

The return of the repressed

photos: Festival of Festivals

by Michael Dorland

In this great future, you can forget the past - Bloor St. graffiti

For all of us, the consequences are grave. The very success of the Broadcast Fund is putting in jeopardy the raison d'etre of Telefilm Canada. For Canada, as a nation, without feature films, the brightest and the best will simply leave...

- Peter Pearson, Telefilm executive director

It was perhaps to be expected after last year's triumphant Canadian Retrospective that the Festival of Festivals' second Perspective Canada program would suffer somewhat by comparison. After all, there is an enormous difference between a retrospective that can select from 60 years of Canadian film's up-and-down history, and the much narrower perspective of the '84-'85 film crop. But in that difference lies all the difference, namely a context. Last year, current Canadian film - and this for the very first time - could be seen within its own larger filmic context, that web of situation, association, and memory that makes up a culture. This year,

though, there was no such context at the Festival of Festivals. Or rather the context was that of 36 Canadian entries of various lengths often forlornly adrift amid some 200 other selections, mainly features, of the best and brightest of world cinema, past and present. And in that context, the Canadian section revealed a cinema still labouring against extraordinary cultural handicaps.

This was only reinforced by the Perspective Canada program's domestic context. In a stunning example of cultural myopia, this was also the week in which CBC chose to go 100% Canadian content, heightening the political competition currently going on as to the future orientation of Canadian images and the means of their delivery.

If Perspective Canada is to become a serious showcase for Canadian cinema, that vocation is not helped by taking place in a domestic environment where Canadian cinema itself appears like television's poor cousin. This was the first year in which it was possible to actually see the effects on Canadian cinema of the redirection of policy, money and production towards broadcasting. "For us," says Telefilm's Peter Pearson, "the

lesson is plain. There are no longer any neat boundaries. Film crosses into television which crosses back into film."

But it was precisely the absence of "neat boundaries" - namely context - that was most striking about the Perspective Canada program this year. Measured against the stronger film industries - and, more importantly, stronger filmic traditions - of other countries, Canadian cinema is still very uncertain not just of what it is trying to say, but how it is to say it. There is an oppressive belatedness to Canadian cinema in content and in style that simply has to be worked through - and is being worked through. Successfully with films like *90 Days or Canada's Sweetheart*; with considerable promise in *My American Cousin*, *Jacques et Novembre* or John Paisz's work-in-progress *Crime Wave*, but also with varying degrees of difficulty, ranging from *Joshua Then and Now* or *La Dame en couleurs* (to mention two films by veteran filmmakers) to badly flawed features by nearly-new directors (Laurence Keane's *Samuel Lount* or Claude Gagnon's *Visage pale*), to outrightly amateur efforts like Eric Weinthal's

Timing. (But as Pat Thompson notes in issue, Canadian shorts, the category in which this country wins Oscars, were on the whole in fine shape.)

If the process of working through the burden of feature film belatedness could be greatly eased by a clearly defined context for Canadian cinema, the fact that there isn't one - that it survives somewhere between the domination of international cinema on the one hand and television on the other - only compounds it. The difficulties of style that appear in the work of experienced directors like Ted Kotcheff or Claude Jutra only illustrate how real a burden belatedness is: *Joshua* is Kotcheff's first Canadian film since 1974 and it shows; Jutra's *La Dame en couleurs* is his first French-language film in nine years; both films struggle against a literariness that preoccupies them to the detriment of their qualities as cinema. The reverse side of that belatedness is that the brunt of the burden has to be carried by those least equipped to do so - first-time directors. Tellingly six out of 14-feature-length entries in this year's Perspective Canada program were first-features. But if the Sandy Wilsons, Jean Beaudrys,

François Bouviers and John Paizses of young Canadian cinema do clearly have something to show for themselves, what sort of judgment does one render on films like Bachar Chbib's *Memoirs* which, whatever its other faults, is at least properly photographed and has energetic music, or Weinthal's *Timing* which has no visible qualities whatsoever other than being unabashedly set in Toronto? (If it's any comfort to the weaker first-time directors, this year's award for worst film would have to be evenly shared between *Timing* and a third stab at a feature, Claude Gagnon's *Visage pale*, another exercise in non-filmmaking.)

If, to indulge in the Perspective Canada program's wishful thinking, this was "the year of the young filmmaker," those young filmmakers face bleak futures in terms of making another film. As Pearson laid it out before the industry Trade Forum, the commitment of broadcasters to the Broadcast Fund makes television programming the top priority. But the industry itself has already made giant strides in conflating film and television production into some sort of halfway genre that is neither film nor television, and, if anything, more a hybrid between dull theatre and bad film. The risk is very real that the Festival's Canadian section, if it is to endure, will soon consist mainly of made-for-TV programming.

The television streamroller was visibly in evidence this year, both in the 36 films that were selected by programmers Kay Armatage, Piers Handling and Peter Harcourt, and the 120-odd that they rejected, as either bad or as being too televisual.

"A lot of us were waiting to see what effects the Broadcast Fund were going to have on Canadian film," says Handling. "Last year it was too early to tell. This year we began to see what the effects were. We certainly saw more material that was geared for television. The films that we rejected or did not accept were very precisely that. Most of the films that we showed this year are straddling that very fine line, so you can imagine what the other material looked like. Not that it was bad, it was just that it was done for television, and I think it is very difficult to show television material in a film context."

Yet Perspective Canada's strongest 'film' at the festival, *Canada's Sweetheart*, is an NFB/CBC production, and so will get delivery on TV rather than in a theatre. *The Magnificat*, however competent a piece of film work, is still nothing more than a TV documentary, as are the other documentaries *Artie Shaw: Time Is All You've Got* and *Quel numéro/What Number?* – both could of which be cut to TV durations with absolutely no loss of substance. In fact, the real tragedy of this year's Perspective Canada is that there was little in the crop with visual qualities so overwhelmingly filmic, so demanding of a big screen that couldn't run as safely on the small one.

If it's nice to be able to go and see *Joshua Then and Now* at a cinema, as an indulgence in nostalgia for all the other Canadian films audiences don't get to see in a cinema, there's unfortunately nothing in this, Canada's biggest

budget film production – no vistas, no immensity of acting, no staggering camera techniques – that would be lost in seeing it on the tube.

Given the enormous difficulties in raising the \$6-7 million required to make just one *Joshua Then and Now*, where indeed is the money to come from for the 30 *Joshuas* a year that would be needed just to begin to recapture Canada's cinema screens? But when Canada's prime minister is widely quoted as saying "We've been trying to tell you for some time this country is bankrupt," one wonders what priority Canadian film carries with a government whose national leader defines his country as "bankrupt."

But the problem of the cinema in Canada – or to call it by its American name: free-trade – is what Canadian cinema had always had to struggle against. Last year, the wide perspectives of the Festival of Festivals' Canadian Retrospective showed us, that, in spite of everything, Canadian cinema did possess a distinct and distinguished history. This year, Perspective Canada offered a much narrower focus on the present and its difficulties, aesthetic and other.

"Nothing ever happens" – My American Cousin

Canadian cinema, to the extent it has existed, is a cinema of belatedness. Its establishment has taken so long, has suffered so many false starts, and experienced so many problems and difficulties in getting itself off the ground that its images appear on the screen burdened by the necessity of restoring a past from which we have been severed. From the very beginnings of Canadian feature filmmaking (*Back To God's Country*, 1919) through to *The Grey Fox* (1982), Canadian cinema has often been deeply perplexed by its own backwardness. This year's features were no exception to this search for a context: for example, *My American Cousin* looks back to adolescence, *La Dame en couleurs* to childhood, *Samuel Lount* to history. Instead of a past, what is found is a sense of a past that has somehow been lost (*Joshua Then and Now*, or *Canada's Sweetheart* offer two very different 'explanations'). Or, in a film like *90 Days*, the lost past is simply the operational given for which no explanation is offered.

Yet in a country as massively uncertain about its past as ours is, film has an extraordinary potential as a form of collective memory – far more than television, since film possesses an epic dimension that television can just never achieve. This epic potential, however, puts tremendous pressure on the filmmaker's vision: if it is not strong enough to withstand that pressure, what collapses is more than just a film. And the further back in time the content of the film, the stronger the pressure and the greater the risks of failure. Of this year's crop, the three strongest films were, not surprisingly, those closest to the present:

Giles Walker's *90 Days*, a brilliantly humorous contemporary examination of the impossibility of tradition on the

The necessity of a Canadian cinema

by Ted Kotcheff

What follows has been slightly abridged from a speech given by Ted Kotcheff at the Festival of Festivals Trade Forum lunch in Toronto on Sept. 5.

I've made two Canadian films separated by 11 years. *Duddy Kravitz* in 1973 and *Joshua* in 1984, and the thing that struck me most forcibly about the two experiences was this: When I directed *Duddy Kravitz*, it was difficult to find a decent cameraman. (Producer) John Kemeny and I used a British cameraman. The production manager was eager but inexperienced, the crew was raw and post-production facilities were miserable. Post-production personnel were non-existent. The sound track was atrocious, the post-synch was post but not in synch, and Bellevue Pathé delivered an answer print that I was never happy about.

Eleven years later to the making of *Joshua* and the situation was entirely different. The Montreal film crew was world-class. François Protat is an wonderful cameraman and did an extraordinary job. Editor Ron Wisman cut it brilliantly and is as good as the best that I've ever worked with in London or Hollywood. The sound-editing crew were first-rate and the gifted Anne Pritchard, who did such a wonderful job on *Duddy*, excelled herself in *Joshua*. Pathé Recording Studios gave me a marvellous track and the finished print is beautiful, out of the very same labs that had done such indifferent work on *Duddy*.

So within that time period, Canadian films have made an extraordinary leap forward on the sheer professional and technical level. They are world-class and there is no question that, on future films of mine made here or abroad, I would want to use people like Anne Pritchard, François Protat, Ron Wisman.

You know, we talk of films in terms of stars, directors, writers. But you don't have a viable film industry and a true cinema until you have a body of experienced and skilled artists, craftsmen and technicians, prop people, hair stylists, costume designers, carpenters, painters – the people who provide all the pictorial elements that make up the totality of a film. And whatever the mistakes that were made during the tax-shelter years, one good thing that emerged was a group of first-rate professionals.

And this is not just my feeling, but one that is increasingly encountered in Hollywood. The first thing out of a studio executive's mouth is "Let's make this in Toronto or Montreal," not only because of cost but because they know that production person-

nel and facilities are available here.

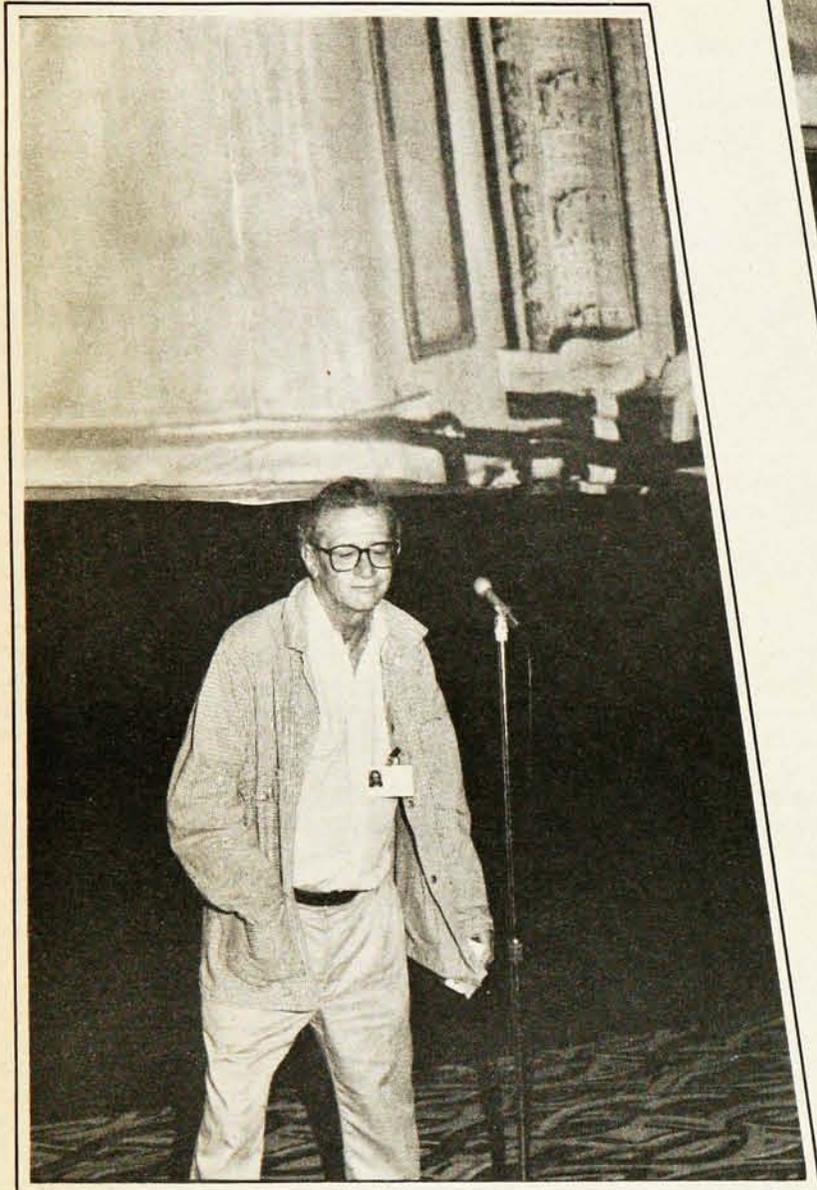
So we have the technical ability now to make great films here. But having achieved these levels of proficiency, where do we find ourselves? Once again, Canadian cinema is in an unstable state and uncertain conditions prevail. And the sad news is that a film like *Grey Fox*, *Joshua* or *The Boy in Blue* just couldn't be made this year because government financing is going into TV production.

We all know why. Millions of dollars of feature-film production never got distributed and ended up unseen by anybody. So government tied the financing of features to obtaining a TV license so, if all else failed, the films would at least be seen on TV.

Well, we all know that films and TV are totally different aesthetically and in content. TV by its very nature has to be timid and safe, cautious in its depiction of sexuality and violence, careful in its language. Films deal in levels of realism that are just not possible on TV. So whereas for me, the system of yoking was inconvenient and a bit wasteful financially, what is going on now has brought film production to a grinding halt.

The government, by playing it safe and investing heavily in TV production, are protecting their downside but in the process are destroying their upside. Let us not pay for the mistakes of the crazy tax-shelter years by dismembering Canadian cinema. Otherwise, we will be back to writers and directors emigrating again to make movies abroad and Canada will be finished as a film country. This is already happening. We have a lot of young talent – and some old talent too – and, to hold them, we must create stable financial conditions so that they know there will be continuity of work. What we need now are persons of vision. And I trust that the Right Honorable Marcel Masse and Peter Pearson and the newly appointed task-force will be these men and I wish them the best in trying to solve the manifold problems facing them.

One last thing and then I'm off. When the present impasse in Canadian films is resolved and Messrs. Masse and Pearson restore the financing of films on a sound basis, let's promise to do one thing. Let's make films of quality, substance and distinction. Films that spring from our cultural memory. Films about who we are and where we are going. We blew a chance to do it in the '70s; let's not blow it again. We're a country that knows very little about itself, so a vital flourishing cinema is not a luxury but an absolute necessity for us. We have the talent, both creative and entrepreneurial. We have the professional skills. There's no reason not to do it. So, let's do it.



• Canadian documentary's sweetheart, Donald Brittain



• 90 Days writer/director, Giles Walker



• Shy in Montreal, thrilled in Toronto: 90 Days co-stars Christine Pak and Sam Grana

one hand and a cold, technological future devoid of all Romanticism on the other; Sandy Wilson's sweetly nostalgic *My American Cousin* set in the late '50s; and Don Brittain's formidably bitter *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks*, set from the late '40s to the '60s.

However, with *Joshua Then & Now*, also set from the '40s to the present, already there are difficulties: as the Anglo city the film describes no longer exists, the motivations of the characters are more difficult to grasp. While that does not create insurmountable obstacles for the film's strongest actors (Alan Arkin and Alan Scarfe) it does for the less-developed talent, particularly Joshua himself (if only James Woods' dramatic powers were as strong as his looks), or Gabrielle Lazure, who has a nice body and that's about all she has. The difficulty of a film's attempt to capture a past that has left few traces of itself reaches exemplary heights in *Samuel Lount*, Laurence Keane's courageous but highly flawed stab at turning conscience-stricken bunglers into history's heroes.

The weight of Canadian cinema's belatedness often reveals itself as a strikingly unmodern film style that

privileges re-creation over creation — indeed, is less a style than a stiltedness, a sense of filmed theatre instead of film as the construction of a total environment. If Ted Kotcheff does in *Joshua* re-create Montreal's Fairmount Street for one lovely long crane-shot, that richness of camerawork plus décor is only a passing moment; it does not permeate the film as a whole. Similarly *Samuel Lount's* attention to interiors is not matched by equivalent exteriors: instead of a sense of what Toronto in the 1830s could have looked like, there are only exterior shots of landscape. It's the same in *My American Cousin*: the beauty of the Okanagan Valley is only the context of no-context. Because landscape is not historical: it is merely the "nothing ever happens" of Sandy's diary in the opening shots.

But, of course, things *do* happen — if you can remember them, and even more so if you can capture that sense of their happening. *Joshua* leaves Canada and becomes a famous writer — then he fatally returns home to do a book about Canada that he can't and, instead, sinks into existential quandaries. Most important for Canadian cinema in terms of happenings is the arrival of the Americans: the American Cousin; Hal Banks;

and American ideas of freedom in *Samuel Lount*.

With these metaphors for Americanization, (English) Canadian cinema does begin at last to wrestle with its own belatedness. *Why* does nothing ever happen? *Why* can't Joshua write when he comes home? *Why* don't "brave Canadians love freedom" (William Lyon Mackenzie in *Samuel Lount*)? *Why* are our films so slight? If Canada on its own so often seems a graveyard for failures of the imagination, (or more accurately for the institutionalized bankruptcy of the imagination), it's the encounter with America as history that provides the beginning of Canada's own sense of itself as different. Because in an environment of peace, order and good government, nothing does happen until the 'Amer-

ican' aspiration to freedom brings out the criminal in the Canadian: under Butch's influence, Sandy rebels against her parents; under the influence of American revolutionary ideas, Samuel Lount treasonously rebels; under the reign of terror of Hal C. Banks' control of the Canadian maritime industry, Canadian unions and shipping companies eventually rebel against the American domination established at the invitation of the Canadian government.

Of course, these are not real Americans; they are caricatures and symbols; imaginary constructs invented by Canadian artists to account for something that is embarrassing or difficult to grasp about ourselves and so needs to be symbolized. The 'real' Hal Banks never appears once in *Canada's Sweetheart*: he

is only seen as represented by Canadian actor Maury Chaykin, while the voice-over tells us that "because of him, men once feared to walk the streets." Banks is a Frankenstein symbol, "the stuff of the Capones and Hoffas."

These imaginary Americans, then, represent Canadian aspirations and fears, visions of freedom and unfreedom: cars, rock'n' roll, sex and movies in *My American Cousin* – that is, the invention and creation of art; an end to internal Canadian terror through the establishment of a new order of justice in *Samuel Lount*; 'the horror, the horror' of America in *Canada's Sweetheart*. In *Joshua*, freedom is still entangled with imperial cultural symbols (London) but more strongly is symbolized by the flag of the Attlee Brigade, and it is buried. (No wonder Joshua can't write once he comes home.)

But these visions of freedom often go together with an equally acute consciousness that the way to realizing them lies through transgression, for which there is a heavy price to pay. Butch may be free ("Anything you want we got in the USA") but, as Sandy immediately challenges him, "So what are you doing up here in Canada?" Seen from Canada, American freedom often conceals crime: fearing he's knocked off his girl, Butch has stolen his mother's car; Hal Banks packs his shotgun, automatics and a suitcase full of greenbacks and heads for the Canadian border; Samuel Lount is hanged for having believed that ideas are worth dying for. From Canada, Joshua does return to England – to bury both his own youth and Sidney, the 'real' writer and friend of his youth. Canada is always the place where dreams of freedom turn into nightmares. Paisz's *Crime Wave*, Jutra's *La Dame en couleurs* or, in experimental film, Jesionka's *Resurrected Fields* make this point also.

Always? Not quite.

After all, as Sandy Wilson says in voice-over, "I never gave up planning my escape," and *My American Cousin* did eventually get made. After all, the Canadian legal system did eventually, 13 years later, come after Hal Banks who jumped bail and slipped back south across the border. After all, Mordecai/Joshua did manage to write books in Canada, and producers Robert Lantos and Stephen Roth did prevail through trials and tribulations to finance *Joshua Then & Now*. After all, Samuel Lount's

descendant Elvira did produce a film in faint memory of her ancestor. After all, films – and even feature films – do get made in this country. Belatedly.

"That's Canada for you"
– Timing

However, a cinema of belatedness constantly risks succumbing to nostalgia, to that which never was, a temptation that television, quintessential nostalgia-box, intensifies. This is to say only that while it is a giant step forward for our cinema to be wrestling with symbols, symbols alone are not enough; paradoxically they have to be real symbols. One of the problems with *Joshua* is that its symbols are only empty symbolic: Pauline is everything that Joshua is not; not Jewish, not poor, not dark – not real. Likewise stringing Union Jacks all over the place and other symbols of empire as in the Trimble's garden-party scene does not reestablish the reality of what gives these symbols once really meant, and what gives them their value as symbols. Even less so when Trimble himself (Alan Scarfe) is revealed as a false symbol, a fake Brit – just another lower-class grasper trying to get his fingers up Westmount debs' skirts. Other than sex as a form of compensatory dominance to make up for economic deprivation, it's hard to know what a nice guy like Joshua ever sees symbolized in these people who made up the ruling class of the day. But if *Joshua* fails symbolically, it is because the reality of what it is symbolizing – Canada as a hypocrite's Britain – has since been replaced by a new reality – Canada as a hypocrite's America.

That dilemma – the belated imagination caught in a metaphoric shift – destroys Samuel Lount, both man and film. The man Lount was an 'American' in Canada when Canada was still British, and while the film adequately handles the British, that's about all it adequately handles. *Samuel Lount* fails both as reality and as symbol: neither R.H. Thomson (Lount) nor Linda Griffiths (Elizabeth Lount) have any depth of character, and so the reality that Lount died for is also only purely symbolic. Lount himself is a belated revolutionary whose would-be 'revolution' was already over before he had sorted out who he is.

If the reality of Sandy Wilson's grow-

ing up in late '50s BC is still fresh enough in her mind to successfully translate it into film, Butch, her American symbol, is himself just another kid – a belated, imitation Jimmy Dean. That makes *My American Cousin* little more than an exercise in innocent symbolization. It's good that it's there, like the film itself, but it is only a beginning.

The strongest evidence of serious mastery of symbols and reality together in this year's crop comes not surprisingly from one of Canadian media's authentic masters, Donald Brittain. In awarding *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks*, City-TV's \$5000 prize for best Canadian film, the Festival jury displayed a discernment that can only be endorsed with complete enthusiasm, for *Canada's Sweetheart* is probably the most authentically Canadian story ever told. For it is the first Canadian film ever to fully explore the pathology of Canadian dependence on the United States. (Obviously an idea whose time has finally come: Denys Arcand, in many respects Quebec's answer to Canada's Brittain, is exploring a similar theme fictionally in *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, and Canadian intellectuals like Arthur Kroker and David Cook are pursuing related strategies in political philosophy and literature respectively.)

"Canada's Sweetheart" is, of course, a metaphor for American cinema's hold over Canada. If one of Toronto's first gifts to Hollywood was actress Mary Pickford who went on to become "America's Sweetheart," it's saying something nasty both about the U.S. and Canada that, in exchange, "Canada's Sweetheart" would arrive in the guise of an ugly enforcer.

But where Brittain's *Canada's Sweetheart* distinguishes itself from those strains of Canadian anti-imperialism of both left and right that tend to blame Canada's 'silent surrender' on Ugly Americans, is that this film situates the problem of Canadian dependency where it belongs, squarely on Canadian soil: in the collusion between the Canadian federal government, Canadian business, and Canadian labour as the builders of the dependency system. A goon like Harold Chamberlain Banks, complete with criminal record a mile long including such charges as attempted murder, was invited to Canada in the late '40s by the St-Laurent cabinet to clean the Commies out of Canada's

maritime fleet, third largest in the world, after they had managed to bring work on Canadian waterfronts and abroad to a halt. And Banks did what he had been invited to do, under the protection of the cabinet, while the RCMP turned a blind eye to the SIU's shotgun and baseball-bat tactics. This is a time when Canadian cabinet ministers in Parliament were denouncing Communists at the National Film Board, and when Hollywood promised to refer to Canada in its scripts if the Canadian government let stand the U.S. domination of Canada's cinema screens.

Thirteen years later, after the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway and Transport Workers revolted against the 'internationalism' of the SIU and, with the support of Toronto's Upper Lakes Shipping Company, raised enough noise for the feds to appoint a commission of enquiry, Banks just slipped back across the border. Subsequently charged in Ontario for perjury, an extraditable offense, Banks was arrested in Manhattan in 1968 to be deported back to Canada. Dean Rusk, Lyndon Johnson's secretary of state, quashed the extradition order at the request of an unnamed Canadian cabinet minister. Banks, until his recent demise, lived in comfortable retirement in San Francisco.

But, fascinating as the purely documentary aspects of *Canada's Sweetheart* are, it is in its extra-documentary dimension that the film really bites deeply. Because Banks is a metaphor, in colour and in sepia. While Butch and his parents in *My American Cousin* remain standard Ugly American symbols, only here for a flying visit, Banks stayed and wanted to stay, and the Liberal cultural nationalist Jack Pickersgill approved his application for citizenship. Banks is the dark side of Canadian dependency: the American idea stripped of all ideational content, reduced to brutal efficiency only. If at the time of a Samuel Lount, American ideas of liberty were just too foreign to take root in the Canadian garrison state, 100-odd years of rule by the subsequent Family Compacts had opened up Canada to the welcomed penetration of American culture in its most debased and moronic forms. As Brittain's voice-over explains near the beginning of *Canada's Sweetheart*, one of the attractive features of Hal Banks, in the words of a Canadian official, is that he was "our own gangster," namely, that



he satisfied some repressed Canadian aspiration to gangsterism.

Now, if from the distorted pinnacles of Canadian power, administer an outpost of empire and governing a sovereign nation are so much one and the same thing that a U.S.-imported gangster can serve as a substitute for gangsters of our own, it was still too early for Banks, outside of high government circles, to fully receive the welcome he felt he deserved.

"What's the matter with your fucking country?" an outraged Banks protests. "You invite me up to do your dirty work and then you crap all over me."

The brilliant reversal that Brittain achieves in *Canada's Sweetheart* is to make even a Harold Banks become a victim of Canadian belatedness. As he says to R.H. Thomson who plays one of his enforcers: "You're a smart boy - why are you still here (in Canada, as opposed to New York)?" As one of the Canadian union officials says, "It's okay in this country to spill blood on the waterfront, but not on a freshly-mowed lawn. That's left to Americans." At least that's how it is as Justice Norris, who headed the commission of enquiry into Bank's SIU, puts it, in "this generally law-abiding country where we boast of our culture and freedom."

For the issues raised by *Canada's Sweetheart* cut dangerously close to the heart of Canadian ambiguity; namely, can freedom, culture and abiding by the law coexist simultaneously without one or more of those realities suffering serious damage? If in Canada's case, some form of abiding by the law has clearly taken precedence, it has been at the expense of freedom and culture. Instead, belated American ideas of freedom and culture have filled the vacuum created by Canadian law-abidingness's inability to generate either freedom or culture of its own. A system of law that neither produces freedom or culture nor, like the Americans pretend to, willingly restrains itself in the furtherance of freedom and culture, is at best an administrative mechanism subject to nothing but its own arbitrariness. In *Canada's Sweetheart*, Jack Leitch, the president of Toronto's Upper Lakes Shipping company, offers a terribly revealing indictment. Of the Canadian government's backing of Hal Banks, he says "the support of the government for something really evil bothered me at the time." *Canada's Sweetheart* documents in detail one such moment of government-backed evil. There have been others since, and what makes *Canada's Sweetheart* so poignant a film is that it is perfectly aware that there is nothing to stop those evils from happening again.

"The traditional Canadian manner of inquiry is to cloud issues and conceal findings until the public forgets what it was all about"

- *Canada's Sweetheart*:
The Saga of Hal C. Banks

If this year's Perspective Canada program suggests a map of the current state of Canadian filmmaking, what it showed was a series of scattered

filmmaking communities, each struggling away in isolation - lonely, little pioneers belatedly grappling with what has often been called the art-form of the 20th century. It's a largely regional cinema. From the West coast come Sandy Wilson (*My American Cousin*) and Laurence Keane's *Samuel Lount* which, whatever its weaknesses does nevertheless aspire to a national perspective. There's John Paisz (*Crime Wave*) all alone in Manitoba. There are Toronto's various separate film communities: Eric Weinthal with his *sui generis* *Timing*; the students Ken Scott and Fred Jones with their clever short, *Working Title*; the gays, thriving in splendid isolation with shorts such as Midi Onodera's sardonic *Ten Cents A Dance (Parallax)*, Laurie Lynd's brilliant musical *Together and Apart*, and Nick Sheehan's AIDs documentary *No Sad Songs*; the orthodox Elderian experimentalists Richard Kerr (*On Land Over Water/Six Stories*), Henry Jesionka's *Resurrected Fields* and Barbara Sternberg's *A Trilogy*, and the less orthodox experimental narrativists, Peter Dudar (*Transylvania 1917*) and Peter Mettler with his searching *Eastern Avenue*. Other women directors like Patricia Rozema's short *Passion* and Barbara Sweete's documentary *The Magnificat*. There's the National Film Board, undergoing a renaissance with films like *90 Days* and *Canada's Sweetheart*. There are the Québécois with four features: *La Dame en couleurs*, *Memoirs*, *Visage Pale*, and *Jacques et Novembre (Le Matou)*, unavailable in English subtitle, was not screened); and Sophie Bissonette's documentary on technological change, *Quel numéro?/What Number?*. Nothing, however, from the Maritimes unless Sternberg's Nova Scotia seaside images qualify. Like the country itself, a trans-continental scattering of films with lots of blank spaces separating the distant communities of filmmakers patiently tiling images in a harsh and unwelcoming soil.

Yet where the sheer vastness of such a country might call for a cinema of such imaginative impact that those great empty spaces do get spanned, there are instead only isolated (and competing) garrisons of cinema. And where an enlightened national film policy might pull together the disparate communities of filmmakers (as is, to some extent, the case in broadcasting), the scope for Canadian feature film is not exactly growing, but steadily shrinking. And, as a result, the Canadian feature film now too has a ministerial Task Force to study its problems. "Regrettably," warns Peter Pearson, "we are sliding back."

So what else is new? Canadian cinema is *always* sliding back. It's just that, from time to time, along comes a film that lets us forget this. The problem with the Perspective Canada program this year was that it served mainly to remind us of it all once again.

The distribution factor

by Gail Henley

At this year's Festival of Festivals, Linda Beath of Canadian film distributor Spectrafilm had a vision. She said that Canadian cinema would come into its own in 1990 because of the numbers and quality of the present generation of young filmmakers. However, many Canadian filmmakers don't believe in her vision of 1990: instead, they see a very grim future ahead.

Perspective Canada is the Canadian showcase program at the Festival of Festivals, and in this, its second year, was clearly indicating a dearth of features. "We saw lots and lots of films, the majority short films, student films. There isn't much happening," says Kay Armatage, one of the programmers for Perspective Canada. "We saw every feature film made in Canada and we simply selected the best. It doesn't appear to be a thriving industry, certainly not in feature films."

The 1985 films chosen for the Perspective Canada program included 10 features (of which four were French independent productions; four were English independent productions; and two were NFB productions); six documentaries (one a CBC/NFB co-production and five independently made); 14 shorts; and five experimental films.

Donald Brittain, Canada's premiere documentary filmmaker, won the Toronto-City Award for Excellence in Canadian Production for his docudrama *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks*. Though the award comes with an option on a City-TV broadcast licensing agreement, Brittain's film was one of the few in the Perspective Canada program that did not require distribution. As a NFB/CBC co-production, it premieres on CBC this fall and the NFB has plans not only to place it in its free-library distribution, but on rental video cassettes as well.

Another feature that doesn't face the

Canadian distribution dilemma was Perspective Canada's opener *My American Cousin* by Sandy Wilson, the first English fictional feature film directed by a woman in 10 years (the last was *The Far Shore* by Joyce Wieland in 1975). Financed and packaged for a small-budget film with a CBC pre-sale and Telefilm funding, *My American Cousin* has Spectrafilm as its distributor. It will be seen in virtually every market and should prove commercially successful given that it immediately became a popular favourite at the Festival and was scheduled for an extra screening due to demand.

It is an indigenous film full of integrity. Wilson clung tenaciously to her vision of the film. She fought long and strenuously for her choice of Margaret Langrick (an unknown and a non-actress) to play the lead. She fought to direct her picture. On top of that, everything had to be resolved and negotiated under time-constraints, because filming had to commence during the B.C. cherry season. And win every battle she did. As producer Peter O'Brian admits, "Every frame of that movie is Sandy Wilson's."

Movies that get to the screen without compromise are often quickly recognized by critics. *My American Cousin* won the Festival International Critic's Choice Award this year - the first Canadian film to win. It shared this position with *No Surrender*, a British-Canadian co-produced feature funded under a Telefilm Canada "twinning" agreement. The two films join the other features which won the International Critic's Award in previous years: Fassbinder's *Veronika Voss* in 1982; Paul Verhoeven's *The Fourth Man* in 1983; and Alan Rudolph's *Choose Me*, 1984.

If Brittain and Wilson are exceptional in having distribution, what of the other features already made? Or those yet to be made?

As for the principal production-funding agency, its position is clear. Says Telefilm's Peter Pearson: "The Canadian independent television production has been a success precisely because it was distribution-based. Canadian feature film production without a parallel dis-

Gail Henley is a novelist and independent producer in Toronto.

tribution-activated mechanism has no chance of success." As a result, Telefilm financial participation will now be conditional on having a Canadian distribution company in place.

But the prominent position given to the distributor in feature-film financing is a double-edged sword – and swiftly blunts filmmakers' optimism. If those films that do get made will be assured distribution, what types of films will be made?

At a workshop concurrent with the Festival Trade Forum, entitled "Make Them An Offer They Can't Refuse," a hypothetical film-deal was struck as an exercise. The workshop was sponsored by Women in Film, the Toronto chapter of an international organization of professional women in the film and video industry. The deal-makers were Joan Schafer representing the producer; Gail Singer the director, and Linda Beath the distributor. What was most interesting about this 'game' was how quickly the marketplace called the shots. Director/writer Gail Singer had decided to do a film on the Susan Nelles story entitled *The Deadly Nursery* so she sought out the producer, Joan Schafer. CBC, represented by Barbara Allinson, was interested in providing initial support because of the Canadian nature of the story. Telefilm, represented by Gwen Iveson, would come in due to the CBC's interest in the project. When the producer approached the distributor, the response from Beath was: We don't want something set in Canada; stories about killing babies don't sell; and Jane Fonda (working under the revised landed-immigrant clause) is wrong for the part. The producer responded by changing the story: it would now be set in Milwaukee, be about saving (not killing) babies and the nurse would be played by Bill Hurt (favoured by the new landed-immigrant clause).

The moral of this encounter was: whatever the distributor wants is the story that gets made. For the seminar to proceed and the workshop not to be immediately stalemated, the producer had to agree to working on the distributor's terms. The choice sent a shiver through the spines of every filmmaker in the audience. Without jumping into bed with the distributor, the workshop would have ended right away, and the hypothetical deal would not have been made. In reality, this is the bind most filmmakers face.

"Canadians have a dilemma," says Phillip Borsos, who directed *The Grey Fox* and, in the U.S., *The Mean Season*, and was nominated by this year's Festival as one of 10 directors to watch for in the future. "They want the film to be seen by a lot of people, namely Americans, and yet they want to make a film that is indigenous and speaks to their roots. Two separate sides to what is essentially a business."

According to Borsos, "Telefilm is as right as any financial organization would be to have a distribution agreement prior to involvement. Why would they end up with 20 films with no distribution?"

"And yet," Borsos adds, "for the young filmmaker it's difficult, if not impossible, to find a distributor up-front. So by imposing this regulation, Telefilm



Sandy Wilson, writer/director, *My American Cousin*: every frame her own

is substantially inhibiting the growth of young filmmakers in Canada. Telefilm is a financier, as opposed to a supporter, to the development of Canadian film."

As Pearson told his Trade Forum audience. "It is now clear that Telefilm is a corporation that is in the Entertainment Business. At the beginning of the Broadcast Fund, we thought we were investing in film and television programs. We have discovered that we are now, as a consequence of our investment, involved in the record business, video-cassettes, stuffed animals, and refrigerator door stickers."

"What Telefilm has done," Borsos continues, "is shifted the decision-making from the producer who doesn't know anything, to a distributor who doesn't know anything. As long as Telefilm is being a business operation, they will do that and have to do that, and it will compromise the integrity of Canadian cinema. But, as a business organization, they have to do that. So again they have limited the filmmaker. However, if the filmmaker wants to make a film, maybe it will be without those people."

There are alternatives for filmmakers determined to make their film. The American Donna Deitch, who brought to the Toronto Festival her movie *Desert Hearts* – based on the Canadian

novel by Jane Rule and starring Helen Shaver – offers one example of how a film can get done when its topic is not of wide appeal and would not at the outset engender market support. Deitch personally raised the money over a period of two-and-a-half years through a series of fund-raising parties at which she flogged her private placement prospectus. "It was gruelling," she says "but it is far more profitable to be exhausted and ready to do the next thing than exhausted and not having a picture."

West Germany's Margarethe von Trotta, invited to Canada by the Festival as another of the 10 To Watch, is pessimistic about the situation for independent filmmakers. "The time to do problematic, serious films is almost over in every country. Even in France, the nation of cinephiles, spectators are declining. Only the big machines are doing well. The same in Italy. In Germany. It's harder and harder for all of us, male and female, doing serious films which are more complicated than what the machines produce, to find support. I'm not very optimistic for our cinema on the whole."

All von Trotta's films are co-produced with television and first have a theatrical run in the cinemas, then move to a TV window. Despite her commercial

success, she still finds it difficult to get her subject-matter passed. "I always have to convince them very painfully to accept what I want to do. There is always the television deciding. So we still have censorship. The taste of those making the decisions begins to limit all of us."

Marianne and Juliane, considered to be her masterpiece, faced numerous rejections. "It was feared to be too extreme in its terrorism. The TV station which produced my two previous films refused it. And the next TV station I approached refused it. Finally it was a third station, which had a woman programmer, that decided to support it."

Among Canadian filmmakers, a few have continued to struggle against considerable odds to make what Kay Armatage calls "political" films. One is Sophie Bissonnette, whose documentary on technology *Quel Numero/What Number?* was in the Perspective Canada program. "Political cinema is hard to make in any country. It has such a narrow possibility," says Armatage. "The NFB does it without the hard-hitting analysis that Sophie brings to her films. She and Laura Sky are stunning examples of filmmakers who continue independently of any institution to make powerful political films. It's very difficult to make committed left-wing films period. To raise the financing for this is quite something."

In *Quel numero*, Bissonnette reveals the electronic sweatshops of large corporations such as Bell, Canada Post, and a supermarket chain, where masses of imaginative, intelligent women are systematically being dehumanized by computerization. "Making films like this gives me a chance to allow people who rarely get a chance on film such as ordinary working women to defend their interests," says Bissonnette.

"There is a credibility that comes out of real people and real working conditions. The audience can't dismiss it as they could a feature film. Documentary has a potential for moving people that feature film can't. If you listen carefully, the women say things I could never have scripted."

Bissonnette is also wary of the change the Broadcast Fund has had on Canadian film. "It solves one problem, doesn't solve the other. When you didn't have a broadcaster, you could still get the funds to make your film. Feature films are having the same problem and this will be even more exacerbated. Independent filmmakers should still have access to other funds at Telefilm even if they don't have a broadcaster or distribution license. If you try and pre-arrange a broadcaster, you're asking him to take a risk – a finished film speaks for itself."

Bissonnette sees herself as typical of the independent filmmaker who goes out after the film is completed, and privately and systematically nurtures its distribution and exhibition. "I spent three-and-a-half years researching and making this film. The personal price you have to pay for independent filmmaking usually makes you the best person to push it through."

Perhaps one of the most energetic and independent marketing plans devised for the theatrical release of a fea-

ture made with Telefilm Broadcast Fund support, is being undertaken by Elvira Lount, producer of *Samuel Lount*. "Because we understand we won't make a fortune theatrically, Canada being such a small country, we want to stay as much involved with the distribution."

Telefilm, unfortunately, will not allow a producer access to the fund set up for distribution, regardless of how imaginative or competent the release plan is. "In talking to distributors," says Lount, "we realized we could do what they could do." So, without the assistance of Telefilm's distribution program, Lount is embarking on a release pattern which will give *Samuel Lount* as much playing time as possible in this country. After Perspective Canada at the Festival of Festivals, the film will have its official premiere opening the Atlantic Film Festival and will then run in a small theatre in Halifax. From there it goes to close the Ottawa Festival of Arts and, at the end of October, it will have a run at the Towne Cinema in Ottawa. In November, *Samuel Lount* opens in Vancouver at the Ridge Theatre (an independent cinema).

"Toronto is a problem," admits Lount. "They have rep houses but they only do second runs." But the principle behind the release strategy is clear. "We want to go from a national awareness of our film and then take it to the U.S. and internationally." Once the film has been marketed this way, she feels it is easier to line up a distributor in the U.S., especially in the specialty market.

Because *Samuel Lount* was one of

the first films negotiated when the Broadcast Fund was established and since many of the rules of the game were still being worked out, the more serious strictures that now impede the feature filmmaker did not impact on this production. However, Lount too is wary of the new line that Telefilm is taking in regards to a distributor being in place on a film. "I would strongly advise about being so hardlined about it," she says. "What that tends to do is not allow any room for originality and seems to make product conform to an idea of what is marketable, or a distributor's idea of what is marketable, as opposed to making a product that is non-conforming and has originality and that you know there is a market for, and have thought about who your audience is. If a distributor comes in early in the game of a mainstream production, it may barely matter - in an artistic endeavour it can matter very much."

Aware of the dilemma that will face many independent filmmakers, Lount wonders how the new task force, announced at the Festival by former Communications minister Marcel Masse to report on issues facing Canadian film production and distribution, would address this problem. "The task force better pay attention. Distributors change from one month or one year to the next, so a project that takes two-and-a-half years to get off the ground could be in the hands of different people. Distributors are calling the shots on what product is made and distributors are not the creative people. They feel they understand the market, but in Canada

they don't understand marketing because they're used to distributing pre-marketed American product. I hope the task force does not just address industrial strategy, but also the cultural strategy."

"At the trade forum," comments Laurence Keane who directed *Samuel Lount*, "I felt a real lack of passion coming from other people about the issues. There should have been more heated discussion about the direction." As a filmmaker Keane has serious objections to the distribution factor. "It ensures that there's another player in the game that is telling you how to make the movie - another compromise that tends to make the commercial package more important than the artistic package - and as far as I'm concerned that's a step backwards."

Many filmmakers are leery about sending briefs or messages explaining their point-of-view to the task force. "I made my feature film," claims Keane, "and that's enough of a political act. Briefs fall on deaf ears. All you seem to do is make a few enemies by stating your opinions. I don't know that it makes any difference."

If making a film in spite of the system is a political statement, then some of the films in Perspective Canada this year did, indeed, carry a clear statement of defiance and individuality. No compromise was visible in Claude Jutra's *La Dame en couleurs*, and John Paizs' *Crime Wave* from Manitoba, that came to the festival so wet it broke half-way through the first screening, is also evidence again of filmmakers who aren't

bending to commercial winds.

"If people in the east (meaning Toronto) were doing what I'm doing, I'd look for something else," says Paizs. *Crime Wave* is a film that caused people to sit up and take notice of a new talent because Paizs is utterly uncompromising in his quest for a certain type of picture - a picture of style.

"People don't ask me if I'm coming to Toronto, they ask me when I'm coming to Toronto, assuming that I am. But I'm not. I may go to Lockport, which is 10 miles north of Winnipeg, the size of Hollywood when the first film pioneers arrived. There's hot dog stands there and great fishing. And it's inconspicuous."

Paizs' confidence comes from his deep-seated belief that if the picture is good, it will sell itself. "I've had calls from Paramount, MGM and Spectrafilm to send *Crime Wave* down to them."

"I'm sure they call everyone who is making a feature, but, still, it is encouraging that they called," he adds modestly.

John Paizs' ambition is *not* to move to Hollywood. "I'd like to develop a studio in Manitoba. Films can be made cheaply. Being made in Manitoba won't hinder their sale. It's unique. People would take notice because they were made in such an unlikely place. And being made in Manitoba could possibly help them."

Ultimately, it is this kind of attitude, more than anything, that's going to ensure there will still be distinctly Canadian films of high-quality by 1990 - no matter how difficult the road ahead. ●

Investment Opportunities in the Canadian Entertainment Industry

A Conference for Investment Professionals

October 22, 1985

I would like to purchase audio cassettes or transcripts as indicated below (please place a check mark where appropriate):

A. AUDIO CASSETTES

1. 8AM Breakfast

Keynote speaker: Mr. Barry Young, President, the Skyld Group, Toronto
Title: Successful Individual and Corporate Investment in the Production Industry

2. 9:30 New Investment and Financing Opportunities: Three Perspectives

Moderator: The Honourable Francis Fox, Partner, Martineau Walker of Montreal

Panelists:

Mr. Robert Lantos, Partner, Alliance Entertainment Corporation
Mr. Robert Thiessen, Manager Product Development Equion Securities
Mr. Frank Jacobs, President of Entertainment Financing

3. 11:15 Industrial Evolution and Maturity Personal Case Studies; Presented by Robert Cooper.

Moderator: The Honourable Francis Fox

4. 12:30 Luncheon

Keynote speaker: Mr. Frank J. Biondi, Executive Vice-President of the Coca-Cola Company in the Entertainment Business Sector.
Title: Opportunities and Strategic Changes in the Entertainment Industries

5. 2:30 Mr. A. Jeffrey Radov, Vice-President, Delphi Financial Services Corporation, a subsidiary of PSO-Delphi Corporation.

Title: Quality Investment Opportunities

3:30 Roundtable Discussions

6. 1. Marketing: Producing for Paying Customers

Mr. Denis Héroux, partner in Alliance Entertainment Corporation

7. 2. Investment: The Personal Perspective; Mr. Merritt Goddard, Vice-President, Equion Securities

8. 3. Legal: Defining and Locking in the Rights and Benefits; Mr. Louis Silverstein, partner in Silverstein Fisher Kugelmass & Selznick

9. 4. Accounting: Reporting and Accountability; Mr. Phil Dunn, partner, Ernst & Whinney chartered accountants.

Number of Sessions x \$ 15.00 = \$ is enclosed

B. TRANSCRIPTS

Number of transcripts x \$ 50.00 = \$ is enclosed

I would also like an abstract in French

Name:

Home Address:

Postal Code: Phone Number:

Cheque or Money Order payable to Screen Investment Services is enclosed.

Send your order form and payment to:

Film Investment Seminar
Screen Investor Services
2300 Commerce Court West
Toronto, Ontario
M5L 1C6

The conference was produced by Ian McCallum under the auspices of the Association of Canadian Film and Television Producers and Ryerson Polytechnical Institute with the support of Telefilm Canada, the Department of Communications and the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship & Culture.