

ON (EXPERIMENTAL) FILM

by B. Sternberg

One of the ways experimental films are shown is at a screening to which the filmmaker is invited to introduce/explain/answer questions about/discuss his/her work. The thinking behind this, I presume, is that this personal contact will draw an audience, facilitate understanding and thus make the work more accessible, will personalize the work and, in paying the filmmakers an honorarium which increases the rather meagre returns from rentals, will contribute to their continued output.

Peter Rose, a filmmaker who has travelled 'a fair bit' in the exhibition of his films, is a film-programmer in the Philadelphia area who has written an open letter in *Media Arts* on this subject. He speaks of his own very uneven experiences: "an adventure, a thrill, an inspiration, an insult, or a waste of time (for all concerned)" and asks the following questions to

ascertain what produces the differences:

"Is the purpose of a given presentation merely to satisfy some grant-related requirement? Is the commitment to the presentation pro forma or underlain by a real feeling for the field?"

"What do we as artists expect from such occasions?"

"Is there any connection between the exhibition context and the attitude encountered by the travelling artist?"

"What do programmers have a right to expect from the artist? In what ways should it make a difference that the artists attend the screenings of their own work?"

In answering some of these questions, Rose points out that the experience of presenting one's work to an "attentive, recipient, articulate audience" must be the source of "nourishment" for filmmakers whose work finds few opportunities for constructive feed-

back, and that the only support a filmmaker has in that experience is the sponsoring agency. It makes a difference how they handle the event.

Whether the filmmaker *should* or *shouldn't* speak (the work speaks for itself) is a question many grapple with. Rose considers it the obligation of artists to clarify the work to others, especially in the absence of much "critical metalogue", and to find ways of doing this without feeling compromised.

It is rather a dilemma. Yes, filmmakers know what they're doing and why they've made the choices they have (although often others see or read more in a work or are better at the business of discussing a film than the filmmakers themselves), but I see a danger in our tendency towards verbalizing work. The work exists as a film exactly because it needs to be that. Words can't give the same experience. Discussing work is good and necessary — as long as it is kept as distinct from the work, a parallel not an equivalent ac-

tivity. Perhaps when the talking is being done by the filmmaker and accompanies the viewing, it is harder to keep this difference in mind. Also, it sometimes feels like the question period following a screening is a test of the audience! Peter Rose would probably respond that *not* creating this feeling is part of the responsibility that the sponsor and the filmmaker undertake. It may also be a reflection of how unprepared we are for informed discussion.

At a recent conference of Ontario art teachers, I had the opportunity to present a workshop on film. I was shocked out of any complacency vis à vis the acceptance or awareness of experimental film by the comments of two supposed participants who were explaining to me why they would *not* be attending my session. One said that if she were teaching theatre arts she might have thought it useful to attend; the other said she saw no relevance to her art classes unless this workshop involved drawing on film. Both were speaking from the presumption that live-action filmmaking refers only to dramatic, act-in-front-of-the-camera filmmaking and without a knowledge of other ways of treating and organizing filmed images

and sound that do very much relate to 'art' concerns, traditions and vocabulary (not to mention that film is a 20th century art form). The shock was that they didn't want to find out.

As a postscript I must add that I did have a number of very interested and willing participants in the workshop!

Some new films out and some more in the works: **Just Talk**, by Gary McLaren and **The Encyclopedia of Natural Defects**, by Sharon Cooke are in distribution; **Passing Through** by Phil Hoffman, **Consolidations** by Bruce Elder, **3:48** by Blaine Allan are almost in distribution and, Annette Mangaard just returned from Sao Paulo, Brazil where she showed **The Tyranny of Architecture** as a part of a performance-work-with-film. She reports great interest in this combining of film and live performance which audiences there had not seen before. Annette was in Brazil as one of 10 Canadian artists participating in a cultural exchange.

TORONTO — Canadian animated films will be one of the main topics when York University holds a three-part animated film festival in January.

Animation 87 is the tenth in a series of annual film festivals held at York's Vanier College. This year's festival will be held Jan. 14-16.

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