CANNES '86

The Year of Revelation

by Marc Gervais

Twenty years of heroic service at the Cannes Film Festival have convinced me of at least one thing: Nowhere, but nowhere, can one consistently experience so surrealistic and contradictory a mixture of images, sensations, facts, ideas. Cannes '86 was no exception. It was all there, the ridiculous and the sublime, the good surprises and the fiascos, the twain and the noble.

Big Business? Where film is really at (as we used to say) The "New Hollywood"? Well, come to Cannes and watch the Go-Go Boys, those indomitable cousins, Menashe Golan and Yoram Globus, parlay a small U.S. film company, Cannon, into the Big Time, hurting it into the giddy stature of a world Major For this was the Year - once again, but now in a "serious" incarnation - of Cannon From the beginning of the Festival (with their Polanski film, The Pirate) right through to the end (three other biggies in the Official Competition, besides some other features in the Market and elsewhere), the Cannon presence was in evidence: numberless mammoth posters and displays, receptions, news stories, press conferences - and all of it loud, brassy, exuberent, arrogant, Cannon, it seems, is now going high-class (to go with the shlock of the past and the present), with every director from Coppola to Godard, and every superstar (Stallone, Pacino, Voight) coming under the once upstart company's banner. But more, folks, much more: the daily trade papers in attendance kept canonnading us with the scoop after scoop as Cannon gobbled up movie house chains in the U.S., Italy, Holland, Britain (over half the cinema houses), West Germany - and on it goes, with cable TV, exhibiting deals thrown in (Can Canada be far behind?)

Is Cannon the coming number one film power, or is it, as its detractors hope, a house of cards ready to fall apart at the first serious financial tremor? No wonder, then, that at the Festival's end, Newsweek (international edition) gave its cover story to the Cannon Cousins.

Cannes, of course, reveals other aspects of reel life and real life. As the Festival began, good old reliables such as Mario Ferrer and Nagisa Oshima were in attendance with their usual doses of sexual aberration, bestiality - that kind of cinema. But as the Festival progressed this year, a remarkable thing was beginning to manifest itself. Gradually, religion (the real thing, in terms of serious, deep concern and probing) began to dominate the scene. The critics were highlighting it in their articles; and sure enough, the Jury prizes confirmed what the headlines were gleefully proclaiming: "Dieu triomphé à Cannes!" "Le jury consacre Dieu!"

Rambo, as we heard, chickened out. Sylvester Stallone, no fool, and quite aware of the U.S. war-lust he plays to nowadays (inspite of his fatuous public disclaimers), had decided not to come to Cannes for fear of "terrorist reprisals." Many other U.S. stars and directors stayed away, apparently believing the vision of the world their President is trying so hard to make a reality, aided and abetted by the hysteria of the North American media. The result: with true Cannesian unpredictability, this year's Festival turned out to be the most pleasant, enjoyable, civilized and (relatively) easy-going event in years. Nary a soupcon of bomb threats or demonstrations, though security pervaded the place, welcomed by all in attendance, with good humour and friendliness. To be sure, the magnificent weather, in marked contrast to the drizzling cold of recent years, played its part in bringing a festive spirit to what is, after all, supposed to be a Festival. And the fact that Cannes '86 saw one masterpiece, as well as many other very good movies, did not hurt one bit.

And surely there was something else contributing to the positive feeling. One month previous to opening night, the Khadafi/Reagan terrorist escalation had appalled that part of the world that is civilized and intelligent; and two weeks later, the Chernobyl catastrophe had brought in its wake a dose of consciousness, especially to the Europeans. It was as if this Festival was determined to be a Festival, a blessed relief from the signs of escalating madness.

An image, both threatening and pathetic, helped put this in perspective for me. All through the festival a magnificent "Spanish Galleon" was spotlighted, once for the opening night's The Pirate (a silly film directed by an artistically bankrupt Roman Polanski) lay at anchor in the Old Port, to every Cannes stroller's delight. One day after the festival end (and with uncharacteristically diplomatic timing), the huge U.S. aircraft supercarrier America, on Mediterranean patrol near you-know-where glided into port, not far from The Pirate's galleon. The movie world versus the real world, or back to reality-as-shaped-by-certain-powers, one thought. The pathos, of course, centred on the hundreds of teenage U.S. navies not particularly privileged nor affluent nor aware wandering politely around Cannes, supervised by their Military Police - today's front-line super-power sailors, most of whom, one felt, should still be in school.

And there were, of course, the movies, the reason most of us come to this former Riviera resort for the affluent British. As always, one is aware that one cannot possibly do justice to the whole scene, that one's choices are partial, enlightened perhaps by clever networking, but still subjected to one's own a priori and nature perverses. With that firmly in mind, I nonetheless give my own reading of the scene this May.

The Americans. Many were absent, but there were plenty of U.S. films in and out of competition, over all the largest national representation. John Voight was twice spot-lighted, once for Andrei Konchalovsky's Runaway Train, and once for Eugene Corr's Desert Bloom; Steven Spielberg's The Color Purple, and Robert Altman/Sam Shepard's Fool For Love, Martin Scorsese's After Hours, and Woody Allen's Hannah and Her Sisters (the latter two excellent films) rounded out a strong contingent. But since most of these are by now old news in North America - and, besides, American pizazz was definitely overshadowed by the Cannon Boys' determined attempt to re-create Hollywood in their own image.

The French continued to be mildly disappointing Claude LeLouch's Un homme et une femme: Déjà vingt ans had its moments of charm, an essentially pleasing, nostalgic film whose real centre dissolved due to LeLouch's penchant for flashy tricks. For those of us who were here, in Cannes 20 years ago for LeLouch's first triumph, there was an emotional complicity, a sad delight in seeing Jean-Louis Trintignant and Anouk Aimée reunited, still sort-of-young.

Alain Cavalier's Thérèse saved the day for France (see below). But perhaps the clearest indicator for the decline, long begun, of the French cinema was André Téchiné's Le Lieu du Crime A thriller, with a touch of Truffaut, and more than a touch of Chabrol - but without their mastery of style, wit, flair, their amazing cinematic inventivess, not to say genius - Lieu becomes just a fairly stylish commercial film, a sad reminder of what used to be and ain't no more.

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The Australians enjoyed another banner year in Cannes. Nothing of the quality of Breakfast of Champions or a film such as the good entertaining films. Of the 25 new ones brought to Cannes in various competitions and for the Market, I saw (to my surprise) about nine — and even one or two commendable. Bruce Beresford was back in the Official Competition with Fringe Dwellers, not quite up to his usual work. Beresford is off again for a while to the U.S., but Peter Weir and Fred Schepisi are back in Australia. Veterans such as Tim Burstall and Donald Crombie are at work, Paul Cox continues to grow, and Australia's future is emerging, many of them women. Cactus, Emma's War, Death of a Soldier, Jenny Kissed Me, Burke and Wills — the list goes on of vigorous, stylish, personable Australian work. In a renewed spirit of confidence, Ken Adams, chairman of the Australian Film Commission, seemed convinced that the Aussie cinema now rests on a secure and substantial national film culture. In that conviction he looks forward to coproductions and the financial possibilities they can offer for small-scale films. For the time being, the immeasurable change of attitude, he now seemed to be looking forward with relish to an official coproduction treaty with Canada, something the Canadians were keen to implement in the past.

What Canada does in terms of coproduction agreements with Australia we should know before long — and whether or not we are able to exploit the immense creative possibilities presented by artistic collaboration with the Australians, whose feature cinema still far outshines ours when it comes to production values, dollars well-spent, and, indeed, general all-round quality. Co-production, if handled properly, can work even at the cultural level. And that was proven by one of the best Canadian films shown at Cannes this year, Anne Wheeler’s Loyalties, starring Canadians Robert Brown and Paul Gross, with American Michael Ontkean and British Susan Wooldridge (seen on TV in Jewel in the Crown). Loyalties, originally shot as a CBC television movie, is the Canadian half of a twin-tower coproduction agreement between Canada’s Laurel Productions and Britain’s Dumbarton Films; two films are made, one of which is almost totally Canadian, the other almost totally British. The coproductions equal sharing (and consequent double national certification) coming from the equally shared total package. What has resulted in the Canadian production is a genuinely indigenous film, a modest but highly intelligent and telling story about the growing friendship between two 40-year-old women, one of them British, the other Canadian, who share the loss of mixed blood — and both with man problems. Well crafted, superb in its handling of acting, and rich in its human (feminist) insights. Loyalties captures life and times in Northern Alberta and the complexities of cultural adaptation. It may well be the best dramatic portrayal of contemporary Canadian Indians yet seen. May our first coproduction (as Variety would put it) serve as a model for future undertakings.

There were some fifty-five Canadian feature films shown or another, some new, some old, on sale on the Market, some of them handled by foreign (U.S.) exporting agents, some of them by Canadians (i.e. Films Transit, Films Réal, Simco, Spence, Vilain, Les Films du Crépuscule). There is no way of arriving at a total cash income figure derived from Cannes; even Telefilm Canada has to say “if you want to know, ask the exporter.” That said, projecting an infinitesimal proportion is that these agents were indeed selling the Canadian product. Cannes was, in other words, a very promising sign of a new movie world player, we seem to have left the adolescent stage, the playing now as the other grown-ups do.

This becomes extremely promising in the context of the Second World Congress in the German city of Munich, a few weeks previous to the Festival. I refer to the MIP TV market, and here the Canadian success story was truly remarkable. As of now, already in excess of $400 million in foreign purchases (via sales-pre-sales, signed coproductions x see box). Canada’s exciting breakthrough in the production of exportable programming is not without consequence. The new generation of agents is looking for the Canadian, something the Canadians were keen to implement in the past.

Festivals

Britain. Probably the most dazzling, creative and exciting presence at Cannes this year was that of the British. After all, this was the British Film year, part of the Festival of Britain. Whatever the merits or demerits of the Festival of Britain, it was certainly a time when British cinema and television were pushing themselves forward with the media into the world, in a very impressive way. That Britain was a force in cinema was not news, in fact, many in the industry had been warning that “too much was being heard and not seen — especially in the cinema.” This was a Cannon prestige production by the way, and a precursor of next year’s special Cannes theme, “Opera and the Cinema.” The Japanese showed little to elicit enthusiasm, and ditto for the Germans. An Austrian production, however, Axel Corti’s West was big news in Vienna, another example of those nice unheralded surprises, a very interesting treatment of Vienna in the immediate post-war years (WWII) and the ways Europe countries continue to turn out interesting modest films of merit. Rauni Mollberg’s remake of the Finnish classic, The Unknown Soldier, was rather special, one of the best films presented. Sweden had produced a film in the last film of Ingmar Bergman’s own film on the making of Fanny and Alexander, and, of course, the film of the Festival, The Sacrifice, made in Sweden by the expatriate Russian Andrei Tarkovsky (see below).

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The other Canadian feature in the Fortnight, Denys Arcand’s Le Déclic de l’empire américain, The Decline of the American Empire was nothing short of a hit, both artistically and commercially, going well beyond the popular level. Decline won the FIPRESCI (International Critics) award as best film in the Quinzaine: it should have been in the Official Competition. A devastating attack on the Ontario of the affluent, intellectually hip middle-class (a group of college/university professors in Montreal), Decline is a black comedy of manners, whose beginning is sex talk, some of it funny, some of it stupid, some of it “realistically” scabrous — sex as the ultimate commodity of self-centred bourgeois society, a sort of titillating order out of chaos, with a hilarious conclusion with poetry, sans let-up, bhos clos. Decline reveals an Arcand at the top of his powers, still the severe moral observer, a kind of impish Savanarola castigating the sexual mores of our own world, with more than a sly touch of complexity and the naughty-boy-out-to-shock thrown in. If the French reaction is any indication, Arcand and the National Film Board have a hit on their hands. Add to that Dancing in the Dark, Loyalties and (in a different vein) a film such as...
Pouvoir Intime and you had a pretty promising Canadian presence on the Croisette this May.

But film always has an elusive, mysterious quality that defies appropriation into strictly rationalistic or materialistic categories. So many of the movies seen at Cannes are structured on a somewhat hidden sympathy for their characters and the plight that they share with the rest of us. Unquestionably, there is a reaching out beyond the solutions offered by the world of materialism, perhaps all of it mated, implicit or rendered impotent by doubt. Few filmmakers in recent years have offered more than that. And certainly the spheres inhabited by, say, the quintessential world of Bergman, and again, by Olmi and Bresson and a few others -- in Canada by Paul Almond a few years back -- have been beyond main-line cinema life, beyond its parameters of relevance.

Well, Cannes '86 may indeed come across as a revelation, a witnessing to important areas of the contemporary cinema's turning to a conscious, explicit, deliberate concern for and exploration of what might be termed the spiritual, religious, metaphysical. When told of the Festival's prize winners, the night clerk at the back of the ticket counter said, 'If you r... was right (when he said in the '50s, 'The 21st century will be religious, or it will cease to be.' Or as the popular song promising a new era of the spirit of the official accolades, was said to have been unthinkably a decade ago.

Woody Allen, America's finest director, has always skinned over the surface of that territory; and his Hannah and Her Sisters, which would have won a major prize had it been in competition, continues to search in a playful, whimsical mode. Paul Cox, rapidly becoming the Flaubert of the early '80s, has won the Camera d'Or with his Along the Tree Line, a film which had, until then, never been given to me. It was a room I had always wanted to enter and where he was moving freely and fully at ease. I felt encouraged, and moved by power, pressing what I had always wanted to say without knowing how Tarkovsky is for the greatest, the one who invented a new language, true to the nature of cinema as a reflection, life as a dream.'

One indeed is reminded of Bergman: The Sacrifice was made in Sweden; it was shot by Sven Nykvist; it stars Erland Josephson; and the cinematography, natural beauty. Above all, it treats of the soul, existence, human destiny, life, dream, illusion, art, all Bergman staples. But he, who has over the years so manifestly have recourse to other evocations: Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare, Chekhov, or Russian Eastern Christian iconography.

The Sacrifice, ultimately, is wholly Tarkovsky, unique, special, the "war film," one guesses, that Bergman would have liked to make when he directed The Shrike. Our world today, our humanity threatened by power, madness, huddling on the edge of nuclear holocaust, crying out for meaningfullness, proclaiming a desperate need to return to innocence, to inspirite of all -- and all of it in a mysterious, poetic mode, inhabiting that unfathomable region where life/art and reality/dream/unreality converge in a region which can only be fathomed in a dream, and yet totally affirmative of its author's conception of life -- such is the stuff of The Sacrifice.

Cannes, then, did have its moment of grandeur. It was sadly a grandeur steeped in pathos, for everyone knew about Tarkovsky's critical illness (cancer). Recently reconciled with his estranged son, who was permitted to leave the Soviet Union for the first time in many years, and who accepted the award in Cannes on behalf of his father, Tarkovsky has indeed given us his last will and testament, dedicating it to that son. The Sacrifice is dedicated to the Word, including it in life, hope, and, yes, sacrifice.

That was the final image/feeling/idea I brought away from Cannes this year. It may also prove to be one of the most affecting of all the experiences ever filmed, directed by a Russian who moved to Florence a few years ago. Difficult, demanding, mysterious, inevitable -- Andrei Tarkovsky's work has always been a world apart, and this may well explain why the jury, headed by Sydney Pollack, shied away from the Palme d'Or, deeming it fit to award The Sacrifice only its second prize, the Grand Prix Special du Jury -- and trying to give a fitting recognizing to its remarkable cinematographer, Sven Nykvist.

The is some films that defies explanation, ever eluding the final definition, the reduction to something safe and "understandable." With The Sacrifice, we are in the realm of poetry, mystery, beauty, and "aesthetic" -- Andrei Tarkovsky's film, and many of its contemporaries, defies deep feelings at all levels go on spiraling. One is left with attempts at vague approximations, suggestions, convergences that, essentially, is the language of the Sacrifice.

Ingmar Bergman put it this way: "My discovery of Tarkovsky... was like a miracle, suddenly I found myself standing at the door of a room in which had, until then, never been given to me. It was a room I had always wanted to enter and where he was moving freely and fully at ease. I felt encouraged, and moved by power, pressing what I had always wanted to say without knowing how Tarkovsky is for the greatest, the one who invented a new language, true to the nature of cinema as a reflection, life as a dream.'
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