

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 chorus 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; from the doomsayers to the utopians, there remained one constant: contestation. Congress participants replayed debates (tiresomely, for some) that have plagued the discussion of art in this century. The seeming lack of connectedness to or knowledge of wider historical debates central to aesthetics and politics, and the over-reliance on American "expertise" and film institutions, occasioned a rather xenophobic and uniform Congress. Some players were cognizant of, or interested in, recent (post-'68) contributions that could expand or disrupt the insular nature of the dialogue. Most were not.

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 homecoming for New York University's Graduate Film Studies Programme. At least 25 of NYU matriarch Annette Michelson's former students were said to have been in attendance. (Michelson doubled at the Congress as editor of the august journal *October*.) A panelist, Deke Dusinberre, 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 "tried and true", 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, ex of NYU, jump-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



Scene from *The Sound (A Treatise in Harmony)* by Brazil's Arthur Omar.

Kass Banning is a Toronto freelance writer, critic and film lecturer.

consistently took up the voice of opposition throughout the week. She championed the "promising films now", with their liberatory potential evident in various contemporary German film practices ranging from new narrative to neo fluxus to neo Dada. Panelist Deke Dusinberre (also ex-NYU) provided a psychoanalytic reading of experimental filmmaking and concluded that it was middleaged. (Perhaps he was projecting a little bit?)

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 constraints, Dorland finally agreed with recently self-exiled filmmaker Al Razutis 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 focussed 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 Colonized 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. Birgit Hein and American filmmaker Stan Brakhage exemplified this split. Brakhage, with microphone in hand and a manner approximating a mix of Kenny Rogers and a fundamentalist preacher, blessed the Congress with his passionate entreaties. They ranged from unprovoked personal testimony – "men have problems too" and "I'm a man who chews tobacco" – to the most questionable pronouncement this writer has heard in a long time – "that causes unhinge people, causes are dangerous to human behaviour and death to the arts" and "why should film be burdened with the political?" Hein consistently countered Brakhage's *l'art pour l'art* orthodoxy (a romantic orthodoxy he claims he doesn't own) by claiming art practices should deal with the immediate and the social, reject high art and turn to more populist forms appropriated from mass media, in the hopes of producing new

audiences. This dichotomy has an old history, a debate between autonomy and commitment which can be traced back to the Frankfurt school and beyond.

SPEAKING TO A CANADIAN CONTEXT

Janine Marchessault, while introducing Canada's "Emerging Generation" screening (held on the last day of the Congress) commented on how the institutionalization of the Canadian avant-garde, with the attendant relegation to the art gallery, approximated what Theodor Adorno calls "tolerated negativity." State funding simultaneously offers strong incentives for younger people to make feature films. Marchessault outlined how young 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.

After Canada's "Emerging Generation" screening, Congress panelist and programmer ("Recent Films From Latin America") João Luiz Viera noted similar hybrid tendencies in Brazil. Brazilian films, he said, merged a concern for the referent with formal innovation. His programme of engaging hybrid films by Brazilian Artur Omar proved the point. Luiz Viera's well-considered dismissal of "film as film", with an emphasis on intertext that would lead to "an aesthetics of garbage," proved to be one of the most original moments at the Congress.

It is unfortunate that more individuals from this sector were not present. Luiz Viera's 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 see prints restored to their original glory instead of those faded, scratched films one screens for one's class every year. The event is important for the continuation of filmic practices, for the formation of new traditions. We need more congresses, especially when alternative practices are shrinking. In spite of its limitations, the event was interesting and worthwhile. The round-up session made commitments to make the next congress more international. The uproar, the opposition between late '60s and early '70s practice and '80s practice just points to the fact that there is room for competing and overlapping histories. ●

On (Experimental) Film

MIKE HOOLBOOM

A s a genre of filmwork, avant-garde film has come to be distinguished by the foregrounding of cinematic means – showing in its most incandescent moments that the aims and methods of expression are bound together. At the recently convened Experimental Film Congress, a gaggle of scholars, filmmakers, curators and the simply curious gathered "to take the pulse of the avant-garde." Framed by retrospective screenings of dead fathers Jack Chambers and Hollis Frampton, the Congress quickly turned to a celebration of film formalism – an extended bout of exhibitions demonstrating film's fascination with its own materials.

That anyone outside of the white middleclass hegemony of traditional art practice should have been excluded from such an enterprise should come as little surprise. What is noteworthy is the way in which the Congress managed to reify a historical practice which has already given way in the face of community pressures in many countries, most notably with Black collectives in England and feminist practice in the United States. But if the Congress remained distant from the pluralities of the international avant-garde, it stayed true to the markings of the home turf, of a Canadian avant-garde film scene that has come to be dominated, for better and worse, by Toronto.

Toronto's "visible" minorities are all but invisible in motion picture practice – and to this extent the experience of the avant-gardists manages to mirror the rest. But the methods of exclusion of each film practice are as particular as their histories.

Avant-garde film has proceeded through the twentieth century by fits and starts – generally attached to a procession of movements (Constructivism, Cubism, Dadaism) that have included the cinema as part of a transgressive politic. The signal shift in what is less (for avant-garde film) a history but a collection of moments comes in the aftermath of the Second World War.

American painters raised an art heralded the world over as "abstract expressionism". Positing an aesthetics of silence, fuliginously flat testaments to a resolutely individual conscience, this iconic art was championed by critics making pains to separate it from kitsch and the wiles of popular culture.

In the 1950s the American film artists who took up cameras in the wake of abstract expressionism – Curtis Harrington, Stan Brakhage, Gregory Markopolous – engineered a turn towards an unprecedented continuity of activity. Forging an irreducible link between "art" and film, they helped foster a number of institutional caretakers that would ensure an ongoing, committed body of avant-garde filmmakers for the first time in its history. Film co-ops in Toronto, Paris, London, Melbourne and Tokyo followed the way of their New York counterpart, universities turned to the study of avant-garde film and hired avant-garde filmmakers to teach them, art galleries and "alternative" screening venues arose, catalogs, magazines, books and monographs were issued, government grants were secured...

"Can the obligations of Black consciousness and artistic freedom be complementary rather than mutually exclusive? Can there be a revolutionary core to what Richard Wright once called the aesthetics of 'personalism' and the matching political forms of radical individualisation which have characterized Western modernisms – their academicism, formal preoccupations, and imaginative proximity to social revolution?" (Paul Gilroy, "Cruciality and The Frog's Perspective", *Art and Text* 32)

All work arrives in a certain time and a certain place – and it is difficult not to make an easy join between the modernist tenets which spawned and which continue to inform today's avant-garde film practice and the racist, sexist, homophobic institutions which lend support to the modernist project in the arts. If the case can be made more clearly in the United States – where a tradition of private sector patronage has provided pensions for the widows of Jackson Pollack and Mark Rothko – the Canadian example, covered over in a veneer of government bureaucracy, is scarcely innocent in this regard.

If the traditional agon of avant-garde film has remained consistent since the fifties, imagining itself as the Other of the American media machine, the oppositional fount has dried in the wake of an increasing institutionalization which has raised other questions. How is one to account for the fact that in Canada, the number of male avant-garde filmmakers outnumber their female counterparts 3:1? Why is it that avant-garde film has made no discernible impact on the Asian communities, Black communities, Hispanic communities... Where are their stories, their images, their filmmakers?

The silent aesthetics of modernity, too content to live in a world Kant imagined as being separate and distinct from the world we live in, have found a champion in a man whose isolationist and reactionary politics have dominated the Canadian avant-garde film scene for the past decade – Bruce Elder. How then is one to negotiate the turn towards answering the undeniable questions left in the wake of the recent Experimental Film Congress? All those who have cherished and upheld The Tradition have already spoken. But where does that leave the rest in the underground – simply in the dark?