ON(Experimental)Film

by B. Sternberg

We've been speaking of distribution/exhibition and so I asked Patricia Gruben how things were going in this respect with her feature Low Visibility which premiered at the '84 Festival of Festivals.

Patricia had just returned from a tour of cinematheques and campuses in 12 U.S. cities including San Francisco, Houston and L.A. The film had received good critical reviews. Patricia is somewhat disarmingly pointed with its distribution, however; not that the film isn't being seen, but that it's being seen only in the same places, in the same context as her previous works. She had thought, she now suggests naively, that this film could make the crossover to broader distribution (it has sync sound and actors!); that there might be an audience somewhere between those interested in strictly experimental films and the Anne-of-Green-Gables-Sunday-night-'TV-drama watchers.

There is an audience, but so far there seem to be no avenues to it. The type of features that get distribution, Patricia notes, such as Grey Fox and My American Cousin do so not only because they are good movies, but also (and more!) because they create a "national identity." They are promoted as "Canadian" films. Films are considered in terms of themes and subject matter as opposed to their formal concerns. And when this is the case, it seems that we become attached to the most conservative forms - and to past history as subject matter as opposed to current issues (like the media war we are engaged in, the battle of the airwaves, the constant bombardment of our minds). Low Visibility is a film dealing with these issues not only in subject/content but through its formal devices. It is more a film about drama Patricia explains, than a dramatic film. Mind you, it is about survival... Or, perhaps, as Patricia contends, "Canadian" is not the issue. Intellectual curiosity is international - and so can be the scope and appeal of our films.

Patricia is now at work on two films, one dramatic and one non-narrative. The latter, Ley Lines is to be shot in film and video. Interior, distanced, it centres around the family name and what it means.

It is about the fiction of personality - how we as individuals are constructed out of the intersection of concepts about biological, psychological, voluntary and societal states. The film starts at the point of someone's dreams. It too will have sync sound/actors, music (distributors, get ready!), and be more emotionally involving than anything she's done. Patricia is not making the film just to bridge gaps - it does follow a continuum of her concerns and involvements. "It would have to be a script I loved or I wouldn't do it."

Patricia teaches filmmaking at Simon Fraser University, B.C. She told me of an exciting project being established there: Praxis, a professional group with a director, a studio and a bit of equipment where people might go to develop their script and perhaps shoot the film there as well.

Critical support would come from the group and visiting filmmakers, screening relevant films, discussion and workshops. The group will help the filmmaker structure his/her idea in an arts-oriented environment beyond the tyranny of the made-for-TV formula.

I guess everyone's read or heard of the Film Industry Task Force report: Canadian Cinema, A Solid Base, and we'll all wait to see if, perhaps this time, the government will act on the recommendations. But did you all take note of what areas were totally ignored by this report (and who was on the Task Force)? This Task Force was not looking at, not even casting a quick glance in the direction of, experimental film. Of course, a task force needs a focus and "the industry" needs Canadian control of Canadian distribution/exhibition and access to our own markets, but, can you imagine what we could do in the production, distribution and exhibition of experimental films given even $2 million of that $60 million recommended for the Industry? So, Marcel, how about it?! It can't be that Marcel Masse is unaware of experimental films and the international stature of its filmmakers, or of the value the Canadian public gets for their relatively small expenditure in the Canada Council?

A follow-up comment on the accessibility/availability argument raised in a previous column. A reader argues:

In stating the problem (small audiences for experimental films) to be more one of availability (lack of exhibition venues, minimal advertising, etc.) than the accessibility or nature of the films themselves, you seemed to be equating accessible with 'good' and inaccessible with 'bad'. But this is not the case. The very thing that makes James Joyce, for cont. on p. 47
For these productions which have recently completed  
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RAY SAGER  
Production Supervisor  

LARRY KENT  
Director  

BOB FREDERICK  
Production Manager  

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of Henry Osgood  

PATRICK WHITLEY  
Producer  

DAVE THOMAS  
Director  

CHRI S SULI  
Producer  

BRIAN KAVANAGH  
Director  

MANIA  

PETER SIMPSON  
Executive Producer  

ILANA FRANK  
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