

*Read to the Film Studies Association of Canada, May 2002, for a panel on "Teaching Film Production"*

## **Teaching Making**

A theme of all my writings for the past fifteen years has been modernity's disenfranchisement of non-discursive modes of consciousness and the role that artwork has play in extending the franchise them. The cost of not acknowledging that we engage in such forms of thinking is that we fail to understand a dimension of our being, that we are therefore alienated from our own experiences (and that carries with it the treat that, as a unknown and repudiated aspect of our selves, it comes to dominate us). I can be placed in perspective only when we have a way to make these modes of consciousness clear. That, I believe, is one of the functions of art. What I want to do here now is to make a few remarks on the implications this has for affording making, poesis, a place in a humanities curriculum.

To my mind, the greatest danger with which the university confronts the arts arises from a confusion between art and craft. This confusion involves a means/ends or planning/execution distinction. Craft understands means and ends as distinct from one another, and the means are something traversed, in order to reach an end. (The university typically invokes this distinction when students are encouraged to make proposals, to clarify their ideas before embarking on making a project, as though an artistic idea could be worked out in any other way than by making a work.) I do not mean, of course, that a work of art never arises consequent to phase of planning – if an unplanned work of art is possible, that does not mean that no planned piece is a work of art – all that I assert is that it possible that a work of art arise through a process that cannot be neatly divided into a planning phase and an execution phase. It is impossible to imagine how the realization of a craft work could not be divided into such phases, but it is possible to imagine that the making of artwork not be divisible into those phases. And if our way of understanding poesis (or worse, our way of teaching poesis), cannot account for the fundamental difference, then so much the worse for our understanding (or for our way of teaching).

Nor do I mean that discipline and experience can never play a role. The abject misery of the current experimental film scene in Toronto would be reason enough to reject any claims that art can be made by anyone, no matter how little pains he or she has taken to learn the job, provided his heart is in the right place – or, to be more current, that his or her sentimental theory is close enough to the gonads. A great deal of effort, even of intelligent and purposive labour, and of self-conscious discipline, goes into forming the person who can write a line of poetry or draw a line. Nonetheless, the artist's technique is not the essence of what makes the artist an artist.

A piece of art is not in the first place a physical object – an arrangement of colours or noises. It is the experience that the arrangement of colours and noises is – and here we confront a major difficulty – "meaningful." – that the arrangements of colours excites something more just sensations of colour, but a complex of sensations (including tactile sensations) and feelings. We feel ourselves in touch with a total experience of a peculiar sort.

How the arrangement of colours or sounds garners the ability to elicit such a total experience remains something of a mystery – a mystery that we must not tame by taking refuge in the view that confuses art and craft. This much we do know: that that ability results from artist's having handled the perturbation or excitement that the artist felt as more than mere raw feels. He or she builds a form that correlates with the perturbation experienced. The very reason that we are impelled to gave expression to these feelings is that we want to get clear about the – and do so in a way that does not corrupt them, as we do when we turn them into discursive forms (or, I tend to say, much to people's evident annoyance, into stories). We do not know

exactly what we feeling, until we have found a form that gives expression to it.

Even this, I believes misses the most radical implications of the relation of feeling and form. For in truth, the activities involved in making art continue the processes involved in perception. The artist's hand does not reproduce what the artist's hand and mind have just perceived – the hand actually plays a role in shaping the perception. The artist's activities of making an object are part of the artist's process of experiencing. The bodily gesture is part of the process of articulating a percept, so in artistic perception body and spirit are at one. Art-making is forming visibility. Visible nature is a welter of intuitions and perceptions; but art gives visibility a splendid order. Art is therefore nature transformed. Nature has a form, for if it did not it would not be visible. Still, its form is rudimentary. Art takes this rudimentary form which nature offers as a gift, in such abundance, and refines and elaborates it. Thus art-making is process that carries perception from confusion to clarity, from indefiniteness to exactitude. Thus natural form and artistic form are not related to one another as *Vorbild* to *Nachbild*, to appropriate Conrad Fiedler terminology, roughly as model to image, but, rather, as a less definite image to a more definite image. Art-making brings what is incipient in nature to an articulate and well-patterned form in which human consciousness can more adequately comprehend it.

One explores one's feeling – learns about, so that it no longer dominates you as a alien force – by expressing in paint, in sound, in moving images. Conversely, explores pain, or sound, or moving images, by working out ones feelings in them. This is part of what I meant by saying that there what is artistic in artworks does not involve a distinction between means and ends. The medium is not an instrument through which we express emotion. It provides the form of the emotion. The intuition (to shift terms slightly, so as to present a different aspect of my idea) which gives rise to the work art is not separate from the medium – the intuition that gives rise to the poem is as much about words as it is out emotions. What is more, until the intuition has been given form in words, one does not really know what it is.

We cannot distinguish between the intuition (or feeling) and the expression of the intuition (or feeling) in the form of the work. The intuition is not one thing, and the expression (or embodiment) of it another things – a something that made to fit the intuition. The complete experience of the intuition cannot exist until the intuition has been given expression.

The intuition is individualized in the process of being "bodied forth." An intuition (or feeling) does not become what it uniquely through being compared to something else, through being described, or brought under a category (that was Kant's great point, wasn't it). The poets urge, or the painter's urge, or the filmmaker's urge, is to give body to the intuition or feeling in all its peculiarity. Grappling with a feeling, a painter says, "I want to get this completely clear." To get this clear, he or she does not compare it to something else like it (though painting teacher's often make the mistake of assuming that getting the student painter to do that is their task). Rather he or she fusses with a line, trying something out, troubling him or herself over it, complaining that "That's not it" reworking, reworking it again, and again, and again, until he feels, or she feels "That's it." This process is repeated over and over, until the painting is finished. Then the emotion, or intuition, has been clarified. The task of clarifying our intuitions is not separable the task of discovering what the medium in which we clarify it can do.

That is why one cannot execute a work according to a plan. One couldn't give a specify for that line the painter was working towards in advance. A craftsperson could, but not an artist. In that sense, the actions the artist engages in are not purposive actions – at least not in the sense that one can educe a purpose for them in advance, and strive to realize that purpose.

However, most people are not used to dealing with non-purposes. The present ideas about education make it very difficult for people to speak as though they were in tune with the sort of endeavour. This is true, even though one would expect that most people would be familiar with an analogous process in the domain of ideas – the process of struggle to get one's idea clear by finding the words to state it. What distinguishes an artist, in fact, is an unusually

intense involvement with the medium.

We betray consciousness – betray ourselves – when we seek to avoid the work of getting our ideas(our intuitions or emotions) clear; and we do so when we consider the medium a mere vehicle for conveying our emotions. We betray ourselves, in our task of getting our intuitions clear, when we fail to explore the medium in which we express them. Consciousness is corrupted when we consider the medium simply a vehicle for conveying ideas or feelings that have been already been clarified

But how does all that fit with an educational system that increasingly concerned with outcomes and transferable skills. Education now is to teach means that can be specified in advance. Humanities education had been the effort to get students to grapple with exemplary accomplishments in clarifying intuitions – both production and film studies teachers can share that goal. But now we encourage students to acquire skills Success has become confounded with attaining a preconceived end. Resisting that ideology of education is perhaps the best that a conscionable teacher can offer.