

# 'As Canadian as possible under the circumstances':

*The annual Film Studies Association of Canada conference*

BY MICHAEL DORLAND

For about three years now – since the publication in February 1985 of experimental filmmaker-philosopher Bruce Elder's manifesto "The Cinema We Need" (in the *Canadian Forum*) – something has been stirring in Canadian film studies. (This is the minority-within-a-minority that believes in the academic validity of the study of Canadian cinema in Canadian universities.)

What exactly is stirring is harder to say. But if one takes a cue from current rethinking in Canadian art theory and literary criticism in the wake of the post-structuralist pluralization of discourses, it may be possible to discern, as a result, a reconsideration of Canadian experience. Crudely put, such a reconsideration suggests that Canadian experience has been badly served by the modernisms that have been orthodoxy in the artistic domains since about the 1920s. In this light, Canadian experience would appear as profoundly non- or even anti-modernist; somehow Other. One of the signs of its Otherness would be the stubborn persistence of a nationalism without which such notions as 'Canadian' art or 'Canadian' film become simply meaningless.

Very briefly, the reconsideration that is underway in these domains entails looking again at what the Canadian experience has been, now from a perspective that is not by definition dismissive of that experience (e.g., Canadian nationalism is bad), but rather one that seeks to understand what that experience has been.

In the area of film studies, some of the signs of such a rethinking in the last couple of years have included:

- the historic 1986 conference in Quebec City between the FSAC and the Association

québécoise des études cinématographiques in which teachers of Canadian film of both languages spoke with each other for the first time in half-a-decade;

- and at which Peter Morris, in a public feature, presented the beginnings of his magisterial rethinking of the influence of John Grierson;
- The 1987 FSAC conference at which I presented a re-evaluation of the role of *ressentiment* in Canadian nationalism and culture;
- and, in the tradition of Hilda Neatby's 1952 assault on Canadian education, *So Little For the Mind*, Peter Harcourt's "The Education We Need" (see *Cinema Canada* No. 150), a resounding criticism of the failure of Canadian film education.

The 1988 FSAC conference, held May 26-28 at Queen's University – an apt site given that it was here in the 1890s that something of a Canadian intellectual renaissance began under G. M. Grant – thus attempted to further the rethinking that is underway.

Broadly, there were two themes to the conference. Firstly, that of the relationship of the theory of film to the teaching of film production. Here a panel of film production teachers and two representatives from the Canadian film industry discussed the pedagogical approaches of their respective departments and some of the problems they encounter teaching film production to students. For instance, experimental filmmaker Richard Hancox (Concordia) was adamant that the role of the production teacher is not to train students to work in the film industry but, given the

limited financial resources of universities, to at best provide some of the basics of filmmaking. In this, he felt that the experimental filmmaker was the best kind of teacher because of the independence of style that such a type of filmmaking represents. Above all, he wondered, what is the effect of the film education we dispense? For Hancox, too much emphasis in teaching what he called "the cinema of elsewhere" left students with an unrealistic sense of their own abilities and blinded them to the kinds of filmmaking practices that had developed in Canada.

Richard Kerr (Regina) delivered a humorous account of the problems of teaching film in Saskatchewan where, it seemed to him, the major problem was "lack of knowledge about our culture and our own film culture."

That question was at the heart of the conference's second theme, namely, that of the 'Canadianness' of film studies in Canada. It was this question that caused two conference participants to undertake, in the course of the winter, two surveys, one an attempt to develop a socio-cultural profile of the Canadian film teacher, the other to ascertain the pedagogical profile of Canadian experimental film. A third survey focussed on the status of experimental film teaching in U.S. schools.

I presented a paper contextualizing Canadian film studies within the more general development of Canadian social science research to the panel specifically devoted to problems of Canadian film studies.\* In such a context (numbers, resources, a national professional association and a recognized academic journal), Canadian film studies was still at the very earliest phases of development. Peter Harcourt (Carleton) paralleled the struggle for Canadian

culture with the relationship that the aboriginal peoples developed to the land, suggesting that in rethinking Canadian experience there was much to be learned from native experience. Zuzanna Pick (Carleton) paralleled the similarities between Canadian film and other 'marginal' cinemas, such as Third World Cinema, arguing that a revitalized Canadian film studies could also benefit fruitfully from the experience of immigrant filmmakers to Canada.

If the 20-odd papers presented at the conference also ranged through a variety of topics from Fellini to Max Headroom, from Maya Deren to the machismo of Michael Cimino, from the present state of film theory to German feminist film theory, a sense that a turning-point may be in the offing for Canadian film studies appeared to surface towards the end of the conference when the FSAC membership resolved that there is a need for a *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*.

Something, then, is stirring in Canadian film studies. So stay tuned, same time next year, to find out more. Next year's FSAC conference is tentatively set for Regina about which Richard Kerr quipped, "There's just nothing out there." He paused, then added, "But out of nothing comes everything."

<sup>1</sup> In addition to screenings of recent Canadian experimental film (Snow, Mogaard, Kerr, Hoffman, Hoolboom, Leeming, Fung, Longfellow, Odonera) organized by the CFMDC, Canadian topics included Bill Wees on Cronenberg's Videodrome, Seth Feldman on Longfellow's *Our Marilyn*, Gene Walz on Canadian cinematic generations, David Weaver on Michael Snow, Cameron Bailey on *Pouvoir Intime*, Peter Rist on *Italo-Canadian neo-realism*, and Deborah Knight on an extended conception of narrative for Canadian film study.

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