

BOOK REVIEWS

Canadian Film Reader,

edited by Seth Feldman

and Joyce Nelson

Peter Martin Associates, 405 pages. \$6.95

Several years ago I knew five or six people who were writing books on Canadian film. The future prospects then for the teaching and study of Canadian film seemed auspicious. At last there would be a critical mass of easily accessible materials. But, as with the best laid plans of mice and writers, most of the plans went astray and few of the books actually appeared in print. The result is that there is still a paucity of written materials (especially in English) on the Canadian film. There are, of course, the articles and reviews in *Cinema Canada* and *Motion* and the occasional piece on Canada in *Take One*, but in-depth, critical studies of particular films, movements, or personages are rare in book form. In the past, people teaching a course on Canadian film have literally had to scrounge for sufficient written materials to use.

Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson's *Canadian Film Reader* does much to rectify the situation. The anthology is comprised of 44 articles and reviews, many of which were originally published in such diverse journals as *Cinema Canada*, *Descant*, *Take one*, *Saturday Night*, *Film Quarterly*, *Canadian Forum* and *This Magazine*. Included are three pieces which seem to have been written especially for the volume, one transcript of a speech, a portion of a yet unpublished manuscript, and three excerpts from books. In quality, the selections run the gamut from unreadable academese to throw-away journalism. The vast majority of the articles, however, are readable, worthwhile, and significant.

As in any collection of this size, gaps are inevitable. As Feldman and

Nelson point out in their introduction, the book has:

... "more material dealing with the 'Establishment' cinema than with 'Independent' cinema; a stress on English-Canadian films rather than Francophone works; maybe even too much 'factual' material and not enough critical-theoretical works."

The editors hope, however, that their book will stimulate others to respond to the articles, that

"There will be new research, new writing, new courses, lectures, conferences and retrospectives on the Canadian films discussed here, as well as those that have gone unmentioned."

Overly optimistic, perhaps but there is no doubt that the need exists.

Feldman and Nelson divide the book into five parts. Part One, "The Possibilities Are Truly Great", consists of five articles dealing with the pre-war years of Canadian film. Memorable in this section is the article by Peter Morris on Ernest Shipman. The story of Shipman's success in producing seven feature films in Canada in three years, followed by his rapid demise in the early twenties, is a fascinating case study of an early huckster and entrepreneur who was outhuckstered by the "growth" and "progress" of the film industry in the U.S.

Predictably, the second section of this anthology centres on the National Film Board. Of particular interest here are Barbara Halpern Martineau's study of women's films at the NFB during World War II and Ronald Blumer and Susan Schouten's piece on the overly neglected documentarist Donald Brittain. This section ends with John Grierson's "Memo to Michelle about Decentralizing the Means of Production", reminding us how forward looking and astute Grierson was, even toward the end of his life.

Section three, the longest, deals with Feature Filmmaking and is highlighted by Bob Fothergill's theoretical piece, "Coward, Bully, or Clown". In it he cleverly extends to film the theory popularized by Margaret Atwood (in *Survival*) on the depiction of the Canadian ego in literature.

In-depth interviews with filmmakers can be particularly valuable in a work such as this as a way of coming to grips with realistic, personal, and practical issues and problems. The interview by Sarah Jennings of Terence Macartney-Filgate that appears in section two and the interview of Denys Arcand by Judy Wright and Debbie Magidson in section three are both works with which I had been familiar, but which, till now, had been relatively inaccessible. Alan Rosenthal's interview with Allan King on *A Married Couple* appears here, but unfortunately is not accompanied by the useful companion interviews with Richard Leiterman and Arla Saare or by the budgets and "Notes Made from Inspection of Footage", all of which appear in Rosenthal's own book of interviews with documentary filmmakers.

Section four, "Experimental Filmmaking", is disappointingly brief, containing only six pieces, with articles on Joyce Wieland and Michael Snow taking up half of them. Joe Medjuck's interview with Michael Snow, in addition to being readable and enjoyable, has a 'down home' quality and a lack of pretentiousness. This interview, as well as many of the other pieces, is updated with a postscript written in 1976.

The final section of the book, "The Possibilities Are Truly Great' Continued" contains Peter Harcourt's "Introduction" from *Film Canadiana 1975-1976*. As the final piece in the book, the irony of its title is not lost. For what it, and one other piece in the final section do, is to question the future of Canadian film. Both Harcourt and Sandra Gathercole, in her "Statements from the Council of Canadian Filmmakers", look to government for solutions to the problems.

Despite the fact that there are no easy answers to the myriad difficulties facing the Canadian film industry, the times are encouraging. And that encouragement is fostered and strengthened by the publication of Seth Feldman's and Joyce Nelson's *Canadian Film Reader*.

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