

Whose party?

Kass Banning's review of the Toronto International Film Congress ("It's My Party" September 1989) identified the critical polemics quite correctly. She does accept the "generational" difference that the Congress itself promoted through curatorial labels, invitations and decisions, and I would point to a history of politicized avant-garde film practice which was by and large excluded, along with contemporary tendencies in alternative film practice. However, the main point that I would like to take issue with is Banning's designation of New York University graduates as some kind of clique that is (1) American and "uniform," and (2) representative of the Congress's bias towards aesthetics at the expense of politics.

As a graduate of the Cinema Studies Program at NYU, as a Canadian and a participant in the congress, I object to being labelled "a student of Annette Michelson's," although I did take several classes with her. Furthermore, I have very little in common with Fred Camper, whose proclamation of "The End of Avant-Garde Film" initiated the Congress. From the many NYU graduates, current students and ex-faculty in attendance, of several generations, paper topics varied from analyses of Dovshenko, Frampton, Mekas, Akerman and experimental ethnography, to Derrida and Kaja Silverman; and NYU alumni curators were responsible for programs of Canadian film, American "buried treasures" and Brazilian film. No doubt there are other areas covered by NYU grads if, as Banning claims, there were 25 of us.

The only thing we all have in common is an interest in alternative film practice, and indeed, as Banning notes, the NYU school was responsible for institutionalizing the study of avant-garde film in the 1960s. Over 20 years the school has changed, as has the entire field of cinema studies. In fact the study of experimental film is an endangered species in the American academy. As the field expands more and more to include television and cultural studies, the avant-garde is being rapidly relegated to the dust-bin of modernism. This shift is reflected in such things as course offerings, conference panels, hiring practices and publishing decisions. And it is not only the cinema of Snow and Brakhage that is being squeezed out by soap operas and Chinese film but it is also the cinema of Yvonne Rainer, Peggy Awesh and Arthur Omar. Even within NYU, Annette Michelson is now the only faculty member who teaches experimental film, and she does so on a very irregular basis. The Congress was in some respects a "homecoming" for many NYU grads, at least five of whom were Canadian or Brazilian, and a rare opportunity to discuss the avant-garde, which has very few critical forums these days.

It should be recognized that there are very few scholars of alternative film practice around, and while that may sound like a contradiction in terms, any experimental filmmaker knows the importance of criticism to keep this cultural practice alive. And if many of these scholars are graduates of NYU, it is simply because there are not many other graduate programs anywhere that have been as committed to alternative film practice. Unfortunately, those NYU students who did participate in the Toronto Congress now represent a very small fraction of the contemporary department, and of the current field of film studies.

I think that Banning would agree with me that soap operas and Chinese film are worthy objects of study, but that popular culture studies should not replace the study of more marginal film practices. Along with the critical discourses of feminism, post-structuralism and postmodernism, the expansion of the field has suggested new critical approaches to alternative film and video practice. Unfortunately, in this Congress such critical experimentalism was relegated to a badly organized early morning "Critics' Sidebar", and in this sense it was very much a missed opportunity.

Catherine Russell
Queen's University
Kingston, Ont.

Just get the name right

We very much appreciated your article about our company, Master's Workshop, in the September, 1989 issue of *Cinema Canada* ("Master's leads the way with computerized audio-post").

There are two minor typos and one major error, however, in the article which we would like to correct. The two minor are in the spelling of the names of Doug McKenzie and Andrew Staffer, not Mackenzie and Shaffer. The major is that Soundmaster International Inc. is not wholly owned by Master's Workshop. In fact, when Selkirk Communications Limited purchased Master's Workshop Corporation in July, 1988, Soundmaster International Inc. was not included in the transaction, and now is an entirely separate corporate entity. Messrs. McKenzie, Predovich and Staffer were the founders of Soundmaster International, and remain principals of the company.

We hope this clears up any confusion, thank you for your attention to this matter.
(Mrs.) Carol Predovich,
Office Manager, Master's Workshop
Toronto

No film without frame

I am writing to you in response to the article published in the July / August 1989 issue of *Cinema Canada* entitled "3-D: Exploring the 3rd Dimension," and in particular, with the authors' notion that "the Imax film format comes closer to our mind movie by removing the artificial frame around the image."

I have been studying film for the past two years, and in my opinion, the implications for this excerpt are ludicrous, if not anti-aesthetic. Forget the pompous notion of the "mind movie" for a minute, and look rather to the idea that a movie is a movie is a movie, with, yes, an artificial frame around the image. Film is a visual art form constituted by a 4-sided horizontal rectangular frame which designates the central aesthetic element of composition. In film, the "mise-en-cadre" is the essence of camera composition; it is the primary means to make explicit that which is visually essential to the thematic whole of the shot. What is not integral is by necessary means cut off from the boundaries of the frame—not for lack of empathy but rather for a need to focus.

The Imax film format is impressive; I saw it in Vancouver during Expo '86, and my first reaction was, "wow!" It was overwhelming. But when I saw Imax, I did not see any point to it; it was all style and no substance. I ended up looking in all directions, in an attempt to capture the whole image, without success, because there was no way to see the entire picture all at once due to the inability to perceive the frame. Technically, the frame is there, but one cannot actively see it; therefore what we are watching is no longer a cinema with an artificial frame, and without that, there is no cinema.

Richard Fontaine
Lac Beauport, Que.

An untapped resource

We are writing this letter in our capacity as the jury for the first NFB Short Film Award in the Toronto Festival of Festivals. We wish to draw attention to the lack of Canadian venues for short independent films.

The short films in this year's Festival ranged from straight drama through documentary to experimental. The element that was almost entirely consistent through this diverse program was the degree of care taken in conception and craft. As a result, the calibre of most of these films was extremely high by any standards. They were as painstakingly, skillfully and successfully wrought as this year's features and perhaps, in some cases, more so.

Those responsible for broadcast programming in Canada must recognize the untapped resource of quality Canadian content which these films represent. Certainly the Canadian public would be more appreciative of a program comprised of three high-quality films of varying lengths than of one mediocre feature or other program of conventional length. This kind of imaginative and flexible approach to programming would not only increase the Canadian content but also improve the overall calibre of broadcast programming. In addition, broadcasters would be playing a vital role in developing Canadian talent.

Rena Krawagna, Judy Gouin, Lori Spring
Toronto



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