

The Art Form of the 90's

or how to make millions, go broke, and become "ART"

by PETER ROWE*

With the exception of a few old sluggers like Alfred Hitchcock and Jack Warner, most of the old-timers from the Golden age of movie-making have quit the business. Not retired; quit. Frank Capra, the late John Ford, Jean Renoir, Bill Wellman, George Cukor, Henry Hathaway, Raoul Walsh. All quitters. The reason? Movie-making has totally changed, they say. There's no life left, no visions. It's no fun anymore.

Well, of course, there is still fun in it for every new generation that discovers the movie camera, but there can be no denying that television has just about killed the medium. The tube was introduced here in '52, and in five years had made the cinema obsolete. It may not be obsolete for me, nor is it for you, but it is no longer the medium of importance in people's lives that it once was.

In 1946 "A Night in Casablanca" couldn't be released in Britain because one of the writers of the film (Ben Hecht) had spoken out against Britain's stand in Palestine. Today, who would care? No-one would go to it anyway (oh, perhaps a few hundred thousand, but what's that?); why bother banning it? It isn't that people or governments are less sensitive to criticism; the Smothers affair proved that. It is that the cinema is largely irrelevant.

The "film boom" that "A.V. Consultants" and effervescent English teachers are always going on about is largely illusory. Sure, 8 year olds play at super-8, and extension students get degrees watching "Potemkin", but who goes to the cinema anymore? Famous Players runs its chain at 20 per cent capacity. The biggest success story in local exhibition in the last two years is 99 cent re-run houses. Looking backwards. Play it again, Sam.

As for the educators and advocates of an "alternate, nontheatrical cinema," their enthusiasm is boundless but they usually expect someone else to pick up the tab.

"Rent your canadian-made feature for \$100?! Why, I can get 'Bullitt' for \$100!" And video-tape it for \$8 so they'll never have to rent it again. There is no reasonable alternative, but there's no health left in the old ways, either.

The medium has become obsolete,

and, as a result, it has now become an art form. Every rag-tag three hundred thousand dollar Canadian feature gets a wine and cheeser, is presented with bouquets of flowers while a band plays softly for the assembled guests, and generally is opened with all the 1923 debutante ball nonsense that painting has been burdened with for 50 years, and then quietly dies three weeks later. 40 years ago they just struck 400 prints and went off to make another.

So as film-makers, technicians and actors head off to the unemployment insurance office, the jewelled, tailed and tuckered rags-to-riches excess of the age of Thalberg, Hearst, Mankiewicz and Von Stroheim becomes more and more ancient history. Could any sane person send a telegram like the famous proposal the neophyte screen-writer Herman J. Mankiewicz made to his pal Ben Hecht in 1927: "COME ON OUT. THERE'S MILLIONS TO BE MADE OUT HERE, AND THE ONLY COMPETITION'S IDIOTS"?

Well, as it turns out, they could. Not in the movie-business, of course. No-one ever made "millions" out of art - at least not out of anything that was publicly accepted as art at the time. But there is a business today which has all the marvelous, magical qualities and all the dismal, wretched excess that Hollywood had from the early teens until the late forties.

And that business is a billion dollar baby known as Rock. Its parentage is obscure, but it is about twenty years old. Thus, like film was at its zenith of popularity (say, 1935), it is about the same age as its audience. There are a number of other similarities.

First, there is the business of studios. Much of the false mystery of 30's movie-making emanated from the fact that movies were made in these strange life-size recreations of streets and houses and rooms and towns called studios. Just what is this word, "studio"? It has the same ring to it as "laboratory" - some sort of mysterious place where men in white coats produce wondrous new products out of bubbling liquids and glass tubing.

Today, of course, the world's a stage. You're more likely to see a canadian film being made out on the streets in

front of a theatre than shown up on screen inside it.

Not so with rock and roll. It, like the films of old, is created inside studios. All new, all magical, all mysterious. A single singer and his guitar get 24 tracks to record on. The control panel in most recording studios would make a 747 pilot dizzy. I'm sure all those knobs and sliders, Dolby passages and noise gates help the sound, but lemme tell you, they do wonders for the image.

But more important than that, consider: class. Around 1960, about ten years after the cinema became obsolete, film suddenly became respectable. Certainly it wasn't seen as a new equivalent to law or medicine in the eyes of the potential father-in-law, but it did suddenly achieve a new classiness, a certain noblesse and old-worldliness that it had never possessed before.

This was presumably largely a result of the ponderous, difficult films Europe was making at the time ("if I can't understand it, there must be something there"). But in the decade since "L'Avventura" and "L'Année Dernière à Marienbad" this image has managed to democratize itself to now include Jerry Lewis, Don Siegel and Sam Peckinpah as well as Antonioni and Resnais.

It is thus easy to forget that in the most productive period in film's short history the medium was despised by intellectuals, scorned by snobs, patronized by newspapers and even hated by many of the people who worked in it. That is to say, treated the same way that television is today, or with the exception of a few super-stars, the way that rock is. As for what happens, and what happened, to these "stars", the allusions are plain.

In 1935, the stars had names like Garbo, Gable, Tracy and Dietrich, and appeared in movies and fan magazines. Today they have names like Taylor, Stewart, Lennon, Jagger and Townshend, and they appear on record albums and in Rolling Stone. While there are, of course, movie stars still around today, they are typified by Paul Newman, who became one by studying acting, and slowly working at it, not by luck or chance, who races cars, puts his own deals together, directs movies and is on the official enemies list of the

White House.

Today's equivalents to Valentino and Temple play guitars and hold microphones. The comparisons are between Jagger and Flynn, Alice Cooper and Faye Wray, the Mothers and the Marx brothers.

But more especially, the comparisons are between the rock producers of the last fifteen years and the movie directors of the 30s. The canonization of the film director is of course a fairly recent phenomenon. The canonization of the rock producer has yet to occur. In '35 there was one popularly-known film director – and similarly, 60s rock and roll had its one Cecille B. DeMille, in the person of Phil Spector.

But past him, and perhaps Barry Gordy, Jr. and George Martin, who's ever heard of any of them? And just what is it that they do, anyway?

Well, alright. Movie-goers 40 years ago had never heard of Howard Hawks, John Ford or Nunnally Johnson, and you, record buyers all, may never have heard of Bob Johnston, Lenny Waronker, or Richard Perry, or Canadians like Jack Richardson, Dennis Murphy or Eugene Martynec. Just to keep things straight, Johnston produces Bob Dylan, Waronker cuts the albums of Randy Newman and Maria Muldaur, and Richard Perry – thought of in the record industry as Kubrick or Nichols is by film producers – makes albums with people such as Barbara Streisand and Frank Sinatra. North of '49, Richardson does the Guess Who, Gene Martynec makes records with Murray Mc Lauchlan and Bruce Cockburn, and Murphy produces a number of singers including Chris Kearney.

They, and a few aficionados, all know who's who. Most of them wish that we did too, and pine for the day when they, along with the stars they produce, get credit for their albums. But the old rags-to-riches legend was not and is not, dependent on fame. Let me tell you about one local record producer, and let you make the allusions to Irving Thalberg.

He's a Canadian, lives in Toronto. He's produced 6 albums. By now, somewhere between 40 and 50 million people have heard his work. He's got a terrific wife, two kids, his own brand-spanking new, floating-on-air, richly decorated recording studio, owns five cars, including a '49 Bentley roadster and a '37 Auburn, has his own \$75 an hour psychiatrist, while in New York stays at the St. Moritz, and just to keep things crazy, owns two ocean-liner cleaning machines moored in Puerto Rico. He's 24.

Interestingly enough, this same producer's latest rock extravaganza is being sold (not, as it turns out, in any great numbers) as "A Film for the Ears". Could that be a first crack in the castle?

Remember Hearst, running all over Europe buying old Italian paintings and statues? You can have all the money, the popular mass support, and the glamour of success, but there is one thing that movies in the 30's, and rock in the 70's, can't bring you, and that is the class of a.r.t.

So the way to get class is to make artistic claims for what was previously admitted to be schlock, or more likely was not thought of by its creators in any terms at all. What this process always does, or course, is produce a product far more schlocky than the earlier, vigorously low-brow creation ever was. The word for this product is usually kitsch, and what better word is there for the over-dubbed, over-produced, over-played and over-sung quality of most contemporary popular music?

It is, albeit, popular kitsch, at least at the moment. But the operative phrase is "at the moment". Because, surprising as it may seem, there are signs that the enormous non-stop growth that the record industry has seen for the last ten years may be slowing down. You've presumably heard about the vinyl shortage (a spin-off of the famous fuel crisis), which has had the effect of enormously slowing down production this year. What's more important is that, apparently, people just aren't buying records anymore. At least, not in the quantity they were five years ago.

Is it possible: in one generation, the death of radio, movies and records? If it is so, and it is of course an enormous exaggeration to say that radio or films have "died" or that records are about to, but if the same thing happens to records as happened to film, then presumably they too will evolve from a popular, powerful medium into an elitist, somewhat obscure art-form.

And the first signs of that happening are, in fact, already here. One of the most popular new albums among record producers and their coterie is a pretentious collection of songs collectively titled "Wings" which is by Michele Columbier. The intriguing thing about this album is not that it is bad, but that the man who is given primary credit for it neither sings nor plays a note on it. Instead, he wrote the songs, and arranged and produced the album. It is "An Album by Columbier" in the same sense, then, as 8 1/2 was "A Film by Fellini". The name above the title.

And out at Fanshaw College, which is near London, Ontario, Doug Pringle (late of Syrinx) has just begun to teach a new course which is titled "Experimental Electronics", which is to say, how to use a sound studio, how to become a record producer.

I think Columbier and Pringle are doing two things at the same time. The first is giving their trade the previously mentioned "class" and mystique. What

Pringle is doing is actually both mystifying ("It is so complex you have to go to school to learn how to do it.") and de-mystifying ("But at least you now *can* go to school and learn it"). The second is contributing toward making their art-form obsolete.

Obsolete or not, it will presumably take the medium of contemporary music albums a good number of years to die. Say, ten. 1984 then. What will be happening by then?

By that time the new "aural consultants" in high-schools will be telling each other, and their bored students, about the "wonderful new medium" of long-playing records. Record producers, which is to say the people who today produce records, will vainly lope around town doing what film-makers do these days, which is to say, try to put deals together.

Since it took the Canada Council until 1973 to discover the new medium of film, one might assume that if records become obsolete in the early 70's it won't be too far into the late 80's before they announce "record-producing grants" with which record producers, who will by then by and large make their living by teaching old studio techniques to wide-eyed 12 year old "aural vision" students, will get the occasional chance to make records.

Discs featuring Canada's native peoples and "sound documentaries" about Doukhobors and Icelandic Manitobans will proliferate. Albertan record producers will picket the Juno awards in 1985 and in '88 Eastern Sound will go bankrupt, but will be saved from the clutches of the Kinney Corporation with a grant from the Ontario Arts Council.

By 1990 people will begin to notice that there are 6000 trained recording students coming each year out of Canada's community colleges, and only 40 records made each year in the country, and so questions will begin to be raised in the legislatures of the country.

Ottawa will appoint a Royal Commission on the Recording Industry, which will keep a number of ex-producers alive for two years studying the problem, and then finally recommend the awarding of \$2 million annually in "Sound Opportunity" grants.

So with records joining the other dinosaurs of print, radio and film, what is left? I'd recommend getting into making exercise shows for early morning television. You can make millions at it for ten years, and then you'll go broke and it will become the art form of the 90's. I'm convinced of it. ●

**Peter Rowe directed his hilarious Neon Palace: A Fifties Trip a Sixties Trip long before the currently fading nostalgia craze. He is an independent filmmaker working out of Toronto, although his next feature film might be made in Winnipeg, where he was born.*