

ON (EXPERIMENTAL) FILM

• by B. Sternberg •

As experimental film co-ordinator at an artist-run distribution co-op, I'm all too aware of the lack of regular coverage of this genre of film. The intention of this monthly column is to touch on some of the ideas, issues and concerns of experimental filmmakers and in general talk about current developments, and who's making what films.

When I say that I make experimental films, why am I asked to justify it? (Does an artist have to justify Art — or just his/her own art?) I get asked: Why don't you make films that people can understand? Why can't you say what you want to say but use the 'language' that is accessible (that is, the narrative conventions of the dominant cinema or 'movies')? If you were in Germany, you would speak German to be understood. You wouldn't speak English and say "understand me", would you? And finally there's the query: Why are you so elitist?

In response, one could dis-

uss the validity of the language analogue. But not now. For now, let us say that film is a language; for instance, film = German. So I'm in Germany and, yes, I speak German to be understood. But there are many different things one can speak about. One can talk of the birds and bees in German; we can also discuss Hegel in German. Would we be right in speaking as if there is one German language? Don't we use different speeches for different purposes: everyday speech, business speech, psychoanalytic jargon and so on? And is there only one prose style? And shall there be no poetry???

Film need not necessarily be, nor should it merely be, the translation of an idea that can be said in words into the 'language' of film. (For that matter why not leave ideas which have already been expressed in a completed novel, play or other form as such? Why paraphrase?)

Perhaps film *is* in the seeing of it, in its being experienced. And each making/experiencing necessitates a certain form,

length, style that is that film. Or we could say: this filmmaker's way of being, of working, of sharing is this way. Each film can be experienced and criticized in its own right according to its effectiveness and impact as opposed to how well it uses a particular and limited set of conventions which tends to preserve the status quo. I might mention here the case often made for the revitalizing effect of experimental film, or any art activity, in that it continually questions. Although many innovations, in their appropriation by the "industry" often get "used-up" and become merely techniques, nonetheless there is a process going on, an evolving which affects perceptions for us *all*. I know my aim in making experimental film is not elitist (elitism implying an intentional exclusiveness, a snobbishness). But it is true that not everything has "mass" appeal. Would we tell a philosopher not to philosophize because it is not "popular"? In making my films I am not trying to not be understood. But I am not trying to be understood either. I am making films.

A recent conversation I had brings up another thorny question — that of the name "experimental."

Q: That's such an unfortunate term. It sounds like the films are incomplete or just attempts. It's really unfair to film and to you.

A: Yes, people I know who have never even seen an ex-

perimental film say the same thing — that label makes them not interested to begin with. Or people assume it's a student work or what's made while you're learning how to make NFB films or features! There are other terms: avant-garde, or underground. Maybe "innovative". Or I read an article recently that used "advanced"...

Q: Why any name? Why not just film? Why not just say B's film and leave it at that?

Now I admit that it is convenient for purposes of study and analysis to have terminology that can group types. We can discuss "prose" as distinguished from "poetry." So when necessary for film theory, shall we use "advanced" or perhaps () Film? What do you think?

An exciting and significant event in Toronto this Fall (besides the Festival of Festivals) the retrospective of the films of R. Bruce Elder. The retrospective was presented by the

Art Gallery of Ontario Oct. 1 - 11 and concluded with the premiering of *Lamentations* a two-part work: Part 1: The Dream of the Last Historian; Part 2: The Sublime Calculation. *Lamentations* is an epic piece in length (7 1/2 hours) and in scope. Concepts from the various disciplines of music, history, religion and philosophy are interwoven in the film. Bruce is much aware of the work of Canadian philosopher George Parkin Grant (author of *Lament for a Nation*). This film is Elder's la-

ment and consideration of the state of society and culture today. Exquisitely shot and edited, it continues the style of filmmaking Bruce has established in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* and *Illuminated Texts* — the flowing camera movements and the overabundance of visual and verbal information which includes text printed over images and multi-voiced tracks.

A screening of *Illuminated Texts* is scheduled in February at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.