

ON (EXPERIMENTAL) FILM

Questions relating to curating and curatorship are in the air - seminars, articles and a recent issue of PROVINCIAL ESSAYS are devoted to the topic. Who determines what gets shown/seen and what gets written about/included in the history? What relation has this determination to the market evaluation of art and/or its socio-political value? What is the relative power between patronage and curatorship, and how do art, politics and government-funding interact? Do curators observe and place into context, or interpret, or do they, in fact, create theses for which the work serves ^{merely} as example? AND what has this to do with film?

Nothing and everything (as usual)!

Film, as other reproduceable art, is not apart of the art-as-a-collectible market. (Is it coincidental that these same art forms are largely ignored by museums?)

The 'market' in relation to film is the feature-film industry. What gets shown and produced is 'selected', via Telefilm, by television executives.

As far as I know, there are no curators of film in the major public galleries, and generally a refusal or inability to include film art in the curating of contemporary art. Thinking of curating as the procuring of, caring for and exhibition of a collection, there is no curating of experimental film - and there needs to be. Major public galleries should be collecting and regularly screening at least the 'foundation ^{experimental} films, thereby educating the public and providing a context for independent curating of programmes of contemporary film art, and exhibition in artist-run centres.

Artist-Run Centres arose in Canada to provide artists unmediated access to galleries. Selection committees are composed of artists as opposed to administrators or critics. Experimental films are often presented in programmes selected according to an independent curator's theme or thesis. One question: does placing individual films in a context aid viewers to see more insightfully or limit the viewing experience by giving primacy to the curator's position? Also, what control has, or should a filmmaker have, over the context in which her/his work is seen? And who/what accredits curators as such? (Is film taught in art history courses?) So, let's continue to screen films - more and more - and keep open the dialogue on Criticism and Curatorship

I just finished reading an article by J. Hoberman about the film and video components of the Whitney Biennial (Village Voice, June '87) and, while there is much I found myself nodding my head in agreement with, there are a few premises, stated and unstated, I take exception to. When he recreates for us his first adolescent experiences of underground film-going "in cruddy storefronts and the even wierder basement of a midtown skyscraper", I felt along with him the nostalgia for those adventures with experimental - then underground - film. Hoberman's adolescent beatnik days of madness, drugs, sexual liberation are equated with greatness and all else pales in comparison. But when Hoberman continues to judge film (and life?) through that adolescent's eyes, although I'm tempted to agree (yes, that energy, that demanding honesty, that naivety) I wonder if there isn't more to be said for viewing work with knowledge, experience, maturity of age. We can't stay adolescents forever, nor should we expect experimental film and its makers to. Interestingly, later in the article Hoberman cites two films in the Whitney Biennial as being 'challenging films by first-rate artists, Yvonne Rainer's THE MAN WHO ENVIED WOMEN and Ernie Gehr's SIGNAL - GERMANY ON THE AIR'. Both of these films are by mature filmmakers and neither has the kind of shock/titillation/popular appeal of SCORPIO RISING (the film Hoberman repeatedly cites as exemplar of the golden days of the American Underground movement). These are slow-moving films, the first more of the 'theoretical' film, Hoberman later laments and the second of the 'intellectual' structural movement.

The article continues. Hoberman goes on to state that 'Individuals (filmmakers) persevere, but the movement seems moribund.' (Is 'death' the *hot* word right now, and continuing to live day to day is just ho-hum...) Who is it that needs an identified movement? And who says that the movement need be avant-garde in its impulse? Must experimental film be seen/judged only in so far as it challenges the establishment? Why do we even look to the mainstream cinema to note the effects of or to compare experimental film with, anyway? We know that, though both are film, the 'Hollywood' use is industrial, market-driven and formulaic; experimental films are filmic and individual. Why compare? Experimental films are; they are not alternative to. Experimental films present ways of seeing and experiencing through film. Let's look, see, live, learn, enjoy, be bored, be engaged, be aware, look, see, experience.

The article seems to bemoan the marginalization of experimental film - reviewers won't cover "the crazy movies at the Whitney", 'the starvation and squalor of ghetto life' - and yet when Hoberman reports the inclusion of this film within 'academic bulwarks' it is only with regret that 'Where once raving madmen became filmmakers, it was now the turn of genteel professors.' We just can't win! But how much and for how long was avant-garde film taught in film schools? Is it not, within academia, a fringe? Most film schools teach the popular culture of movies and now T.V. (of the 51 panels at the last joint U.S. and Canadian Film Studies Association Conference, 6 concerned themselves with analyses of television.) So, perhaps it is only fitting that artists use this as a source to subvert or, at least, comment on in their work.

There may have been little strong work in the Biennial or just out there at the moment, perhaps because of the tendency to show immediately everything one makes, but let's discuss/write about what is interesting - and not worry what to name the movement!

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