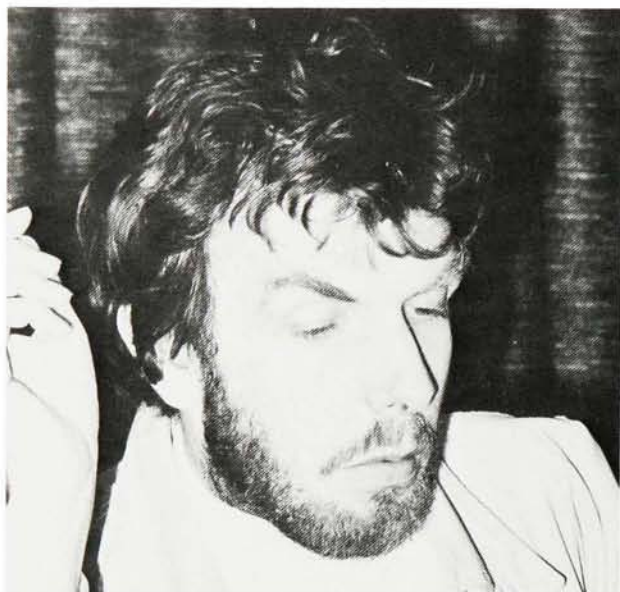


A Reply to Hofsess, a Challenge to Shebib and a Recommendation for Markowitz

Robert Fothergill



There is a half-serious tendency among our critics to be on the look-out for the Great Canadian Movie — the irresistible homegrown blockbuster, with the knockout authority of a *Gone With The Wind*. A recurring wave of excitement is generated as we ask each other, Is this it? Is this it? But (as with other waves of excitement) if you're not sure, then it wasn't. Meanwhile the pursuit of the GCM, the time of our time, is a distraction which works against the production and recognition of the Necessary Canadian Movie — the movie for which there is a need. In this spineless, flavourless, odourless blah that we call English Canadian culture, what we need is a sharpening of consciousness, a galvanizing of awareness. To sharpen we require abrasion; to galvanize, a flow of electric current. Whence are these stimulants to be derived?

Hofsess puts a biting case in his *Cinema Canada* article "Headless Horsemen" (No. 18) when he rails against the feebleness and irrelevance of so many of our films, and declares his opposition to government subsidy and/or protection for works with no other visible means of support. He argues that films which "connect" with a real popular demand will have a commercial viability of their own. It seems to me, however, that of the several ways of seeking to make that connection, some are likely to be more fruitful than others.

A repeated refrain at the agitational sessions of the Winnipeg conference was: "Basically I'm not even interested in politics and social change and all this shit — I just wanna get out and make movies." What a film-maker means by this is that he relishes the challenge and the excitement and the individualist self-dramatization of Being a Director, struggling to bring in his picture against all the daunting obstacles that lie in his path. Like climbing the north face of the Eiger "because it's there", this is not an intrinsically contemptible incentive, but it lacks specific meaning. One mountain is much like another; it's the climbing that counts.

But how long can you go on making movies if you're not interested in anything except movie-making, if the completion and release of a 90-minute film is an end in itself? What can you produce out of this kind of inspiration except expensive fillers, consumable distractions?

If I seem to be discounting the value of films as "sheer entertainment" (as they say), I should hasten to say that I would applaud wholeheartedly the production by Canadians of works like *The Sting* or *La Bonne Année* or *The Three Musketeers*. Even so, I don't believe that the manufacture of "sheer entertainment" is the course we should embark on, seductive though it might seem. Some of our critics, I realize, would vehemently disagree with this view. They would argue that the bane of Canadian films is not their lack of seriousness, but the fact that they are frequently so dismal, in situation and outcome. "Give us something to enjoy", they say. "If I'm going to fork out three-bucks-fifty, I want to be entertained. If it's truly entertaining, people will flock to see it." (This is also the line peddled by the distributors and exhibitors — foreign controlled — to justify their prejudicial handling of Canadian films.)

Two factors are at issue here. One is the pragmatic question of commercial potential; the other concerns a notion of what I would call 'validity'. In practical terms, the film of "sheer entertainment" has to compete solely on the strength of its power to entertain. It's up against the product of the world's greatest exporter of entertainment, a product so expertly produced and so effectively promoted that the Canadian rival has to be twice as good to succeed in the same market. Compounding this disadvantage is the fact that Canadians, on the whole, do not seem to be naturally gifted entertainers. The qualities of gusto, vivacity, charm, wit, energy, magnetism — do they readily spring to mind as prominent among the national traits? Would the pub-life of old Toronto, if there were such a thing, sparkle with the wizardry of a hundred irrepressible raconteurs?

We are a sober people (like it or not), and our best work in the cinema, and in literature for that matter, is of a generally sober cast. We betray this sobriety at our peril.

What then? Either we try to be entertaining and produce *The Rainbow Boys*, *The Reincarnate*, *The Inbreaker*, *U-Turn*, and *My Pleasure is my Business*; (if this last-named movie is making money, as director Al Waxman claims, it's because it sounds as if it *ought* to be lively entertainment, not because it actually is.) Or we refuse to be entertaining and espouse instead a great dreariness and desolation.

No, it's a false antithesis. Suppose we substitute for that bland word 'entertainment' a more energizing notion like 'stimulation'. Films can stimulate laughter, excitement, sympathy, fear, passion, thought, controversy, social awareness, rage — that's enough to be going on with. Many Canadian films fail to stimulate even one of these responses, and they fail most notably when they try to stimulate the more purely diverting responses, such as laughter and excitement. It's partly that our film-makers seem not to have the knack, and partly that those of other cultures have it so abundantly that ours can only fade in comparison.

There is, however, one kind of response that films from no other culture can stimulate, and that is controversial critical reflection on our own situation and experience as Canadians — the sharpening of consciousness. What the

movie-makers of English Canada need is to have the flow of their energies and talents channeled and accelerated by a social passion. If they forget about trying to amuse some amorphous segment of the consuming public, and undertook instead to communicate to their neighbours; if they took subjects with an actively provocative, rather than a passively inoffensive interest; if they stopped trying to be show-biz, and started to come out as engaged human beings — then they might make films that would display intrinsic validity, yes and dramatic effectiveness, yes and the power to claim for themselves the active attention of Canadian audiences.

Here is a little analogy. You're at a party, competing with a born raconteur, mimic, and joke-teller for the attention and interest of an attractive person whom you would like to engage. You can try to put in your own stock of feeble witticisms and Ed Sullivan imitations, while your rival is pausing for breath; or you can talk about those human and social questions which really arouse you personally. If the person wants only to be amused, you are going to lose out anyway. But if . . .

Meanwhile, Canadian directors continue to convince themselves that the way to succeed at a party with a stock of boring anecdotes is to tell another one. Getting serious is called "political".

Take the case of Don Shebib. He condemns Jean-Claude Lord's *Bingo* because it's "political", and "because the guy obviously has no talent". *Bingo* is indeed a contemptible film, but not for the reasons Shebib presents. The fault of *Bingo* is that it's not a political film, but a film which exploits politics for sensationalist and mercenary ends. (Just as pornography is said to exploit sex.) *Bingo* is the *Face Off* of Québec, concocted from a recipe calculated to pander to mass tastes. Conspiracy politics for the Québécois; hockey and folk singers for Ontario. Films like this are interested not in communicating an enlarging vision of life, or even in giving pleasure or interest, but solely in "connecting" with half a million pocket books.

As for talent, Jean-Claude Lord clearly has some skill in handling actors, constructing scenes, etc.; but talent isn't like eyesight — you can't measure a director on a scale between 20-20 and blind. What we crudely call talent has a lot to do with applying our minds and skills and energies to the right task.

Shebib would never permit himself to make *Bingo*, because he is too honest and serious. But he's making a mistake when he rejects political film-making altogether, and points to *Bingo* as the epitome of what he rejects. "I don't give a shit about politics." (I'm quoting *verbatim*) "I'm interested in stories and characters." In other words, in bourgeois personal drama? "Sure, why the hell not? I'm very bourgeois."

And he tells me he's got two scripts in mind right now, one about a runner, the other about a guy who gets involved with an older woman. I'm sure the films will have the Shebib hallmarks — sincerity, directness, strong human presences, an unsentimental sympathy for people whose lives are going nowhere fast. Maybe they will be intelligent and compelling screenplays with real dramatic potential. A script about a guy who gets involved with an older woman . . . maybe it's a film worth making.

But not by a Canadian director, and not now. It's not a "necessary" film — just another hundred minute misunderstanding. It won't claim attention for itself, here or elsewhere. It won't draw on the best kind of talent and conviction and plugged-in vitality that Shebib himself has demonstrated. It will produce only a dispensable film, a film that doesn't matter, a glorified soap-opera.

Let George Bloomfield do it.

Don't waste yourself, Don Shebib. Politics doesn't mean ideology, the party line, stories about M.P.s or re-

volutionaries, or prime ministers called McAdam meeting a transfiguration of the Queen in the great white wilderness.* Politics doesn't necessarily mean *La Chinoise*, *Tout va bien*, or *Vent d'est*. Politics means recognizing that the conditions of every individual life, the options apparently open, the options definitely closed, the potentialities and constraints (both internal and external) are governed by more than simply individual factors. Every individual life is a meeting point of a whole network of economic, social, and political influences which shape the person's disposition and ability to choose. Furthermore, this network of controlling factors is not a fact of Nature, but the expression of a particular ideology and system of values which the people who profit by it actively seek to perpetuate. A film which ignores this dimension of experience is telling only half truths, frequently the less significant half.

Shebib's a-political bourgeois stance is all the more exasperating in that it seems like a betrayal of his own creative tendency. A film like *Goin' Down the Road* already displays a significant measure of that awareness of the relation between individual destiny and social fate. Pete especially (the Doug McGrath character) is inclined to question and to gain some insight into the system that is going to screw him for his whole life. The film is unable to conclude that these beginnings of political awareness will do him any good, but that's Shebib's prerogative. I'm not asking that Pete should join the N.D.P. and struggle happily ever after. If Shebib doesn't have any faith in political solutions to individual problems, then he cannot honestly display such a faith through his films—though he might examine the possibilities. What I do ask is that the films should express, in the consciousness of the characters and in the treatment of the situation, some recognition of general social forces bearing upon the lives of individuals.

English Canada is a chronically unpoliticized culture. To take a visible symptom, our journalism is more severely addicted than most to the 'human interest story', at the expense of a critical awareness of the operations of political and economic power. Shebib is equipped, technically and intellectually, to make films in which significantly conscious characters encounter the kinds of experience through which they (and we) can find out what our society is like and what effect it has on us. For instance, he could make a powerful and dramatic movie about people caught up in a wild-cat strike. What is the strike about, and what happens when people in the same family have to take sides? (John Howe's *Do Not Fold, Staple, Spindle or Mutilate* points in a worthwhile direction for the kind of film I'm suggesting.)

Well, we must wait and see. Maybe Shebib's instincts are quite right. Time: Saturday morning. Scene: Breakfast over the weekend paper in a Toronto high-rise. "Hey Marilyn, I see there's a new Canadian film about a guy who gets involved with an older woman. Sounds pretty neat, eh?" "Sure does, Bill. I only hope we can get in." Perhaps. But how about this, for a change: "Hey Marilyn, we've gotta see that film they've made about the Truscott case!"

II

Recommendation for Mercy is an ambitious and powerful work which made me ask myself repeatedly, "Is it the right film to have made on this subject?"

The subject itself is undoubtedly compelling. As everyone knows, the film is a dramatic reconstruction of the Steven Truscott case — the rape-murder of a teenage girl, for which the 14-year-old Steven was tried, found guilty, and initially condemned to hang. The case raised important questions about the judicial system and the larger social context within which this verdict was reached. Years later, after the book by Isabel LeBourdais had exposed the serious

*This is an arcane allusion to *Question Time*, a play by Robertson Davies.

miscarriages of judicial process, not to mention the enormity of condemning a 14-year-old to execution, the Pearson supreme court, and Pearson himself, refused to re-open the case. Truscott, who is widely thought to have been innocent, served ten years.

With a peculiar shiver we realize that sooner or later **Recommendation for Mercy** is going to be shown to a theatre audience with Steven Truscott in its midst. Presumably, too, the family of the murdered girl and of Truscott, many of the witnesses at the trial, the police investigators, the lawyers for prosecution and defence, and the jury who found the boy guilty, may go to see the film. It may be, also, that there is one other man who will watch the recreation of those events with a more than ordinary interest in how accurately they are portrayed.

Undertaking to reconstruct a story of this kind confronts the writer-director with momentous problems of selection and point of view. What is essentially important about these events? What needs to be communicated about them? How shall the public be confronted with them and made to encounter their implications? Involved with these questions are critical problems of dramatic method. How do you tell a story at whose crucial centre there is an event of which you are ignorant?

You can tell the events of which you are reasonably sure, and for which there is corroborating testimony, and then say: "Beyond this point, either this happened, or this, or this, or something else altogether." When, as in this case, a determination of what took place led directly to the selection of somebody to punish for it, the problem becomes critical. Markowitz is rightly concerned with questions about the manipulation of evidence and the desire of an enraged community to find a convenient scapegoat. Even if he was guilty, the boy "John Robinson" was convicted by a pretty haphazard proceeding.

While he makes a commendable effort to establish the trial in the social milieu that bore so heavily upon its outcome, Markowitz has perhaps opted too strongly for the did-he-or-didn't-he fascination of that brutal event. In an attempt to be dramatically intriguing (à la **Conversation**), the film goes far beyond the issue of how the court dealt with what was presented as evidence. Markowitz wants to draw us into the emotional turmoil and bewilderment which he presumes were inflicted on the boy by his imprisonment and interrogation. (The 24 anxious hours that Markowitz himself spent in jail on a rape charge have furnished him with the knowledge of how the most innocent mind can get spooked into a crazy loss of bearings.)

In pursuit of this dramatic mystification, Markowitz shows us images whose reality-status is left deliberately obscure. To take the crucial instance: among several versions of the rape-murder we are shown one version in which John Robinson is the killer. The structural position of this scene prompts us to assume that it is John's own recollection of the event (if he is guilty), or his confused fantasy (if he is innocent). But if it is a recollection, then it should be properly seen from his point of view, instead of in the form of brief flashes from a third-person camera position. And if it is a fantasy, then it should not conform in its details to the exact place and condition in which the body was shown to have been found - because John could not have known those details.

In other words, a version of the event which Markowitz intends to be receivable as *either* recollection or fantasy, can in fact be *neither*. It could be a juryman's visual conjecture, but that is not the way in which it is planted. Thus the film's format has moved from showing how the objective reality of the event cannot be conclusively proven, to the point of suggesting that the event actually had no objective reality.

The director is not, I think, altogether responsible for this shift. It results from an intrinsic tendency of cinema to con-

fer the status of objective reality on whatever it clearly shows (unless positive signs are given that the event is to be taken as dream, fantasy etc.). Very early in the film we see John Robinson fall from his bicycle, in such a way as to receive the injuries that the police doctor argues were incurred during the sexual assault. There may be some doubt in the minds of the jury, but there can be none in ours. We saw him fall and clutch at his groin and cry in pain. Now, in a court of law, two conflicting verbal accounts of an event may cause us to doubt the veracity of the tellers; we may no longer believe what we have been *told*. But the film has *shown* us an event taking place. We may easily accept that other people, who were not there, can refuse to believe it; but we have *seen* it — it did take place. If the film then tries to undermine our certainty by showing us another version of the event, the effect is to suggest that *both* versions are real, and that therefore nothing, or anything, happened during those critical minutes. Or else someone is fooling with us.

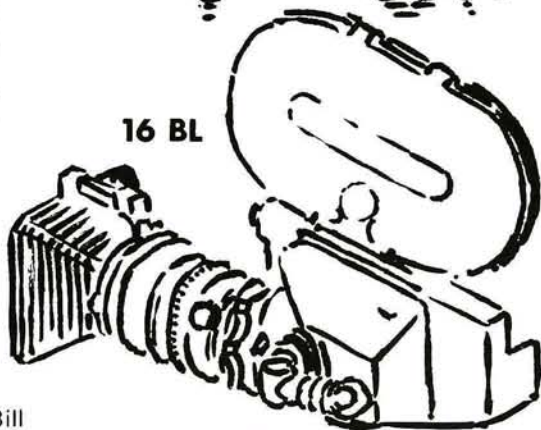
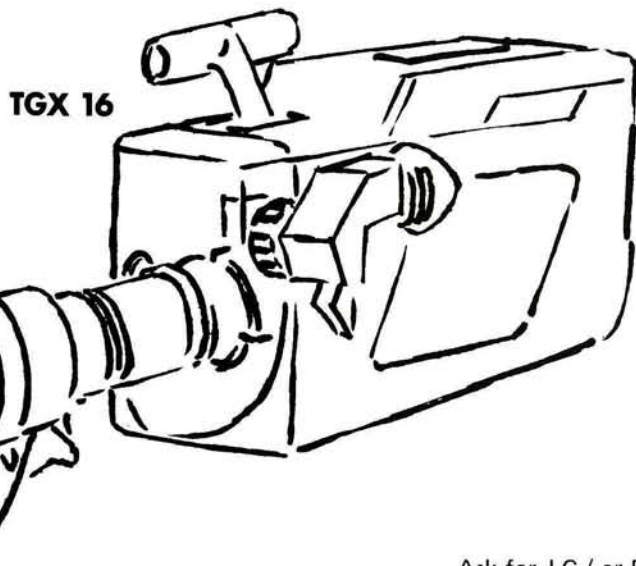
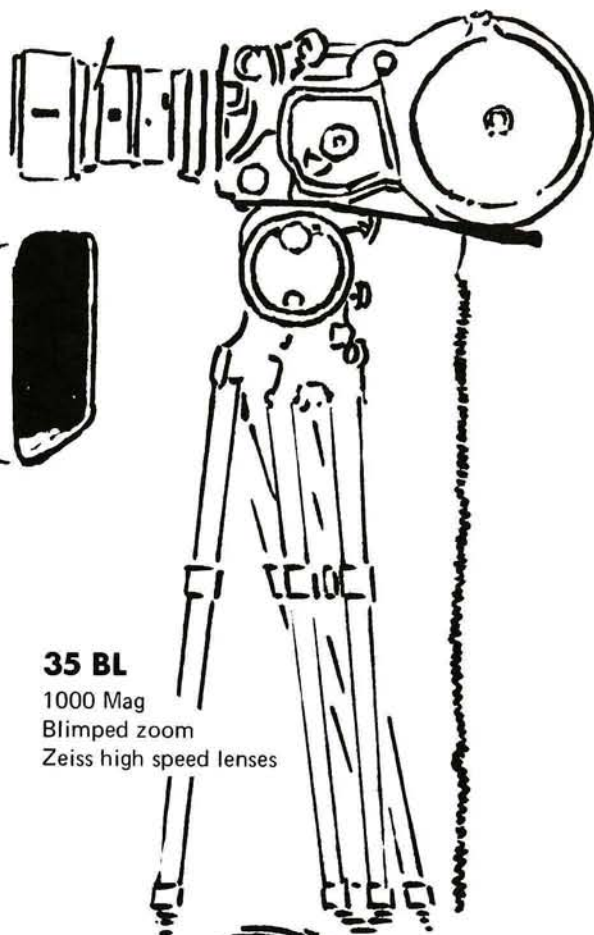
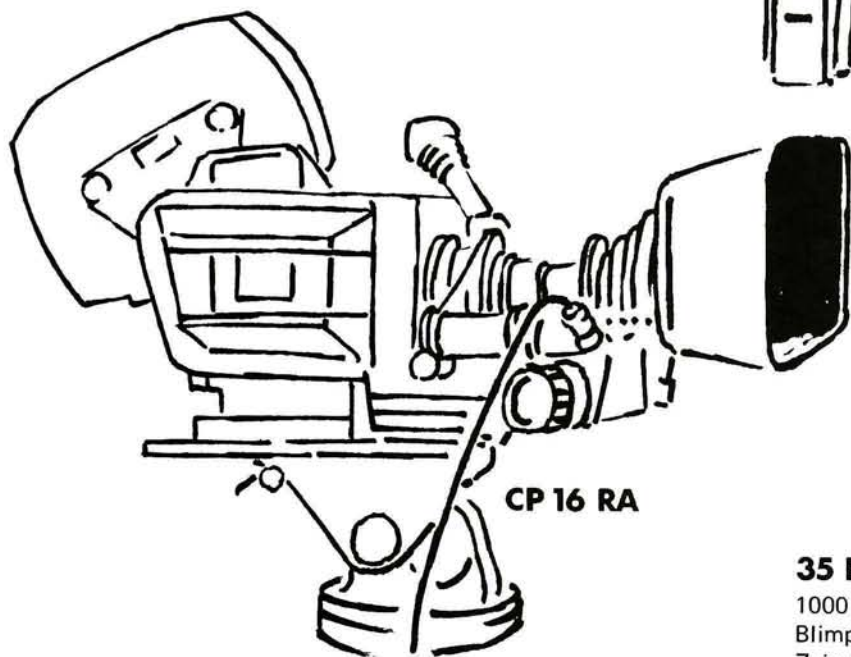
Markowitz has spoken in an interview (with Natalie Edwards, *Cinema Canada* #19) about his own problems with reality — how things are real and unreal at the same time. He is prepared to endorse the "surreal" dimension of **Recommendation for Mercy**. Insofar as he seeks to convey the private horror of John's ordeal, the technique is defensible, although it threatens to deflect from the social drama of the story, which I would judge to be more significant. And in fact the most powerful scenes of John's suffering are those of remorseless interrogation, which depart from objectivity only to the extent of a distorting intensification of vision and sound. Such scenes make it clear that we don't need to be shown an arbitrarily selected version of John's inner experience. We can feel from his behaviour (in the beautiful performance by Andrew Skidd) the full shock of his disorientation. Our capacity to feel what he is going through is not intensified but actually limited by the injection of synthesized subjective flashes.

But if Markowitz is going further and allowing the notion to prevail (in the Pirandello—Durrell—**Rashomon** vein) that there is *no* objective reality, only an array of subjectivities, then he is playing a pseudo-philosophical game of almost criminal irresponsibility. It's all very well for frivolous literati to wonder if yesterday ever happened. But if Truscott was innocent, it will be small consolation to him to be told that, philosophically, it's all a matter of how you look at it!

For the most part, Markowitz is not toying with his subject, but channeling his strong feelings about it into an indignant and compelling drama. The strength of the screenplay resides in its depiction of stupid authorities, lying and hypocritical witnesses, disgraceful judicial practices, and the overwhelming presumption of the helpless boy's guilt. The power of the situation has elicited immediate and most believable performances from some of the actors, especially John's two friends (Rob Judd, Mike Upmalis), his father (James Millington), and the two investigating police officers. To an extent that is rare in Canadian films, and which involves the expense and difficulty of handling a large cast, Markowitz has created a complex society around the central action. In the teenage demi-monde, through which John moves with troubled innocence, pent-up adolescent sexuality generates a restless violence. Among the adults, bigotry and shortsightedness and indifference prevail.

If Canadian cinema is viable at all at present, a film like **Recommendation for Mercy**, while it violates its own codes sometimes, is the right kind of film to be making. Its dramatic potency comes from having something urgent to say and to show about Canadian society. The film cries out to its audience "For God's sake, something very like this actually happened, and could happen again." **Recommendation for Mercy** doesn't offer to entertain — turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream — but to arouse and appal. □

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