

What Does It Mean to be a Filmmaker in the Late 1980s?

By P. Adams Sitney (1988)

What does it mean to be a film-maker in the late 80s? There is of course the immense industry which makes film for profit, and there are droves of young people seeking a place in that industry; some of them even try to break in by making films on their own. The industry and its problems, the aspirants and theirs, are not our concern now. For at least sixty years there have been men and women who believed cinema was a great art -- perhaps the greatest in our time -- whose possibilities have barely been explored. They have faced preposterous fiscal and technical obstacles. Very few people care to see the films they made. The predicament of the film-maker with a vision of the medium as a high art is so complex and poignant today that we have to understand at least forty years of a continuous tradition to grasp the issues such an artist faces.

At least forty years was not an exaggeration. J. Hoberman in the *Village Voice* and Fred Camper in *Millennium Film Journal* have recently bemoaned the decline of the American avant-garde cinema. Without denying the crisis they describe, I believe they err by focusing on the last twenty-five years. Significantly, both critics are frankly autobiographical in their complaints. What pains them is a falling off of energy and excitement since they discovered the independent cinema in the Sixties. Although they do not share a perspective, each is right in his own way; Hoberman remembering a counter-cultural cinema from a period of national political unrest, Camper regretting the termination of a sustained series of masterpieces and his ecstatic response to them. Lost illusions, sentimental education: this was the material of major fiction, a century ago. A few years older, I am close enough in age to these two friends to empathize with their collapsing of personal and aesthetic histories.

If we look back twenty years to 1967, we could take the famous International Experimental Film Competition in Belgium as a focus for discussion. It was the fourth of an apparently terminated series: 1947, 1958, 1963, 1967, 1973. That year Michael Snow's *Wavelength* was both the grand prize winner and the critical success of the festival. But at the same time it was also the occasion of a political demonstration, the first of many during film festivals in the following year, contesting the relevance of showing such films. Far from coinciding with political protest, the avant-garde cinema was a vulnerable object of attack.

The same festival created a special prize for Gregory Markopoulos' *The Illiac Passion*. (His *Twice a Man* had won a major prize in 1963.) In essence, it was being moved out of competition because it was such an ambitious film, the work of a "master," who had already gained some limited recognition in this area. The absurdity of prizes is of course no measure for film history. However, it is worth noting that twenty years ago the very idea of the masterpiece was contested. The founding of Anthology Film Archives the following year precipitated an eruption of

criticism because it attempted to select a canon of avant-garde films so limited that it could be exhibited in monthly cycles of approximately eighty screenings. Arguably the greatest influence that museum had was in the institutions and polemics spurred on in opposition to it for more than a decade.

Forty years ago marked a peak for the incipient independent Cinema in America. Maya Deren, in New York, had made her most complex film, *Ritual in Transfigured Time*. In Los Angeles, teenage filmmakers, Kenneth Anger and Gregory Markopoulos attracted attention; Markopoulos initiated his first trilogy; Anger had finished *Fireworks*, a film so original and daring in its representation of a sado-masochistic homosexual fantasy that the few film societies that showed it did so with great fear of the legal consequences. Sidney Peterson and James Broughton had collaborated on a film, *The Potted Psalm*, which would initiate their two very different careers as independent filmmakers.

Clearly some of the film-makers of the Forties had an advantage over those who began making films in the last twenty years: tradition weighed lightly on them. Some were able to make astounding contributions at remarkably young ages. Furthermore, many of the feeble works from the past are forgotten; the nostalgic critics did not have to endure them or have projected their youthful enthusiasm for the medium into their memories of viewing untried films. Undoubtedly they have forgotten the anxieties with which such film-makers have always approached the present and future of their art.

That "golden age" of film-making turned out to be very short lived. By 1950 the community of filmmakers, drawn to each other in the first place because they were so very few, was dispersed. Many years passed before any of those central figures would complete another film. Even in the late Forties, after one screening in New York and one in San Francisco most independent film-makers didn't know where they could show their work. Maya Deren tried to invent a market in the universities by lecturing with her films. She was fortunate in getting a Guggenheim Fellowship, but that was because her project was to make an anthropological film in Haiti. Peterson landed a teaching job in an art school, not because they wanted film in the curriculum, but because the administration thought his mode of teaching would excite the students -- returning Vets -- about modern art. Twenty years later a few film-makers could survive by grants, lecturing, and teaching.

In 1947 the production of masterpieces or the politics of a counter-culture were not issues. But perhaps if we were to look back still another twenty years to 1927, the picture of the avant-garde film-maker will be even more clearly outlined. At that time the two centers of noncommercial film-making were in France and the Soviet Union. In France 1927 turns out to be a curiously dormant year; the first flurry of film-making activity that produced Leger's *Le Ballet Mecanique*, Clair and Picabia's *Entr'acte*, Kirsanoff's *Menilmontant*, Dulac's *Smiling Madame Beudet*, and Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* seemed to have

ended. The major surrealist cinema of Man Ray, Dali and Bunuel, and the symbolist effort of Cocteau were to come in the next few years, largely through the patronage of a single art collector. For the most part this was not an avant-garde of film-makers but of visual artists who were interested in exploring dimensions of the cinema ignored by professional film-makers.

The Soviet situation was different: Eisenstein, Vertov, Dovzhenko, Pudovkin among several others, were indeed fully committed to cinema. But they had to struggle desperately, eventually in a terror that threatened their lives, to win sponsorship for their projects, and then again to execute them as they wanted. Only the international prestige of the most advanced Soviet films made possible the ten years of production of major cinema.

What if we had looked at the intervening ten years, 1937, 1957, 1977? The prognosis would have been dismal. In 1937 it looked as if independent cinema was dead; the immense cost of making films with sound and the domination of realism were the obvious reasons for seeing the avant-garde as a historical phenomenon of the Twenties. No one could have predicted the need for lightweight 16mm film technology that was part of the war economy and which the Americans of the Forties were the first to adapt to artistic ends. Yet in 1957 the revival of the previous decade seemed played out. Stan Brakhage, the paradigmatic case of the prolific avant-garde film-maker began his unceasing production of films in the early 1950s, but he is virtually a solitary figure. Furthermore, when he abandoned the style he inherited from Deren, Anger, Broughton, and Peterson around 1957, and began to forge his uniquely powerful cinema (albeit with debts to Marie Menken) the very few places where such films could be shown refused his new work. Yet seven years later Brakhage, along with Mekas, Warhol, as well as Anger and Markopoulos whose careers revived, would receive more media recognition than such film-makers had attracted before or would since.

In 1977 this cinema had found a temporary home within the academic world although at the time it did not seem temporary. Film-makers were becoming tenured professors of their art; a number of bulky journals published critical debates about the taxonomy and interpretation of such films, dissertations were written.

The fluctuating fate of the avant-garde cinema naturally entailed the birth of a number of cruel illusions which did not die easily. Many important artists and eager ephebes still cling to them. None were as invidious as that of the symbiosis of serious art and socialist revolution. But five bankrupt fantasies continue to torment our best native film-makers.

These illusions are (1) that there is an undiscovered audience for serious film art apart from aspirant film-makers themselves, (2) that a commercially viable cinema of ambitious low budget feature films could survive in the United States, a

middle ground cinema between Hollywood and the avant-garde; (3) that private and state support in the form of grants to film-makers and institutions including public television could support serious film-making; (4) that the academic world will support film art and educate an audience; and (5) that filmmakers' initiative, through distribution cooperatives and print sales, could establish an alternative mode of funding.

Of course such illusions have been productive in unpredictable ways. For instance, the Filmmakers Cooperative in New York was conceived as a distribution outlet for the "middle ground" cinema, to place 35mm feature films in art film theaters. That idea changed before the cooperative began to function because so many avant-garde film-makers responded to the idea of a film-maker run distribution center. Although it and its San Francisco counterpart, Canyon Cinema Cooperative have always required private and institutional support to survive, publish catalogues, etc., they have been important symbols for the film-making community especially because they are open to all who want to join them without any principle of selection. One prolific film-maker, who strongly supports the cooperatives, told me he made about five hundred dollars from twenty years of cooperative distribution; another with more critical success says she made two thousand dollars in a decade. There are some who may gross a few hundred dollars every year. But in each case the rental income runs considerably below the fees for personal appearances which are negotiated without the agency of the cooperatives.

Today the technology and economics of video present new hopes and threats to avant-garde film-makers. Many abhor the diminished scale, the foreshortened depth, the rounded edges of the tube, the electronic pointillism, the gaudy palette, and the sickly light that comes with the horror of making art for a piece of furniture. Some see it as merely a variation on the art of the moving image, as easily bridged as the transition from silence to sound or black and white to color. The economics of tape sales and rentals contributes yet another illusion to those who want to believe that their film-making will not ruin them financially. Perhaps the most important influence of video is its threat to engulf film, to make it obsolete. The avant-garde film-maker of today works in a vanishing medium. The spectre of cinema as the -- exclusively -- twentieth century art is a powerful admonition to appreciate and make the most of a mode of experience that seems destined to disappear. A more optimistic rhetoric might restate this situation as an acknowledgement of a cinema yet to come that would celebrate the powers of the chemical image, depth of focus, the handling of a strip the artist can look at and through, and a wealthy historical tradition at least as robustly as the late Twenties exulted in the forms of the silent cinema once the uncertain future of sound was inescapable. With even more visionary optimism one might quote Peter Kubelka's prediction that if the technology of film is forgotten it will have to be reinvented, just as modernity has found ways to hear the "lost" music of the renaissance.

The avant-garde cinema embodies the contradictions of Twentieth Century culture. Addicted to a rhetoric of futurity, it succeeds in finding continuity with the aesthetic aspirations of both the recent and remote past; operating at the fringe of a medium where vast fortunes are made, fame unequalled, and audiences enormous, it has always been economically unsound, obscure, and unwanted, even if it fulfilled the hopes of visionary artists of the last century for the cultivation of the eye for a world that moves (from a pole that can barely be called shimmering to one of convulsion) and of a synchronism of eye and ear.

When I asked what it meant to be a film-maker in the late 1980s in the beginning paragraph of this speculation and when I used the word 'predicament,' I did not mean to suggest that today's film-makers lack the illusions and fantasies of those twenty, forty, or even sixty years earlier, nor that they are actively concerned with the twilight of their art form. Instead, much of the debate within avant-garde film circles sounds like displacement, even an evasion, of failed fantasies and foreclosed options. Yet what gives this moment its peculiar excitement is the prospect of a final ripening, and inevitably, clearer indications of domains to be explored.