

Explosion in the Movie Machine: Essays and Documents on Toronto Artists' Film and Video

Edited by Chris Gehman

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Review by Andrew James Paterson

Explosion in the Movie Machine collects personal reports on film and video presentation from throughout Toronto's moving-image history. Film and video have frequently been called "two solitudes," as one of the book's keynote reprinted essays affirms. Yet the very title of this volume collapses film and video into "movies," begging the question: are all moving images movies?

Editor Chris Gehman's introduction states that a decision to concentrate on film and video, "... was motivated by the need for focus in a book of modest scale. And the recognition that there was so much to say about these media in the Toronto context that to try to include the entire range of artists' media practices would be to do a disservice to all of them." This is true, and Gehman adds that "media-arts" can be a slippery term. I myself agree: why are some works media-art but not film or video? Accordingly the first several chapters of *Explosions* reprint iconic essays on Toronto film and video that assert and problematize the distinction between the two mediums. Among them, "Toronto Artists' Film Activity between 1950 to 1969" by John Porter (1984) outlines a fascinating timeline of how certain events happened and how they instigated others. In doing so, Porter introduces not only individual filmmakers but

also organizations that continue to figure prominently in Toronto's ongoing film trajectories. Porter's essay is followed by Peggy Gale's newly commissioned essay "All These Years," which details early Toronto video activities. Film is barely present in Gale's essay, although television lingers as both a "vexed other" and a desired venue for many artists.

Tom Sherman's "Transvideo" (1981) is a manifesto proclaiming video to be a new medium for electronic communications, but not an art movement nor a form of art-making akin to painting or sculpture or other traditional practices. At the time the essay was first published, in 1981, video was still a young medium that could be accessed or infiltrated by artists wanting to share and exchange outside of studios and galleries. Sherman does not list film among video's ghost mediums or vexed others. By contrast, R. Bruce Elder's "The Cinema We Need" (1985) is a manifesto vehemently countering narrative trends and co-optations of "avant-garde" strategies by Canadian filmmakers and programmers. Elder argues for a cinema of the immediate: a Canadian cinema of experience characterized by visual and verbal poetry and not constrained by ideas. According to Elder, video, ghosted by television, does not qualify. As a result, both Sherman and Elder are unapologetically "avant-garde" with their manifestos.

A commissioned essay by Michael Zryd, "Toronto As Experimental Film Capital," focuses on how identity-related representational concerns problematized formalist definitions of experimentalism and helped jettison "avant-garde." Zryd's essay highlights Toronto's annual Images Festival in its first decade (1988–1997), and how it wavered between being committed to experimentalism while also encouraging

identity-related programming. But as specifically identity-based festivals developed in relation to the limitations perceived around Images (and the Toronto International Film Festival), Images had to “remain distinctive in an environment in which community-oriented festivals were beginning to spring up every year or two...”. Thus, Images became “experimental” in profile. Zryd’s essay also examines the hotly contested 1989 International Experimental *Film* Congress and then the not-so-contested 2010 International Experimental *Media* Congress. It was not only the terminology that had changed.

So, is Toronto an experimental film capital in the 21st century? The second section of *Explosions* is largely concerned with festivals, distributors, and funding agencies – and issues involving these institutions and those who must negotiate them. Richard Fung’s “Colouring the Screen: Four Strategies in Anti-Racist Film and Video” (originally published in *Parallelogramme*, volume 18 in 1993) and Taryn Sirove’s newly commissioned essay “Truce or Compromise” both focus on histories of state and other forms of censorship and exclusion. While the presence of “artists of colour” has certainly increased since Fung’s essay was first published, and exemption from censorship procedures for artists and their festivals has now been in place for over two decades, many other contentious issues have not been satisfactorily resolved. Anti-racism and anti-censorship activisms have often run parallel to each other but have sometimes conflicted. Similarly, identity concerns have not completely disappeared and there is still danger that “community standards” might impede free speech when there isn’t an obvious boundary between the art-world and “society.” In his introduction, Gehman states that he leaves it to the reader “to decide whether this represents the

'tepid pluralism' decried by the authors of the 1989 manifesto *Let's Set the Record Straight...* or whether this expanding pluralism is dynamic or positive".

Fung's second included essay, "We Like To Watch: Toronto's Passion for Film Festivals," details how festivals develop and grow, how one creates the need for another, and how festival personnel tend to either progress from one to another or simply overlap. Toronto's numerous festivals have built upon the same sort of networking that many individual careers and representational incentives have built upon. Wanda Nanibush's "Cultural Sovereignty in Cinema: Beyond Tonto in Toronto" details a major growth of autonomous aboriginal production that includes artists working in industrial modes and also artists moving away from straightforward storytelling. Meanwhile Jonathan Culp's new essay, "Farther Shores: Experiments in Canadian Feature Narrative," examines various independent artists who have negotiated film and television careers to various degrees of success and satisfaction.

Gehman's introduction states that there is a reason why none of the historical texts are dated later than 1992. Since that date, there has been general movement among media-arts players and organizations away from advocacy and manifestos towards practical organization and audience-building. The book's final essay, "Notes on a Sea Change" by Jon Davies, focuses on artists in the 21st century who enjoy wildly varying degrees of success or media presence. Today, the gallery world is a coveted destination, not a constraining parking spot. There are artists who have their cakes and eat them too, with art dealers, media art distributors and a world wide web permitting free access to their works. Yet there are more artists than ever who continue to toll in relative obscurity. Who qualifies as a video artist in the age of YouTube and Vimeo? What is a film print in an age when so many works reside online? Who is an artist, who isn't, and who cares or decides?

Gehman's introduction states that this book is about systems and networks and not about individual artists – and that those who wonder whether or not they are referenced are misguided. True, this book is more about community-building and less about individual achievements: *Explosion In The Movie Machine* highlights cinema (and video) as social experience, something that has become dissipated in the 21st century with its variety of possible screening formats. Although I think this volume could have benefitted from a couple more commissioned essays (such as one on distribution with its strengths and limitations), it is still a useful reference document for those wanting to research Toronto's post-World War II film and video histories. It may not have been intended to be a scholarly book, but scholars will find valuable information within it, as will cineastes and videophiles and maybe even media-artists.

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