

Some Organizations, Writing, and the Future of the Art of Cinema

by Robert Haller (2002)

In 1982 Bob Sitton, of the Film Study Center of the Portland Art Museum, and I visited Washington to be public witnesses before the House subcommittee on appropriations. We were there to speak about the prospective funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. Sitton and I both felt strongly about the importance of the funding of what were then call "major media arts centers" or "regional media arts centers" and that is what Sitton focused on in his testimony (only he actually spoke before the subcommittee).

Media Arts Centers were a priority for the Endowment in the mid-1970s, the time when Sitton was building his Film Study Center and I was working at Pittsburgh Film-Makers (we were both executive directors of the organizations). The Endowment's concept was that a national network of these Centers could and should be encouraged to develop. These Centers would embrace most of these specific functions:

1. exhibition of film and video to the public
2. providing film and video-making tools to the public
3. encouraging/publishing critical/descriptive writing about film and video art
4. distributing film and video to the public
5. preserving film and video for current and future audiences
6. stimulating local and regional funding for the media arts
7. encouraging the study of film and video - - by lectures, classes whether formal or informal, and the production of interpretive program notes.

By 1978 there were 18 such centers across the country, most growing into the media arts center model (though functions four and five were widely deemed too specialized to be embraced by most centers). Many hosted artists on tour, developing exchanges of ideas as films and video works. They stimulated their audiences and enlarged them.

At Pittsburgh Film-Makers I saw how these different functions had a synergistic effect, amplifying the energy of each, and stimulating the organization to grow, on its own, with local resources as well as state and federal funding. Sitton had the same experience in Seattle. One of the Endowment's hopes was that this national network of such Centers could build a social consensus about the importance of motion pictures - - the same kind of consensus that supports the network of fine arts museums.

Pittsburgh Film-Makers and very few other such centers exist today. Ironically, at the very moment Sitton and I were visiting Washington, the tide had turned against the growth of these centers. Several overreached themselves and were soon disbanded (in Alabama, in Buffalo, in Minneapolis). Others were too

dependent on federal and state funding, and foundered when government cutbacks erased 60 to 80% of their operating monies. but most of these centers turned inward, focusing on equipment access, and chose to ignore the outreach to the public through visiting artists and tours film programs.

What is distinctive and attractive about independent and avant garde film is that they are not just entertainment. They reward interpretations, they generate enduring interest if they are not based on styles and issues of the moment. Academic fashions in particular, which have dominated so much of the printed literature, are boring and sterile. So too are journalistic approaches to writing about film.

Years ago Stan Brakhage said that what we needed was not more film-makers, but more film commentators. Thoughtful writing about film is painfully rare and hard to find, yet it is crucial to attracting new spectators, to engaging audiences with the growth experience of cinema as an art, and not just "the movies." A film that is seen once and does not tempt you back for a second viewing is most likely shallow and not worth looking at even the first time.

But a film that calls you back again and again- - like Antonioni's *L'Aventura*, and Stan Brakhage's(1) *Mothlight** or *Creation* or any of the 300 others he has made, and Bruce Elder's four hour *The Book of All the Dead*, and Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, and Bill Morrison's(2) *The Film of Her* and Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*, and Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, and Steven Spielberg's *AI*, or Bill Miles' *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, and any of the forty early gems of D.W. Griffith made in his miracle years of 1909 to 1912, or Louis Feuillade's *Judex* and *Les Vampires*, and Ken Burns' *Not for Ourselves Alone* - - these films all cry out for an engagement that explains why and how an audience can be transfixed both emotionally and intellectually.

Writing well about film is not easy - - even the vocabulary still needs to be invented in many cases. But it is a challenge that will reward the writers and the film-makers, and our culture which is so shaped and dominated by moving visual imagery. We need more writers like Fred Camper (Chicago) and Scott McDonald (New York) and catalogs like the splendid Bruce Conner recently produced by the Walker Art Center (in Portland, OR).

If we could get back to lucid, articulate, accessible writing about films that are screened in our showcases, if we could appeal to the currently sleepy curiosity of the public that once upon a time thirty yeas ago threw its time and ticket purchases into supporting what used to be called experimental film and personal film, and not narrowly focused films that value subject matter more highly than aesthetics, then we might be able to build a new constituency.

A generation ago that constituency gathered in media arts centers, around traveling film-makers and innovative forms of cinema - - whether film or video - -

which spoke to the crucial issues of our times as well as the crucial issues before our times. Aesthetic achievement does not wither, fads and current politics do.

(1) Brakhage's new handmade film Seasons is in the Black Maria tour.

(2) Morrison's new film Decasia is also in the Black Maria tour .

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