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 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 from 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 invited 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

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

F or 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 Uyterbroek from his piano suite Innocence) co-introduces, along with Ben’s voice, which is somewhat but not totally given to melancholy, a sullen 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.

An direction by Kathy Hommer 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 unrestrive, adding to a mise-en-scêne which in its modesty signifies capably and subtly.

Patricia Kearns •

HORSES IN WINTER

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 counteracted 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 many commercial cinemas, the boys are still up on their old tricks behind the camera (e.g. The Last Temptation of Christ), but the feminist opposition appears to have recombined. In light of recent films by Rainer, Alkman, Pool and Borden, feminist filmmaking no longer has to be so easily identified as "counter-cinema". The Man Who Invented Women, The Golden Eighties, La Femme de l'Hôtel and Winning 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 "Experiments!" in the title of this column, in brackets? 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 Guattari 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 critics, distributors, programmers and juries.

Some feminists have recently begun to redress the hegemony of their own practices 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 Anh's landscape, Nailed Spaces: Living and Lodging (1985) and Bamboozled (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 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.

The centrality of psychoanalysis in feminist theory has brought with it not only phallocentrism, but also a particular burden of anxiety. If one compares Patricia Grabiner's Sighted Evidence (1982) with Jackie Burroughs' A Winter's Tale (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 has emerged.

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