



Photo taken with an automatic camera on Bikini Atoll of a 1946 American atomic test

# The Dominion of Forgetfulness

by Michael Dorland

*"We may be little and dirty, but we're Canadian"*

— Jack Darcus, *Overnight*

*"Art is essentially parochial. It has to start somewhere and is best when it stays there"*

— Stephen J. Roth, *Producer*

*"Falling now, falling at last, falling in place"*

— Carolyn McLuskie, *The Wake*

The critic at a film festival is necessarily confronted with the fact that what he (or she) is looking for (and at) is fragmentary. Far be this from saying that as a result the critic's task is not possible, only that the critical preoccupation is with fragments. The critic then is first a collector of fragments and secondly the assembler of such fragments

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into the appearance of a whole. Such a critical strategy, however, is not being unfaithful to the aims of either filmmaker or film festival categories which themselves attempt an illusion of wholeness. Thus the Perspective Canada program at the 11th Toronto Festival of Festivals (Sept. 4-13) was tempted "to herald an imminent cinematic in Canada" — "It seems, in other words, that the conditions for the emergence of something distinct — **if not distinctly Canadian**, whatever that is — are upon us," according to programmers Kay Armatage, Piers Handling and Geoff Pevere. Similarly, *Winds of Change*, the Festival's 80-feature film retrospective of Latin American cinema, programmed by Handling, assembled an array of films that in equivalent quantity it is not possible to see in Latin America itself, in an overview of emergent national cinema that does not exist locally.

The wholeness of a festival (or particular festival program) then is potentially greater than its components. There is in the cumulative effect, even if only fragmentarily perceived, at least the possibility that the critic might be

fortunate enough to be able to identify something of that wholeness. The third Perspective Canada, if it underscored a growing gap between the English- and French-language feature film in Canada (the Quebec feature having by and large crossed over into the properly filmic while English-Canadian cinema still hovers along its borders), also allowed some of the fundamental concerns that could constitute an English-Canadian cinema to emerge into clearer focus. For as the critic Walter Benjamin so perfectly understood in his seminal study of an emergent national literature, the fragmentary form is original:

Indeed this is where the task of the investigator begins, for he cannot regard...a fact as certain until its innermost structure appears to be so essential as to reveal it as an origin. The authentic — the hallmark of origin in phenomena — is the object of discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition.

*And the act of discovery can reveal it in the most singular and eccentric of phenomena, in both the weakest and clumsiest experiments*

*and in the overripe fruits of a period of decadence.* (emphasis added)

One then need not insist again on the essentially fragmentary nature of Canadian cinema as a result of the centripetal pull of language, sex, region, or institutional reorientations, and the centrifugal attractions of shifting genre traditions, changing production techniques, developing domestic market forces, and, most overwhelmingly, American domination. But under such conditions of extreme fragmentation, is not the very possibility of "the emergence of something distinct — if not distinctly Canadian, *whatever that is*" itself, as the programmers' wording suggests, problematic? How to know what is distinct *if one doesn't already know what it is*? Here, there are three epistemological models, each with its film analog: i) *the implicit* — that one already knows but has somehow forgotten and so it can be remembered (which is predominantly the preoccupation of Canadian experimental film); ii) *the explicit* — that one doesn't know but others do (notably by the objective standards of foreigners or the numerical standards of audience numbers), a

model that applies overwhelmingly to the Canadian feature; and iii) *the residual* – that one knows only from what is left over (principally the documentary). On the basis of these models, all of which are possible, a program like Perspective Canada is in the broadest terms both experimental and fragmentary: out of the over 200 films screened by the programmers (i.e., excluding mainstream or marginal video output and commercial features, the bulk of industrial media production in Canada), 50 films in all (15 features, 34 shorts) are selected for projection onto festival screens in the epistemological hope that these might be perceived as “distinctly Canadian, whatever that is.”

Therefore one won't insist overly on the 'popular' success of this year's Perspective Canada program with the festival-going public, other than to mention the turnaway crowds at the screenings of **Dancing In The Dark**, **Loyalties**, and **Pouvoir intime**; full houses for the less-hyped features such as **Overnight**; or Denys Arcand's **Déclin de l'empire américain** winning the CityTV-City of Toronto's best Canadian film award as well as the John Labatt Classic award for most popular film of the festival. In part these are the effects of advance word-of-mouth, media-hype in a media-hip town, a 25 per cent increase in festival attendance, and the smallness of the two theatres allotted to the program (though both **Déclin** and **Dancing** screened in larger theatres outside the program proper). Even in a year when Canadian cinema (i.e., in Montreal and Toronto) assumes some aspects of what Swiss director Alain Tanner in his film **The Middle of the World** termed “normalization” (“a period of exchange provided that nothing changes”), the fact of its fragmentary nature remains – and remains precisely what constitutes its originality.

Looking at the Perspective Canada selection thematically, one finds under the emblematic cultural sign of decline (Arcand's **Déclin** that its predominant manifestation is in loss: *loss of place* (**Anne Trister**, **Loyalties**, **A Judgment in Stone**, **Close to Home**, **Evixion**, **Knock! Knock**); *loss of memory* (**Faustus Bidgood**, **Sonia**, **The Dead Father**, **Triptych**, **Memory Lapse At the Waterfront**, **As Seen on TV**, **Passiflora**, the **Arthur Lipsett retrospective**); *loss of purpose* (**The Final Battle**, **White Museum**); *loss of job* (**Sitting in Limbo**, **Overnight**); *loss of life* (**Linda Joy**, **Richard Cardinal**); *loss of case or caper* (**Confidential**, **Pouvoir intime**); *loss of youth* (**Waiting for the Parade**, **Close to Home**); *loss of mind* (**Dancing In the Dark**); and ultimately *loss of everything* (**Les Vidangeurs**). (Indeed about the only film in the program not directly concerned with some aspect of loss was Steven Denure and Chris Lowry's semi-experimental and occasionally spectacular documentary, **Ranch**, on environmental sculptor Alan Wood's sprawling Alberta art piece in homage to the Western.)

The ramifications of such a concentrated preoccupation with loss are far-reaching, not only in the general terms of contemporary cultural reflection as



• **The Wake** – “Falling now, falling at last, falling in place”

to the effects of media technology, but more immediately in the context of the role of film in Canadian identity theory on the one hand and the Canadian film industry's problematic relations with U.S. domination of the Canada-U.S. domestic market on the other. Since the question of the Americans in Canada was only directly addressed by two Perspective Canada films (**Déclin** and **Overnight**) and indirectly in **Les Vidangeurs** – in all three as an allegory of corruption – it may be worthwhile to momentarily move beyond the film program to note two further manifestations of loss (here *loss of identity*), both in the context of the industry Trade Forum at the festival. The first was offered Sept. 9 at the morning panel on new markets during which, with refreshing frankness, Toby Martin of New York program-syndicator Viacom told the Canadians that they had to try harder to produce better U.S.-imitation programming. “The only reason we come up here is money,” Martin stated, explaining, “We want U.S.-looking programming for less.” To the extent that Canadian producers are prepared to play by such U.S. market rules, they have a chance of gaining greater access to that major market, he said.

But how much further Canadian producers are prepared to make concessions to American perspectives became an issue at the Trade Forum debate on free-trade (Sept. 10) in which producer

Stephen Roth responded to Senator Joe McCarthy look-a-like Arthur Murphy of the University of Southern California. Murphy, after expressing the cliché that art knows no boundaries, threatened in no uncertain terms an immediate withdrawal of “United States motion-pictures” from Canada if any attempt was made to nationalize American-dominated film distribution in Canada. In his response, Roth, frankly admitting his own vested interest, stated that free-trade as presented by the Americans offered nothing more to the Canadian film and TV industry it did not already have, namely access to the U.S. The problem of Canadian cinema, Roth said, was not accessing the U.S., but Canada's own domestic market – “Why? Because the country is in the hands of Americans.” And shortly after, Roth offered the interesting – because combative – definition of culture as “an identifiable group under threat.”

Returning to the Perspective Canada program as the fragmentary cultural production of an identifiable group under threat, the problem becomes not so much which threat as which group? For on the basis of the films, there is no shortage of sociological groups all of which are shown as threatened: *youth* (**Sitting in Limbo**, **Close to Home**, **Welcome to the Parade**); *children* (**Loyalties**, **Richard Cardinal**, **Henri**); *women* (**Loyalties**, **Dancing in the Dark**); *filmmakers* (**Overnight**, **White**



• **Dancing in the Dark's** Martha Henry and Neil Munro

**Museum**) *male private investigators* (**Confidential**, **Triptych**); *visionary politicians* (**The Final Battle**); to the *total cultural system* itself (**Arthur Lipsett**, **Passiflora**, **Evixion**, **Les Vidangeurs**), which collapses in a spectacular mountain of garbage where human beings, dressed in Glad bags, are reduced to walking refuse: “The only difference between you and me,” says a garbage-man to a bus driver in Coudari's wonderful **Les Vidangeurs**, “is that your garbage gets on by itself.”

However, the catastrophe-haunted plunge into a state of chronic emergency with its consequent desperate refuge-seeking in images of nature (the ending of **Déclin**; Wieland's **Birds at Sunrise**, or McLuskie's **The Wake**) is not so much a sudden welling-forth of current global anxiety as it is the predominant underlying continuity of Canadian cultural expressionism (and, for that matter, political existence). In terms of the Perspective Canada program, Lipsett's films alone mark that continuity as being 25 years-old, as does Wieland's artistic and film practice, while Brittain's **The Champions** (of which **The Final Battle** in the program is the final chapter) reflects a parallel 20-year span that runs from the euphoria of early '60s Quebec nationalism to the suicidal cynicism of both Trudeau and Lévesque's last year in power. Brittain's epic irony suggests that the institutional stability of keeping the same men in office for long periods is no protection against manic cycles that alternate over-enthusiasm with acute despair (a boom-and-bust pattern familiar to Canadian film).

What was distinctive about Perspective Canada this year, then, was not so much the explicit recognition (still to come) that Canadian cinema, like Canadian literature, Canadian painting or Canadian philosophy, has specific continuities of its own, as the implicit discovery albeit fragmentary, of the value of our own garbage, so to speak. As Stephen Roth put it: “It is only from such a mix, producing good stuff and garbage, it is only out of that that great films can come.” Or in Darcus' **Overnight** where the Canadian Pornmakers, having just lost their Czech *auteur* to Hollywood, do nonetheless manage to rise above the occasion and produce a film that transcends pornography. Or in Stuart Clarfield's **Welcome To The Parade**, which if it is York's umpteenth remake of **Nobody Waved Goodbye** and is full of cinematic clichés, is nonetheless a film that manages to have a life of its own – a specifically Canadian and gloomy story about middle-class coming-of-age. Or in Leon Marr's **Dancing in the Dark**, a film which if blown out of all proportion by assinine comparisons to Bergman or Godard, is nevertheless a first feature of considerable directorial competence (and a superb performance from lead Martha Henry) that is above all true to its context: the repressed emotional landscape of Toronto (as opposed to that city's mediatized declension of itself as a powerhouse of postmodernity).

For it's in the ability to grapple with Canada's repressed emotional landscape, which begins or ends with the confrontation with that landscape, that Canadian cinema has both its past (stemming from an equivalent grappling in painting, literature and poetry),

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and so its only future. To judge by the Perspective Canada films, that grappling is heavily loaded with irony (the disjunction of words and images) as in Arcand's *Déclin* from which all spoken references to Canadian specificity have deliberately been removed. Or Carolyn McLuskie's extraordinary short à la Colville, *The Wake*, a glacial examination of the western landscape to a voiceover that says: "I went numb / Inside there was nothing / A vast plain, the landscape swirling / I wanted others to see the terrifying void." Or in *Loyalties* where Lily (Susan Wooldridge), the civilized foreigner, complains to her husband soon after arriving at Lac LaBiche that "It's so far away from everything, so forlorn," even though the domestic tragedy she is running from had preceded her to Canada (and she knows it).

Even when the attempt is made to expunge the landscape of its specificity, as in Bruce Pittman's *Confidential* (U.S. currency, New Hampshire plates), it still breaks through in production mistakes (accents, photos of royalty, Canadian stamps) that, with poetic justice, help wreck the film's credibility. Mike Hoolbloom in his experimental film *White Museum* pushes the irony to an opposite limit with his fascinating proposal for "a cinema without images."

However, it's not only at the level of imagery, visual or verbal, that the emotional grappling with landscape takes place. It's also generic, as Phil Hoffman's *?O, Zoo!* slyly demonstrates in examining the slippage from documentary to fiction. More generally, the Perspective Canada program reflected a curious Canadian struggle with the codes of film noir, ranging from Bev Brigham's pretentious *Triptych*, an attempt to feminize the genre; Pittman's *Confidential*, a quickie shot in 17 days in Owen Sound disguised as New Hampshire, all to no discernible purpose; or Yves Simoneau's commercial rollercoaster *Pouvoir intime*. Now there's nothing that prevents Canadian filmmakers with experimenting with all possible genres, though there's every likelihood that a genre film transplanted from one country to another will become something else entirely. Look, for example, at how the Italians revolutionized the Western. But it's because it isn't that — or anything — that *Confidential* is such a bad film — it begins nowhere, goes nowhere, and ends up nowhere — and conversely why Winnipeg filmmaker Guy Maddin's first film, *The Dead Father*, is so brilliant. Not only because it fuses together film noir, the horror film, the psychological drama, and the youth film with state-of-the-art Paizsian prairie postmodernism, along with a whole lot of thoroughly well-digested American production references from the '30s to the '50s, but manages to do all that in 30 minutes and remain a profound exploration of the Canadian emotional landscape.

If early Americans saw themselves as Adam in their new environment, Canadians saw themselves as the sons of Cain battling a hostile and forbidding land overseen by a vindictive and vengeful god. From the environment (a cold and remote deity) to government (a distant and uncaring central state) to parent (emotionally dead fathers) runs a direct line of continuity. From *Sitting in*

*Limbo* (Montreal), *The Wake* (B.C.), *Loyalties* (Alberta) or *Faustus Bidgood* (Nfld.), the theme of the absent, non-existent, lost, or violent (raping) father runs like an equally direct thread through the films. In one of the first scenes of *The Dead Father*, set in location the narrator tellingly identifies as the Dominion of Forgetfulness, the dead father lies in the living room table while the children eat peanut-butter sandwiches and play checkers beside him. The dead father also appears, cold and stiff, in the conjugal bed, as the wife wearily pulls the blanket over herself.

It is the adolescent son, in other words, the principal male descendent, who realizes that "my father was not

evidenced by the sympathy cards the family receives inscribed with the words "Thinking of you." But if memory is severed, you can't remember, or even think about what's lost, and what you can't remember passes into nothingness. "Jilted again," says the narrator, "we plunged into our new routines." However, haunted by images (shadows) of the dead father, the son decides that "there seemed no choice but to reclaim him once and for all." In "a night of great excess," he takes a spoon, goes to the graveyard where the father is sleeping, and begins to disgustedly spoon out the paternal stomach. As a result of this carnal expression of love (and trope on birth) the father res-

decline of the American empire, Canadian cinema has just barely begun to break through to some portion of the Canadian public and to its own themes. As Benjamin observed of *all* periods of decline, ours "is not so much an age of genuine artistic achievement as an age possessed of an unremitting artistic will...The form as such is within the reach of this will..." Certainly the 1986 Perspective Canada program testifies to the continuation and authenticity of that artistic will. Small comfort perhaps, but it does occur at a time when the problems of Canadian culture are increasingly being recognized less a particular to Canadians only as shared by all nations in the global technoculture, including Americans.

One of the most important political documentaries to emerge from the U.S. in recent years (where the documentary form is undergoing something of a renaissance) that screened at the Toronto Festival is New York filmmaker Barbara Margolis' *Are We Winning Mommy?: America and the Cold War*. Completed with the technical assistance of the National Film Board of Canada, *Are We Winning* explores a renunciation of the past not dissimilar to Canada's cultural attrition by U.S. media. Margolis focusses on the relations between technological form (the A-bomb), cultural form (the American media system) and cultural content (instant amnesia) in the post-nuclear United States. She examines the growth of the military-industrial complex Eisenhower warned against in his last speech as president, a global technological empire powered externally by the permanent invocation of the threat of imminent escalation of cold war to hot and internally by anti-Communist hysteria. The linkage between the two was provided by American media, for whom, as the legendary Fred Friendly of CBS explains, anti-Communism became a \$100 million-a-year industry. Six million Americans were screened by the state security apparatus; many were driven to suicide or had their careers destroyed; at public hearings, scores of others went through the ritual of renunciation of their personal past — "and the news media," as Friendly puts it, "particularly film and television, lived off that."

In the broader cultural context of media-driven techno-terrorism, that a Canadian producer like Stephen Roth speaks of "culture as an identifiable group under threat" and Canadian filmmakers from one end of the country to the other stubbornly persist in mapping out the artistic and emotional terrain of this largely unknown land, is an act of cultural resistance and an argument for the continuation and increase of Canadian culture that takes on an importance far beyond the immediate one of a film festival program.

#### NOTE

Citations from Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, Verso: London, 1985, pp. 46, 55. For a detailed study of the relationship between Canadian landscape, art and sensibility, see Gaile McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985.



• *The Dead Father* — an exploration of the Canadian emotional landscape

quite dead in the traditional sense — brief periods of recovery were common." Yet even during the brief periods of recovery, the father remains stern and remote, though the son is hopeful that clumsy exchanges of gifts (art?) might yet earn paternal approval. The wife too seeing that the father is "not quite dead" also turns hopeful enough to put on make-up, change her clothes, and appear less haggard. But the father keeps leaving, either to die again or go elsewhere: "Why did he prefer that address to his old one with us?" asks the son.

With abandonment and death comes the severing of memory, or at least the ritualization of memory into thought as

surets and, taking the son to the attic, now presents him with a gift — the album of ancestral photographs. Then he climbs into the trunk and *finally* dies, as the Latin for 'the end' appears on-screen. One could scarcely ask for a more graphic description of the agenda for "an imminent cineatic" than this.

To be sure, one film or half-a-dozen does not change anything in the structures of Canadian displacement that have far stronger histories. But even these fragmentary elements point to the possibility of the emergence of greater compositions. If we are, in fact, in the

photo: Winnipeg Film Group