

# BOOK REVIEWS

...towards a national cinema  
**MOVIES &  
MYTHOLOGIES**



by Peter Harcourt

AN EIGHT PART SERIES FROM CBC RADIO

**Movies and Mythologies:  
Towards a National Cinema**

by Peter Harcourt  
CBC Publications, 171 pp.

Peter Harcourt is a man who knows and loves movies. He has an extensive background in international cinema, having worked for a number of years at the British Film Institute and served as intermittent contributor to such journals as *Film Quarterly* and *Sight and Sound*. His previous book is called **Six European Directors** and is published by none other than Penguin. Yet alongside the respected international film scholar stands an ardent cultural nationalist, a man firmly committed to the expression of a Canadian film viewpoint. Harcourt is then the ideal critic to define, through reference to other country's films, what constitutes a national cinema in general, and, through study of this country's films, a peculiarly Canadian national cinema.

CBC Radio commissioned him to do just that and, in a series of broadcasts during the autumn of 1975, he probed the qualities of national cinemas, always using patterns found elsewhere as possible guideposts to discovering similar patterns in Canada. Those broadcasts have been con-

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verted into print and published under the title, **Movies and Mythologies: Towards a National Cinema.**

Harcourt admits from the outset that the topic is rather broad and that his short book is but a sketch of some of the territory to be covered. He also claims that the original broadcasts, and now the book, were intended for the casual movie-goer and not the film-buff. That's an ominous admission and the text soon validates the reader's apprehension. Harcourt's rich background and well-honed perceptions are limited to what eventually amounts to a capsule history of Western cinema. An all-too familiar map is once more charted, from Edison through Griffith to the Hollywood Heyday, with side-trips through Lumière and Méliès and on to Renoir and the New Wave. They're all there, the Neo-Realists and Fellini and Antonioni and Godard and Bergman, the British cinema of the early sixties and the New Hollywood of the late sixties, all the figures and schools of film analysed in scores of other short histories of the movies.

Harcourt, however, is here for slightly different reasons, not just to look at the films but to answer two basic questions: "What are the economic and cultural conditions that encourage a national cinema to flourish, and what are the means that will allow talented individuals to work within it?" Thus, Italian Neo-Realism, both in its socio-political content and documentary technique, was a purge of false attitudes, a rejection of two decades of fascism and the dominant movie aesthetic of larger-than-life glamour; the British Free Cinema represented the expression of the Angry Young Man generation, etc. If these sound like obvious observations, that's often how the book reads. Whole national cultures are summoned up in a few paragraphs and film movements described and placed in context in a couple of pages. Much of what is in the book is perceptive. It just doesn't go deep enough to constitute really original analysis.

A real sense of different national cinemas often gets lost in the too simplistic history. For instance, Harcourt's extended (three pages) analysis of Fellini's career is never described as part of an Italian cinema. In fact, he asserts that by the

early sixties, Italian cinema "began less and less to reflect the reality of the Italian nation". Really? At a time when Antonioni and Fellini were peaking, when Pasolini and Bertolucci were about to emerge, when Visconti and DeSica were reasserting themselves, and when Wertmuller was preparing herself in the wings? I don't believe that Harcourt doesn't actually consider these filmmakers part of a healthy Italian cinema. He just never had the time to complete the argument and place these directors within their cultural context. One wishes he'd been given or taken the time. He needn't write sketches for casual movie-goers. There are a lot lesser talents already handling that market.

The one national cinema that does emerge a little more fully is the American one. This is partly because Hollywood was the world's most dominant film culture, imposing an all-pervasive influence over much of the globe, and partly because there's already a wealth of material examining that culture. It is the only cinema Harcourt describes that did create a national popular mythology to give an unconscious expression to the preoccupations, fears and aspirations of its country. He examines the way Hollywood's formula movies, genres like the Western and the Gangster pictures, embody contradictory tensions relating to themes such as violence and success. These otherwise dangerous tensions are contained within the safe framework of movie fantasies that unconsciously raise the tensions only to wish them away.

This critical approach to American film is also not original with Harcourt. He even quotes Robert Warshaw's oft-quoted, classic twenty-nine year old essay on the gangster to illustrate his argument. And more recent and much more thorough studies (Barbara Deming, *Running Away From Myself*, Michael Wood, *America in the Movies*, and Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America*) have already defined this relationship between Hollywood and American society.

Brevity also creates simplistic arguments that often mislead and even distort the case being made. **Goldiggers of 1933** is cited as an example of escapist musicals which ignore so-

cial contradictions. What Harcourt fails to point out is that the chorines dancing in oversized coins and joyously singing "We're in the Money", never get to finish their number. The sheriff arrives from the creditors to close the show for lack of funds. A coin is actually ripped off an otherwise semi-nude Ginger Rogers. When asked why there's no money, Rogers sarcastically quips, "It's the Depression, dearie." Even in Hollywood, the show didn't necessarily always go on.

But what does all this historical analysis have to do with Canadian movies? As an emerging nation (in the cultural sense anyway), Canada must develop the myths that will give us a sense of cultural identity. If we turn to other countries to study alternative means by which these myths are developed, it is obvious that the American model doesn't apply. Other countries, however, have never developed the mythical richness, at least in films, achieved in the U.S. What Harcourt does find in cinema elsewhere is a tradition of personal expression, fostered in different ways under different economic circumstances. A similar kind of tradition needs to be developed here by applying some of the measures taken elsewhere. First, get films made, no matter what they're like; second, influence the distribution-exhibition system to make it more conducive to Canadian production; and third, create a film culture whereby movies from throughout the world will be seen in Canada.

The first is obvious, though not readily achieved. The second point suggests a way of promoting the first. We must establish a distribution-exhibition system not monopolized by U.S. films but which provides access for "foreign films", both from Canada and from abroad. Equally important, government support must not just be through direct financial assistance but through laws - tax laws - that ensure a reasonable portion of box office revenue be returned to Canadian production. These too are obvious and basic suggestions (or are they demands?) repeated in all discussions on the Canadian film industry, but obviously in need of much repetition.

The third requisite, a film culture, is not one normally propounded, but it too makes complete sense. Other film conventions besides the American ones must reach Canadians, both filmmakers and public, to help open

up imaginations to other possibilities. This also implies that a Canadian Nationalist cinema must still be part of an international cinema, that distinctively Canadian films must stand beside the best from other countries. This does not mean that **The Hard Part Begins** must be *like Nashville* or *like That'll Be the Day*, but that it must achieve in its own way a standard of quality in terms of drama, insight and style comparable to such films. Of course, the only way Canadian films can achieve such international standards is to be wholly nationalistic, to be wholly themselves rather than imitation American or British or French. In this way, Harcourt's nationalism is a quite normal longing common to all other culturally developed countries. It's just that in other countries it is accepted as a natural phenomenon, something that's just there without even thinking about it, like breathing. In Canada though, people like Harcourt have to defend and fight for it.

Harcourt concludes the book with what he calls a long overdue "celebration" of Canadian film. Two basic qualities emerge that Harcourt tries to use as a basis for the definition of Canadian cinema - its roots in documentary and the recurring theme of the search for self-definition. But again the time is not taken to explore the repercussions of either of these qualities. How does the documentary influence differ from that of other countries at other times? Harcourt has earlier in the book described

location, how Italian Neo-realism redefined the aesthetics of cinema, how more light-weight equipment was basic to the emergence of the free-wheeling French New Wave, how the social grittiness of Britain's New Cinema related to its generation and time. It is not enough to point out how Canadian features developed their approach from documentaries. One must also question how Canadian films compare to these earlier examples and how our filmmakers compare to those working in a similar style today, such as Peter Watkins and Ken Loach.

Harcourt finds the theme of identity fairly consistent to most features:

"...one of the recurring elements in Canadian movies, even in French-Canadian movies, concerns the failure of our society to provide meaningful roles for us. Hence the recurrence of films about adoles-

cence, about drop-outs or criminals, or simply about wild and energetic characters like Pearson's "Paperback Hero" or Carter's "Rowdyman" - characters who end up acting destructively because there is nothing else to do."

This may be true, but he never really tells us how these films differ from many others, mostly from the U.S., he himself describes earlier in the book. Do not **Bonnie and Clyde**, **Easy Rider** and **Five Easy Pieces** and dozens of other films fit this description as well? One also gets the feeling that Harcourt is often stretching to make his case, forcing his theme on films. He even quotes for a half page a vituperative argument from **A Married Couple**, citing a fairly universal domestic squabble as indicative of "very Canadian" characters "striving to define themselves through arguing". His analysis of these under-analysed films is indeed refreshing and often fascinating, yet I can't help but feel that on the whole they fail to live up to the critical yardstick he would set for them.

As much as I sympathize with the motives for Harcourt's "celebration", I find it just a bit premature. The much touted boom in Canadian film in the early seventies was a beginning which established, once again, a lot of promise, promise that, also once again, remains unfulfilled. Even granting the thematic complexity Harcourt wishes upon many of these films, what does that tell us of their quality as cinema? Does it necessarily make them good films? One could easily take a bad John Ford film and find within it themes parallel to his better films, but that still does not improve the film. How many Canadian directors have an assured control of the medium with which they can develop their own style to communicate their own vision? I don't think it fair to describe many of the films' tentative clumsiness as a distinctive and mature style. Certainly some, not all, Quebec directors have grown beyond the awkwardness found in English Canadian pictures. Claude Jutra and Michel Brault are filmmakers who not only have something to say but the means with which to say it. But most Canadian directors are still struggling to master the medium, to reach that point where they can begin to explore the themes Harcourt mentions with greater richness and clarity.

In the end, Harcourt never really discovers why films from Canada

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don't quite match up to those of other countries. How can a country such as Switzerland, with its small population, its multiple languages, its lack of any great cinematic tradition, suddenly produce filmmakers such as Alain Tanner and Claude Goretta who win international acclaim? Canada's failure can't just be reduced to a destructive distribution-exhibition system and lousy economics. That's not the whole reason. The cultural forces that allow such filmmakers as Tanner and Goretta not just to begin, but to actually grow and mature into very fine artists ultimately elude Harcourt.

Still, despite the many complaints I've lodged against it, **Movies and Mythologies** is a valuable book. By writing a survey of Western cinema as seen through Canadian eyes, Harcourt is beginning to articulate a Canadian critical perspective towards film. For the first time anywhere, the movies from Griffith to Coppola are described in relation to a Canadian viewpoint and for the first time Canadian films are given a place in the scheme of world cinema. Even if on the whole those films are not quite up to the task Harcourt sets for them, his articulation of where they should be is one important prerequisite to getting them there.

**Jim Purdy**

### Changing,

by Liv Ullmann

244 pages, Knopf, \$9.95

"I love close-ups. To me they are a challenge. The closer the camera comes, the more eager I am to show a completely naked face, show what is behind the skin, the eyes; inside the head. Show the thoughts that are forming. Even when I tell myself I am expressing a role, I can never completely hide who I am, what I am."

Although Liv Ullmann is expressing the meaning of her screen work, the quotation is also expressive of her autobiography. Her ability to express herself on the screen is also true of her writing style. Her autobiography, simply called *Changing*, is much more than just a facile account of yet

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Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman

another movie star's life. Deviating from chronology and superficial recollections of people she has met, Miss Ullmann's book is an absorbing self-portrait full of exact and intimate detail and shading. It is a book of crystal-clear focus; a search for definition and clarity.

The book's most appealing quality is its loose, seemingly undisciplined, structure. Professional writers might cringe at its haphazard style but it's precisely this style which is so refreshing; sounding spontaneous and shimmering with all the brilliance of an uncut diamond. Refining and honing her apparent disregard for verb tense would only do damage to the overall appeal.

Just as Ingmar Bergman, the man with whom she shared five of her 38 years, loves agonizing close-ups, Miss Ullmann takes us into her privacy for a penetrating close-up of a woman, a mother and lastly an actress. She exhibits all the blemishes, all the guilts, all the scars and all the hurts.

Her wandering monologues sound candid. She is honest about herself; yet, she respects the rights of others. When telling of the particularly sad effects Hollywood success has had on one couple she knows, their names remain her secret. For what is important are the results of too much success, the excesses and the distortions; the who of the story is really unimportant.

Other autobiographies of screen personalities too often parade a collection of other screen personalities that reads like a *creme de la creme* — a *Who's Who*. Above such obvious pretensions, Miss Ullmann presents a sensible (though she may doubt it), down-to-earth person who is not at all impressed by the company she

often has to keep. The reader can identify with her because, like us all, she is wracked with the same fears, frustrations and anxieties.

She has dated Kissinger and dined with Brezhnev. "Brezhnev looks vain, but I like him immediately when he takes my hand and says he loves **The Emigrants**. Nixon's make-up is melting and I feel sorry for him. He would have made a marvellous tragic figure in a Bergman film had he been a better actor... We eat airborne caviar and drink airborne vodka served by airborne waiters but the pact remains uncertain. Do they decide our fate over dessert?"

Her life story, her philosophies, her beliefs and experiences at time sound like the outpourings of a patient to her psychiatrist. Self-analytical, *Changing*, at times, reads like an exercise designed to help her reach her own conclusions. For clearer perspectives, she steps outside the physical limitations and talks about herself in the third person. "And when the bitterness and hate and despair were gone, she was sure she had experienced love and had been enriched... Only when it was all over did they become true friends," she writes of her relationship with Bergman.

A cinematic god, Bergman is humanized in her book. She tells of a man frightened, a man of recognizable shortcomings and a man of unquestionable genius. She writes: "After a while I was the object of his jealousy, violent and without reason. Friends and family, even memories, became a threat to our relationship. We had been a revolution to each other and became each other's hell. I craved absolute security and protection. He yearned for a mother. His dream was the whole woman, all

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in one piece, but I crumbled into small anxiety-ridden pieces at times. His hunger for togetherness was insatiable."

Her autobiography is the story of a contemporary Nora, who, like Ibsen's heroine, suffers through the process of growing up and casting off her expected duties, always trying to please others. She identifies strongly with the character she has played so many times in Europe and North America. "I found respect when I became independent, ceased to cling. Ceased to rely so desperately on others for my own happiness."

When she goes into great detail describing Nora, her fears and her motivations, we know and she knows we know, that she is describing herself. But, no doubt, it's easier to do in the manner she chooses.

Although much of *Changing* is about meditations and reflections, the book is sparked and heightened by moments of unexpected wry humor. "In the car I wonder if I am having a nervous breakdown. And, if so, can I give it artistic expression?" In the midst of a violent battle with Bergman, she barricades herself in the bathroom. As he breaks in the door, a slipper flies into the bowl.

Throughout the book she tells of a vulnerable person and we connect with her immediately. It makes a story of a fairy-tale princess, globe-trotting and doing as she wishes, wonderfully normal. We can relate to her even when she says, "Normal people don't rush about the world the way I do."

*Changing* is one of the finest autobiographies I have read. However, I hesitate to dredge up such superlatives as "finest", "best" and "most" since inevitably as soon as the words are said, along comes another work which either equals or surpasses the work being praised. So until that book comes along - and it will come along - *Changing* is the finest, most poignant, most rewarding autobiography I have read. Well worth even the hard-cover price.

Lee Rolfe

## ORGANIZATIONS

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### 3) Background

Canada's national airline, Air Canada, now uses Canadian music and magazines. However, their films are programmed in the United States with the result that no Canadian films are used. Florida travelogues sponsored by Avis and American airlines are shown.

*Therefore, be it resolved that CCFM reiterate its request that Air Canada film programs include Canadian films and be programmed in Canada to make this possible.*

### 4) Background

Secretary of State John Roberts called for an inquiry into Canadian broadcasting in a recent speech to the Canadian Cable Television Association convention in Calgary. He stated in that speech that such an inquiry is needed to find new ways of meeting the objectives of the Broadcasting Act and that television fosters the development of Canadian talent and programming.

*This Annual Meeting of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers urges the Government of Canada to establish a Royal Commission with broad terms of reference to enquire into and report on the state of broadcasting, communications, and the cultural industries of Canada (including broadcasting, film, the performing arts, the recording industry, the publishing industry) and to make recommendations which will enable these cultural industries to fully serve the public interest.*

We suggest that such a Royal Commission give particular consideration to:

- the present or probable effects of fragmentation in the Canadian broadcasting industry
- technical changes in the methods of delivering and distributing materials produced by the cultural industry and the probable effects of such changes
- pay television (the introduction of which might be delayed until such an enquiry is completed)

- the problem of the Canadian production industry, and how such an industry is to be financed and maintained in the long term as well as the short

- the control of the various producing, distribution and exhibition systems, especially in broadcasting and film, and how such control affects or may affect the kinds of products that are or will be offered by such systems to the Canadian public.

5. This Annual Meeting of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers has noted the suppression by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation of the television production **Tar Sands** for what are apparently purely political reasons. We deplore and denounce this act of political censorship, and demand that this program be shown to the Canadian public who have paid for it and who are entitled to see and judge its merits for themselves.

6. This Annual Meeting of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers calls on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to immediately and unequivocally commit itself to the fullest use of Canadian talent in all its programming, and particularly to the use of Canadian performers, writers, directors and technical personnel, and most especially to the use of such Canadian talent in its drama and variety programming.

7. This Annual Meeting of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers urges the Government of Canada not to proceed with those provisions of proposed Bill C 43 which would give to the Minister of Communications discretionary powers of direction in relation to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission or any other agency that may come under control of the Act.

The election of individual members to the new executive committee were as follows: Kirwan Cox, Natalie Edwards, Sandra Gathercole, Allan King, Peter Harcourt, Finn Quinn, Connie Tadros and Ralph Thomas. They will be joined by representatives of the member organizations: ACTRA, BCFIA, CFEG, CSC, DGC, IATSE 644C, IATSE 873, NABET 700, SGCT(ONF), and the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op.

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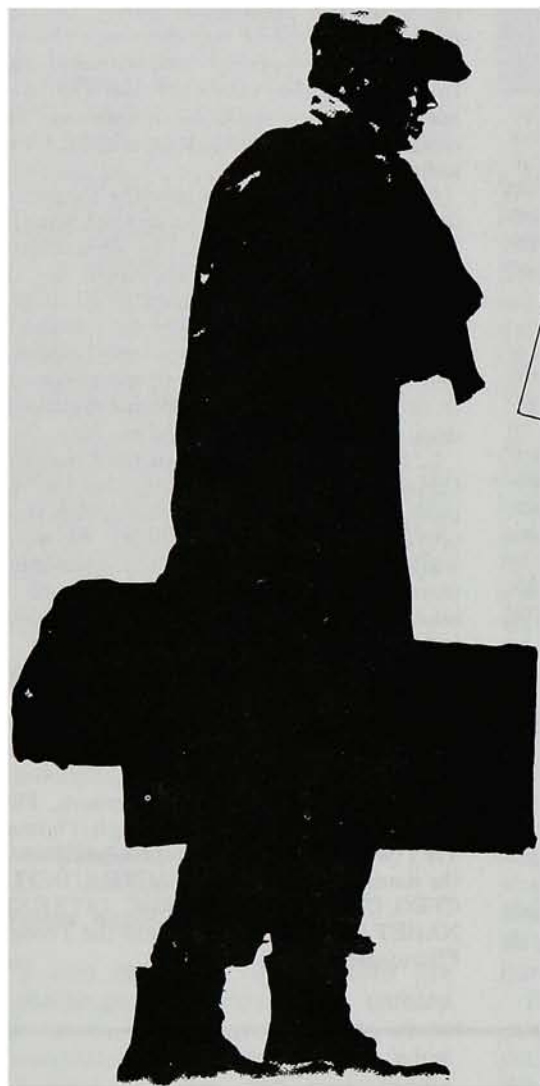


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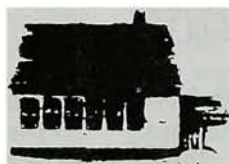
*"A warm and satisfying film."* Los Angeles Times

# WHY SHOOT THE TEACHER



"Touching and hilarious."  
- Clyde Gilmour, *Toronto Star*

"Why Shoot the Teacher is a parade of haunting images that linger long after the movie ends. Stunning film that left me breathless and, to be completely honest, in tears."  
- George Anthony, *Toronto Sun.*



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**in WHY SHOOT THE TEACHER**

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From the book by **MAX BRAITHWAITE**

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