

cannes

Once again the Cannes Film Festival has come and gone. And this year, with over 500 films shown, and some fifty thousand people in attendance, Cannes must again be acclaimed the biggest film festival ever. A sort of mini-Olympics of the cinema—that is what Cannes has become, except that the event takes place *every* year. And Cannes does have its peculiarities, representing that strange mixture of what are often irreconcilables: on the one hand, culture and art; and on the other, business, economics, and industry; the two bridged by the word “entertainment”.

Because it is so huge, because it so dominates the film world, and because it attracts films and filmpeople from all around the globe into its ever widening upward spiral, the Cannes Festival goes on affording an unmatched opportunity for finding out where feature film is right now, and where it is heading. As such, Cannes has much to say to Canadians, not only about our own film industry and how it measures up to world standards, but also about the larger question of Canadian film viewing habits—what Canadians could be seeing, and what in fact we are permitted to see.

One of the facts immediately emerging this year from the two-week marathon at Cannes: there were no overwhelmingly great films, movies that one feels will go down as landmarks in film history. But that has been the case, by and large, for the last six years. Which is not to say that everything was bad; for this particular edition, though not challenging, nonetheless afforded its share of good, solid film moments.

Cannes makes another fact of film life painfully obvious. In spite of the extraordinary richness of film sources, and the amazing degree of film mastery now evidenced by so many countries, film viewing is subject to a tightly controlled, quasi-monopolistic marketing, with the big boys, the “majors”, determining, to a large extent, what can or cannot be seen in one country or another.

There are the state monopolies, of course, and the sad consequences associated with that phenomenon. Internationally speaking, for example, the Czech cinema, so brilliant only a decade ago, is now dead, many of its leading directors in exile, and another thirty blacklisted at home.

And the USSR? With a huge film industry capable, one would think, of almost anything, Russia stands out as the archetype of monolithic state control. This year, the Russians insisted on presenting Sergei Bondarchuk's **They Fought for Their Country**, a heroic poem commemorating those who fought against the Germans thirty years ago. Monumental is the word, with breath-taking scenery, matchless tank battles, and the cosmic lyricism that Bondarchuk displayed in **War and Peace**, but marred by a false Boy Scoutism, a super-patriotism that would elicit skepticism from even a Duke Wayne, and a heavy academicism that is totally predictable. It is the old story: the Russians, with their fondness for recalling a certain “history”, but refusing to tackle any of the problems inherent in their own society, or even to glimpse at another kind of “history”, say the Ukraine genocide under Stalin and others.

There is, however, another kind of control every bit as effective as state control. And that one concerns Canadians much more directly, for it determines what we see or do not see up there on our silver screens. That, of course, is the enormous power exercised by the “majors” (mostly Americans) in film distribution and exhibiting.

Cannes mirrors this year after year. For, year after year, the “Big Four” of the West—the U.S., Britain, France, and Italy—have a disproportionate quantity of films invited to the *official* competition. These films are not all bad by any means, but most of them have no business whatever in the official festival. They are simply well executed commercial products. But money talks; and so we saw—and Canadians will be afforded the privilege of seeing—John Schlesinger's disappointing **Day of the Locust**, a lavish, **Great Gatsby**-esque failure. Ditto for Ken Russell's **Tommy**,



“Day of the Locust”

another Russellian monument to bad taste, and another mind-boggling proof that Russell is brilliant, energetic, foolish, imaginative, chaotic—and still in search of a mind.

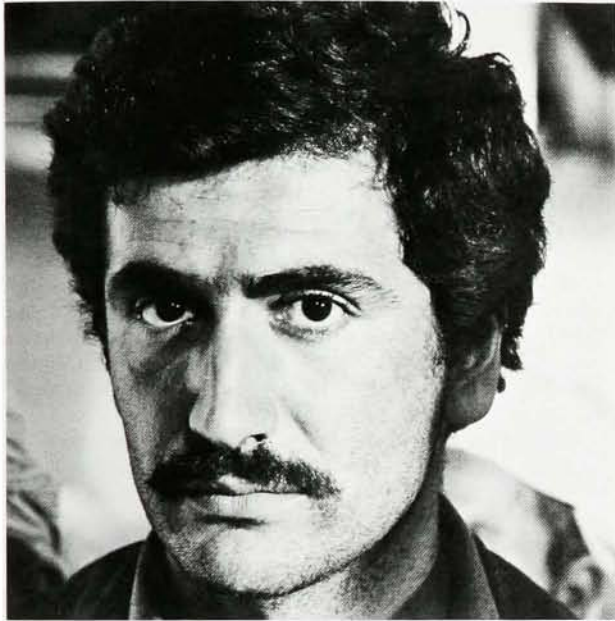
One could go on listing certain kinds of films that will get big international distribution, not because of quality, but because they are considered as box-office by those who control major production and distribution. And *this*, fellow Canadians, is the single most important factor determining what Canadians can see in their own cinemas.

One need but look at what is offered nowadays in Toronto and, above all, in Montreal. So few good films, desperately few “foreign” films (except in highly limited circumstances at our film conservatories and Universities, often years late,

or occasionally some tiny art house)—but heaps of cretinous trash, usually exploiting porno or violence, because these are so cheaply made and have a small but guaranteed audience that makes them commercially viable. The situation tends to be worse in smaller centres across the country.

The point: while our film viewing situation is deplorable, there are many films being made around the world that could transform our viewing wasteland into cultural richness. But how do you crack the vicious circle built on commercial dictates and pathetically limited (and ignorant) North American viewing habits?

And so, for one reason or another, most of the following films will, I fear, *not* be shown in Canada. Or if they do appear, it will be, at best, marginally.



"Chronicle"

This applies to this year's Cannes *grand prix* winner, an Algerian entry, Lakhdar Hanina's **Chronicle of the Years of Ashes**. It is nothing short of extraordinary that Algeria, a country with so short a film history, could produce an epic film of such proportions. And stunning, too, that a French festival could give its top award to a film extolling the Algerian struggle for independence against French colonial rule. Hanina loves John Ford; and though he cannot rival the old master's genius and complexity of vision, still he shares Ford's love of human beings and his enthusiasm for heroic effort. **Chronicle** witnesses to something else as well. Films coming from the "Third World" tend to be filled with hope and belief—in great contrast to most of those produced in the affluent West, singing their sad songs of confusion, sterility, cynicism, not to say of downright sadism, pornography, or nihilism. A lesson here? One wonders how long this aberrational situation must endure, and, even worse, how long we must go on accepting it as "normal".

Chronicle was far from the only "political" film shown at Cannes. The cinema with political overtones was indeed well represented. A superb Swiss film was the best of the lot. Rolf Lyssy's **Konfrontation**, which recounts the assassination, in 1936, of the leading Swiss Nazi by a Jewish student. In Theodore Angelopoulos' **The Voyage of the Comedians** the Greek cinema shows signs of a rebirth. And such films as Bull Tuhu's **Strike** (Norway), Robert Kramer's **Milestones** (USA), and Paolo and Vittorio Taviani's much admired **Allonsanfàn** (Italy), although often too long, demonstrate that film can explore ideology and politics intelligently and artistically. Indeed, they represent film as a *vocation* of sorts.

Western Germany, let it be noted, may be on the verge of becoming a major feature film producer once again, after so many years of appalling mediocrity. Certainly, two of the darlings of the new German cinema scored impressively, the first, Rainer Werner Fassbinder with his rather kinky, narcissistic **The Survival of The Fittest**; and above all the second, Werner Herzog with **The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser**.



"Kaspar"

Herzog is that rare thing, a tough, ascetical, naive crusader in the world of cinema. His films are strange, haunted gropings in a harsh but beautiful world; and **Kaspar** won a major award in the official competition.

There were many other kinds of films that deserve to be shown around the world, but that probably won't. Australia is hopping ahead by leaps and bounds; and nowhere is this more in evidence than in Ken Hannan's **Sunday Too Far Away**, a marvelous, hugely entertaining study of sheep shearers on the Australian range. Mats Arehn's **Maria** (Sweden) shows Canada one of the directions our films might well take with its warmth, humanity, intelligence, and contemporary feel and, above all, modest budgeting.

At an artistically far more ambitious level, however, one needs to mention two of the world's film giants, Hungary's Miklos Jancso and Poland's Andrzej Wajda. Jancso has created yet another haunting aesthetic dream in **For Electra**;



"For Electra"

and Wajda has never been more baroque, terrifying, epic, and sardonic than in his huge **The Promised Land**. Another masterly director from Poland, Krzysztof Zanussi, presented what I feel is one of the most deeply human and moving films seen at Cannes, a contemporary urban incarnation of the "eternal triangle" called **Quarterly Report**. Ignored by American (and therefore Canadian) audiences, the Polish cinema continues to be one of the richest in the world.

And finally, a hopeful word about two delightful, but small and marginal American films. **Hester Street**, by Joan Micklin Silver, tells the story of a few Jewish immigrants in New York City at the turn of the century. Intelligent and humorous, this little film will surely make it to our screens. And so, one hopes, will a "documentary" about the American thirties, **Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?**, put together by Philippe Mora. A compilation of newsreel clips and excerpts from Warner films of the thirties, the film is dominated by Franklin D. Roosevelt and James Cagney; and it may well prove a huge success, riding on the coat-tails of **That's Entertainment** (for which, by the way, Metro is preparing **Part II**).

There were, then, many good films at Cannes. I am leaving unmentioned the vast number of others, of lesser quality—films which cater to the particular formulas demanded by the taste or fashion of a particular time or place. Nor have I bothered to describe any of the innumerable trash objects, always an important, malodorous part of film life. Over 500 films in all, as previously reported—and an enormous amount of buying and selling.

Where does Canada fit into the picture, from the *production* side, that is? Well, Cannes '75 was in some ways a repetition of Cannes '74 for Canadians, who once again rushed about this Mediterranean city with big smiles on their faces. Canadians had the largest number (next, of course, to the hosting French) of officially accredited people, 250 in all; the Canadian organization, Cinema Canada, was once again by far the best, the most efficient, the most gracious; and the Canadian receptions, too, were the largest. We certainly do try harder. And all in all, thirty Canadian features were shown on the market, a huge number, really, when one considers that the Americans had no more than sixty features in Cannes.

The biggest news of all: this year's Cannes sales seemed assured of topping last year's which had grossed eight (!) times more Canadian sales than those of any previous year at Cannes! So, Canadians had reason to be smiling, and the prodigious effort of Cinema Canada, the investment of serious sums of money, and so on, seemed to be paying off. As one Australian told me, Canada has now become a sort of model for a country like Australia. One thing for sure: the label "Canadian" on a feature film is no longer a burden discouraging potential buyers. Au contraire.

The amazing aspect in all of this is the shift in popularity from French Canadian films to English Canadian. It is now the English Canadian films that are selling internationally. The formula of popular story, an American (or Hollywood Canadian) star or two, and relatively cheaper production costs, seems to be working, making of the English Canadian movie a marketable product—fine films such as **Duddy**

Scene from "Les Vautours" appearing in the Directors' Fortnight



Kravitz, which is still selling, and commercial ventures such as **Black Christmas**, **Christina**, and many others yet unseen in Canada.

On the Québécois scene, however, prospects are not nearly as bright. It now seems clear that there are two distinct types of Quebecois films. One is strictly commercial, built on local humour à la Dominique Michel; and it simply does not sell outside of Quebec. The other, more socially involved, more artistically conscious (e.g. Michel Brault's **Les Ordres**, Denys Arcand's **Gina**) are the most popular expressions of this tendency) finds at best a limited art house audience in Francophone countries.

So, with rising production costs, union problems, and the open conflict between the two camps (social involvement versus commercialization) in Quebec, where do Quebec features go from here? A crisis of sorts—and just possibly, Quebecois films may be suffering from a kind of psychic cultural exhaustion: they don't have as much to say as they used to, or it's all been said before.

On the English side, too, we are at a cross-roads. Outside of last year's **Duddy Kravitz**, what English Canadian films can now match the finest work, say, of Allan King, Paul Almond, George Kaczender, Don Shebib, William Fruet? Is the vocation of the English Canadian cinema merely to cash in on whatever genre happens to be successful at the moment in the U.S.—once again creating Canadians as pale images of Americans? And are critics to remain mute, their role reduced to that of helping producers, distributors and exhibitors to make more money? Is that what Canadian filmmaking is all about? One could go on asking similar rhetorical questions.

Of course, the other possibility is more heartening. The new climate does indeed encourage the blossoming forth of greater skills and expanded resources, with more artists at work and a market that is growing. Surely out of all this films of serious artistic or social intent will emerge. One hopes so. But we are now at the stage where critics and the rest of us can make *demands*. The feature film infancy days in Canada are at an end. One can legitimately look for quality from now on.

Quality—surely a good note on which to end this report. This leads to some concluding remarks on four films shown at Cannes, films which are by no means their directors' finest works, but which nonetheless breathe a life of mastery that places them among the finest things seen there this spring. With these films, too, we are beyond the realms of commercialism or nationalisms of any kind.

It is as if these four veteran directors—Welles, Losey, Antonioni, and Bergman are all around sixty, give or take a few years—are now such masters of their craft, and take such a delight in their work, that their films flow effortlessly, becoming nothing less than a joy to watch. Each film is mysteriously something else as well, a meditation of sorts on life or on art, pursuing a dialogue with the world that each of the four directors started many years ago.

F for Fake. François Reichenbach begins a film, several years ago, on Clifford Irving's study of the masterful painter of fake masterpieces, Elmyr de Hory. But then Irving's fake biography of Howard Hughes is exposed, and so Reichenbach quits. Enter that prestidigitator/magician/faker extraordinaire, Orson Welles, backed by Iranian money. (Iran, by the way, has decided to pour some of its oil billions into film.) Welles transforms the film into a freeform conversation with the audience. What ensues is a novel kind of cinema, mature, great fun—and a wonderful document on Orson Welles, who reveals much 'neath the guise of wit and humour.

The Romantic English Woman. Joseph Losey, too, goes in for a lighter mood, transforming a traditional intrigue melodrama into an impeccable study of British upper middle class

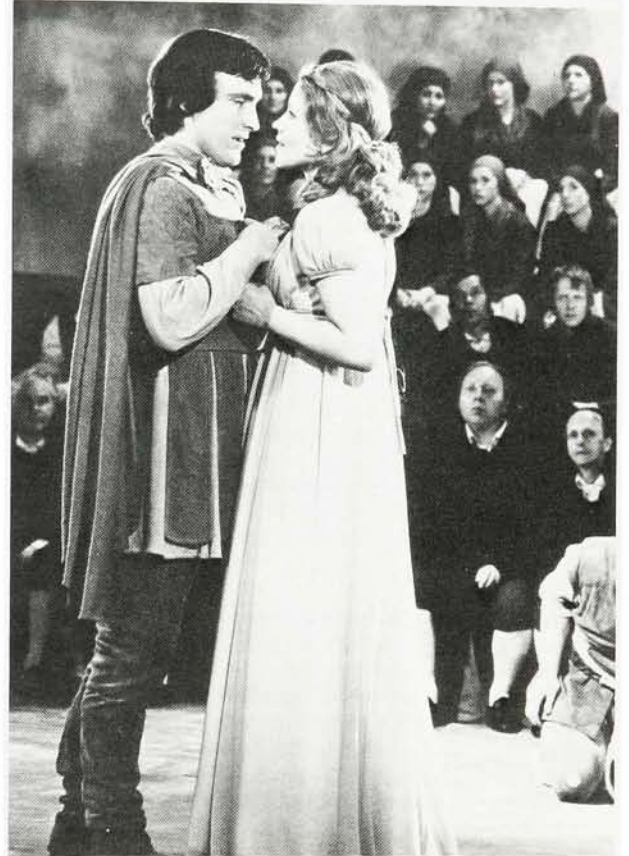
mores. Michael Caine and Glenda Jackson have never been better than in this humourous, elegant, and intelligent movie which barely conceals Losey's perennial fascination with evil in an opulent world.

The Passenger. Michelangelo Antonioni adventures into the international thriller domain ruled by Graham Greene and Eric Ambler. Another sad meditation on death, this film is easier and less innovative than Antonioni's previous efforts, though it is still marked by Antonioni's trademark of splendid aesthetic austerity.



"The Passenger"

The Magic Flute. Ingmar Bergman finally brings Mozart's comic opera to the screen—the T.V. screen, that is, though it is also destined for the cinema (in **Scenes from a Marriage** fashion). A huge success in Scandinavia and in Cannes, this playful filming is really a prodigious *performance* by Bergman-the-magician, a transformation of opera into television as has never been done before. Never has Bergman shown more playfulness, joy, sheer fun—and once again he proves himself the master of *all* dramatic arts. Bergman, by the way, is now preparing another six-part television series starring once again Liv Ullmann and Erland Josephsson. This one, however, (titled **Face to Face**) promises to be totally different to **Scenes**.



"The Magic Flute"

A final final note. **Les Ordres** won a major award (best direction) for Michel Brault, the first time a Canadian film has won in Cannes. This is a fine recompense to Brault for his years of major contribution to Quebec cinema, and it is also symbolic of the universal success enjoyed by his film in Cannes.

The film in no way pretends to be an analysis of the October Crisis. It simply communicates Brault's dismay at the suspension of civil liberty, and his anger at police treatment of some of the prisoners, most of them innocent. As such, it was welcomed by all.

Brault's critique of the government, however, for all its indirectness, is clear and strong. And this is what amazed festival goers, particularly the French: that the Federal Government, through the CFDC, should put up half the money for a film that criticizes that same government so severely! The comment one kept hearing: *that is democracy in action, and you Canadians don't know how lucky you are. You should live under our system. . . . So, all in all, and from every point of view, Cannes was indeed a success story for Canada. And on that happy note . . . !* □