

Doing the Cannes thing

BY MARC GERVAIS

Gregory Peck, Marcello Mastroianni, Sophia Loren, Woody Allen, Gérard Depardieu, Yves Montand, Meryl Streep, Francis Coppola, Nick Nolte, Anthony Quinn, Ettore Scola, José Ferrer, Ossie Davis, Rubie Dee, Carole Bouquet, Sandrine Bonnaire, Sam Neill, Philippe Noiret, John Voigt, Jane Fonda, Fred Schepisi, Paul Cox, Chris Haywood – they (and many others) were all there, on the screen or in person, making it very clear that the Cannes Film Festival, in its 42nd edition, is still the *première* event in world cinema, showing no sign of diminished vitality.

So the Festival thrives. What is especially rich from the cinematic point of view, however, is that the festival has a vitality that grows out of the richness of the past, its own, and that of the cinema as a whole. And so, to commemorate the centenary of Charles Chaplin's birth, his grandchildren officially opened the Festival. Marcel Pagnol, a man who communicated his quintessentially *Le Midi* vision of France, was the object of a retrospective (complete with freshly restored prints). Jean Cocteau was ever present, since one of his Muses served as the Festival's

logo-in-motion to launch each official Festival entry. And more "hommages": to Carl Dreyer, to Harry Langdon, to Jury member Krzysztof Kieslowski, and even to films featuring the Eiffel Tower! The Festival's most affectionate moment: Yves Montand, bestowing a special Palme d'or on Gregory Peck, now elderly, but still the epitome of handsome nobility and grace. And there was the National Film Board of Canada, celebrating its fiftieth anniversary... but more about that later.

QUALITY CONTROL AT CANNES

It was a good year, vastly superior to last year's below-par exhibition, though nowhere as brilliant as the Cannes offerings of two years ago. But before going into the films of May 1989 (surely the *raison d'être* of the Festival and of this report), a few further situating observations may be appropriate.

One comment concerns the continuing evolution of the Festival toward business "realities" – but with a switch. As one perspicacious Cannes Festival *habitué* pointed out to me, something fascinating, and hopeful,

seems to be happening at Cannes. He totally agrees that Cannes (alas) has evolved away from its Festival aspect. Most of what remains of the fun-and-celebration past is ersatz, a phoney, mediated non-event for the benefit of television at its most trivializing. Now, everything in Cannes is business and market.

What film people go to Cannes for is, primarily, to set up co-productions, find international investors, that sort of thing. More and more Canadians, for example, were expressing delight at their success this past May in raising international money. However – and this, if true, constitutes an amazing development – when it comes to the buying and selling of films, the business is centring on quality products, one might even say art films. If you are in the business for genuine "B"s (or worse), you now go, instead to MIFED in Milan, or maybe to Los Angeles, or wherever. In Cannes, the best sellers now tend to be films with cultural ambitions, be they from Canada or from any other country. All of which could mean that the Cannes Festival, through a bizarre and circuitous evolution, is once again becoming primarily a centre promoting world film culture. Well, perhaps.

Thus, even as stirring a summons as that uttered by this year's Jury President, Wim Wenders, may not seem out of place: "The cinema is our common language, it is universal. More threatened now than ever before, it is also more necessary than ever." Wenders is no doubt alluding to the flood of images now washing out the meaningfulness of our culture (Post-modernism at its most threatening), as he continues: "In the vast media circus that Cannes has become, it is incumbent upon the Jury to define the just proportions, to give pride of place to the cinema and to progress in cinematographic art, so that the truth of the images imprinted on film stock may shine out beyond the half-truths and lies of the noisy environment."

Going one step further towards nobility, in this bicentenary year of the French Revolution and of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the Cannes Festival created a special "Day of Cinema and Liberty." No less than 100 directors ("from Angelopoulos to Zanussi"), who had presented works at Cannes in the past, films that championed freedom and human rights even at the personal risk of the film directors themselves,



A scene from *Black Rain* by Japan's Shohei Imamura.

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were brought back to participate in an all-day seminar – a celebration, really – on the right to human liberty and the right to a free cinema.

Pretty heady stuff, this. And that spirit actually found its way on to the Cannes screens, a few times, in films that harked back to the stridency of the '60s. Lino Broka's *Fight For Us*, shot in the Philippines, paints a frightening, disheartening picture of the post-Marcos years, the early hopes dashed by vicious paramilitary execution gangs running wild – beyond the control of Cory Aquino, and with the connivance of the Army. A more muted, sometimes humorous, ever-intelligent effort, *China My Pain*, about the Maoist re-education of a thirteen-year-old boy, becomes terribly poignant in the light of the recent events. Spike Lee's sparky *Do the Right Thing* does its sizzling slice-of-life thing about the big-city ghetto, only to succumb to muddleheadedness (or insincerity?) in its attempts to sit on both sides of the violence fence. And there was *Shot Down*, a very low-budget film, seen on the market by only a handful of us because the producers had no money to show it more than once. Filmed in South Africa by South Africans, *Shot Down* is a sort of contemporary incarnation of the German expressionist cabaret '20s, dazzling in its searing condemnation of the social evils prevalent in that troubled country – and witness to the fact that there is an explosive movement for reform in South Africa among whites as well.

Not that these four films were typical of Cannes '89; the late '80s are decidedly not the late '60s. Freedom in the contemporary cinema finds its expression in other ways, or better still, focuses on other aspects of the question. The good films tend to posit freedom's desirability as a given. Many movies go back to the bad old days – say, the Nazi era (*Reunion*) – in a spirit of meditation, or regret, or indignation. Generally, however, it is not vast social or political movements that are envisaged, but rather personal struggles for inner fulfillment, for achieving a sense of person. In this more spiritual mode, it is rather the mass media, or contemporary culture, or false materialistic values that are seen as the enemies of genuine liberty. Or so it seems in the most of the films that are not given over to mindless exploitation.

AND WHAT ABOUT EQUALITY?

Liberté, oui. Égalité... well, that is another question. Cannes pays scant attention to the Third World countries, or, perhaps more accurately, to the "non-Western" cultures. It was ever thus, it seems: and in that the great Festival merely reflects international viewing patterns, Cannes quite possibly affords less leadership in this area than certain other world Festivals. To be sure, there are always exceptions to this rule, such as this year's charming modest offering *Yaaba*, by Idrissa Ouédraogo. Now here is a movie (with some



Philippe Noiret as Alfredo and Salvatore Cascio as 'Toto', in the nostalgic Italian entry, *Cinema Paradiso*.

help from French and Swiss sources) that was made in Burkina Faso, Africa. The direction smacks a little of the African-student-just-back-from-European-film-school syndrome, but there is unquestionably an authenticity, a kind of Jean Rouch ethnographic (*cinéma vérité*) interest, as well as lovely scenery, and a deep basic humanity that give *Yaaba* freshness and interest.

India, in spite of its gigantic film output, is strictly Third World in the most appalling

cinematic sense of the word. The veteran Satyajit Ray, however, continues to stand as one of the magnificent exceptions. *Ganashatru*, a minor opus when judged within the context of Ray's finest achievements, is an intelligent, rewarding film, complete with master's signature.

Japan of course, is one non-Western country that has a rich film history – but, alas, not in the last 25 years or so. *Black Rain*, however, is a fine

film, the most recent creation of Shohei Imamura, who a few years ago won Cannes' top award with his overrated remake of *The Ballad of Nayarama*. *Black Rain* scores high with its unsentimentalized treatment of those victims of Hiroshima's nuclear holocaust who initially survived, only to succumb to the after-effects years later – a rather gentle reminder to those who still live quite comfortably with the reality of nuclear proliferation.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST

But now, onto the "Western world," and those films that always make up the vast majority of Cannes' more interesting offerings. That means that usual hit-and-run approach of choosing what to see amidst the avalanche of possibilities.

Scandinavia. Denmark was unable to follow up on the lovely creations of the two previous years (*Katinka*, *Pelle the Conqueror*, and its two masterpieces, *Babette's Feast* and *Hip, Hip, Hourrah!*). Sweden was represented in the official competition with *Women on the Roof*, a mildly perverse, rather stylish *fin de siècle* study perilously close to the David Hamilton school of aesthetics. Mitä Kassila's *The Glory and Misery of Human Life* I found more satisfying, except for a certain ponderousness one tends to associate with Finnish filmmaking.

Australia presented an intriguing mix. Fred Schepisi's *A Cry in the Dark* has been around North America for a while, but is new to Europe. Predictably, it picked up Best Actress award for Meryl Streep, whose showy talents and narcissistic acting style continue to enthrall a surprising number of "experts." Two other Aussie films, Jane Campion's *Sweetie* and Ian Pringle's *St. Petersburg*, received prestige showings, aggressively showing the "other side" of Australian filmmaking. Campion cultivates the absurd, the outrageous, and the ugly, while Pringle engages in a sort of counter-culture updating of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. On the other hand, Ian Barry's *Outback*, a sophomoric spin-off of *Man From Snowy River*, demonstrates how awful an Aussie period piece can really be, no matter how beautiful the landscape and photography, or how breath-taking the horsemanship. Fortunately, however, Paul Cox's *Island* had a (very low-key) showing ahead of its official presentation at summer's end at Venice. With Irene Papas, Eva Sitta, and Christ Haywood doing a fine job, Cox once again made valid the claim that he is Australia's *auteur* filmmaker *par excellence*.

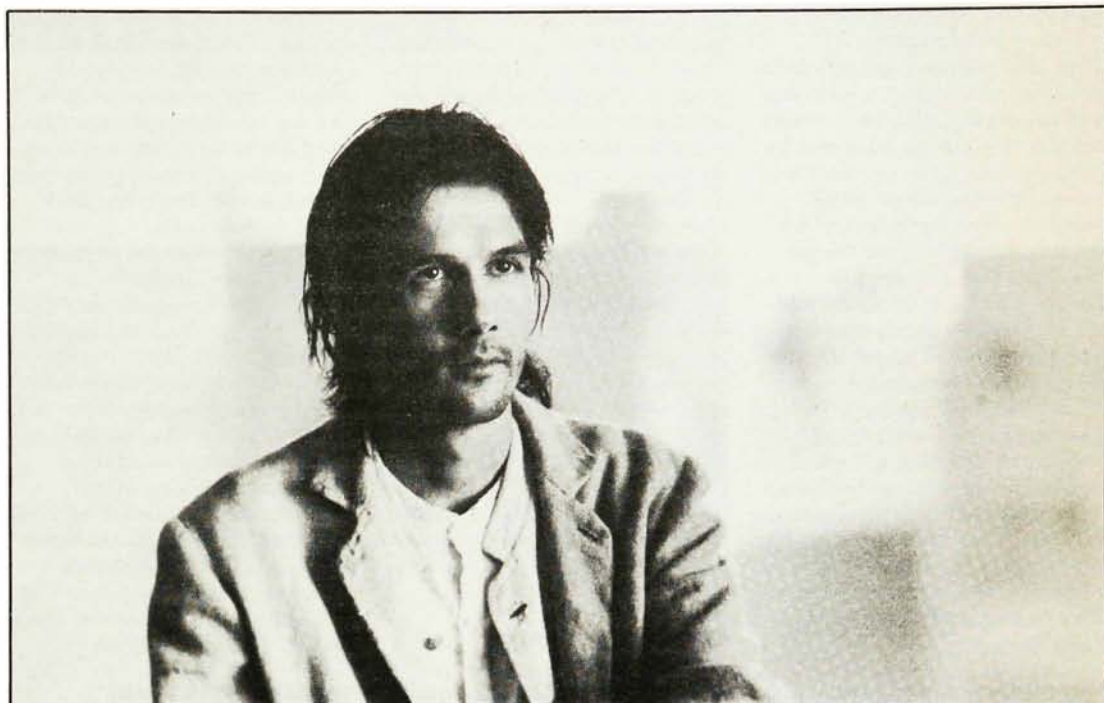
(West) Germany presented two films on the Nazi Past. Bernhard Wicki's *Spider Web* is an ambitious, not terribly distinguished effort featuring Klaus Maria Brandauer, and somewhat obvious in its cultivation of the nightmare experience. Much more beautifully crafted and intelligently nuanced, Jerry

Schatzberg's *Reunion* brings a humane spirit to bear on the anti-Semitic horror of the Nazi experience, breaking free of the usual traumatic neuroses still affecting the cultures of both the oppressors and the victims. In a totally different vein, Percy Adlon returned to the U.S. after his cult success *Bagdad Cafe*. *Rosalie Goes Shopping* is equally off-the-wall, and it features the ineffable Marianne Sagerbrecht again in yet another crazy comedy. This time, Sagerbrecht applies her ample talents to beating the Credit Card Companies at their own game. Great fun, but, alas, the mad poetry of *Bagdad* just is not there.

Britain, in very untypical fashion, elicited little interest. Cannes did give France its first viewing of the restored (etc.) *Lawrence of Arabia*, bigger and more expansive than ever – and still vaguely disappointing, the whole strangely smaller than the sum of its parts.

France did well enough. Bertrand Blier's *Trop Belle pour Toi* shared second prize, surely an exceedingly generous reward for an okay film, *pas plus*. Of a higher order, on the other hand, was Patrice Leconte's adaptation of Georges Simenon's dark novel *Monsieur Hire*, a masterfully controlled creation enhanced by the superb acting of Michel Blanc and Sandrine Bonnaire.

Italy may not be as glorious, filmically speaking, as it was decades ago, but it continues to present enjoyable films. Micky Rourke, blessedly purified of his usual tics, could well have taken top actor award for *Francesco*, Liliana Cavani's second film on St. Francis of Assisi. We are still in Cavani's nightmare world, and flesh and blood are still murky; yet, through Rourke, a depth and beauty emerge. But it was two other, much softer Italian films on the death of the old cinema era, that made this Festival fairly glow. Ettore Scola, back again in Cannes for the umpteenth time, mixes sentiment with wry humour, irony and maturity in *Splendour*, ably served by Marcello Mastroianni, Marina Vlady, and a marvelous comic, Massimo Troisi. However, it was director Giuseppe Tornatore, in only his second feature, who stole the spotlight, sharing a well-earned second prize and stealing Cannes' heart in the bargain with his unabashed tear jerker, *Paradise Cinema*. This movie, nostalgically served up on Ennio Morricone's habitually lush music, had all of us digging for our hankies, but, much more deeply, into our own personal experiences of movie-going back in the age of innocence. (I was remembering a little boy frequenting the Granada Theatre in Sherbrooke with his Grandma, partners in crime because it was against the law in those days to go to the movies before the age of fourteen...). But Italy was also responsible, alas, for an incomparable model of disastrous English dubbing ("so it can sell internationally"): Jerzy Skolimowski's *Torrents*



Lothaire Bluteau in Denys Arcand's *Jésus de Montréal*.

PHOTO: GROS-DAILLON



James Spader in the Palme d'Or winner, *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*.

of *Spring*, a retelling of Turgenev's novel – high classic romance and dazzling visuals, utterly ruined by an incredibly inept English mouthing of words.

The United States officially opened the Festival with a little gem of a compilation film, *New York Stories*, and officially closed the event with the

action-packed, quality mish-mash, Jane Fonda (starring and producing) epic, *Old Gringo*, not nearly as good as it should be in spite of Gregory Peck's bravura performance. Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* proved one of the best-liked films of the Festival, in spite of its serious shortcomings. And then there was Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train*, a very slight affair which "earned" Best

Director award for Jarmusch, presumably because Wim Wenders sees him as a kind of protégé.

SEX, LIES, VIDEOTAPE – AND WENDERS

Ah yes, President Wenders – which brings to mind Cannes '89's big winner (Palme d'Or for

best film), *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, a first feature by 26-year-old Steven Soderbergh. Fresh, different, really a perceptive essay in anti-cinema, *SLV* certainly reflects the contemporary malaise *re sex qua* commodity, experience *qua* removed from reality through media, and the confusion and absence of fixed values so prevalent in many areas of contemporary culture. And it is decidedly not a main line "Hollywood" flick. One easily understands then how Wenders, true to his love/hate relationship with the U.S., would be so intrigued by this film, and could find for one reason or another, substantial backing among the other Jury members: Peter Handke (Wenders' German colleague); the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski; the young Canadian film-student-in-Paris, Renée Blanchard; and Sally Field, to name some of them. *SLV* certainly has its merits, and some kind of reward was certainly not out of place. But to raise it to the level of a Palme d'Or...? Not satisfied with this, however, the Wenders Jury also bestowed Best Actor award on one of the film's unknowns, James Spader. Well, why not, I suppose...

THE GIANT IS WAKING UP

All of which leads legitimately into other areas for rumination. This year's Festival made it clear that it was dedicating itself to nothing less than a rebirth of the cinema. And so, at the end, there was a lot of self-congratulating going on, expressing hopes for the cinema's future, given all the fine young directors who were given exposure. In that context, the Jury's decision takes on certain political ramifications that may make sense. Possible... but it really is not terribly convincing. There were other things occurring, on the screen and off, in and out of Cannes, that are quite possibly far more meaningful in terms of a cinematic rebirth - which, by the way, can only come about by the creation of conditions that give the filmmakers room to breathe - yes, real creative freedom. Thus, while Cannes was festival-ing, reports were floating in that the European Common Market countries, in their continuing efforts to develop measures aimed at preserving the possibility of European feature films to exist in the face of American competition, were seriously talking about imposing a quota system on American television imports.

Predictably, Jack Valenti and his Hollywood vigilantes are already making threatening sounds about U.S. economic retaliatory measures. This time, however, Hollywood is really worried. A huge European Common Market, hurtling into its next phase of integration (1992), is no laughing matter. This is a match-up between equals, not at all like the Canada-U.S. love match, where the weaker partner fairly purrs in Free Trade contentment - the threat of cultural extinction.

The cultural repercussions could indeed be enormous. For years, we Canadians have been

experiencing a phase of growing acceptance of the conviction that only what U.S. show biz does, or only what U.S. show biz accepts, has any relevance. Try to think, for example, of a single newspaper or radio station in Canada that betrays the slightest awareness that there just might be fabulous films out there independently of U.S. canonization (ever hear about Grade's *Hip, Hip, Hourra!*, or Olmi's *The Legend of the Holy Drinker*, or Zanussi's *Wherever You Are* - all very recent films vastly superior to almost anything our media talk about?). In Europe, some have even reached the stage of thinking that movies "must be made in English" to succeed... often with predictably disastrous results. One could on the one hand, go on reciting examples of the growing submission to American dominance, in spite of the proliferation of new media outlets. But there is another side: the European giant is waking up in the media area as well, beginning to realize that Europe is indeed a giant - and that by united action Europeans can do something about redefining the rules of the game.

FREEDOM IN THE USSR

So the freedom espoused officially by the Cannes Film Festival this year can come in many guises, and from many sources. I have saved perhaps the most significant phenomenon - which, strangely, has remained almost totally unreported (at least at point of writing) - for the end, *ou presque*. As was the case two years ago, the most exciting cinema to be seen at Cannes came from the Soviet Union. This year, however, the Soviet approach was low key, with few people at Cannes apparently connecting. Were the Soviets deliberately saving the Big Impact for their own Moscow Festival? Whatever the explanation, I was fortunate enough, during the last four or five days of the Festival, to see, on the Market, two films from the Moscow Studios, and two from the Leningrad. That foursome, in sheer artistic and cultural significance, far eclipsed the output of anything in evidence from any other country at Cannes.

Karen Shakhnazarov's *Zero City* (starring the superb Leonid Filatov), Vadim Abdrashirov's *The Man Servant*, Yuri Mamin's *Fountain*, and Alexander Sokirov's *Days of Eclipse* are long, sprawling, not terribly disciplined works, today's incarnation of what westerners love to refer to as the "Russian Slavic soul." Here are films difficult to describe, with plots defying re-telling. It is almost as if the Russians were now experiencing what the quality cinema of Western Europe went through in the sixties, but in a totally different way, without the Europeans' exquisite formal experimentation, but also without their sense of a death and hopelessness, and far more rootedness in the Life Force. Irony, the absurd, the breakdown in logical communication. Rock'n Roll, Cosmic expansion, the apocalyptic birth of a new world, surrealist dream, distanciation, withering

disenchantment swept away by breath-taking beauty (or vice versa), music, music, more music, the thirst for truth, for meaning, the distrust of systems, historical reckoning, the ironic awareness of the precariousness of the present situation, the reaffirmation of religion, the wry smirking at politics and (yes) *glasnost* and *perestroika* - everything in these films is symbol, everything is soul.

These directors are wise, they are searching, they are street smart. And the viewer is gloriously overwhelmed, not quite understanding, but undergoing a broadening, deepening experience. Cinema and liberty? Here is a cinema that is actually defining the new terms of liberty, part of the process toward a new meaningfulness, a new society. And here, too, is a cinema, whatever its limitations, that becomes a central mirror and shaper of contemporary life. It may indeed be foolhardy to affirm all this from viewing only four features; but however, it really does seem that the contemporary Soviets are giving the world the most significant and thrilling models of what freedom in the cinema really means.

THE GIFTED CANADIANS

So that, in a sense, was the Cannes high note. Well, for a Canadian, not quite. Because 1989 was, I believe, the finest all-round Canadian presence I have experienced in my 24 years of scrupulously dutiful attendance at the Cannes Film Festival. In many ways, this was the Canadian year, Canada was in. And Canadians, believe it or not, were obviously proud of their filmic achievements, united in celebration to an extent never so clearly manifested in the past.

Canadians have been through the not-always-happy cycle of boom and bust, "pure" art or ideology, and crass commercial exploitation, rip off, what have you. But now, maturity was the key word. On the one hand, Canadians were going about their business, selling, buying, finding investors, showing their films. But a good part of the hustle was for quality product. Indeed, if my Cannes *habitué* is right, the best business in Cannes centres on quality, and that goes for Canadians there as well.

Atom Egoyan's *Speaking Parts* enjoyed very successful showings in the prestigious "Directors' Fortnight" section. There is no mistaking the serious intent, talent, and personal vision of this young Canadian filmmaker. He has helped continue the renaissance in our quality cinema, and he seems to have a support system in the Toronto area that is truly enviable. Which is not to deny that Egoyan may be limiting his outreach somewhat radically. His cinema of confused, disconnected, obsessive "psychological" loners ponderously working their way through more-or-less muted inner probes is vaguely reminiscent of a certain something long prevalent - and disheartening - in the cinema of the Canadian loser. Be that as it may, here is a talent to watch.

Quality and outreach, however, are the words for Denys Arcand and his *Jésus de Montréal*, a smash quality hit. It is a measure of Arcand's stature that there was general disappointment not only among the Canadians at his being awarded "only" the Prix du Jury (sort of third prize) for a film which many (including *Le Monde*, France's most prestigious newspaper), considered to be the true Palme d'Or winner. Cannes '89, in fact, was a personal triumph for Arcand (and for his producers, actors, et al). Never before has Canada had a movie considered even remotely eligible for the top prize. And indeed, with *Jésus de Montréal*, Arcand, in his mid-forties, the child of the Québec '60s, of Godardian reflexivity and distanciation, and of the current post-modernism (especially in its Québec post-Catholic expression), has come up with his best film (and possibly the best treatment of the Christ experience yet seen in the cinema) while sacrificing none of his awareness, his almost Savonarola-like moral indignation, his humour and irony.

But there is a new universal dimension now in his work: Arcand seems free to reveal his own vulnerability, his sympathy for human beings. *Jésus de Montréal* is a heartfelt statement of sincerity, the director's personal coming to grips with his culture's Catholic roots, with its doubts and concerns, and with the dehumanization of our electronic media age. *Jésus* also witnesses an artist who continues to grow from film to film, so much so that he now appears to be eminent among Canadian filmmakers, and ready to take his place among the world cinema's most interesting directors. And the film world knows it, much to Canada's benefit.

A final note. There is, of course, another all-important component in Denys Arcand's progeniture. And that is the National Film Board of Canada. Quite fittingly, the NFB was highlighted throughout the Festival. Receptions, special awards, special shorts encapsulating its glorious 50 years - and all of it presided over graciously by our acting Film Commissioner and NFB Head, Joan Pennefather. One quite simply basked in the warm glow of our Canadian achievement. And surely the Palme d'Or that did go to Canada - for best short film, awarded to Gilles Carle's montage short of NFB product over the years - was intended not only as a reparation of sorts for the injustice done to Denys Arcand, but above all as a tribute to what is probably world film history's most distinguished film production centre, a place, let it be noted *en terminant*, that by and large has been synonymous with a freedom of creativity scarcely matched anywhere else.

One can indeed end on the idealistic note sounded at the beginning of this Cannes Festival (and of this report): Denys Arcand and the National Film Board of Canada are living proof that cinema, culture, and freedom need not be mutually exclusive realities. ●