

# on the road to a national cinema

by Florence Jacobowitz

Taking a detour from the great Canadian Cinema Debate, Florence Jacobowitz takes a look at the new German films, and draws parallels to the situation in Canada.

Much has been written lamenting the fact that the Canadian cinema, as it exists, is only a 'branch plant,' a colony of the mighty ever-spreading American cinematic empire. We have been weaned on the Hollywood model and have become junkies of cultural products which have been mistakenly adopted as our national cinema. We continue to, perhaps validly, blame American cultural imperialism for the situation we are in and yet simultaneously cannot rid ourselves of the need to compete with the Hollywood film form and language which we have been trained to love and desire. These paradoxical love/hate feelings bind us Canadians to a continuous schizophrenic state of confusion and stagnation. It has become too destructive and frustrating to compete with a culture and cinematic form neither relevant to our culture nor to our economic possibilities. In order to progress towards our goal of witnessing the emergence of a popular, commercially viable Canadian national cinema rooted within historic and economic actualities, it is time to move from the level of 'lament' to developing positive steps towards change.

One major difficulty has always been Canada's relative isolation and, therefore, lack of exposure to other countries (besides the States) who have taken alternate routes towards

the development of a national cinema. Their successes, pitfalls and struggles offer important, constructive 'lessons' and new possibilities worth investigating.

Sometimes, as Jean-Luc Godard has said, it is essential to 'take a detour,' to talk about the machine, one must go out of the factory that uses it; the basis of this discussion will be outside the world of Canadian cinema, so as to have a better view of it when we return.

The New German Cinema, (which spans, at least, the last fifteen years) like Canadian Cinema, emerged from a system still heavily colonized by Hollywood movies and American culture. Perhaps what unites the very diverse New German films can be seen in a quote from an interview in *Sight and Sound* with Rainer Werner Fassbinder, one of the most prolific and well known NGC filmmakers, who proclaims, "I am a German making films for a German audience." Again and again one clearly senses from these films the emergence of a much more personal cinema, the insistence upon self-identity and the need to situate oneself historically.

What most of us have loosely understood is that the New German Cinema burst forth with productions strongly subsidized by the federal government and T.V. networks; that the movement was more of a 'foreign-festival affair' rather than a national one and seems to be petering out (or some will smugly claim has died) in the last couple of years. The following is an attempt to demystify and understand some of the strengths and problems that confronted the New German Cinema.

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*Florence Jacobowitz is a graduate of the York University Fine Arts Department who is presently working on an MA at New York University.*

In 1962 twenty-six filmmakers, writers and artists united to publish a manifesto proclaiming the beginning of the New German Cinema.

“... This cinema needs new forms of freedom: from the conventions and habits of the established industry, from intervention by commercial partners, and finally, freedom from the tutelage of other vested interests. We have specific plans for the artistic formal and economic realization of this New German Cinema. We are collectively prepared to take the economic risks. The Old Cinema is dead. We believe in the new.”

In this short extract of a rather general statement, there exist three important keys to the beginnings of positive change. As Thomas Elassar points out in his informative article, *The Postwar German Cinema*, the group: 1) made aware and exposed the problems and shortcomings of the “old cinema” by openly publishing and publicizing their protest; 2) instead of attempting to “storm the industry that had left them out in the cold” and stop at the frustrating stage of rejection, they published a program of ‘new freedoms’ towards positive change; “We have specific plans...”; 3) they united on a common platform despite a wide range of personal interests; “We are collectively prepared to take economic risks...” The group – among them Alexander Kluge their political ‘spokesman’ – went on to successfully lobby members of the federal government and in 1965, the Kuratorium Junger Deutscher Film was set up to actualize the Oberhausen proposals and sponsor new filmmakers via interest free loans (that were more like grants than loans). Other important results were the formation of the following centres encouraging national cinematic growth: the Berlin and Munich film schools, the Berlin ‘Arsenal’ (a cinémathèque) and the German Film Archives in Berlin.



Bar scene from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Angst Essen Seele Auf*

As the system is set up today, a German filmmaker seeking funds has the following options. Of the available government subsidies, the main governmental source is the FFA; Filmförderungsanstalt (Federal Film Board or Film Subsidies Bd). In 1967 this federal board was set up to distribute funds

collected from a box office levy imposed by the Film Subsidies Bill (Filmförderungsgesetz). Today there is a tax of .15DM (approximately 7 cents) on each ticket sold, and approximately \$7,500,000 is made available for film production from this levy. ‘Deserving’ scripts rated by the FBW (Filmbeurteilung Wiesbaden) that meet a ‘certain criteria’ and promise a box office return are awarded, and/or producers whose films have brought in more than 500,000 customers. (Catch 22 of course is that one needs a certain amount of exposure before one can command a public and box office returns). Also awarded are certain winners of international film prizes. Mr. Elassar points out that these subsidies can be abused by encouraging the production of ‘fast sellers’ or sure box office successes such as soft porn films, or the Heimat-film and Lummel Schoolyard films. Sometimes filmmakers would produce the fast sellers in order to be able to fund their own projects. Meeting ‘criteria’ or film ratings might also discourage overtly political, historical or national themes and encourage instead a product that is ‘internationally’ appealing enough to sell.

Another source to approach is the Project Förderung des Bundesministeriums des Inneren (The Film Department of the Bonn Ministry of the Interior) responsible for ‘culture.’ Out of a budget of 80,000,000 DM spent on opera, theatre, museums, orchestras etc. only 5,600,000 DM is allocated to the advancement of film. The money is used to award screenplays, promote exhibitions, or donate as prize money and at least has no box office stipulations. (Some argue that this sort of funding allows filmmakers to produce films that are geared to festivals and thus bypass their home market altogether.)

The Kuratorium Junger Deutscher Film is a government organization funded by the various federal states (similar to Canadian provinces) who contribute the surplus of their cultural budgets (totalling a rather insignificant amount of approximately \$300,000). The funds are awarded to submitted screenplays and are designed to support ‘new’ directors, though Ron Holloway notes in an article in *Variety*, often even ‘new’ directors need connections (‘names’ and ‘friends’ of, for example, prominent T.V. producers) to qualify.

A main source of funding involves approaching the T.V. executive producers, the ‘Redakteurs’ at one of the state supported T.V. networks. They will either entirely produce, co-produce or simply buy prints of a film to be aired on T.V. Filmmakers retain the rights to their films, excepting T.V. broadcasting rights which cannot be utilized until two years after the film is released. *Variety* argues that since the filmmaker must make his film according to normal T.V. format (excluding wide screen and cinemascope) the T.V. films are not “genuine movies.” On the other hand, German national networks allow filmmakers much more freedom in making ‘controversial’ films. Tony Rayns points out that “American filmmakers like Kenneth Anger and Steve Dworkin found support from German T.V. when there was none to be had closer to home.”

Television is vital to New German Cinema because of the medium’s potential for massive national exposure. Filmmakers can reach an immediate audience estimated between 17-23 million viewers. Screening feature films on T.V. can be a disadvantage commercially, since, some argue, people feel they need not go see the films at theatres if they are soon to be shown on T.V. Here are some of the facts Edmund Luft

reports, in this year's *National Film Guide* from West Germany: This year ARD, ZDF and the regional third channel are airing some 1,000 feature films, the highest number ever screened. NGC films 'unspooled' on T.V. this year included Sinkel Brustellin's *Berlinger*, Peter Stern's *Sommergäste* and Wim Wenders' *Im Laufe der Zeit (In the Course of Time)*. Schlöndorff's *The Lost Honor of Katarina Blum*, the only subsidized film to gross more than its original subsidy investment, was rerun on T.V. which, Luft points out, reduces its theatre rerun possibilities. Most of Herzog's films, including *Kaspar Hauser*, are also scheduled.

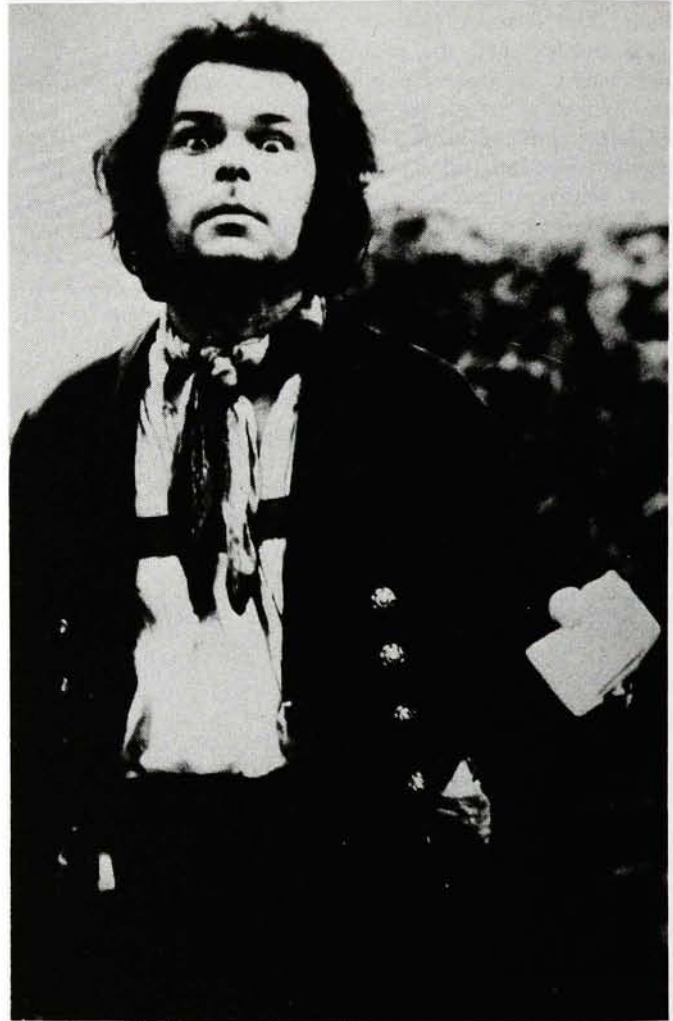
The last source one can approach are the private investors who generally contribute 20-40 percent of production costs, (although the film *Hitler, A Career*, was made totally from private funds) it is, however, difficult to get investors to bank on German films that do not promise to be box office hits. Germany, like Canada, and unlike the United States, has kept tax shelter incentives to encourage investment by allowing investors to write off their losses. Producers in Berlin have 30 percent of the financial risk of bank credits not recouping reduced by a guarantee granted by the city and secured against the municipal budget. Tax sheltered production deals do not, on the whole, assist German or other 'national' films since foreign investors can take advantage of the deals (for example, by lensing a film in Germany after it has been conceived in the U.S.).

If a film is popular at festivals abroad or on certain networks the filmmaker can get another film subsidized without necessarily having reached, or spoken to the commercial audience who supposedly must share and relate to the national culture, history and mythologies presented in the New German films. The problem is still partially economic. Though the government is helping to subsidize many new films, there is still not enough money budgeted to both produce films and have them properly distributed, publicized and exhibited. (And yet filmmakers must keep producing in order to be subsidized at all.) Considering that there is no assured quota system in Germany, that the powerful Hollywood distributors control over 40 percent of the market and are quickly buying up many cinemas, it is, not surprisingly, difficult to get New German films properly distributed and exhibited. In 1971, twelve filmmakers (including Wim Wenders, R.W. Fassbinder, Uwe Brander) founded the Filmverlag der Autoren, a co-operative set up to distribute films. Almost two years ago the Filmverlag almost went bankrupt and was bailed out by Rudolf Augstein of *Der Spiegel* who bought a 55 percent interest in the company and invested \$300,000 of his life savings into the Filmverlag. Another private industrialist invested \$3,000,000 into Munich's largest distributing company, Constantin, which was going bankrupt. Although the Filmverlag exists and is growing, Luft reports that there are still many 'subsidized' films not being distributed, for example, *Rheingold*, the German entry to last year's Spring Berlin Festival with over \$100,000 in aid from the First German Video Net or Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler-A Film from Germany*.

Public exposure to the cinema in general is a problem in Germany. *Variety* reported this year that there are 313 villages in Germany with 4 to 10 thousand people without a cinema altogether, 64 villages with 4,000 people have one cinema etc. and many theatres in the bigger cities have closed. The FFA (Film Subsidy Board) recently subsidized 60 per-

cent of a project to stimulate movie going; during the Berlin Film Festival a Kinomobile was set up to bring films to different villages. Although individuals or groups are opening 'alternate' cinema houses that are screening New German films, (like the Berlin Arsenal), there still is not enough box office return to cover production costs.

Many New German filmmakers have been increasingly co-producing with the close European market, and even Hollywood, (among them Wenders, Herzog and Fassbinder). It is somewhat ironic that these 'New German' filmmakers who were so genuinely concerned in an inherently 'German' cinema have begun to co-produce, and it is unfortunate, because it seems too early for a young movement that has yet to settle itself solidly, to successfully integrate co-productions.



The visions of an innocent: Kasper Hauser

Developing a new, national cinema that will be an immediate commercial success without the necessary exposure — and, in a way, education — is impossible. Journalists report that the "dark and bitter subjects of the New German Cinema accounts for the poor reception at home; personal slant, social and philosophical approach fails to click with the public." The political and historical statements are "too clear," too forthright. The fact is that Germany has not had a very entertaining recent past history. Many filmmakers have tried to express their postwar-guilt crisis and cultural insecurities, and deal with the confusion that arose from the

West German postwar need to forget its own past by trying to assimilate into other histories and cultures (predominantly American); many of Wim Wenders' characters are constantly 'preparing' new starts.

Wenders expressed some of his frustrations in an interview he gave Jan Dawson in Toronto a couple of years ago:

"Nobody's used to German films and nobody wants to see them. Nobody has confidence in films shot in Germany and about Germany, especially not in black and white — people in Germany are very suspicious, or even indifferent and there's a very, very strong opposition to the New German Cinema from what is left of the old industry, even a very fascist opposition... The way the New German films are handled by the German institutions, who'd prefer to have nothing to do with them and are rather disturbed if one of these films wins a prize. They'd prefer it to disappear somewhere. Especially in the distribution system over here, the opposition to German films is very, very heavy... It's pure schizophrenia. Because the only alternative is to have even more American films in the cinemas (already there are more than 80 percent) and they don't want that either. What they do want is national productions, but of films that look international. They don't want national films, but they want a national film industry. They want those wishy-washy international co-productions. They want what they call 'popular film.'"

Some New German filmmakers have tried bridging the gap between 'popular' films and New German films. The trick involves the ability to take a foreign grammar and use it to express something 'national.' The most prominent examples of this are the films of Fassbinder who has tried, as Thomas Ellasar writes, to "reinvent Hollywood in the Germany of the seventies, since Hollywood is the language shared with the under-thirty working class and lower middle class." He uses beautiful exaggerated Hollywood images and fills them with German actualities. He makes one aware of one's condition as a victim in an oppressive society, and yet tries to show one how to cope, or even take steps towards change.

Still, the appreciation of the New German Cinema has been more international than national. The facts and figures seem to point to a decrease in the exhibition of New German films. Edmund Luft reports that German films exhibited domestically dropped from 26.5 percent in 1974 to 10 percent in 1977, 5 percent of which were co-productions. Out of 339 films exhibited last year, one third, 105, were from the U.S., 38 were German, 13 were German-foreign co-productions and the rest were from France, Italy, Hong Kong and England. Out of an entire gross of \$100,000,000, the films from the United States gross 55-60 million and the German films, 11 million. (This also means that 60 percent of the FFA's subsidies that help finance the production of New German films comes from taxing these American movies, something Canada never has learned to do.) The only really good news Luft reported was that out of the "local public of cinema-goers, 80 percent consists of young people, who (he hopes) will be inspired by the German cinemas' international acclaim to find their way back to the theatres — and it's beginning to happen."

In many of Wenders' films, the characters are often exploring, travelling in foreign places and 'crossing frontiers.'



Wearing the same shades in Wim Wender's *Im Lauf der Zeit*

He tries to explain the reason for this and, to me, it reflects an important key to the development of a national cinema:

"I think the notion of identity is a very new one and I think the cinema is, in a way, the art of things as well as persons becoming identical with themselves. And foreignness for me is just a throughway to a notion of identity. In other words, identity is not something you just have, you have to go through things to achieve it. Things have to become insecure in order to become secure in a different way. That's what I meant about foreignness; it's a way of losing the old notion of self evidence... In other words, perception depends on how much you allow yourself to perceive; it depends on your state of mind, on your receptivity... Crossing frontiers gives you a feeling of losing preconceptions."

My point in all this is only that an authentic 'national' cinema is 'new' cinema which is necessarily different and will demand new forms and an audience which will be open and willing to experiment and try out new forms; an audience with enough self-respect and interest in its own culture to open up and perceive its own films in a new light. And that's why it is particularly important that it is the *youth* in Germany who are taking pride in their own product (through the detour of foreign acclaim) and can turn back home and re-see and re-experience New German films in a new and meaningful way.

This is where we come home to Canada. The fight for a national cinema is, and will always be, a fight on all fronts; an economic battle of levies, quotas, better distribution and exhibition, and an ideological battle of decolonized perception. To really get at the root of the problem of a Canadian culture crisis, and to initiate change, Canadians must investigate the centres and sources for nurturing the national and historical self-images. That instead of being encouraged to emulate and build upon Euro-Americanized products and foreign cultures, our universities, film departments, cinemas and festivals should be exposing future Canadian filmmakers, Canadian critics and Canadian audience 'experiencers' to an already existing rich economically viable, and even exciting, Canadian cinema both in English and *en français*. Perhaps, like our German counterparts, we will be convinced that we have the grounds for exploration and creative growth, right here at home.