The 1989 Canadian Student Film Festival

BY PETER WINTONICK

The conventional wisdom states that watching 89 student films would be something akin to a masochistic nightmare. We all think we know what a student film is: something to be avoided like an ozone plague. But I volunteered to cover this year's Canadian Student Film Festival because avoiding conventional wisdom is a genetic trait of mine. I have recently kicked the habit of watching the more "mature" and commercial art films that frequent international festivals and world screens. At this year's student fest, an annual rite of summer passing or autumn falling, I was subjected to nine programmes screened under the auspices and guiding wing of Daniele Cauchard's World Film Festival. The kiddie festival is curiously older than its parent. Having celebrated its 20th anniversary this year, it pre-dates the WFF by several years.

I accepted this mission because I wanted to immerse myself in the spirit and light of adventure that characterizes the best of student films. As well, being a professional filmmaker, I wanted to steal their bright ideas. Advertising spot makers, music video directors and fiction filmmakers do that all the time. They prey on the feeding ground of the experimental film genre (of which student film is a sub-set), knowing that it won't fight back. I also happen to genuinely like students and their films. I've even tried to teach the critters a thing or two about documentary film history in Concordia University's Film Studies Department.

In the typical student film we can see the future of our nation's film culture at work - what it is and what it wants to be. Reflected on the student screen are the trends and tendencies of the media community at large. We can see worlds of wonder collide with idealism and reality. We remember when we too, were younger mythmakers. In fact, we are now entering an era when many of this country's more famous producers, directors and technician-artists can claim to be products of the film school system. Their films once won prizes at the Student Film Festival. Some would argue that it was their best work. I know it was mine.

At risk of sounding like the old man that I am, ahhhh ....

1. remember when I was just a little tyke, fresh

Peter Wintonick is a filmmaker who lives in Montreal.
into film, and my first experimental documenta-
ty won a prize. It was a collectively made film
(remember collectivity?) about a poet-har-
monicist who played amateur hours in Ottawa's
slazy nightclubs. Those days and those clubs
are gone. I went on to make a documentary
about a clown who still gets more work than I do,
and then I became a clown myself. My final film
d'étudiant (I promoted the author theory in
these days) was an ambitious and surreal film
about death and destiny. I figured that death
was, and still is, the only subject for any film.
Once you've done it, why do it again? Since
those student salad days, it's been all downhill
and vinegar.

DISPROPORTIONATE REPRESENTATION
As I settled down into the back row of the
Parisian Cinema, strategically situated for quick
escape, I scanned though the list of titles in my
student programme book. From A through Z,
an alphabet of good intentions. The buzz and
electricity that went through the SRO crowd
reminded me of fans cheering for the university
football team I never made. Whether as a result
of pre-selection, lack of interest or entries, none
of the six or seven promising directors offered
 anything from Manitoba, Newfoundland? As many of our
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parli a m e n tary d e m ocracy e it her.

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Vancouver Film
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There was less than proportional representa-
tion from the five Ontario schools that made it
into the finals. A disproportionately large
number of films came from C. B. , with the Emily
Carr College of Art and Design leading the pack,
particularly strong in animation and experiment.
il work. ECCAD was joined by its Western
playmates, the newly emerging industrial
Vancouver Film School, and traditional favorites
Simon Fraser U. and U. B. C. We were honored
by single selections from Regina and Alberta,
but large areas of the country were not
represented, and I'm not talking about
parliamentary democracy either.

Where were the films from the Arctic Tundra
University of the nation, from the Maritimes,
Manitoba, Newfoundland? As many of our
nation's cultural agencies are wont to ask,
"Where is the east coast anyway?" It is also
strange that nothing came from Norman
Jeffson's industrial jewel in the capped
and corporate crown of Canada, The Centre
for Advanced Film Studies. I guess the students at
the centre think they're not students, or perhaps
they don't believe in unfair competition.

As in the film world at large, males
numerically dominated this competition,
showing more than two-thirds of the films
entered. Not surprisingly, a majority of males
were attracted to the fiction genre. Fiction films
stroke the ego, and are generally easier to make
than experimental or documentary films
because they hold fewer surprises. Female
directors, either by choice, enforced institutional
iniquity, or tradition, found themselves making
animation and experimental films, resulting in
the more important work of the festival. The
video section was more egalitarian, perhaps
reflecting its false economy. There were also
admirable attempts at collaboration with a
number of dual-directed cross-gendered
offerings (too much of a mouthful to be a
category in and of itself).

FUTURE FELLINI
As a result of watching over 80 works, I thought
it might prove revelatory to compile some data
into my old brain and emerge with a generic
student film that touched every subject and style
of the competition. To put the whole mish-mash
into a blender and come out with some
cuisine-art. A film that'll either stick to, or kick
you in, the ribs. With no risk of copyright
infringement, plagiarism or special favors, I
offer you here, tongue firmly in cheek, a peek at
the future Fellini.

The generic film is made by a kid 21 going on
45. It is written, directed, produced, shot,
edited, and sound edited by one person—a male
person. It is as fictional as you can get these
days, with a running time of half an hour, which
is about 29 minutes too long. It is financed with
money from one's own family. It has a title like
Black Vision or Fig. The title has very little to do
with the subject of the film. It is usually

completely photographed by one's best friend.
Little attention is paid to costumes, make-up,
or design. The music is lifted gratis from a
famously obscure contemporary synth-band, or
one's second best friend. The lead actress is
either your girlfriend or would-be girlfriend.
The extras are what's left of your peer group
after asking them to work on your film for four
weeks without pay. In the worst-case scenario,
you have to ask your mother to play roles she
wasn't meant for.

You can't afford the time or money it takes to
integrate wild ideas, special effects, or animated
experiments. You play safe. The script, which
was written overnight on a napkin in a café,
favours bad dialogue where it exists at all. There
is heavy emphasis on a chase scene. The film is
sedless. The plot involves infant memories or
childhood, absence or loss, or a quirky dream
that just can't be remembered.

It is slow as in s-l-o-w. It takes the "moving"
out of the term "motion picture." It is aimed at
an audience of intelligent kids, but the script is
primitive, exhausting too many ideas in too few
minutes. The list of credits must necessarily be
too long, because you have to thank everyone
who was ever nice to you. But in the end,
despite adversity, and the fact that you had to
write five term papers, three essays and
memorize Nietzsche while you were shooting.

From Barb Harwood's One Small Step

The Official Winners
of the 20th Canadian
Student Film Festival

The members of the Jury were: Theresce
Descartes, producer at the National Film Board
of Canada; Martin Barry, filmmaker; Jean Boy, film
critic and delegate of the Cannes Film Festival
"Critics Week".

Best Experimental Film: "You Take Care Now"
by Anne Marie Pankert (Emily Carr College of
Art and Design, Vancouver)

Best Animation Film: "One small step
for man two steps for
man" by Sheila Smart (Emily Carr College of Art
and Design, Vancouver)

Premier regard by Pierre Sylvestre (Concordia
U., Montreal)

Best Documentary Film: "Barker" by Donna
Barker (Concordia University, Montreal)

Best Fiction Film: "Absolute Truth, A Recycling
Story" by Mark Saunders (University of British
Columbia, Vancouver)

Norman McLaren Award ($1000. offered by the
NFB) "Eyeing Rain" by Brian Berger (Humber
College, Toronto)
FILMS WITH A BULLET
At the award ceremony on the final day of the festival, several of the announced winners were boosed by the partisan audience. Hey, this is just like Cannes, I said to myself. Granted that the Jury had its work cut out for them, their snobs obviously had missappropiated a few prizes.
In an attempt to rectify and subjectify the situation I offer you these, Peter Wintonick's top student films, divided into the five categories of the festival competition.

- In the animation section I was particularly impressed by Patrie Schwalb's Minuet. Regard produced at Concordia. This was a flawlessly written humorous film, impressionistically animated from a baby's point of view, with a little bit of social contest thrown in for good measure. Bog was E.C.C.A's Sheila Smart's smart film designed from a bug's point of view. It was ridiculously funny and compassionate. Runner-ups were E.C.C.A's George Ashcroft's Along, the unreal world of Canadian feature filmmaking. The student films were asked and abetted in some cases by the National Film Board's program aid to private films and filmmakers.

- While I endorse the active engagement of the NFB in film training, the NFB-supported films looked much more pretty farther than their poorer cousins that one must question the wisdom of judging them together in the same category. Le Bonheur et Rita (Renee-Et-Evelyn-Nuelle), 25-year-old Jean-Francois Forbes of Concordia, was the best of the best. A surreal period piece allegory, complete with special effects, great pacing and cinematography, Le Bonheur, will mean lots of happiness for its makers. The hypenthesized John Marquie-Martego from Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnical Institute stepped up by Patrie Schwalb's Minuet, his brilliant Marie Lenza Story. Owing much to Fellini and MuchMusic, the film is a Ry-High hybrid of dream journey and parody.

- Also of interest were Concordia Peter Mantello's imaginative Another Green World and SFC's Carla Wolf's Where Moons Come From, UBC contributed John Tuscany's White on White, Jean Paul Faust's Ice and the Alpin and Barb Harwood's One Small Step. In my list of favorites, Concordia Andreas Sadler's Mythology, Eti Chur at and Crayon Kid from U de Montreal's Renaud Berube and the Vancouver Film School's Jonas Quastell's The Man Who Walked Backwards, were also in the running. Concordia's strong fictional bias informed Joseph Balass' Or a Very Violent Night in the Apartments Diplomat, Francois MacHabai's The Director, Marielle Rivo's Aussi and Steve'In' Hal's Delirium. Humber College's Brian Berger contributed Evening Rain, a moving interior story which eventually won the Norman McLaren prize.

In the relatively thin documentary section only Concordia's Donna Barker's mockumentary Barmer and Jerimiah Haye's experimental documentary Elephanti were of note. Maybe next year both teachers and students will realize that the documentary form in this country is in danger of being destroyed forever by the atomic bomb of television, and will resolve to mobilize around 35mm. In the more daring video department, I was attracted to the University of Regina's Michael Danoski's Embryo: Development of Fish, which reduced 24 hours of material to 90-second repeated cycles, which is no mean feat. E.C.C.A's David Tuil produced a tough Are We Going Backwards, a pre-Godardian, Van der Slimming video about Bill B., a quarantined and isolation block in British Columbia. Winning was Concordia's Maurice Mathieu's evocative interpretation of suicide.

- The most important student work is being done in the Experimental category. E.C.C.A's Michael Small's Shining and Dreaming and the University of Alberta's David Antonelli were noteworthy as a large contribution from Concordia, including Dominique Lemay's and Eric Trudel's Camouflage, Scott Proctor's Blueprint, Sheila Morrisette's and Adina Hecht's Between Bright and Celine Basset's Veux du Silence.

- Out of the nearly 100 works that I viewed, the most impressive single film came from the heart and mind of Emily Carr's Anne Marie Flemming. Her 10-minute experimental You Take Care Not won the award in its category. It is a personal expression about violence. It is about rape and being run over by cars in Vancouver. It is a cinematic film about the human experience, voyeurism, and universality. Flemming's film works on many levels. It brought to mind the image-memory of a Zen exercise. Its discourse is an emotional one, it refuses categorization. It takes its language from many tongues and stretches out. It successfully and strategically combines film, video animation, text-on-screen, quotation, live action, re-recreation, and found materials. It is what would have happened if you'd armed Marcel Duchamp with a movie camera, or let John Cage out of his music cage.

In her acceptance speech Flemming managed to thank the audience for supporting her and her colleagues and then, embarrassed, fragmented her thoughts in mid-sentence and left the stage. Such shly behaviour belies a woman of assertive conviction. In conversation later in a low-life bar on Montreal's Main with several student filmmakers, I found Flemming to be an open and articulate representative of this new generation of Canadian filmmakers. Her words, like the text in her film, are powerful, mundane and mature. She talked about the politics of art, the lack of money, and her aspirations. (She's now working on a multi-level psychological low-budget fiction, so if anyone's willing to invest...)

Ann Marie Flemming is a 27-year-old B.C. student, who once upon a time lived in Toronto. She studied English before finding herself at ECCAD, as did her mentor, award-winning animator Wendy Tilby. She wants to produce moving art. She feels honest. She doesn't tan. She deletes the various. When asked about her film, she's too busy to provide too much wanted to make a film that I myself would like to. I wanted to move beyond categories, beyond feminist doctrine. I don't want to be branded or ghettoized as 'experimental'. "My aim is to challenge." These goals seem valuable both for students and for those of us who are students of life.

MEDIA-OCRITY
To misquote the Bard, "CV or not CV, that is the question." In other words, should our educational institutions have as their main goal the production of career-oriented clones or thinkers?

As is evident in student work, a desire to produce, promote and encourage media-ocity with an industrial bias dominates our nation's film schools. As they mimic other cultural agencies, should our colleges and universities play an elevated societal function, or should they create an elite cadre of uncritical artist-producers whose main goals is self-enancement and advancement? Far from being in an open-ended environment where orthodoxy is challenged and where the heart rules the head, students find themselves preparing to work in an industry without either. If they're lucky they'll find a niche in the television industry, or in media management, serving the state of things. Some will lay bricks in the walls of Telefilm and the CBC where they will be expected to conform to standardized goals.

Educational bureaucrats feel a responsibility to provide a cultural fodder to the commercial industry. Must it remain so? On the ground level, the burden and responsibility for change may lie with the instructor. But too often overworked teachers have retreated into film schools, burned out by the real-world hustle. As a result, education is left to esoteric and arcane academics treading in the waters of McLuhan, Foucault, Barthes and anyone else with an exotic name to give it an "-ism." As well, the overemphasis of the fiction form in our film schools creates a void in the skills necessary to produce meaningful documentaries.
What should be the role of the film school? I would suggest that these institutions teach students how to perform higher acts of experimental subversion. To give them all the technical training, equipment and money necessary to define their own visions. To let them loose on the world without having to pass their scripts through the filters and levels of prior approval, without having to model real life. Without pressuring them to create professional-looking films to add to their industrial product reels. Do they really need jobs directing car commercials? Does the world really need another car?

Is a hall of mirrors distorting truth and ringing false. Other times it is translucent and transcendent. In most good films we find our lives and an equation is made. The process of watching a good film then becomes both a personally and socially synthesizing experience. When they were good, the films of the 20th Student Film Festival were that good. Imagine.

The plot: On Christmas Eve a milkman and his best companion - a musical dog, get lost in a big store, engage in a search for possibility, and then transmute into black and white to meet a dream girl who lives with a strange family, and whose memory mirror has cracked to freeze time in a world beyond this. A death mask leads them to happiness but changes into a spider. The alcoholic father marries an old actress who lives in a demolished hotel whose films keep on repeating the same old formula. Meanwhile in a Viking village, imagination clouds the mind with failure, and a couple of bad jokes lead to a special effects scene, out of focus, with a road to an old political event or two, while sex roles are reversed. The elephant (what elephant?) commits suicide on a subway while looking at a book of photographs. The camera spins: grotesque adolescence becomes a macho machination; poets commune with aliens; relationships break down. Meanwhile... the audience, waiting for something to happen, goes to sleep. Finally a Buddhist monk who can walk backwards phones a talk show, while famous Italian tenors sing on and on about laundromats, water, enlightenment, sigh, dyslexia, declining birth rates, baseball, babies, the apocalypse, staring, fear, and materialism. And on the backstairs of the hotel, the Third World is thrown in for good measure. The milkman finally finds his milky way. But his memory fails him, and he lapses into silence - a blank canvas in the museum of life. While his dream girl bathes in the light of human kindness, others are homeless, are raped, are treated like Siamese twins, obsessed fish, or neglected superheroes.

- P.W.

Delta Dusk, by Stev’n Hall

A treatment for a student film

The Department of Communications Canada invites Canadian film and video producers to apply for financial assistance to develop, produce and distribute new non-theatrical film and video tapes. The fund is administered by Supply and Services Canada.

For more information contact:
Supply and Services Canada
Non-Theatrical Production Fund
440 Coventry Road
Ottawa, Ontario
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Tel: (613) 993-4959
Fax: (613) 952-1004

Correction

Canada