

Midnight Matinees

by Jay Scott
Oxford University Press
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Of the less enviable fates available to mankind, that of being a movie-reviewer for a Canadian daily must be one of them. If Canada could let itself be a more significant filmmaking country, instead of just a dumping-zone for U.S. media-fallout, the calling of the Canadian newspaper critic might aspire to greater heights than the consumers' check-list it usually is. But being subjected to continual reminders of your own country's sheer inadequacy in film must be one of the uniquely Canadian forms of cultural masochism. It's a wonder, then, that the written work of Jay Scott who as *The Globe & Mail's* man-at-the-movies, is the dean of Canadian journalists living from the proliferation of 'foreign' movies, isn't more scarred.

There are scars in *Midnight Matinees*: Scott's bitter piece on the failure of Canadian cinema's promised new wavelets is the single essay devoted to Canadian cinema (aside from a short review of *The Wars*). But the piece, "The Burnout Factory: Canada's Hollywood," in spite of a five-and-a-half-page update, was already anthologized, under a slightly different title, a year ago in *Take Two*, also published in Toronto. The recycling of this one piece, originally written for *American Film* in 1982, does, however, add to the impression that this is Scott's entire output on Canadian cinema after seven years of reviewing for Canada's national newspaper.

That Canadian film gets a mere 13 pages in a 266-page Canadian book is, of course, not necessarily Scott's fault — though his "burnout" piece suggests it doesn't deserve much more, even if, to his credit, his spirits lift at the promise of a *Grey Fox* or a *Wars*. But, after all, he writes for a paper whose coverage of Canadian culture is a scandal, and this is the best newspaper the country has to offer. So Scott, like Canadians in general, seeks his cinematic comforts elsewhere but, intelligent and perceptive film critic that he is, what he finds there is hardly cause for rejoicing.

Midnight Matinees is a lament — "for a time when movies mattered — really mattered;" that is, before television (which Scott defines after American writer Renata Alder as "An appliance through which reviewable material is sometimes played") destroyed what little community North American life had to offer. In short, before the universal factory system of today's 'cultural' industries and their grimly uniform productions.

Roughly the first half of the book is organized around 10 thematic chapters, each of which looks at a particular aspect of the so-called worldwide factory system, while the second half (pp. 124-255) consists of films reviewed between 1978-1985, from the States mainly (46), but also Italy (5), Japan (3), U.K. (8), Australia (3), France (7), Germany (4), Ireland, Holland, Hungary, Sweden, Brazil, the U.S.S.R. and Canada one each.

The factory manufactures emotions (frustration, sadomasochism, youthful-

ness, patriotism), character-types (teens, "jes folks", *auteurs*), and, of course, the artifacts themselves — more and more movies that less and less people go to. Because, above all, in Scott's finest piece in this collection, the factory manufactures death.

This first piece in *Midnight Matinees*, in case you missed the *Globe* version, is a splendid bit of New Journalism about Paul Schrader's *Mishima* film. Best of all is the epitaph-epigram from Mishima's novel *Confessions of a Mask*: "I have never seen such a strange factory. In it all the techniques of modern science and management, together with the exact and rational thinking of many superior brains, were dedicated to a single end — Death."

The prominence of the piece — that it

is, in fact, an epigram to the book itself — should alert the careful reader to a critical stance that does take cinema seriously and grieves at its absurdities (the piece on Canada, or the piece on *The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas*), its tragedies (Mishima, Fassbinder) and its trashiness (the Cannes piece.)

Consistent to its end, *Midnight Matinees* closes with a 1984 review of *The Woman In Red* that asks the unanswerable question that's probably the most puzzling not only to critics, but even to some producers as well: "... why...do the wrong kinds of movies travel?"

In *Midnight Matinees*, Jay Scott, despite the very real constraints he works in, (though he notes that the *Globe's* tolerance has earned him the

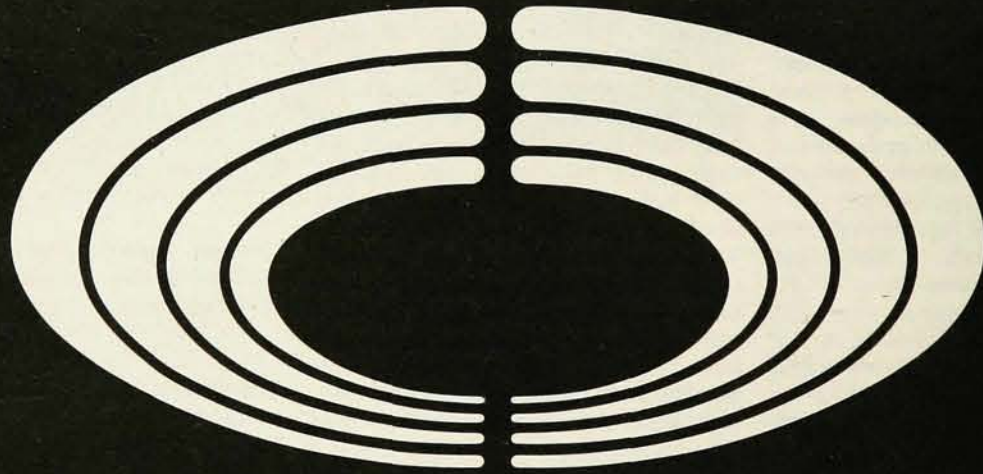
envy of newsroom colleagues on London, New York and L.A. dailies), provides an honest enough glimpse into the multi-mirrored spectacular of film's perverted culture.

Quoting that most Canadian of philosophers, Baruch Spinoza, Scott, in a brilliant piece of post-ideological criticism on Fassbinder, suggests what can only be taken as a personal critical canon: "Not to laugh, not to lament, not to curse, but to understand." And it's for this kind of honesty and wisdom Scott brings to *Midnight Matinees* that the book should earn a deserved read.

From a toiler in daily celluloid, *Midnight Matinees* comes mighty close to understanding.

Michael Dorland •

"Keep 'em rolling."



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