

## ON (EXPERIMENTAL) FILM

by B. Sternberg

Two film-related events took place recently in Toronto which featured, in each instance, a filmmaker as critic: *Kalling all kanadian kritics*, a performance by Al Razutis, took place at The Funnel on December 19 and had been preceded by his screening the week before of *Splice*, a film which in turn was based on a seminar in which six filmmakers spoke on the topic "Avant-Garde Film Practice: 6 Views;" the second event was a paper *The Death of a Canadian Art Movement* presented in lecture format by Bruce Elder, at Innis College Film Society on January 29. As little as these two people and presentations had in common (I'm not even sure how they will take to being mentioned in the same paragraph!) it is interesting to note and wonder upon the significance of this move by filmmakers to 'take on' both the critics and academics who propound and give credence to certain film theories and critical positions. Is it a case, as was suggested by Bart Testa, film teacher at University of Toronto, of filmmakers whose aesthetic is without a critical milieu: that faced with films which have a density of their own and theories laid upon these which are inadequate to the films, filmmakers have turned critic?

Since I had not attended *Kalling All KK*, I decided to call some of the Kalled for their opinions, observations, and more particularly to ask what issues/questions Razutis' performance had raised for them. The position/condition Al was analyzing is Postmodernism, and this by way of employing some of its methodologies; namely, parody and appropriation, or, as Al refers to it, plagiarism. For Bart Testa, the citings became less of an attack on the various theories quoted, (apparatus theory, feminist film theory, Bruce Elder's histories of philosophy found in *Illuminated Texts*), than a 'jolt to the memory, a game of recognition of sources, and, in some cases, a reminder of how interesting the source material is. This was clearly not Razutis's intention.'

Bill Wees, of McGill University, questions whether a multi-media performance can function as a viable form of critical debate. An art event, Bill muses aloud, is by its very nature open to interpretation, is multi-valent, which is unlike the desired exactitude of critical discursive thinking. *Kalling* introduced critical issues

which, for Bill, were then overshadowed by the 'show'. Dot Tuer, freelance art critic and reviewer, notes that Al ascribes a lot of authority to critics. She asks why Al would want to locate himself in the avant-garde and at the same time decry critical canon? If one is avant-garde why bother about critics and institutionalized curating at all? And she asks, then, what is the authority of the critic? What is the critic for? Is the authority of criticism more properly a question of the authority of language itself - intimidation by rhetoric? Does criticism arise from work, from a theory, or from the intersection of a theory and work? Is the image (films) stronger than what surrounds it (critical canons)? Dot also questioned what she supposed to be a desire for dialogue that the performance was to facilitate: where are the openings for dialogue - and is it the function of experimental film to create dialogue?

Al Razutis tells me that he intends to keep developing this area of *live* film performance that will employ elements of audience involvement. He wants to directly interact with audiences *while* the film is being made (an element of *Kalling* was to have been the filming, processing on stage and screening of the same foot-

age during the performance) as opposed to spending years to make a film and then have it screened and criticized in the filmmakers absence. Is this an attempt to control not only the making but the reception of film, and/or is it an attempt to stress each aspect as process?

Bruce Elder prefaced his paper, *The Death of a Canadian Art Movement*, by expressing his regrets with his past role as advocate for Canadian avant-garde cinema. He reflected that in celebrating work done here in the past, he had papered over defects, and stated that now this tactic was to change.

The theme of the paper was "Film Theory's Assault on Avant-garde Cinema", and the film theory Bruce challenged is the particular Feminist film theory, or 'Ecriture feminine' (feminine writing.) Bruce maintained that he is not against theory, *per se*, but opposes academic film theory institutionalized in film journals, university film departments and curatorial policy. The wide-spread critical attention this theory enjoys and its legitimization by academic institutions has caused, Bruce alleged, the death of Canadian avant-garde film.

Support for this accusation proceeded along two lines. Part a), was an attack against the theory itself. Bruce also made a point that I particularly noticed as contrary to a position often reserved for experimental film in explaining not only its history, but it's *raison d'être*; namely that of being an

alternative to or 'anti' the dominant cinema. Bruce argued that being 'anti conventions' is not the point, (in fact, conventions are all right as long as they are true to the medium and not so overdone as to be hackneyed); that valuing alternative cinema as anti-dominant, values only its social aspects. Films are then discussed only in terms of how they differ from dominant cinema, and not for their own aesthetic value. In fact Elder attributes the drying up of an aesthetic interest in cinema, and in avant-garde in particular, to this tendency.

Bruce accused the theory of being bourgeois, counter-revolutionary and, in as much as it advocates a filmmaking that is valued solely for its social utility, a return to a Calvinist world-view in which the value of the liberating potential of art is denied. Elder also questioned the validity of Lacan and concomitantly called for a re-reading of Freud and the tragic state of duality and negation at the core of language and the human condition.

In part b), Bruce enunciated what he considers the 'baleful' effects of institutional support as evidenced in Canada by specific appointments to university positions, selection of Ontario Arts Council film juries, access to publication and the role of academia in legitimizing this theory unreservedly.

The reading of the paper was followed by a screening of Anna Gronau's film *Regards*, which was then followed by a question and answer period.

Although this structure had been announced at the outset of the evening, and so the possibility for dialogue was guaranteed, nonetheless many of those implicated by the paper or qualified to question its tenets were either not in attendance or left part way through the presentation. I wonder about this; wonder about the mode of presentation, about the concerns of the paper itself and whether these suited the targeted audience of a university film society. Perhaps such a paper needed to be presented at a conference like the one held in London at the ICA on Postmodernism, or at the Canadian Film Studies Association Conference; that is, before people learned in the same field and with a designated responder appointed to 'answer the paper' before general discussion ensues. I say this, if, in fact, a dialogue was the aim. If the righting of past sins of omission by the tactic of full, public disclosure of perceived errors and conspiracies to gain and maintain power was intended to draw attention to the severity of the problem before rigor mortis sets in - was it effective? Is there another way? Is it more honest to say it out loud than to 'politic' behind closed doors? What does one do when the people behind the closed doors are seen as part of the problem? Are subjective characterizations warranted? Is naming names and describing specific events a necessary part of the game plan? And what's next?

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