

NOTES FOR A NEW UNDERGROUND

By Vanda Carter

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Digging underground. The shovel is back in our hands. Cuts. The axe is coming down hard on independent film. Media courses and workshops are scrabbling for what funds there are. Many are going mainstream to get into Channel 4 and commercial promoland. Experimental film, which is not commercial (in intention or in fact), nor by definition, mainstream, is thrown back to its roots. After its association with the academic and art establishment throughout the 70s, and a brief fraternization with the ever so cautious risk-takers of 'progressive' TV - in 1986, experimental film is going back underground.

The Co-op is twenty years old this year. Happy Birthday Co-op. Twenty years on, the mood in London is very different. There is not much left of the euphoria of 1966:

"The London Film Maker's Co-op began as one of the many liberating influences that hit Britain in the mid-sixties, along with the Beatles, the mini-skirt and 'swinging London'."
- Steve Dwoskin. "Film Is". 1975 (1)

It must have been fun. But I was too young to go to the party. And swinging in the Depression is a bit tough. However...underlying the constraints of life in Thatcherist Britain... (less money, less screenings, less travel, less opportunity, less hope...), there is a certain freedom. It is a limited and limiting freedom, but nevertheless it is, or could be, a freedom. It is the liberation which comes with the dawning realisation, that if we do not experiment in earnest, the more 'avant-garde' film practices will go dormant, bury themselves in retrospective forays or die altogether.

In 1986, an optimistic view of the future, at least in the short term, would be naive. Instead, a creative pessimism can inform and energise our Arts. And the outspokenness of those who have nothing left to lose except their (financially worthless) integrity:

We must **EXPERIMENT**. We must re-think context, set up screenings in unlikely places. Collaborate across the range of marginal arts. Confuse and coerce audiences. Rediscover how to make films extremely cheaply. Pick things out of dustbins in Soho. Publicise our films with poetry, philosophy, exhibitionism and seriousness.

And we need to **QUESTION**. Ask ourselves individually what we are doing. What political, aesthetic and intellectual intentions underlie our film-making. Then we need to question each other. And if, as a result, we disagree, at least there will be

a debate again. And when we have done this, perhaps we should push ourselves further and issue manifestos, write articles denouncing other film practices and praising our own. **BLOW OUR TRUMPETS LOUD**. Because, if we do not blow our trumpets, no one else will.

And we must be wary of wasting our time grovelling for commercial sponsorship for avant-garde film: production, exhibition or distribution. If we have any teeth at all, experimental art is the **ENEMY** of commercial qualitative values, and capitalist norms are the kiss of death for anyone innovating on the margins.

The survival of experimental film may depend on our ability not just to survive as marginal artists, but our ability to rebuild an autonomous Underground movement which creates its own identities through practice. In recent years it has been left to others (critics, teachers, funding bodies...) to identify and define any trends. We have a handful of vague labels: 'Pluralistic', 'New Narrative', 'Post-Modernist'¹. We need analysis, but not neat definitions.

"Artistic self-expression has nothing to do with definable positions, but works in a world of ambiguities and abstractions." - Steve Dwoskin "Film Is" (1)

To build this new Underground, it is useful to look at the old ones. There are lessons to be learned from the past. (And we had better learn them quick.)

Lesson 1 - The Underground is not a myth. It exists wherever something new is happening which does not (yet?) have mass media attention or immediate populist appeal. And where the people involved believe (rightly or wrongly) that they have something to communicate which cannot be diluted or compromised in intention or in form. (cf. Surrealism, Beat, Psychadelia)

Lesson 2 - Irony of the Underground. The Underground only ever gets widespread popular attention when it is most difficult to define, most ludicrously idealistic and most intransigent in pursuit of its visions, (cf. Dada, PopArt?, Structuralism?)

Lesson 3 - Underground Kudos. Anyone interested in Art likes to think they are in touch with Underground happenings. Underground is box-office. The more Underground the better, (cf. Warhol, who exploited this phenomenon for a decade.)

It is precisely the defiant oppositional stance which we need to preserve and cultivate. Instead of scrabbling to keep the fragile footholds in Establishment structures by trying to pass ourselves off as something we are not, we should be ready to defend our film practices in our own terms. As always, we must try to sell what we have made. But NOT by pretending that it is something which it is not (popular entertainment). NOR by lying about what it is (The 80's are too sophisticated for that.)

But what CAN attract new audiences, new film-makers, (new funds... or is that wishful thinking?) is the idea that someone is making films which are uncompromisingly different. Which experiment ruthlessly with form and content. Which are proud of not looking like films on the TV. Which really do take radical perspectives and struggle to oppose the political and commercial forces which are working to appropriate and homogenise cultural expression.

What we need is a Movement or two...

"One of the distinguishing features of the modern arts is to be found in the milieu and lifestyle from which they are generated - the avant-garde life-style in which the artist functions as a kind of aesthetic guerilla (sometimes a frankly political one as well) given to distinctive mannerisms, outrageous social display, withdrawal from bourgeois norms and manifestations of group cohesion and solidarity."

- Renato Poggioli in "The Theory of the Avant-Garde". 1968. (2)

Lesson 4 - SHOOT SHOOT SHOOT SHOOT STOP NEVER STOP (3)

References

(1) From "Film Is" (Dwoskin. 1975)

(2) Paraphrased in "Movements, Magazines and Manifestos" in "Modernism" Bradbury/McFarlane. 1974.)

(3) The wording of the telegram which started the LPMC.