

Sweeney

4th INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF ART CRITICS

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Theriot

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It would seem to me that the theme, Art Criticism through the Film Medium, was introduced into the Congress program less as a topic for debate than as a platform for the encouragement of this approach and for the solicitation of ideas to this end. If we accept as basic objectives of art criticism (which I feel most of us do) the stimulation of a wider or deeper appreciation of those works of art which we as critics with a certain training of eye enjoy and admire and a fuller knowledge of or sympathy with the point of view of the artist in creating the work, the film medium is an obvious channel for this. And in its growing alliance to television distribution promises in the very near future to become the broadest power of popular education.

These were some of the reasons which inspired Mr. Sandberg of Amsterdam to associate the International Art Film centre in that city with the Stedelyck Museum which he directs. They were also the reasons which led the Trustees of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York to go a step further and approve in principle a project which I put before them for the establishment of an Art Film Laboratory as a department of that institution. The Museum of Modern Art in New York had already a long established and rich repository of films and an effective service for putting them at the disposal of Museums, schools, clubs and the like throughout the United States. But no work except in a single instance some years ago or of a marginal character had been done by that institution in the production of films on art. The Guggenheim Museum Trustees agreed that a valuable critical and teaching service could be performed through a research laboratory in art film techniques

and a programmatic production of films in connection with contemporary painting and sculpture. Actually no laboratory for free research in film techniques exists anywhere, even in Hollywood where one might logically expect it. And for three months before my departure an exploratory study of possibilities ideas and interests of individual film makers and film organisations was carried on by the Museum. Thirty-two films makers were interviewed and fourteen asked to submit formal ideas for films in keeping with certain tentative themes which were made them. And out of the results of this research I am to compile a full report for the Trustees on my return to New York next week.

It was our belief that film-makers as technicians and potential artists in their own medium would best know how to visualize critical and analytical ideas in terms of their own medium the film. It was for this reason we urged them to make their proposals with entire freedom. The art historical, or art critical control, we felt should only come later and ideally should come only concomitantly with the production. And here in my opinion we come to the key question in the matter of art films and that of art criticism through the film medium: is the film which is dominated by a literary approach, or the film which attempts to explain a work of art in its terms not an added means to the confusion of the layman? The temptation in art films since the war in particular has been either towards a "Potted lecture" as it were on a work of art; or an artist, or a school, towards a straight and frequently dull documentary on a museum, a city, a cathedral or the like or towards a fantastic composition of the elements of a painting - in the manner initiated by Eisenstein - which often completely loses sight of the total work

of art from which it is drawn?

The question as I see it comes down to this: do such exegeses, documentations, or fantastic developments of translated features add any true depth to the layman's appreciation of a work of art. Is this type of art film which we have known up to date not just another barrier between the observer and the actual work of art?

In my opinion the film opens up a fertile field of possible stimulation to the appreciation of painting, sculpture, and other art expressions, but not in the literary character it has taken up to now. If it is to avoid confusing the public and divert it from the actual work of art in the same way the written word has so often done it, it must find a more direct filmic expression than it has taken to date. The film must create an equivalent for the work of art which will make its critical contribution through a stimulation of interest in the work of painting or sculpture by a work of parallel intensity in the film medium rather than through a dependence on literature, which is only a subordinate element of film expression - not its essential - much as conventional naturalistic representation was in painting and sculpture.

When such purification of the cinematic approach to a work of painting or sculpture is achieved then we can envisage a true critical contribution in the film medium. Till that time, in my opinion, films on art will remain in the category of journalism or at best documentations to add our ever swelling heap of documentation around art, rather than avenues to works of art and a profounder appreciation of them.

James Johnson Sweeney