

ON (EXPERIMENTAL) FILM

by Richard Kerr

As a pinch writer, I will keep the rally going around the question of film education in our universities as it relates to our avant-garde cinema. The situation is desperate, to be sure.

I can only relate to the dire situation through personal experience as a film student and, now, educator. I consider myself fortunate because my mentors at film school (Rick Hancox and Jeffrey Paul), introduced us right off the bat to the classics of cinema art, the visionary works of the avant-garde and the European *auteur* cinema. They took great care in nurturing our sensibilities towards a responsible cinema, insisting that you can't make films about other people, other fictions, until you make a film about yourself. In other words, know who you are before you exploit the power of the medium towards others.

We were taught a personal vision which could be reinforced best by the American avant-garde. Times were good in the mid-'70s. We developed a passion for, and an understanding of, our culture. In this class were Holly Dale, Janis Cole, Lorraine Segato and later Michael Hoolboom, Gary Popovich and Philip Hoffman, all of whom are contributing to our culture by doing personal work inspired by a grounding in the avant-garde, not by studying the fashions of a consumer-based cinema. Remember, this is pre-tax-shelter financing and before the dark recessions (culturally and economically) of the early '80s.

The recession changed film education. Administrators and film educators became timid. Cinema education shifted from the liberation of ideas to job and product orientation. Film schools, by and large, convinced themselves they had to be training centres for the industry. This reactionary stance was the nail in the coffin that diminished the study of a visionary cinema. Film schools found it safe to champion the cinema of the box office and the pragmatics of industry production. Though this thinking might place students into entry level jobs, in the long run it short-circuits an innovative and responsible cinema of ideas, one that strengthens the integrity of our culture.

I would like to make it clear, though I champion good avant-garde work, I think it is vital that students screen and be provided with analysis of the classics of narrative cinema. After all, a good film is a good film whether it is from a narra-

tive school or the avant-garde. I refer interested readers to Fred Camper's "Two American Cinemas" in *Spiral*, Issue # 4, 1985. Camper makes the claim

that the work of Brakhage and the work of John Ford, though opposites in construction and intent, can both offer the viewer a rich cinematic experience. (As a digression, Camper also maligns the trend of new narrative methodologies in hope of accessing the larger mainstream audiences. The efforts

most often wind up being uninspired when compared to the artist's earlier work, which adhered to a more genuine *avant-garde* spirit. Camper's case in point is Bette Gordon's *Variety* which embraces Hitchcock's *Vertigo* but falls sadly short in terms of discourse and form. New narrative

practices have led many promising avant-garde artists into a box canyon of films that aren't particularly good narrative work).

The point being that the narrative films on university screening lists have to be the



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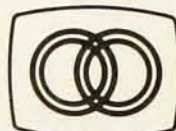
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ground-breaking work (Goddard, Truffaut, Antonioni, Welles, Bresson, and so on). The danger is in endorsing the mediocrity of our commercial cinema. It is healthier to screen a minor work from the avant-garde with a personal vision than to screen an uninspired Hollywood or network production. The responsibility is to screen only innovative work or a cinema that evolves narrative

language and takes the form to new places.

It is my position that the avant-garde offers the richer experience of screen education when given proper and thoughtful analysis. Unfortunately, avant-garde screenings are often overlooked in favour of the mediocrity of commercial productions for no other reason than their commercial success. Would you, in literature, study James Michener over James Joyce; or in paint-

ing, examine the work of Ken Danby instead of Pablo Picasso? Then why embrace a lowbrow populist cinema over a critically inspired cinema of ideas and form?

The reality is that our universities are poorly equipped to train our future commercial filmmakers. The equipment is often outdated, instructors are often tenure-tired and are out of touch with the industry they champion, and, most importantly, the curriculum does not

set the grounding for a career in today's film industry - There are few courses in accounting, or finance which hone the skills it takes to succeed in a producer-centred business.

Whenever I encounter zealous students who want to make it in the industry and question the study of art, I suggest they take Business Administration, observe the trends of Hollywood cinema, and get a subscription to *Variety*.

Our university film depart-

ments should be venues of intellect and social responsibility. When given the chance they can do that better than be training schools for the industry. I state this because when I teach a class in avant-garde cinema, the students respond to the challenge of the ideas offered in these works. This past year I taught a course in Canadian avant-garde cinema that was rewarding to the students; it generated a high level of attendance and enthusiasm. The students responded to the writing of R. Bruce Elder's *The Cinema We Need* and the work that it advocated. His writing (and films) challenged them; and in my heart I believe that is why they are at university studying film; it's for ideas and intellectual development.

In contrast, when I teach a documentary class and am forced to screen National Film Board or CBC product (budget reasons) I am met with cynicism and apathy because these films pale in comparison when it comes to teaching the fundamentals of film form. Our students are more visually literate each year, and they expect more in terms of philosophy, intellect and social awareness. The best way to satisfy their image/sound hunger is through the work of the likes of Stan Brakhage, Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Frank, David Rimmer, Michael Snow, etc. Everyone has their own list of ground-breakers who are important.

The rich heritage of Canada's avant-garde artist is being eroded in our film schools. I say it is time to reevaluate our curriculum and do what universities do best, and that is deal with ideas and research towards an advancement of all the cinemas in our culture, abandoning the pretense of just training people for the industry. Let Norman Jewison and his band of entertainers at the Canadian Centre for advanced Film Studies or DramaLab take the responsibility for industry training. Let's open university film departments to the writings and films of Frampton, Elder, Snow, Brakhage, Sitney and all artists and critics who have done the work and pioneered the language and aesthetics of a cinema concerned with a personal vision, as opposed to the reactionary cinema of the box office.

The avant-garde must be revered for what it is - cinema's truest art form.

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