The Dominion of Forgetfulness

by Michael Dorland

"We may be little and dirty, but we're Canadian"

-Jack Darcus, Overnight

"Art is essentially parochial. It has to start somewhere and is best when it stays there"

-Stephen J. Roth, Producer

"Falling now, falling at last, falling in place"

-Carolyn McLuskie, The Wake

The critic at a film festival is necessarily confronted with the fact that what he (or she) is looking for (and at) is fragmentary. Far be this from saying that as a result the critic's task is not possible, only that the critical preoccupation is with fragments. The critic then is first a collector of fragments and secondly the assembler of such fragments into the appearance of a whole. Such a critical strategy, however, is not being unfaithful to the aims of either filmmaker or film festival categories which themselves attempt an illusion of wholeness. Thus the Perspective Canada program at the 11th Toronto Festival of Festivals (Sept. 4-13) was tempted "to herald an imminent cinematic in Canada" - "It seems, in other words, that the conditions for the emergence of something distinct - if not distinctly Canadian, whatever that is - are upon us," according to programmers Kay Armatage, Piers Handling and Geoff Pevere. Similarly, Winds of Change, the Festival's 80-feature film retrospective of Latin American cinema, programmed by Handling, assembled an array of films that in equivalent quantity it is not possible to see in Latin America itself, in an overview of emergent national cinema that does not exist locally.

The wholeness of a festival (or particular festival program) then is potentially greater than its components. There is in the cumulative effect, even if only fragmentarily perceived, at least the possibility that the critic might be fortunate enough to be able to identify something of that wholeness. The third Perspective Canada, if it underscored a growing gap between the English- and French-language feature film in Canada (the Quebec feature having by and large crossed over into the properly filmic while English-Canadian cinema still hovers along its borders), also allowed some of the fundamental concerns that could constitute an English-Canadian cinema to emerge into clearer focus. For as the critic Walter Benjamin so perfectly understood in his seminal study of an emergent national literature, the fragmentary form is original: "the act of discovery can reveal it in the most singular and eccentric of phenomena, in both the weakest and choicest experiments and in the overripe fruits of a period of decadence." (emphasis added)

One then need not insist again on the essentially fragmentary nature of Canadian cinema as a result of the centrifugal pull of language, sex, region, or institutional reorientations, and the centrifugal attractions of shifting genre traditions, changing production techniques, developing domestic market forces, and, most overwhelmingly, American domination. But under such conditions of extreme fragmentation, is not the very possibility of "the emergence of something distinct - if not distinctly Canadian, whatever that is" itself, as the programmers' wording suggests, problematic? How to know what is distinct if one doesn't already know what it is? Here, there are three epistemological models, each with its film analog: i) the implicit - that one already knows but has somehow forgotten and so it can be remembered (which is predominantly the preoccupation of Canadian experimental film); ii) the explicit - that one doesn't know but others do (notably by the objective standards of foreigners or the numerical standards of audience numbers), a
model that applies overwhelmingly to the Canadian feature; and ii) the residuum— that one knows only from what is left over (primarily the documentary). On the basis of these models, all of which are possible, a program like Perspective Canada is in the broadest terms both experimental and fragmented: out of the over 200 films screened by the programmers (i.e., excluding mainstream or marginal video output and concerts, all features, the bulk of industrial media production in Canada), 50 films in all (15 features, 34 shorts) are selected for projection onto festival screens in the epistemological hope that these might be perceived as "distinctly Canadian, whatever that is."

Therefore one won't insist overly on the "popular" success of this year's Perspective Canada program with the festival's going public, other than to mention the turnaway crowds at the screenings of Dancing In The Dark, Loyalties, and Pouvoir intime: full houses for the less-hyped features such as Overnight, Dancers, Orca, and Maelström. Wieland's sprawling Alberta art piece in homage to the Canadian feature; and iii) the smallness of the attendance, and the smallness of the industrial media production in Canada), by the programmers (i.e., excluding the "normalization" ("a cliché") as announced in the Toronto press release).

The Middle of the World served as the "normalization" ("a period of exchange provided that one can change") of the fact of its fragmentary nature remains— and remains precisely what constitutes its originality.

Looking at the Perspective Canada selection thematically, one finds under the emblematic cultural sign of decline (Arcand's Déclin that its predominant manifestation in loss of place of Toronto (as opposed to that city's downtown media production (Canada), with its dominance of the Canadian domestic market on the other. Since the question of the Americans in Canada was only directly addressed by two Perspective Canada films (Déclin and Overnight) and indirectly in Les Vignageurs—in all three as an allegory of corruption—it may be worthwhile to momentarily move beyond the film program to note two further manifestations of loss (here loss of identity), both in the context of the industry Trade Forum at the festival. The first was offered Sept. 9 at the morning panel on new markets during which, with refreshing frankness, Toby Martin of New York program-syndicator Viciacom told the Canadians that they had to try hard to produce better U.S.- imitation programming. "The only reason we come up here is money," Martin stated, explaining, "We want U.S.-looking programming for less." To the extent that Canadian producers are prepared to play by such U.S. market rules, they have a chance of gaining greater access to that major market, he said.

But how much further Canadian producers are prepared to make concessions to American perspectives became an issue at the Trade Forum debate on free-trade (Sept. 10) in which producer Stephen Roth responded to Senator Joe McCarthy: look-a-like Arthur Murphy of the University of Southern California. Murphy, after expressing the cliché that art knows no boundaries, threatened in no uncertain terms an immediate withdrawal of "United States motion-pictures" from Canada if any attempt was made to nationalize American-dominated film distribution in Canada. In his response, Roth, frankly admitting his own vested interest, stated that free-trade as presented by the Americans offered nothing more to the Canadian film and TV industry it did not already have, namely access to the U.S. The problem of Canadian cinema, Roth said, was not accessing the U.S. but Canada's own domestic market—"Why? Because the country is in the hands of Americans. And shortly after, Roth offered the interesting—because combative—definition of culture as "an identifiable group under threat." Returning to the Perspective Canada program as the fragmentary cultural production of an identifiable group, under threat, the problem becomes not so much which threat as which group? For on the basis of the films, there is no shortage of sociological groups all of which are shown as threatened: youth (Sitting in Limbo, Close to Home, Welcome to the Parade), children (Loyalties, Cardinal, Henri); women (Loyalties, Dancing in the Dark), filmmakers (Overnight, White House of postmodernity)."}

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What was distinctive about Perspective Canada this year, then, was not so much the "normalization" (i.e., dominant) programmatic model that continuity as being 25-years-old, as does Wieland's artistic and film practice, while Britain's The Champions of the trade forum (as presented by the Americans in the final chapter) reflects a parallel 20-year span that runs from the euphoria of early '60s Quebec nationalism to the suicidal cynicism of mid '70s American cinema. Dancers, a film which if blown out of all proportion by assimilative breakthroughs, works against both acute despair (a boom-and-bust pattern familiar to Canadian film).

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WINNING VISION

FROM SCRIPT TO SCREEN, PILOT TO SERIES, CULTURAL SUCCESS TO BOX OFFICE HIT TELEFILM LEADS THE WAY

LE DÉCLIN DE L'EMPIRE AMéricAIN
Cannes Film Festival/Directors' Fortnight
Winner - International Film Critics' Award 1986
11th Festival of Festivals, Toronto
Winner - Best Canadian Film 1986
24th New York Film Festival 1986

My American Cousin
Emmy Award Winner
- Outstanding Children's Program 1986
- The most successful drama ever shown on Canadian Television - 56% of all Canadians watching English language television saw Anne of Green Gables on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Network.

Anne of Green Gables

RECENT SPECTACULAR SUCCESSES HAVE PRODUCED WINNERS. IN 1986-1987 TELEFILM CANADA IS MORE COMMITTED THAN EVER AND IS PROUD TO BE PART OF IT.

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and so its only future. To judge by the Perspective Canada films, that grappling is heavily loaded with irony (the disjunction of words and images) as in Ar- 
cand's Déclin from which all spoken references to Canadian specificity have deliberately been removed. Or Carolyn 
McLuskie's extraordinary short à la Colville, The Wake, a glacial examination of the western landscape to a 
voiceover that says, "I went numb to the point where there was nothing / A vast plain, the landscape 
swirling / I wanted others to see the terrify

ing void." Or in Loyalites where 

Lily (Susan Wooldridge), the civilized 
foreigner, complains to her husband 
soon after arriving at Lac Lachine that 
"It's so far away from everything, so 
forlorn," even though the domestic 
tragedy she is running from had pre-
ceded her to Canada (and she knows it).

Even when the attempt is made to ex- 
punge the landscape of its specificity, 
as in Bruce Pittrane's Confidential 
(U.S. currency, New Hampshire plates), 
it still breaks through in production 
mistakes (accents, photos of royalty, 
Canadian stamps) that, with poetic 
justice, help wreck the film's credibility. 
Mike Hoobloom in his experimental 
film White Museum pushes the irony 
to an opposite limit with his fascinating 
prosaic "a cinema without images."

However, it's not only at the level of 
imagery, visual or verbal, that the emo-
tional grappling with landscape takes 
place. It's also generic, as Phil Hoffman's 
70. Zoo! slyly demonstrates in examin-
ing the slippage from documentary to 
fiction. More generally, the Perspective 
Canada program reflected a curious 
proposal for the continuation and authenticity of 
the Canadian emotional landscape.

To be sure, one film or half-a-dozen 
does not change anything in the struc-
tures of Canadian displacement that 
have far stronger histories. But even 
these fragmentary elements point to the 
possibility of the emergence of greater 
compositions. If we are, in fact, in the 

Limbo (Montreal), The Wake (B.C.), 
Loyalites (Alberta) or Faustus Bid-
good (Nfld.), the theme of the absent, 
non-existent, lost, or violent (raping) 
father runs like an equally direct thread 
through the films. In one of the first 
scenes of The Dear Father, set in loc-
ation the narrator tellingly identifies as 
the Dominion of Forgetfulness, the 
dead father lies in the living room table 
while the children eat peanut-butter 
sandwiches and play checkers beside 
him. The dead father also appears, cold 
and stiff, in the conjugal bed, as the wife 
weanly pulls the blanket over herself. 

It is the adolescent son, in other 
words, the principal male descendant, 
who realizes that "my father was not 
evidenced by the sympathy cards the 
family receives inscribed with the words "Thinking of you." But if memory 
is severed, you can't remember, or even 
think about what's lost, and what you 
can't remember passes into nothing-

ess. "Jilting again," says the narrator, "we plunged into our new routines." 
However, haunted by images 
(ghosts) of the dead father, the son 

decides that "there seemed no choice, 
but to reclaim him once and for all." In 
"a night of great excess," he takes a 
spoon, goes to the graveyard where the 
father is sleeping, and begins to disas-
tedly spoon out the paternal stomach. 
As a result of this carnal expression of 
love (and tropo on birth) the father res-
decline of the American empire, 
Canadian cinema has just barely begun 
to break through to some portion of the 
Canadian public and to its own themes. As Benjamin observed of the experience of 
decline, "It is not to much an age of 
genuine artistic achievement as an age 
possessed of an unremitting artistic 
will... The form as such is within the 
reach of this will." Certain "Profile 
Canadian program testifies to the 
continuation and authenticity of 
that artistic will. Small comfort perhaps, 
but it does occur at a time when the 
problems of Canadian culture are in 
creasingly being recognized as a par-
ticular to Canadians only as shared by 
all nations in the global technoculture, 
including Americans.

One of the most important political documentaries to emerge from the U.S. in 
recent years (where the documenta-
ry form is undergoing something of a 
renaissance) that screened at the 
Toronto Festival is New York filmmaker 
Barbara Margolis' Are We Winning 
Mommy?: America and the Cold War. 
Completed with the technical as-
sistance of the National Film Board of 
Canada, the film is an act of renun-

ciantion of the past not dissimilar 
to Canada's cultural attrition by U.S. 
media. Margolis focuses on the rela-
tions between the technological form (the 
A-bomb), cultural form (the American 
media system) and cultural content (in-
stant amnesia) in the post-nuclear 
United States. She examines the growth 
of the military-industrial complex, 
Eisenhower warned against in his last 
speech as president, a global technologi-

cal empire powered externally by the 
permanent invocation of the threat of 
immunity, a threat that is hot and 
internally by anti-Communist hys-
teria. The linkage between the two was 
provided by American media, for 
whom, as the legendary Fred Friendly of 
CBS, the anti-Communism became 
a $100 million-a-year industry. Six 

million Americans were screened by the 
state security apparatus; many were 
driven to youth culture, with all de-
stroyed; at public hearings, scores of 
others went through the ritual of renun-
ciation of their personal past--"and the 
news media," as Friendly puts it, "par-

ticularly film and television, lived off 
that."

In the broader cultural context of 
media-driven techno-terrorism, that a 
Canadian producer like Stephen Roth 

speaks of "culture as an identifiable 


group under threat" and Canadian 

filmmakers from one end of the 
country to the other stubbornly persist in mapping out the artistic and emotional terrain of this generation of cold war with 

the form as such is within the 


FESTIVALS


NOTE

Citations from Walter Benjamin. The 
Origin of German Tragic Drama. 
1985, pp. 46, 55. For a detailed study of 
the relationship between Canadian 

and foreign cinema, see Galie 
McGregor, The Wacoustus Syndrome: 
Explorations in the Canadian Land-


scape. Toronto: University of Toronto 