

ON (EXPERIMENTAL) FILM

Hello. I'm back - though not exactly in the same seat. No longer at Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre, I am teaching at York University in both the Film and Visual Arts Departments - this cross-appointment, an attempt to have some film in the Fine Arts building and some F.A. in Film.

But, I actually have been out of Toronto participating in both the 7th Wave Seminar (the 7th wave is the biggest - the one that rocks the boat), in Wolfville, N.S. and The Plains Canada Film and Video Conference in Winnipeg.

The 7th Wave Seminar, organized by David Craig for Picture Plant, collected and concentrated Atlantic filmmakers in - three day non-stop viewing and assessing process. The aim: to develop critical discourse, to look seriously at and critique work from the region with the view that all this will improve filmmaking abilities and the ability to stay in the region and continue in film. The dedication of the participants was heartening; consensus was to make the seminar a yearly or bi-yearly event.

Films, all genres, as well as video and interactive media were presented. A comment: Often, especially ^{WITH} ~~when discussing~~ documentary films, the subject of the film is discussed as content rather than the film's ways and means, seeing as telling versus seeing as experiencing. Other films, e.g. experimental films, then get looked at through that frame ~~thereby~~ thereby losing essence.

The Plains Conference, organized by Grant Guy of Shared Stage, took place at Artspace which houses the Winnipeg Film Group, Video Pool and The Cinematheque. Film and video screenings and a performance by Denis Lessard of Montreal complimented the day-time panel discussions. Panel topics included Curatorial Canons with Leila Sujir, ^{from} Calgary; Bruce Ferguson, ^{from} New York and Winnipeg; Tom Sherman, ^{from} Nova Scotia and Ontario; Vern Hume, ^{from} Calgary; Roles and Responsibilities with Sue Ditta (National Gallery's Film/Video officer), Jon Tupper, Jean Tourangeau; Deconstructing Local Barriers with Gerry Kisil, Winnipeg; Richard Kerr, Regina (formerly Ontario); Martine Sauvagneau, Montréal (formerly Northern Quebec); Barbara Sternberg, Toronto via New Brunswick; and New Media Centres (should new centres be constructed - should there be new physical structures - for the proper presentation of media or time-based arts) with Dale Admundson, University of Manitoba, Brian McNevin, Vancouver; Marcella Bienvenue, Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers; Debra Mosher, Winnipeg photographer; Dennis Burton, Radio, Radio, Calgary.

Dennis will programme works that fall outside the standard format which, he explained, usually allows about 5 minute stretches for work once station identification, commercials, news breaks are slotted in. Dennis wondered whether in the end he was only playing music for himself (am I reaching anyone?), but rejected the we-will-do this-to-build -an-audience programming rationale.

Brian McNevin made the point that the architecture of the space controls what can go into it and that the exhibition situation or presentation context determines how a work is seen/received. Although our large public galleries/museums come out of and thus suit a European painting tradition, nonetheless Brian proposed that film and video make use of these institutions. He suggested regular, bi-weekly screenings derived from the gallery's collection or rented works; a library system which would make works available for in-gallery use for individual viewing on request; weekly television programming be presented by the gallery on educational systems (work from their collection without docent) thereby reaching an audience not geographically based. WHY NOT? EACH OF YOU? APPROACH YOUR NEAREST PUBLIC GALLERY WITH THIS PROPOSAL?

Dale Admundson took up the question of what New Media Centres might do, asking at the same time whether or not what is being done by artist-run centres is better than the large galleries. He asked, What of the status, the stamp of approval that comes with an exhibition at a major public gallery?

Debra Mosher commented on artist-run media centres from her perspective of an independent photographer. She felt that if openness and education were of primary importance (as opposed to being self-serving) to these centres, there would be a lot of people interested. She thought that they should be accessible to artists of all media to use as needed.

In the panel on curatorship, Leila Sujir spoke of curating as involving both the presentation (how and where work is shown; establishing its context) and representation (how curators choose what they choose; forming the canon and the frame through which work is viewed) of work. The canon, by legitimizing some films, makes others illegitimate. This raises questions of power and empowerment, of community (how we have an identity) and of representation. Leila defined her role of curator as ^{one of} "unhiding the hidden" - a phrase she has borrowed from a Robert Kroetsch essay of that name - as opposed to one of discovery with its connotations of colonialism, empire, newness, being first; and in taking as the starting point the works themselves, to make visible what often becomes invisible and make what may be 'the absent reference' present.

Vern Hume, who is curating a large film and video exhibition entitled From the Heart of the Heart of the Regions, took up the issues of community, absence of reference or invisibility (it is important to see ourselves reflected in the mediated world) and the necessity of self-representation (artist as curator is a survival strategy when one is from a small centre). Vern also questioned the notion put forward by Bruce Ferguson of an objectivity the professional curator gains through distance (are there hidden agendas?) and countered this with interest of an artist-curator.

Richard Kerr described his projects as an artist-curator or programmer, as he prefers. In the absence of much professional film curation (is this a word?), he felt it necessary to undertake the job. Richard concentrates on getting work out into the smaller centres via their public galleries and/or artist-run galleries.

Throughout the conference, notions of regionalism and new takes

on that concept interacted with the explicit panel topics. The point was well taken by Martine Sauvagneau when she said that the region is within us. It is our sense of place that keeps human our perspective. The conference itself with its mixture of people from mixed locals and media, avoided an us-them polarity. It felt good - important as much for the connections, networks established, the camaraderie and support as for the ideas or solutions generated.

THE NATIONAL GALLERY NEEDS TO HEAR FROM YOU. Right now the film/video officer has a budget for video acquisition only. The National Gallery needs to hear from you. Silence = approval.

I went to see Landscape Suicide, the latest James Benning film, at the Toronto Festival of Festivals. Yikes - the audience laughed, booed, moaned. It was a shock to realize the distance separating parts of the viewing public and separating the film from much of this audience. The resistance some put up within the first two minutes of the film to seeing ~~any~~^{some} thing of a different nature, pace, form, imagery than mainstream narrative was so fierce as to prohibit those audience members from seeing/understanding/experiencing any thing at all in the unfolding 90 minutes. Oh-Oh.

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