

BY JOSÉ ARROYO

Home Movies: Tales from the Canadian film world by Martin Knelman
Toronto: Key Porter Books 1987, 248 pages.

Every filmmaker who's ever been trashed in print by Martin Knelman should be delighted by the publication of his latest book. *Home Movies: Tales From the Canadian Film World* is the revenge they've been waiting for.

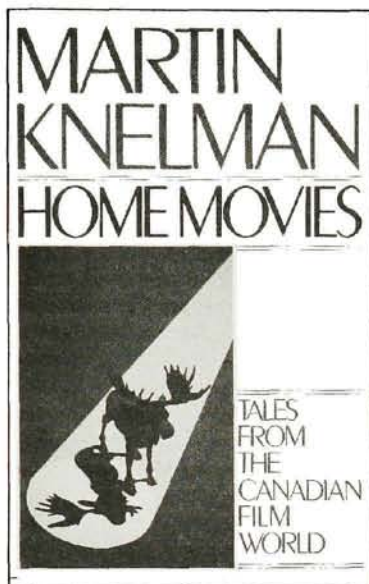
The front flap promises Knelman will look at "the financial, artistic and political complexities of our movie-making over the past two decades." The back-flap more modestly confides that it is "part consumer survey, part business analysis and part gossip column." But those who believe book-flaps and their money are soon parted.

Home Movies is divided into three sections - Dancing with Hollywood, Mixing Media and Slouching Towards China - framed by an introduction (Opening Shot) and a conclusion (Closing Shot). In his introduction Knelman writes, "Wherever Canadian movies were made, they were made in the shadow of the American eagle, or the MGM lion, or of Mickey Mouse" and that, "there was an unmistakable sense that if you were in the game of making major movies, sooner or later Hollywood was the place you had to go to even if the movie was about a Canadian who goes to China."

This sets the tone not only for the lengthy Dancing with Hollywood section, but for the entire book. For these are not so much Tales From the Canadian Film World as tidbits about Canadians who've made it big in Hollywood. Thus in the first section we get anecdotes about Daniel Petrie, Ivan Reitman and Norman Jewison. *Louisiana* (Thanks Margo); *Joshua Then and Now* (ditto Ted, Mordecai); *The Decline of the American Empire* (Merci, Oscar) and Garth Drabinsky (Love ya, MCA); each rate a chapter.

The book's title, seemingly self-evident, takes on another dimension. Home movies means not only movies made in Canada or movies made by Canadians but also that they are amateurish, to be shown only to friends and family, not fit for public consumption. If there's no "California connection" it's not worth looking at. The Canadian Moose depicted on the cover only deserves attention when he's hit by the spotlight from Grauman's Chinese.

It also becomes clear that Quebec only rates outhouse status in Knelman's home. *The Decline of the American Empire's* Oscar bid and a few anecdotes on Jutra, Simoneau and Mankiewicz make up the Québécois content of the promised look at the "financial, artistic and political complexities of our movie-making over the past two decades." Lefebvre, Forcier, Groulx, and other great original filmmakers from Quebec who never wanted to go to Hollywood, just don't rate. Knelman's 50 Notable Home Movies 1978-1987 list includes



City on Fire, *If You Could See What I Hear*, and *Tribute* but not *La Femme de l'hôtel*, *La Guerre des tuques* or *Les Fleurs sauvages*. It's very revealing of the extent of our cultural colonization, and the continuing existence of our two solitudes, that the author is seemingly aware of Mickey Mouse's every move while oblivious to the Quebec film industry.

In his acknowledgments Knelman admits that *Home Movies* "evolved from a series of lunches." The book reads as if the lunches subsequently devolved into a few lazy spurts at the word-processor. In the Mixing Media section there's a predictable chapter on SCTV and its famous alumni, and an embarrassingly gushy one on *Anne of Green Gables* ("[Sullivan] has created so much glory that there's plenty of room for Telefilm, CBC and Walt Disney - perhaps the oddest ménage à trois in this country's cultural history - all to bask in Anne's glory").

The Heroes for the Small Screen chapter has anecdotes on *King of Kensington*, *Seeing Things*, *Stratosphere*, *Prison Mother*, *Prison Daughter* and *Charlie's Grant's War*. Some of them feel like sloppy versions of ones we've already read, probably in the *TV Times* Supplement to the Saturday paper. Or it could just be that Knelman has already mentioned them for he has the most annoying habit of repeating information. For example on page two we are told that Garth Drabinsky has "become a major player in the States" and has a "complicated partnership with the Music Corporation of America (which) raised puzzled questions about who was taking over whom." On page 11, while not yet letting on that Universal is a subsidiary of MCA, Knelman "reveals" that Drabinsky "continues to buy up theatre chains

in the United States and has a complicated, ongoing corporate relationship with Universal, a giant among the Hollywood majors."

Home Movies is a word-processed book written off the top of Knelman's head. He jumps around from subject to subject within chapters. One can almost tell where paragraphs used to be, where they have been rearranged. For example, the Stage Fright chapter begins by telling us how Martha Henry has been neglected until recently. The next paragraph moves on to the neglect of Jackie Burroughs, and subsequently we get a review of *The Grey Fox*, a little bit of Canadian theatre history, back to a bio of Henry, a comparative review of *The Tin Flute* and *The Wars*, and on to a review of *Dancing in the Dark*. The first and last paragraph in the first eight pages of the chapter both focus on Henry but in between he turns tenuous threads into a zig-zag boomerang route through a large chunk of the Canadian cultural landscape.

Much of the book deals with recent events. And much of the book seems rushed. For example, Knelman is able to tell us that Jackie Burroughs made a low-budget film in Mexico but not that it came to be called *A Winter Tan*.

The Slouching Towards China section recounts various attempts at bringing a biography of Norman Bethune to the screen. We get to read how Ted Allen, Donald Sutherland, Philip Borsos, Jacques Dorfmann and Pieter Kroonenberg got involved with the project. But the making of *Bethune* received extensive press. A cover story in *Maclean's*, for example, covered a lot of the same ground Knelman does. Moreover, newspapers across the country printed frequent updates on *Bethune's* troubled shoot in China. We've read gossip about Sutherland and Borsos rewriting the script, Ted Allen's threats to sue and other stories that came out after Knelman published the book. The film hasn't even finished shooting yet. Nevertheless, the stories Knelman does cover could have used more original source material. With more facts he wouldn't need to resort to such mystical speculation as: "It was as if all these people believed the surgeon saint could heal the nation's infected movie industry, purify it and effect some miraculous cure," "(Sutherland) felt some mystical bond with the turbulent doctor," and "(Borsos) too had fallen under the spell of a movie that had drawn so many people into its strange, obsessive powers." *Puh-lease!*

I don't want to denigrate the gossip-peppered genre of journalism *Home Movies* belongs to. I usually enjoy it. But muckraking is an essential element of the genre. *Home Movies* would have benefitted from a thorough, opinionated writer who's not afraid to stir things up a little - the Martin Knelman who used to write abrasive film reviews wouldn't have been a bad choice.

Unfortunately *Home Movies* is gushy, sloppy journalism and even its gossip is the kind you can dish out to the subject without embarrassment. Knelman writes that *The Tin Flute* has "no redeeming qualities". Neither does his book.

Argentine Cinema edited by Tim Barnard
Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986, 177 pages,
\$10.95.

We should know more about other national cinemas. Like daily exercise and quitting smoking, familiarity with other film cultures is good for us, and it's something we often find ourselves promising to do more of. When we do try, however, we find our efforts are often frustrated. Texts on national cinemas have become the domain of academia. And most of us can't overcome such common ivory tower by-products as scholaresse, reams of shot-by-shot descriptions of films we've never heard of, and writers who assume we're already familiar with their subject. *Argentine Cinema*, edited by Tim Barnard, avoids these pitfalls and provides a useful and stimulating encounter with one national cinema Canadians should get to know.

In his foreword, Barnard warns us that "this monograph on Argentine cinema has been prepared with a view to providing a general introduction to the subject," and that "no attempt has been made to maintain a thematic unity between the articles." He also admits there's an absence of women contributors and a discussion of women filmmakers in the book but notes that "this absence is a reflection of the continued exclusion of women from the feature film industry... and from intellectual life in general." He thus foresees, and neatly sidesteps, much of the possible criticism against the book. But *Argentine Cinema* needs no excuses.

The history of Argentine cinema, like Argentine history, is very dramatic and makes a great subject. The industry enjoyed its golden age in the '30s when it was producing the most popular films in the Spanish-speaking world. The '40s saw it sabotaged by a U.S. government who thought Mexico was a friendlier country and refused Argentina the raw film it needed. Later years witnessed new successes and greater setbacks as classes fought for pride of place on the screen and government intervened not only with financial help, but also with censorship and its own agenda for the industry.

This gave rise to alternative cinemas in Argentina. In the '50s, Fernando Birri, who believed "the first step to be taken by an aspiring



national film industry is to document national reality," founded the first Latin American school of documentary film in Santa Fe. The school produced several films. They won prizes abroad, embarrassed the government at home, and paved the way for what would be called the 'New Latin American Cinema' movement.

In the '60s Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas co-founded the Cine Liberación film collective and co-directed *The Hour of the Furnaces*. Drawing from those experiences they introduced the influential concept of 'Third Cinema' which is a cinema characterized by "collective productions, parallel distribution (which emphasized audience discussion) and direct confrontation of political events."

These events crop up in different sections of the book. But the editor has successfully ordered the articles so that, despite disparate subjects and styles, they give the impression of being part of a single narrative.

Barnard's *Popular Cinema and Populist Politics*, the first essay in the book, is a survey of Argentine history, the history of Argentine cinema, and the different ways in which national and international politics have influenced Argentine film. Barnard's excellent synthesis clearly and concisely conveys the various fortunes of a volatile industry and gives a good account of the development of the film culture. We are not only introduced to the intellectual and political context that made possible the various Argentine film genres (the gaucho film, the tango film, the social folkloric film), but also to some of the best examples and exponents of each genre. This section is the foundation upon which our understanding of the book lies, and it is solid.

The last piece in the book, also by Barnard, is a chronology of the development of Argentine cinema which recaps the major events and fills in the gaps.

The articles in between, all properly

introduced by the editor, have a narrower scope. Some focus on particular aspects of Argentine cinema (Alfonso Gumucio Dragon on film censorship up to the late '70s; a report by the Argentine film workers' union on the state of their cinema from '83-'85). Others spotlight individuals (Julianne Burton interviews Fernando Birri; Julio Cortazar remembers Jorge Cedron). The structure of the book thus creates a synergistic relationship between the more general articles and the personal testimonies. For example, Octavio Getino's *Some Notes on the Concept of a 'Third Cinema'* gains depth when read in the context previously provided by Barnard while Getino's account of how and why he went from guerrilla filmmaker to head of the censor board dramatically imbues the otherwise faint and abstract political and intellectual agendas of '66-'73 with vivid immediacy.

The weakest chapters are those on and by Jorge Luis Borges. Edgardo Cozarinsky's *Partial Enchantments of Narrative: Borges in / and / on Film* is a rumination on the influence of film on Borges' writing which has only a tangential relation to Argentine Film. *Borges on Film* consists of four of Borges' film reviews. They are elegant, witty, and informed. But, again, we end up learning more about Borges than about the cinema. We get the impression it was included only because it was written by Argentina's most famous writer. Considering Barnard claims he was operating under space limitations, the space these articles take up could have been put to better use.

The Canadian film industry has never enjoyed the popularity, influence or financial rewards once enjoyed by Argentina's. The vagaries of politics have never resulted in our film talent being exiled or murdered, in the destruction of entire generations of filmmakers. Yet when I read that cultural colonization results in "subjection of a cultural medium to the goal of multinationals striving to sell their goods" and to a "deculturation process that turns us into spectators and consumers of life, instead of being its protagonists", I feel I'm reading *Cinema Canada* instead of a report by the Argentine film workers' union.

There are similarities between the two industries. Part of what made reading *Argentine Cinema* so interesting to me was the sense of *déjà vu* in reading about the Motion Picture Association of America's power in Argentina and about their industry's distribution problems. Part of what made *Argentine Cinema* valuable was that it made me realize that cultural colonization of countries that are not superpowers is the norm. The difference between ours and Argentine's is merely a matter of degree.

Argentine Cinema leaves us with a desire to know more, and especially, with a desire to see the films. It far surpasses its modest aspirations and is a happy intrusion onto academic turf. I hope Canadian writers and publishers will continue producing this kind of work.

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Bookshelf

GEORGE L. GEORGE

Eighty years of motion picture progress come to life in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, a large-format 13-volume set containing, in photographic reproduction, over 5,500 articles published between 1898 and 1979 in the pages of that estimable daily.

Knowledgeably edited by Gene Brown, it offers an overview and appraisal of the industrial, social, economic, political and cultural issues that marked the worldwide course of cinema. Written in journalistic rather than didactic style, it imparts a topical flavor to events and personalities of the movies' historic past. Future volumes will update the set. (Garland, NYC, \$2000/set, for a limited time, \$995/set).

Bruce Petri's perceptive study, *A Theory of American Film*, probes George Stevens' career from his beginnings as cameraman and gag writer for Hal Roach to director of such highly praised classics as *Shane* and *Giant*. The book discusses fully the story line of each Stevens film, its social implications, the cast's performance and the director's contribution. In a lengthy interview with Petri, Stevens provides discerning insights into his craft. (Garland, NYC, \$65).

As Vince Waldron asserts in *Classic Sitcoms*, his informative and engrossing survey, "Prime time television has not been the most hospitable breeding ground for classic film comedy." *All in the Family*, *I Love Lucy* and *Honeymooners* were all at first rejected by the networks that financed them. The broadcasting history of 10 among these series is vividly told with a wealth of documentation about production, ratings, awards, and a complete guide to their episodes. (Macmillan, NYC, \$27.50/14.95).

In *The Best Science Fiction TV*, John Javna stresses the international origin of such shows, with Great Britain and Japan significantly supplementing the American product. Javna's poll of critics, writers and fans finds *Star Trek*, *The Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits* in the three top spots. His survey analyzes the 15 best and 10 worst series, quoting critics' comments and offering a perspective on the genre's place in the television galaxy. (Crown/Harmony, NYC, \$8.95).

A hilarious and perfectly aimed putdown of over 35 of TV's most outrageously trashy or artistically obnoxious programs is delivered by Kevin Allman in *TV Turkeys*. It points a selective finger at such single-season flops as *Supertrain* and *Amerika*, longtime hits like *Let's Make A Deal*, and Steve Allen's embarrassingly pretentious brainchild, *Meeting of Minds*. You may even find your favorite show in the book. (Putnam/Perigee, NYC, \$9.95).

Critical analysis of film structure is examined in two significant volumes. Joyce E. Jesionowski's study of D. W. Griffith's Biograph films, *Thinking in Pictures*, reveals the innovative method Griffith used to blend the various elements - plots, performance, action - into a cohesive entity. In *The Prophetic Soul*, Leo Stover evaluates the structural design of H. G. Welles' 1936 film, *Things to Come*, based on its treatment and shooting script, both included in the book. (U. of California Press, Berkeley, \$27.50; McFarland, Box 611, Jefferson, NYC, \$39.95).