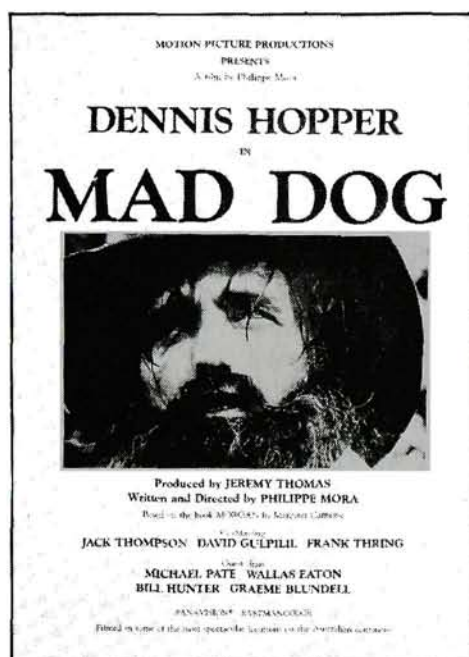


cannes (2)

the year of the kangaroo

by Marc Gervais



'a rare film because I can't think of anybody who wouldn't be absolutely enthralled'
...Mike Harris THE AUSTRALIAN

In Cannes, just one short year ago (May, 1975), the film Australians were looking at the film Canadians with envy. And they wanted to *learn* from us – they, the younger Commonwealth nation with their 13 million population, looking up to Big Brother (or Big Sister) with our 21 millions, and our bouncy feature film presence at the Cannes Film Festival.

One short year ago – and now, to all intents and purposes, forget it. At the moment, Australia is out of sight, way ahead of us. And thereby hangs a tale or a moral with some pertinent lessons.

The simple truth of the matter is that in spite of foreign sales that may even exceed last year's record, Canadian feature films in Cannes caused nary a ripple. *Au contraire*: foreign critics expressed positive disappointment with the artistic output of a country that seemed, these last years, to be heading toward major achievement.

Whereas the *Australians*...!

And this leads to certain reflections about why the Australian situation is so good, and why the Canadian so lackluster.

It's not that the Aussies are turning out masterpieces. No, Down Under there are as yet no John Fords or Mizoguchis or Bergmans or even a Francis Ford Coppola. I would even go further. In terms of esthetic awareness and esthetic experimentation, the Aussies have not shown the type of concern (or matching achievement) of some aspects of the direct cinema of Allan King a few years ago, or of certain Québécois cinéastes such as Perrault, Lefebvre, Brault.

Furthermore, I do not mean to imply that there was nothing Canadian that was worthy of interest this year in Cannes. Certainly, Don Shebib's *Second Wind* is an excellent film for all the lukewarm response it received from some Canadian critics. And one has to admire the rigorous and ascetical probing spirit behind two of the Québécois films in side festivals, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre's *L'amour blessé* and Anne-Claire Poirier's *Le temps de l'avant*. André Forcier's *L'eau chaude l'eau froide*, too, is a highly local, but brilliant black comedy, the product of considerable talent – and of that nihilistic repulsion

that has too often become a trademark of the Québécois cultural stance.

And it is only fair to add that a lot of intelligent effort by a lot of people has gone into making the Canadian feature film industry well known by distributors and critics around the world. And that is to the good.

However...

Being exposed to a number of Australian films in Cannes has brought this observer face to face with something so obvious, so close to us, that maybe we can't see it. By "we", I mean the type of people who read **Cinema Canada**, no less. Or who should read it.

Why was our output of 24 or so features this year so uninspiring? What's wrong with the Canadian film industry? (Now there's a real Canadian-type question!)

There are certain answers that by now are maturing into some kind of consensus. By all means, we must go on struggling for a better distribution deal. Nothing less than to be *maîtres chez nous*, to be sure. And we've got to get that Canadian Constitution working in the film area: the provincial governments have to be made to get together with the federal to levy a tax on every ticket sold at the Canadian box office, the revenue from which will be poured back into Canadian feature filmmaking (according to norms which will be worked out). In that way, **Godfather**, **Exorcist**, and **Jaws** will continue to take millions back to the States, but at the same time help make our own film industry viable.

All of this is essential. But something else is at least equally essential – and there the blame (yes, *blame*) lies squarely with the mental attitudes of Canadian film directors, writers, producers, the people running the Canadian Film Development Corporation and critics. Somewhere along the line, we've lost our contact with the lifethrob, we've become asphyxiated with the smallness of certain intellectual obsessions, or maybe just money-making obsessions. It means nothing less than overcoming our myopia, or breaking free from our tunnel vision or, better still, broadening our cultural concerns beyond the pathetic, self-centered negativism of cynical self-inhibition that is rendering our own film scene rather sterile.

I'm not going to discuss individual Canadian films shown at Cannes. And, obviously, the past and present have furnished some pretty magnificent exceptions to today's general trend. But by focussing on what the Australians have been doing, our own dominant pattern may appear with greater (and more disconcerting) clarity.

The Canadians had some 24 features at Cannes, the Australians some eight or nine out of this past year's production of 14. And yet, the Aussies outsold us internationally by a huge margin. One Aussie representative told me, towards the end of the Festival, that their international sales at Cannes alone would *more* than pay for the entire production costs of all the Australian features made last year!

Not only that, but of the 14 most recent Australian features released in Australia, 11 have already made back all their costs at the home box office alone. In other words, the 13 million Aussies (English-speaking and ergo facing, just as we do, the Yank competition *et al.*) love their own films. And they flock to them.

Because, mate, the films are ruddy good, that's why. **Picnic on Hanging Rock**, **The Devil's Playground**, **Mad Dog**, **The Trespassers**, **The Fourth Wish**, **Caddie** – here are fresh, intelligent, often exciting, often lovely films.

As one analyzes these movies, and studies the Aussie situation, certain patterns emerge. By and large, for one thing, the directors and producers and writers are young.

*Marc Gervais, Montreal film critic, is an associate professor in the department of communication arts at Concordia University. He is the author of **Pier Paolo Pasolini**, edited by Seghers in Paris.*

Far more important, they tackle subjects they seem genuinely interested in, and they treat them in their own fashion. Unlike most Canadian films, Aussie movies are well scripted, and they do not look like cheap imitations of American exploitation flicks, weighed down with the same tired film language and clichés.

The Australian films touch on deeper, wider human experiences. They do not cultivate a kind of mindless nihilism. They do not conform to some dominant recipe. Somehow, out of it all, their films sing a song to people, to life, no matter how tough the context or situation may be.

Totally Australian, totally filled with breathtaking images of their own country, they nevertheless have an enormous appeal for *everyone*, simply because they are human (however one may define the term), rather than exploitative or hermetically sealed-in. They definitely are not the sort of one-dimensional products of a cynical commercialism that threatens our own film scene.

Will the absurd economics that dominate Canadian film life permit these films to be seen in Canada? And if so, will Canadians, so brainwashed (along with their neighbours to the South) into wanting to see only the reigning movie recipes of the moment, be permitted to awaken from their cultural stupor? And will Canadian film folk (writers, directors, producers, critics, and the CFDC) take a look at the Australians, and find inspiration to break out of the trap they have helped build for themselves?

For the English-Canadians especially, it seems to me, are playing a desperate game. In their frantic attempt to break into the American market, they are making of the feature film industry in Canada a cheap imitation factory of those American exploitation films (violence, horror, etc.) we know so well, and in so doing, helping to create or perpetuate the cultural wasteland. What is it, for example, that has motivated William Fruet to make a slick violence flick like **Death Weekend**? One fears the marketing/financing policy of the CFDC is in great measure responsible for the present state of affairs.

Surely, there are writers, directors, and technicians who are not bound by the tunnel vision that seems to be determining our film evolution. Surely they have *something* they wish to express, *something* they genuinely feel, along with the adequate skills...

But that brings us to another aspect of the situation. No one can dictate how anyone (including a director or a writer) is supposed to relate to life, or to feel about this or that aspect of life. But our cultural/intellectual *elite* (please include film critics and great sections of the whole communications field) have become shrivelled up in their own negativity. Our cultural stance is one of fear of such things as action, hope, celebration, *creativity*. And so, the outlawing of huge areas of topics and concerns. There is no question that the dominant attitude is that of the downer. A kind of small, rationalistic cynicism succeeds in reducing everything to its own reduced dimensions. In that sterile climate, the imagination has little chance, and film creativity becomes desperately inhibited.

As a result, Canadian audiences do not respond to the home product. On the one hand, they find the eternal downer theme, with the concomitant lack of enthusiasm and positive thrust, a **bore**. Or, on the other, they prefer the slick (albeit usually redneck and stupid) American commercial product to the less slick Canadian imitation.

So, in rethinking our film situation, we had better take a look at the films themselves, and, going all the way, at the smallness of attitude of the mentors of our cultural life. As one immediate application of this, the CFDC had better junk its policy of subservience to US commercial distribution. The best way to get our films distributed outside Canada is to make good films, not to set up all sorts of creative roadblocks (recipes, imitations, etc.).

If the Aussies can do it, why can't we? □

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