

# New Canadian cinema



Haligonian Bill MacGillivray's *Stations: Citizen Kane* on rails

## by Peter Wintonick

### DEFINITIONS

**CAN\*A'DA** (*kan'e'de*) noun. A British Dominion, north of the United States.

— **Comprehensive Desk Dictionary (U.S.A.)**

Canadian masculine and feminine noun.

1. a variety of apple
2. a type of canoe
3. a type of fur coat
4. a person of Canada, a state in North America

— **Petit Larousse (France)**

(CANADA) There is no entry in this dictionary for Canada, although there is one for Canuk.

— **The New Canadian Edition of the Highland Dictionary (Great Britain)**

Canada Lily noun. An American lily (*Lilium canadense*) with drooping orange or yellow flowers.

— **The Canadian edition of the Standard College Dictionary (Canada)**

There are many ways of looking at ourselves. There are many ways and roads to a definition of our culture and our cinema. The idea of a Canadian lily being an American lily with another name is a silly, albeit symbolic, way to look at lily ways, to look at the roots of

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our realities. For the lily, symbol of spring and resurrection, beyond its nominative, semantic and linguistic appellation, is the symbol of the Hope for our cinematic future as embodied by this year's new crop of first dramatic feature films by a number of young and not-so-young seeds in our national plot. In fact, the plot, in both senses of the word, is constructed to re-energize the dormant and fallow, not quite barren, filmic landscape that is ours to claim. The garden of delight becomes the garden of the light on our future's brightened screens.

I've been thinking about our nation's future culture these past few months. This is due to the birth of my new baby daughter. It is also due to a recent trip I took down the MacDonald-Cartier freeway to this year's edition of Toronto's Festival of Festivals. Lured by flashing lights on Yonge Street, fashion-flashers in Yorkville village, and by the fact that I wanted to see my name and face up there on the screen in the credits of three new Canadian feature films that I worked on (as one of the editors of *The Bay Boy* and *Hey Babe*, and as an actor, of all things, and production co-ordinator of *Listen To The City*.) I also helped set up a Festival sidebar event, a seminar about media, money and morals, all things that I've had very little experience with...

In actual fact, it was the more than 200 Canadian films that lured me to Toronto. It was a chance to re-view them and to inject my waning autumnal spirit with a little love for this particular time and geographic space. I made an unconscious decision to ignore all the other nations' films, with the exception of Fritz Lang's expressionistic and operatic *Metropolis* (Germany 1926) recently

remade by Disco Giorgio Moroder Enterprises Ltd. in 1984. In order to test the theory that I could get all the vicarious thrills, emotional jolts, laughs and yawns from our own indigenous cinema that I could get anywhere else, I went Canadian, eh.

Time for a Haiku joke:

*What's red and white,  
faces south, and has just turned blue?  
A frozen Canadian flag.*

I sit here on my balcony, thinking. Balconville is what they call it here in Montreal when you can't afford to go on a real vacation: you take a vacation into your own reality. Sitting here on my balcony, with a few perspectives on the Toronto festival's Canadian section called Perspectives, which they intend to make a regular feature of ensuing festivals; sitting here on my balcony overlooking the unfinished cross on Mount Royal, I see in the frozen tomatoes falling off their brown stems an image of Canadian film. I see it in the maple tree in front of me, one half of which has turned crimson, one half of which remains very green: the image of Canadian film. This in turn evokes something that Peter harcourt, our great cultural protector, wrote in his introduction to the Canadian Perspectives section of this year's festival programme:

*Strung out as it is between the dictates of commerce and the need for artistry, personal filmmaking in this country remains an endangered species. While the new structures within the recently re-named Telefilm Canada seem at last to guarantee financial stability in the industry, there are still no structures that guarantee the*

*integrity of the cultural product. In fact, recent developments question the very meaning of that phrase. What is the cultural product? (Can it simply be defined by WASP, male or central Canadian, to be accepted by the rest of Canada — as Westerners have had to accept the symbolic significance of the maple leaf, even though there are no maple trees on the prairies?) Does it always have to imply the low budget, "little" film, just because in the 60's, this type of film did seem to be the most characteristically Canadian? In fact, is the interest nowadays in half hour dramas (which, if well crafted, might just receive an Oscar) still part of this self-diminishing syndrome? Are Canadians condemned forever to making little gestures — or cheap little films — and leaving larger gestures to more powerful nations? (Must we always paint in water colours? Or might we some day, while still remaining ourselves, be brave enough to take on the more complicated demands of oils and acrylics?)*

I see Canadian film reflected in the experience of the Pope's visit to Canada. I watched the Pope from the twelfth-floor balcony of the Festival's Hostility-Hospitality suite in the Park Plaza hotel, while others, too sophisticated to view the real thing passing far below on Avenue Road, watched it all on a Buffalo TV station, made holier than thou comments, and discussed their latest deal in the adjoining room.

I see Canadian film reflected in the giant video-scream-screen that accompanied His Victorious Self, Michael Jackson and a 162-person entourage to Montreal for a mammoth concert before 110,000 Quebecois at the Big Owe Olympic stadium.

I was there, selling T-shirts for some entrepreneur, doing my cultural investigation, exploiting youngsters who needed another nice new American idol and easing my conscience a little knowing that Michael the Millionaire was donating his proceeds to the United Black College Fund, cancer research, Jehovah and other good causes.

I decide to leave my balcony and visit the Alcan Montreal aquarium. This too is a Canadian film where the multinational die because they are forced to drink Montreal water (which is really imported from Toronto's affluent effluence) which joins the billions of gallons of untreated wastes from three million Montrealers in its merry journey to the world's oceans. What an export! We do better distributing fecal matter and industrial waste than we do cultural products like films.

I sit in front of the penguin pool to write this article about new Canadian film.

Do I see a future for Canadian film? I do.

Do I see any Hope? I do.

If I could investigate the commonalities of these experiences, the connective tissue, the heart and muscle which embodies and corporealizes the corpse of Canadian Cinema, would I see any life? I do.

The new soul of the New Canadian cinema, given a little encouragement from those that count the dollars, will be as new and original as the new German Cinema, the new Australian Cinema or any other new National Cinema that critics and hustlers wish to propagate. This is due, for the most part, to the individuals and their friends that make up this new wave. In the spirit of co-operation, I'll share some of these encouraging impressions with you - if you want to read a little farther.

I must admit that I'm devoutly non-critical and subjective. I think that part of "our problem" is that we lack promoters with enough faith in our culture to see beyond bottom-lines and BMW's, to believe in the idea of a national cinema and to suspend dis-belief in order to vigorously lobby for recognition of our cultural production and its no less significant cultural bi-products - jobs, vision, pride, collective consciousness and all those things which result from an act of creation.

This year's new production of first features can be characterized in many ways. They represent various regions of the pre-Cambrian mistake that is Canada. They are similar in that they are different from other mass mediocrities. They are very much dissimilar from each other. They reflect very strongly the ethnocentricities, egocentricities, and eccentricities of their individualistic author-directors. They are generally written and produced by their directors. Because they must fulfill the producer function, these directors find precious creative time spent on aspects of production that would be better served by sharing the work with a sympathetic co-producer. These films are created outside the normal corporate system. They are low-budget. It's still tough and may even be tougher to raise \$200,000 than it is to raise \$5 or 6 million. They are

hindered by the track-record syndrome. (The cultural Czar: "We can't give you any money until you do something" The director: "I can't do anything until you give me the money to show you what I can do.") As a result they are all learning to hustle, which does not necessarily translate to anything on the screen, but gets them into the "proper" offices. They are generally young. They are generally poor. They must support themselves by teaching film, doing industrials or short dramatic films. They don't know or care about distribution. They depend on the Government. There are certain recognizable thematic and formal concerns that link them together and liken them to each other. Beyond the fact that a number of video screens and Sony Walkmans appear in an unusual number of these films, they are joined, in my mind, by a connection with the documentary/social-realist tradition, or the CBC aesthetic of innocuous dramatic virtue or, in the more interesting cases, excursions into the political and formal considerations which derive from our rich history of experimentalism/cinematicism, - a concern with the form and language of the medium itself. At any rate, regardless of all this, these films are the films that the director wanted to make. This is unusual.

The disparate visions that connect these films together might also include what William Withrow says about Canadian Contemporary Painting in his book of the same name:

*Our Canadian identity is certainly strongly manifest in many of our contemporary arts: in the novels of Marie-Claire Blais and Margaret Laurence, for example, or in the poetry of Irving Layton, or in that especially insistent voice of our identity crisis, Gaston Miron, or in Canadian films like Mon Oncle Antoine by Claude Jutra, or The Best Damn Fiddler From Calabogie to Kalarad by Peter Pearson.*

*But, so far as I can see, it is not there in contemporary Canadian painting. If I were to enter a room filled with artists from many nations, including the twenty-four Canadians in this book, I feel sure that I could pick them out of the crowd (given that their appearance was completely unknown to me); but if I was faced with the same challenge in terms of their paintings in an exhibition of international contemporary art, I know my score would be low indeed. To me, at least, the nationality is simply not there: not that "presence of the horizon" that one critic has claimed to detect; not that "curious stylelessness (Canadians are Unique in being immensely civilized but relatively uncultural)" perceived by another critic; certainly not "that peculiar combination of directness, sober restraint, honest expression and decorative intent" praised in Canadian art by a third. The paintings illustrated in this book are, to me, both individual to their creators and international in their approach. It is significant that the two Canadian artists represented here who are most self-consciously Canadian, Joyce Wieland and Greg Cur-*

*noe, work in styles that have their roots in international pop art, so that both artists have to resort to using words in their work to convey their specifically national messages. But then universality is the very essence of an abstract art. And in any case that is perhaps the best way for it to be.*

*Through the ages, art has been employed in the service of many ideas; magic, religion, politics - and nationalism. Nationalism is the sum of a way of thinking and feeling, a relationship of people with a particular geographic and political entity. If one accepts this definition, one has to accept the fact that nationalism is difficult to translate into visual terms. But at one stage in the Canadian experience, the art of the Group of Seven served our image of ourselves very well.*

*Now our collective experience has out-stripped that art. If, in turn, our art has gone beyond any current definition of nationalism, perhaps it is only that our art is more mature than our politics. At any rate, it has lost its early innocence.*

*Yet, in spite of this, there is a kind of nationalism in Canadian painting. A non-objective painting by Borduas is Canadian - not because anyone other than a knowledgeable critic could recognize it as such. That doesn't matter. What matters is that as a Canadian I know it was painting by a Canadian: I know that such a Canadian painting exists. It enters into my feelings about Canada that I know it is a country that has painters.*

These new filmmakers embody the spirit and drive of that other great period of Canadian film in the '60s and early '70s - the Carles, the Jutras, the Pearsons, the Larry Kents, the Lefebvres, the Shebibs, the Owens. These new filmmakers are the new and next wave. 1985 will be a new age. These people will not represent, with a few exceptions, that dark era of our cinematic history where everything that was touched by capitalists turned to plastic dust. The times of capital costs, capital punishment, capital loss, *kaputt*.

### The films, the filmmakers

Dan Petrie's *The Bay Boy* may rightfully be included at the outset of this little survey. This is Dan's first true *auteur* film. After decades of carrying the story and images of this semi-autobiographical film about the coming of age in Glace Bay, N.S. of Donald Cameron (played marvellously by Keifer Sutherland in an auspicious acting debut), Dan was finally given the chance to realize his dream by the very brave and talented team of John Kemeny and Denis Heroux whose International Cinema Corporation leads the way in the production of quality Canadian films. This is a rare thing. After years of directing dozens of American films, both Hollywoodian studio visions and independent ones, *Fort Apache*, *The Bronx* and *Resurrection* among them, and after years of being another ex-patriot director for hire, Dan returned home, hoping for the first time to write

and direct the film that he wanted to direct.

*The Bay Boy* is a delightful rite of passage film, and like so many other great Canadian films that deal with growing up in this country, I'm sure that it will strike a chord of sympathetic recognition in the national audience. In terms of atmosphere, tone, texture and quixotic spirit, it conjures up the work of another cinemagician, Fellini, in his *Amarcord*. It is a coal story turned into diamond story. I know, that as a co-editor of the film along with Susan Shanks, it was one of the most enjoyable experiences that I've had on a film in a long time. To work with a director who had honed his skills on all those commercial and conventional films, and who had returned (for good I hope) to share his experience with us was a pleasure. Petrie knew that he wanted and fought for it. He used the camera to tell his story, in originally economical and sure-footed ways. He believed in what he was doing. At the same time he approached the production with a light heart, a joke or two, and much respect for other's opinions. That was nice. These experienced ex-patriot directors who are now returning home have a lot to teach the younger generation of filmmakers. Organization. Craft. Attitude. Courage.

On the other end of the budgetary, experiential and age scale is *Mother's Meat Freud's Flesh* (MMFF) a film inflicted, as it says in the credits, by 22-year-old Demetrios Estdelacropolis, Demetrios East of the Acropolis and/or Demetrios Demetri. MMFF is a no-budget film. I find it an original auto-erotic carton in search of a cult. When I explained to Demetrios that I was writing a piece about first features, he interrupted me by injecting "You mean first and last." This statement stems from the frustration that a lot of first-feature directors experience when confronted by the brick walls of the funding apparatus.

It's hard to make your next film, when your first one causes so much reaction. At this year's Berlin film Festival more than one invited Canadian dignitary was left gasping by some pretty explicit scenery. That should be recommendation alone. Ostensibly "a charming old fashioned story of the struggle between a boy, his mother and a psychiatrist" MMFF is much more than that. According to its own synopsis "it treads the thin line between the grim quality of low budget pornography and the creativity of the art film." What I find interesting about this film is its rigorous investigation and dissection of language systems and cliches, its formal attack on conventional narrative storytelling. It is as much a film about the fantasy of language as it is a post-structural film about anti-romantic love, and self-reflexive aesthetics, semantics and imagery in absurdist dress. It is not unlike Michael Snow's epic *Rameau's Nephew* by *Diderot* (*Thanx to Dennis Young*) by *Wilmy Schoen* (1974) that few have been allowed to see. Others have said: "Where Spielberg spent millions for their stunts, Demetrios spent \$120." (Gary Evans, Cinema Canada). As D. has written "MMFF is conceived and produced on a no-budget theory: since its audience can not be bought with mega-Hollywood dollars, its attention has to be captured with a sense of humour, imagination and arrogance." Zev Asher said in *The Concordia Link* that D. assembled a cast of geeks and eccentrics who desperately deserve some exposure. This is true.

*The Advocate* said that this Canadian effort was best suited for leftover punks, gays with a jaded sense of humour, and masochistic filmgoers who will later con their friends into believing they should go see this for any number of pathological reasons. *Variety* said it was a low budget, low-talent effort aimed squarely at the midnight movie crowd. The Berlin daily *Der Tagesspiegel* praised its structure and dynamics. D's mother didn't like the fact that people would assume that it was her fault that he made these kinds of movies. But the final word must be left to Demetrios himself. "The most fun I have in life is making or watching films... Many people seem to be forced into a routine that they never challenge. That shocks me. The sense of security that they derive from being conventional eventually stifles them. I don't want to be a millionaire, I just want to make films." He won't have any problems. I think there are people with courage out there.

● *Hey Babe*, Montreal director's Rafal Zelinski's first feature was a great surprise to me. Having worked on the production as one of several editors and knowing the struggle that Rafal went through to get it made (five years in the making, another familiar story) I approached the screening at the Festival of Festivals with a little apprehension. It turned out to be the wonderfully beautiful Cinderella/Pygmalion December-February romance that I remembered in the editing room. Rafal started the production in Canada with the support of the CFDC, Famous Players and the Quebec Film Institute. It was financed in part through private investors, as well. After delays in shooting the film was finally edited. Enter a sales agent, Carolco in L.A. They thought they could do a better job of it so the film was sent to Hollywood for re-editing, sound and mixing. There were some disagreements. Says Rafal: "They wanted fast-paced American. We wanted slow, poetic European. It was a long learning experience for both of us but the finished product is very fresh and exciting." This all serves as a warning to the pitfalls that could face many of our first directors.

The lucrative lure of the Hollywood fish tank has destroyed more than one young minnow in a bowl full of sharks. Rafal made what is called a teenage comedy-called *Screwballs*, since making *Hey Babe*. *Screwballs* was named dog of the week by a couple of famous television critics. But it has grossed more than five million dollars. Is there any justice? I would like to caution my friend Rafal to beware of the Hamlet-in-Hollywood syndrome: "to be (sold out) or not to be (sold out) that is the question." *Hey Babe* is a film which furnishes us with Rafal's unusually well-developed visual sense and much underrated cinematographer Peter Czerski's surrealist and atmospheric camerawork. A film held together by a slick narrative. A film which is very uplifting and very positive. A film, judging by its Festival reactions, which gives its audience enjoyment and relief from the rest of the world. A film that's been to the Filmex, Montreal, Taormina and Toronto festivals. A film that appeals to people.

Like most first directors Rafal started out making innumerable short films. Unlike most he has travelled around the world three times. He feels that a lot of filmmakers get trapped by their roots and make films only about their own lives. "Filmmaking everywhere is confining, but you must be creative within

the limitations. I spent a lot of time in L.A. recently and filmmakers there are frustrated with the Hollywood system, and I come here and everyone is frustrated with the Canadian system." He believes, though, that we Canadians have a good chance to make films with North American appeal and a definite Canadian touch. We wish.

● One young director who will never sell out is Ron Mann, a 25-year-old Torontonian whose performance documentaries *Imagine The Sound* and *Poetry in Motion* won many international prizes for their original and pure treatment of music and wordwork.

Joining now that tradition that sees many fine directors leap out of the real and into the fictional Ron has written, produced and directed his first dramatic feature *Listen To The City*, a modestly budgeted political allegory. I've worked with Ron for three years, most recently as an actor and production co-ordinator of this latest effort and he never ceases to amaze me with his drive, hustle and promotional abilities. Despite the life and death struggle, he is director of promising originality.

*Listen to the City* is a Brechtian fable about economics, unemployment, city politics, corporate wrangling and a Utopian vision for our world. Certainly not the stuff of Walt Disney. Ron manages to give this dense and complex material a human face through the use of symbolic representatives of various theoretical positions and through the use of what poet Lawrence Ferlingetti describes as a public surface - the use of humour and music (the Burlington band The Spoons did the music). Reminiscent of early Godardian experiments, Ron exhibits an unusual courage in taking on these larger subjects. It would have been easy for him to re-make the successful formulae of his earlier documentaries. Or to make rock videos. Not many people in this country are making



● Gruben's *Low Visibility*

politically inspired feature films. Despite the inherent problems of funding, scripting and finding sympathetic cast and crew that we all must face, *Listen to the City* is augury on a cinematic scale. While its very ambition leaves it necessarily not quite fully realized, the future of meaningful quasi-didactic entertainment seems sure. Ron has found the kind support and backing of Linda Beath's Spectrafilm, so it seems that a lot more people in a lot more places will be listening to the city.

● *Walls* is Vancouverite Tom Shandel's first feature film - almost. He also created the low-budget *Another Smith for Paradise*, in the eminently forgettable '70s, but the film might have been renamed

Another Film for Paradise for all the attention that it etched onto the collective consciousness. This is due to its lack of broad distribution and airplay, a problem that faces all these works because of the corporate and bureaucratic control of the distribution infrastructures, its monopolistic quality, its foreign domination, and all those other qualities that could be attributed to any other Canadian industry. This is as much true of one's first film as it is of one's tenth film. It's harder to distribute your film,



● Ron Mann: no sell-out

the old wisdom whispers, when you bill it as "a Canadian feature film" as Walls does. This has got to change.

A filmmaker since 1968, Tom, as a former consultant to the CRTC and the Secretary of State's Committee on the National Film Policy and vice-president to the B.C. Association for Public Broadcasting, has maintained a special interest in our nation's communications and culture. His body of work includes work for the National Film Board, and the bread and butter commercials and industrial road so typical of most of these filmmakers. I found *Walls* to be an intriguingly well-constructed and well-acted dramatic piece. Its dramatic source is a play of the same name by Christian Bruyere which enjoyed much success in Vancouver. The film retains some of the play's claustrophobic staginess to its ultimate advantage because it conveys, with much accuracy, life in prison and what that does to those on the inside and those on the outside who are their caretakers. *Walls* is a story driven. Based on a 1975 hostage-taking incident at B.C. pen, where three inmates took a number of prison workers captive in an effort to right the injustices of our prison system, *Walls* brings social consciousness and topical debate to the screen in a tension-packed and moving form. The clash of wills is admirably acted out by Andrée Pelletier, a sympathetic social worker who was killed when a prison SWAT team stormed the hostage area; Alan Scarfe as the liberal lawyer and Winston Rekert as the prison leader who gives the best performance of his career. *Walls* catches your interest and holds it. It owes a little to our tradition of well-crafted CBC storytelling, which is its major strength and weakness. I would have preferred a daringly innovative structure and vision. What we get is something else no less valuable and a good effort for a second first film.

● Haligonian Bill MacGillivray's first feature *Stations* is a *Citizen Kane* on rails. It is the story about a journalist whose

career suddenly fumbles when a film documentary he is doing about failure leads to the suicide of an old friend. He takes a work vacation travelling across Canada by train interviewing average people - the unemployed, and the frustrated, who force him to confront his own belief systems, values, past and future.

Bill was born in Newfoundland in 1946. He studied painting and fine art in Halifax and Montreal and film in London. Returning to Canada to teach, he became a founding member of the Atlantic Filmmaker's Coop. His first dramatic film *Aerial View* has claimed much critical success, and it was that fact that helped him make *Stations*. My friend Les "Bob" Halman did the sound editing for the film. Les said that working on *Stations* was one of the most memorable and enjoyable experiences of his long film career. I trust sound editors, and any other craftspeople when they speak about a particular film. They know what's special.

I talked to Bill by phone. I told him that *Stations* was a film that I wished that I had made in a place where I wished I could live. He was pleased by the critical reaction in Toronto which pointed to the fact that Bill could start a new wave in the Atlantic region, if only through his use of humour, that elusive thing. He described the problems of raising the miniscule budget (about \$22,500) with help from those old standbys, Telefilm, the Canada Council and the National Film Board. He had praise for Piers Handling and Wayne Clarkson for their lobbying for a 35mm blow-up and for Telefilm and the NFB for making it possible. Although most of these first features are shot in 16mm, Bill was aware of the unbalanced bias against the format in terms of respect from Festivals and distributors.

But budgetary reasons are the main reasons that this is not possible for most of these films. A good blow-up can cost \$32,000. This is more than the budget of some of these films and would be considered a good box-office return given the sorry state of the exhibition of Canadian films these days. Bill also had some private investment and the crew worked on the inevitable deferred basis that crews seem to always work on when involved in these types of films. The raising of money has taken a lot of steam out of many productions. If too many levels of the Cultural Bureaucracy or private enterprise's Corporate ladder get involved, then these young directors face the possibility of getting railroaded into untenable artistic compromise or being railroaded to serve some other master. Fortunately, Bill avoided these things. He thought the NFB added a lever to the project, which helped it along.

"Canada is a joke that doesn't laugh", he told me on the phone. I laughed, nervously. "*Stations* is a film about structure. About process. About other ways of given information to an audience." It has found an audience on First Choice, buried in an obscure time slot, but at least it's an audience. Bill hopes to find American distribution after a launching at New York's Film Forum and plans to take the film to Germany where he's sure they'll like it. A road-movie on rails. The autobahn meets Viarail. Good luck, Bill.

● *Next Of Kin* is Toronto filmmaker Atom Egoyan's first feature. Made for \$37,000 with help from the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council and the sale of a half-hour film (*Open House*) to the

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motherlode itself, the CBC, this 24-year-old filmmaker has created one of this year's most enjoyable and accessible films. Using a wild and funny premise, Atom tells a tall and human tale. Imprisoned by the bourgeois life that imprisons most of us in this country, Peter (played intelligently by Patrick Tierney) and his family attend psychodrama sessions in order to discover the source of his boredom. After one such session Peter rummages through videotape records of another family's session and decides to invent the character of the long-lost son that is that family's major preoccupation. He presents himself to this new Armenian family and the fun begins there.

Atom himself was born in Cairo in 1960 of Armenian parents. He was educated in Canada and received a degree in International Relations from the U. of T. *Next of Kin* is a film about international relations... cousins, mothers, fathers, uncles. Its ethnographic qualities transform the film into modern myth. It is lovingly done. Touching. Warm. And not without a great deal of situation and character humour. The acting is universally realistic, with fine performances from Berge and Sirvart Fazlian and Arsinee Khanjian. The fine writing comes from the fact Atom has completed ten plays and five short films since he was 13-years-old. His latest play, *External Affairs*, should be produced in New York this fall.

But it also comes from the transmutation of culture. The cross-cultural emphasis of this film makes it unique and Canadian. It's about taking something you know something about and recreating it for fictional purposes. It's about doing something well. Judging from the strong applause at the premiere screening from the Armenians in the audience and the Armenian-in-the-rest-of-us, *Next of Kin* demonstrates that there is a future for film in this country - if we could only discover and reveal and hand over the screens to articulate, genuinely concerned and talented people like Atom Egoyan.

*Low Visibility* is Vancouver filmmaker Patricia Gruben's first feature after much acclaim for *Sifted Evidence* which won the award for the best experimental film in Athens and which was named one of 1983's top twenty films by the Village Voice. Patricia worked for a dozen years in Canadian film as an art director, set decorator and writer. She is also teaching film at SFU.

*Low Visibility* is a complex examination and reconstruction of personal perception. It tells the story of a Mr. Bones who was found wandering in the wild and was brought to a hospital where experts tried to piece together his past and his personality. Seen through the eyes of a TV news camera, the hospital's ever-present video surveillance system, a clairvoyant, a detective and his doctors, he is a puzzle, a white sheet as empty as the snow on the TV screen that he watches. It is a film about multiple views, paradox, the search for truth, speculative inquiry, and enigma. Constructed with unyielding attention to formal and aesthetic structure its antecedents lie buried in the (Michael) Snowfield glacier that is the rich tradition of Canadian experimental and avant-garde filmmaking. It challenges you.

At this year's festival a large section was devoted to so-called experimental film curated by R. Bruce Elder. I saw a few of the programmes and went to a seminar which gathered a number of

theorists together. I learned a lot. About a certain thematic, a certain concern that ties our cinema together. It may be easier to see Canadian feature films as an entity if one understands the groundwork that supports them in the large body of avant-garde cinema. Landscape. Constructivist. Materialist. Memorials. Nostalgia. Reference. The Human as Incidental. Visionary. Isolationist. Realist. Representational. Disjunction. There are factions afoot.

But once we realize that "words aren't clubs" as one panelist said, we can, in the words of Peter Harcourt, consolidate our own practice, our own film culture and make the oppositionalism and fragmentation into positive constructive. In other words we can make films that people respect. For me, films like *Low Visibility* and Micheline Lanctôt's *Sonatine*, a second feature so strongly different from her first, *The Handyman*, that I would consider it her first real breath, are films born in our rich experimental tradition. *Sonatine* is brilliant. Even if it hadn't won the Silver Lion at Venice, it would still be brilliant. I wish distributors could see that there is beauty and wonder in these films. That these are true films of dramatic and cinematic expression, of examined image, of engagement, of provocation, of thought and of the extrapolation of an aesthetic message that rarely ever gets made or seen these days.

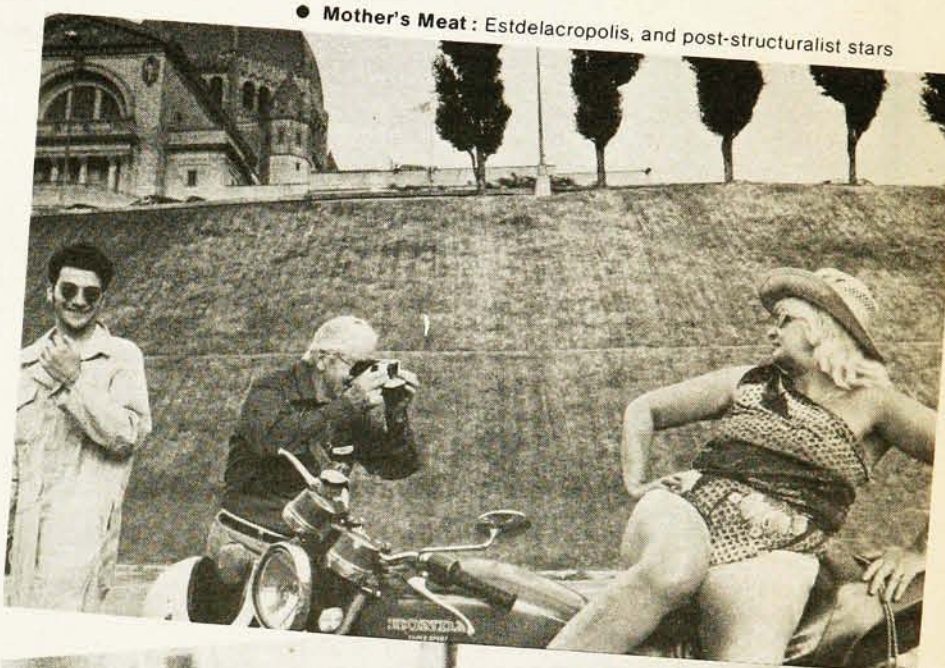
There is much to be said about Lea Pool's first feature *La Femme de l'hôtel*. I might say everything I have to say by saying that I honestly believe that this film is the best film ever to be produced in this country. Ever. It is the synthesis of all that is best in film. It projects Pool immediately into the ranks of international film-authors like von Trotta, Wenders, Bresson, Duras and Bergman. No less. The \$500,000 film was made possible by Telefilm, the IQC, Radio-Canada and Radio-Quebec. It was produced by Bernadette Payeur and ACPAV, a wonderful organization which has produced 20 features in the last fourteen years, allowing many Quebec filmmakers their first chance at making their first feature. It is brilliantly acted by Louise Marleau, Paule Baillargeon, Marthe Turgeon and Serge Dupire. It is a film that relieves the emptiness. It is a film about love and the love of creation. "The eyes alone are still capable of screaming," says poet Rene Char, as quoted at the film's beginning. It is not a film to be analysed, it is a film to be felt. An archtypical puzzle. As Léa says "It is not a film to be subjected to reason... it has no nationality... it is not a film about searching for identity and roots, it is a film about rootlessness and not belonging... Interior exile." It is a film about the fragility of things. I don't want to destroy that fragility. I don't want to discuss it. I want you to go see the film.

So there you have it. Ten films. Ten new films from new and renewed filmmakers. Why watch anything else? There is Hope in those hills, and valleys, and cities. There is hope if the CBC gives these films a chance and increases its pitiful exposure of Canadian work to its audience. And it's not just the CBC. The others are much, much worse.

Maybe we are aiming too low. This was the only valuable thing said at this year's trade forum. If our new minister of communications, Marcel Masse, a one-time nationalist, can help correct this mess, then more power to him. But also more power to the creators of this

cultural production. We need affirmative action in terms of distribution and nationalization of the content of our cinema's screens and airtime. It's time to take responsibility. De-regulation will not work, if we value this country. Private enterprise will not work, if we value this country's cultural integrity. These problems are shared by all our country's films - the \$10 million miniseries and the \$10,000 first feature. Frankly there is no difference. The experimental qualities of the latter often find themselves integrated into the former somewhere along the line. The broadcasters and distributors must learn to trust us.

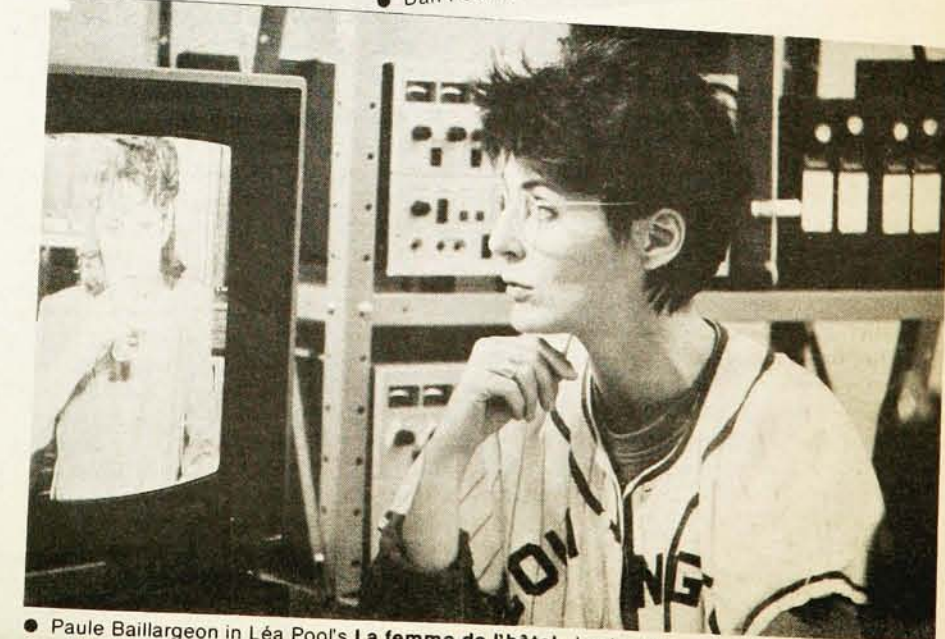
Audiences can be taught to love Canadian film, just as they have been taught to hate it. We can no longer afford to insult the audience, to entertain their silent minds. We must take the spirit and adventure of these young filmmakers, their most original creations and open up the bureaucracies, to make them responsible to the Canadian public who created them and who they must serve. The future is bright but destiny has been thus far denied. Censorship and formalistic ritualization of the bureaucratic structures (who needs fifty pages of forms?) are stifling our cinema. Let freedom ring. Let our cinema sing.



● *Mother's Meat*: Estdelacropolis, and post-structuralist stars



● Dan Petrie's *The Bay Boy*: first true auteur film



● Paule Baillargeon in Léa Pool's *La femme de l'hôtel*: best ever

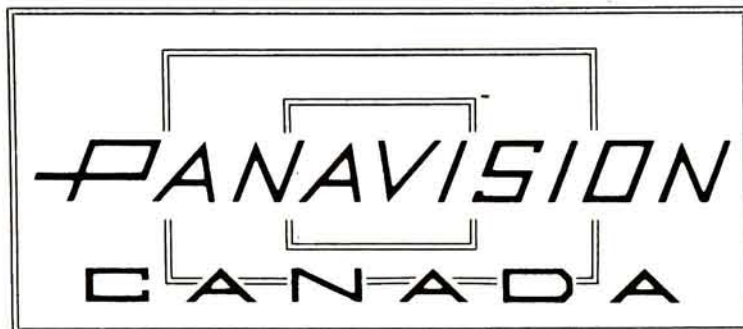
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