

*for Mario/89 deadline*

On (experimental) film by Barbara Sternberg

In the November/88 issue I outlined some issues within feminist film theory and asked what relationship it has to avant-garde film. The next two columns, written by guest columnists Leila Sujir and Catherine Russell, were responses to this question.

Leila answered from a sense of urgency, as she stated in a covering letter to me: 'It seems to me that feminist theory is currently a battleground, disputing, amongst other notions, postfeminism, and until that ground is sufficiently cleared (a space cleared etc) the films themselves are not really part of the discussion; and from her column: '...the space created for both feminism and the avant-garde continually needs to be reasserted.' With this as her imperative, she made connections between feminist theory and experimental film as being spaces for difference, spaces for questioning, and, citing Kaja Silverman, as 'the possibility of a resistant and oppositional agency to mainstream (patriarchal) culture'.

Catherine Russell ~~seems~~<sup>seems</sup> in her response, to have equated experimental/counter-culture film with inexpensive or low-budget, with small and/or difficult and with ghettoized or of interest to small audiences. She suggests the possibility of larger budgets and broader audiences for films that nonetheless maintain themselves as 'alternative'. She warns of the danger, however, of slipping into its (minor cinema's) own marginal hegemony, threatened by the ever-present temptation of enacting new definitions of unity and coherence. Thus she calls for less concern with defining and maintaining rigid categories and suggests that 'there is room in this country for lots of different kinds of films'.

Neither response really answered my question. If feminist theory was only calling for non-narrative or disrupted narrative in opposition to mainstream, then wasn't that already happening in avant-garde film? Why is avant-garde film not included within feminist film discussions, not even feminist/female experimental filmmakers? Why has the a-g been called 'male'? How does avant-garde film relate to issues of pleasure, gaze, pre-Oedipal readings,

2

chora etc? Can't I for example, be both? Why, I guess, are we not greater allies? a call to which I read, in some way, in Catherine Russell's article.

A slight digression: I heard Stuart Liebman talk on the films of Alexander Kluge. He discussed the work in terms of utopia and enlightenment theories, in terms of Adorno and Benjamin. He described Kluge's position as anti-Hollywood narrative and thus counter to the attendant dominance of instrumental reason, closure, an authoritative directorial position and passive receptive viewer, and the resultant support of the consumerist status quo. Kluge's method embraces 'difficulty' and manyness - by making a work difficult one encourages an active audience to discern distinctions and connect threads in the many stories that form history, the many voices and views within the richness of mystery/ambiguity in images.

It was an interesting talk - and disconcerting. It sounded somewhat familiar, that is, as sharing much with the aims and methods of experimental filmmaking (and feminism). And yet the films were not situated in or next to either of these contexts. Is it because Kluge's films are feature-ish, 90 minutes, 35mm, relatively big budget, using some narrative features? (Liebman rejected this suggestion) Or is it that 'experimental' or 'avant-garde film' conjures up 60's, structural, materialist and over? I could ask the same of the writing on Yvonne Rainer's films which I consider 'experimental'; though they are not spoken of as such, but are distinguished as feminist. I guess I'm feeling left out! But back to Catherine's column:

I cannot really agree with the characterizations she made, but her conclusions, particularly formulated in her question: 'Why is the 'experimental' in the title of this column in brackets?', brought me back to the first column I wrote in which I discussed the problems of this nomenclature. I suggested other possibilities: 'innovative', 'advanced' or '( )' film, only to be queried by a friend: 'Why any name? Why not just film? Why not B's films and leave it at that? Yet Leila, Catherine and I all attested to the usefulness educators, critics, curators and distributors make of definitions and categories - and to the dangers of limits, hegemony, canon exclusivity that these same distinctions bring. I seem to be back where I started from, still asking questions - a good place to end.

Doina Popescu of the Goethe Institute, Toronto has, for the second year, made the pre-selection for the prestigious Oberhausen Short Film Festival. Included amongst those she has submitted are: Richard Kerr's *The Last Days of Contritions*, Chuck Clarke's *8 Frames/Second*, Barb Sternberg's *Tending Towards the Horizontal*, Lisa Miles' *Hiroiti*, Stephen Butson's *Isis*, Tim River's *Frame of Mine*, Roy Cross' *Thru the Looking* and *The Red Shoes* from Montreal.

TVO's 1/2 hour programme originated and directed by Richard Johnson which shows experimental film, video and computer generated work is on the air for its second year. Up to twenty from the original ten part series it can be seen Tuesdays at 10:30 pm and Sundays at 4:00 pm. That's the good news. The bad is that TVO doesn't seem to put much stock in the programme if one judges from how infrequently (never?) they advertise it on their network and from rumours that it may not be produced for a third season. So - write to TVO - let them know you're out there WATCHING - you want MORE - and why the hell are they keeping this wonderful programme a secret?!? The letters do make a difference.

### **Experimental Film Everywhere Alive This Spring**

Three shows around town in Halifax organized by David Miller; three exhibitions in Calgary organized by Marcella Bienvenue, two series of three screenings at AKA and Neutral Ground in Regina organized by Richard Kerr; an exhibition 'Documentary in Ruins' at Island Media Arts and NASCAD; in the USA, shows at Berks Filmmakers, Philadelphia and Millenium, New York. Horray and good work, Mike Hoolboom!

Big Experimental Film Doings scheduled for May 28-June 4 in Toronto. The International Experimental Film Congress focuses attention on experimental film from Britain, Europe, USA, Canada, Latin America and the Philipines in a series of curated screenings and will bring experimental filmmakers and theoreticians as presenters of practica and on panels. The Congress centers its discussions on the burning issue of the first panel: Cinema's Phoenix: Deaths or Resurrectins of Experimental Film? Certainly there is work being made - lots of it, to which ten programmes of recent work will attest. So does

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→ this question become: Is it avant garde and what can this mean today? Will a new name be found? What is in a name? Is there an experimental film movement and is it continuing? In what directions? Will this Congress be the place for Catherine Russell's response/call/undefinitions (or should I say a-definitions) to find acceptance? Whatever it may or may not see accomplished, the International Experimental Film Congress will be an occasion for filmmakers and film enthusiasts to congregate and for this filmwork to see light. Plan to attend! For registration and information contact Jim Shedden co-ordinator, c/o Innis College 2 Sussex Avenue Toronto, Ontario

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