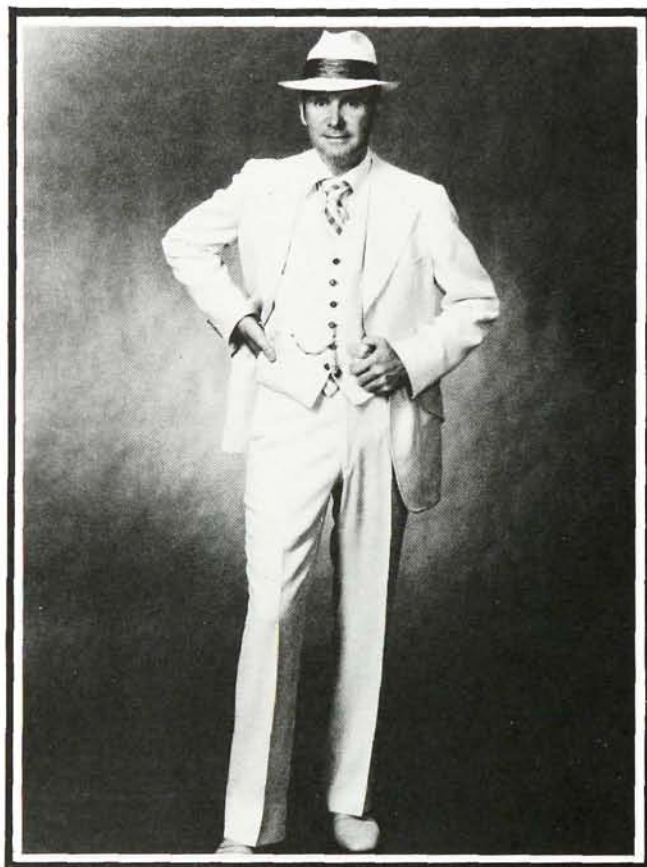


HEADLESS HORSEMEN

“... Let's quit pretending that all these mad, misbegotten movies represent the vital interests of Canada...”



There's a lot of *talk* nowadays about (the possibility of, the desirability of) an independent Canada; but where are the healthy and vital people ready to *realize* such a new way of life? Some ideas cannot be born in smoke-filled rooms filled with pudgy, bitchy, half-drunk people: Canada's future, as a fresh and unique culture, is precisely such an idea. It needs vigour, drive, joy, determination: *athletic qualities*. An independent Canada isn't to be talked about, it's to be *lived*.

Throughout the four days and nights of the Canadian Film Symposium in Winnipeg I heard angry attacks on the NFB, CBC, CFDC, Odeon, Famous Players, American-owned distribution companies, and *everybody* in the Secretary of State's department from Hugh Faulkner on down to the janitor. These political sessions, in which one heard proposals for quotas, levies, the nationalization of Famous Players, occupation of the Prime Minister's office, in ascending order of emotional temperature, were, I presumed, the *preliminaries* of the conference. At some point, Peter Pearson, or Chalmers Adams, or Werner Aellen, or Jack Gray would stand up and say,

“Now the big question. What can we, as English-Canadian film-makers, do to make films that the public really *wants* to see? It was a telling omission that the question never came up. When I look over the many box-office disasters through the years, ranging from *The Ernie Game to Journey, Only God Knows to The Rainbow Boys*, from *Child Under a Leaf to Sally Fieldgood & Co.* (a film so unappealing that a third to a half of the Symposium audience walked out on it) it is clear that the film-makers themselves — writers, directors, producers — have a *personal* responsibility for the presently depressed condition of Canadian cinema, a responsibility they are refusing to accept, and which they obscure under a smokescreen of political activism.

Over and over again — especially in English-Canada — we get films that don't *connect* with anybody. Films with no social awareness, no concept of audience, poor thematic choices and bad marketing judgement. (By films that connect with people, I mean anything from *Deep Throat to Scenes From A Marriage*, films which people want to see so badly you can't keep them *out* of the

theatres.) Too often the trouble with our films is that they appear to be made in a social vacuum. Didn't Peter Bryant know *before* making **The Supreme Kid** that it was dusty with cultural lag, that the fashionable values it reflects peaked in 1968? Didn't George Bloomfield know — before spending all those thousands — that **Child Under A Leaf** was as flimsy as one of Dyan Cannon's night-gowns? Doesn't Werner Aellen know that **Sally Fieldgood & Co.** is just a poor man's **McCabe and Mrs. Miller**, stale tea after strong brew? Because if they don't, they need psychiatrists to attend to their delusions, not government support for more movies.

The issue here is not "good" and "bad" films, or "works of art" and "trash," but simply between movies which attract filmgoers and those which don't. Until more film-makers develop a closer relationship with the film-going public, and start making movies abreast of social issues and values instead of five years behind them, until they start making films for hundreds of thousands of people, instead of themselves and a few friends, Canada is not going to have a viable film industry.

We are killing ourselves through incompetence (look at the mess Al Waxman made of **My Pleasure is My Business**: a good commercial property committing suicide) and then we assail the government to make the country safe for mediocrity. There *are* film-makers in Canada who have their hand on the public pulse — Ralph Ellis with his box-office bonanzas **Cry of the Wild** and **Wings of the Wilderness**, Budge Crawley with **Janis**, Kemeny, Kotcheff and Greenburg in **The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz**, Jim Murray, Eric Till and Pierre Berton with **The National Dream**, Graeme Ferguson with **North of Superior** and **Snow Job**, among others, and they have proven that there is a large Canadian audience for certain types of entertainment.

Because we have a lot of artsy film-makers with vague pretensions in this country, who have the Midas touch in reverse (everything they come in contact with turns to lead), instead of clear-headed commercial and creative artists who have something to say that the public wants or needs to hear, (an admirable example being Michel Brault's **Les Ordres**) we have imposed upon ourselves an utterly spurious "quandary of Canadian cinema." Just because someone was born in Canada, and manages to persuade producers to back the making of another god-awful, solipsistic home-movie, wildly out-of-touch with public interests and taste, is no reason why we should accept the burden of his or her failure, and consider it synonymous with the national interest. A Canadian film is one which Canadians support at *both* ends of the enterprise — not just the initial financing, but the paid-for enjoyment of seeing.

Whenever I heard it said at the Symposium that Canada's film makers had their backs to the wall, were destitute and in despair — I wanted to know *who* and *why*. Many of these directors are friends of mine yet I refuse for that reason to softpeddle their faults. After making some of the films they have, they *deserve* to suffer, they have to suffer, because they are so far out of alignment with cultural and social realities. I know of no film-maker in recent years who made a film of even passable competence who did not get bookings in good theaters, in as many cities as the film's track record (established in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal) would indicate was sensible.

The central problem, the crucial problem, of Canada's film industry was not on the agenda of the Film Symposium, and nowhere did I hear it talked about. Good films such as **Les Ordres**, commercial films such as **Bingo**, **Janis**, **Duddy Kravitz** and **Il Etait une Fois Dans L'est**, are

not encountering difficulties finding their audiences. Whatever government protection they may need is minimal. If they would benefit from some system of box office levy (and no doubt they would) then they are wholly deserving of increased support. But most of the films which were said to be suffering neglect are ones which filmgoers clearly don't want to see. Slipstream didn't die in Toronto because of some multinational corporate conspiracy; a quota system isn't going to put new life into **A Fan's Notes**; and hanging Hugh Faulkner in effigy isn't going to make **Child Under a Leaf** into a roaring box-office hit.

Going home, bleary-eyed with the flow of about two million *more* words on the subject of Canadian film, it was my conclusion that most of the film-makers present had their political horse before their artistic cart; the horses were running full gallop but the wagons were empty.

It was especially exasperating on the fourth morning of the conference during a panel discussion ("Identity and Creativity" — with participants Robert Fothergill, Michel Brault, Kathleen Shannon, Byron Black, Michael Snow, and Len Klady) to see what utter confusion the Symposium sank into once the traditional whipping-boys had all been whipped. Fothergill and Brault were the only ones to address themselves to the topic, and for a few exciting moments during Fothergill's opening address we came close to the kind of challenge which the Symposium badly needed. "English-Canadian directors seem incapable of developing an intellectual grasp of what they are doing," said Fothergill, "They are cut off from one another, isolated from the public, and it shows in their work. Unlike Quebec directors whose films usually have a political or social dimension which audiences can relate to, English directors tend either to retreat into private fantasy worlds (where communication is arbitrary and difficult) or else give us another portrait of a weak, impotent male who can't cope with any aspect of modern life." After Fothergill finished there were a few moments of silence, then Len Klady played with his dog, Byron Black told a string of unrelated anecdotes desperately aspiring to be jokes, Michael Snow discussed his films (which, whatever one thinks of them, are clearly outside the mainstream of commercial theatrical features,) Kathleen Shannon said that as a woman she didn't relate to any of these problems, and *la de da*, time passed, and that was it. As a fruitless waste of time the session rivalled some of our more obtuse Canadian movies.

When I hear the statistics — that 13 English features were made in 1972, 6 in 1973, 4 in 1974, — I can only hope that the fittest survive this pruning process which is more to be welcomed than avoided. Time after time I am called to preview a new Canadian film and find instead of energetic originality, only an eccentric mindlessness coupled with an inexplicable self-confidence, as if nobody engaged in the enterprises had the slightest notion how boring it was. Let's quit pretending that all these mad misbegotten movies represent the vital interests of Canada. When a Canadian film is made from deeply felt conviction about something that matters to other people, that is, it has something sociable to say and speaks clearly, and shows a reasonable-to-commendable competence in technical and artistic execution, there is usually no want of an audience, and no crisis in our film industry. □

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