

UNDERCUT

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A Decade of British

Experimental Film & Video Art

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From Across the Channel and 15 Years Barbara Meter



Sanday, Nick Collins

Asked to write something about British experimental film - since I have viewed quite a lot during the past year, due to the programming I do in Holland - I had mixed feelings towards such a request because I have only seen most of the films once.

One could characterise my involvement with experimental film as somewhat periodic. I was engaged in it in the early 70s and living in Holland, where there is a void in terms of avant-garde film, plus drawing the conclusions of the debate I was tangled up in at the time as to whether experimental film was 'politically relevant' or not, (to which my answer then was no). I enrolled into making political action films (relevant or not ...) About

three years ago now I have 'returned to my roots' as it feels, and so have looked at this area anew.

So, looking again at the British avant-garde after 15 years is as if I have plunged into an orgy of romantic images, grainy colours, decadent and dark moods and personal evocations. What a reaction against the asceticism of the formal and structural film which reigned at the time I was around. A predictable reaction of course - and one which is highly indebted to just that formal movement. I think that all of British experimental film pays a tribute to the structural movement (even when being vehemently the opposite, like the work of Cerith Wyn Evans, Derek Jarman, Anna Thew etc). Whatever it did,

this formal 'regime' certainly made an extremely clear point of film as an autonomous art, as an answer to film as a derived medium.

I have a very high opinion of British experimental film. Almost all the films I saw are made with a lot of thought and devotion. At the same time they are made with a kind of ease, which depicts a cultural climate in which thinking of film 'as-film' comes almost as second nature. This is something which - coming from Holland - I am extremely envious of, and must be due to the teaching at art colleges, starting with people like Peter Gidal, Malcolm Le Grice, William Raben, Mike Leggett and all the younger film-makers that followed - plus the incessant enthusiasm and zest with which all these artists have kept the London Film-makers Co-operative active and alive for more than 20 years.

What an achievement for something as fragile, controversial and exceptional - seen against mainstream and all other forms of cinema - as experimental film. The British should be proud to have such a 'moving' visual art, unique in Europe, with its own characteristics and history.

But I know the 'British' are not as proud as they should be and there is a constant struggle to obtain the necessary funds and opportunities. I do not at all have the opinion that artists should suffer in attics in order to produce great works - but it could also be possible that this constant struggle was a factor in preventing an easy incorporation within the status-quo ... I don't know, for I certainly would like to see the Film-makers' Co-op and film-makers provided with more means.

I can see why it would be necessary to have more paid staff at the London Film-makers' Co-op. Apart from the fact that all distribution and workshop staff are overloaded and work much longer hours than they are paid for - new equipment is urgently needed and new premises will be much more expensive - I think that a paid person to promote British avant-garde film would help to maintain and expand this precious film-as-film climate, which is always under threat of being crushed by bigger institutions and more publicly accepted film forms. In a sense, the Film and Video Umbrella does this, but I think it would be vital to have someone from within the Co-op concentrating on trying to get a foothold in museums, art galleries, colleges etc.

I can see how English film-makers have to work really hard to earn a living - grants obviously do not provide salaries, and are too little anyway - which means that there is hardly any time left for making films except in the much needed holidays. This does not seem to get any better under Thatcher and the economic situation.

Having mentioned English 'characteristics' I am of course obliged to clarify this. It is walking on slippery ground, as it is slippery to say anything is 'typical' of a nationality. On the other hand I do think English avant-garde film does have a specific history and development, which is reflected in the works. The films mentioned are a selection of what I saw.

The outburst of voluptuous, rich, theatrical, dark and moody imagery as found in the work of Cerith Wyn Evans, Anna Thew, John Maybury, Michael Kestiff, Cordelia Swann, Derek Jarman seem, from the outside, typically English. First of all, this work has developed out of the punk movement, which had a strong impact in England, maybe even more so than on the Continent. The theatrical clothing of punk was both aggressive and fetishistic. From that I see a development into the ritualistic and mythological symbolism of films like *Epiphany* (Wyn Evans) and *Behind Closed Doors* (Thew). The celebration of taboos, typical of decadence, like gayness, death, morbid sexuality (necrophilia in Kestiff's 8mm work), made me think of another historic mode in England at the time, the gothic novel - albeit on a higher level. These works



Messages. Guy Shorwin