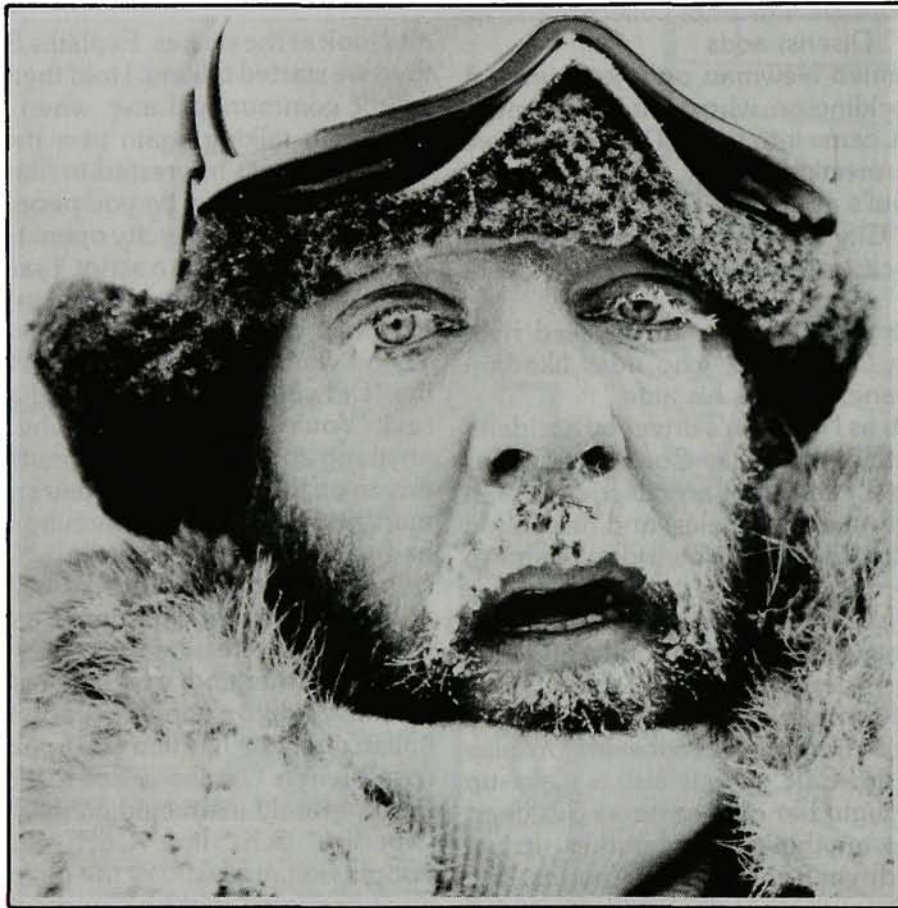


survival of the fittest



Survival films be damned! — Where's that hot toddy? Don Sutherland braving the elements for **Bear Island**

by david clarke

What's a "Canadian Film" anyway? David Clarke takes a serious look at the themes that dominated last year's features.

There has been endless and acrimonious debate over the sixty-odd features made in Canada last year. Critics have been dismembering the films because they have not fit snugly into some preconceived notion of what is authentically Canadian. **Out of the Blue** ran into trouble with Canadian cultural authorities at Cannes, because its story was judged to be not very relevant to Canadian concerns. In some quarters the entire Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) was, and is, blamed for supporting the making of *un-Canadian* films.

Certainly, last year's feature boom triggered a revival of that well-worn debate, "What is Canadian?" As the filmmaking goes on, so does the debate — and the search for easy labels.

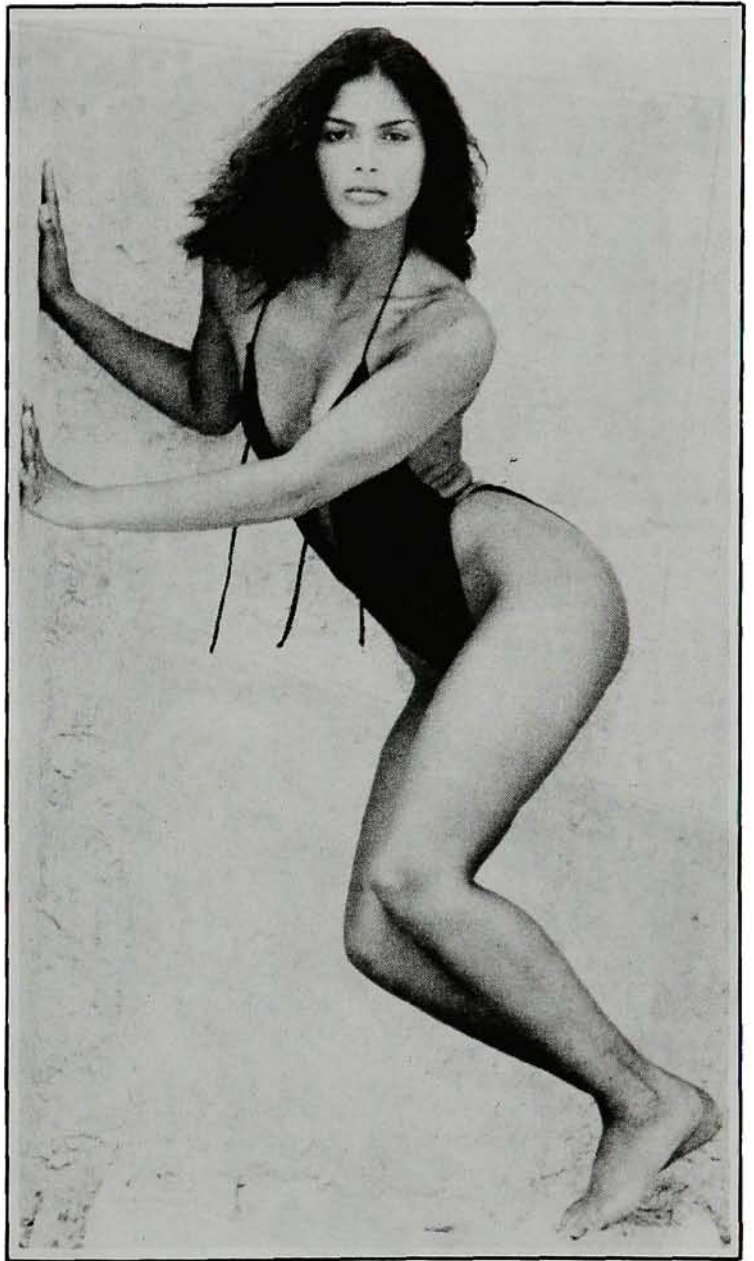
In her book *Survival*, Margaret Atwood provides critics with a handy yardstick for measuring the importance of new, Canadian, narrative art, whether it be in print or on film. She found that, traditionally, Canadians have been concerned with the theme of the *hero as survivor* in the face of harsh conditions; *survival* being the most the Canadian hero can expect by way of victory or reward. New work is authentically Canadian then, to the extent to which it deals with this theme — or so goes one argument.

In surveying the thematic content of last year's films, some interesting parallels and contrasts to Atwood's thesis can be drawn.

The 1979 Canadian film harvest produced an abundance of horror films. On the surface they would hardly seem to reflect anything of the national experience. But Atwood herself recognized the Canadian-ness of the horror theme. The film **Surfacing** — based upon her book — deals with the theme of terror ultimately surfacing from the waters which had concealed it.

Canadian history highlights the early pioneers who *lived* a horror show. Arriving in the early summer with no forewarning that it would soon be... getting... very... cold..., they could do little but hang on until the horror passed and spring came. Perhaps the Canadian experience has sensitized us to horror, in that the heroes of some of last year's films find themselves in relatively similar situations. For example, an innocent, or a group of them follow a normal course — buying a house in **The Changeling**, taking a sea voyage in **Death Ship**, writing scenarios in **Deadline** — when the curtain that shields everyday life is suddenly parted, and malevolent supernatural forces are exposed. Once this happens, the best that they can do is hang on for dear life, and hope to survive until the curtain is re-drawn and normality restored.

Some of last year's adventure-suspense films feature the same theme of innocence entangled, only it is not the netherworld that is stumbled into, but the underworld. The hero of **Highpoint** is a humble accountant-turned-chauffeur who, by misadventure, gets caught up in CIA intrigue. Nicole, the heroine of **Final Assignment** is working as a TV reporter covering a story, before she gets entangled. It is the death of his wife, not any desire for adventure, that involves the hero of **Double Negative**. But the ultimate in



Hot toddy indeed! D.D. Winters in her first starring role... (Eat your heart out Sutherland; **Tanya's Island** is in another world!)

innocence-entangled has to be William Coffin, in **The Coffin Affair**. He is leading the good life, just minding his own business, when out of the clear blue sky of the Gaspé drops a frame-up and death.

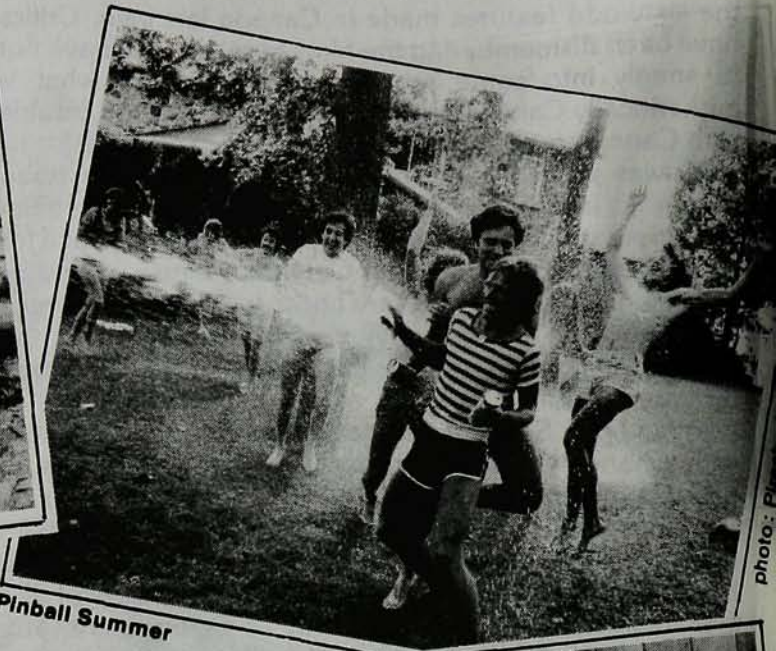
In contrast to these films, are the ones in which the heroes go looking for trouble. The hero of **The Kidnapping of the President** is a secret service agent who goes barrelling headfirst into a plot to kidnap the most powerful man in America. **Mr. Patman** features a rebel male nurse taking on the bureaucracy of a hospital, and **The Last Chase** features a rebellious old car-lover taking on a whole futuristic society.

A student of Atwood would presumably find the first category of innocence-entangled films more Canadian than the second, which assumes a certain devil-may-care confidence on the part of the hero. The student would be left scratching his head at **Dirty Tricks** and **Nothing Personal**. In both of them, the heroes are college profes-

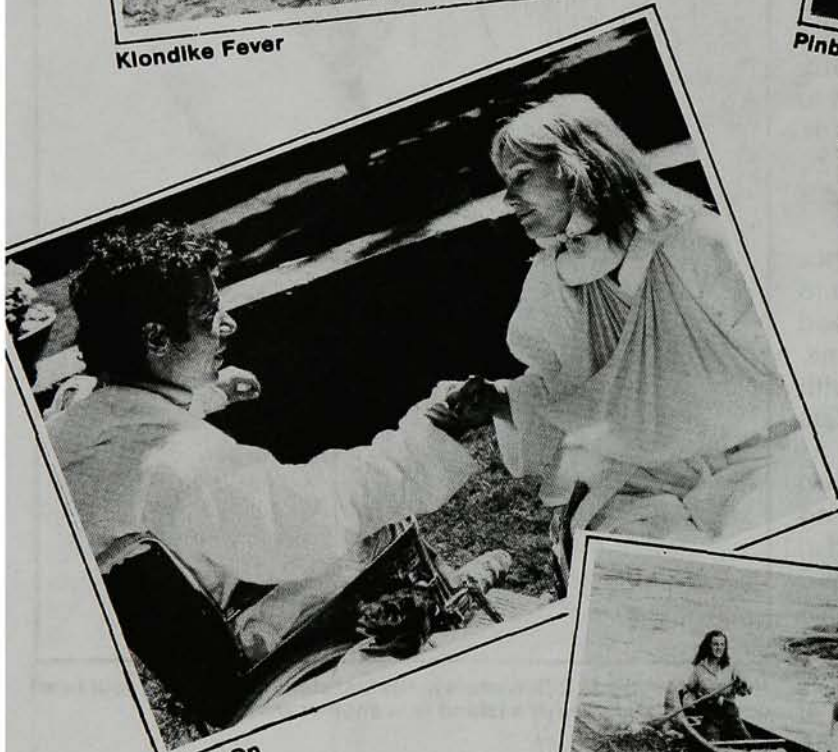
David Clarke has been a free-lance journalist for the CBC, *The Montreal Star*, and *Blow-up*. Currently, he is a screenwriter working in Montreal and Toronto.



Klondike Fever



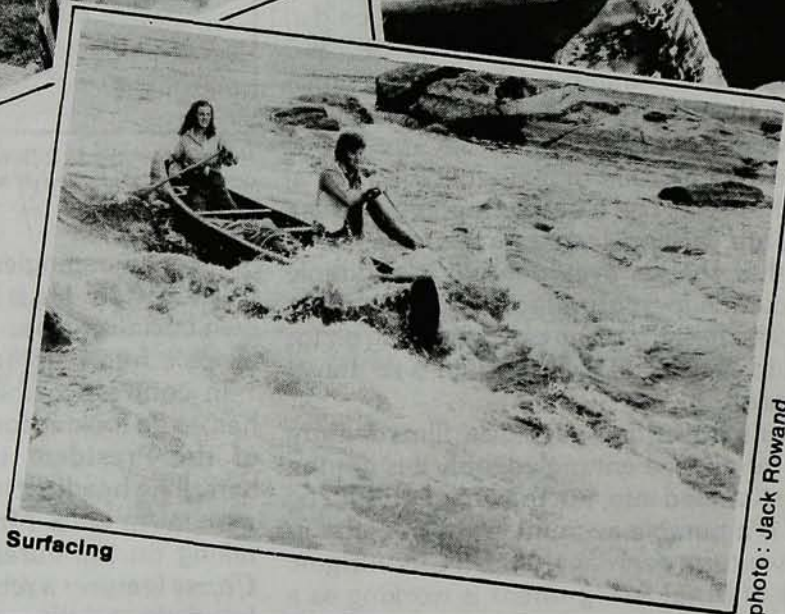
Pinball Summer



Head On



Meat



Surfacing

photo: Jack Rowand

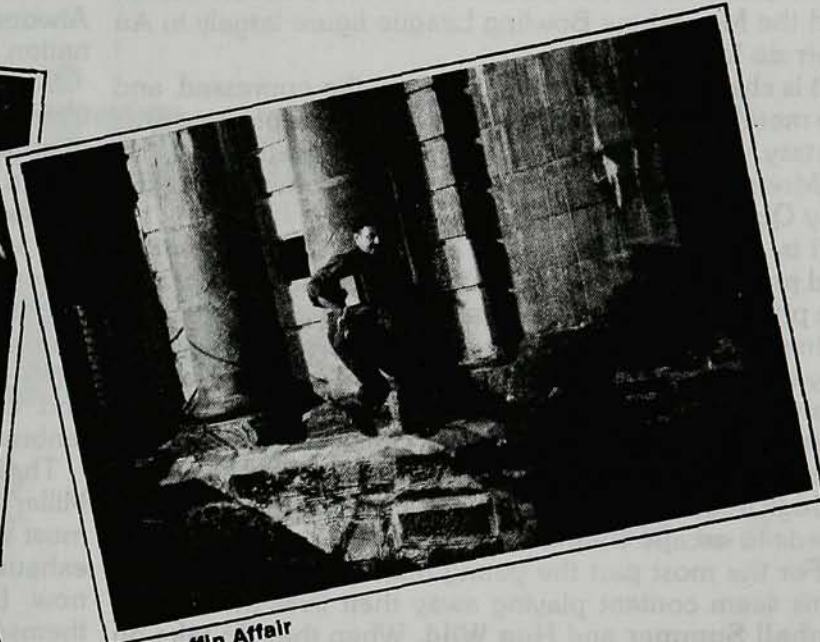
sors who drift into intrigue just like Canadians would do; however, the intrigue isn't portrayed as frightening, but funny. And certainly, there is not supposed to be anything funny about being Canadian. Laughing at adversity requires far too much confidence about survival than any freezing prairie homesteader could possibly have mustered up

when counting up his stocks of food and fuel and dividing by the number of months until spring.

Ultimately one can only conclude that puritan inflexibility about what is, and what isn't *Canadian* inflicts upon the student all the pains of dogmatism — until he is left splitting cultural hairs and counting the number of Cana-



om Night



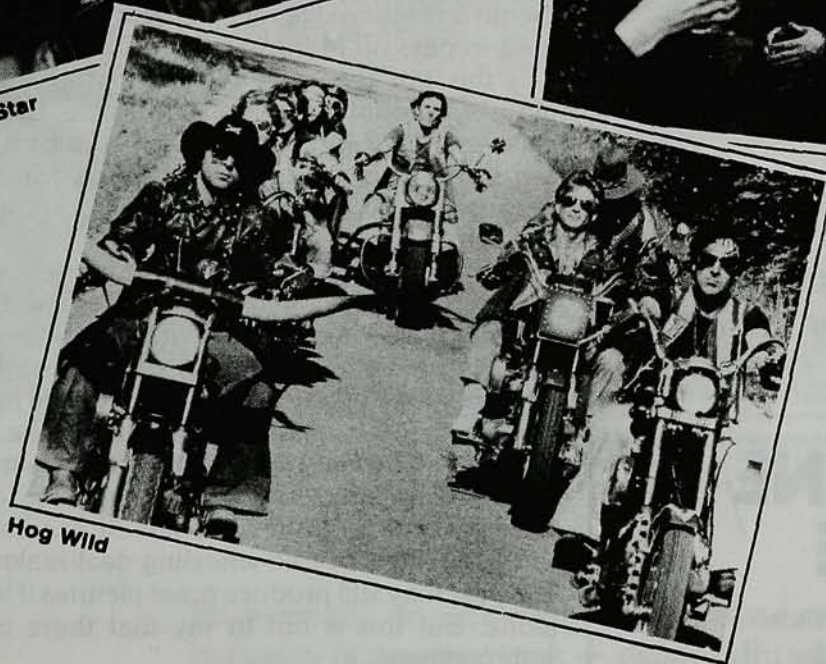
The Coffin Affair



The Lucky Star



Scanners



Hog Wild

dian angels on the end of a nail. The danger is that Atwood's theory could too readily become a security blanket for those still in search of the Canadian Identity. (Atwood would probably be the first to object if her survival theme was to become next year's recommended film formula.)

A number of last year's Quebec films are set along the graceful, allegorical lines of fairy tales. The long caravan that brings the **Fantastica** troupe into Shawin could have been travelling along the Yellow Brick Road. **Le trésor de Nouvelle-France** could have attracted the attentions of Long John Silver. Nothing less than a friendly witch crops

up in **Chateau de cartes**; and an albino, a sandwichman and the Moonshine Bowling League figure largely in **Au clair de la lune**.

It is characteristic of the powerless, the oppressed, and the merely timid, to speak in the veiled terms of allegory or fantasy. East Europeans resort to these methods, as do children. Perhaps these films symbolize something of the way Quebec feels...

It is, however, a film made in English Canada (written and produced by a Québécois), **Tanya's Island**, that takes the prize for fantasy-allegories. Tanya's lover, an artist who paints women who resemble her, in scenes with apes, one day says good-bye. As a result, Tanya drifts off to a fantasy island where she, an ape, and her lover act out an eternal triangle — a primitive, if less sophisticated thematic scenario reminiscent of Marian Engel's novel *Bear* (although it seems unlikely that such a tigress as D.D. Winters needs to escape from her problems into fantasy!).

For the most part the young men in recent Canadian films seem content playing away their lives in **Crunch**, **Pinball Summer** and **Hog Wild**. When they do take on something serious, it tends to be in the past, and / or in some faraway place; obvious examples include **Klondike Fever**, **South Pacific 1942** and **Bear Island**. **The Lucky Star** is a notable exception, because mixed with the young hero's fantasy is a conscious embrace of reality on the part of the filmmakers. Even so, it relies on the American cowboy myth for support. Those who may, in fact, wish to treat Canadian males in a modern context, struggling with a psychological / social reality in, say, Toronto, may hesi-

tate to do so for fear of not being taken seriously (a.k.a. Atwood's theory of the limitations of the Canadian imagination and sense of identity.)

So, it seems to have been left to the women in Canadian films to realistically confront the contemporary situations they face: the encounter with reality usually ends in, at best, a draw. In **In Les bons débarras** the young woman endeavors to shelter her poverty-stricken family with love: in **L'arrache coeur** she attempts to understand the great issues of cancer and motherhood. In the English films her efforts consist mostly of running — into the arms of a drunken old vaudevillian in **Babe**; into the sleeping bag of a nice-guy convict in **The First Hello**; to seedy waterfronts and casinos in **Atlantic City, U.S.A.**; and into the embrace of Richard Burton in **Circle of Two**.

The focus of these films seems to substantiate Henry Miller's theory that twentieth-century storytelling, at its most serious, is by women and about women, given the exhaustion of the themes that have preoccupied men until now. If nothing else, it should embarrass men to see themselves frozen into the defensive posture of survival long after the country has been settled, or merely bouncing around like so many pinballs in frothy **Meatballs** remakes. After all, the Australian cinema — which started from much the same position as the Canadian — seems to be outdoing us at the moment, by portraying the country and its people with dignity in pictures like **My Brilliant Career**, **Picnic at Hanging Rock** and **Breaker Morant**.

Obviously, the Canadian feature film output ranges in thematic content as a drunken sailor wanders: all over the place! We have made everything from **Mondo Strip**, **Prom Night** and **Scanners** — all worthy attempts to make a buck — to serious and ambitious films like **Head On** and **The Lucky Star**. The films have engaged the survival theme and ignored it, reflected our daily life faithfully, and tried to pass off Montreal as Boston, and 1980 as 1890.

Is this not the very image of what a new-born film industry should be — all confusion and promise and awkwardness? But instead of being proud parents, there are some who would choose to disown the offspring: because, of all things, its features don't look *Canadian* enough.

A great national cinema is great because it addresses *universal* themes. A film like **The Tin Drum**, or **The Marriage of Maria Braun**, might achieve greatness by speaking directly of national experience, but if German cinema spoke of nothing else it would be half the national cinema that it is. It is a batch of films like **An American Friend** or **The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser** that catch the attention of other nations, by speaking of matters not necessarily close to the national soil, but close to the heart.

The carnival of free-wheeling deal-making that existed last year may still produce great pictures if left more or less alone. But this is not to say that there is no room for improvement.

Critical evaluation of what is being produced must not be ignored; but it must be tempered with a little patience, imagination and flexibility. If not, Atwood's diagnosis / prognosis will realize its final, ironic victory — Canadian filmmakers finding themselves back at square one, putting all of their energies into basic survival. ■


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