

cannes

ramblings and rumblings

by Marc Gervais

To find out why Canada's performance at Cannes was both "intriguing" and "inconclusive", what the Aussies brought from *Down Under* and more, read film critic Marc Gervais and savor his musings about the Festival of Festivals.



From Olmi's splendid "Clog Tree"
10/Cinema Canada

What is the Canadian film critic's primary job at Cannes? Is it to watch Canadian Films? Or is it to find out as much as possible about a batch of films most of which one knows will never be shown commercially back home?

Chalk it up to naïveté, or idealism, or lack of realism, or whatever, but the fact does remain that some people like to think of movies as something valid, as some vital reflection of our culture, some heightened vision of human experience, some exalted call to life as it should be: quite simply, as a means of communication still capable of producing works of art.

Even critics – well, some of them – manage to feel that way now and then. Pity the poor Canadian scribe, then, burdened with this kind of attitude, as he faces the sixteen-or-so Canadian and the five hundred other films Cannes has to offer in two mad weeks.

To be sure, most of the Cannes action is the fast hustle, film *qua* commodity, exploitation, to be bought and sold. All of this kind of activity is what makes film possible to begin with, right? – at least in terms of our Western ways. The game is immense, it has its conventions and rules – and it is so easy for the critic to play that game, to straight-jacket himself with protocol in those conventions.

The first thing you know, the only *real* question for the Canadian critic tends to become: what about the *Canadian* films? Were they any good? And did they sell?

And yet, there is Cannes, the incomparable showcase for films from all over the globe. Shouldn't film be a force knitting the whole world together, enabling us to share insights and understandings? And shouldn't the role of the critic be to encourage this process? Rhetorical questions, to be sure; but the answers they imply are very difficult to implement.

So these are mixed musings about Cannes, partial comments about disparate aspects, a kind of compromise between "ideal" visions from abroad and home-central preoccupations.

Poland

Without obvious rhyme and reason, let's start then, with Poland. Actually, I saw only two Polish movies at Cannes. And yet, for vague reasons, more or less touched upon above, I find myself returning to them. Poland?

For a number of Canadians, that means the mother country once or twice removed. But as far as Canadian film life is concerned, one might as well be talking about Mars. And yet here is a country with a considerable film history, especially since World War II. Film riches abound; they are not limited to, say, a few early Wajda masterpieces that used to be shown on the film club circuit.

There have been three so-called waves in post-war Polish cinema, culminating in the contemporary third wave, whose acknowledged *chef de file* is Krzysztof Zanussi.

Zanussi's kind of cinema would have a hard time in Canada, given the prescribed nature of our film viewing habits. His latest film, a typically deep, intellectual, inner prober called *Spiral*, serves as a marvelous reflector for Poland's present day cultural sensibility. It was in the official festival competition. For many, it proved to be one of the best at Cannes



One of Zanussi's earlier films, "Family Life"

this year, exploring, in the Polish mode, areas that have remained too exclusively Ingmar Bergman's preserve.

Chance had it that I spent some time with Zanussi in London, where he is teaching for three weeks at the National Film School. Zanussi's views on contemporary culture, on the problems of free creativity in the vastly differing Polish and North American contexts, and on the responsibilities and duties of filmmakers toward their culture were fascinating and enlightening.

To some Canadian film people – Allan King, Harry Gulk, Paul Almond, a few critics and teachers, and the like – they would make fine sense. But Zanussi's aesthetic and his ethic seem lightyears away from the *politique* underlying most Canadian film life.

Zanussi is nonplussed, not to say keenly frustrated, by his North American *confrères*. Aren't any of them, he asks, believers in some humanistic creed or other, don't they feel involved in society, in twentieth century life, and don't they want to do something about it? So where is their witnessing to this, what are they afraid of, why do they play the cynic's game vis-a-vis the media?

Big questions indeed. And our tragedy if that is not too grandiose a word – is that such questions tend to be considered irrelevant.

Another Pole's work also was much in evidence at Cannes, that of the pre-eminent Andrzej Wajda, still very active, still one of the half-dozen greatest European film directors. *Man of Marble* presented Cannes with an even sharper expression of the Polish political/cultural stance. Here was a film plagued, from its inception, by political censorship, but which, somehow – after two years – managed to find its way to Cannes as the hush-hush special "film surprise". Wajda's movie looks back at the Stalinist fifties, at the role of the media then and now, and comes to a tough, aware, yet conciliatory attitude, both in terms of recent Polish history and in terms of Wajda's own artistic activity. One is tempted to see it as a landmark of sorts in Polish film history.

Meanwhile, back in Toronto and Montreal and once in a while elsewhere in Canada, the money boys go on putting so much energy into trying to produce *consumer* movies. Even our most serious endeavors are inhibited – or usually down-right prevented from existing – by questions such as: "Yes, but what's the latest Hollywood recipe? Will it sell?" And so it goes.

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Poland is only one of many countries with much to offer. A number of them deserve careful study as possible models, *mutatis mutandis*, for our own emulation. At another level, their products could enrich our film viewing habits. But of course those movies are prevented from doing so by the very narrowness of the viewing habits and the economics that control our entire system.

Canada at Cannes

Let's face it, our performance was intriguing, but, by and large, inconclusive. There were things to be happy about, and things to regret. Compared with the past, Canadian business was good, the best yet at Cannes. And that should be good news. George Kaczender's **In Praise of Older Women**, for instance, was not even in Cannes, yet its international sales continued to mount even there. Initial reports indicated that a number of other films were doing well, including Lionel Chetwyn's version of Hugh McLennan's **Two Solitudes**, and some of our more obvious, exploitation flicks.

Yet the general critical reaction to our offerings — all of them on the Market, not a single feature invited to any of the competitions — was one of pronounced disappointment. The question I kept encountering from non-Canadian critics: "What has happened to your films? They used to be so promising (last year)."

I saw about seven, or half, of the "new" Canadian films shown on the market. The Canadian product was, to put it mildly, highly diversified, coming from a variety of opposed approaches, attitudes, ambitions.

There were the culturally prestigious films, very Canadian in content, reverential in their treatment of pre-existing books, such as **Two Solitudes** and Allan King's **Who Has Seen the Wind**. You prefer the chic, glossy, empty international co-productions? We had that too: Stuart Cooper's **The Disappearance**. To be sure, a number of schlock exploitation movies, Hollywood-in-Canada derivatives, were grinding away with varying degrees of success. And then there were the faulted, but more authentically personal, and far more interesting and promising attempts on a more modest level, such as Teri McLuhan's **The Third Walker**. There were even two films by four recent Loyola (Dept. of Communication Studies) grads, one of them an experimental, Marguerite Duras-like feature, **Shadows of Silk**, a tiny-budget affair created by two Montrealers living in Paris. Mary Stephen and John Cressey — and which is enjoying a good run in Paris.

So the Canadians presented a sort of kaleidoscopic effect. The over-all result, however, was anything but spectacular, especially when compared with the relatively stunning array of films on display from, say, Australia.

Australia and/versus Canada

For these last three years, the recurring mood, for this writer at least, has been one of enthusiasm over what is happening in our Commonwealth sister, that sprawling giant Down Under. The Aussies brought roughly the same number of films to Cannes as did the Canadians — but there the similarity ends.

One goes on hearing that Canada has marvelous directors, cameramen, and so on; that we are lacking only in screen writers. Well, when it comes to feature films, I beg to differ, judging from the past few years.

The cluster of Australian films — **Newsfront**, **The Last Wave**, **The Getting of Wisdom**, **The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith**, **Mango Tree**, **Mouth To Mouth**, **Solo**, **The Irishman**, and others — leaves our own output looking pretty shabby.

True, the Aussies generally do have better scripts. But it is not merely a question of the writers, it is a question of the general attitude behind the whole film. One feels the strong native Aussie spirit, the local color, topics that are indigenous to Aussie culture. So the films have a certain ring of truth and freshness about them — qualities so often lacking in Canadian products.

And they have a *look*. The Aussies are high on their own vast spaces; and their cameras are communicating to us. It may smack of old-time, pre-distanciation aesthetics, but the Aussies go in for a cinema that *sings*. Even if it means having to find some pretext for using a plane or helicopter, up they go, enabling their cameras to fill the screen with celebration of Australia's marvelous landscape. Just as the Americans did with their Westerns.

We have an even bigger country, I am told. But, judging from most of our efforts of late, it is not our cinema that can sing that song. The very film stock — or perhaps it is the way it is finally processed — seems to help *diminish* our sense of space and color. *Our* cameras are timorous, cast down, communicating a feeling of claustrophobia; and the colors that fill our Canadian features are — again, by and large; this does not apply to films like **Who Has Seen the Wind** — without the Australian, or Swedish, or English, or French, or Hungarian, or whatever, glow.

Canada has a distinguished record in the area of the direct cinema, the documentary, and animation. But in the area of fiction features, it may well be that Canadian talent simply has not reached the standards of many other countries, including non-majors such as Australia. One hates to think that it is the Canadian spirit that is at fault; that in spite of our unparalleled possibilities, we cannot respond, artistically or otherwise and are too busy wailing how we, the richest of earthlings, are so miserable.

It is difficult to pinpoint the whys and wherefores. And certainly the answer is fraught with paradox. Maybe it is that Australia — to return to that country, since the parallel with Canada is so obvious — benefits from being isolated, to a certain extent, from other Anglophone Whites. That Pacific Ocean keeps the USA far away, in more ways than one. Quite possibly, the Aussies have been forced to trust their own history and geography in a way beyond our experience, totally dominated as we are media-wise and every other-wise by the giant to the South.

We have our Canadian Film Development Corp., which has helped create and develop our feature film industry. The CFDC, let it be noted, is officially interested in culture, as well as the commercial aspects of film. The irony is that the various Australian government bodies that help finance their films define themselves uniquely as banks, and in no way as cultural monitors. And yet, the Aussie films over-all have a far more developed sense of culture. Their films are not yet masterpieces, but both at the artistic and the popular levels they are better than ours.

Let's compound the irony. One would wish that Aussie films would appear on Canadian screens so that English-Canadians could see their own background and cultural roots reflected better than in their own films! So far, however, Aussie films have not been shown here to any appreciable

extent. For example, the only print of a beautiful 1976 movie, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, that is available in Canada is French-dubbed.

The reasons for a situation that verges on the absurd? One seems to be that the Australians, unrealistic in their demands on Canadian film distributors, are asking for too much money up front. They do not seem to understand the degree to which the Canadian (and American) audiences are limited to certain kinds of subjects and certain kinds of approaches, all of this, of course, is the fruit of years of carefully nurtured and controlled viewing habits. For the Australians to break through, they must work with Canadian distributors and exhibitors who are sharp enough to realize that, at least initially they must aim for special audiences, use specialized promotion, and soon. In other words, modest beginnings.

A recent seminar in London, sponsored by the British Film Institute, demonstrated that the Australians are anything but sensitive to these kinds of realities. Surrounded by friends and admirers, their mood, unfortunately, shuffled from lack of interest to defensiveness against anticipated criticisms. So, all in all, the day of fruitful Australian-Canadian collaboration seems still a bit far off, for a variety of reasons. Still, one can hope.

Thus, for one set of possibilities.

Other models, to be sure, abound. The West Germans, for instance, loosed a veritable flood of films upon Cannes this year. A number of their more artistically ambitious ventures — these tend to be the ones threatened with meagre box office returns — are in great part financed by state-backed television, destined for both TV and theatrical release. In this fashion, they are almost guaranteed not to lose money.

Italy, certainly one of the Movie Big Four (along with the U.S., Britain and France) in the West, operates on another formula. Besides giving to *all* Italian-made films (what I believe is) 14 percent of each film's box office earnings, garnered from a general tax levied on total box office returns (including returns on American film imports), the Italian state, through three outlets — RAI for television, Luce and Italnoleggio for film — *totally* finances certain films of defi-



Last year's Cannes winner, "Padre Padrone"

nite cultural promise. *Padre Padrone*, by the Taviani brothers, was one such film; and it won at Cannes last year.

This year, the formula struck gold again. The most stunning film at Cannes, the one that garnered the "Palme d'Or" and a bushel of other awards, was Ermanno Olmi's *The Tree of the Wooden Clogs*.

The Tree of the Wooden Clogs was wholly financed by Italnoleggio; and the thinking behind this financing was quite lucid, centering as it does on Olmi himself. For the last ten years or so, Olmi's films and television creations have been financed *entirely* by state agencies. Olmi is rightly considered a serious, brilliant artist, one deeply attuned and dedicated to the cultural dimensions of the media. Given the pattern of today's film market, it is obvious that Olmi stands little chance competing with the mass exploitation flicks. So the state, recognizing the value of his work, assumes the financial responsibility, including the distribution of his film. To put it metaphorically and prejudicially: the state cultivates this rose in the wasteland.



Lombardy farmers serve as actors in "Clog Tree"

The result? In the case of *The Tree of the Wooden Clogs*, a glowing work that not only stands out against the contemporary injustice, alienation, and viciousness, but that soars into the realm of exalted art — whatever that may be. *The Tree of the Wooden Clogs* is the antithesis of the recipes now dominating the media. It makes demands of an audience. It signals the supremacy of contemplation over titillation, respect over exploitation, depth over superficiality, open-mindedness over propaganda.

With it, Olmi may at long last receive the international acclaim he deserves as the great successor of the early Rossellini and De Sica — no small praise indeed — but in the contemporary mode. Paradoxically enough, the film will make its money back many times over in the special film houses and the TV networks in many countries around the world.

So there are models and possibilities, and with imagination and perhaps radical rearranging, the Canadian situation could be helped to realize its potential more fully. For that, however, we have to have the insight, the knowledge, and the willingness to break out of our boxes.

Ultimately, that may be Cannes' chief role, surpassing even its mammoth market function: by gathering together such a multitude of approaches for mutual display, it can help point the way for achieving finer results. □