Censorship

Landscapes of contemporary censorship in cinema

by Gary Betcherman

National Film Board of Canada Office national du film du Canada

NEWS

Forty-five NFB films will be presented during the course of this year’s Festival of Festivals in Toronto, September 6 to 15.

Highlights of the Film Board’s participation include a wide selection of NFB productions in the Festival’s retrospective programs and the world premieres of two new NFB productions: Gail Singer’s Abortion: Stories from North and South and Paul Cowan’s Democracy on Trial: The Morgentaler Affair. Singer’s film, produced by the NFB’s Studio D, is a cross-cultural survey of the perceptions and practice of abortion. The Morgentaler Affair chronicles Dr. Henry Morgentaler’s challenge to Canada’s abortion laws in the early 1970’s. The film recreates his six-year battle in Quebec’s courts and provides a profile of an individual who risked everything for a principle he believed in. Programmed together in the “Perspective Canada” series, the films will be screened at 2:00 p.m. Saturday, September 8 and at 11:30 a.m. Monday, September 10 at the Showcase cinema.

TORONTO PREMIERES

Mario, Jean Beaudin’s new feature film and Giles Walker’s and John N. Smith’s The Masculine Mystique will open in Toronto at the Festival of Festivals in the “Perspective Canada” series. Mario, inspired by Claude Jasmin’s book, La Sablière, is the touching story of two brothers and their world of imagination. Starring Xavier Norman Pettermann in the title role, and Francis Reddy, Nathalie Chalifour, Jacques Godin and Murielle Dutil, Mario will be screened Saturday, September 8 at 9:00 p.m. at the Showcase cinema.

The Masculine Mystique, scheduled for Sunday, September 9 at 2:00 p.m. at the Showcase cinema, is the story of four modern men trying to cope with four modern women. The film, combining an unusual blend of fact and fiction, marks the first of a new genre of feature-length alternative dramas from the National Film Board.

Incident at Restigouche, an investigation of the 1981 police raids on the Micmac Reservation in Quebec, is programmed in the Festival’s “Two Way Streets” series. The film includes newsreel and documentary footage as well as a heated interview between the former Quebec Minister of Fisheries and Abeeaki Indian filmmaker Alain Obomsawin.

CANADA’S BEST

The National Film Board’s Mon Oncle Antoine, directed by Claude Jutra, has been named the best Canadian film of all time. Also named among Canada’s top ten are NFB films J.A. Martin Photographe, directed by Jean Beaudin; Pour la Suite du monde, directed by Pierre Perrault, Michel Brault and Marcel Carrière; and Don Owen’s Nobody Waved Goodbye. The selection was based on a poll of international and Canadian film critics carried out by the Festival of Festivals. Coincidentally both Don Owen and Jean Beaudin have new releases opening at the Festival this year. Owen’s Unfinished Business, co-produced by the NFB and Zebra Films, is the sequel to Nobody Waved Goodbye. It will be screened Friday, September 14 at the Showcase cinema. Beaudin’s new feature, Mario, will have its Toronto premiere at 9:00 p.m. Saturday, September 8, also at the Showcase cinema.

One of the films shelved in Poland after martial law was imposed in 1981 was There Was Jazz by Falk, a director little-known in the West but with a following in his own country. Hardly a political film, it nevertheless deals with a subject that is taboo in most Eastern Bloc countries: jazz. The anarchical philosophy and decadent lifestyle associated with this form of music has for years made jazz, in the minds of officialdom, a kind of foreign virus that threatens to tear apart the fabric of their society. Most Westerners have constructed an image of paranoid authority and bleak repression behind the Iron Curtain, but one forgets that paranoid structures are not restricted to the Soviet Union and that censorship, in one form or another, is practiced almost everywhere in the world. While doing research for a film festival, FORBIDDEN FILMS: THE FILMMAKER & HUMAN RIGHTS, which will be taking place in Toronto Oct. 18-28, I have come to see that censorship is as widespread as film itself and almost as old.

Seen optimistically, censorship is a strategy to foster a just and cohesive society: approached from the opposite end, it is an attempt on the part of a power base to maintain control over the masses. In application they amount to the same thing, and it is only the methods and targets that change from one country to country. Thus, in Brazil, the state-run Embrafilme pumps out soft-core porn for the urban masses (unthinkable in Canada), while at the same time it imposed, in 1981 was Jazz, an idiom in the Portuguese language of Brazil used by men to describe transgressions of sex, and the substitution of ‘men’ for ‘women’ in the term was suddenly very shocking. This film would have encountered no difficulties in Europe or North America, but in a country where a man can
be acquitted of the murder of his wife when it had been having an affair, it is not so surprising that the film could not be seen for a decade. Teresa Trautman was 21 years old when she made The Men I Loved in 1972. She was the first woman director of modern cinema in Brazil and has continued to be a strong and rather witty feminist voice despite anonymous threats and the sort of neglect on the part of the industry that comes of having made a banned film. She will be in Toronto for the festival of forbidden films and will talk about her experiences at the hands of the censors and some of the projects she has been involved in over the past ten years.

Brazil has a long history of repression, and not all of it is concerned with social roles and gender identity. The Cinema Novo derived much of its style in the middle and later period from the development of a coded language that would pass the scrutiny of the censors. By 1972 most of the Novo directors had left the repressive regime of Brazil, and when they returned years later they found that a new generation of filmmakers had taken over the reins of cinema. The Novo movement, aside from giving us classics of the cinema, provided the model for the autonomous and socially conscious film movement throughout South America, which in turn injected new ideas and offered alternate strategies for world cinema. From the point of view of censorship, however, South American cinema is little more than a catalogue of horrors. The story of censorship in this area is intimately tied up with foreign economic domination and unstable local governments.

_War of The Furies_, by Argentinean directors Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, was both made and shown in almost total clandestine conditions. Completed in 1968, it called for a popular Peronist revolt against the military regime of Ongania. A year after the Peronists resumed power in 1973, the film was banned! It seems that Peron, once back in power, did not want to stir up revolutionary fervour over social injustices. The year 1974 marked the turning of the Peronist government towards the political right, and other banings include Raymundo Gleyzer's _The Traitors_, which attacked corruption in the trade unions, and Hector Olivera's _Revolts in Patagonia_, an historical reconstruction of the brutal army suppression the 1921 peasant revolt. In 1976, under General Videla, the military once again regained power, and Raymundo Gleyzer "disappeared", never to be heard from again. The other directors took this as a warning and all but one fled Argentina. Getino went to Peru, while Solanas and Jorge Cedron, director of the expose of secret executions conducted by the army in the '50s and called _Operation Massacre_, left for Paris. Hounded by foreign agents there, Cedron finally took his life in 1980 – the last of all the principal participants of _Massacre to die a victim of repression_. Oliviaera meanwhile stayed in Argentina and continued to work, claiming, of course, that there was no such film as _Revolts in Patagonia_.

The situation in Chile and Bolivia, though not quite as extreme, was cast in the same mould. The coup in Chile in 1973 forced more than 35 directors into exile. Some, like Miguel Littin and Patricio Guzman, remained in Latin America and continued to make films relevant to the social and political life in that area. Others, like Raoul Ruiz, went to Europe to make films less restricted in subject matter and more concerned with the art of film. At least three Chilean filmmakers – Marilu Mallet, Jorge Fajardo, and Leuten Reiss – are living and working in Canada. The first full-length feature made in Bolivia, the 1925 _Prophecy From The Lake_, was banned because the story involved an official's wife falling in love with an Indian servant. Censorship in that country hasn't let up since. The leading filmmaker, Jorge Sanjinés, had to flee the military coup of Colonel Banzer in 1971. Antonio Egurza, the cameraman on Sanjinés' _Courage Of The People_, was imprisoned in 1975 for his part in the production. Sanjinés returned after the fall of Banzer in 1973, but had to flee again in 1980 with the military take-over by General Meza. Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, another filmmaker who narrowly escaped with his life in that coup, has since explained the growing popularity of super-8 filmmaking in Latin America: when the soldiers come at you with guns, you can still run with a super-8 camera, but 16mm only slows you down.

Filmmakers use these adjectives and many others to describe Montreal, the Europe next door.

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For information about Montreal's services to filmmakers, write or telephone: Montreal Film Commission CIDEM-Cinema 155, rue Notre-Dame est Montreal, Quebec Canada H2Y 1S5

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CENSURSHIP

If Latin America is a dange­rous place for filmmakers to make their films, at least films do get made. In many countries of the world, scripts have to be approved before permission to produce the film is granted. In Pakistan, for instance, one cannot buy film stock without a license, and one cannot get a license without script approval. Jamil Dehlavi, who had the good fortune to be well-connected, managed by a series of happy coincidences to bypass this stage: his film, The Blood of Hussayn, could have been made otherwise. The film shows Islam as a revolutionary force, but is critical of the military. A month after shooting was completed, General Zia, in a coup strangely reminiscent of the opening scenes of the film, took control of the country. Dehlavi secretly had the footage sent to London, but word soon got out about the existence of his film and his passport was impounded. He managed to escape to England before permission to produce the film was granted. Dehlavi will be coming to Toronto to participate in the festival.

Another film on Islam, one critical, also went unseen in its own country. Osmane Sembene, Africa's black pearl's most renowned novelist, has repeatedly found himself in trouble because of his outspoken criticism of social injustices. Newly liberated African countries are still quite tender and seem unable to weather any criticism that implies that they, rather than the old colonial governments, might be responsible for the continuing social ills. Ramparts Of Clay by Bertuccelli is one example of this, although Sembene's Ceddo goes much further in its indictment of the "new regimes." His film was banned ostensibly due to the spelling of the title. Ceddo with one 'd' is how the old French regime spelled the word for "outside," while the native Wolof spelling has two 'd's. This is certainly a red herring. For the "outsiders" of the story are precisely those Afri­cans who are supposed to be con­quering Islamic faith. In his call for Africans to reclaim their own culture, Sembene emerges fully as an African of both Islamic and the natural heir to the colonial regime.

Nationalist sentiments are not the only driving force in a country under foreign domina­tion. The great Armenian director, Sergei Paradjanov, has suffered unspeakable crimes at the hands of the Russians. His Shadows Of Forgotten Ancestors was banned at home while winning two awards for the Soviet Union at film festivals around the world. Colour Of Pomegranates, described as "more a vision than a movie," is about an 18th-century Arme­nian. Banned in the USSR since 1969, it has been available only in a bootleg print until the author­i­ties finally released a copy this year. In a closed trial in 1974, Paradjanov was convicted of either homosexual related crimes or dealing in art objects, and upon his release from pris­on two years later he was not allowed to work in film. He is reportedly back in prison now, though on what charges nobody seems to know.

The extent of Soviet influence and the crude manner of its application are quite frightening. The military crackdown on Dudcek's Prague Spring in 1968 not only curtailed the rights and freedoms of the Czechoslovakian people, it brought to an end one of the most exciting periods in the history of the Czech New Wave. Many of the leading directors, such as Milos Forman and Ivan Passer, left to avoid prosecution. Of those who stayed behind - voluntarily or otherwise - had to modify their attitudes or else not work at all. The film was shortlisted for the Academy Award-winning Closely Watched Trains, denounced his earlier films and has been allowed to work. Vera Chytilova did not denounce her earlier films and was not able to work again until 1976; even now she is permitted to leave Czechoslovakia to attend festivals where her work is being exhibited. Jan Nemec, the giant terrible of the Czech New Wave, was also allowed to work after the Russian invasion either, but in 1975 managed to get an exit visa to West Ger­many. It is reported that he is residing in the States, where he is in pre­production of a film for Am­nesty International on torture victims. Nemec is too well known to be coming to Toronto for the festival, bringing with him two of his films that are no longer in distribution, a third film, Czech Connection, which has never been shown here.

If one wishes to expect, grudg­ingly, Russian interference
the affairs of Soviet Satellites, its influence in places like Turkey still seems surprising. In 1978 Kilic made a film, based on an historical incident about Russian sailors who had escaped to Turkey and were eventually sent back. When Will The Sun Rise, a fast-paced espionage tale, is less at home on a specific country than a call to Turks to throw off the cultural domination of both East and West and to search its own problems. The film was originally passed by the censors, but certain unnamed diplomats from the North lobbied against it. When this didn't work, prints were banned what is probably the most famous film inside Turkey.

The Americans have not allowed cultural imperialism to remain a function of the Russian machines. Governments dominated by the U.S. notably in South America, have levied cruel taxes on filmmakers interested in social and cultural change. Beyond this they have exported their world vision through the great Hollywood Dream Machine. At home American methods of cultural repression are different but no less effective than those of the Russians. People still think of Joseph Losey as a British director, rather than an American victim of the McCarthy witch-hunts. Julie, director of Naked City and Never On Sunday, was not, despite his name, French, but rather was born in Middleton and was also driven out by the House of Representatives' Un-American Activities Committee. This method of blacklisting, which in Russia has just forced Andrei Tarkovsky into exile, in America destroyed the careers and in many cases the lives of hundreds of people. And the fate of Hollywood Ten director Herbert Biberian's film Salt of the Earth provides an insight not only into the world of cinema but into that of labour as well. A movie sympathetic to striking miners in New Mexico, this independently made film survived both legal and economic attempts to destroy it. Even influential groups set up outside the theatres were unsuccessful in preventing audiences from seeing it. Finally, the AFL-CIO persuaded the projectionists' union to refuse to screen it, setting a pattern for labour solidarity for years to come while consigning the film to the limited circuit of universities and non-union theatres.

Marginality is an effective method of censorship. In Britain, where a classification system is set up, a film given an X rating, such as Peeping Tom, will end up playing small houses on the outskirts of town. Leaving aside the emotional disquietment of a director whose film will be little-seen and less reviewed, this practice ensures that the film will lose money and the director will therefore be in an industry already hopelessly enslaved to the banks.

One is not surprised to hear that censorship is in effect in most Arab countries, where strict codes governing most aspects of life already exist. Even less of a surprise is to find censorship heavily applied in South Africa. But who would have thought that France has one of the strictest and structurally most arbitrary codes of censorship available? Some of the most famous victims of censorship in that country have been Jean Renoir, Luis Bunuel, Andre Malraux, Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, Jacques Rivette, and Jean-Luc Godard. Any mention of the Algerian situation in the '50s and '60s was bound to get a film banned. The Resnais/Marker film on the subject, Les Statues meurent aussi, was not released for fifteen years, and even then it was cut to half its original length. Godard's Le Petit soldat was banned for three years, and when it was released certain references had been deleted - holes in the sound-track still exist in the prints we see today. Rivette's film The Nun, based on a story by Diderot, was banned because the story itself, rather than any particular scenes, was deemed immoral. It is about a woman who must choose between a convent and a brothel, and somewhere along the line the censor confuses the two. A similar banning happened in Ontario, when Harel's film, Vie d'ange, about a man and a woman who become stuck while making love and are unable to disengage, was banned because of the theme rather than anything in the picture.

Two famous cases of censorship are Nagisa Oshima's In the Realm Of The Senses and Pier Paolo Pasolini's Salo. Both of these films raised the hackles of even the most liberal supporters of anti-censorship laws. Oshima and Pasolini are clearly artists of the first rank, and yet - or perhaps because of this - their films are clearly transgressions of the accepted imits (cont. on p.51.)