ON (EXPERIMENTAL) FILM

What is the relationship between Academia and Film, between teaching film and the making and reception of film, between the university situation and experimental or avant-garde film practice?

I had thought of investigating this large area, first broached in this column in the report of Bruce Elder's paper "The death of a Canadian art movement", issue #139, wherein he posits Academia as a cause of this demise - I had thought to start looking at this relationship by asking the institutions that teach film what the rationale is for their curriculum, what they perceive as their role vis a vis film, whether, in their opinion, they determine or reflect the attitudes to and place of experimental film in our society, and how they make their policy determinations. I began by calling Ryerson, York University, University of Toronto and Ontario College of Art.

At the date of writing, I have not progressed very far in my research: in rather casual phone conversations I've learned that at O.C.A. a student can't take film only. Film is one of many possible technical courses or mediums through which a student might work through their ideas. Film is offered through Contemporary Media, Experimental Arts, Photo Electric Arts and Technical Studies courses. . There is one history of film course given which changes some years. I don't know whether examples of film art are included within the other, regular art history courses. And today I noticed an ad for a summer course called Film for Artists.

At York, the film and video department is within the Faculty of Fine Arts, but it is a separate department in a building separate from the visual arts. Theatre and film, I believe, will occupy the new building that is being planned; there is a theatre course for film students in directing actors. At York, both theory and production emphasize the narrative and documentary genres as situated within the film and television Industry. Courses in Interdisciplinary Studies is a place where inter-department links occur and there is some talk of further ties between visual arts and film to come. " In film and television", explains Ken Dancyger, chairperson of the film department, "you either train students for a vocation or train artists who in a sense prompt change. There is a tension between these two directions, with administrative and student inclinations toward the former. The hope is to create a milieu, nonetheless, that can foster the latter."

Both O.A.C. and York understand that the individual interests and strengths of the faculty members do exert an influence on the broad outline of the curriculum. What complex of factors determines hiring?

At the University of Toronto, there are well over twenty film courses; the twenty teachers teach about one course as each comes out of home discipline that is usually a language. So you have at U. of T. a series of national cinema courses: German, French, Italian, Russian, American (U.S.) cinema etc.(Note that this keeps American cinema in its place, as it were, as a national not a universal cinema.) Film is studied from the point of view of the literature and film culture of that country. One course in experimental film, international, is taught in this area. There are four other areas offered in film (though there is no core curriculum in film): inroductory film, which includes the avant-garde films of the 20's; theory courses, which might include references to experimental film; interdisciplinary studies such as religion in film, the novel in film, semiotics; and senior seminar (script-writing, production). Film is taught, according to Bart Testa, along much the same lines as other subjects at U.of T. : with a belief in history or an historical method versus from paradigms of theories.

Just as I had embarked on this investigation, along came the annual Film Studies Association of Canada conference, this year joined in Montreal by the Society for Cinema Studies (U.S.A.) and the Association Quebecoise des Etudes Cinematograhiques. Here were 500 film studies professors come together to present and/or listen to papers! All were presented in two-hour panels with four presenters. Panel topics ranged from those on various national cinemas with examinations of particular films or filmmakers, to discussions of certain ideologies, to the question of the history of film theory itself, and the relation of cinema studies to critical studies. Six of the fifty-one panels were concerned in one way or another with television! -"Histories of Early Network Television", "Television and the Body", "Theories and Methods of Television Study" amongst them.
The two panels which named the avant-garde in their titles were, interestingly, both linked with documentary.Bill Wees of McGill, in the panel called "Border Crossings: Documentary and Avant-Garde", spoke on Stan Brakhage as a documenter of seeing whose films find equivalences for the experience of seeing - of closed-eye vision and of light itself; Richard Neuport of Northwestern U. in a paper entitled "Blind Spots: Bruce Baillie as Experimental Ethnographer" gave a close analysis of Baillie's "Valentin" , illustrating his almost exclusive use of close-ups to relay sensory information in significant fragments which deny as much as they reveal and how, through editing and selection of close-up shots carefully matching colour, texture and shape, Baillie suggests the human fit with the landscape, yet foregrounds the presence of the filmmaker. Leo Charney, New York University, differentited between the genres in that documentary aims to

educate - the spectator is to amass knowledge throughout the film. Avant-garde films problematize the areas of time and knowledge and so destabalize documentary. Charney referred to "Wavelength", "Nostalgia", "Unsere Afrikareise", and "Zors Lemma" in a questioning of subjectivity-objectivity and concluded that the articulation of cinema for the avant-garde is between frames, in the gaps, at the threshold of meaning.

The other panel with avant-garde in its title was "Avant-Garde Documentary/Documentary Avant-Garde". One of the panelists, Paul Arthur, NYU, in his paper, "Recent Avant-Garde Films and the Resurgence of History", noted a social shift in the avant-garde in the last ten years in three trends: historical revision in new narrative; the return to primitive film as metahistory - our history as seen through film's history - in the use of found footage as in "Eureka", and "Gloria!" and thirdly, the human identification of history in the presentation of a history of daily life in the diary film - "Lost, Lost, Lost", and "American Dreams".

I found it interesting and somewhat frustrating that many other panelists spoke of the strategies that often inform the avant-garde without actually mentioning it by name or acknowledging the films that would have so appropriately illustrated their points. In the panel "Historiography of Film Theory" which questioned how the history of film study itself should be written, Brian Henderson (SUNY-Buffalo) suggested that an interesting fix on that history would be a study of the shift in strategies for excluding avant-garde theories from film studies!

This topic needs more than one column. Please input your thoughts, theories, comments.Til next time....