
Robert Fothergill's book about Canadian cinema *Redeeming Features* is to be published this fall by Peter Martin Associates. The following article is an excerpt from the preface in which Fothergill takes on John Hofsess, author and cinema critic. He questions Hofsess' theory about the general evolution of cinema, raises the problem of cinema as an art form vs. cinema as a medium of communication and considers the cultural 'ambiguities' of English Canada.

part of a polemical preface

by Robert Fothergill

Recently an attempt has been made by John Hofsess, in the introductory chapter to his book **Inner Views**, to relate the condition and quality of Canadian movies to the general evolution of the cinema. His thesis proposes that when an art form, such as film, has ceased to be the dominant form of popular entertainment within a culture, it passes into its 'minority phase' in which it is taken over as a means of expression by and for various sub-cultures. He draws an analogy between the emergence in the early twentieth century of a rather esoteric mode of prose fiction, sometimes marked by controversial explicitness in its treatment of sexuality (he names Joyce, Lawrence, Proust, Mann, etc.), and the emergence in the sixties of esoteric screenplays, or 'art films', sometimes sexually graphic. On one page he names **I am Curious (Yellow)** and **Last Tango in Paris** as "heralding the freedom of movies", as **Lady Chatterley's Lover** and **Ulysses** had been "declarations of independence for the novel". Elsewhere he lists Bergman, Fellini, Godard, Resnais, etc., as the lead-

ing exponents of esoteric cinema. He then proceeds to link to this development, of what might simply be called the 'highbrow' wing of an art form, the emergence of novels (in their time) and movies (currently) expressing and satisfying the minority group consciousness of Blacks, homosexuals, Jews and Canadians. This recurring fragmentation of the forms of mass entertainment he attributes partly to the rise of superseding forms (cinema over printed fiction, TV over cinema), resulting in the proliferation of essentially decadent blossoms on a dying stem, and partly to economic and technological developments which make the medium accessible to hitherto excluded groups.

On the surface this elaborate theory of the evolution of cultural forms has some merit, but it is so riddled with fallacy and illogic that one hardly knows where to begin in reply. Moreover its application to Canadian cinema is less than illuminating. First of all, Hofsess persistently fails to notice any distinction between a **medium of communication** - print, film, television - each of which has a history of technological development, commercial exploitation, and social impact, and an **art form** - written prose fiction, photographic screenplay, and the various hybrid forms of TV programme - which also have

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evolutionary histories of their own. Secondly, his analysis of literary history is fallacious. The result is a spurious piece of theorizing, built on a series of false analogies.

Comparing the histories of the novel and the motion picture, he argues that both forms fell out of the hands of innovative artists into the clutches of mass entertainers, namely Charles Dickens and Hollywood. After their 'mass phase' of family entertainment the forms begin to lose ground, and the intellectuals and ethnics divide the remains between them.

Now it is certainly true that the highbrow segment of the population is slow to recognize a form of mass entertainment as Art. In the nineteenth century the literati continued to read poetry and to despise prose fiction, even though the major novelists have subsequently been recognized as the really creative imaginations of the time, expressing the most complex awareness of human and social truth. (The same posthumous recognition is not likely to be accorded to the Hollywood directors of the thirties, forties, and fifties, whose work was mainly derivative and conventional.) Only later, as novelists like Henry James developed a sophisticated critical theory of prose fiction, did the highbrow public and novelists themselves come to take the form seriously and to cultivate an esoteric and experimental mode of the novel. This development had nothing to do with the rise of the cinema, and in fact pre-dated it. Nor, of course, was it related to any evolution of the technology or economics of book production. Some of the 'highbrow' novelists were published by the old established houses, others by small private presses. Paperbacks had not yet been introduced. And sexual explicitness (to take a third detail of Hofsess' theory), was not a central feature of avant-gardism in the novel, any more than it was in poetry, painting or music. James's *The Golden Bowl* and *The Wings of the Dove*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves*, Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* and *Point Counterpoint* – books like these do not 'declare their independence' by describing sexual intercourse! As a matter of fact, the novel of the twenties that really caused a sensation by virtue of its sexual vividness was *Forever Amber*, a mass entertainment story about Nell Gwyn. Forty years later *Valley of the Dolls* was to reach a public which still had not altogether abandoned the habit of reading.

The popular success of sexually graphic movies in the last few years is in no sense analogous to the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *Ulysses*. Initially, to be sure, it was the esoteric film, like *Les Amants* by Louis Malle or Joseph Strick's screen version of *Ulysses*, for example, that tested the limits of movie censorship, and established (or failed to establish) new boundaries. But the times they were a-changing across the whole spectrum. The trials of *Lady Chatterley*, as distinct from her initial appearance, marked a watershed in the public acceptance of sexual explicitness in print, while the heroic crusade of Hugh Hefner advanced (inch by inch) the limits of the visible in a glossy magazine. In the theatre, too, *Hair* and *Oh Calcutta* were letting more and more of it hang out. Pubic hair, four letter words, male genitalia, and finally *people actually doing it*. The battle had been won.

We should not confuse the emergence of the 'art film', yet to occur in North America, with slick profiteering from a new public appetite for com-



Last Tango in Paris

mercial erotica – profiteering by the same entrepreneurial interests that have produced and packaged movies from the beginning. The importance of *Last Tango in Paris*, of which Hofsess makes so much, is not that it was a breakthrough for mature and sophisticated cinema, but that millions of people were misled into expecting to see *people* (and Marlon Brando of all people) *actually doing it*. That a film by a classy European was used for this symbolic defloration of the American public only says something about our need to disguise our motives.

Similarly, the emergence of various sub-culture cinemas proceeds from a recognition by the movie entrepreneurs that a specialized audience exists for a specialized product. It's not as if Blacks, homosexuals, Jews and Canadians (to use Hofsess' clustering) had never been to the movies until, in its "democratized" minority phase, they "gained access to the medium" and were able to make films about themselves. Nor do they cease to attend the mass culture movies that continue to be produced for white heterosexual gentile Americans. Quite a few Jewish Canadians and Black homosexuals liked *The Sting* really a lot. The truth is that identifiable sub-sections of the mass audience have always been served when it was profitable. After all, the precursor of youth movies, rock movies, C. & W. movies, Black movies, and hard-core porn was *The Song of Bernadette*.

As for Canadian films, for which Hofsess' theory is intended to account, they represent a very mixed bundle of cultural phenomena. National self-awareness looking for a means of expression, small-time entrepreneurial capitalism looking for a piece of the pie, individual egotism looking for its name in lights, creative imagination looking for a formal outlet – such disparate seeds have produced a hybrid cinema, showing several strains. It is hard to maintain that

Canadian cinema reflects and gratifies "the Canadian need and demand for a 'separate culture' ", and Hofsess cannot do it. According to him it would seem that some films succeed because there is a popular demand for their distinctly Canadian ethos, and others fail because there isn't. This ambivalence about the Canadian public leads him into several such contradictions, as for instance when he claims that Canadians prefer the humane mildness of **Goin' Down the Road** and **Mon oncle Antoine** to Peckinpah's **Straw Dogs**, but a few pages later (re: the unlikelihood of **The Exorcist** being made here) writes: "The government wants a tasteful Canadian film culture; what the public wants is perfectly obvious, but the Canadian film industry is so self-conscious and high-minded an enterprise, so political a movement in some quarters, that it *can't* give the public what it wants. So the Americans continue to rape and reap." Who is being reproached here, and for what? Later still he laments that "the crowds that lined up for George Lukas's long-running excursion into early 60s nostalgia (**American Graffiti**) lined up for **Duddy Kravitz** as if it were a sequel." I do not blame Hofsess for this ambivalence, which I share. I blame him for not coming to terms with it.

Certainly he is right in saying that for movie production to establish itself, against the economic odds, in a cultural subgroup (be it ethnic, linguistic, national, or whatever) there must be a positive and vital group identity, and an active demand for its artistic expression. Given these conditions it is possible for filmmakers to take advantage of the cheapest technology and reach a public which cares more for substance than for the trimmings. A black-and-white film in 16mm in a church basement or school auditorium will satisfy such a public if the film feeds an energetic cultural self-assertion. But here Hofsess reveals another unresolved and unrecognized Hofsess valence. Having spoken of the need for an integrating passion and pride of cultural separateness in the minority that will support its own movie production, and having lamented the coolness of such passion and pride in English Canada, he later writes the following: "The reason why Black movies are a highly profitable, self-sustaining sub-culture is that the minority they appeal to is a militant or passionate one. Similarly in major American cities hard-core pornography is now a thriving sub-culture. The theatres may be squalid, the 16mm films amateurish, but the satisfaction of being constantly re-inforced by screen images that are ingratiatingly uncritical and unabashedly indulgent, serves a psychological purpose that keeps attendance high." Not only is he uncertain as to whether Canadians desire their own cinema with the requisite warmth, but he is none too sure that such a desire should be catered to anyway!

This confusion, so typical of liberal bourgeois nationalism, results from the lack of any clear conception of why Canadian independence matters. He talks vaguely about the emotional need for identification with a sub-culture of relatively graspable proportions, and for "organizing one's life around a few central prejudices, maybe even a few crazy prejudices", and he attaches to this need the wonderfully ambiguous word "irrational". "Irrational" can mean mad and dangerous, or it can mean spontaneous and heartfelt. It's exactly the word to hide the vagueness of an idea that could as well countenance Fascism or the Flat Earth Society, as Canadian Nationalism. Sometimes he tries to get off the hook by de-

claring that "I am not speaking as a nationalist, but as a strategist, understanding media" – the good old value-free, uncommitted hype. Yet he obviously likes to hear himself speaking warmly of "the dreamers of independent mind and a unique vision who said 'No' to American mass culture". He denounces **Duddy Kravitz** for being a "smirking apologia for ruthlessness", for attempting in a typically American way to depict an unmitigated rotter with some ironic complexity and a measure of charm; then, in one of the book's ten interviews, he patronizingly instructs Denys Arcand on how, in **Rejeanne Padovani**, he should have depicted the gangsters and corrupt politicians in the Montreal construction industry in a less "one-sided" fashion, with a keener eye for "ethical ambiguities".



The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz

Why do I spend so much time flagellating my friend John Hofsess? First, because he has repeatedly asked me to express in print my dissatisfaction with his book; and secondly, because he exemplifies to a startling degree what he himself describes as the "cultural schizophrenia" and "cultural ambiguities" of English Canada. The only way to develop an unambiguous sense of how and why a Canadian cinema is important is by considering the contribution of artistic culture to the political and economic independence of a country. And in turn we must ask: What collective ideal is furthered by the continuing independence of Canada from the U.S.? Hofsess has no answer to this question. Through the talk of irrational loyalties to crazy prejudices, of being "Canadian in a profound psychological sense", not a hint emerges that unless Canada can take hold of its political independence from the U.S. to develop a socially progressive, non-exploitative society, the survival of the maple-leaf film industry is a matter of no importance at all. □