

ON (EXPERIMENTAL) FILM

• by B. Sternberg •

We've been speaking of distribution/exhibition and so I asked Patricia Gruben how things were going in this respect with her feature *Low Visibility* which premiered at the '84 Festival of Festivals.

Patricia had just returned from a tour of cinemathèques and campuses in 12 U.S. cities including San Francisco, Houston and L.A. The film had received good critical reviews. Patricia is somewhat disappointed with its distribution, however; not that the film isn't being seen, but that it's being seen only in the same places, in the same context as her previous works. She had thought, she now suggests naively, that this film could make the crossover to broader distribution (it has sync sound and actors!); that there might be an audience somewhere between those interested in strictly experimental films and the *Anne-of-Green-Gables*-Sunday-night-TV-drama watchers.

There is an audience, but so far there seem to be no avenues to it. The type of features that get distribution, Patricia notes, such as *Grey Fox* and *My American Cousin* do so not only because they are good movies, but also (and more?) because they create a "national identity." They are promoted as "Canadian" films. Films are considered in terms of themes and subject matter as opposed to their formal concerns. And when this is the case, it seems that we become attached to the most conservative forms – and to past history as subject matter as opposed to current issues (like the media war we are engaged in, the battle of the airwaves, the constant bombardment of our minds). *Low Visibility* is a film dealing with these issues not only in subject/content but through its formal devices. It is more a film about drama Patricia explains, than a dramatic film. Mind you, it IS about Survival... Or, perhaps, as Patricia contends, "Canadian" is not the issue. Intellectual curiosity is international – and so can be the scope and appeal of our films.

Patricia is now at work on two films, one dramatic and one non-narrative. The latter, *Ley Lines* is to be shot in film and video. Interior, distantiated, it centres around the family name and what it means. It is about the fiction of personality – how we as individuals are constructed out of the intersection of concepts about biological, psychological, evolutionary and societal states. The film starts at the point of

personality and traces back, along ley lines, to cultural and biological roots. Ley lines are imaginary straight lines, pre-historical, along which there are concentrated points of energy – a sacred well, a sacred yew tree... One such line runs through London and St. Paul's Cathedral.

The other, dramatic feature (two Houston oilmen want to invest!), will be more overtly political than her previous work and less self-consciously analytical. It is about being colonized as a child within a family, as a woman in a family, as a Canadian within the American culture. Also, like all her films, it's about how we can know what we know, how we arrive at knowledge. The film will unfold as a mystery story solved

by someone's dreams. It too will have sync sound/actors, music (distributors, get ready!), and be more emotionally involving than anything she's done. Patricia is not making the film just to bridge gaps – it does follow a continuum of her concerns and involvements: "It would have to be a script I loved or I wouldn't do it."

Patricia teaches filmmaking at Simon Fraser University, B.C. She told me of an exciting project being established there: Praxis, a professional group with a director, a studio and a bit of equipment where people might go to develop their script and perhaps shoot the film there as well.

Critical support would come from the group and visiting filmmakers, screening relevant films, discussion and workshops. The group will help the filmmaker structure his/her idea in an arts-oriented envi-

ronment beyond the tyranny of the made-for-TV formula.

I guess everyone's read or heard of the Film Industry Task Force report: *Canadian Cinema, A Solid Base*, and we'll all wait to see if, perhaps this time, the government will act on the recommendations. But did you all take note of what areas were totally ignored by this report (and who was on the Task Force)? This Task Force was not looking at, not even casting a quick glance in the direction of, experimental film. Of course, a task force needs a focus and "the industry" needs Canadian control of Canadian distribution/exhibition and access to our own markets, but, can you imagine what we could do in the production, distribution and exhibition of experimental films given even \$2 million of

that \$60 million recommended for the Industry? So, Marcel, how about it??? It can't be that Marcel Masse is unaware of experimental films and the international stature of its filmmakers, or of the value the Canadian public gets for their relatively small expenditure in the Canada Council?

A follow-up comment on the accessibility/availability argument raised in a previous column. A reader argues:

In stating the problem (small audiences for experimental film) to be more one of availability (lack of exhibition venues, minimal advertising, etc.) than the accessibility or nature of the films themselves, you seemed to be equating accessible with 'good' and inaccessible with 'bad'. But this is not the case. The very thing that makes James Joyce, for

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example, worth reading is the profundity of the work, a register of which is the demands it makes upon the reader and its very radicalness. So with experimental films, the more a film is like what one ordinarily sees, the more it conforms to a perceptual pattern, the less it questions and challenges perception, the less it intensifies by being different from the norm. And a film is art, is valuable as art, to the extent that it

renews our perception by difference.

I agree — and, Vive la différence!

But how 'Vive' without making the films less rigorous, challenging, radical, unsettling? As I have already indicated: more exhibition and promotion, and more and better education at all levels to effect a change in attitude; one in which art is valued; the new, unknown or challenging work is engaged, and demanding thinking is responded to in kind.

Americans check out Canadian company

TORONTO — When it comes to checking into foreign markets, the CTV sitcom *Check It Out* has an inside track, thanks to a New York-based company that's spawned such sitcoms as *Three's Company* and *Too Close For Comfort*, Taffner and Associates, producers of *Check It Out* in association with CTV, is the Toronto end of that bilateral link. Equally owned by

D.L. Taffner Ltd. of New York and Sarsden Communications, Taffner and Associates is a Canadian company, though as 50% American-owned, received Investment Canada approval in 1984.

Its raison d'être, in the words of president Charles Falzon, is "to produce highly successful TV programs that are Canadian (lead actor Don

Adams is the only American content in *Check It Out*, says Falzon) but with Taffner marketing in New York to sell them internationally." So far 17 of the first 22 *Check It Out* episodes have been completed (airing on CTV) and with D.L. Taffner Ltd. as the exclusive distributor, *Check It Out* has also found a time slot on the U.S.A. Network where it's pulled in average audience ratings of 1.2 to 1.3 million viewers. The series has as well been sold by its New York connection for syndication starting in April and, notes Falzon, the hope is for *Check It Out* to run long enough to be sold in strips (over 65 episodes) and in syndication.

With an eye to producing commercially saleable product, Falzon says the accent for his company is on export sales. Hence the tie-in to a worldwide distributor he credits with "making it happen" for *Check It Out* and which he views as a unique strength for the Toronto production company (itself unique considers Falzon, since "all we're here to do is produce shows that are commercially successful"). That *Check It Out* is a Canadian show is immaterial to its U.S. buyers, says Falzon, because it is produced and tailored for an international market. As a previous international sales manager for CBC TV programs, Falzon says that contrasts with previous Canadian sitcoms that were produced and sustained domestically.

One change in mind for Taffner and Associates is that although sitcoms have been the D.L. Taffner Ltd.'s bread-and-butter and was the TV genre chosen to start Taffner and Associates off (since they're easiest to sell, says Falzon), it will also be looking at domestic production of dramas and developing shows in concert with the Global TV, CBC-TV, and CTV networks. One ironic note and testament to Canadian content is that while Taffner and Associates' New York link is benefitting the *Check It Out* series Falzon, a Toronto native, is grateful for his departure from the Big Apple, commenting "New York's nice, but I wanted to live in a sane city."

OTTAWA — *The Bestest Present* and *The Raccoons and the Lost Star*, two animated TV specials produced by Atkinson Film-Arts drew over four million viewers when they aired on the CTV and CBC networks respectively last Dec. 9.

A third Atkinson production, the half-hour *Rumpelstiltskin*, netted a further two million viewers on CTV Dec. 12.

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