

POURQUOI EST-CE QUE LA BÊTE EST NOIRE? A BRIEF MEDITATION ON CANADIAN EXPERIMENTAL FILM

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Marc Glassman asks,

Why are films by contemporary artists called 'experimental'? This pejorative term has attached itself to all manner of film-making from non-traditional modes of production and expression in the documentary, cinemation, and dramatic genres, to pure attempts at defining the cinematic apparatus. By labelling all of these styles and practices experimental, it is increasingly difficult for critics, audiences and filmmakers to come to terms with much current work.¹

Glassman wants to be able to come to terms with film(s). To do so he believes that he has to do away with the word experimental (and perhaps other words as well). This implies that experimental cinema is nothing more than arbitrary and misguided terminology, and that removing experimental from film discourse will allow more inspired, clear and shining terms to come into place. But where is the place which experimental occupies, the site which Glassman thinks should be reserved for something else? Let us look for this location in the following statement by Catherine Jonasson:

In spite of some dour predictions on the relative health of the experimental film community, 1987 and 1988 have seen a tremendous amount of work accomplished by Canadian experimental filmmakers. Senior artists have completed major films or film series, and younger filmmakers have undertaken ambitious projects that have resulted in a body of provocative

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and accomplished films. Although Canada has a distinguished international reputation within the experimental film world, this has largely been without substantial support from the traditional exhibition venues (museums and galleries).²

Glassman calls experimental not only a term but also a *bête noir*. La *bête ne doit pas venir. Mais la bête est venue. Donc la bête devient noire.*

Coming into Venue

Is experimental only a term, and a negative one at that? A book of Andre Bazin's essays entitled *What is Cinema?* provides us with the answer (to the title's question) that cinema is a language.³ Bazin elaborates many aspects of this language, yet it is possible to enhance Bazin's moves towards a descriptive linguistics of film by suggesting that experimental cinemas are dialects. Each is a separate voice. Some experimentals are dialects of race or gender, others are dialects of geographical regions, and/or of technologies. Across nations, *bêtes* recognize one another and sometimes differ radically but generally celebrate one another. The experimental is not a misguided term. If anything it is a *bête* which seeks to misguide and perhaps for this reason it makes Mr. Glassman, among others, uneasy. The experimental is a constellation of perspectives which reflect Hollywood, and nationhood, back upon themselves thus revealing the more obscure membranes of narrativity.

The Canadian Refraction

Reflections refract when film experiments are opportunities to explore the fissures, crevices, wounds, and thresholds of a so-called other and more dominant film dialect.

All film experiments have their basis in alterity as conscious visions of a change, a lament, a glorification or a meditative gaze. Some consciously proffer resistance. The Canadian experimentals call values and dreams into question. They make the reliability of sight problematic. They even, at times, call the medium of cinema into question. Below I list a number of films which call upon us to face our ambivalence.

Richard Kerr *The Last Days of Contrition* (1988): Our eyes are Americanized but our hearts are not (yet), because we wish to be accountable. However, there is no mode of accountability; there is no contrition.

Bruce Elder *Lamentations* (1985): *Nous devons venir et dire "nous sommes venus."* We are all lost and all forgotten yet all accounted for in nature.

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David Rimmer *As Seen on TV* (1986): What only American hairdressers know for sure—hair will make or break you. It must come when called. A good cut and perm should withstand even nuclear attack.

Michael Holbloom *Was* (1988): I want to remember a me behind this hazy curtain. Am I the me on Rimmer's filmed TV?

Jack Chambers *Circle* (1968-9): A mystical tragedy. There is no "me." There is nothing but light; memories are vanishing into the wheels of a child's tricycle. Laundry becomes a flag which shields us from a brilliant American sun. This is a curtain past/future through which we may not pass, except to shop. On our side of the flag they say it is grey and forgettable. The screen is fuzzy. They get better reception over the border.

Michael Snow *La Region Centrale* (1971): The wilderness is kinder to my camera than to me. The wilderness within my country has no room for my fear, but it has all the time in the world to be foreboding.

Joyce Wieland *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1973): There is no "we." Any animals can become patriots, or ex-patriots.

Barbara Sternberg *Transitions* (1982): Every space is my place. History has collapsed and folded in upon itself. I find comfort in this, believing that complete interiorization is possible.

The Term Turns

A number of critics now seem to have moved far and fast from deconstruction theory (almost as fast as they embraced a version of it five years ago), as well as from experimental cinema, fearing both to be uncritical. Janine Marchessault has written of young Canadian experimentals: "Moving beyond the negativity that characterizes deconstructive practices, these works take on the difficult task of making sense through the fragment."⁴ To be critical is to seek out ideological effects. All experimentals (not just the young), and deconstruction, are concerned with effects. As Derrida explains:

Nous n'assistons pas à une fin de l'écriture des intentions qui restaurerait, suivant la représentation idéologique de MacLuhan, une transparence ou une immédiateté des rapports sociaux; mais au déploiement historique de plus en plus puissant d'une écriture générale dont le système de la parole, de la conscience, du sens, de la présence, de la vérité, etc., ne serait qu'un effet et doit être analysé comme tel. C'est cet effet mis en cause que j'ai appelé ailleurs logocentrisme...⁵

Marchessault continues: "They interrogate a history of representation, not to do away with history (subjectivity, emancipatory practices, and so on) but to give it a new sense and a less totalizing expression."⁶ Critics worry over what is critical, what is archival, what is a term, what should

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come to terms, and what is terminal. Instead of denying or negating deconstructive analysis, it is possible to study deconstruction by watching experimentals. Experimental filmmakers make effects visual which may have formerly made themselves present only as terms. To give sight to a term may be a beastly thing to do, but it is a quintessentially experimental activity. But it is an activity which experimental filmmakers take up as a responsibility; I am extremely grateful for their concern. This activity makes it possible for us to, among other things, see social conditions which we could only formerly vaguely intuit.

And so, what place is this, the location which experimental film inhabits? It is a site from/toward which to be able to call the taken-for-granted into question. The space to be made problematic is always different, always shifting, always changing. Even the critical must be kept alive, precisely by being ever more critical of itself. Experimentals must always therefore always be on the move. They must forever be situated in movement, so that they may always set the tone for new and undiscovered questions.

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Notes

1. Marc Glassman, "Michael Snow's 'Seated Figures.'" *Vanguard* (Summer 1988): 39.
2. Catherine Jonasson et al, *Recent Work from the Canadian Avant-Garde* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1988): v.
3. Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Edited and Translated by H. Gray. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967): 16.
4. Janine Marchessault, *Catalogue of the International Experimental Film Congress*. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989): 115.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la Philosophie*. (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972): 392.
6. Marchessault, *Ibid*.