

# Les 5 jours du cinéma indépendant canadien

*A showcase / distribution forum for independents*

BY PATRICIA KEARNS

Attempts to establish an independent film production and exhibition movement distinct from the mainstream of commercial cinema date back to at least 1929 when the first International Cinematography Congress met at La Sarraz, in France. One of the hopes of organizers was to establish an international filmmaking co-operative, to be based in Paris. This did not materialize, as such, but the congress spurred great debate about the role of independent cinema.

Sixty years later the discussion continues, as was evident, during "Les 5 jours du cinéma indépendant canadien", held in Montreal, from Nov. 16 to Nov. 20. The very successful "5 jours" provided both the opportunity for a Montreal audience to see a different film fare and for independent filmmakers and distributors from across the country to meet one another. The event was coordinated and organized by an energetic team of Main Film members, a Montreal production co-op. Peter Sandmark, one of the two principal organizers (the other was Guylaine Roy), spoke of the event's success in terms of its original goals. That several of the screenings were sold out and the others extremely well-attended means that exposure to the 37 films was high. That was a primary goal. The second aim was to work towards better distribution of Canadian independent films by establishing a stronger network of those involved. For this, a two-day distribution forum was set up, to which several speakers involved with distribution at different levels were invited. Their presentations were heard by participants who belonged to film production co-ops and distribution networks across the country. Most were members of the Independent Film and Video Alliance, an umbrella organization of 45 separate groups. The Alliance has acted as a pressure group to large institutions such as Telefilm, the NFB, Canada Council, and the Ministry of Culture, for the last eight years to assure that the needs of independent film and video makers are being recognized.

Representatives of the different groups introduced themselves and explained the history and specific concerns of their organizations. The level of information shared and the nature of that exchange point to the participants' desire to create the necessary links in better communication. Problems now faced by the



Jacob Tierney as the young Ben; Vicki Barkoff as Ma Waxman

## Rick Raxlen's and Patrick Valley's *Horses in Winter*

For some, the greatest fear is death by drowning. Not for Ben Waxman (Rick Raxlen) who remembers coming back from a watery grave. Now he fears the water, also the dark, and howling wolves, but not death. Ben was saved from drowning at eight years old; he is now 41 and puzzled. Where does the child's state of grace go? And why suddenly, he wonders, is there this longing to remember his happy past. Waxman's adult ponderings provide one level of narration in Rick Raxlen's first feature film *Horses in Winter*.

As he leaves the city on a bus headed for his trailer in the country, Ben's memory travels to that summer when he was eight. He questions and comments on his childhood in a voice-over; fine solo piano music (Michel Utyerbrock from his piano suite *Innocence*) co-introduces, along with Ben's voice, which is somewhat but not

totally given to melancholy, a pensive and casual mood. We see, in flashback, the little Ben (Jacob Tierney) and his family during the last summer spent at their cottage, north of some city.

The film moves along slowly. Like Ben's summer it unfolds without great conflict or action. The film's characters do not motivate changes, they have little explicit effect on the story. There really is a single protagonist - Ben, seen in two stages of his life; even *he* is not outwardly moving towards something. The movement is inward in this film and represents the reflective experience of the filmmaker. Raxlen himself plays out a drama of psychological revelation in *Horses in Winter*.

This extremely personal style of filmmaking belongs to a tradition that film theorist P. Adams Sitney called the trance film. *Horses in Winter* describes an interior quest; a certain transparency of the protagonist exists; we are aware of the filmmaker's journey.

Young Ben's days are filled with simple things, examining painted turtles in the Book of Knowledge and in the grass, walking down the dirt road with his sister, lying on the raft - a place that big Ben describes as straddling the earth and water. The film brings us to a place like the raft,

a neither here nor there place, a place of contemplation, a place strangely familiar.

Art direction by Kathy Horner and Deborah Creamer helps create the simple world of the child Ben. The early '50s, a period easy to represent with embellishment, is treated here with restraint; costumes and sets are unobtrusive, adding to a *mise-en-scène* which in its modesty signifies capably and subtly.

Patricia Kearns •

**HORSES IN WINTER** *p/s/c*. Rick Raxlen *co-d./co-ed.* Rick Raxlen and Patrick Valley *d. o. p.* Stephen Reizes *asst. cam.* Achraf Chbib *add. cam.* Michel Lamothe *loc. sl.* Glen Hodgins *art d./cost./set dressing* Kathy Horner, Deborah Creamer *1st. a. d.* Alejandro Escobar *p. a. s.* Ed Fuller, Alison McGillivray *p. man.* Ray Roth *loc. man.* Suzanne Bouchard *craft* Barry Simpson *For Main Film: del.* p. Denis Langlois, Guylaine Roy *project coord.* Eric Gregor-Pearse, Sylvain l'Esperance *asst. ed.* Dilek Aral *sl. ed.* Richard Comeau *mix* Andre-Gilles Gagné *mus.* Edgar Bridwell, Peter Sandmark, Clive Jackson, Craig Morrison *mus. rec.* Fred Torak *add. mus.* Michel Utyerbroek from *Innocence*. *l. p.* Jacob Tierney, Rick Raxlen, Vicki Barkoff, Jacques Mizne, Colin Kish, Erin Whitaker, Lucie Dorion, Alejandro Escobar, Edward Fuller, Alexandra Innes, Neil Kroetsch, Roxanne Rvder, Lemi Parker, Lou Israel, Jancy Wallace, Ann Page, George K., Elizabeth Bellm, Steven Lepage, Mathew Niloff, Chloe Rose Raxlen. A Main Film, Raxlen coproduction with the assistance of the Canada Council, Telefilm Canada and the NFB PAFPPS program. 90 minutes, colour 16mm.

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independent cinema – a lack of space to exhibit, for example – take on an urgency when heard repeated from different places. The fact that so many repertory cinemas have shut down recently in Montreal, reverberated when Aileen Brophy, of Island Media Arts, in Charlottetown, spoke of the crisis she and other islanders face as their local film society has become defunct and there exists virtually no venue to show independent films, save for renting the commercial theatre in order to show, say, Canadian cinema.

Acknowledging an already well-informed audience for independent and experimental film in Montreal, programmers chose primarily works that had never been shown here before, and would likely not be shown outside these special screenings.

The films shown during "Les 5 jours" defy easy categorization, as for the large part these independent productions combine elements of dramatic fiction, animation, documentary and experimental techniques. What they do share in common is the fact that they are short-length films as opposed to feature-length, except for Rick Raxlen's and Patrick Valley's *Horses in Winter* which opened the event. As such have great difficulty in being distributed and exhibited. For example, when organizers approached Telefilm and SOGIQ for financial

assistance to hold this event, they were told that Le Festival de nouveau cinéma includes the category "the short film" in its program and therefore they could offer no additional funding. However, out of 67 films in the 1988 Festival de nouveau cinéma's program, 10 were short-length films, the rest were feature-length. Fifty-four videos were shown.

Theatrical distribution and television sales are certainly uncommon for this format of film, but these possibilities were not excluded from lively discussion during the distribution forum. André Bennett, invited speaker from Cinephile (based in Toronto) who distributes *Family Viewing* and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, spoke fervently of the art-house audience that is still out there, a market for alternative cinema in its many forms. Bennett reiterated that the film industry's profit motive, its search for the big film, the megabuck, affects every level of cinema, forcing decisions to be made along strict financial gain lines. Everyone wants the film that is going to make money for them, be they producers, distributors, or exhibitors. Bennett's optimism, however, came across loud and clear as he reminded us that the choices made according to these principles do not reflect the entire population's desires. With that said, Bennett encouraged active support of independent cinema through ciné-clubs, a push for national exhibition, critical awareness through interviews and reviews of independent filmmakers and their works, and good old word-of-mouth, never to be underestimated.

TV Ontario was represented by Richard Johnson who attended "Les 5 jours" checking for suitable films for *Moving Images*, a half-hour program which showcases, in excerpt form, art films and videos. Originally conceived of in 1985, the program introduces to viewers alternative productions they would otherwise have little opportunity to see. Johnson is aiming to have the station program a 90-minute showcase that could include Canadian independent features or short works in their entirety.

The distribution forum also included Iolande Rossignol from Radio-Canada speaking on independent cinema and the TV market, Carole Boudreau from Famous Players addressing theatrical distribution of short films, John Karmazyn from Filmclips explaining his business which distributes, the work of independent filmmakers internationally to festivals, Jan Rofekamp, of Films Transit, describing his job as distributor of Canadian independent works to European television, François Poitras from *La Boîte Noire*, a video rental business that deals with independent film distribution by videocassette, and Judith Dubeau, who traced Cinéma Libre's history (a Quebec production and promotion center) from 1978 to the present showing how shifts in granting policies affected producers, distributors and filmmakers. •

### Films presented at the Cinq jours

*Horses in Winter* d. Rick Raxlen, Patrick Valley. *Nivis* d. Simon Goulet. *Absurd Pretexes* d. Velcrow Ripper, Philip Lanthier. *Manual Labour* d. Mark Nugent. *The Red Shoes* d. Andrea Sadler. *Albert* d. Charles Tomlinson, Nigel Markham. *Chopi Music of Mozambique* d. Ron Hallis. *The Canneries* d. Bonni Devlin, Stephen Inslay. *Waving* d. Anne Marie Fleming. *L'Ombre du Nous* d. Guylaine Roy. *The Caretaker* d. Allen Schinkel. *My Shadow* d. Gail Snedden. *A Little Older* d. Marsha Herle. *The Last Days of Contrition* d. Richard Kerr. *Immortal Memories 1* d. Gary Popovich. *Human on My Faithless Arm* d. Valerie Terezsko. *Raised on Junk* d. Linda Andrews, Judy Radul. *The Orientation Express* d. Frances Leeming. *Plastic Dreams* d. Lois Siegel. *Bodies and Pleasures* d. Douglas Berquist, Nowell Berg. *Inanima* d. Harriet Wichin. *Retrieval* d. David B. Ward. *Valley of the Moon* d. William E. Hornecker. *Unpeopled Space* d. Kim Blain. *La Historia de Julio* d. Victor Regalado. *On Display* d. Kim Blain. *Deedication* d. Elaine Pain. *A Muse* d. Tracey Lewis. *Malle et Fils* d. Mario Bonenfant. *Lupo the Butcher* d. Danny Antonucci. *Up to Scratch* d. Craig Condy-Berggold. *8 Frames Per Second* d. Charles Clark. *Eclipse* d. Denis Langlois. *Du Pain et des Jeux* d. Marie Potvin. *Les Ecarts Perdus* d. Sylvain l'Esperance. *It's a Party* d. Peg Campbell. *Clouds* d. Scott Haynes, Fumiko Kiyooka.

## Room for a view

BY CATHERINE RUSSELL

In 1973, Claire Johnston declared that the strategies and goals of women's cinema were those of a counter-cinema. And indeed, a good number of women filmmakers have countered dominant cultural representations of women by dismantling the codes and conventions of mainstream film. Claiming that the gaze in classical film is inevitably defined as male, a central task of this counter-cinema has been to reorganize that gendered "economy" of looking and to seek out new visual and acoustic spaces for women in cinematic representation.

But this is 1989. Surely things have changed in 16 years. Well, some things have and some things haven't. In mainstream commercial cinema the boys are still up to their old tricks behind the camera (e.g. *The Last Temptation of Christ*), but the feminist opposition appears to have retrenched. In light of recent films by Rainer, Akerman, Pool and Borden, feminist filmmaking can no longer be so easily identified as "counter-cinema". *The Man who Envied Women*, *The Golden Eighties*, *La Femme de l'hôtel* and *Working Girls* are all big (relatively expensive) films, running over 90 minutes. Where the original conception of "counter cinema" was non-narrative, narrative being the taboo project of patriarchy, women are now dismantling narrative space from within. In doing so, they have been able to reach out to slightly larger audiences, to climb out of the "ghetto" of experimental film.

Why is "Experimental" in the title of this column, in brackets? Is alternative film practice, like feminist film practice, redefining its status as "marginal"? Marginality, after all, assumes a coherent centre. Feminist film theory is currently backing off from the critique of patriarchy, with which it was preoccupied for so many years, and excavating the histories of women in film – from the alternative practices of Dulac, Deren and Duras, to the mainstream genres of melodramatic women's films and soap operas, and the star *personas* of Davis, Monroe and Crawford. In this archeological process, the representation of women is restated in the affirmative and the marginal gives way to what theorists Deleuze and Guatarri call (with reference to Kafka) "the minor".

A minor cinema likewise flourishes in Canada and elsewhere. It is always in danger, however, of slipping into its own marginal hegemony, threatened by the ever-present temptation of enacting new definitions of unity and coherence. The problem of categories and definitions does not only belong to filmmakers but, most critically, to curators, distributors, programmers and juries.

Some feminists have recently begun to redress the hegemony of their own practice of the last 15 years, and to consider the possibility of a multiplicity of feminisms. Taking into account the variables of class and ethnic difference, sexual difference can no longer remain a singular definition of oppression, and white bourgeois women cannot speak for all women, but have to do some listening to other "minor" voices.

One of these voices, a particularly strong one, is that of Trinh T. Minh-ha, a Vietnamese-American woman whose films of African people, *Naked Spaces: Living is Round* (1985) and *Reassemblage* (1983) are neither ethnographic, nor documentary, nor experimental or feminist, but all of these. The practice of filmmaking as an act of looking remains at the center of her films, in which she "stares" at another culture, especially at the women of that culture. Perhaps what distinguishes her films from the canon of feminist counter-cinema is the refreshing lack of guilt within her deconstructive practice.

The centrality of psychoanalysis in feminist theory has brought with it not only phallogentrism, but a particular burden of anxiety. If one compares Patricia Gruben's *Sifted Evidence* (1982) with Jackie Burroughs' et al. *A Winter Tan* (1987), can one not detect a lifting of this burden? Both films are about North American women travelling through the exotic machismo of Mexico, and each film in its own way is tragic. Where the 1987 film may be accused of leaving intact those narrative codes which Gruben so resolutely attacks, Burroughs' volatile performance as Maryse Holder, a woman whose sexuality is her *raison d'être*, brings new meaning to the slogan "the personal is political". Gruben's film is not without a "pleasure" of narrative, despite its political correctness; Burroughs immerses herself in that pleasure, giving it another, fatal, twist.

Burroughs' "experimental" performance leaps out of a film which recedes into the background as a poor attempt to recreate the journey of Maryse Holder. This disjunction between subjectivity and film narrative is very close to that of "counter cinema". While the low(er)-budget practice of the *avant garde* continues to produce enormously rewarding films by and for both men and women, another kind of filmmaking that is "feminist" and "alternative" has emerged.

These films, demonstrate that a film does not *have* to be small and/or "difficult" to lend itself to a multiplicity of readings. A larger audience is also, I would hope, a heterogeneous audience. Experimental filmmaking slides so easily into documentary and narrative film, with such benefits to those practices, that it is a shame to maintain rigid categories to contain these different modes. This is not a call for anything like "new narrative" but simply a suggestion that there is room in this country for lots of different kinds of films. Once experimental and feminist filmmaking is recognized (recognizes itself) as minor rather than marginal, maybe guilt will be left to Hollywood.