and equally surprising, are the extended talking-head interviews

Spheeris does with the kids on Hollywood Boulevard, who've taken street names like Squid, Troll, Hamburger and Why-me.

To see these gutter punks is not to love all aspects of them. They brag about drinking every night until they black out, talk openly about thievery, and at times display typical teenage sullenness and bravado.

But Spheeris has deftly captured another side of these people,

which makes the sight of wasted lives sadder than it would otherwise be. Along with their baby-faced nihilism, the gutter punks also display a poignant idealism about the decency they'd like to see in the world, a wistful sense of

being let down by forces beyond their control and by a society that is often judgmental, violent and uncaring.

Surprisingly bright and articulate, many of these kids turn out to be victims of adult abuse who turned angry and anarchistic because they felt no hope of fitting in. Their toughness ("We're the cockroaches, we're the ones that can live through anything"), as it turns out, does not always run deep. "We get our feelings hurt," one girl says, "and we cover it up with spikes and color." Adds another punk, speaking for them all: "It's not really fun to be in reality."

With her unblinking but non-judgmental eye, Spheeris doesn't shy away from the horrifying, at times violent messes these kids make of their lives, but she is always sensitive to the pain behind everything, to the unhappy futility of squandered potential.

Spheeris plans to donate any profits from this self-financed venture to charities for homeless young people and abused children. In her introduction to this film when it debuted at Sundance (where it won the Freedom of Expression award), the director said that of all her films "this one is closest to my heart, the one that I feel, if I die tomorrow, I've done something." She certainly has.