

Student Films

What's wrong with student films? I am aware that this question can only be answered with generalizations, but I feel obligated to make these generalizations with the hope that next year's films just might be improved. Also I make them because I take student filmmakers seriously: They are the future of Canadian film.

Excessive length is a pervasive difficulty with student films. I think that every film in the Festival over ten minutes long would have been better if it had been cut by one third. This is a strong statement, but excessive length is a constant problem. Students seem unable to discard footage. I realize that each foot of film represents thought, effort and money, but students seem to regularly lose sight of their goal. The goal should be to make the best film possible, not to organize all the acceptable footage into a film.

The myth that there is a correlation between using lip sync sound and quality is one which needs to be destroyed. The statistics are clear: of the eight live action films receiving awards, only one was made with lip sync sound equipment. The statistics from last year are similar, but I am not just discussing statistics or winning a Festival award. Student lip sync films often are afflicted with poorly written and delivered dialogue or with dull documentary footage. Why does this happen so often?

Students making scenario films with lip sync sound burden themselves with the problems of writing the dialogue as well as with the almost insolveable problem of finding people who can say the lines. Finding film actors and actresses is one of the major problems of English Canadian film, and I would like to think that students will eventually find the people to solve the problem. However, I have seen little reason to think that students can develop these actors and actresses for their first films. Students making lip sync documentaries face the normal risk of this kind of filmmaking: they may or may not find interesting subjects and their search may require shooting a lot of film. Professional documentary filmmakers budget for this; students can seldom afford the costs of the stock and often end up using lip sync footage which lacks the spark which can be found by a filmmaker searching through rushes from a 20 to 1 shooting ratio.

On the basis of looking at films with and without lip sync sound, I conclude that silent shooting allows students to use their imagination and to think exclusively in terms of images and editing. Lip sync shooting introduces an entire new series of aesthetic elements and seems to overwhelm many student filmmakers. Although I am arguing that students should free themselves from the myth of lip sync sound, I think that it is essential for students to make lip sync films. This is a contradiction, but there is an explanation: I think that students can make better films if they shoot silent. But I also think that students need to be educated in the technique of making lip sync films. A student who wants to work as a filmmaker must have experience with professional lip sync equipment. My suggestion is that students be conscious of the purpose of the films they make: They should make their winner with silent shooting, and they should make their lip sync film with consciousness that it is likely to be educational, but a loser. Students: Prove me wrong next year at the Festival!

The final problem with student films is the most serious one. The goal of many of these filmmakers appears to be to make a film without style; their ideal would be to make a film in which no cuts are noticeable, in which all camera movements are perfectly smooth, in which the soundtrack is absolutely clear. In short their nirvana would be to achieve a National Film Board level of professionalism. I wish their goal was much higher: art, style, the best film anyone ever made, craziness. I would prefer seeing brilliant failures to seeing pedestrian, competent tripe. □

Thoughts After the Festival

by Neal Livingston, director of *Aura-Gone*

Film schools need to be a training ground for all types of cinema. However, what we saw at the festival was an exposé of the way most schools are trying through direct and indirect methods to mould young students into existing styles of filmmaking. In my opinion, students should be shown the possibilities of the medium, then left to work, discover, and develop into filmmakers. It was obvious that few schools are aware or open enough to be real educators instead of trainers. It was also obvious to the audience at large that the lack of interesting and stimulating work was not due just to the students and schools, but to the organization of the festival itself. A pre-selection committee screens the films and limits the material available for viewing by both audience and judges. The organizers of the festival in their statements on awards night seemed to have strong ideas of what should be produced by students. Lorne Marin, upon telling a Famous Players representative he wasn't interested in commercial cinema, was informed that he would receive a letter with his award cheque to help "straighten out his thoughts."

This brings up the matter of product itself. What films submitted should be seen, or win awards? One of my impressions is that the organizers and judges would have liked a highly polished 35mm colour short, slick and with some creative thought and potential, as the grand prize winner. This is basically the formula that a large Canadian film distributor gave out to a hall full of film students at York University a year and a half ago: nice films for an established mass audience for young filmmakers to fit into.

The judges thoughts seemed directed in the above manner instead of toward the students' work itself.

I am not against commercial cinema as such, but why must it be the predominant attitude at a student festival? The funding support that Famous Players gives to the festival appears primarily to be for young Canadian cinema to be shown in competition. It also seems directed to their future needs for more Canadian products. Witness the speech of their representative on awards night, and his enticement of \$2,000 for student filmmakers to work towards for next year.

Within the student community there is a large and growing number of serious working artists who do not see their products as a means of stuffing mounds of money into their pockets. It is my belief that from these people a Canadian Cinema can develop against formidable odds. Not to be overlooked is that they will need serious funding in the near future to fully develop as filmmakers. Private investors should not be turned away through lack of exposure and information as to where film may really be going in this country.

As a participant this year and a possible future participant, it's hard to know where to turn with the problems surrounding the festival. Following the disgust of awards night, there was discussion of a future boycott, and of the possibility of an alternate festival. I hope the mounting calls of protest over the last two years help institute some changes, and that the sham of this year's festival is not repeated.