

OPINIONS

IN AND OUTS OF THE FESTIVALS

Gerald Pratley's article on the Festival of Festivals (*Cinema Canada* No. 36) followed on the heels of the official release of the second annual Festival of Festivals dates, from September 9 to 18 of this year. The announcement of a film festival always creates excitement in the hearts and minds of filmgoers unless, of course, the person also happens to be the former head of a film festival of his own. The thought of seeing more outstanding films from the young German filmmaking community, more new women director's films, a Quebec retrospective, and a Brechtian Cinema Event from the Edinburgh Festival – some of the announced Festival of Festival events – creates eager anticipation among us more mortal beings.

Film festivals that take place in large cities have their own special excitement. There is actually something to *do* besides seeing movies. The electric feeling of seeing the latest and best in film can combine with good dining and other big-city delights. Cannes, of course, is the exception – the sheer volume, and its importance in the film world, carries the day. On top of that, its location in the south of France is certainly a help. Stratford, in the south of Ontario, home of the late, lamented Stratford Film Festival, is a nice place to visit but I never wanted to live there for a week. The alternative, for a resident of Toronto, was to spend more time in a driver's seat than in a movie seat.

Film festivals in small cities have, if not excitement, their own special charm. Special guests and regular patrons of Stratford often remarked on the relaxed, convivial atmosphere that surrounded their week there, in marked distinction to other film festivals. It would be nice if Robin Phillips' theatre schedule could be trimmed a bit to allow for the re-establishment of the Stratford experience. A bit of trimming is perhaps necessary too, from the Festival of Festival's government funding, to return to Stratford its rightful budget. Horror of horrors that government money could be increased to support two film festivals!

Mr. Pratley's budget at Stratford was miniscule in comparison to the Festival of Festivals, but that is a necessary reality. Big-city prices, the expanded size and aims of F of F, accompanied by the larger publicity costs required to attract a greater audience, translate into more money. What a magnanimous, truly Canadian gesture it would be if the F of F could, during its hard, painful scrambling for funding, look after Stratford a bit!

Festival of Festivals will have to sustain itself for many more years than just two before it can even begin to equal the amount of good filmgoing experiences that Mr. Pratley has been responsible for over the years, and is still putting on every week at the Ontario Film Theatre. Nevertheless, gentle chiding is in order for some of the points made in his article.

Gerald Pratley, like Bill Marshall, has been a critic of the way American film distributors and producers have treated Canada as their domestic territory, freely dumping in piles of films and pulling out piles of money. So, when Mr. Marshall chooses to make a public issue

out of the American statement that F of F could not have American films because Canada is U.S. domestic property, what is wrong? After all, as Mr. Pratley points out, it was only an *excuse* anyway. If the Americans thought that a Festival screening would help box office grosses, they not only would have supplied the films but applied pressure to have them shown! Al Mayles, in Toronto recently for an Art Gallery showing of one of his films, was asked why he, as co-producer and co-director of **Grey Gardens**, withdrew the film from the Festival of Festivals. He replied unhesitatingly that it was decided that the showing would not help the film financially. The point, I feel, that Mr. Marshall brought out was that things are so bad that the Americans, while trying to cover up their acquisitiveness, think nothing of publicly stating that Canada is their domestic financial property. "After all, we can freely move our money in and out, right?"

Mr. Pratley also calls for less ecstacy – specifically on the part of film commentators, when writing about film festivals. The message is "more appreciation and less ecstacy". As the recipient of a great deal of both throughout the years, I suppose Mr. Pratley knows what he prefers best, but as amply commented on by film reviewers like Andrew Sarris, unless a film is blown right off the screen by ecstatic reviews nowadays, it tends to go unnoticed.

A film festival, by nature, is an exciting event. The latest and best of film talent from all over the world is on display. Last year at F of F, the combination of new German and new women director's films was truly heady stuff. The notable films that are made in the next few years will either be made by or influenced by directors in these two categories. The German **Strongman Ferdinand** by Alexander Kluge and **Kings of the Road** by Wim Wnders, or **India Song** by Marguerite Duras and **Jeanne Dielman** by Chantal Akerman are films that many commentators can become ecstatic over.

Mr. Pratley's points about the neglect that special screenings receive in the press are more telling. In Toronto, the daily press would not be caught dead reviewing a film that was not opening commercially. If it's not going to play in either a Famous Players, Odeon or 20th Century theatre, chances are it will not be reviewed by the Toronto dailies. As of last fall, there was a notable exception – the Festival of Festivals – which places in question the standard reply of the dailies that they review only what is available to the general public. Why then, did the Toronto Star review **Strongman Ferdinand** at the Festival, for instance, when there is no sign that it will ever be shown here again? Why not review the Ontario Film Theatre's notable premieres or other premieres when they occur in the repertory cinemas in the city?

Mr. Pratley also gives the impression that there is something wrong with showing films that have or are about to have another screening locally. To be shown or not to be shown is often the question for films in festivals with commercial distribution lined up. If a distributor is willing to receive nothing in return except a pres-

tige showcasing of his product, with the hope that it will increase interest in it, then surely one of the main functions of any festival has been answered – the promotion of worthy films. Ideally, a festival should help a film gain local distribution. Dabara Films now distributes many of the Wim Wenders films that were shown last year at the Festival of Festivals, perhaps a direct result of that showcase.

The charge of being childish occurs a couple of times in Gerald Pratley's article. Bill Marshall is childish for criticizing American film producers; Canada is a "nursery school" for asking for the films in the first place.

I have always thought that this was a curious epithet. In the age of Piaget, we have come to realize that too often, by throwing the baby out with the growing-up process, we lose innocence, directness and creativity. The Festival of Festivals is a brash youngster trying to survive its first birthday. The Stratford Film Festival is a venerated senior that needs to be allowed to live again. Both require the help and constructive criticism of everyone who loves good films.

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CAN THE CANADIAN FILM INDUSTRY CLIMB OUT OF BANKRUPTCY?

Canadian filmmakers and the Canadian government have been talking about the establishment of a Canadian film industry for a long time. Through the Canadian Film Development Corporation, through the Film Festival Unit of the Department of the Secretary of State, through the Film Policy Unit of the same Department, and by way of the two dozen or so feature films made by the National Film Board, several millions of dollars of tax money have been spent to try to get a Canadian film industry launched.

Matching the government expenditure – which includes the salary of numerous civil servants, their travel cost and the cost of numerous meetings and conferences they underwrote and attended – is the expenditure in time and money by private companies and private individuals, both those who actually made films in Canada, and those who only talked about making films. Nevertheless, in spite of all of this activity, we are nowhere nearer to having a viable Canadian feature film industry than we were ten years ago, **The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz** notwithstanding. What are we doing wrong?

There are many who would answer that question by saying that we – meaning we Canadians, are not doing anything wrong; the wrong is being done to us, by the film distributors (largely American), the owners of the major theatre chains (not Canadians, for the most part), and by the whole American film industry which, in spite of our protestations, persists in regarding us as merely a profitable pimple on the American market.

Now all of the above arguments are true; we have recognised this, we keep repeating them, ad boredom, but we have not been able to make any change. The fact is that in our efforts to establish a viable Canadian film industry, we are not doing today anything we did not do ten years ago, and the brutal truth is that the Canadian Government and Canadian film makers are being stupid in persisting in actions that lead nowhere. The filmmakers are being stupid in persisting in actions that lead nowhere. The filmmakers talk about quality, pointing to **Mon Oncle Antoine**, talk about quotas, pointing to India, and about government support, pointing to various Eastern European countries. The government for its part mainly listens, pays for studies, and adds each year a few hundred thousand dollars to the budget of the various organisms (as they say in Ottawa, adopting a French word) that it has erected to support the film industry,

such as it is. When are we all going to admit that this exercise could continue for another twenty years with the same lack of results?

I was born in a small island that, until I left it, was a colony of Britain. One of the social burdens under which we suffered was that the population of the island looked outward for excellence, for expertise, for the solutions of difficult problems. Outwards to England, to America, to Canada, even. I was surprised when I came to Canada and found that in many areas of the life of the country, the attitude that so seriously crippled development of my country, my small and underdeveloped country, was to be found here also. It is this basic attitude, this self-denial, unstated but nevertheless real, that cripples us Canadians when we confront many of the problems inherent in our physical and cultural and social proximity to the United States of America, and our historical and cultural ties to the United Kingdom.

So, while we berate the Americans for regarding us as a mere extension of their market (God knows how many times one hears and reads this complaint!) It never occurs to us to think of them as being an extension of our market! Good Lord, compared to filmmakers in every other country of the world, what an advantage we enjoy! Given the advantage point of our proximity to America, we would understand things Americans, including their film market, even better than they understand it themselves. While remaining outsiders, and thus being able to maintain a large measure of objectivity, we are nevertheless flooded with their moods, opinions, shifts in taste, their reading matter and their television. Why have we not been able to take advantage of this? This is really a rhetorical question, because the answer is obvious. We have not been able to take advantage of this because we have not tried to. Not seriously, and not even half heartedly. If there is a problem of definition around this question, it centers around not what we have *not* done, but why we have not done whatever we could have done vis à vis the American film market.

There are two situations that must be confronted and acknowledged if there is to be a breakout of the circular arguments in which discussions on the Canadian film industry have always been trapped. The first situation is so obvious that it would be embarrassing to discuss it here were it not for the rather odd fact that it is hardly

ever talked about or written about in the debate on the future of the Canadian film industry. This basic situation is the domination of the international film market by American production companies.

Outside of India, China and the Eastern European countries the feature films and television series films that most people see, by an overwhelming margin, are American productions. This situation is not going to change in the foreseeable future. In the American market itself, foreign film productions capture, on television and in theatres, only a relatively small part of the market. Less than 5% of the theatre and television films seen by Americans are non-American productions.

The second basic situation that affects the way in which we have been dealing with the problems of a Canadian film industry has to do with a Canadian characteristic that has become apparent to me after five years in Ottawa, watching the workings of the government. This characteristic affects every facet of Canadian life where overall policy decisions have to be made, from the relationship between English and French Canadians, to developing a coherent energy policy or a sensible workable national housing policy, or to developing a policy on film. This is an unwillingness to step far enough back from problems and consider them from the roots up, to get back to "Ground Base Zero," (to use a term gaining currency in graduate Business Schools), and study all the factors affecting a particular problem, in global terms. Because of this, one serious problem after the other has been tackled in a makeshift fashion, with the government running like a fire-brigade from one problem to the next, unable to see the forest for the trees, appeasing here, patching there, and making many things worse. Meanwhile, money gets wasted and time gets lost. This fault of the government extends to other Canadian institutions, including the one we are concerned with here, the film industry.

It is this second situation that has prevented us from coming to terms with the first. The articulate activists among Canadian film makers need to stop being the whiners and complainers that they are, berating the government in briefs and press releases and speeches dealing with the immediate symptoms of their problems, and help the government and themselves to arrive at a position where it will be possible for all of us to come up with overall solutions that will solve our problem altogether.

Instead of complaining about the situations that we are faced with, we should find ways of dealing with them that will be advantageous to us. Example. American companies dominate the world film markets. Could not the Canadian government encourage a consortium of Canadian companies to take over one or two of the major American film companies? With the understanding that while they will be as businesslike and as hardheaded as major film companies are, they will ensure for Canadians a substantial slice of film business. To bring this about is not impossible, nor even very difficult. An examination of the current issue of Moody's Handbook of Common Stock or the Standard and Poor guide will reveal that control of a number of film companies or companies that own film companies could be gained with a tender offer well within the reach of any number of Canadian companies. Furthermore, Canadian banks, with enormous assets, with excellent international operating experience, and with good practise at managing takeover bids, (gained

at the expense of Canadian companies taken over by American companies with their aid) would be well able to aid such an operation. The problem is, have we got a Canadian willing to think that big and to act that big? Has the present government - its Cabinet and its senior Public Servants - got the vision and the courage to take on a task so uncharacteristically adventurous? I think no, but I hope yes, otherwise I would not have written this article. At one financial stroke we would plant ourselves at the heart of the business, getting all the experience and the expertise of a large number of film business professionals, securing for Canadian films a distribution network, (and indeed if we choose our takeover target carefully we could even do something for Canadian publishing, as some of the companies that own film producing and distribution companies in the United States, are also in the book publishing business).

At one financial swoop, we would have done much to correct the problems with which the Canadian film industry labours. Of course there will be other problems, but those will be problems of a different order and of a different nature, and, in my view, preferable to those that beset us now.

As for the Canadian film makers, I know some of you and find you charming and enlightened men and women, admirable artists and people of conscience, of whom there are not enough in this world. I treasure the memory of many of the beautiful films you have made that I have been privileged to see. I regret, however, that there is not a Lew Wasserman among you, nor even a Dino de Laurentiis. Some of you are contemptuous of people whose approach to films is 'too commercial.' Well, with all due respect to your Wilderness Awards and your ACTRA awards and your Etrogs and your prizes won at obscure film festivals around the world (and at some not so obscure), and with all due respect for the high regard many film makers around the world have for you, and the high regard which you have for yourselves, it is going to take people whose attitude to films is largely commercial to rescue you from limbo. Over the past decade you have lost hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in your ventures by trusting people. You have wasted hundred of thousands of dollars of the taxpayers' money. You might not think of it as waste, but that is what it is. No one puts money into producing feature films with the hope or expectation of *not* getting their money back, and via the Canadian Film Development Corporation and the National Film Board this is what has been happening. Measured against the total investment, your accomplishments have amounted to not very much. Measured in terms of impact on the whole world of film, what a waste of talent! You deserve better than you have gotten, better than you have given yourselves.

So, the time has come to discard old ways and to attempt radical new measures. We have been satisfied for too long with scraps and small handfuls and noble failure, with thinking small and with merely surviving. You will respond to this article with self righteous indignation, but I for one will find it hard to take you seriously, because logical as your arguments and defenses will be, the hard truth is that collectively you have failed. So where do you go from there?

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