

The Downtown Review

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Enter The Downtown Review:

a few introductory notations

What.

Quite simply, a new journal of opinion. A forum for review and for discussion of some of the many events that take place in the Downtown Manhattan area each month. ("Downtown," however, is more a state of mind than a place, since we intend to cover other areas as well, such as screenings at the Whitney and MOMA.) Downtown is where we are located: 270 Bowery, and there is a certain ring to that. Journals of opinion are precarious ventures, to say the least. But we hope to survive by taking as our starting point—as our founding philosophy if you will—that there are many things going on in Lower Manhattan these days and there is just not enough coverage of them. We don't begin by finding fault with the coverage that does exist; we merely attempt to provide more. We do not begin as an alternative. We begin as another.

Why.

Work exists to be seen. To be reviewed, confronted, analysed, at times discussed. Work not reviewed is ignored and thus disappears. As Soho has grown over the last few years, there has been an increasing need for more analytical response to the work that has been presented here. Take film as just one example. I happen to be an admirer of the writings of Amy Taubin, Noel Carroll, and Jim Hoberman. But they cannot cover everything, nor are they asked to by their respective publications. More film takes place within the Downtown community than they can seriously review. And the serious work that they do review is often not taken seriously enough by the publication that prints it. At one weekly for instance, the important works of cinematic art are shunted off into a column called "The Other Cinema," as if there could still exist in Lower Manhattan anyone who takes seriously the American commercial film. For us, the "other cinema" is the stuff that the NY Film Critics seem to endlessly argue (and fawn) over. But, you may ask, are there not already a number of journals that speak directly to independent or avant-garde film? Yes, certainly: *Film Culture*, *October*, and the new *Millennium Film Journal* are all important and energizing forces in the field. There are more: *No Rose*, *Idiolects*, *Cinema News* (from California), and *Field of Vision* (from Pittsburgh), to name a few. So why start another? Just three reasons, really:

1. We hope this to be a monthly and therefore a more frequent publication than the others mentioned.
2. While we expect to cover more than just film, we are aiming to concentrate on just the Soho area (again, with a few exceptions). That sort of focus is in some ways less ambitious and in some ways more ambitious than some of the other publications. We'll try to keep that focus sharp: we won't attempt to cover fashion, parties, network television or the disco scene.
3. We hope to provide a real forum. We invite responses to published pieces. We shall attempt to provoke a dialogue. We would like to offer an opportunity for more than a few voices to comment upon Soho in the late 70's and other related topics.

Some problems.

Getting started is never easy. While both editors have a passionate interest in American painting, we are finding it difficult to cover the complex and seemingly static gallery arena. Most of the painters we know despair that "nothing is happening." We are not convinced of that. But we still search for evidence. Painting has been a problem. In addition, money has been a problem. Time has been a problem. Labor has been a problem. Getting started is never easy. But as this issue goes to press, we have begun the next. It should be out by the end of February.

Some hopes.

In an age perhaps best signified by the demise of *New Times*, our main hope is, of course, to continue. We also hope to be provocative and thoughtful, accurate and fair. We know there is a lot of worthy work out there. We hope to respond to it.

Raymond Foery

... but today the air has grown so dense that delicate things are literally not recognized.

Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*

The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism,

P. Adams Sitney, editor, The New York University Press, 1978.

This is a welcome volume—an impressive collection of crucial writing on avant-garde film not too dissimilar from, but a vast improvement over the editor's previous (and now out of print) anthology, *The Film Culture Reader*. Unlike the earlier reader, this one is more strongly unified, following one tradition, and exhibits excellence from first page to last. Indeed, it can be read cover to cover with virtually no lapse in interest or relevance. Believe me, there are few film books about which one could make a similar claim.

Part of Sitney's editorial decision-making has been to bring to print material previously unavailable or whose availability has been hitherto severely limited. For instance, there is a bulk of translated essays appearing in English for the first time, including three pieces by Germaine Dulac, two by Jean Epstein, and one by Sergei Eisenstein. Dulac and Epstein are embarrassingly under-appreciated in this country for both their writing and their films. A short essay by Artaud, "Sorcery and the Cinema," until now only available in an inadequate translation in England, has been newly translated by the editor.

Excerpts from Peter Kubelka's lectures make their debut here in printed form. Until now, Kubelka has avoided such publication because he felt (and still does feel) that verbal transcriptions of his lectures diminish their vividness and impact. Having seen and heard Kubelka speak, I would agree, but then again, Kubelka's stance is self-evident and bringing his theoretical speculations to print is a valuable addition to the literature. Incidentally, I would suggest that of all the numerous stories of how a particular film was made under unusual circumstances, the story behind the making of *Schwechater* has to be the most peculiar and amusing of them all. Fortunately one has the background here in the artist's own words.

There are numerous other rarities: film notes by both James Broughton and Sidney Peterson, unpublished for thirty years or so; perhaps what is Maya Deren's most brilliant single piece of theory, "Cinematography, the Creative Use of Reality," reprinted only once in an expensive format since its initial appearance in *Daedalus* in 1960; and previously unpublished lectures by Jonas Mekas, Hollis Frampton and Tony Conrad. The volume features many more artists, both European and American, whose writing is central to an understanding of avant-garde film, Vertov, Richter, Brakhage and Snow, among others.

One of the pleasant things to arise out of this book is the location of a school of wit among the writer/film-makers in the avant garde. The school's motto might be taken from Tony Conrad's hilarious piece, "A Few Remarks Before I Begin," which parodies the rather dense contemporary theoretical discourse. Both Hollis Frampton and Harry Smith would assent to Conrad's ironist dictum: "Naturally, the advantage of being serious by not being serious is that it is impossible to communicate by being serious." The founding father of the school is Sidney Peterson whose program notes for his own film, *The Cage*, are chiseled in a cool Jamesian prose:

If a half century from now somebody falls off a ladder as a result of a sudden realization that the gradual coming into focus of a plaster bust in the opening shot represents the history of art from blur to plug hat, thus disposing in four feet of film of the absurd tradition that the aesthetic impulse is a dolled-up version of the involitional mimicry of butterflies and shellfish, the producers of the film cannot, of course, be responsible.

Tragically, no one seems to enjoy weaving sentences like that one anymore.

A work which is neither theory nor criticism (except in a larger sense), but an inspired inclusion anyway is Joseph Cornell's screenplay, "Monsieur Phot." This particular piece points to one minor weakness of the volume: an occasional lack of precise bibliographical background. The notes fail to indicate, for example, that the reproductions from stereo-optical slides are placed in the present text more or less exactly where Cornell placed them in the first limited edition of the work in the 1930's. The images have been restored to the text for the first time since that initial appearance (another Sitney coup). Without some inquiry, however, I wasn't sure if the illustrations were Cornell's own selections, or those of a painstaking editor who had rummaged in the Cornell files.

Sadly, though it is through no fault of Sitney's, one major figure is missing, Gregory Markopoulos, who refused to grant re-publication rights. Being one of those in the important so-called first generation of post-war independent American film-makers, his writing is sorely missed. Otherwise the list of material by film-makers is long—too long for recounting in full. Only four pieces are by non-film-makers. Although these are all worthy (e.g. Annette Michelson's classic essay on Michael Snow, an excerpt from Stephen Koch's book on Andy Warhol, etc.) one wonders why this more academically oriented criticism has been considered at all, for it sticks out, puts the reader in another mode in the midst of all the writing by the film-makers themselves. An artist writes criticism towards a different end than a critic/theorist—even if an artist considers himself one of the latter—which he invariably is anyway. An artist's criticism fights for elbow room in which to work; a critic attempts to lock

wk
things into place, however deftly he may handle complexities. Especially since the book closes with three humorous essays written in ironic tones, my admittedly personal sense of this volume (despite the editor's probable and more honest intentions) is that it refreshingly fights for room, irony, as ever, being one of the most effective weapons. For this reason I feel that the true critical pieces (in the strict sense) belong more appropriately in Sitney's periodical adventure, *The Essential Cinema*. Whatever, the great bulk of primary source material will make the volume valuable to the film-making community and astute academics will see its indispensibility if they teach avant-garde film.

Sitney's introduction is, in many ways, a cursory

amendment and refinement of his historical work, *Visionary Film*. In the five or more years since that work, his writing has matured. Ideas are presented with more concision and clarity.

I started out the review with the theme of availability and it is not without some embarrassment that I have to mention that *The Avant-Garde Film* is expensive, \$12.50 in the paperback edition! One wonders if, at that price, the contents have been made truly "available." I can only reiterate and say that judging from the usual fare of film books, one could go without a dozen others in one's library and choose this one instead and come out ahead in terms of pages worth acquiring. All in all then, it is still a bargain.

John Pruitt



The Bowery, 1888