

# Seven days in June

## Banff Television Festival '88

BY BOB REMINGTON

There is an absolutely devastating BBC documentary called *Fourteen Days in May* in which a British film crew follow a condemned black man through his final two weeks on death row in Mississippi. There are serious doubts as to the man's guilt, but clemency for a black convicted of raping a white woman and killing a law officer in Mississippi is about as remote as summer snow.

I paced the room as I watched life tick down for this young man, painfully wondering if the BBC crew had actually been allowed into the gas chamber itself. Fifteen minutes before he was to be executed, with his family around him in death's waiting room, a member of the BBC film crew stepped out from behind the camera and said goodbye. We were spared the inhumanity, but not the agony. In 90 minutes we had come to know the man and his executioners, and we marked our feelings with tears.

The scene took place in early May during the selection committee process for the Banff Television Festival. Five of us had come to Banff to screen some 450 programs submitted as possible candidates for competition in the nine-year-old international TV program competition. Our job was to whittle the number of entries down for the final jury, forwarding our choices without recommendation. The ultimate decision on winners would be the jury's alone.

A kind of tense camaraderie exists between the selection committee and the jury at a program competition like Banff. The committee has its favorites, which don't always gel with the final choices of the jury. I felt *Fourteen Days in May* should have been a finalist for a major prize like "best of festival" or one of the so-called "special jury awards" for programs of exceptional merit.

Not only did *Fourteen Days in May* fail to make the list of contenders for a major prize, it did not even win its category. Such are the dilemmas in any program competition. Out of respect for the integrity of the process, you can only shrug your shoulders, offer to buy a jury member a refreshment at the bar, and proceed to demand answers while refraining from wringing his neck.

There was no quibbling, however, on the Grand Prize winner at Banff. Without sounding self-serving (well, perhaps just a bit self-serving) I picked *Baka: People of the Rain Forest*, as the best

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Channel Four's Jeremy Isaacs, honoured with an award for lifetime achievement, with Banff foundation executive director Carrie Hunter

of anything I had seen in pre-selection. This independently-made program for Britain's acclaimed Channel Four was simply an outstanding example of debunking stereotypes. For two years, a film crew lived with the Baka pygmies of east Cameroon, coming away with a portrait of an almost Stone Age family who were people, not savages. Wonderful music, unobtrusive cameras, it was compelling anthropology that was as engrossing as any make-believe prime-time drama.

In the final analysis, the jury matched my choices in six of 10 categories. Not bad, given the vagaries of culture and taste that exist between a kid from Edmonton and seven jurors from around the world. It was especially gratifying to see Canadian programs running second only to British productions in the TV derby at Banff. Britain took six awards; Canada four.

The final count does raise one of my major concerns with Banff. There is a fair amount of America-bashing that takes place at this festival, and I wonder how much chance the *St. Elsewheres* and the *L. A. Laws* and *The Wonder Years* have in this arena. That's not to say American programs haven't won, or that Banff organizers have an anti-American bias. Nothing could be further from the truth. *Hill Street Blues* has its share of Rockies, and MTM Productions was honored last year with the festival's

outstanding achievement award.

While it is true that American television tends to paint everything with broad strokes instead of employing subtleties, one wonders how an absolutely top-rate TV movie like ABC's *God Bless The Child* or the eloquently written and charming *The Wonder Years* can come away emptyhanded. In the international effort to build dams against the rushing floodwaters of American culture, let's hope the gates will remain open for at least a trickle of America's best.

Despite this nagging concern, there's no doubt that Banff is a first-class affair. The festival has come a long way from the days when Dinah Shore was given an Award of Excellence and CTV entered *This Week in the CFL* as a documentary. Today, the Banff festival is mercifully short on star appeal. People go to see,

not to be seen. Peter Ustinov picked up this year's Award of Excellence, and Soviet TV smoothie Vladimir Pozner wowed delegates with some perceptive comments about TV news East and West. But, for the most part, Banff remains an invigorating think-tank that stimulates the mind, not the ego.

There is also a fair amount of backroom commerce taking place at Banff, although it is not, nor will it ever be, a marketplace like MIP. It was difficult to engage in any journalistic skulduggery at the festival this year, but not for lack of trying. Everyone I spoke with, including some closet critics of the festival in the past, said 1988 was one of the most productive business years at Banff.

Next year, its 10th anniversary, the Banff Television Festival can be excused for throwing itself a party.

**Grand Prize / Best of the Festival (\$5,000)**

*Baka: People of the Rainforest*  
DJA River Films U.K.

**Special Jury Award (\$1,500)**

*Foster Child*  
NFB, Canada

*Tudawali*  
SBS/Barron Films, Australia

*State of Welfare*  
VPRO TV, Netherlands

**Quebec-Alberta Prize (\$5,000)**

*Ravel*  
Rhombus Media, Canada

**Best Television Feature**

*Shadow on the Earth*  
BBC, U.K.

**Best Continuing Series**

*Degrassi Junior High*  
Playing with Time, Taylor Productions, CBC, Canada

**Best Social & Political Documentary**

*The Falklands War: The Untold Story*  
Yorkshire Television, U.K.

**Best Limited Series**

*The Horse's Eye*  
Sveriges Television, Sweden

**Best Performance Special**

*Music in Camera: Facade*  
BBC, U.K.

**Best Television Comedy**

*The Comic Strip Presents... The Strike*  
The Comic Strip Ltd. U.K.



**Baka: People of the rain forest**

**Best Children's Program**

*L'Homme Qui Plantait Des Arbres*  
SRC, Canada

**Best Arts Documentary**

*Bopha!*  
Daniel Riesenfeld Productions, U.S.A.

**Best Drama Special**

*Sweet As You Are*  
BBC, U.K.

**Best Popular Science Program**

*Vista: The Greenhouse Effect*  
TVOntario, Canada

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1988 Edinburgh Film Festival

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A Film by Ron Mann



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friends  
at  
Film Arts*

# Yorkton '88

*Awards controversy leaves bitter aftertaste*

BY PATRICK DAVITT

**N**owadays, whenever any of the national media mention Saskatchewan, it's usually because they want to mention the drought that has burned into the collective Prairie consciousness the image of farmers dragging their plows through soil that looks more like beach sand than rich, cropworthy loam. In such a milieu, it shouldn't have come as such a surprise when the Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival had a crop failure of its own, in the burning heat of controversy.

Filmmakers from across Canada had planted the seeds of hope when they entered their films at the festival, hoping they would harvest a Golden Sheaf award or two. After the pre-selection committee separated the wheat from the chaff (sorry), there were but 77 productions left in the running for 22 awards. Seven of those awards were to be given as Craft Awards, and 15 more in various film categories.

A certain amount of controversy is to be expected whenever awards get handed out. But that's nothing compared to the fofoeraw you get when awards aren't handed out.

Confused? Good. You're not alone. And it gets crazier.

Not only were there six Golden Sheaf awards left over once the awards ceremony had ended Saturday night, they were one grand Prize short. And a new documentary award changed hands even before it was given.

Earlier in the week, Lawrence O'Toole, the jury chairman, told the *Regina Leader-Post* newspaper that there were going to be categories in which no awards would be made, explaining that they simply couldn't award prizes "that weren't deserved." And, true to its word, the jury - O'Toole, actress Marie Tifo, animator Wendy Tilby, filmmaker Peter Bryant, and documentary-maker Martin Duckworth - left six Golden Sheafs in their golden granaries on awards night. The six categories left out of the awards were: documentary under 30 minutes, experimental, fine arts, health/medicine, nature/environment and music video.

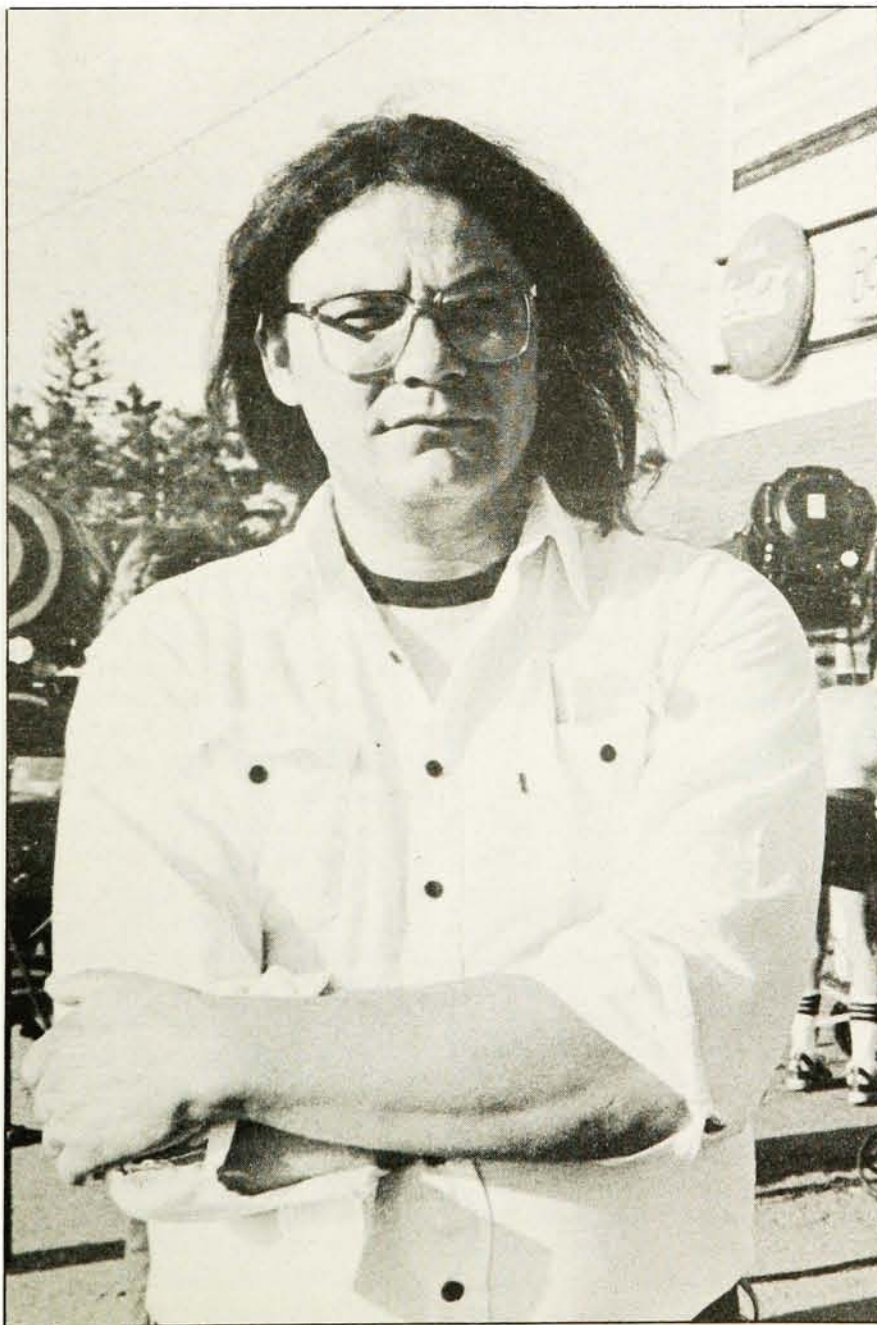
Ian Reid, the executive director of the festival, said the jury was within its rights not to give awards it deemed undeserved. "We hire the jury to do a job for us, according to the rules of the game. That's what gives a festival integrity, and that's what has given this festival 40 years of respect." He said the rules of the game include a

non-award provision, although it is used rarely. Last year's festival missed just one award.

O'Toole said he knew the jury's decision would leave entrants in the affected categories "very unhappy, but anybody who wins a Golden Sheaf here this year will know their film is extraordinary."

While the ceremony crowd was still buzzing - not to mention grumbling - over the missed awards, the jury threw another curve by splitting the Award of Excellence, the festival's top prize, for the first time in its history, dividing

**GIVEN THAT ENTRANTS IN THE SIX UNAWARDED CATEGORIES HAD NO WINNER BY WHICH TO MEASURE THEIR OWN WORK, THEY ARGUED, THERE SHOULD HAVE BEEN SOME MECHANISM TO ALLOW THEM TO GET MORE OUT OF THE TRIP TO YORKTON THAN SUNBURNS, HANGOVERS AND PEROGIES.**



Director Gil Cardinal went looking for his Métis roots in *Foster Child*, winner of the NFB-Kathleen Shannon documentary award

the award between the drama *L'Emprise* and *Foster Child*, a documentary. *L'Emprise*, a Les Productions du Verseau/Société Radio-Canada co-production, was the big winner at the festival, earning five Golden Sheaf awards in addition to its share of the top honour. The film won awards for best drama over 30 minutes, best performance (Geneviève Bujold), best cinematography (Sylvain Brault), best sound editing (Dominique Chartrand, Martin Fournier, Alice Wright) and best director (Michel Brault). Screenwriter Luc Héту collected all of the awards on behalf of *L'Emprise*.

*Foster Child*, a National Film Board co-production with independent director Gil Cardinal, was named best documentary over 30 minutes, and cinematographer James Jeffrey was given a certificate of merit for his work on the film. The film also won the National Film Board-Kathleen Shannon Award for documentary, but only after a last-minute emergency meeting involving the jury, some festival officials and Shannon herself.

The award, inaugurated this year, is given to a documentary production "that provides an opportunity for people outside the dominant culture to express their perspective." An early list of the awards, prepared in advance for deadline-conscious reporters who wanted to send dispatches to the east, said the Shannon award had been given to *Break the Cycle*, a production about domestic violence, produced and directed by Debbie Cartmer and entered by Esprit Films of St. Catharines, Ont. Festival officials confirmed that the award had originally been given to *Break the Cycle*. But after the meetings which ended just two hours before the awards were to be handed out, the Shannon went to *Foster Child*, a film about Cardinal's efforts to discover his Métis roots and cultural heritage. "The jury did change the award at the meeting, from *Break the Cycle* to *Foster Child*," said Catherine Degryse, the festival's public relations officer.

Jurors interviewed said the award was changed because its qualifications had been "misunderstood." Juror Duckworth said, "The criteria (for the award) were clarified, and we realized we had made the wrong choice." The criteria, as published in the festival program, said the winning production should be "an independently-made documentary production."

*Break the Cycle* was an independent production. Before presenting the award, Shannon said that the criterion should have read, "a film by an independent filmmaker." She said, "An

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## Coveting the Golden Sheaf

BY RON HALLIS

Lawrence O'Toole, one of the awards' jurors at the 1988 edition of the Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival, has proven, at least to himself, it is possible to judge an entire film after seeing only the first five minutes. He and the jury admitted to a gathering of festivalgoers that they had not screened some of the "nominated" films beyond the first five minutes because it quickly became clear to them that they were not watching "award-winning material."

One wonders if Mr. O'Toole wrote his film reviews for *Maclean's Magazine* after seeing only the first five minutes.

At Yorkton '88, one's amazement was seldom left untended.

Six categories of nominated films were ignored at the awards banquet without a single word of explanation. Several filmmakers present were left sitting in stunned silence at their tables, having travelled halfway across Canada at their own expense to "share in this celebration of Canadian filmmaking" and experience a little "prairie hospitality."

I just spoke to a young Montreal filmmaker whose excellent film was nominated in the Experimental category and who tried to scrape together enough money to travel to Yorkton. He said he fell "a few dollars short." While he was trying to raise the money, he had no idea his category was being 86'd by the jury. Not only did he save himself some money but also the insult of seeing his fine film screened at 2:00 a. m. before an audience of four people in the Harvest Room of the Holiday Inn.

It seems the Canadian short film industry has grittily come of age. Yorkton has been dragged out into cruel world by Mr. O'Toole and fellow judges Martin Duckworth, Marie Tifo, Wendy Tilby and Peter Bryant. O'Toole, the so-called "New York Critic," has come home to roost doing invaluable service in protecting the purity of the "coveted" Golden Sheaf Award, although some may now argue that a "nomination" for said award has become a dubious honor, spotlighting some films for awards, others for besmirching.

Along with other filmmakers whose films were "nominated," I was warmly invited to the festival by its executive director, Ian Reid. He also informed me that the pre-selection committee had "loved" my film and the festival staff would be "honoured" to have me. I must admit I did end up feeling somewhat "had".

By the time the authors of films in the "doomed" categories had arrived in Yorkton, the jury had secretly made its decisions and didn't have the courage or consideration to

inform those whose films had been disqualified. We were informed by default that the first five minutes of some of our films were not as good as the first five minutes of films in the awarded categories or the first five minutes of films that ever would be given awards in any categories in the future. (The American underground classic *Twice a Man* by Gregory Markopoulos would have fared poorly at O'Toole's Yorkton, beginning as it does with several minutes of black leader accompanied by the sound of rain.) I was offered the following explanation from judge Martin Duckworth for the axing of the Best Documentary Under 30 Minutes category: "If the festival wants to give awards to films like yours they had better get another jury because this one wanted to see innovative use of the form. Your film was too traditional."

Unfortunately, the only clue to what constitutes "innovative use of the form" that Mr. Duckworth could give in his somewhat desultory contribution to the festival workshop on New Documentary was that it should be "reflective."

"The only thing new about documentary is that it's dying," he added. The workshop went on to become a collective carthartic lament on the old problem of funding and exhibition of independent documentary films in Canada. This workshop could have been a lot more interesting had it been announced at the outset that the venerable jury had already decided the films in the Best Documentary under 30 minutes category did not deserve adjudication.

For the filmmakers who make short documentaries and are totally marginalized, being snubbed at Yorkton '88 was just another low blow dealt by an arrogant and insensitive establishment.

In conclusion, I would like to make the following suggestions to the organizers of the 1989 Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival.

1. Compel the judges to make awards in all announced categories of "nominees" or state clearly on the festival application form that awards may not be made in certain categories at the discretion of the jury. By signing the application form the filmmaker accepts the conditions stated therein. Like a contract, it should work both ways.
2. Recruit judges with the stamina to watch all the pre-selected films from beginning to end or divide the judging between two sets of judges.
3. If the judges refuse to award in certain categories, the original pre-selection committee should be asked to break the deadlock so as to avoid the kind of insult to the creative process that happened at Yorkton this year.



Claude Gauthier and Geneviève Bujold in Michel Brault's *L'Emprise*, a drama about domestic violence

independent filmmaker should not be disqualified from institutional support."

Cardinal received financial support from the NFB to produce his film, and will now also get the NFB's \$1,000 cash prize that goes along with the Shannon award.

Neither Duckworth nor anyone else would say who "clarified" the criteria at the meeting to make *Foster Child* eligible. One festival official said it was Shannon herself, but she denied any knowledge of the proceedings that had led to the award change.

Meanwhile, the six unawarded categories had some entrants steaming, especially one disgruntled man who had come to the festival from Montreal. After the awards, he approached jury chairman O'Toole and said that the jury had been "sleazy" in not awarding prizes in all the categories. He declined to be interviewed.

By the next morning most of the disgruntled filmmakers had cooled off somewhat, but there remained a feeling that the festival should look at its rules and structure to allow filmmakers a greater opportunity for critiques of their work.

Given that entrants in the six unawarded categories had no winner by which to measure their own work, they argued, there should have been some mechanism to allow them to get more out of the trip to Yorkton than sunburns, hangovers and perogies.

At a forum held on the afternoon of the awards ceremony, several people said they got little sense of "feedback" during the five days of the festival. The members of the jury said that they had experimented with tape-recording their comments during the judging process, but had found the system clumsy, cumbersome and ultimately unworkable. They also said that written comments would have been far too time-consuming. After the festival, juror Peter Bryant of Vancouver said by phone that future juries should consider giving detailed critiques of selected films, reasoning that established producers like the CBC don't need the feedback as much as smaller, independent producers. He disagreed with the argument that a lack of awards meant there was no standard for filmmakers. "There have been winners in other

years, and they are excellent films," he said. "If anyone needs a standard they can look at some of those films, in any category."

At the forum, Duckworth suggested that the festival should either be moved to a larger centre or turned into a retreat, where artists and jurors could meet in seclusion for intensive and intimate discussion of the craft. "If it's going to be an award ceremony then it should take place in an electric atmosphere," he said. "If it's going to be a place where we can talk about films, then let's do that."

Besides the awards, there were several workshops and seminars, including a workshop on the New Documentary, led by Duckworth and Scottish filmmaker Timothy Neat, who also hosted a seminar-and-screening session on some of his films: *Time Is A Country*, *Hallaig* and *The Tree of Liberty*.

Vancouver animator Hugh Foulds gave a seminar on animation in the classroom, pointing out the advantages of using animation to motivate students, especially those whose academic skills were not as advanced as their peers. The seminar was run in conjunction with the Saskatchewan Society for Education through Art.

It appears likely that the festival will expand its screening facilities, perhaps cutting back on public screenings in favour of increased facilities in which festivalgoers can view films from the festival catalogue. There was such a facility at the festival (dubbed *The Marketplace*), but it was almost always full to the brim and lacked an organized waiting-list system.

One change that appears certain is a new award for debut films. This year's jury decided that there was an element of disparity in making novice filmmakers compete with established artists in the existing categories, so the five jurors will dig into their own pockets to create a cash award for next year's festival. If all goes well, the award will become permanent, with corporate sponsorship or with each jury contributing money for the following year's award.

Other award-winners were: *The Man Who Planted Trees* (directed by Frederic Back) for animation; *Inside Out* (Lori Spring) for drama under 30 minutes; *Les Enfants de la rue: Fernand* (Roger Tetreault) for instructional or educational; and *Shooting Stars* (Allan Stein) for sports and recreation.

In addition, the jury moved *A Child's Christmas in Wales* (Don McBrearty) from drama over 30 minutes to production for children, where it won; *Dancing Around the Table* (Maurice Bulbulian) from documentary to public affairs, where it won; and *Water for Tonoumasse* (Garry Beitel) from educational to promotional, where it won.

Other individual awards went to John Tucker for his original music in *Inside Out*; to Louise Dugal for her picture editing of *Oscar Thiffault*; and to Sharon Riis for the script of *The Wake*.

## A view from the jury box

BY MARTIN DUCKWORTH

I have always viewed Yorkton as one of the few remaining bastions of the Canadian short film, which has been severely battered in recent years by the tightening grip of commercial TV. Unlike the other major showcases for Canadian shorts – Banff, and the Gemini and Gêmeaux awards – Yorkton places artistry ahead of marketability by not requiring entries to have first played on television. So I felt really honoured when asked to sit on the jury.

But now that it's over, I have to say that I think for Yorkton to achieve its full potential, some major changes will have to be made.

If it is going to remain a national competition, I think it is going to have to move to a nearby city – Regina, Saskatoon, or Winnipeg – in order to generate the kind of razzamatazz that a competition needs – big crowds, stars, good press coverage, and a program full of the best productions of the year. This time there was a healthy number of great films in documentaries and dramas over 30 minutes, but a real shortage of good submissions in all categories under 30 minutes – drama, documentary, animated, and experimental; there were no film reviews in the press; the one big "star", Marie Tifo from Québec, felt quite out of place; and the attendance varied from 10 to 40 spectators per show, with most of them being professionals in the film industry from out of town. That is quite a letdown for a filmmaker who has travelled some distance to participate in a festival whose reputation was built on the basis of strong support from the local community (Jim Lysyshyn tells me that 1200 local people would keep two commercial theatres packed in the early years of the festival).

But do Canadian short-filmmakers really need a competition? I am starting to think not. If we are to play a role in preserving a distinctive Canadian culture, now increasingly menaced by the free enterprisers and free traders, what we may need more than anything else is a competition-free forum where we can assess one another's work and build networks of support. This is what the Grierson seminar used to do, of course, before it moved out of Niagara-on-the-Lake and Brockton and into Toronto in an attempt to turn itself into more of a "festival." There may have been bigger audiences, but the filmmakers lost the time and the space that they needed for critical exchange between screenings, and lost therefore their chance to build continuity and community.

I think that Yorkton could become the Grierson seminar of the West. There were two events in this year's festival that demonstrated that the possibilities for such a seminar are there.

The first was the barbeque outing at the

Wildlife Federation Clubhouse a few miles out of town, on the second evening of the festival. Baseball and volleyball, followed by the screening of Lorne Bailey's marvelously wacky film *The Milkman Cometh*, made everyone feel at home. I wonder now if the whole festival shouldn't be held in that Clubhouse, instead of in the soul-less Holiday Inn downtown. Holed up in that lakeshore lodge, surrounded by the magpies, the gophers, the train whistles and the open skies of the prairies, it's easy to imagine how 50 or more filmmakers, educators, students, community activists and journalists could stimulate one another enormously through critical exchanges between screenings.

The only subsequent event that fully capitalized on the spirit of community created that evening was a workshop held two days later entitled "Researching the Documentary". Organized by the Saskatchewan Women's Film Network, a couple of dozen aspiring young filmmakers were attracted from around the prairies to join us that Saturday morning to hear Brigitte Berman (*Artie Shaw*) and Barbara Evans (*Prairie Women*) make very practical suggestions for preparing for a documentary shoot. Chaired by Kathleen Shannon, the workshop was a model of how useful film gatherings can be when put into the hands of those whom it is intended to benefit. Maybe the Saskatchewan Women's Film Network should be asked to program the whole festival next year!

The trouble with the other workshops during the four days of this year's festival was that they were all designed to screen and discuss films by visiting luminaries. The only scheduled opportunity that the competing filmmakers were given for a critical exchange about their own work was at a gathering on the afternoon of the fourth day entitled "Film Critiques by Adjudicators." Here what could have been a useful discussion was stifled by the requirement that the winning films not be named until the award ceremony that evening. All we could do was talk in abstract terms.

Without a programme designed to build a sense of solidarity among attending filmmakers, and in the absence of any sign of interest in the film programme by the local population, it was almost inevitable that the only filmmakers to leave town satisfied would be the award winners. As a jurist, it was really a painful thing to have to face fellow filmmakers, comrades in the struggle to preserve a distinctive Canadian culture, some of them personal friends, and to justify the jury's decision that they were "losers".

What makes a film "good," after all, is only a matter of personal taste. A different jury would probably have come up with different

"winners." The five of us who were thrown together this year all happened to be "film-as-art" oriented. That diminished the chances of some excellent advocacy-type documents like *Break the Cycle* by Debbie Cartmer, about wife-beating, and *In Support of the Human Spirit*, by Jennifer Hodge, about the John Howard Society; some excellent presentations of events in the fine arts, such as *Guitar*, by Barbara Sweete, about the Toronto Guitar Festival, *Danny Grossman*, by Moze Mossanen, about the Toronto dancer, and *Chopi Music of Mozambique*, by Ron Hallis; some excellent television shows like *Eggbert*, about teenage pregnancy, from CBC's *Degrassi Junior High* series, *The Forgotten*, about brain-damaged victims of traffic accidents, from CBC's *Fifth Estate*, and *Greenhouse Effect*, about changes in the earth's atmosphere, from TVOntario's *VISTA* series; and some excellent information-pieces like *Au clair de l'ovule*, by Louise Mondoux, about new technologies in human reproduction, and *Nous sommes assis sur un volcan*, by Suzanne Côté, Norman Thibault and Jean Gagnon, about Bishop Tutu's visit to Quebec. All these films serve a useful purpose, and are not helped by being considered non-winners.

Then there were the entries that showed great artistic promise but which were overshadowed by films made by people with more experience in the craft – for example, the animated film *The Crow and the Canary*, by Arnie Lipsey; the documentaries *Those Roos Boys* by Barbara Boyden, and *They Look a Lot Like Us*, by Bonnie Dickie; the experimental films *Gercure*, by Jeanne Crepeau, *Illumination*, by Mark Morgenstern; and *Waving*, by Ann Marie Fleming; and the short dramas *End of the Game*, by Michelle Bjornson, *Heartline*, by Will Dixon, *Meandres*, by Norman Thibault, and *Lamento pour un homme de lettres*, by Pierre Jutras.

Serving on a jury is, of course, a privileged experience. The intimate relations that develop between jurors as they share the strains and joys of their work are the same that bind a film crew together on location. By the time it is over, you have made friends for life. I will always cherish Wendy's ability to articulate the ebbs and flows of film language, Peter's strong sense of fairness, Marie's immediate response to the lights and shades of new insights, and Larry's ability to place contradictory things in order.

I see no reason why it shouldn't be possible to develop those kinds of close relations with all the filmmakers who present films at Yorkton, simply by placing them in the same comfortable room for a few days, and scheduling critical exchanges between them after each screening. Maybe the jurors could be kept not as prize-pickers, but as commentators and discussion-starters. It might help reinstate Yorkton as the pioneer festival it once was. ●

# Floating on becalmed waters

Cannes 1988

BY MARC GERVAIS

The intent of the Cannes Film Festival authorities, so it is claimed, was to bring the Festival back to earth after last year's extraordinary 40th anniversary bash. They succeeded, I am unhappy to report, beyond their expectations. Cannes 1988 was a festival floating on becalmed waters, with nary a ripple of excitement, enthusiasm or significance.

One thing for sure, the refrain heard the last half-dozen or more years is now grown menacing: where has the *Festival* gone? The Market "realities" of Cannes now totally overwhelm the festivities side. It has reached the point where the buyers, sellers, distributors, deal-makers are complaining that the Festival lasts too long – all of this, of course, in terms of the law of diminishing returns and of overall marketing efficiency.

Long gone are the days when a major facet – and surely a most delightful one for those of us who still stargaze – was the constant mixing of communities (actors, directors, producers, critics, etc.) at film showings, in cafés, bars, seminars, parties, on the street. The talk was *film*, not deals; and one had the feeling of an enormous vitality, and effusion of creativity worldwide. Now it is each one in his or her own sphere, busy, busy, scurrying, ferreting, working. The Big Names are now only names, reduced to the role of communities parcelled out to sell the product, hiding out briefly in the mountain villas or in Antibes resorts, their computerized appearances determined by agents, PR types, and the like.

Succumbing to nostalgia, perhaps, I found myself humming, time and again, Charles Trenet's song used by François Truffaut in *Baisers Volés*: "Que reste-t-il de nos amours?" And that, man, was sad.

Nostalgia may be the wrong word. Rather, it may well be a loving lament for what film can be, what it can do, what marvelous things it has done in the past. That feeling, fortunately, has not totally deserted Cannes. Truffaut himself seemed still to be with us in spirit, his face peering out of bookshops all over the place (announcing his "Correspondence"). The British, who have had the most impressive national presence of any country at Cannes

these last few years, did their bit again by honouring, in a dinner gala, one of their most distinguished figures, the octogenarian David Lean. The Swedes were doing their thing by promoting an impressive tribute (in a special edition of their film journal *Chaplin*) to Ingmar Bergman, and also a beautiful documentary, called *Directed by Andrei Tarkovski*, on the creator (now deceased) of *The Sacrifice* by that film's editor (and friend of Tarkovski), Michal Leszczylowski. And from Germany, Ron and Dorothea Holloway presented their excellent documentary on the leader of the new movement in U.S.S.R. film, director Elem Klimov, and on his deceased wife, the dazzling actress/film director Larissa Shepetko. All of these, to be sure, stand out as reminders of what film can be.

Cannes '88 proved rather uninspiring where it counts most: in the quality of the films presented. What Ettore Scola, president of the official jury, said of the official competition held for the vast ensemble of films presented: there were a decent number of rather good films, but a total lack of anything approaching the masterpiece category – the kind of thing you want to write home about (as, for example, last year's stunning revelations from the U.S.S.R.).

Some explained this sad state of affairs by blaming the various Cannes selection committees. The reason, however, probably lies deeper in the objective reality – in the general worldwide quality of the last year's most recent products. The better films admittedly shared a certain stylishness, an academic correctness of form and structure. Most of them expressed a decent concern for human beings, their problems (mostly of the heart or the psyche) and their desires to live happily. But in depth, drive, energy, urgency, the willingness to take a chance, to be different, to re-invent one's own film language, the films of Cannes '88 came up relatively empty.

Where was the conviction, the dedication, the power? A few exceptions, blessedly; but generally the ability to excite, or even to antagonize, was absent. Nowhere was this more in evidence than in the prize for "artistic achievement," voted to the most outrageous con artist of them all, Peter Greenaway, for doing his naughty, naughty, British things in *Drowning By Numbers* – but all of it *déjà vu*, Greenaway's clever nihilism neutered by its predictable, repetitious strategies already explored in his previous films. Take ability to shock and to surprise and to befuddle away from a Greenaway movie and what have you left?

To concentrate, then, on the particular films shown, herein are comments on some of the bits and pieces that may or may not give some kind of kaleidoscopic overview, and may help balance the rather negative tone, so far, of this article.

Over the years, France, the U.S., Britain and Italy have benefitted by the overweening number of their films invited to the big official manifestation, whether intrinsic merit has warranted it or not. So, on to the Big Four, as seen by Cannes.

**BRITAIN.** Britain once again did well, very much in the forefront. There was the David Lean tribute, the Festival's most prestigious occasion. Greenaway's *Drowning By Numbers*, as mentioned, garnered a minor award. James Dearden, son of the legendary director Basil, made a fine directorial debut with *Pascali's Island*, a nice, stylish story about foreigners in Turkey on the eve of World War I, beautifully acted by Ben Kingsley, Charles Dance, and Helen Mirren. By all accounts, one of the best-received films in the entire Festival was one I missed, Terence Davies' *Distant Drums*, *Distant Lives*, a sort of not-so-funny British version of Woody Allen's *Radio Days*.



Clint Eastwood (left) directs best actor-winner Forest Whitaker (right) and Sam Wright in *Bird*

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**U.S.A.** The U.S. maintained its standing as the world's leading producer of movies. It seems superfluous, in this report, to comment on films which may have already been seen in Canada, but clearly Robert Redford's *The Milagro Beanfield War* with its intelligence, humour, poetry, and social dedication, had few peers. Redford's brief personal appearance – on the way back from Russia with three of his children ("I happened to be in the neighbourhood") – was Cannes' highlight for 1988; and the charming, charismatic, articulate Redford lived up to the occasion. So did Clint Eastwood, for that matter. Gracious, elegant, soft-spoken, Eastwood brings a certain dignity to his real-life presence; and his movie, *Bird* – a sombre study of jazz's brilliant, addicted Charlie Parker – deserved the two awards it received (one of them for Forest Whitaker as best actor). Rounding out the three big U.S. offerings, the George Lucas/Ron Howard fantasy, *Willow*, ended the Festival on a note of mega-energy and reckless fun. Chock-full of allusions to literature, the Bible; Hobbits, other Lucas and Spielberg epics, and dedicated to a sort of mild fascistic cult of the warrior and the beauty of violence (who knows, some presidents might love it), *Willow* is definitely *not* for the kiddies. But then how can you deny the astounding special effects, the breathtaking beauty of the Welsh and New Zealand locations, the crazy fun and energy, and Jean Marsh's astounding performance as the most evil witch of them all? In a totally different vein, Gary Sinise's *Miles From Home* begins wonderfully, reenacting Khrushchev's visit to Iowa in the '50s. But then, succumbing to an all-too-prevalent tendency in American cinema, *Miles* gradually degenerates into another Richard Gere foray into the world of the dim-minded, violent, semi-psychoic loser. Far removed from this was the immense compassion of *Dear America*, Bill Couturie's collage of real letters written by American boys who fought in Vietnam: actual footage, pop music of those times, and the voice-over readings of the moving epistles by a multitude of leading American actors. We are reminded that three million U.S. soldiers went to Vietnam, that 300,000 were wounded, and that 58,000 were killed. But can true enlightenment, however unpleasant, come from this sympathy, when HBO, the producer of this film, refused to allow Couturie to create any context or explanation whatever, not even to mention that some two million Vietnamese also perished as a result of that action?

**FRANCE.** The host country may have reached its all-time low this year with Luc Besson's *Le Grand Bleu*, a kind of Club Med ethics/aesthetics/philosophy concoction, and Francis Girod's *L'Enfance de l'art*, an embarrassing updating of *A Star Is Born*. Fortunately, however, Claire Denis did partially retrieve a shattered French reputation with *Chocolat*, an intelligent, low-key

tale of some French settlers in Cameroon shortly before that country achieved its independence. And coming from quite another planet, Jean-Luc Godard descended once more upon an unsuspecting Cannes with two half-hour episodes of his made-for-TV *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, random musing on film and anything else, some of it funny and clever, some of it jejune, much of it a put-on, a kind of televised lecture on Communications *à la Godard*. Contemplating the French output, one indeed wondered *que reste-t-il* from the good old days of French cinema, those good old days which, in a sense, still cast their spell on Paris today, where film viewing is still a rich, exciting activity, a veritable treasure trove of choices of the best works of the past and of the present as nowhere else in the world, the irony being that *today's* French output, by and large, is so relatively lacklustre, so relatively denuded of the creative spirit – a testimonial, perhaps, to a culture that has lost its vitality, a prey to its own almost total dedication to consumerism.

**ITALY.** Astoundingly, there was no Italian film in the official competition; and everywhere there were reports about the Italian cinema and its present state of crisis. One hopes that the malaise is temporary. Or is it that Italian cultural life is going through a paralysis even more acute than France's? Big questions, these, far beyond the strictly cinematic.

**GERMANY.** Italy did share, via the co-production route, in *Fear and Love*, by Germany's Margarethe von Trotta, a contemporary version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, replete with feminist overtones – and, in spite of a penchant for the melodramatic, one of the very best films to be seen in Cannes this year. Another fine offering from West Germany was Thomas Brasch's *Welcome to Germany*, an extremely interesting exploration of the psychotic effects still ravaging both German and Jewish culture because of the Holocaust, with a strong performance by Tony Curtis as a Hollywood director returning to Berlin. Add to that the teaming again of Germany's Klaus Maria Brandauer and Hungarian director Istvan Szabo (both of *Mephisto* fame) for the finale of their *tour de force* trilogy on Nazi Germany and you get the impression of a good German film year, even if their latest collaboration, *Hannussen*, strains a bit much for brilliance, at once too strident, too self-indulgent, and too familiar.

**SPAIN.** For some reason, Spanish cinema has never amounted to much, except in the work of that brilliant rascal, Luis Buñuel – and in any case he was forced to do most of his work somewhere else. Cannes nonetheless insists on inviting Spanish movies to the official competition, especially if it happens to be Carlos Saura who has made the movie, *any* movie, in the preceding year. So, Saura's *El Dorado*, a big,

lavish, lushly photographed epic drowning in historical histrionics was on the menu. True to form, it proved not nearly as interesting as many movies from other places, including Argentina's *Sur*, by Fernando Solanas (prize for best director), André Delvaux' pictorially breath-taking, but ponderous, *L'Oeuvre au noir* (Belgium), and a grim, powerful, deeply human study of murder and capital punishment, the Polish *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, which richly deserved the award it won (third best film) for Krzysztof Keilowski.

There were the usual, not-numerous offerings from other countries, ranging from Japan, once so extraordinarily rich in film creativity but for years now a spiritually bankrupt, pathetic shadow of its former self, to India, to smaller countries with very tenuous film histories. There is not a great deal to report from these areas, at least from my experience at Cannes. And this applies even I feel, to China's *The King of the Children*, by Chen Kaige, a story of a school teacher during Mao's cultural revolution, witnessing prudently to the Republic of China's new political climate, but more interesting for its relative openness than for its cinematic interest.

**AUSTRALIA / NEW ZEALAND.** Coming closer to home, at least culturally speaking, Australia for the second year in a row chose a regrettably low profile approach to the Festival. Having already seen recent Aussie product, I can report that the Australian production is still of good quality, growing out of still rich cinematic soil. But Cannes was not the place that highlighted Australian wares this past May, even though *The Navigator*, a wild, "medieval" science fiction fantasy from New Zealand, directed by Vincent Ward, but with co-production involvement from Australia, was invited to the official competition.

**SOUTH AFRICA.** Cannes '88, I am glad to add, was by no means totally bereft of positive significance. Another Southern Hemisphere country with roots in the Empire furnished some of the Festival's most exciting moments – South Africa. Chris Menges, Roland Joffe's cameraman for both *The Killing Fields* and *The Mission*, made a stunning directorial debut with a British film about South Africa in 1963. *A World Apart* deservedly won the Prix Spécial du Jury (for second-best film) and best actress for its three main female roles, the marvelous Barbara Hershey (who won last year as well), a remarkable British youngster, Jodhi May, and a fine black actress, Linda Mvusi. Menges tells his anti-apartheid story beautifully, with great emotional impact and political conviction. It is classic commercial cinema done with taste and dignity.

But another film proved truly astounding, this one a *real* South African movie shot in Johannesburg and the Soweto slums. *Mapantsula*, written by and starring a South African actor and former teacher, Thomas



Best actress Jodhi May in Chris Menges *A World Apart*

Mogotane, springs essentially from its own native country (with some serious Australian collaboration through producer David Hannay). What stuns the viewer, however, is that so outspoken an anti-apartheid film could see the light of day in South Africa at all. With *Mapantsula*, the very making of the film becomes an act of true political courage; and its profoundly generous human spirit, denying hopelessness, mindless violence, and cliché stereotyping in character and incident, gives real hope for the future in that land. The movie is tough, anti-sentimental, anti-lyrical. It steadfastly refuses all the obvious cinematic embellishments, those very strategies that make *A World Apart* such comfortable viewing. Indeed, one might well fault *Mapantsula's* cinematography and overall direction as unnecessarily austere, while at the same time realizing how true it rings, how much closer to reality it is than the rather obvious, though very moving, *A World Apart*. The two make fascinating companion pieces, giving a certain relevance to a festival much in need of it.

**CANADA.** 1986 – *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*; 1987 – *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* and *Un Zoo la nuit*; and now, 1988 – Francis Mankiewicz's *Les Portes tournantes*, given a prestige showing in the "Un Certain Regard" section. The good news is that Canada has another hit on its hands – and, at least for this writer, probably the most enjoyable film shown in the whole Festival. Some could, I suppose, find the experience somewhat soft and sentimental, for it is shot deliberately pretty and soft focus, and it centres on a boy's journey to the past, to his grandmother – and that boy played with astounding charisma and charm by young François Méthé,



François Méthé and Miou Miou in Francis Mankiewicz' *Les Portes Tournantes*

yet another of the child actors who dominated this festival. But that is to ignore *Portes'* complex structure, its self-conscious romanticizing of culture in a playful complicity with the audience. Mankiewicz never does things by halves; and whether it is ugliness (we saw that in *Bons débarras*) or beauty he is communicating, he goes all the way, and then some, take it or leave it. *Portes*, in following the path of the heart, represents a breakthrough for Québécois cinema, both in its attitude to the past and to culture, and in the aesthetic it espouses. In some ways, it resembles some of the things Canadians have admired in the Australian cinema, pointing to possibilities that are enormously promising.

The other Québécois film given special treatment - this one in "The Directors Fortnight" (Quinzaine des Réalisateurs) - is far more austere, far more along the quality lines long espoused by both French-speaking and by English-speaking Canadian filmmakers, Hubert-Yves Rose's *Ligne de chaleur*. Once again the film, a good one, centres on a fine child actor, Simon Gonzalez, and once again on the ubiquitous Gabriel Arcand (he starred in *Portes* as well) playing the isolated father. These two movies, coupled with last year's flashy *Zoo* and 1986's intellectual *Déclin*, give an image of a very rich, varied, solid - and authentically Canadian - Québécois film industry.

As usual, the "official" Cannes showed relatively little interest in English-Canadian films; but many were on display on the market. This is not the time, nor the place, to go into John Smith's *Train of Dreams*, Atom Egoyan's *Family Viewing*, Anne Wheeler's *Cowboys Don't Cry*, etc. - merely a sampling to indicate that English Canada, too, has quality films. Indeed, the overall Canadian situation is a very positive one, and it is seen by outsiders as such. Great numbers of Canadian movies were available in

Cannes in one form or another, some of them with real cultural/artistic validity. Our producers, distributors, sellers were busy. People like Rock Demers and René Malo are going concerns here in Cannes: they now have the track records, the solid credibility. And so the Canadian story is a benign one; the Cannes performance, coupled with MIP-TV a few weeks earlier, meant good sales and promises for an even better future. While precise figures in this area are nigh impossible to come by, the advance report is that if this year was less spectacular than last in the sale of film/TV product of Canada, the results were nonetheless excellent; and the majors, so it is claimed, evinced interest as never before.

It takes a year or two for bad effects to be felt; and so the Telefilm problems, the termination of the tax shelter, the weakness of the import legislation, etc. have not yet been felt in all their impact. The ensuing good news, however, about recent additional government financing, may well counterbalance all of that. In any case if Cannes is any indication, the news is good.

It's nice to find a beautiful, positive symbol for all of this. Well, Cannes did furnish one. Last year's dazzling Cannes presence, Patricia Rozema, who happened to direct the best Canadian film of 1987, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (there, I've said it, Genies, etc. notwithstanding), was back, a few miles out of Cannes, totally low key this time, but busy planning, working out financing patterns that will permit her to make the films she wants to make. Intelligence, talent, knowhow, values, heart, reasonably youthful energy and dynamism - who could ask for anything more for Canadian cinema? Indeed, folks, we have turned the corner.

Last year, Cannes enjoyed its finest festival in a decade or more. As we have seen, that particular success was not repeated in May 1988. The greatest "révélation" of last year's event was the emergence (or discovery, really) of a new, open Soviet cinema, the sign of broader and deeper changes in the U.S.S.R. that only a few years earlier would have seemed impossible. Well, the Soviets scarcely took Cannes by storm this year, though the movie I did see, Eldar Riazanov's *Forgotten Melody for a Flute*, tended to confirm what we saw the previous May. It is a whimsical, tragicomic film and was quite mesmerizing in its modest way - and that resolutely challenges just about everything that was once considered unassailable in the U.S.S.R.

Elem Klimov, new head of the Film Directors Union, feels it will take another year or two before the new wave really expresses itself in films that reflect the new vitality and creativity. Meanwhile, 30 features that were suppressed during the last seven years will be released internationally - and that could prove interesting indeed.

Was there any comparable revelation at Cannes this year? Obviously not - and yet, a lesser revelation was becoming more and more inevitable. It comes from the Nordic countries.

There were, as always, some films of interest from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland. Pekka Parikka's *Pohjanmaa* (Plainlands), for example, gives us a harsh, dark comedy from Finland. A distinguished director, Jan Troell (remember *The Immigrants*?) pours out his love and concern for his native Sweden in a lovely, 185-minute documentary, *Land of Dreams*. The films keep on appearing, financed by these small countries in their conviction that movies are essential to their national cultures. Not too many of these films, however, are outstanding;

and few achieve international distribution - one of the reasons being that one country (the U.S.), to all intents and purposes, controls world film distribution, as we so well know.

Paradoxically, Ingmar Bergman continues to play a role in this Scandinavian reality; and it could be an inhibiting one. Not only has he retired from feature filmmaking, but now, turned 70 and not in very good health, he has announced that his recent immensely successful production for the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (starring Bibi Andersson and other familiar Bergman names), is his last "major" theatrical venture. From now on, he will attempt only "little things".

It seems that Swedish film creativity is semi-paralyzed, unable to fill the gap. Instead, the Swedes, via co-productions, are acting as midwives to a remarkable new Scandinavian development, this one essentially Danish! Denmark, whose last fling at international film glory dates back to around 1910 (except for the works of Carl Dreyer), has for decades kept on financing movies too often of very little interest to most people. But at long last the Danes seem to be bursting into cinematic prominence. Last year, Sweden's Kjell Grede directed in Denmark what may be 1987's best movie, *Hip Hip Hourrah!* A few months earlier, a 30-year-old Gabriel Axel, after waiting for over a dozen years, was finally able to create an almost equally brilliant *Babette's Feast*, which went on to win the Academy Award (Best Foreign Film). And now, Bille August's *Pelle the Conqueror* keeps the Danes on a roll by winning Cannes' *Palme d'Or*, for 1988 - a fine historical drama, no masterpiece to be sure, but quality filmmaking that no one can fail to appreciate. Max von Sydow, after starring in so many Bergman films in the '50s and '60s, gives an acting performance that is memorable.

As if to confirm the trend, old Max then takes the plunge and directs his first feature, also in Denmark. The movie is *Katinka*, a lovely turn-of-the-century tale beautifully photographed and acted. Somewhat deliberate and precious at the beginning, *Katinka* gradually seizes the audience's heart, becoming a love story of matchless depth, beauty, and power. It also brings to the screen a hitherto relatively little-known Danish theatre actress, Tammi Osk, who could well become the next Scandinavian screen goddess... with a little bit of luck and so on.

So the Danes have come into their own, proving to the world that small countries can, through determined effort and intelligent co-productions, create movies both that are uniquely, culturally their own, and that can restore to the cinema its vocation as purveyor of films that reach those indefinable heights we call art, a profound and beautiful expression of what we are.

There just could be a lesson there, somewhere, for the folks in Canada...