A chill wind blasted between the office buildings along Bloor St. on the last night of the 9th Festival of Festivals. At the Towne Cinema, theatre personnel were ripping down the plethora of posters advertising festival films. Schedule changes and hatred for Ontario's film censor. Further along, in front of the University Theatre, the rented searchlights, that for the past 10 evenings had been sending their glistening rays into the Toronto sky, were extinguished. On the theatre marquees, the half-replaced letters INDIA 30 signified the return of business as usual. In the morning, these theatres, like so many others across the land, would once again be showing American films to Canadian audiences.

The Festival was over. But for 10 glorious days, Canadian cinema, in the largest public showing it has ever received, lived as it has never lived before: in the glow of admiration and the celebration of its film directors; above all, in the seeing of itself as good. For 10 unforgettable days, Canadian cinema existed in a condition of normality, as Canadian audiences and Canadian films encountered one another in a spirit of eye-opening discovery. For 10 days, the extraordinary became the ordinary as, in the heart of this most American of Canadian cities' downtown theatres, screens flickered from morning to night with images of Canada from the 1890s to the 1980s. Perhaps not since the days of the National Film Board's travelling projectionists had the power of Canadian been so apparent. For while the festival lasted, it was as if the movies themselves had single-handedly succeeded in overturning the falseness of what which claims to be reality. After all, are not American movies just as illusory as Canadian movies? That last chilly night on Bloor St., watching the return of the American illusion, it seemed that the problem had less to do, in the end, with movies in themselves than with the spirit through which they are seen — or rendered invisible.

"Nothing is as foreign to Canadians as Canadian culture," writes Seth Feldman in his introduction to Take Two, one of two books on Canadian film published in conjunction with the 1984 Festival of Festivals' 250-film hurrah to Canadian cinema.

The statement is as harsh and as blunt as it is true. While the Festival was running, the Art Gallery of Ontario "for the first time in recent memory," according to the Globe and Mail's art critic, opened an exhibit to contemporary Toronto painters. That the newspaper art critic hated it is only another measure of the foreignness of Canadian culture and the depth of the problem.

A second example deals with literature, via one of the films in the Festival's Northern Lights retrospective (a title that refers knowingly to the celebrated collection of Canadian writing that established the existence of Canadian literature). In a memorable scene in Larry Kent's Epochal When Tomorrow Dies (1965), a film that played commercially for one week before vanishing into the archives, one of the characters who teaches literature at UBC, tells his class that he's going to do something unheard of: add a Canadian novel to the course. There's no reason, he tells the class, why this novel should not be taught, for it is perfectly competent, "as competent," he adds, "as it can be coming from a country that systematically refutes its own greatness."

Painting, writing and filmmaking are those arts that reflect, in verbal, painlessly or moving images, both the eye and the I of how we live in this country. But to exist (as we do) cut off from one's own visual arts (using this term in the widest possible sense) is to live in the formal separation of eye from I on the levels of landscape, language and gesture — that is, on the levels of eye-dentity and eye-certification — that constitute the only authentic sep tation at the heart of the Canadian problem.

In the pathological absence of self-images, the eye, because it must nonetheless see, will accept as real whatever else is there. It will eye-identify with its own alienation and attempts to alter that identification (Canadian content, for instance) will in turn seem foreign and alienating. Furthermore, since the separation of eye from I requires the maintenance of de-dramatization (as the encounter of eye with I is essential a dramatic one), a preference for the undramatic and factual becomes the dominant style of identification that leads to such things, for example, as the documentary tradition in Canadian filmmaking or, more to the point, in the case of Canadian television, the noted preference for news and sports, while drama and entertainment are supplied by the Americans. A third manifestation of the preference for the factual concerns a privileged status to newspapers and newspaper accounts of things, which, particularly when one is dealing with national culture, amounts to a self-perpetuating structuring of the communications bias that favors the factual in the first place.

In this sense, it was not surprising, if one judged only from the Toronto press coverage of the Festival, to read that it was on the whole business as usual, with the usual fawning before American stars, and no inkling that something quite different was taking place at the Canadian part of the festival. By and large — and for the same reasons — this was also the case for the business-end of the Canadian film industry, with the entire spirit thoroughly well-captured by a Sid Adilman column entitled "Canadians eat canapes. American dine in style."

But this was, significantly, not the case for Canadian filmmakers seeing their films, nor for the public. Not for nothing did the Festival advertise its Canadian retrospective with the slogan "Two hundred answers to the question of Canadian identity." For the first time on such a scale, Canadian film culture would, in ceasing to seem foreign, have answered the question of Canadian eye-dentity.

There was, among the Festival organizers, some fear and trembling over the size of the Canadian retrospective. A first in the nine-year history of Canada's two major film festivals. Toronto this year devoted 65% of the programming of 400 features and shorts to our national cinema.

But last year a Canadian documentary retrospective of some 60 films had been a big disappointment, attracting little interest and even less public. So there was concern that this year's large display of Canadian films would be, as chief programmer Peter Handling put it, "overdoing it with a massive this size."

The gradualists among the organizers favored steady year-by-year increments leading, five years down the road, to the large retrospective that would actually take place this year. Immediateists wanted the large retrospective now. But this was not a battle between some people more in favor of Canadian film than others. Both positions had their advantages and disadvantages. If the immediatist approach won out, this would prove equa
ly to the satisfaction of the gradualists. For the problem was not internal to the Festival organization which, from the Board of Directors through festival director Wayne Clarkespie, was, as all the organizers of the retrospective agreed, completely supportive. The problem lay in the nature of doing something unprecedented, for example, in programming the Experiments series. Bruce Elder found that he could have put together 50 programs as easily as the 20 finally agreed on. What should the proper balance be without draining material from the other programs? Handling mentions “there was a point when we realized that we were holding 13 separate screenings per day in the Canadian retrospective as compared to only five in the Contemporary World Cinema. Were we stretching the audience too much?”

What was involved. Handling explains, was nothing less than “the whole process of defining Canadian cinema—of being representative and programming good films at the same time, and this within the limitations of faithfully attempting to reflect the range of Canada’s 1,100 feature-film history from an available sample of about 105.”

“Looking back from 1984,” says Handling, “it seems clear that the years 1963–1975 were a period of extraordinary growth in the modern Canadian cinema. I wanted to give a sense of that, to celebrate what we’ve got to hold. The films themselves need no apology. In fact they constitute one of the most stimulating national cinemas in the world.”

But knowing that as a critic or teacher would be one thing and knowing that as programmer of the largest Canadian film retrospective ever would be another—as Handling admits, describing how he felt as the Festival got underway: “I was petrified, totally numb. I couldn’t sit through a film. It took me three days to screw up the courage to go see what was happening. By Monday, I knew. To my astonishment, the audiences and the people were applauding the films. I couldn’t believe it. It was a dream and the cinemas were packed. That Monday, three artists of the Festival opened, was the biggest high of my life.”

The difference of course was that the films were at last reaching a public, and an enthusiastic one. As Handling put it: “Seeing the films in a screening room, usually alone, is one kind of experience. Seeing the films with 500 people is totally different.”

Perhaps it was this difference that would prompt Festival board of directors’ member Bill McMurtry to respond to Handling’s interview with the words of two people: “Who complains about it don’t know squat about cinema.”

It’s not that the films change so much (though each viewing of a film always reveals a different film), it’s that you are changed: the films become your eyes as you meet and suddenly you can see. In some way, this Festival was a return from the ghettoization of being part of a minority culture and, thus freed, begin to refer to each other: at times they seem to merge until they are united utterly. For instance, a shot of a park in Lea Pool’s La Femme de l’hôtel (1984) will refer to the same park in Michael Snow’s One Second to Montreal (1969). Not only do the films begin to converse among themselves, they also speak to the satisfaction of the gradualists. For the problem was not internal to the Festival organization which, from the Board of Directors through festival director Wayne Clarkspe, was, as all the organizers of the retrospective agreed, completely supportive. The problem lay in the nature of doing something unprecedented, for example, in programming the Experiments series. Bruce Elder found that he could have put together 50 programs as easily as the 20 finally agreed on. What should the proper balance be without draining material from the other programs? Handling mentions “there was a point when we realized that we were holding 13 separate screenings per day in the Canadian retrospective as compared to only five in the Contemporary World Cinema. Were we stretching the audience too much?”

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beyond themselves, addressing a future still remote when the film itself was made: the shadow of October 1970 already hangs over Le Chat dans le sac (1964), or feminism in Larry Kent's The Bitter Ash (1963) or When Tomorrow Dies (1965), or modern nationalism in Wieland's prophetic Reason Over Passion (1968). In each other's presence, the films become less the orphans in search of significance that they are in solitary viewing situations; instead they are part of a noisy and numerous family. They have an air of family provides a context, a commonality that not only protects and enhances them, but support them as well: call it a landscape of films.

Not only do the films emerge from specific settings (e.g., Montreal, Vancouver), but each film creates and creates its own definition. Sometimes uniquely, sometimes in conjunction with other films. Gilles Carle's use of the autours around Montreal in Red (1976) to define a view of that city's dynamic modernity had always struck me as unique. Seeing Arcand's La Maduite Galette (1972) showed me how another filmmaker could use more or less the same setting to create the completely opposite effect. In both cases, the two films were adding to a cultural definition of Montreal.

This can be done in endless ways. Michael Snow's One Second In Montreal took a city with which I am rather familiar and made it utterly unfamiliar; a marvelous effect that is difficult to achieve. Lea Pool in La Femme de l'hôtel could not recreate that unfamiliarity so hauntingly present in her 1980 film Strass Café.

The most startling rediscovery of landscape for me was in Gilles Groulx's Le Chat dans le sac when Claude leaves the city for St-Charles-sur-Richelieu, mythical scene of a brief victory for the 1837 Patriots, and scene for me of my adolescence. To see that highway preserved circa 1963 as I saw it weekend after weekend (though none of it, from the road-signs to the existence of the city, any longer) was an extraordinary thrill. It was as if a part of my past had unexpectedly been returned to me.

I can still remember watching Jack Chambers' experimental The Heart of London (1970) which in 80 riveting minutes gave me every image I needed to understand why I've never gone back to the city of my birth.

These are only two immediately personal examples of something of the monastic landscape that films can evoke, of the manner by which filmic representations do become enwined with the personal, and gain the power to claim a place in the national imagination. For a Canadian film can say something quite specific to one growing up or living in this country in a manner that no other world cinema could ever hope to. In order to do that Canadian film would require what it does not possess and what it is not expected to possess: a place in the world cinema's forever development.

Such a film culture need not be in the personal style of this, that or any particular filmmaker. In fact, the masterful series Experiments which he programmed for the Festival demonstrated that the Canadian visual art need not be realistic at all: in order to become 1, the Canadian eye does not have to define itself through realism but can instead manifest itself as an awareness of its own self-consciousness.

Yet if the festival showed what a genuine national film culture could be like, it also showed what obstacles to that film culture remain, aside from the lack of access to Canadian images. For part of the difficulty of approaching Canadian film begins on as mundane a level as proper subtitling. If the I cannot see, the ear will not hear, and on the whole the quality of English subtitling from Quebecois was surprisingly poor. Gilles Carle pointed this out seeing Red in Toronto the first time since the film's release 14 years ago when he wondered aloud why so many meanings in French were completely reversed in English. He gave the example of someone saying "Bonjour" only to have it subtitled "Good evening," only a slight exaggeration. With the exception of Robert Gray's subtitles for La Maduite Galette, every one of the eight Quebecois features I caught contained similar major reversals of meaning, as well as other instances of 'creative' translation such as turning an ordinary Quebecois name (Rosaire) into an Anglicism (Sam).

The flip side of this complaint, perhaps, is that only a festival such as this one could provide the opportunity to notice.

For what the festival underlined, again, was the desperate need for continuity of all kinds in Canadian film in each and every one of its manifestations, including film festivals (not to mention government policy or the commerce of film production, distribution and exhibition). For only such a continuity can create the Canadian film culture - the ways of seeing ourselves - that can orient the future of Canadian filmmaking because it reflects an awareness of Canadian cinema's past.

As the retrospective showed, it is not a monolithic past by any means. For a film with so few resources, it is something of a model of tolerance of different approaches to filmmaking: from the beginning it grants a space to the Ernie Snows (1916-34) to the Toronto festival, in the past so closely associated with the Toronto festival, in the past so closely associated with the future of Canadian cinema's past.

But is that really enough - especially when the 1984 Festival was without a doubt the single biggest vindication of the Canadianess of Canadian cinema ever? Surely the point of the retrospective amounts to something more than a passing corporate pat on the back of Canadian film before reverting to the future of Canadian cinema's future. And yet international cinema and international unity a Americaine? Surely in this country someone must be prepared to face the fact that what happened at the 1984 Festival was an authentic cultural turning-point?

What if the Festival had, almost without our knowing it, already found that magical key that everybody from the DDC to telfilm Canada to the CBC have been desperately searching for - namely, a successfully market Canadian cinema to Canadian audiences? And if that were the case, would this not mean that Toronto had almost miraculously gained the power of life and death over the future of Canadian cinema's past?

Surely with the DDC, neither the Ottawa festival nor any other can either help launch the rebirth of a genuine Canadian cinema, aware of its past but willing to set the job of the lingering death already familiar to Canada's best filmmakers.

Canadian culture, it has been said, will either be nationalist or will completely pass into the corporation's cosmopolitan exile. It would be more than ironic that the Festival be the bastion of hope of the corporation's cosmopolitan exile. It would be more than ironic that the Festival, after so successfully promoting cinema's cosmopolitan exile, may have at last discovered its true vocation, perhaps even its destiny, as the national showcase of Canadian cinema.

But finding oneself living along Bloors Street that cold and windy evening, it was not the ironies that were lacking. For it seemed for a moment, that perhaps the Festival was not over; on the contrary, it had barely even begun.