

BOOK REVIEWS

This Is Where We Came In

by Martin Knelman,
McClelland and Stewart,
176 pages, \$5.95 paperback
(ISBN 0-7710-4533-6).

"The most influential film reviewer in Canada right now is Clyde Gilmour," a Toronto distributor recently told me. "A positive review in the *Toronto Star* can make the difference for us between fair business and no business. *The Globe and Mail* has no effect at all – because serious filmgoers don't respect Robert Martin, and general filmgoers don't follow what reviewers say anyway. *The Globe* used to matter – when Martin Knelman wrote the reviews, but now there's just Clyde and that's it."

Whatever the state of Canada's film industry, the state of Canadian film criticism appears to be worse. This is due in part to the apparent indifference of newspaper and magazine editors in utilizing such talent as there is available. *Maclean's* currently uses film reviews by the American critic John Simon; *Weekend* and *Canadian* have, so far, resisted the idea of publishing film criticism on the grounds that such writing would compete with local reviewers in the various newspapers that distribute the weekly supplements; and even prominent newspapers, such as *The Globe and Mail*, have shown a shocking lack of discernment in choosing reviewers. It's as if they preferred journalistic non-entities to possible (and possibly troublesome) "stars." *Châtelaine* settles for "mini-reviews", instead of finding – or helping to create – a major feminist critic such as Molly Haskell. There is hardly a publication in Canada that could not significantly upgrade its standards of film criticism if editors had the vision, and the will, to do so. Instead, a lot of lip-service is paid to the cause of Canadian film culture, but when it comes to the crunch, these same editors and publishers pointedly do not

hire the kind of film critics who can prod, provoke, stimulate, and help make Canadian movies a lively art that is well appreciated. American films, after all, are well covered by such writers as Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, Rex Reed, Judith Crist, and many other critics and interviewers of note, in publications ranging from *Time* to *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times* to *The New Yorker*. But Canadian movies are left, in the main, to a handful of hacks who have no ideas to speak of, let alone an interesting philosophy of criticism.

The failure of editors to invest in building major critics has, I believe, contributed to the way many Canadians perceive their own movies – as drab, second-rate, earnest rather than exciting. We have lots of mediocre reviewers in this country, but they're of no help in interpreting, in a way that generates interest, the work of our best (or worst) filmmakers. Nowhere in Canada is there a magazine with the policy of *The New Yorker* which allows Pauline Kael and Penelope Gilliatt to alternate, in six-month terms, the writing of weekly criticism, and then to rest, read, travel, and develop themselves the remaining months of the year. Nor is there a newspaper with the policy of *The New York Times* which allows Vincent Canby, as its lead critic, to choose the movies he wants to write about, and leave those he feels no special affinity with to other filmwriters (all are fulltime employees and well paid). Canby once told me that he doesn't consider himself to be "a major critic" and would never allow a collection of his reviews, or Sunday essays, to be published. "Nothing is more embarrassing," he said, "than the vain attempt to preserve the insubstantial." In the U.S., magazines, newspapers, radio and television stations, want "star" critics, and a lot of thoughtful effort, and money, goes into establishing such careers. And the critics themselves are creatively ambitious and work hard to produce the most distinguished articles and books they are capable of doing.

In Canada, even the few critics that are supposed to be "our best" (Robert Fulford, Martin Knelman, Clyde Gil-

mour), maintain their reputations with comparatively small effort. Gilmour, like Canby, doesn't aspire to produce a book about films, and doesn't believe that his daily reviews (which he has been doing now for over 25 years) are worth reprinting, having served their purpose upon first publication. Nowhere, it seems, is there a critic who takes Canadian films seriously enough to write an invigorating analysis of the subject, comparable to what Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, Dennis Lee's *Savage Fields*, or George Woodcock's various studies, have done for Canadian literature. Robert Fulford's anthology of reviews from *Saturday Night*, *Marshall Delaney at the Movies* (1974), devoted less than 70 pages to Canadian movies, none of which was new. Judged by the prevailing standards of Canadian journalism, Fulford is an entertaining gadfly; but judged by the intellectual standards set by such books as, say, Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (a brilliant study – one grows by arguing with it) the ideas and values that are Fulford's stock-in-trade seem wholly unremarkable.

Martin Knelman's *This Is Where We Came In* (subtitled: The career and character of Canadian Film) appeared to be a more promising venture. It wasn't supposed to be a spin-off from already-published and paid-for journalism (the book was funded by a Senior Arts grant from the Canada Council) but rather, an original, in-depth study. The result however, three years later, is a curious book that starts off with respectably-written chapters on John Grierson, the National Film Board, and the formation of the Canadian Film Development Corporation. Then, in a changed format and style, there follow a series of chapters ("Corpses and Snow", "Culture and Kétaine", "Politics and Quebec", and others) in which Knelman combines review and interview material written over a period of years (involving such directors as Claude Jutra, Gilles Carle, Denys Arcand, Don Shebib) in a manner that ranges from elliptical to slapdash. Practically all of this material has been published in some form before (the original articles were often more coherent than the pastiches published here).

Toronto writer and film critic, John Hofsess is the author of *Inner Views: Ten Canadian Filmmakers*.

The final chapters ("Hollywood North: Notes Toward a Screen Mythology") consist of nothing except shortened versions of old reviews of such movies as **Only God Knows**, **Black Christmas**, **Act of the Heart**, **Fortune and Men's Eyes**, etc., ending with Knelman's reviews of **Outrageous** and **Who Has Seen The Wind** done for *Toronto Life*.

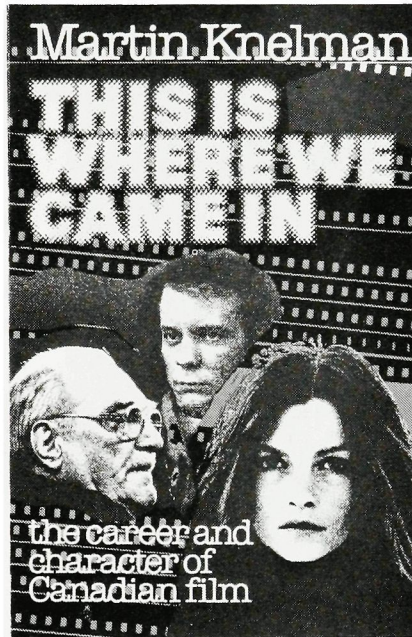
I kept asking myself while reading this book what there was in it that took three years to write? Did Knelman lose interest in the project? Was he so busy doing other journalism that the book only got small amounts of his time and that he finally just threw in 40 pages of mini-reviews to flesh out the text? Despite the assertion made throughout, that all of us should take a greater interest in the film culture of Canada, I kept wondering, if he believes it, why didn't Knelman devote himself – utterly, passionately – to writing a better book? Is *this* his limit?

Consider the style. In Chapter Four, ("From Documentaries to Features"), he writes about Pierre Perrault's **Pour la suite du monde** (1963), "one of the finest movies ever produced in Canada."

"(Perrault) chose for his collaborators Michel Brault, the son of a Westmount stockbroker, who was already earning recognition as the most gifted cinematographer in Quebec, and Marcel Carrière, a sound-man who had been at the NFB since 1956 and who had just done some stunning work in a marvelous NFB short called **Lonely Boy**, about Paul Anka, the Ottawa teenager who became an American pop star. The subject and the spirit of **Pour la suite du monde** were centuries removed from Anka's star trip – the film had greater affinity with the works of Robert Flaherty than with the *cinéma vérité* devotees who hung out with Rolling Stone groupies – but Perrault's film did have something in common with **Lonely Boy** and also with the outstanding documentaries produced in English Canada in the late sixties, Allan King's **Warrendale** and Don Shebib's **Good Times, Bad Times**. It freed itself from the stodgy conventions we had all come to associate with NFB documentaries, especially the voice-over commentary."

This is writing with a tin-ear: no sense of cadence, and little sense of logic. Not only are there too many lame adjectives ("stunning," "marvelous," "outstanding"), and irrelevant facts (who needs to be told *who* Paul Anka is, or what the occupation

of Michel Brault's father was?) but the entire paragraph is a verbal clutter moving gracelessly to an anti-climax. All we really learn is that **Pour la suite du monde** didn't have a voice-over commentary (except that Knelman adds a footnote pointing out that the English version, known as **Moon-trap**, *did* have such a commentary!).



It hardly seems worth the effort. One might also point out that all the films mentioned are in black-and-white – how's that for breathtaking insight! At another point, in a chapter entitled "The Children of Grierson", Knelman recounts an anecdote about a meeting between John Grierson and Sydney Newman. "On a Saturday morning in December 1971, worn down by the problem of the Quebec political films and the squeeze he was getting from the Ottawa government, Newman phoned Grierson and said, "Grierson, I don't know what to do about the Film Board. Can you help me?" Grierson said, "Right. I want to get out of this horrible little room." Grierson went over to Newman's house, and they talked out Newman's problems at the NFB for three hours. The next day Grierson left for England to spend Christmas break at his house in the country. He didn't return for the next semester. Two months later he was dead."

Naturally the reader expects to be told what transpired between the two men on this occasion (otherwise, why bring the subject up?), but in his next line Knelman writes, "Nothing John Grierson told Sydney Newman on that Saturday could have resolved Newman's problems, because the problems were part of the Grierson legacy." Either he doesn't know what was said, or nothing of any importance was said; in any case his anecdotal lead-in leads nowhere. At another point in the same chapter he writes, "Like Duddy Kravitz, Sydney Newman is openly a Jewish hustler, and like Duddy he has a knack for making people with artistic or intellectual aspirations appear impossibly fake." The word, I notice, is "aspirations", not "pretensions" – so apparently anyone who is intellectually ambitious (Freud? Sartre? Einstein?) is "impossibly fake," in Knelman's cosy, smug, middlebrow view. Ironically, *This Is Where We Came In* could use a massive infusion of "artistic or intellectual aspirations", for as it stands, it's an uninspired muddle.

The best chapter, in my view, is "Politics and Quebec", dealing with the films of Denys Arcand. Knelman's analysis of **Réjeanne Padovani** runs directly counter to my own perceptions, but he certainly makes an interesting case on behalf of the film. One chapter, and parts of others, do not make much of a book however, and the conclusion is inescapable: if a book like this were produced in any other field, except Canadian film, it would be dismissed. It would be practically unthinkable for a literary critic to publish something this slight and disorganized. Knelman had a good chance to produce something substantial; instead he settled for the merely serviceable. In recent years – since leaving *The Globe and Mail* – Knelman has tended to overproduce, spreading himself thin, writing articles on such subjects as beauty pageants, TV talk shows, and silly series such as *Custard Pie*. Whatever he has added in income, he has more than lost in prestige. None of us gain when such a basically talented writer becomes disconnected from his integrity. Knelman did not dive deep into himself to produce this book – in fact he has given very little of himself.

It's a sad commentary, whether on himself, or his subject matter, that he didn't even *try* to be brilliant. □

Robert Lantos and Stephen J. Roth present

Year **1** 1977

Year **2** 1978

L'ANGE ET LA FEMME

(An Angel and a Woman)

written and directed by Gilles Carle
starring Carole Laure and Lewis Furey

— in release —

IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN

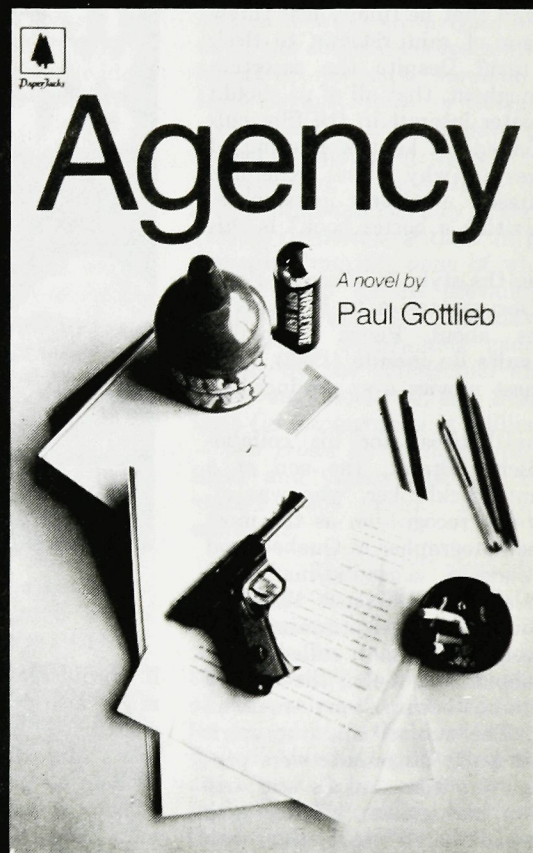
based on the novel by
Stephen Vizinczey
screenplay by Paul Gottlieb
directed by George Kaczender

starring

Karen Black
Tom Berenger
Susan Strasberg
Helen Shaver
Alexandra Stewart
Marilyn Lightstone

— in post-production —

NEXT...



screenplay by the author
directed by George Kaczender

— principal photography summer '78 —



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