

Acquired Tastes

By Scott McDonald (1989)

"At no time have I been outraged at Hollywood. What I have always insisted on, however, is that it's wrong for the commercial cinema (Hollywood) to impose its cinema on the people as the only cinema; that Hollywood is only a small part of Cinema; that Cinema is huge, vast, undefined. I have always been using a very simple example to illustrate my position regarding Hollywood. I see Hollywood as one kind of animal -- say, a cow; and I see the Independent/Avant-garde Filmmaker as another kind of animal -- say, a sheep. A cow is good for one thing, the sheep is good for another. They lead parallel lives, they do not live in 'outrage' against or with each other; and they graze in the same pasture."

-Jonas Mekas, *Downtown Review*, Vol. 3 (Fall/Winter/Spring 1981-82), p. 48

All my most important film experiences have involved similar mixtures of emotion and have affected my general thinking about film in similar ways. As far as I can determine, my first powerful experience at a big downtown theater happened in 1952, when I went alone to see *King Kong* (I was 10 years old). I suppose I must have known that the film was about a giant ape -- I can't imagine why else I'd have gone -- and that it would involve some suspense; I'm clear that I sat a third of the way down the right center aisle, so I'd have an excellent chance of getting out of the theater in a hurry if things got too rough. And, I remember that whatever I did know about the movie was forgotten by the time the freighter came in sight of the island: watching Ann Darrow practice her screaming had put me in a heightened state of sensual awareness. At first I had fought off my growing fear by assuming that Carl Denham was probably just a blowhard; later I tried to convince myself that the tribe of superstitious savages was the real danger: probably there was nothing on the other side of the wall. By the time Ann Darrow hung in the stocks, I was balanced half on my seat, half on my toes, and in the silence after the gong stopped, my chest was pounding. When I heard the first thud and the first ripping of wood, I rose out of my seat and noticed as I did so, that no one else in the semi-crowded theater seemed to realize the danger. In a flash, I thought, "I should warn them," but I was aware of my ignorance, and decided to stay just until a rush to the exits began. When I walked out of the theater at the end of the film, I'd overcome my terror and felt exalted. My whole attitude toward movies had changed, I knew they could provide experiences as powerful as any other in conventional life, and that there was nothing to be afraid of -- except missing the excitement by confining myself to the films that were supposed to be safe for kids.

The same mixture of fear, excitement, and pleasure, the same implicit expansion in the world's exciting possibilities, has happened to me several times since 1952, always in a slightly different manner, and always producing new and different kinds of awareness about film. Somewhere during 1965 I took the

opportunity of seeing *8 1/2* for the second time, approximately a year after I had made a nuisance of myself during a screening of the film in the small Indiana town where I had been an undergraduate literature major. On first viewing the film had seemed completely irrational, incoherent; and I had been outraged that so many in the audience were participating in the ruse by pretending they understood what was happening. The very clarity of the film during my second viewing was the revelation. I was shocked that I had so completely missed the film's psychological complexity, but excited that -- apparently -- I had grown. And I realized, for the first time, that film might be able to compete with the intellectual depth and stylistic subtlety of the literature I was studying as a graduate student. From then on, I haunted local screenings of European, Japanese and Indian films.

In the summer of 1969, in the hope of beefing up my qualifications for teaching college film courses, I attended a two-week summer film seminar at which Andrew Sarris was to be the guest of honor. On his first evening at the seminar, Sarris -- whose writing I was only marginally aware of -- introduced and screened *The General*. I had never seen a Keaton film I guess, and I was simultaneously convulsed with laughter and astonished at the commitment and rigor evident in a comedy made by an American director. When I learned that not only were there a substantial number of other first-rate Keatons to look forward to, but that Keaton was only one member of a "pantheon" of 14, all I thought I had learned seemed suddenly only an embarrassingly tiny part of a huge world. I excitedly explored the categories of auteurs, grateful to a critical approach that had opened so many new doors.

A final experience began on the first afternoon of a weekend film symposium at SUNY-Binghamton in 1971. The announcements had been a little vague; all I knew was that there was to be a screening. In one continuous sitting my stunned colleagues and I saw Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity*, Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, Ken Jacobs' *Soft Rain*, and Larry Gottheim's *Barn Rushes*. Though my statements afterward expressed outrage, deep inside I knew my reaction had more to do with fear and insecurity than with intellect and sensitivity. I ignored the implications of the experience for a while, but within a year it had me -- for I'd realized that not only were these films staying fresh in my mind month after month, but that they were showing me new dimensions of the other films and kinds of films I'd grown to love. I began to rent several of the films, and others that seemed related, and to study them carefully while I had them. For the past 10 years I've devoted a large part of my viewing time exploring the immense body of work the experience at Binghamton alerted me to.

In the years after the Binghamton experience, I realized, with growing puzzlement, that while many people -- and especially many of those who teach or write about film -- had had experiences similar to the first three I've described, a comparatively small number of people shared my enthusiasm for independent film. For awhile, I assumed it was just a matter of exposing people to the films.

They seemed so wonderful to me that I couldn't imagine how anyone -- how most people, at any rate -- could fail to be captivated. I've come to see that while a substantial number of people, particularly in a college setting, are powerfully affected by avant-garde film, a great many are not -- enough, certainly, to give me pause. In the past, and still to a large degree, my way of dealing with this was to write critiques which would demonstrate that one could intellectualize about the films -- often in the relatively precise way we feel we can intellectualize about a Hemingway story or a Browning poem. I had a sense that people were resistant to avant-garde film because they suspected it couldn't hold up intellectually to the best of the commercial narrative film tradition in Europe, North American, Japan. But for many people the amount of demonstrated intellectual content turned out to be irrelevant: "You could intellectualize about any piece of shit, that doesn't make it Art."

Though I don't know why so many people have not been moved as I am by so many avant-garde films, I have a suspicion it has a good deal to do with the comparative scarcity of screenings -- and of good screening conditions. I would guess that, at best, most people see avant-garde films in the sorts of anthologies distributed by the American Federation of Arts and the Black Maria Film + Video Festival, in clusters of films, each seen once, and with long spaces between the clusters. While I am very grateful to the organizations that make these films at least intermittently available -- many people would have no opportunity to see any avant-garde films without these organizations -- the anthology mode of presentation does create a problem because, like the auteur experience, the experience of growing to admire avant-garde film is gradual. I came to love *Serene Velocity* over a period of two years and several screenings. In one instance, in fact, I invited Gehr to Utica to show that film and a newer one -- *Still* - - which I hated, only (after being rude to Gehr) to change my mind later. While the period between initial screening and positive response has largely disappeared (and needless to say, perhaps, there are many avant-garde films I don't like), it was crucial for a number of the films I now admire most. And this process of gradually growing to love avant-garde films is not, has never been available for most people who cannot control their own access to films the way teachers, critics, and filmmakers usually can. No amount of critical explication does any good if people are unfamiliar with what is explicated.

When I first went to *King Kong*, and, more recently, when I've gone to see *Dawn of the Dead*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*...the experience has been similar to a good ride at an amusement park; I sit cowering in my seat, wondering how I could possibly have paid to go through this. Once the film is over and I'm still alive, I feel very serene, very vital -- and more aware of the particular ways in which we are manipulated by stylistic gestures and genre conventions. When I rediscovered *8 1/2*, I felt in the know, sensitive, even cultured -- an experience which has been renewed periodically, most recently by *Wings of Desire*. It always keeps me intellectually at-the-ready, trying to soak in every potential nuance of meaning. The experience of exploring the careers or auteurs has required an on-

going investment of attention, and a grudging resilience about screening conditions (for years the only place I had the chance to see *Rear Window* was on TV). The experience makes me feel grounded, more broadly based. My justifications of avant-garde films tend to center on their conceptual density and their value as "critiques" of other kinds of film, and especially of conventional film experiences (see my *A Critical Cinema*, University of California Press, 1988). But the emotion that commits me to these justifications -- the experience I discovered once my original fear and hostility had worn off -- is another thing, and I'm beginning to realize that I need to be more open about it. When I first saw Gottheim's *Fog Line*, Hollis Frampton's *Surface Tension* and *Zorns Lemma*, J.J. Murphy's *Print Generation* and *Sky Blue Water Light Sign*, Jackie Raynal's *Deux Fois*, Robert Nelson's *The Awful Backlash*, Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses*, Michael Snow's <----> , Brakhage's *Scenes from Under Childhood*, 1, Robert Huot's *Rolls: 1971*, Gehr's *Morning and Eureka*, Barry Gerson's *Translucent Appearances*, Diana Barrie's *My Version of the Fall*, Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't*, John Baldessari's *Six Colorful Inside Jobs*, Kenneth Anger's *Eaux D'Artifice*, James Benning's *11 X 14*, to name just a few, I was -- for lack of a better way to put it -- thrilled, and in a definitely sensuous way. In many instances I saw these films alone, on my tiny workroom screen, with mediocre sound, on sweaty summer afternoons; in others I saw them in college and museum screening rooms, with people arguing and climbing out of their seats, and at those few brave and sometimes grim theaters devoted to the independents. But, regardless, I always felt an immediacy of sensual engagement as powerful as the King Kong experience, but more intimate.

This thrill -- and, strangely, the only critic I'm aware of who has written with a sense of it is Jonas Mekas -- always seems to result from a combination of the ingenuity of a film (its visual and/or conceptual interest) and the commitment implied by its structure or form: for a filmmaker to expend considerable resources -- considerable, that is, for an individual with limited means -- to make a rigorous, beautiful film which because of its very distinctiveness has almost no chance of paying for itself is more than impressive; it's mysterious, and somehow reassuringly so. I think of the avant-garde films I admire most as, among other things, metaphors of intelligence, sensitivity, openness, persistence, hard work, technical precision, and integrity for their own sake. Not all films need be like them; and together they're only one area of interest among many. But they are strong presences among other strong presences, in the population-exploded world of film.

(A word about screening conditions. While some avant-garde films may be effective in almost any screening situation -- I can't imagine the theater that could defuse John Waters' *Multiple Maniacs* -- a great many require first-rate conditions, better conditions than most commercial narrative films require. One can follow a story and understand the development of characters whether the projector bulb is bright enough or not; but if the specifics of color and texture are crucial -- as they are in most of the avant-garde films I've mentioned -- mediocre

projection can be disastrous. At one academic film conference I attended, avant-garde films were included, but the projector bulb was so dim that the printed texts included in several films were nearly invisible; and at another conference -- one nominally devoted to avant-garde film, no less -- the films of half the filmmaker guests of honor couldn't be shown at the correct speed because the available projectors ran at 24 frames per second only! This cavalier attitude about screening conditions still seems the rule, and I often get the impression that those in charge of film programs are annoyed that there are filmmakers unsportsmanlike enough to make films that need to be shown well.)

A few months ago I was on a local TV talk show. The man who was interviewing me said, "Judging from your program notes, I gather that avant-garde film is an acquired taste. " It occurred to me that all film is an acquired taste. It's just that we've forgotten the process of acquiring it. During our first 10 years we were bored and puzzled by many conventional films, and we asked our parents about them, and talked them over with friends, and kept trying to understand -- we could see that pleasure and enlightenment were there. The world of avant-garde film is full of pleasure and enlightenment, too; one need only see enough of the films to get past the initial difficulties.

Fortunately, seeing enough of the films seems to be growing a bit less difficult. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, screening opportunities for avant-garde film seemed to be constricting, relentlessly so. But the reemergence of Anthology Film Archives in New York City this past fall, the opening of the new American Museum of the Moving Image, the plans of the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art to release Andy Warhol's seminal films of the 1960s, the continued health of some of the crucial organizations devoted to avant-garde cinema (the Collective for Living Cinema in New York, the distribution collective Canyon Cinema in San Francisco...), and, of course, the increasing success of the Black Maria Film + Video Festival -- all these developments suggest that as an exhibition option for film enthusiasts, avant-garde film is about to undergo a renaissance. I can't wait! (Insofar as the production of first-rate films is concerned, the renaissance hasn't let up since the 1940s.)

*I use the term "avant-garde film" and "independent film" interchangeably, not because they are the most fitting terms one can imagine, but because they've come to loosely designate a more or less specific body of work.