indicate that he is rapidly losing his tenuous grip on reality.

Thomas Hedley, author of the film's screenplay, is a good writer of scenes. His dialogue, give or take a few clunkers assigned to Kate Nelligan, tends to be excellent. However, like most writers today he has no sense of how to construct an original story. (When did you last see an American film with a truly coherent script? Manhattan, perhaps?) Consequently, he Cuisinarts together an assortment of elements from minor O'Casey, bad Snake Pit-type films and lesser films noirs. The proof is that he gives his hero a cat — a sure sign of trying to pep up a script by giving the hero a number of interesting character quirks. The proof of Coburn's performance, and those of the supporting players, is that they can overcome it.

John Guillermin, the director, is one of those faceless technicians who made his reputation doing mindless spectacles for Irwin Allen and Dino DeLaurentis. His presence is negligible, and while he does nothing to damage the film, nowhere in it does one sense any directorial urgency.

Mr. Patman should be seen for its cast and its performances. And for one other reason. It does not insult the viewer's intelligence: hardly a trivial consideration in a year which has seen such releases as Bear Island, Happy Birthday, Gemini, Nothing Personal and Death Ship. Simple intelligence is beginning to look like a major virtue.

John G. Harkness
Suzanne, then, begins in exciting fashion, and the audience is swept along. But even at the beginning, the seeds of eventual loss of cinematic grace are in evidence. The character metaphors are a bit much: Maman, the vivacious French-Canadian whose joie de vivre finds expression in a strip-tease joint (!); and Father, English-Canadian, and hence dour, Scottish Presbyterian, and similar soul-withering things — so much so, that even so fine an actor as Ken Pogue seems vaguely uncomfortable with the role. Is this writer Sutherland’s doing, or is it Spry’s? (One mustn’t forget that the same, false, self-serving Montreal cliché appeared more subtly in another Spry television film — scripted by Carmel Dumas — Je me souviens, where Louise Marleau/Francio/chi chi swingin’ /’cultural’ Montreal is opposed to Len Cariou/Anglo/dull, gray, ugly/ soul-less business Toronto.)

And Winston Rekert is excellent in his re-creation (of sorts) of James Dean; but in this 1980 view of the fifties type, a certain mature distancing — call it at least irony or wry awareness — has to be on the silver screen, otherwise the audience will laugh at the wrong moments (as it did at the Toronto Festival launching).

Whose were the final editing and mixing decisions in the making of Suzanne? Who souped up the sound track, magnifying — in the name of dramatic intensity? — all sorts of noises, overwhelming the various moments with blatant effect-music? (RSL seems to have recurring sound-recording problems. Another of its features, Agency, suffers from a dreadfully false conversational sound/tone.) One could go on, dredging up the obvious use of certain kinds of close-ups (now referred to by some way as the Lantos CJ).

The final conclusion, alas, is that yes, Suzanne does fall into melodrama — vulgar melodrama, that is. Far worse and this is probably why I use the term “vulgar” melodrama — Suzanne becomes yet one more example of Canadian Crude, possibly the worst disease afflicting our feature film industry right now.

Is it all part of the reaction against our “artistic” films of the sixties, which set no box office records anywhere? Too many of our present films succumb to this dreadful affliction. Even our best contemporary efforts — a growing number are beginning to appear on our screens — tend to show its traces, thereby confirming the fact that our feature
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The more I think about it, the more severe I find myself becoming concerning Robin Spry's latest effort. The film community as a whole seems to share this attitude. However, it has to be admitted that a good section of that packaged Toronto gala audience felt much more positively about the movie. It is conceivable, I suppose, that Suzanne may find some market out there, that it may have enough going for it — its energy, skills, fine performances, youth identification, even its Canadian Crude quality — to appeal to a jaded, perpetual-adolescent market, or some other naive market. Suzanne may even manage to get most of its money back. But what about the general disappointment surrounding it? Is that all there is... Robin? It would be all too easy, and destructive, to end this piece with a whimper, or worse still, to magnify one's lack of enchantment into an over-all condemnation of the present situation. Rather, let the film serve as one more irresistible, unavoidable call to the Canadian feature film establishment to do some serious, far-reaching re-thinking. RSL and the other Canadian producers had better study their own track records. Somehow, the idea has to get across that in the big leagues mass appeal need not be equated with playing down to the audience, and that real professional quality is a far more viable product than Canadian Crude. Producers certainly have a creative role to play, but they are not the be-all and end-all. The supreme arbiters of artistic quality in a film, nor the sole judges of its mass appeal.

None of this contradicts the real contribution of Roth/Lantos & Co. to the Canadian film scene. The energy and dedication of Roth/Lantos & Co. have helped to make things go. And it is RSL who plunged into an all-Canadian film adventure, a risky business indeed in the game as it is now played. Almost all of their undertakings, it must be admitted, have had a touch of adventurousness about them, at one level or another. And with experience and growing expertise, given the initial energy and dedication... tout est possible.

As for Robin Spry, among whose admirers the present writer must be numbered, he is now, for better or for worse, launched in the private sector. Despite its shortcomings, Suzanne has revealed some new and exciting aspects of Spry's talent. He is presently at work on a new feature. Besides, wasn't it Aristotle, or some other Greek who said that Canadian film directors cannot hope to be real feature filmmakers until after forty? Spry was born in 1939. So, in spite of his already distinguished record, one may venture to say that his best work is still ahead.

Marc Gervais

Michael Grant's Head On


Indian wrestling anyone? Caught in a three-way stretch Suzanne's Jennifer Dale, Gabriel Arcand (left) and Winston Rekert

film industry is anything but a class act.

An example, to clarify and exhibit the symptoms. I happened to see one of our better films, Middle Age Crazy, the same day I saw Robert Redford's Ordinary People. Now, neither movie is a masterpiece, to be sure; but there is a difference in quality. Quite simply, the first film is laden with Canadian Crude, whereas Redford's first directorial effort is not. At every level — dialogue, acting style, camera work, sound and editing, in almost every artistic choice made by its creators — the Canadian effort comes out as cruder and more blatant. It is as if its creators felt they must do things to the central theme or story, resorting to cheap effects to win the audience. Redford and Co., on the other hand, seem to trust their material, its essential humanity and appeal, and their audience.

RSL is one of our most dynamic production houses. But, like so many of our other production units, it repeatedly succumbs. Where oh where have sensitivity, nuance, wit, a true sense of quality and style, disappeared to? Where are those values that precisely inform the best American work? RSL's In Praise of Older Women had so many truly fine things in it: it could have been a brilliant, bitter/sweet essay in the tradition of any number of film creators in, say, France or Czechoslovakia. Instead, it thudded its way into crudeness. And the same can be said, mutatis mutandis, about Suzanne.

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