

# FILM REVIEW

## Come on Children

After *Warrendale* (1966) and *A Married Couple* (1968-9) everyone was curious about Allan King's new film. Under the working title "Youth" it was described as "a semi-improvisational film on drugs and their use among young people" in a 1970 Canadian Film Institute booklet on King.

And in a way, that's what it is, although when retitled as *Come On Children* (1972) and shown in March 1973 at the Ontario Film Theatre, King seemed to disclaim this as his full intent. He preferred to consider the film simply a sympathetic look at the ten young people that he chose to live in an Ontario farmhouse for ten weeks, observing what they discovered about themselves, how they developed during that short, free time, and how they lived.

This hypothetical situation was developed in answer to the often heard *If only* comments King encountered in interviewing young people for his film: "*If only* we weren't hassled," and "*If only* we could get out of the city . . ." He selected five boys and five girls "almost as one would choose characters for a drama, looking for different emotional characteristics" to see what they would do with an unhassled country experience. Then he left Bill Brayne (who shot *Warrendale*) in charge of the camera, and withdrew to let natural consequences and time produce the matter of his film.

In this way King's work is like that of an artist working in Conceptual or Found Art, where a photo documentation is often used as the visual record of an object's changes under the effect of time and chance and natural laws, and it is vital that the artist not interfere once these forces have begun to operate on his original concept.

King also attempts not to intervene once filming is underway; he likes to provide a situation in which things can be drawn out or emerge rather than try to arrange the material himself.

If *Warrendale* is like Found Art, then *Come On Children* represents a development toward Conceptual Art. King has arranged his subject and its environment almost totally so that they can be observed while time, chance and the variabilities of personality act on them. His documentation is his film. Unfortunately his camera is not impartial and his editing is extensive. To be within the frame of these art forms I suppose an

automated camera that took completely candid film over regular periods would be required. And no editing. King at least does his best to remove himself from these aspects of the work, by hiring an expert cameraman (Brayne or Leiterman) and editor (Arla Saare).

There are fiction films and animated films and films that document, sometimes called Documentaries or *Cinéma vérité*. King calls his work Actuality Dramas. I think I'd prefer to call this latter group Direct Cinema. At any rate, whatever it is called, it must obey certain laws of integrity in order to be believable, because if it isn't believable, if it isn't truthful, it becomes exploitative, voyeuristic and worthless.

If you don't mind, I'd like to digress and look at some of these necessary *vérités* and how King adheres to them in his films.

Honesty of subject matter requires that the audience must be clearly aware of the precise extent to which the subject has been set-up or manipulated. Much of the strength of *Warrendale* is in this. *Warrendale* existed, and what existed was filmed, without interference. *A Married Couple* were in reality a married couple too, however the sophistication of their responses to an audience did slightly change or telescope the nature of their actions and reactions. *Come On Children* involves people not doing anything they wouldn't otherwise do, perhaps, but as their involvement is invented rather than natural and organic, and much of what they do is not seen, unbalancing the effect of what is seen, there is a weakness in this respect in the film.

Honesty of time, both historical and sequential, seems essential. Historically, it's true, Flaherty played with time in *Man of Aran* by having the natives do things that were not part of their ordinary lives but were part of the past of their people, their grandparent's lives. Some feel he irretrievably weakened the film; others feel his masterful statement remained true to the feeling of the place and its history: it's a moot point. King, of course, does not alter historical time.

Sequential time is even more important however. Time must be honored and natural sequences never lifted out of place for artistic effect without the greatest wringing of conscience. For those who have seen Markowitz's *August and July* it is immediately apparent how plucking a kiss between the two girls out of the natural development

of the film, and cutting it into the beginning created a spurious effect that turned the film toward exploitation rather than honest, direct cinema. In King's *Warrendale* the law of time-sequence appears to be followed. In *A Married Couple* several sequences are in doubt, chiefly the party and cottage scenes. These may have been spaced in the film for overall shape and rhythm. Again in *Come On Children* absolute integrity to sequential time may have been forfeited to create a more interesting film, an artistic construction. So far these interjected scenes, like Lesley's lonely walk over the field in *Come On Children*, seem to be used for poetic pauses only, but this is dangerous ground.

The action, the incidents in the film, must not be contrived or maneuvered but real. In *Warrendale* the death of the cook was real, the children's reactions were real, and the resulting documentation was something quite memorable. In *A Married Couple* the arguments seemed authentically based on the couple's true feelings, though they appeared to erupt out of the self-consciousness of being observed as much as out of circumstance, they remained believable.

The problem with *Come On Children* is that there really wasn't much action. King can perhaps be forgiven for arranging a Parental Visit in the hopes of achieving something dramatic to film, around which he could build his movie. Obviously putting meat, potatoes and vegetables in a pot doesn't guarantee a stew. You have to apply heat.

Despite the fact King had selected a cast including a girl about to have a baby, a boy whose ex-girlfriend was keeping their child from him, a bright young character beginning the long job of trying to untangle himself from a deep involvement with drugs, a serious and determined girl staying off chemicals, a pretty, drifting, pliable girl and some other variously attractive and typical drug users and abusers, he didn't get any crises. What he did get is a fascinating sociological look at how this particular disparate bunch managed to live together and keep cool.

The baby was born, happily accepted, and eventually sent home to Grandma. The kid off chemicals stayed off, the boy on the mend moved a little further toward his goal, those in search of something got perhaps a little closer, those along for a free ride, took it. Not much of dramatic intensity emerged.



Ten formerly unacquainted people won't necessarily reveal much, even in ten weeks. Perhaps King felt that all young people on drugs have so much in common that they could relate spontaneously to each other, or that like a Sensitivity Group they would irritate and aggravate each other into revelations of some depth. What he learned is what we learn: the kids have amazing self-containment. They communicate on the surface; underneath they travel separately.

Thus the Parental Visit is introduced. Although it provides the core of the film and the emotional highlights, it is nevertheless a weak centre because it isn't organic; one never believes the kids would have arranged it themselves. It deviates from honesty of incident.

Finally, everyone questions the prejudices of the cameraman, the sound man, the editor. Is this a built-in weakness in this film technique? Can great integrity to the subject on the part of the director modify the effects of these personalities on the film? Perhaps the crew should also appear in the film, or their presence be more continually acknowledged, until the day when the cameras can run unmanned. As for the editor, certainly there is opportunity in cutting, to select material for specific effects. At a 43 to 1 ratio, 130,000 feet of film were shot for the 3,000 feet shown; that's a lot of potential choice.

In *Come On Children* King includes a long tense scene between one of the boys and the "fucking camera" partly in order to keep the audience well aware of the camera and the cameraman's presence. And he edits the film with the expert and obedient Arla Saare, whose work, like that of Flaherty's editor, Helen Van Dongen, finally becomes an inextricable component of the final film.

Oddly enough, though other people photograph, record and edit his films, and he appears to divorce himself from the action in them, King's films remain as distinctively his as an *auteur* work. His humanistic and optimistic philosophies seep through the material. There is a quality of affection for the human; tolerance, patience and faith, that raises his work far above the level of exploitative semi-documentaries.

As for *Come On Children*, I must not leave it without mentioning that it is colorful, attractive, touching and even funny. The film starts with a feeling of naiveté and youth as John Hamilton, a

bowler-hatted kid somewhere between the Artful Dodger and Huck Finn, sings a very homemade ditty which introduces the various people and the idea of the film.

Sequences include a lot of sitting about, a kitchen hassle, a long heartfelt confession on a snowbank, the reaction to the baby, some of that momentarily hilarious nonsense that makes us all remember the ridiculousness of youth with nostalgia, a touching handshake connecting father and son, a dazed and deadened dope feast where the inhabitants for once escape the prying camera and retreat deep inside their heads, a girl's contemplation of age and death, and many uncentered moments used to glide the other sections into a smoothly flowing whole.

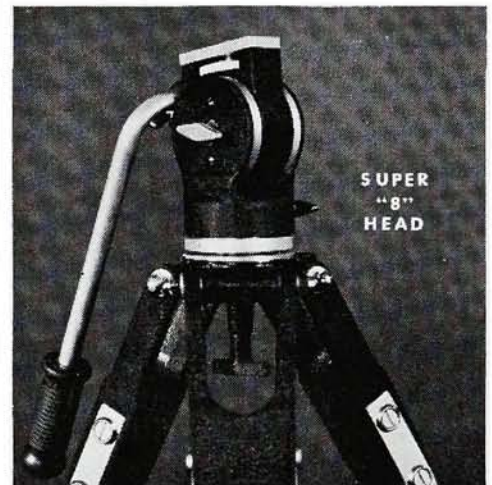
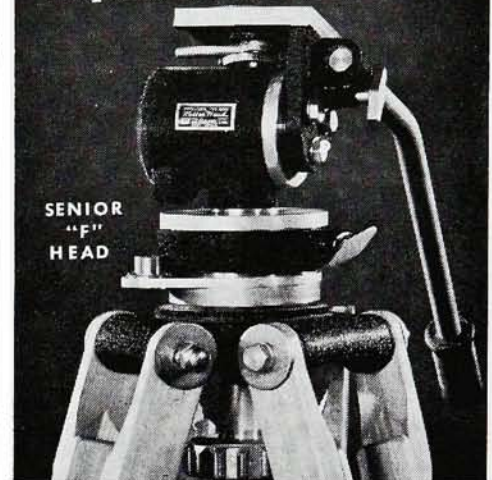
What is the effect of all this on an audience? Have we a remarkable, and unusual documentary look at decadent youth, or a super-revealing slice-of-life? Obviously not. King only succeeds, in a limited way, at presenting people to people, through space and time, past generation barriers and morality hurdles. For those unacquainted with how to shoot speed or handle a joint, and those who have been rather a long time in the tundra, there's a certain educative aspect in the contemporary mannerisms, dress and habits revealed. To others who hope for novelty and perversion, this is quiet stuff, with an uneasy depth.

What makes King's work easier to assess on a superficial level is a simple comparison with other recent works in the genre of direct cinema. King's shaping of the material, his intuitive handling of sequences for pauses, emotional heights and moments of sentiment become more appreciated in contrast, for instance, with the boring, endless repetitiveness of *An American Family*, which recently monopolized a U.S. network, or Murray Markowitz's mishandled *August and July*. Unfortunately his experiment with *Come On Children* wasn't as successful as no doubt he too would have liked it to be. But he shouldn't abandon this technique; he is extremely skilled and has a rare honesty with it. ●

Natalie Edwards

## MILLER

AMATEUR...PROFESSIONAL  
Tripods & Fluid Pan Heads



### SENIOR "F" HEAD

- Complete control for smoother panning in both horizontal and vertical position.
- No shake or jitter.
- Full 360° horizontal movement.
- Varied use with: Bell & Howell—Bolex—Arriflex—Cine Special—F & B Auricon—Telescopes, etc.
- Either right or left hand operation.
- No backlash.
- Adaptable to all types of tripods.
- WHATEVER CAMERA you use—you will get better results with a MILLER HEAD.

### AT LAST A NEW FLUID PAN HEAD FOR SUPER 8 CAMERAS

- Camera mounting screw 1/4".
- Pan and tilt packed with special fluid and factory sealed.
- Height 5", weight 32 ozs.
- Ball Leveling tops available.
- Miller Equipment is used throughout the world by leading photographers, film and television studios.

Write for a free Brochure and prices on all Miller tripods and accessories.

DEALER INQUIRIES WELCOME.



CANADIAN DISTRIBUTOR  
**Leo's**  
**CAMERA SUPPLY Ltd.**

1055 GRANVILLE STREET • VANCOUVER 2, CANADA • 685-5337