

The Averted Eye

Memory, lies and videotape at TFF's Perspective Canada

BY TOM PERLMUTTER



From Colin Browne's *White Lake*

It began six years ago with a massive retrospective that had everybody cheering. The jaunt (actually with 250-plus films it was more like an arduous hike) down cinematic memory lane validated Canadian cinema through the very fact of its existence and, perhaps more importantly, through its reception by an eager audience. Canadians, it seemed, had come to reclaim their film past and, in the

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process, assert its future. The success of the retrospective firmly anchored *Perspective Canada* as a fixture at Toronto's Festival of Festivals and as the leading showcase for new Canadian cinema. But that moment of euphoria was shortlived. Niggling doubts began to creep in.

If, on the one hand, the 1983 retrospective affirmed Canadian cinema; it also opened the doors on a kind of fatal nostalgia for the late '60s when we had it and then lost it. Paul Almond told *Cinema Canada*, "Our films were as good as Australian cinema, as any European cinema; they offered a wide, rich experience for the

film-going public. Those were the 'good years' everybody talks about." He carried on to speak of an optimism based on *a return to the past*; an excision of the history that followed, those horror days of the tax shelter boom and the more subtle horror of being consumed by video by way of the Broadcast Fund.

For others, the celebration of the past was an occasion for lamenting a present dominated by money and television, co-productions, and perverse government policy. Gilles Carle bitterly noted that "writers and artists are forgotten people in this field." Canadian cinema at present, when superimposed on the past,

seemed totally impervious to it. The retrospective brought the ghosts out - like Larry Kent who hadn't been heard of in almost 20 years. They rattled their chains, cried out to be remembered like the lost souls in Hades to Aeneas, and continued to walk the moors of Canadian cinema, unseen.

In reviewing the following year's *Perspective Canada*, Michael Dorland spoke of the terrible belatedness of Canadian cinema; of its working under the burden of a past which it can never quite grasp, and feeling bewildered in the face of the present-day Scylla of international cinema and the Charybdis of television. He noted that

Canadian cinema is "burdened by the necessity of restoring a past from which we have been severed" and followed the trail of the past in that year's crop of Canadian films from *My American Cousin* to *Samuel Lount* and *Canada's Sweetheart*. The ghosts, the cinematic fathers, at the retrospective had faded without being wrestled to the ground; if their legacy remained it was as much in their howling Lear-like negativity, that awful "nothing" which launches the madness of Lear; that dark centre which Canadian cinema as a whole seemed both fatally attracted to and incognizant of.

During the third year of Perspective Canada, Dorland noted the very conscious attempt of Guy Maddin to nail the father into his coffin in his short *The Dead Father*, set tellingly in the Dominion of Forgetfulness. (Many of us still remember living in a similar place, the Dominion of Canada, to whose forgetfulness we, as immigrants, readily acquiesced because this was the land's chief resource, a place where one could forget.)

If, during the succeeding two years, other

concerns illuminated Perspective Canada's screens, this year saw the return of the dead father and a renewed assumption of the burden of the past. In *White Lake*, Colin Browne's innovative home movie documentary, the absent patriarch is the black hole at the centre of the film. If the actual father in Anne Wheeler's *Bye Bye Blues* is feeble in the face of his daughter's rebellion, he is only a surrogate for the real patriarch, the husband whose absence fills the screen. Gordon Pinsent is the dead father and the ghost in the machine of *Termini Station*, a title that echos a different homicidal patriarch, Klaus Barbie of *Hotel Terminus*. In John Walker's *Strand*, the photographer/filmmaker searches for his spiritual father who eludes him, leaving behind imagistic tracks and gestures.

About those images, *Les Matins Infidèles* tells us that fathers lie, and their images lie too. The patriarch dominates in *Cold Comfort* and attempts to do so in *Foreign Nights* in memory of a past alien to the rebelling daughter. The patriarch almost wins amid the beautiful images of *Where The Spirit Lives*, a film in which the patriarchal project is most bluntly stated:

erasure of the past. Subversion of the past is the agenda of the patriarch/producer as he aims to beget his successor, Lance, in Atom Egoyan's exercise in video, memory and catatonia, *Speaking Parts*.

In 1985, the patriarch came to Canada in Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin*; this year the child has grown enough to venture into the heart of patriarchy in Wilson's memory within a memory, *American Boyfriends* - the film itself a remembrance of an earlier film success. In *Trois Pommes* the male no longer sits on the patriarchal throne; but neither is he ready to give it up. Dispossessed, he reminds himself of his past by marking the landscape where he killed a woman. The deranged promoter/patriarch of *Roadkill* redeems the damage of liberating woman by appearing out of nowhere and shooting everyone. *Justice Denied* is the story of white dominant male culture deeming what is truth and is the other side of the coin of *Where the Spirit Lives*. Having erased an indigenous past, this culture superimposes a new one: alcoholic, violent, murderous. An attempt to redress the balance is made in *Black Mother Black Daughter*, and *Goddess Remembered* gently reminds us of the once beneficial primacy of the matriarchy.

Have I stretched the point? Perhaps, but not overmuch. That thread of past, memory, and patriarchy seems inescapable. As interesting is the manner in which the films choose to deal with it. Often the remembering is not a search for the past, but a fumbling around it. At the critical moment of seeing, the mechanism fogs. We veer away from the dark centre and the image becomes the lie that it is in *Matins Infidèles*.

The averted eye is the central device of *White Lake*. A series of interviews unfolds an Oedipal story, not so much in content but in structure: that slow, relentless revelation of the truth that gnaws like a worm in the rose. The difference here is that the point of knowing is never consummated; the truth never acknowledged. At critical points the women, descendents of Herbert Guernsey, a dead man dominating their lives by his absence, who mainly tell the story look into the camera and stop dead in their tracks. The camera averts its eye. And where does it look? Where else but the landscape, seeking relief from history in images of the terrain.

The landscape is vested with all the attributes that elsewhere history claims. In *White Lake* the camera roams across the hillside as if expecting at any moment to find the White Horse of Berkshire or the Long Man of Sussex, those giant neolithic figures carved into England's chalky soil. But Guernsey's imprint is branded on his daughters and granddaughters, not in the landscape. If the patriarch's project is erasure, the filmmaker has internalized it, using landscape as the eraser of memory.

In *Strand*, the true protagonist of the film, the image-maker searching for Strand, uses

landscape as his central point of reference emerging into the film as its conscience presence in the scrub land of New Mexico. Then Walker's moment of truth comes, not in confrontation with Strand or his images, but in the peatscape of the Hebrides when he plays out his wish fulfillment of playing the father and literally emerges from under the dark cloth.

In Phil Hoffman's *River*, landscape is memory, but the memory he invests in the river is so hermetic as to be inaccessible in other than a generalized notion of a river adventure whose greatest expression is American: Huck Finn on the Mississippi.

In *Dark Island*, Turnbull, unable to escape the landscape, attempts to tunnel through it, laying down in the woods a cloth tunnel for his protagonist at his critical experiential turning point.

In turning to the landscape what is it they are turning away from? That old patriarch's handbook, the Bible, suggest one answer. In a crucial episode in Genesis, Noah curses Canaan for having looked on his nakedness while he lay asleep in a drunken stupor. Seeing the father exposed subjects Canaan to becoming the slave of slaves of brothers. It's the naked father that the eye avoids. To remain focused is to confront the sexuality, the dominance, the violence, and, in the end, to subvert it. In Wheeler's *Bye Bye Blues* landscape fills in for the sexual conflict that never climaxes. In *Cold Comfort* we build up to the father's violent consummation, and it doesn't happen. Unable to see the story through to its natural conclusion, the filmmaker replaces the real ending with a fairy tale, the ubiquitous Canadian fairy tale that we are masters in our own home. The truth of our colonization is unbearable to see.

The most conspicuous absence from the screen is the life at this country. Five years of Mulroneyism and four years of acrimonious debate on free trade and Meech Lake, have left no Cinematic Traces. To Britain's *My Beautiful Launderette*, we oppose *Foreign Nights*, a bland bow to official multiculturalism, *Welcome to Canada* stops exactly where the story begins to contradict the notion of an open society. *Trois Pommes* and *Matins Infidèles* are testimonies of a confused and weary Quebec; the technique of the Bourassa regime has, in the end, overwhelmed passion and conviction. *Cold Comfort* and *Termini Station* cloak themselves in American forms to peek at the margins of a marginalized (rural) society; the former as a kind of true north Sam Shepard; the latter some curious revival of the gothic romance of deep south fiction. We scrape away at the past but refuse to define it, becoming like lance in *Speaking Parts*, alienated, on the verge of catatonia. Cinematically, we remain silent, ruminating on hazy video memories, waiting for the Big Brother producer to emerge on the screen and give us our speaking part. ●

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL

The Ontario Arts Council offers grants to professional artists who are residents of Ontario, working in the following disciplines:

SCREENWRITING

to assist with the development of feature-length dramatic screenplays.
Deadline: February 1

FILM

towards the production costs of documentary, dramatic, animated or experimental films.
Deadlines: April 1, November 1

VIDEO

to assist with the production of original video art.
Deadlines: February 1, August 15

Please note: all applications must be supported by examples of recent work.

For further information and application forms, contact:

Film, Photography and Video Office
ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
151 Bloor Street West, Suite 500
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1T6 (416) 961-1660

Appointments

McCALL, DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT AT ALLIANCE

TORONTO - Lael McCall has been named to the newly-created position of Director of Development at Alliance Entertainment Corporation. Ms. McCall will seek new film and television projects as well as supervise Alliance's current development slate. She will report to Steven DeNure, Vice-president of Development.

Prior to joining Alliance, Ms. McCall was a producing resident at the Canadian Centre for Advanced Film Studies. Formerly Creative Affairs Executive at London's United British Artists, she played a key role in developing projects for West End theatres as well as television and feature films, including Nicholas Roeg's "Castaway," "The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne" starring Maggie Smith, and "Windprints" starring John Hurt. Before joining UBA, she was the editor of the British industry trade journal "AIP & CO." (now "The Producer").

MARGO RAPORT VP OF SALES AT NORSTAR

TORONTO - Norstar Entertainment Inc. has completed the consolidation of the Company's international sales operations and appointed Margo Raport to the position of Vice-President of Sales for the division, it was announced by Peter R. Simpson, President and Chief Executive Officer, Norstar Entertainment Inc.

In a move that now makes Norstar Entertainment a fully-integrated production and distribution entity, the Company this month re-located its foreign sales arm to its corporate headquarters in Toronto, from Los Angeles, where it has been operating under the inc of Simcom International for the last five years. The division, which handles all foreign theatrical, home video and television sales for the Company will now operate under the corporate banner of Norstar International.

In her new post, Raport will be responsible for the day-to-day sales and marketing operations of Norstar's foreign division and will also oversee the acquisition of programming for overseas distribution, an area in which Simpson says the Company plans to invest major financing.

LABELLE ACTING V-P AT CBC

OTTAWA - Marcel Labelle has been appointed Acting Vice-President, Communications by the CBC. He replaces Antonin Boisvert. Labelle will be responsible for developing and ensuring the application of CBC communications plans at the national and regional levels. He will also chair Communications' Senior Planning Group composed of the directors of Communications for the networks and regions.

WATSON AND VEILLEUX TO HEAD CBC

TORONTO - Twenty-three years ago, the CBC cancelled the groundbreaking current affairs program *This Hour Has Seven Days* and accused co-host Patrick Watson of an anti-management bias. Last month Watson was named chairman of the

board of the beleaguered public broadcasting network. Gerard Veilleux, a career civil servant and expert money manager, was named president.

"As chairman of the board, I will be responsible for the development of policy," Watson said after his appointment was made public. "Veilleux's job as CEO will be what a CEO does, the day-to-day operating of the corporation." Since Watson's position will not be formally created until a new broadcasting act is passed by Parliament, he will head a sub-committee of CBC directors on strategy and planning.

Reaction to the appointments was uniformly positive. "Pat Watson is a man with vision," said Peter Mortimer of the ACFTP. "Veilleux is a strong administrator and manager. Everything depends on how the job is decided, but together they make a good team." Sam Jephcott, spokesman for the CFTA, said, "Pat Watson has everybody's endorsement. There are few people in the country who have his reputation to run the board. The bureaucrat, nobody knows. Presumably he's been brought in to balance the books at the CBC."

Denis Harvey, v-p of CBC's English services, was quoted as saying, "It's about time we had a broadcaster in that level of the corporation. (Watson) knows the CBC well, and personally supports the objectives of public broadcasting." Other comments include: Doug Bassett, CEO, Baton Broadcasting: "Watson is an excellent choice and Mr. Veilleux is known as a businessman who understands the balance between revenue and expenses."; Trina McQueen, director of CBC news and current affairs: "A broadcaster in the top position is a major breakthrough. Mr. Veilleux is committed to the CBC."; Moses Znaimer, president of CityTV and Much Music: "It's always such a nice surprise when the government does the right thing."

Veilleux, 47, a self-described "faceless bureaucrat", was born in Quebec and joined the government service in Manitoba's Department of Finance. He worked for the federal government in the Department of Finance and the Treasury Board before being appointed Secretary to the Cabinet for Federal-Provincial Relations in 1982, then Secretary of the Treasury Board in 1986. He has been called a brilliant money manager, a skillful administrator and a hard-nose negotiator. "I did not accept this job to preside over the demise of the CBC," he said at the time of his appointment.

Patrick Watson, 61, is the first CBC insider to rise to the top since Alphonse Ouimet became president in 1958. He is independent, passionate and persuasive. He has worked not only as a producer, but also as an interviewer, host, and even an actor. His most recent project was the 10-part international coproduction *The Struggle for Democracy*, which was telecast on the CBC earlier this year. He assumes his new job with the corporation as of November 1.

FORGET TO HEAD FRENCH PROGRAM AT NFB

MONTREAL - Robert Forget has been appointed as head of French-language programming at the National Film Board. He replaces Georges Dufaux. Forget, who has been with the board since 1965, was a founder of the video production and distribution co-op, le Vidéographe. Since 1978, Forget has headed up the French animation studio of the NFB.

OSBORN, DIRECTOR OF LEGAL AFFAIRS AT ALLIANCE

TORONTO - Philippa Osborn is the new Director of Legal Affairs at Alliance Entertainment Corporation.

Before joining Alliance, Ms. Osborn was an executive at the merchant bank, Rothschild Australia Ltd. where she was responsible for the financing of independent Australian productions. In the course of her career, Ms. Osborn was a corporate foreign exchange dealer in the treasury division of the merchant bank, DFC New Zealand Ltd. Ms. Osborn obtained her law degree from Victoria University of Wellington in 1985.

PAYNE TO OFRB

TORONTO - Toronto journalist and newscaster Robert Payne has been appointed as Chairman of the Ontario Film Review Board (OFRB). The new chairman has spent more than two decades with the broadcast media in Ontario and Quebec. An award-winning newspaper columnist, Payne has also been involved in a number of community and charitable projects such as Easter Seals, United Way and Lung Association campaigns. Previous to his appointment, he was a member of the OFRB.

NEW FUND DIRECTORS

TORONTO - Two well-known Canadian producers have joined the Board of Directors of FUND (Foundation to Underwrite New Drama for Pay Television). They are Ian McDougall, president of Abaton Pictures Inc., and Michael Donovan, partner in Salter Street Films of Halifax. McDougall will replace Michael Spencer as the Canadian Film and Television nominee, while Donovan replaces Gordon Parsons as the Atlantic representative on the FUND Board. John H. Kennedy, head of Development Arts, Music and Science for CBC-TV, who also is leaving the Board, has not yet been replaced.

FORTIN AT CINEMA PLUS

MONTREAL - Mario Fortin has been appointed Video Director at Cinema Plus Distribution Inc.. He will be responsible for the management, organization and promotion of video. Also appointed was Mrs. Claudette Lapointe as assistant to Fortin.

TOM DALRYMPLE, HEAD OF FINANCE AT PRIMEDIA

TORONTO - Tom Dalrymple is Primedia Production's first Head of Finance, effective immediately. He joins the company from Nelson Videovend Limited / Nelson Vending Technology Limited where he was Vice President, Operations and Finance. Tom Dalrymple joins other senior members of the Primedia team Jonathan Harris, Gwen Iveson, and Simon Barber.