

ON (EXPERIMENTAL) FILM

by Barbara N. Sternberg

Hello, I'm back – though no longer at Canadian Film-makers' Distribution Centre. I am now teaching at York University in both the Film and Visual Arts departments. This cross-appointment is an attempt to have some film in the Fine Arts building and some F.A. in Film.

I recently participated in both the "7th Wave Seminar" (the 7th wave is the biggest – the one that rocks the boat), in Wolfville, Nova Scotia and "The Plains Canada Film and Video Conference" in Winnipeg.

"The 7th Wave Seminar", organized by David Craig for Picture Plant, brought together Atlantic filmmakers in a concentrated three-day nonstop viewing and assessing process. The aim was to develop critical discourse, to look seriously at and critique work from the region. It was hoped that all this would improve not only the filmmaking but also the filmmakers' ability to stay, and continue to work, in the region. The dedication of the participants was heartening; consensus was to make the seminar a yearly or bi-yearly event.

All genres, including video and interactive media, were presented. A comment: often, especially with documentary films, the subject of the film is discussed as content rather than the film's ways and means – seeing as telling versus seeing as experiencing. Other films, e.g. experimental films, then get looked at that way and their essence as thereby ignored.

"The Plains Conference", organized by Grant Guy of Shared Stage, took place at Artspace which houses the Winnipeg Film Group, Video Pool and the Cinémathèque. Film and Video screenings and a performance by Denis Lessard of Montreal complemented the daytime panel discussions. Panel topics included "Curatorial Canons" with Leila Sujir, Bruce Ferguson, Tom Sherman; "Roles and Responsibilities" with Sue Ditta, Jon Tupper, Jean Tourangeau; "Deconstructing Local Barriers" with Gerry Kisil, Richard Kerr, Martine Sauvageau, Barbara Sternberg, and "New Media Centres" (should new centres be constructed – should there be new physical structures – for the proper presentation of media or time-based arts) with Dale Admundson, Brian McNevin, Marcella Bienvenue, Debra Mosher, Dennis Burton.

Dennis Burton from Radio, Radio in Calgary stated that he will programme works that fall outside the standard format which, he explained, usually allows about five-minute stretches for work once station

identification, commercials and news breaks are slotted in. Dennis wondered whether in the end he was only playing music for himself (am I reaching anyone?), but rejected the we-will-do-this-to-build-an-audience programming rationale.

Brian McNevin made the point that the architecture of the space controls what can go into it and that the exhibition situation or presentation context determines how a work is seen/received. Although our large public galleries/museums come out of, and thus suit, a European painting tradition, Brian nonetheless proposed that film and video make use of these institutions. He suggested regular, bi-weekly screenings derived from the gallery's collection or rented works; a library system which would make works available for in-gallery use for individual viewing on request; weekly television programming presented by the gallery on educational systems (work from their collection without docent) thereby reaching an audience not geographically based. Why not? Approach your nearest public gallery with this proposal?

Dale Admundson took up the question of what New Media Centres might do, asking at the same time whether or not what is being done by artist-run centres is better than that being done by the large galleries. He asked, "What of the status, the stamp of approval that comes with an exhibition at a major public gallery?"

Debra Mosher commented on artist-run media centres from her own perspective as an independent photographer. She felt that if openness and education were of primary importance to these centres, there would be a lot of people interested. She thought that they should be accessible to artists of all media to use as needed (as opposed to being self-serving).

In the panel on curatorship, Leila Sujir spoke of curating as involving both the presentation of work (how and where work is shown; establishing its context) and its representation (how curators choose works; forming the canon and the frame through which work is viewed). The canon, by legitimizing some films, makes others illegitimate. This raises questions of power and empowerment, of community (how we have an identity) and of representation. Leila defined her role of curator as one of "unhiding the hidden" – a

phrase she borrowed from a Robert Kroetsch essay of that name – as opposed to one of discovery, with its connotations of colonialism, empire, newness, being first. In taking as the starting point the works themselves, curators would make visible what often becomes invisible and make 'the absent reference' present.

Vern Hume, who is curating a large film and video exhibition entitled "From the Heart of the Heart of the Regions" with Sujir took up the issues of community, absence of reference or invisibility (it is important to see ourselves reflected in the mediated world) and the necessity of self-representation (artist as curator is a survival strategy when one is from a small centre). Vern also questioned the notion put forward by Bruce Ferguson of an objectivity the professional curator gains through distance (are there hidden agendas?) and countered this with the interest of an artist/curator.

Richard Kerr described his projects as those of an artist-curator or programmer, as he prefers. In the absence of much professional film curatorship, he felt it necessary to undertake the job. Richard concentrates on getting work out into the smaller centres via their public galleries and/or artist-run galleries.

Throughout the conference, notions of regionalism interacted with the explicit panel topics. The point was well taken by Martine Sauvageau when she said that, "the region is within us." It is our sense of place that keeps human our perspective. The conference itself, with its mixture of people from mixed locals and media, avoided an us/them polarity. It was a good conference, important as much for the connections made, networks established, and for the camaraderie and support, as for the ideas and solutions generated.

The National Gallery needs to hear from you. Right now the film/video officer has a budget for video acquisition *only*. The National Gallery needs to hear from you. Silence = approval.

I went to see **Landscape Suicide**, the latest James Benning film, at the Toronto Festival of Festivals. Yikes! The audience laughed, booed, moaned. It was a shock to realize the distance separating disparate elements of the viewing public and the distance separating the film from much of this audience. The resistance of part of the audience to seeing something of a different nature, pace, form, imagery than mainstream narrative during the first two minutes of the film was so fierce as to prohibit them from seeing / understanding / experiencing anything at all in the unfolding 90 minutes. Oh-Oh.

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