



Bernardo Bertolucci. photo : Carlos Ferrand

caught in the crossfire

by lucienne kroha

Instead of capitalizing on Bertolucci's expertise to gain some rare insights into national cinema, participants at the recent film colloquium in Montreal allowed his visit to precipitate a family squabble that left them none the wiser.

The highlight of the Bernardo Bertolucci retrospective, held recently in Montreal (under the combined auspices of the National Film Board, Primo Piano, the Directors' Guild of Canada, and the Italian Cultural Institute) was undoubtedly the panel discussion, entitled, "In search of a National Cinema: Hollywood's Influence on Filmmaking."

The interesting thing about this discussion was that it never actually took place. The panel members' contributions were, in fact, capsule summaries of their private concerns, and confirmed what we all know: 1) there is no 'national cinema' in Canada, and 2) Hollywood's influence on filmmaking in this country is overwhelming.

Garth Drabinsky complained, figures in hand, about the difficult task of competing with the well-oiled Hollywood machine, "incidentally" drawing attention to his own commercial success, achieved in spite of the odds.

Norman Jewison, having *made good* in Hollywood, presented himself as a cosmopolitan filmmaker, for whom the national dimension of cinema is non-existent.

Michel Vennat, as expected, spent most of his time defending the Canadian Film Development Corp.'s recent backing of Grade B imitation-Hollywood films.

The only panel member to address the question of a national cinema at all was Michel Brault, who won the Cannes Best Director Award in 1974 for his film about the War Measures Act, *Les ordres*. He has not directed a feature since.

Obviously unprepared for all this, Bertolucci could say little. He did, however, manage to get in one fairly pointed and provocative, though obviously rhetorical question:

"What has happened to the Canadian cinema as I knew it? Where has it gone?" No doubt he had films such as Jutra's *Mon oncle Antoine* in mind.

Where indeed? Perhaps the most significant aspect of the evening was the intensity of anger and frustration emanating from the audience. Expressed in no uncertain terms, it was directed mostly towards Vennat, who was constantly on the defensive.

What was planned as a *civilized* exchange of views on a theoretical question became a vocal "brawl" over a very distressing practical question: Canadian films are becoming more and more the expression of choices and priorities of financial interest groups, whose concern for questions of taste, intelligence, cultural content and the like is almost negligible.

Admittedly, the contradiction between aesthetic and commercial imperatives is bound to be particularly strong in film. Born as entertainment, film is by its very nature a product for mass consumption. A flourishing film industry can — and must — make room for all kinds of movies geared to all kinds of tastes, as is the case in the U.S., Italy, France and elsewhere.

But those countries have well-established film traditions. Canada doesn't. And yet, instead of helping to establish such a tradition, the Canadian government is blocking the process by creating incentives for investment in films by tycoons and those seeking a tax shelter: people who know nothing, and care even less, about film.

The overriding concern with commercial viability has, in fact, turned Canadian films into commodities designed to supply a hard-nosed business akin to the Harlequin Romance money-machine in publishing. Fortunately, these books do not constitute the sum total of Canadian writing. But, if nothing changes, films aspiring to the moral and aesthetic heights reached by Harlequin Romances will soon be the sum total of Canadian cinema.

This, to put it mildly, is a pity; not only for those seriously interested in and capable of making films, but for Canada as a whole. Ours is a weak nation, primarily, as we all know, because it has no *identity*. If we examine what is happening in film we will see, at least partly, why: it obstinately refuses to forge one.

Case in point: Erika Ritter is a Toronto playwright whose comedy of manners, *Automatic Pilot*, was one of the hits of last season. In the course of recent negotiations with producers vying for the film rights to her play, she found herself face-to-face with a situation which ought to make it into Ripley's *Believe it or Not*: a Canadian production company insisted that the setting of the story be switched to New York, since Toronto was just too "provincial" and would detract from the film's appeal. The New York producers however were more than willing to retain the play's original Canadian setting!

This anecdote only goes to prove that the current Canadian preoccupation with avoiding national subject matter is neither, as some seem to think, a sign of cosmopolitan maturity nor, for that matter, of business acumen (since it is doubtful that the N.Y. pros were



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concerned with Canada's cultural identity). Rather, it is a symptom of a confusion of ideas typical of provincial cultures.

At the risk of stating the obvious, one can hardly imagine Bertolucci — whose *Novecento* is an epic film about the history of modern Italy — ever worrying about the relevance or appeal of his subject on the basis of its being set in Italy. It is sad that Canadian film producers do not know, or care, that the appeal of a film — or of any cultural artifact aimed at a fairly large audience — lies in its ability to recreate *authentic* and universally recognizable human types, dilemmas and dramas. A relatively inexperienced filmmaker dealing with a subject and context he knows and therefore perhaps *feels*, has at least some chance of conveying this authenticity; not so the same filmmaker dealing with an already cliché-ridden American formula-film. Would Bertolucci, had he been forced at the outset of his career to make the kinds of films coming out of our industry rather than the intensely personal films he started out with, have gone into filmmaking at all? He almost certainly would never have turned into the first-rate director he is.

However — and this also must be remembered — Bernardo Bertolucci is not simply a talented individual. He began his career in privileged circumstances, that is, in the context of a highly-developed national cinema, working with Pasolini and Fellini. They, in turn, are descendants or contemporaries of Rossellini, De Sica, Visconti. *Open City*, *Bicycle Thief*, and many other original neo-realist films were produced on shoestring budgets in post-war conditions. They were commercially unsuccessful in their own country — Italian audiences preferred light escapist comedy — but won critical acclaim abroad. In the 35 years since these films were first produced, Italy has established itself as a world leader in cinema, even though, strictly speaking, many Italian directors work with U.S. money. The seeds of this influence — not to be confused with economic power — lie in low-budget films whose moral authenticity and integrity have made them classics.

It may well be that even given the chance to do so, Canadians will never forge a real *identity*, nor produce filmmakers of a truly international calibre who still remain *Canadian*. After all, one can hardly legislate inspiration, concern for real issues, artistic integrity and all the other factors that contribute to the creation of worthwhile films. However, under the present circumstances *it's unlikely we'll ever find out*.

Traditionally, government assistance to the arts has existed as a means of support for endeavours which might

not otherwise have seen the light, because of lack of commercial appeal. The Canadian government, if it wants to aid Canadian films, ought to do so in such a way as to encourage contemporaneously the development of a national cinematic identity. To finance films whose primary aim is to imitate Hollywood's worst, is tantamount to encouraging cultural philistinism. As cultural philistinism will always be with us anyway, there is no need to finance it with public funds.

One last thought: there is such a thing as "paying one's dues." This may mean, for the Canadian cinema, making smaller films aimed at smaller audiences; and for the Canadian government, creating a cultural policy which is just that, and not an economic or employment policy in disguise. With a little foresight and vision — maybe, just maybe — Canada will one day take its place among the nations of the world.

The people protesting so vehemently at the panel discussion seemed to know all this. It does, after all, fall under the heading "common sense." It is unfortunate that it required the presence of a man like Bertolucci to provide an occasion for them to voice their views. The organizers of the event were somewhat distressed by the fact that it had "degenerated into a brawl." Quite to the contrary. It provided a forum for the expression of real concerns, rooted in something other than money: a reason to hope, and believe, that Canada can do a little better than *Death Ship*.

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