Catching the airwaves

The televisual aesthetic at Perspective Canada '88

BY KASS BANNING

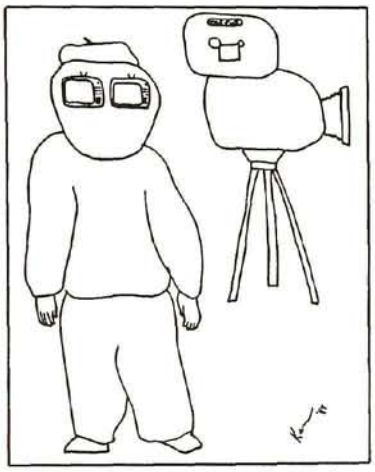
One hesitates to repeat that familiar refrain: "It was a bad year for Canadian film," and judging from this year's Perspective Canada series at Toronto's Festival of Festivals, the cliché (thankfully) does not wholly apply. Yet once again a residue of disappointment remains. Following the triumph of some recent Canadian films – *Family Viewing*, *A Winter Tan*, *The Decline of the American Empire* – anticipation was raised to a fever pitch. But the wave of disappointment that rose in response to this year's independent features suggests more than the absence of a critic's darling at the 1988 Festival. There's an underlying hint of anxiety, a fear that the past will repeat itself.

Granted, the history of the Canadian independent is short and intermittent – we still lack a consistent Canadian feature industry. In the past our dreams were "dealed" away by Grierson and our government to an all-too-eager Hollywood, and the memory of those lost years still haunts us: it looms in debates on Free Trade. The seemingly inevitable loss of Canadian cultural sovereignty sharpens our sensitivity to the "lapse" in this year's independents.

Collaborating in our own exploitation

This uneasiness, over which the long shadow of Canada's cultural history falls, brings home the realization that once again we have collaborated in our own exploitation. Efforts to counter American domination of our indigenous film markets and to foster a film industry and film culture of our own, have descended to television's standard: the Movie-of-the-Week. Efforts by the state to create a space where indigenous cinema can develop, through financing, legislation and incentives have paradoxically encouraged a TV American look a like product. These films stand as the result of trying to compete with American television – on *its* terms. The state's emphasis on broadcast *product*, and its consistent failure to implement effective film distribution legislation, have contributed to the new televisual aesthetic.

The measures embodied in such aid policies as Telefilm's Broadcast Fund are expected to foster a national culture through protection, incentive and encouragement. But these aid policies have failed, in part due to the lack of an existing



definition of what characterizes this amorphous entity, Canadian film. The aid laws can't determine what they are protecting, so in the absence of definitions, they fall back on the world's most pervasive (and hence popular?) form of visual communication – the tube. Television movies are expected to participate actively and systematically in the construction of a Canadian national identity while the marks of nationality with which they are inscribed are sought to differentiate them further from the films produced in the U.S. But the medium has informed the message – films are shot and assembled according to the principles of the box: action over character, pace over *mise-en-scene*, and most significantly, producer over director.

The tube's materiality (the privileging of voice over image) dictates that signs of national origin be loudly delivered through dialogue, as references dropped in passing. From the husband in *Obsessed* who claims "I'm not a cop, I'm a Canadian" to the constant references of *Palais Royale*'s heavily stylized Toronto-the-Good (a gangster replies to that ontological question "who do you think you are?" with "I'm a Canadian"), such lack of nuance and such clumsy Canadian name-dropping – comic value aside – gives away two underlying anxieties. At the psychic level there is the question "Are we being Canadian enough?", at the executional level a fear of using the resources of film as film. In fact with the exceptions of *Palais Royale* and *The Revolving Doors*, one needn't have bothered with the big screen at all.

Disease-of-the-week

Historically television in Canada has been formulated as a public service, while mediating social and cultural needs. Ultimately, it serves as a *moral* and educative social force – it has a public service and a commercial dimension. The paternalistic public service component additionally contributes to the films' predictable nature. Movies such as *Obsessed*, *Milk and Honey*, *Something About Love*, *The Squamish Five* tip the Movie-of-the-week into the Disease-of-the-week. During Perspective's run one could catch: the horror experienced by parents of a hit-and-run victim, the injustices of Canada's immigration policy, the debilitation of Alzheimer's disease, and the story of how a misguided youth, through exposure to a megalomaniacal leader, turns to acts of terrorism. To be fair, all of these "topics" have potential. But the heavy hand of the producer evident in each case means they remain *topics*, "on" or "about" something, rather than being realized by individuals who had the ability to shape the material into engaging and innovative narrative film. In other words, in spite of intentions, good or ideological, the wrong people were involved with these projects. Certain films, *Milk and Honey* and *The Squamish Five* in particular, could have been groundbreaking, but unfortunately didn't come close to hitting the mark. They deserved much more thought and commitment.

The rush to get to the "topic" first is understandable (if not forgivable) given market demands, but in the case of Glen Salzman and Rebecca Yates' *Milk and Honey* this round should have been sat out. Josette Simon's convincing performance as a Jamaican nanny in Toronto awaiting her immigration papers was one of the few high points in a film that falls back on tired stereotypes. Replacing one ethnic group for another does not alter the clichéd cast of characters and situations: the good black woman versus the bad black woman, the modern urban capital versus Jamaican "backwardness," dangerous black male sexuality versus white male, initially active, but eventual benign (read, paternalistic) sexuality. The opening and closing sequences of the film provide good examples. We open with a jam-packed cab ride through rural Jamaica replete with wide-eyed minister (Butterfly McQueen) and colourful dialogue-everything but the chickens cackling in the back seat. At the end we return to the filmmakers' primitive Eden with the reconstituted family beaming beatific smiles in a shroud of mountain mist. Interesting how a film whose story line invites gritty realism closes with such a loaded fantasy, and so dangerous a message – "Who wants to stay in Canada anyway? Might as well go back home where I belong." Sentiment and stereotype clearly inform this movie. A string of other excesses – a less than credible Christian fundamentalist meeting, the son's bloodsoaked shirts from beatings attributed to the bad black woman, disco music that accompanies a club owner wherever he goes – again tip *Milk and Honey* over the top.

Paul Donovan's *The Squamish Five* avoids sentiment, but opting for distance and avoidance of interpretation nevertheless cannot mask its limited view, of both the characters and the action. The film traces the activities of the Direct Action group, responsible for the Toronto Litton bombings of '82. Again, a hot topic, and again grabbed by hands that bungle its complexity. Terrorism in English Canada has not been documented in a manner even approaching Québécois cinema's handling of the October Crisis. *The Squamish Five* is no *Les Ordres*. Quebec's complexly nuanced and artistic *felt* response to the events of 1970 directly counters the intention and realization of *The Squamish Five*. For a CBC production, *The Squamish Five* looks and moves wonderfully, but it opts for a simplistic vision of human behaviour: within the film's world view, actions are simply motivated by neurosis, totally divorced from the real. The camera needed to occasionally get away from this bunch of crazy kids to provide a wider context. The acting-out explanation is hardly sufficient.

Fathers and sons

Television demands its favourites, and at Perspective Canada this year an old standby was dragged out: the father-son conflict and combinations thereof. Oedipal tempers ran high in a long line of films: Allan Goldstein's *The Outside Chance of Maximilian Glick*, Tom Berry's *Something About Love*, Francis Mankiewicz's *The Revolving Doors*, Hubert-Yves Rose's *La ligne de chaleur*, even Morley Markson's *Growing Up in America*, where the fathers and sons are the same people, but separated by 20 years of cultural and political history.

Complicating the father-son drama with cultural differences was a common theme. But the multiculturalist gloss was again forced. Different accents cannot veil the commonality of theme or staid formula. Such efforts might satisfy the state, but they hardly represent the stories or the form in which people from these communities might express themselves. The Ukrainian father-son conflict in *Something About*

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Leonie Forbes, Richard Mills and Josette Simon in *Milk and Honey*

Love somehow blends into the Jewish one in *The Outside Chance of Maximilian Glick*. Both films even share actor Jan Rubes as the ruling patriarch. In *Obsessed*, the boy's Oedipal conflict is displaced onto a larger struggle. This subtext – the questions of Americans in Canada and their lack of accountability – inadvertently raises pertinent issues, perhaps best illustrated in the grief-stricken mother's threat to her son's murderer: "I'm going to make his life so miserable," she says, "that going back to Canada will seem like an easy way out."

La Ligne de chaleur's three-generational father-son conflict played out over a trip to Florida and back is the only topic of the film. As its slow pacing makes us painfully aware, this film was not made for television. To repeat another commonplace observation, only the Québécois features exhibited any real spark of innovation or invention this year. From the charming self-reflexivity of *The Revolving Doors*, to the sensitivity and intensely cinematic nature of Léa Pool's *Straight for the Heart*, even to the disappointingly naive yet wacky *The Box of Sun* (Jean Pierre Lefebvre), to the engaging play with memory and history evident in the exquisite documentary *The Forgotten Years*, one fact runs through. These films explore the medium of film.

Et tu, documentary?

Given the sorry state of this year's feature crop, it is understandable that Perspective Canada programmers Kay Armatage, Piers Handling and Geoff Pevere would look to the documentary. Yet here again, information often took precedence over presentation. Martyn Burke's *Witnesses*, Holly Dale and Janis Cole's *Calling the Shots*, Markson's *Growing Up in America* and Ron Mann's *Comic Book Confidential* all had their gaze on issues elsewhere in the world (often America). The sense of before and after, conveyed through interviews with those who had "been there" (especially in *Growing Up in America* and Bill MacGillivray's *I Will Make No More Boring Art*, a memoir of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), contributed to the nostalgic feel of this year's program. It was only in the experimental work, especially Philip Hoffman's *Passing Through/Torn Formations* where this sense of then and now was at least obliquely addressed. Perhaps the starkest contrast between here and there, in this case geographical and psychic rather than temporal, came in Frank Cole's highly original *A Life*, where the only settings are the Sahara Desert and a bare room.

Jonathan Kay approaches then and now from a supernatural perspective in *Walking After Midnight*, which delves into the past life experiences of famous actors and musicians (Ringo Starr narrates). Kay has adopted a breathtakingly hokey manner, throwing style and substance into the New Age blender. Martin Sheen's head floats above a sea of clouds as he discusses his thousand-year-old fear of horses. Jimi Hendrix intones "Each day brings you closer to death." Patsy Cline goes walking after midnight and k.d. lang follows in her footsteps. Is it parody? You're never sure.

The displacement of Bob McKeown's *Strangers in a Strange Land: The Adventures of a Film Crew in China* is much less odd, based on the tortured cultural and personal conflicts of Phillip Borsos et al. filming *Bethune* in China. So too *Growing Up in America*, while an entertaining "Where (and who) are they now" story, squeezes only ersatz emotion out of its subjects – Jerry Rubin, Timothy Leary, William Kunstler and John Sinclair. Still, Rubin manages the most perceptive comment on the difference between then and now. "I don't eat fatty foods," the '80s incarnation says.

Cole and Dale's *Calling The Shots* is a fairly comprehensive cataloguing of women feature filmmakers, composed of interviews with everyone from Sandy Wilson to Margarette Von Trotta to Penelope Spheeris, but it is significant how ordinary and accepted the film (and the filmmakers interviewed) make the idea of a woman director seem. Only a few of the subjects – Jill Godmillow and Lizzie Borden among them – even hint at the larger social and political factors that kept women from a place behind the camera, and continue to do so today. Cole and Dale have made a number of impressive, hard-hitting films, but with *Calling the Shots*, while probably their most polished film, is considerably softer. And watching the interviews reminds one of how class-specific filmmaking is, regardless of the director's gender. More than one of the women interviewed display some questionable desires to be amateur anthropologists; film allows them to shed their middle-class trappings briefly and see how "real people" live. *Calling The Shots* is a valuable document; unfortunately it doesn't go as far as it could have.

The same problem plagues Midi Onodera's *The Displaced View* and Judith Doyle's *Lac La Croix*. Onodera's film is a gentle, personal piece about her relationship with her grandmother, who was interned during the Second World War. And the minimalism of Doyle's film, about an Ontario native band's battle with the government, also seems to pull its punches. Again the spectre of television haunts these films.

John Greyson's *Urinal* is unlikely ever to get near a television contract; its complex (though seriously flawed) examination of gay washroom sex and state repression is just too anarchic (confused?) to play to a general audience. *Urinal* is innovative – it is a feature film that was shot mostly on video, a fiction film that includes documentary interviews – uncinematic. Greyson's background is in video; he failed to make the transition to film.

Straddling art and industry

There *is* space for a number of competing definitions of Canadian film, culture, and quality, and for the consequent funding of a range of practices differing from those of the mainstream commercial industry. Judging from this year's crop, though, it appears that the independent's scope has become severely limited. Films such as *Something About Love*, *Maximilian Glick*, *Palais Royale* and *The Squamish Five* attempt to straddle art and industry, culture and entertainment, meaning and profit but miss, falling into the gaps between. The commodity-based conceptions of film that independent cinema had sought to challenge under the banner of self-expression have been reinstated through television. The fact that *Maximilian Glick* received the Toronto Award for Excellence at the Festival is not surprising. It's a charming novel, but hardly cinematic. Goldstein's roots are in television.

Canadian cinema will always display this tension between personal expression and "mass appeal," state support and corporate funding, but this year's festival was the site of a wild swing towards a TV aesthetic. But the filmmakers behind this swing may have misfigured: these small-screen movies adopted only the most surface of TV mannerisms: its crass emotional pull and its eagerness to make everything one (TV's famed hyperreality) were missing. Ironically, the form these films adopted came from *public* television, which is state funded and makes claims of supporting personal expression anyway.

So this year's TV hijack took its cue from PBS rather than Wheel of Fortune. Of course the writers and directors can't accept all of the blame for this. The production and consumption of moving images in Canada has always been, and will continue to be, a site of struggle. The issues are complex: film distribution, that perpetually dying monster, continues to defeat our filmmakers. A coincidence of good films, as in 1987 and 1986, can still fool us into believing we have a thriving feature film industry. Both state and corporate support have their pitfalls. And of course the lure of the south and its attractions is ever-present. All of this we know. But it is getting harder to see it through the glare of the small, dissembling screen. •