Canadian Feature Films 1964-1969
by Piers Handling

Canadian Filmography Series, number ten, Canadian Film Institute, 1976, 64 pp. Stiff paperback, 8 1/2" x 11", Illus.

This 64-page, large-format book (which is both too handsome and too important to be termed a booklet) is of immense value as a work of reference and also offers pleasurable reading to anyone even casually concerned with recent Canadian films. It is the largest of three such publications from the Canadian Film Institute, although covering the shortest period and, since it is succinct and in no way over-written, this fact is a cheering reminder that our production is increasing by leaps and bounds, even though, month by month, these movements can seem more like staggers. (The two previous issues in the series, both by Peter Morris, covered the periods 1913-1940 and 1941-1963. They are still available.)

Piers Handling, of the CFI, has achieved a magnificent feat of organizing his material, fusing facts and comments, erudition and occasional wry amusement. He gives full credits, plot synopses, production notes and critical reaction by himself and others on over 100 features - defined as running 60 minutes or more - ranging from the celebrated, like Nobody Waved Goodbye, The Luck of Ginger Coffey and Le viol d'une jeune fille douce, to the obscure and bizarre. Something called The Naked Flame starring Dennis O'Keefe achieved one showing in Edmonton, we learn, while Sex and the Lonely Woman, shot in Uruguay, has Canadian connections you wouldn't even dream of. Famous and forgotten, serious and silly, the features of a six-year period then un paralleled in this country's film history are all here, as they should be, for history is a mixture of the tremendous and the trivial. At least, if anything relevant is not here, I haven't spotted the omission. Instead, it has been stimulating to check the facts I remembered while learning the things I never knew and rediscovering what was half-recalled. The pleasure brought to mind by the artistic success of Winter Kept Us Warm, for example, and the happy financial "rescue" of it by a Commonwealth Film Festival now rather dim in memory is balanced by a sad question mark over David Secter's subsequent absence from the scene. And not the least intriguing section of these solidly filled pages concerns the ambitious and mysterious Roses in December, by Graham Gordon, a film still unfinished and unshown after major production ten years ago. I would love to see this if only for the sight of Gerald Pratley acting a priest. (More seriously, no effort should be so unrewarded.)

In addition to the merits I have tried to suggest, the book has a full index listing titles, directors, actors, etc., and several large and attractive stills. No good public library can be without it; nor, for that matter, can any good private library which even nods towards films.

Clive Denton
in the arts is secondary. Response is primary. The facts that are most useful to us are those which help us to answer the questions about a given film that we are asking ourselves, questions always related to those primordial ones: What does this mean? Why is it affecting me like this? How does it relate to other films that I have seen?

"So when discussing films, we can approach them from two contrary directions — the direction of knowledge and the direction of ignorance. Knowledge certainly helps us more perfectly to understand our own experiences and may lead us through the superficialities of an intellectual curiosity about something to a deeper, more personal involvement in it. But generally, it seems to me, knowledge about a work of art becomes most meaningful when it follows response, when it illuminates the instinctive obscurities of a personal involvement." (p. 20-21)

In the six essays which follow, Harcourt does not betray his critical philosophy — he does not burden the reader with his or others' scholarship, nor with cinematic jargon. Let me explain Harcourt's use of scholarship by discussing the first essay, "The Reality of Sergei Eisenstein". While referring to the enormous amount of analytical criticism by Eisenstein and others, Harcourt interprets that torrent of analysis as an extension of his argument that scholarship can often obscure (and perhaps, in the case of Eisenstein, is meant to obscure) and make the viewer incapable of having or admitting an emotional response. In looking directly at the films, in rejecting that mass of "external clarification" and the generalized statements on montage that wash the viewing of all films by Eisenstein and his Russian contemporaries, Harcourt has given us a breath of fresh air on the subject, concluding that Eisenstein "remains an enigma — a compelling fusion of grand designs with a kind of human emptiness."

The prodigious work of the six directors (besides Eisenstein: Jean Renoir, Luis Bunuel, Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini and Jean-Luc Godard) presents an enormous task to the critic and Harcourt has proven himself more than equal to it. Each essay covers in a critical way all the work of the artist; this is not to say that each film of a specific cineaste is analyzed in detail although it is evident that Harcourt has indeed done that work in his search for the filmmaker's "view of life":

"...I am trying to do basically one thing: I am anxious to explain the form of each director's films in terms of the 'view of life' that has necessitated it...I tend thus to concentrate on the films where I feel the director has been most successful in resolving his artistic problems...Any breakdown in the form of his films is inextricably tied to inadequacies within the view of life at the base of them." (p. 198)

What we have then are a series of critically precise and brief (considering the area covered) essays which can be read separately but maintain a coherence through critical structure and point of view. In this, Harcourt's "Conclusion" is helpful in seeing the six directors within a general relationship in the European setting.

The footnotes are excellent and suggest, of course, further reading. This is a terrific book for any formal or informal student of film, an optimistic work which insists that good criticism is possible for all lovers of the cinema. Peter Harcourt is generously assisting us in that process.

Eleanor Beattie
of the book's format, in that rather than being typeset, it is lithographed from computer print-out data. This format is, however, the essential factor in making possible an unsubsidized price of $25 ($20 to CFFS members for their first copy) and with the photo-reduction ratio having been well chosen, the entries are fully legible.

A number of further innovations are included in the new edition which will shortly be coming off the presses. On the editorial side, there will be a third supplement added to the listings by director and featured players, listing all firms handled by each distributor. In addition, there is to be cross-referencing between 16 mm and 35 mm versions, which in many instances have different distributors.

A further editorial innovation is the provision of a French introduction, including a key to the symbols and abbreviations used in the listings for each title, while on the commercial side, advertising by distributors will now be included. The bilingualization should greatly expand the market for the Index in Quebec and thus permit economies of scale; combined with the additional revenue from advertising, the Index Committee should be able to provide even further value for the $25 price.

Every reviewer must have his quibble, and this one would point out a few discrepancies in spelling and between subject and verb on the introductory page of the 1975 edition, where a little more editorial checking would have paid dividends. Other print purists have complained that the listings are in a computer's idea of correct alphabetical sequence — as a result of which, it is claimed, some searchers have missed listings actually in the volume, but not in the alphabetical order commonly employed in making up an index.

These, however, are mere specks on the total picture, which is that of a very commendable achievement, and in any event, they are unlikely to apply to the 1976 edition, for which the introduction has been completely rewritten. Thus, without qualification, it can be stated that the CFFS Index is an essential tool for everyone involved in film programming, whether it be for a film society, courses in film studies or operating a repertory cinema, and the $25 cost is money well spent.

Tribute should also be paid to those responsible: Arne Ljungström, who handled administration; Pat Thompson for innumerable calls on film distributors researching the titles they had available, and Austin Whitten for the computer programming. In previous years, Aideen Whitten was responsible for data entry but for the upcoming issue, this has been handled by the administrator and programmer, considerably increasing their workload. All in all, despite these quibbles from a one-time editor in the print medium, a very professional job.

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