

Open letter

Open letter to members of the University Film Association (U.S.), the Society for Cinema Studies (U.S.), and the Film Studies Association of Canada, and to the at-large academic film community of Canada and the United States.

Dear Colleagues,

Negotiations are now underway leading to the first joint convention of the three film studies organizations of Canada and the United States next spring at York University, Toronto, Ontario. While such a meeting would promise to be an exciting opportunity for the sharing of ideas and experiences among film teachers and scholars, the current political situation in Ontario demands that the ongoing negotiations be carefully reconsidered by the membership of the three organizations.

Censorship: Four organizers of the 1981 Canadian Images film festival in Peterborough, Ontario, have recently been arrested and charged with exhibiting an experimental film refused for public exhibition by the Ontario censor. The film in question, Al Razut's *A Message from our Sponsor*, intercuts a few hard-core "found" images, reprinted and abstracted, with images of women in television advertising, suggesting a comic, quasi-feminist theme.

This is only one development in the Ontario government's escalation of its campaign against freedom of expression and access in the film community. It is well known how in recent years films by Louis Malle, Volker Schlöndorff, Bernar-

do Bertolucci and George Kaczender have been cut or banned outright. By now this list also includes the names of Michael Snow (!) and the Québécois director Pierre Harel. Harel's film, banned outright, is a non-hardcore feature psychodrama which depicts a couple locked in simulated intercourse as a metaphor for the filmmaker's view of the impasse between the sexes. Hardly a film to be championed by feminists, but feminists could be the next target—censors do not distinguish between a vagina in a pornographic film and a vagina in a feminist film by, say, Chantal Akerman or Barbara Hammer. The censor's singling out of the gay minority for special interference is only one example of the political implications of the unrestrained power allowed the censor by the Ontario government: Jack Hazan's *A Bigger Splash*, the semi-documentary "biography" of painter David Hockney, was cut for images of gay male eroticism (non-hardcore) whose heterosexual equivalent would have passed unnoticed. The Toronto Festival of Festivals is still recovering from the censor's attempted interference with its Godard retrospective last year, and is now openly considering cancellation of the entire festival.

The latest escalation has added experimental, political and independent filmmakers and exhibition spaces to its targets. So far, at least one experimental gallery vital to Toronto artistic life, The Funnel, is being forced to fight for its existence, not only against the censor, but against the fire inspectors etc., that the censor's friends in the government have unleashed. Even the academic community has not been immune to the

censor's harassment. The Peterborough screening was in the context of a panel discussion about censorship! Our recent FSAC meeting in Ottawa was barely able to cope with the punitive bureaucratic and financial pressures imposed by the censor on all screenings of films. Would a film convention at York, assembling 500 instead of 50, succeed in arranging the dozens of necessary screenings?

Campaign against lesbians and gays: The police and judiciary persecution of lesbians and gays has reached unprecedented proportions in 1981 and continues to escalate weekly. The obscenity case against our national gay newspaper, *The Body Politic*, still drags on, now in its fourth year, with punitive legal costs, despite a 1979 acquittal appealed by the government; the mass arrests and violations of gays' civil rights in gay gathering places are now wildly out of control (see enclosed ad); gay community leaders are now being harassed and intimidated by arrests on trumped up charges; the Toronto police have unilaterally succeeded in effectively rescinding the 1968 decriminalization of sodomy by using obsolete "bawdy house" laws to arrest adults for consensual sexual activity in the privacy of their own homes; the Ontario and Toronto governments have refused to institute civilian review procedures to consider complaints of police brutality by gays, blacks and other minorities (liquor law regulations are being used by the police to harass blacks in their gathering places). The Right to Privacy Committee, a group organizing defense in the face of the recent attacks by police, has called for a boycott of Ontario

by conventions in order to pressure the government to let up its attacks on gays' and minorities' civil rights.

The two state offensives against freedom of expression and access and against the civil rights of lesbian and gays are one and the same. Film scholars, teachers, and filmmakers have a vital stake in the struggle that is now being waged in Ontario. Americans who support the ban on conventions in anti-ERA states must consider the Boycott Ontario campaign as part of the same mobilization against the same enemies. Americans and Canadians from outside Ontario must not think that exotic, friendly Toronto is beyond the grip of the Moral Majority. Ontario may be the crucial testing ground for the New Right's efforts against women, lesbians, gays, other minorities, and freedom of expression. It is no accident that the Klan has shown an alarming resurgence in Toronto.

It would be unfortunate to have to pass up the gracious hospitality of the York University Film Department, who would certainly provide excellent facilities and a dynamic atmosphere. However, to meet in Ontario in 1982 is to lend legitimacy to the state-police apparatus that is threatening the freedom of filmmakers, film scholars, and film audiences, and the political survival of lesbians and gays and other minorities. I urge you to make known your views to the executive of your organization.

BOYCOTT ONTARIO!

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WHAT THE CRITICS HAVE TO SAY

Alvin Rakoff's "Dirty Tricks"

"The plot has something to do with a letter from George Washington — and because we are in Massachusetts, Old Montreal becomes Boston and McGill stands in for Harvard. (It could have been worse Dept.: at least McGill's reputation is not splashed by the notion that its personnel department would hire Elliot Gould to teach any thing.) Coeds at this citadel of expensive and exclusive education use expressions like "Holy crow! Is that the time? I've got to get dressed!" (When was the last time you heard an earthling say "Holy crow!" seriously?)

— Jay Scott,
The Globe and Mail

"*Dirty Tricks* isn't a movie, it's part of a philanthropy established by independent producers all over the world to keep Elliot Gould working... Rich Little and Arthur Hill are posted as lookouts for director Alvin Rakoff, but from the looks of things he never showed up. Rakoff may be resting on his laurels, having already directed one great comedy, *Death Ship*."

— Ron Base,
The Toronto Star

"We've recently enjoyed a cycle of quality Canadian films, from *Atlantic City* to *Improper Channels* and *Les Plouffe*. We were ripe for a rotter. This is it."

— Bruce Kirkland,
The Toronto Sun

Eric Till's "Improper Channels"

"*Improper Channels* is a little bit wan. But its idiosyncracies are entertaining. Alan Arkin, gives a warm, accessible performance that makes one wish better material would come his way."

— Janet Maslin,
N.Y. Times

Alfred Sole's "Tanya's Island"

"(This is) the sort of awesome-ly terrible movie that comes out of the fevered imaginings of a scriptwriter (Pierre Bousseau) who wonders what might have happened if King Kong had lived in the vicinity of The Blue Lagoon, or if Marian Engel's Bear was transformed into a Fantasy Island episode."

— Ron Base,
The Toronto Star

J. Lee Thompson's "Happy Birthday to Me"

"The teenagers in *Happy Birthday to Me* are the dumbest yet, and the film is one of the most unpleasant. This ramshackle Canadian gore store displays its wares as if they were brand new, but underneath every item is the signature of another, better film."

— Jay Scott,
The Globe and Mail

"Although he has made effective horror-oriented movies like *Cape Fear* and *Eye of the Devil*, veteran director J. Lee Thompson displays little feel for this material. The film is tedious — badly edited and misshapen. The acting has a pallid TV feel, as does its visual sense."

— Bill Landis, *Soho News*

"There's nothing to be said for the acting direction or story, which is monumentally stupid, dependent throughout on a frail girl to kill and carry the bodies so they can't be found, taking time out along the way to dig up a casket and haul away the contents."

— Har., *Variety*

"The worst thing about *Tanya's Island* is that it is weighted down with pretentious, heavy-handed metaphors for "primal" urges and behaviour. It's all played fairly straight, but when Tanya's boyfriend starts acting animalistically, it becomes quite funny. The movie is so original and eccentric that it ultimately engrosses the viewer. The setting is attractive, D.D. Winters as the heroine is suitably exotic looking, and the gorilla suit is excellent."

— Bill Landis, *Soho News*

"Plotline is thinnest excuse for Sole to show off Winters' undraped form. Plentiful nudity will satisfy voyeurs, but the acting scenes are crude and laughable. Plodding pace makes film most suitable for drive-ins... will find patrons visiting the concession stand."

— Lor., *Variety*

Martyn Burke's "The Last Chase"

"Quirky vision of where the oil shortage will lead us holds some interest in *The Last Chase*. However, filmmakers fail to give new life to clichéd story and characters laid out against that background. Ques-

tionable is whether the car chase sequences and the presence of Lee Majors in the lead role will guarantee pic any B.O. success."

— Tina, *Variety*

Ralph Thomas' "Ticket to Heaven"

"A first class social thriller dealing with cult religions in California. This hard-hitting docu-drama ranks as one of the most outstanding films to emerge from Canada in recent years and should have no problem finding international distribution and audiences."

— Klad., *Variety*

Richard Loncraine's "The Haunting of Julia" ("Full Circle")

"This one might do well at wickets everywhere thanks to a fairly tight script which, in first half of film at least, builds up scary tensions nicely."

— Besa, *Variety*

"*The Haunting of Julia* is virtually scareless, and the few camera angles provide advance tipoffs to the few frightening scenes. Only occasionally are there red herrings, like the overhead shots that suggest — erroneously — that lamps may soon be dropping on the character's heads."

— Janet Maslin,
N.Y. Times