

The Cinema We Need
by
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The task of achieving some clarity about our cultural situation and of developing the means to deal with the present cultural crisis is an urgent one—I believe the most important task now demanded of Canadians, even more important, all the exhortatory rhetoric to the contrary, than the formulation of social policy on employment in an era of electronic technology.

To formulate good policy on these matters, some questions about “the good itself” must first be thought through and the consequent problems—what degree of equality in the distribution of goods is proper in a just society? What would be relationship in a just society between one’s contributions to society, in services and labour—and the material rewards one receives? Can a life of complete leisure be truly good? These questions cannot be answered until we know something about what is good for a person and of the sorts of relations with others it is good for a person to have.

If these questions seem abstract, even preposterous (certainly they are amongst the last matters which a policy maker would, in the present age, be called upon to consider), it is only because they have come to seem that way in an age when the dominant mode of thinking is a technical and managerial one, an age in which the purpose of thinking has been reduced to discovering the means of realizing some goal, not discovering whether the goal itself is good; of finding a way to subject nature and other people to our will; not finding out what the relationship of people to nature and of people to other people ought to be. After all, these unasked questions are those which any reasonable person would consider to be central to what makes us human. If they seem obscure, the darkness around them comes from our way of thinking about them, not from any murkiness in their own natures. Far from being abstract, these questions lie at the centre of our concrete existence and are answered by careful attention to our individual responses to the concrete situations in which we find ourselves.

I raise these questions not to try to answer them but to indicate what we who live in a technical age have lost and because a recognition of this loss is essential to formulating an answer to the most important question posed by this retrospective of Canadian cinema, namely, “What sort of cinema do we, as Canadians, need?” I also ask these questions to explain why my answer about a Canadian cinema differs so completely from those of Peter Harcourt and Piers Handling, two people who have not only thought about the question more thoroughly than anybody else but have also articulated the fullest and most informed responses to it, responses which take into account, as any strong response must, the history of our previous involvement in making films. I feel I must rebut their answers since I believe that they are not just wrong, but dangerous in their implications which, if embedded in policy, would thwart the potential of those current developments in cinema which represent the little hope our country now has for reopening the closed system of thought imposed by technique, that is to say, by the U.S.

We are creatures of the modern technical system. To say that is to claim that the horizon of our thinking is circumscribed by technique. The will to mastery has penetrated all aspects of the human personality and we have become no more than functionaries of the will to control and master. To pretend that our consciousness (and so our personality) transcends the situation in which we live, that it is the site of the origin of will and that it escapes conditioning by the situation in which it finds itself is a delusion that masks the most terrifying aspect of our modern technical system. Our “individual” wills have been brought into conformity with the will to mastery and we, ourselves, have become technique.

This penetration of technique into the deepest recesses of the human personality has resulted in our losing our capacity to think in ways other than those that develop from the will to

mastery. We are so colonized by the technical empire that we cannot even think against the imperial system of technology. Our historical amnesia, to use Adorno's phrase, our inability to even conceive of what we have lost under the aggrandizing hegemony of technical culture, is a measure of the extent to which we are dispossessed of any other realm, including that realm known to the ancients, the realm of mystery and wonder. We have lost our wonder at the gift of things, at what should be the wonder of wonders, that things are given. Consequently, we have become oblivious of values.

The power of technological domination attains its ends by encouraging us to conceive of ourselves as utterly free, by inducing us to think of ourselves as formulating projects for ourselves and as shaping ourselves into what we become. It leads us to believe that we have unlimited freedom to make the world the way we want it, since it portrays the universe as entirely devoid of values and as indifferent to the ends we choose. These delusions lie at the heart of the will to mastery. Overcoming that drive will disabuse us of these delusions, but to overcome the will to mastery, we must find some other focus for our being than wilfulness. That other focus is to be found in attuning ourselves to what is revealed to us, to what is given. This attunement is not a form of quietism, but a process of letting go, so that our experiences can, in revealing their depths to us, change us as profoundly as possible. In attuning ourselves to what is given, we surrender ourselves to that givenness and allow ourselves to be remade anew. If we are to escape the enclosure of human thoughts and beliefs, we must surrender ourselves to something wholly other. We must learn to listen for the intimation of the Good of which we have become deprived and learn to appreciate the gift of what is given in experience.

We need—urgently need, if we are to find some way out of the modern technical system—a cinema that can manifest this dynamic attuning. What characteristics would such a cinema have?

Harcourt and Handling argue that a “realistic” cinematic image of ourselves is sociologically and psychologically important because it shows us as we really are (does “realism” ever really do this?) and so engenders, or at least reinforces, our sense of identity. They argue that just as a child finds itself (that is, discovers it is a unified and bounded being) in the mirror, so we find ourselves in our imaginary relations to portraits of our “type” or our “family.” Setting aside the cavil that what we really acquire in such imaginary relations is an illusory sense of our identity, one would still have to object to this claim. For what the “realist” cinema presents are pictures of ourselves in our present condition and it presents these portraits as though they were portraits of the natural order. In this way, it suggests that the present order of things cannot be transcended.

But my objections to the Harcourt/Handling thesis run deeper. “Realism” relies on descriptions and descriptions follow experience; they are not simultaneous with it. Representations can only deal with the past. We need a cinema that can deal with the here and now. Any cinema that wishes to deal with the experience of the moment must not offer description; rather, it must reveal how events come to be in experience, that is, the dynamic by which events are brought into presence in experience. To do this, it must avoid using forms which present synoptic views of how some situation or another has come to be what it is, for views of that sort can be formulated only after the fact, after the process of creating the situation has been completed, and the explanations that they provide depend upon such disreputable intellectual abstractions as teleology and final causes.

One form that is clearly based on synoptic views of process and on teleology is the narrative. Narrative first creates and then reconciles discord. In a narrative, the end is already present in the beginning. It is obvious that such a form can be created only by looking back at the beginning from the end. Narrative, therefore, is reminiscence. We need a form that presents perceptions. We need a form that will immediately present the coming into presence (that is, the formulation) of present experience.

Given our present cultural imperatives, narratives pose a problem because they misrepresent experience. Narrative misrepresents experience because, in order to organize the past into comprehensible structures, it eliminates the unmanageable ambiguities and the painful contradictions inherent in experience. Only in fictions can we be certain of anything. Narrative explains how events lead up to the final event in order to clarify the past but the notion of causality on which narrative is based is all too simple and serves only to cover over mysteries.

This idea is not new. Pound, speaking through the figure of his esteemed Kung in *Canto XIII*, recalled a time when historians did not try to cover over gaps in their explanatory constructs:

*And Kung said, "Wan ruled with moderation,
In his day the State was well kept
And even I can remember
A day when the historians left blanks in their writings,
I mean for things they didn't know."*

But in technocracy nothing can be left uncontrolled, for technocracy is the will to mastery. Narrative is the artistic structure of technocracy. Accordingly, the cinema we need, the cinema that combats technocracy, will be non-narrative. It will not be fuelled by a rage for order—and order's concomitant, concealment. It will accept that every discovery involves dissimulation. It "accept error and lingering mystery, for its maker's negative capability will afford him the strength to accept what Keats terms the "Penetrarium of Mystery." If these strike you as too modest, even valueless, aspirations, perhaps your doubts can be mitigated by the idea that this cinema will also use constant repetition—not to reminisce, but to progress through states of discovery and to reveal ever more about the ordinary world around us.

Peter Harcourt and Piers Handling have been celebrating the advent of the so-called New Narrative film and advocating further work in the form. The New Narrative is a form of narrative that makes use of some of the strategies and devices usually found only in avant-garde films, especially constructions that refer to the work's material base and its constructed character and that are less emotionally "engaging" than most narratives. According to these critics, New Narrative combines those virtues of formal complexity and self-consciousness that generally associate avant-garde film with the values of accessibility and with the potential for significant mass appeal (and so significant social value) which avant-garde films generally lack. Harcourt and Handling have argued that the best feature movies ever made in Canada were the low-budget, independent, personal features made in the years from about 1962 to 1974. These films represented an indigenous development similar in important respects to the European Art Film. Harcourt and Handling view the New Narrative film as a revitalization of the "Canadian Art Film" after the dark years of the Capital Cost Allowance films, for, like those earlier works, New Narrative films are independent, personal feature movies.

While admittedly there isn't much to be proud of in the Capital Cost Allowance films, I don't for a moment believe that their failure gives us reason to praise the "Canadian Art Film," nor do I believe that the development of the New Narrative film unites the strength of our avant-garde tradition (which is very great indeed!) with that of our "Art Film"; nor that such a cinema, if it were to come into being, would represent our best possibility for countering the hegemony of the technical/managerial system.

The reasons for my disbelief are many. One is that these films are still fundamentally narrative, while the cinema we need is not. Another is that I do not credit claims about the strength of our indigenous Art Film tradition. *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, for example, strikes me as a film that is interesting only for the fact that it was made here. A significant work of art it is not. Thirdly, I do not believe that the self-reflexive strategies used in some forms of avant-garde

filmmaking can be comfortably accommodated within story-telling forms or that they serve important ends when they are used in that context. Self-reflexive ideas were developed to stress the autotelicity of a work of art. The notion that a work of art is autotelic is a development of the idea that every work of art is unique and that it is impossible to paraphrase or otherwise translate any work of art. But in New Narrative films, self-reflexive constructions serve primarily to create an unconventional surface—something desired for its ability to vivify perception. Unfortunately, such breaches of convention have little lasting value, for what seems unconventional one day often becomes a cliché the next, while Milton's rhetoric, for example, has never been turned into clichés and most likely never will be. His celebration of New Narrative a me, too, because in Canada we have a long and very fine tradition of work in avant-garde cinema. This work has never received the attention it merits because the professors of movies at our universities have been too busy to take any notice of it. Now, after years of neglecting this form of cinema, they propose to honour it by advocating its being vandalized and commercialized, for their praise for New Narrative is tantamount to legitimating the mainstream cinema's hijacking of the hard-won, unrewarded achievements of vanguard cinema.

But remarks thus far have been negative—an effort to clear the ground. I turn now to more positive comments—to suggesting something of about what the cinema we need would be like. It would be, in the first place, a cinema not of imagination but of perception. To escape from inwardness and domination of events by the ego, we must, even when “creating” works of art, cease to impose ideas on experience. We must rid art, and ourselves, of self-consciousness, for only when this is done can art manifest the process by which the subject-in-experience bemes identical with the subject-of-experience.

The cinema we need will be a cinema of perceptions, of immediate experiences. It will not be a cinema of ideas. Like narratives, ideas are formed only after the fact, serve only to present what is already past. We must therefore find a form that is capable of orienting us toward the present, a form not based on ideas, just as we must re-conceive morality and learn to think of it as concerned with attention, not with intention). Such a form must not depend on separating out one aspect of experience from all the others, nor on any pre- or post-conception. It would not depend, to use a few examples from recent films, on taxonomic or morphological principles, the alphabet, the structure of discourse or the Kabbalah. It will present, simply and directly, the manifold of forces and relations that come into interplay in the coming-to-presence of an event. To achieve this, the form will have to allow for multiplicity and contradiction, since contraries are present in all experience. The attempt to dispose of contraries-in-experience is due to reason, not perception. It will incorporate the full diversity of the manifold of experience by making simultaneous use of multiple images representing internal speech and a variety of auditory phenomena. It will be a polyphonic cinema, possessing several concurrent lines of development.

In order to be true to its commitment to reveal the process by which events come to presence, this form of cinema we need will reveal the process of its own emergence into being. In fact, it can truly present only its process of coming-into-being; all other emergent phenomena it can only represent after the fact. It would, therefore, include those fits and starts, those hesitations, suspensions and reformulations, those repetitions and periphrases—what T.E. Hulme somewhere referred to as “the cold walks and the lines that lead nowhere.” Accordingly, the encounter with such a work at its best will strike one with the force of the emergence of being. In such a form, truth and method will become one.

This characteristic of our proposed cinema is hardly its most radical or original feature. It would, after all, share this feature with such well-known works as Alain Robbe-Grillet *The Erasers*, Pierre Boulez' *Structures* (1952) and Morton Feldman's *Last Pieces* (1959). However, it would come to this feature by a somewhat different route and this difference in its manner of

creation would mean that this feature itself would be modified. Rather than being a calculated meta-description of the “creative process.” it will, literally, enact the process of its own emergence into being. The temporal development of such cinematic work will be like that of a piece of totally improvised jazz (which also enacts the piece’s emergence into being) rather than like a schematized meta-description of the manner by which a work might emerge into being, which is what Feldman or Boulez provide. As a result, as in jazz, the marks and traces of spontaneity will be valued more highly than through preconceptions.

As it happens, the dynamic by which events come to presence in experience is permeated by rhythm. Our cinema therefore should also be profoundly rhythmic. Rhythm also happens to be among the most physical of the features of any art form and that physicality, moreover, has a close relationship to the physical experience of the body. This fact points toward the importance the body will play in this form of cinema. This association of the rhythmicity of the process by which events come to presence in experience with the physicality and rhythmicity of bodily processes means that the rhythmic form of a work of art can, by uniting the pulse of the body with patterns inherent in emergent events (event phenomena), unite the mind and the body. The cinema we need will, accordingly, make extensive use of rhythmic constructions.

By dealing with immediate experience, the cinema we need would be rooted in the place where we have our being. But where we are, always, is in language, for nothing is given experience outside of language. The thing given in experience is intelligible, is a meaning-being, because it is a meaning-being. It is intelligible precisely because language belongs to its internal constitution. A word fits a thing only because the thing itself is a word-thing. What we experience, what experience intends, is made in language and it is language which establishes things in the whole. This being so, the cinema we need, a cinema devoted to enacting the process by which events emerge into presence in experience, will engage with the formative role that language plays in making present that which is given in experience. It will not be a purely visual cinema, will not be a cinema against the word, but a cinema of the power of the word.

The makers of the cinema we need will be those who have the strength to abide with doubt and uncertainty and still open themselves up to unfolding situations, allow themselves, even, to be remade by experiences the destiny of which they cannot foresee. It is only through this process that truth will arise, for truth, as Heidegger kept reminding us, is *aletheia*, an uncovering.

One virtue of this conception of truth is that it is more vital and more richly embedded in time than traditional Aristotelian conception. Our cinema must insist on the primordially of temporality. The strong makers, the makers who will fashion the cinema we need, will not seek for intimations of eternity and immortality but for intimations of the interchange of being with non-being, and so, of time, for it is the process of temporality which moves something from non-being and then into non-being again.

Since the cinema we need is a cinema that is not just a cinema in time, but one of time, a consideration of some basic and obvious truths about time is, perhaps, the most direct route to identifying key features of this cinema. Here are a few of the obvious but nonetheless ineluctable and intransigent peculiarities of temporal processes:

- 1) It is always true, that is, true for all instants, that right now is now.
- 2) Many things are happening right now, of which I am aware of only a limited subset. (The partition dividing that subset from the set of phenomena of which we are aware is determined by my spatial position, my neural constitution, the extent of my anxiety and other factors. Even so, it seems accurate to say that all

temporal instants are related to a multiplicity of phenomena.) Hence:

3) It is not true to say that one thing follows another. It is only true to say that many things follow many.

4) Some events just joined the past. they are gone and cannot be resurrected except in memory. Their traces, however, can be found in the present and (this is somewhat more certain than even death and taxes) in the future.

The cinema we need will build upon the formal consequences of these obvious propositions; it will be a cinema of immediacy, multiplicity; will use non-causal, non-teleological forms of instruction and will not attempt to arrest time.

A cinema that is based on openness to experience will have extremely individualistic characteristics. Will critics who love “common patterns in art” be up to dealing with such works, or will they sack and pillage them, hijacking their forms and trading them off for use in more traditionally structured works? I don’t know the answer to that question but I do know that of all the forms of cinema we have at present, it is the experimental cinema that most closely approximates the cinema I have proposed and that the critical neglect of that cinema would, in a country that cared about its arts—as Canada must learn to do if it is to become anything more than a geographic landmass within the empire of technology—be considered a national disgrace. Right now, critics are proposing to feature filmmakers that the experimental cinema is a good site to pillage. One is tempted to remark, in this period of cultural tedium and human numbness; art is brief but life is long. We endure, in a sacked city, for what?