It’s my party

Twisting and shouting at the International Experimental Film Congress

BY KASS BANNING

Toronto’s International Experimental Film Congress (May 28 to June 4) raised certain questions: which chocs can sing the loudest? And who owns the coveted object—experimental film? From the purist protectionists to the liberatory proselytizers; from the mastodons to the punks; a guide for the congress organizers. The central to aesthetics and politics, and the strong institutional base; is still disseminated in cognizant led by generation of New practitioners as Keith Sanborn and Yvonne Grumpy rumblings preceded the conference itself. Rumours flew of programmers being strong-armed into including certain filmmakers; alternative Toronto screenings were discussed and organized; a New York petition charged the Congress organizers with promoting an “official History” with too narrow a focus. The petition bore the names of such celebrated practitioners as Keith Sanborn and Yvonne Rainer. It, and the various accompanying responses, signalled just how high the stakes actually are for alternative practice at this historical moment.

The last event of this kind, in London in 1979, was more like a festival. (It in turn had been preceded by two earlier London Festivals in 1970 and 1973.) Ten years of opinions and agendas were therefore bottled up and ready for stock-taking. But in 1979 the event had been called the International Avant-Garde Festival. The shift from avant-garde to experimental is perhaps telling. It signals the shift from European conceptions of alternative cinema to a more categorical “experimental” definition held by some in North America, namely the ‘60s generation of New York filmmakers and critics led by P. Adams Sitney and others, a generation that limped on in various forms into the ‘70s. Oddly enough, this characterization still has a strong institutional base; is still disseminated in the States and Canada; and obviously provided a guide for the congress organizers. The appellation avant-garde did manage to creep back into dialogue, but the interpretation or contemporary use-value of the term was up for grabs and was never queried, with the exception of Toronto video artist Vera Frenkel commenting she was surprised that the term avant-garde can still be engaged without a sense of irony.

KEEP YOUR CANON CLEAN

The Congress itself did not live up to the expected hullabaloo, and the various reasons, both immediate and systemic, are obvious. First, the organizers opted for the safe road. The introductory essay for the Congress stresses the word “focus” and clearly states that “in planning the Congress, we have limited ourselves to aesthetic concerns.” This tame focus generally (there were, thankfully, a few exceptions) informed the choice of programmes and panels. The stress on the “official history” (keep your canon clean) contributed to the generational weight of the Congress. In looking over its shoulder towards the past, the Congress diverted attention from the present, away from issues that have begun to accompany any discussion of art or aesthetics in the ‘80s. These include questioning economies of self-definition such as canon formation, the constitution of value, authorship, the effects of institutionalization, the “structuring absences” of “the other”, how any form of culture intersects with the dominant political economy, and so on.

The older generation, with its attendant institutional clout (a powerbase that was much naively) maligned without being entirely understood; by Fred Camper), outnumbered the “emerging generation.” Obviously, established academics and filmmakers could most afford to attend. But there was a sense that the roosters had come home to roost. Indeed, the “emerging generation’s” films were not screened until the last day of the Congress. Second, sheer numbers tipped the balance, and the large constituency of American academics, critics and filmmakers further contributed to the uniform nature of the Congress. At times, the Congress looked like a homing for New York University’s Graduate Film Studies Programme. At least 25 of NYU matriarchs’ former students were said to have been in attendance. (Michelson doubled as the Congress as editor of the august journal October.) A panelist, Deke Duinberger, commented additionally on the NYU incest.

Third, the Congress’s institutional power-base—sponsors were the University of Toronto, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Goethe Institute—perhaps contributed to the wild swing toward preservation rather than experimentation. The week was jam-packed and divided into panels, a critic’s sidebar, screenings (headed Thematic, National and New Horizons) and practical workshops led by established experimental filmmakers. Filmmakers not included within the main curated programmes were invited to screen their works in the late evening at the Rivoli, a Queen St. bar. This division between the curated and non-curated set up a hierarchy which contributed to a rising generational (and definitional) conflict. Judging by the films screened, the younger generation had made their peace with mass culture, while the older generation evidently believed in the autonomy of experimental film.

AIN’T MISBEHAVIN’

This sticking to the “naively”, and the maintenance of purist definitions of film practice could be called reactionary, a secondariness which arises from our particular Canadian context. The anxiety of American influence was not “acted out” in the usual form of veiled hostility, but became inverted into a desire for validation: the Congress played “yes man” to our American cousins. Canadian specificity, historical or otherwise, was thus elided.

The discussion which opened the Congress, “Cinema’s Phoenix: Deaths and Resurrections of the Avant-Garde” panel, chaired by Annette Michelson, was exemplary in this regard. Fred Camper, of NYU, jumped-started the exchange with unsubstantiated proclamations about good and bad films, and the shift from “deep engagement to sterile mannerism” in experimental filmmaking. (The Congress was initiated, in part, to respond to Camper’s Millennium article “The End of Avant-Garde Film.”) German filmmaker Birgit Hein...
A UNIQUE CRUELTY

Canadian panelist Michael Dorland offered an incisive and original paper that sketched out external factors which come to bear on Canadian avant-garde film practice. Such factors contribute to "the unique cruelty" (a Krokerism) of Canadian intellectual and artistic practice. To summarize, these external factors produce a cultural economy that is characterized by "discursive dependency," the production of export commodities, and the crucial role of the state. In light of these conditions, Dorland finally agreed with recently self-exiled filmmaker Al Razzaz that there is no avant-garde in Canada, only a rear guard. All three of Dorland's factors, discursive dependency, an export mentality, and governmentalization, informed the Congress: there remained the sense of a product created for export. An article on the panel in the following day's Globe and Mail was again symptomatic. The report did not mention Dorland and instead focused on the ideological differences of the guests. We all know what claims for internationalism really mean. As Joyce Nelson has recently pointed out in "The Canadian Eye," they mean American interests. Just because alternative cinema lies outside the immediate purview of the dominant, it does not escape its vicissitudes of an oppositional economy. At the Congress, Canadian experimental film was seen as an extension of American experimental film.

In among the ideological fights, Canadian specificity was lost. Brig Heim and American filmmaker Stan Brakhage exemplified this split. Brakhage, with microphone in hand and a manner approximating a mix of Kenny Rogers and filmmaker Stan Brakhage exemplified this split. Brakhage, with microphone in hand and a presence pointed up the many structuring absences. The group's homogeneity simply negated the Congress's claim to internationalism. In spite of the problems, there were very successful film programmes, although the panels were, for the most part, a waste of time. It was a treat to highlight how Canadian filmmakers were not making categorically "experimental" films, but hybrid works which experimented with form without omitting the referent. Perhaps the term "experimental documentary" was more appropriate than simply experimental. She proceeded to lament absences at the Congress, how its constituency did not represent the diversity of Toronto's alternative filmmaking community. Marchessault's closing comments acted, with Dorland's opening remarks, like bookends: together they marked the sole efforts to speak to a Canadian context.

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