The rites (and wrongs) of the elder or
the cinema we got: the critics we need

by Geoff Pevere

Naturally, perhaps, Canadian film criticism that is cri
risicism that is, criticism of and about Canadian cin
and not criticism written in Canada about movies made
elsewhere tends to the prescriptive mode. What Canadian cinema should be, in other words, is a more frequently addressed matter than what it is.

Ostensibly distinguishing marks and mannerisms notwithstanding, the frequency of the use of the prescriptive mode by Canadian film critics suggests certain fundamental and common assumptions. Basically, they are: first, that there is something identifiable as Canadian Film, and thus an object of criticism which exists. Second, that this object, Canadian Film, is qualitatively and observably distinct from other, similar objects borne of similar aesthetic (as cinema) and cultural (Canadian, American or whatever) concerns or standards of definition. Third, that the objects Canadian Film or Cinema, is somehow beneficial and necessary to someone. It performs a function that is somehow edifying, enlightening, nourishing and stimulating to someone or some group of someone(s) (presumably, in this case, Canadians). In a word, it is worth having around.

So far, these are elementary assumptions for most or all film criticism, but the prescriptive mode makes its distinguishing detour here. While most forms of nationalist film criticism imply the values stated above, fewer suggest, as our criticism frequently does, first, that there is something definitely lacking in a particular national cinema that impedes it in realizing its ideal and necessary form and function; a lack resulting from factors imposed either from outside (economic starvation, cultural imperialism, governmental indifference, etc.) or festering from inside (psychological retardation, cultural immaturity or myopia, overfed middle-class indifference) the national organism.

by whatever means the critic's value judgments are determined, they are essentially derived from the condition and context for the object 'cinema' and cultural 'obje
s' 'agit. '

Before embarking upon an examination of the specific terms and implications of Elder's audacious, if eccentric, prescriptive blueprint for a national cinema (Canadian Forum, February 1985), it might be useful to briefly review the conditions which have bred, fed and sustained the predominance of the prescriptive mode in Canadian film criticism. Basically, the practice of formulating strategies for a better Canadian cinema assumes that a better Canadian Cinema is necessary and will somehow be better for Canadians because, even more basically, there is believed to be a distinct, direct and discernible cause-and-effect relationship between cultural products and their consumers. Culture is viewed as a necessary agent in the process of social and political self-definition, and national identity remains a salient issue in the various debates over Canadian culture. Culture can increase our determination and potential to act upon and understand the environment we live in because it delineates our position in relation to that environment. It shows us who and where we are. In Canada, where most of the cultural products consumed are imported from other political and cultural contexts, the situation is regarded as urgent and particularly pronounced. Given the assumed direct relationship between culture and consumers, in prescriptive criticism, the Canadian cultural predication retards both our individual and social potential for personal and national self-recognition, growth and determination. Thus, while critics may not agree on the precise nature and form of the cinema we need, there is little quibbling over the fact that we need a cinema. Apparent motivations and determinations may differ (ranging, right to left, from cultural jingoism, to the practical drive to economic self-sufficiency, to the mobilization of strategies to sub
vert the discourse of foreign cultural oppression, but the common end of all such prescriptive criticism is to tell us, and we need our own...

According to Bruce Elder, the cinema we need probably isn't the cinema most of us want, if most of us want one at all. An example of prescriptive criticism is hypothetical and utopian; it does not even touch ground long enough to be represented as the central problem facing contemporary Canadian cinema.

Elder's article addresses a multitude of issues and possible answers to the central and perennial problem of cinephilia. According to Elder, the return-to-zero, outright rejection of narrative simply ignores the representational and mimetic strategies as stasis, repetition, rhythm, temporality of its own unfolding and by coining, through representation, certain value systems and modes of behaviour and by condemning, through exclusion and by coining, through representation, certain value systems and modes of behaviour not permissible according to the arbitrary but guarded parameters of the normal. And in some things as things are okay, dominant pop culture forms nullify the need, or even a recognition of its possibility, for radical social change.

But there are ways of countering that. Without necessary means of maintaining an imbalance of power between the excised few that produce and comprehend art, and the vast and ever-growing mass that does not. And, while we're at it, just what the fuck is "art" anyway?

And this attitude, I daresay, is a dangerous one; it will serve no other than a veritable slew of decadent, past-fixed narrative trash movies. Suggesting art must be liberated from language and the representational impulse in order for it to play a subversive rather than supportive social role in relation to dominant ideology may sound like a truism, but it's a truism that does not. What's really at issue here is the reactionary romantic impulse to return to a pre-symbolic, pre-linguistic, pre-discursive art. It's a notion of a pre-symbolic, pre-linguistic, pre-discursive art. And yet, it is a notion of the cinema we need.

Adrift in the realm of the senses: it makes for the apotheosis of the comic and apolitical one, but that's what Elder's conception of the cinema of subjective here-and-now-ness amounts to. By positing the ideal cinema as one which puts us in touch with the pre-linguistic, purely sensory realm of visceral response, Elder is hearkening back to the mystic idealism of the ancients...

The cinema we need, we are told, is a cinema separate from and unsullied by the "genre" and the "art" of the day discourse and popular taste. It is a cinema that depends upon mystery and superstition, a notion of art as something irrational, unexplainable, spiritual and exalted — something magic. It is a perspective that positions art as natural and given, rather than as socially and historically constructed, and as divine mediators of messages dispatched somewhere from the black cauldron of the subconscious.

The cinema we need, we are told, is a cinema of radical social change. It is a cinema that produces and comprehends art not as something transcendent, but as something that does not.

Perhaps prescribing what we should have, is in and of itself, a retrograde rather than a progressive activity for Canadian cinema. Certainly Elder's vision of the cinema we need has less to do with the mystical and apolitical one, but that's what Elder's conception of the cinema of subjective here-and-now-ness amounts to. By positing the ideal cinema as one which puts us in touch with the pre-linguistic, purely sensory realm of visceral response, Elder is hearkening back to the mystic idealism of the ancients...

Whatever the specific form of address, Elder claims that all narrative forms, by definition, speak in past tense. This is, I think, true to a certain extent.

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order to consider what we need. In fact, if there's a crisis facing Canadian cinema at the moment, it's a failure in film criticism as much as it is the films criticised. Why can't we deal with what we've got?

As mentioned, prescriptive criticism usually assumes a dismissal, on qualitative grounds, of the cinema we have. Disheartened with the likes of what we've got, like The Surrogate, Heavenly Bodies and Rock and Rule, critics will indulge in reveries of what we might or should have. Usually, this critical utopianism implicitly or explicitly posits the achievements of national cinemas more consistent, pervasive and respected than ours as models for development. (The phenomenal success, in the past decade, of Australian cinema, which we once condemned fondly as a bedfellow in cultural retardation, has only sharpened the edges of our own sense of inferiority.) There is no single reason for this cycle of self-fulfilling critical self-flagellation, but it seems generally to spring from factors more commonly cited to bemoan Canadian filminers than critics, i.e., the state of cultural schizophrenia caused by the cumulative effects of the unhindered consumption of some else's systems of self-definition. And like those audiences for whom the standard of quality, familiarity and even intelligibility * has been firmly established by the American icons, when dealing with Canadian films, do so under the long shadow of Hollywood. Thus, our own films are invariably found to be "lacking," "long," "embarrassing" or "amateurish." Instead of being evaluated on their own terms or even in the context of a broader but culturally integrated area of enquiry like "Canadian Cinema," Canadian films are routinely hailed by Canadian critics onto the Hollywood chopping block and there condemned to death for failing to measure up. Our producers, directors and awards-show presenters routinely resort to the euphemism "international" or "universal" as both goal and a standard of achievement for Canadian movies to aspire to. But there's really only one border worth crossing for these "universalists," and it's the same one that's proven more difficult for Canadian than American movies to cross.

Dismissed and abandoned, Canadian cinema is left largely forgotten, or consciously put out of mind. Much is written about the horrendous and crus results of the c.c.a.-spawned boom of the 1960s when tax shelter incentives stimulated film production on a scale this country had never seen before or since. The problem was the films were dreck of the lowest order, usually third-generation rip-offs of formula American genres such as police thrillers, teen comedies or teen slash-em-ups. Most were never deemed fit for distribution and, until pay TV, with its gapping 24-hour-a-day appetite for product, came along in 1982, most were never seen. This period has become nothing less than the Cultural Revolution of Canadian film history. (This despite the humiliating fact that Meatballs and Porky's, Canada's most lucrative commercial exports of all time, were produced during this period.) It's rarely discussed, and never with any serious toward the films and always in an incendiary tone. Fault is usually found, and always somewhere else. Yet, if the emphasis of Canadian film criticism shifted from the prescriptive and the evaluative to the descriptive and the analytical; if all film texts, from the Heavenly Bodies to the Greystreets, were treated objectively as texts worthy of analysis (because all cultural texts, from the essay to the vanguard, convey vital messages of cultural and ideological self-definition), and were given equal due, Canadian cinema might finally yield that elusive motherlode of self-identity sought by the prospectors of Canadian culture since Confederation. What we are, what we would like to be, what we aren't—the means for discussing these matters of cultural identity are as firmly encoded in Death Ship and Running Brave as they are in those rare English-Canadian * features that do measure up to the arbitrary evaluative standards of "international" or "universal" appeal. Pop culture, all of it, high or low, class or class, is an equally valid indicator of the cultural context which produces it, of the ideological temper of the times. The refusal or inability of Canadian film critics to adapt a non-evaluative, descriptive and analytical film criticism has merely perpetuated the colonization of the Canadian collective consciousness (if such a best exist). Like the average weekend moviegoer, the critic in Canada has undergone a process of cultural dislocation, resulting from the adoption of imported critical standards that can only be self-defeating in a country where these standards cannot deal adequately with the cultural products that country produces: of course Heavenly Bodies sucks, we can all agree on that. But what does it tell us about our culture, our priorities, our values, ideals, and aspirations?

Concomitant to this negative of the evaluative and prescriptive mode as a necessary progression in the understanding of Canadian popular culture is a re-evaluation of what constitutes a national cinema. Here, as one would expect, the cues have been borrowed from other contexts and applied back home, where the definitions can't be as safely and securely applied. To insist, particularly in English Canada, that the national cinema is comprised of theatrical features, is to further tighten the cycle of critical self-strangulation by limiting the scope of analysis to a small, and particularly distinctive, area of cultural activity in Canada. Most of the film production activity in this country is dispersed to other media, such as broadcast and pay television. Unless the concept of national cinema is broadened sufficiently to encompass these vital and comparable flourishing areas of activity in film-related production, and the traditional cultural elitism elevating film from "lessor" forms of visual media is dismissed for the culturally stagnant identity it is, Canadian popular culture, and Canadians' understanding of what it is and what it means—and ability to direct its future based on this knowledge— will continue to yield nothing but a sense of cultural embarrassment, impotence and retardation. And that, I'm sure, we don't need.

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* Earlier this year, I taught an introductory course in film studies at Carleton University. It was illuminating, if dismayingly, to discover that, in a course that included Godard, Bergman and Welles, it was the Canadian section of the course that proved a major stumbling block. Canadian films were the most "foreign" films, in terms of familiarity, presented all year.

* In Quebec, as usual, always, things are different. Most of the points urgently addressed here are either moot or non-existent there.