









Then there is the problem of the disaffected public. In general, Canadian movie-goers have not yet accepted the vision which its filmmakers offer. Nevertheless, there are those spectators who *do* care and would love to like Canadian films. But the going has been rough. In the following article, written many months ago, Douglas Ord takes *The Far Shore* to task; but his comments go far beyond that film and touch on the very nature of feature filming in English Canada.

# an essay on canadian (film)

by Douglas Ord

Great Here

by Ruby Tuesday

<p>My best friend didn't like "The Far Shore".</p> 	<p>"Nobody dies in the water with her boots on!" he said.</p> 	<p>"But you liked Charles Bronson drilling people in the subway in <u>Death Wish</u>. Does any body do that?"</p> 	<p>"Well, nobody makes love in the water," he said.</p> 
<p>"You didn't mind Mia Farrow being screwed by the Devil in <u>Rosemary's Baby</u>. How often does that happen?"</p> 	<p>"Well, the characters were such clichés," he said.</p> 	<p>"You love Clint Eastwood in all those spaghetti Westerns. What do you mean?"</p> 	<p>Who would have thought allegory could alienate the best of friends?</p> 

(being excerpts from an article in progress, by Douglas Ord, which article had its beginnings as a review of Joyce Wieland's *The Far Shore*.)

## I

Most English-Canadian films are pretty bad. That seems to be a general consensus. *The Far Shore* was pretty bad; most people seem to agree to that too. When I first saw it I was upset for two days. While I was in the theatre, watching it, I was giggling, but afterwards, when I went home, I was upset. I had had high hopes for this film. Before it was released, I read everywhere that it was going to be very good, that these people, Joyce Wieland and Judy Steed, had given everything they had, for seven years, to get enough money to do it. And then I heard too that Joyce Wieland had made a lot of experimental films, and that they were also supposed to be good. I hadn't seen any – I suppose that I should have before I took anyone else's word about them – but mostly, what I was thinking at the time was: wow, here's an experimental filmmaker who's finally made it into features, and maybe she'll be able to produce something that's intelligent, and sensitive, and interesting to a few people besides other artists. A lot of the art that I see these days that's done by people who refer to themselves as artists seems to be done just for the sake of other people who refer to themselves as artists, and I'm getting pretty sick of that. I thought it was nice to see an artist putting her skills at the service of the public in general, instead of just dismissing it as made up of people who are interested in hockey games, and Archie Bunker, and nothing else.

But I was very disappointed. I suppose I should have had some inkling of what I was in for when I heard that the film was going to be modeled on the life of Tom Thomson, but I ignored that, so as not to be prejudiced in advance. That was a mistake. It was all I could have expected, and worse. Joyce Wieland made a film for the general public all right, at least in the sense that it would be shown in theatres that the general public frequents, and would be the length that they usually expect films to be, and would cost three dollars and fifty cents to see. But that was about all. Instead of making a film *for* artists, she made a film about an artist. And what an artist. After her version of Tom Thomson, I don't doubt that most people who ventured a gamble this time will go back to Archie Bunker. I can't say I would blame them. At least he doesn't speak like a character in a comic strip. And neither does he pretend to be a latter-day incarnation of God.

## II

I'm beginning to give up hope on Canadian films. I really am. I go, I'm very responsible, I sit through garbage that I'd ordinarily not endure for 15 minutes. And all because it's Canadian. Of course, there is a certain price the film has to pay for my endurance. Sometimes, when I'm really bored, or my intelligence is really being insulted, I giggle. And that was what I did in *The Far Shore*. I giggled because I couldn't believe in the people. I giggled because they talked like no one I had ever heard in my life, like slogans out of a badly written political pamphlet. But mostly I giggled because if I hadn't, I'd have been very angry that Joyce Wieland had taken someone like Tom Thomson, and made him into a sponge for all of her fantasies about Art, and for all of her neuroses about men, and for that sappy complacent kind of Canadian nationalism that has made just about every feature film made in English Canada appear ridiculous.

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## III

And so what is a person to do? Stop going to Canadian films completely? That *would* be a sad comment on the state of the art in this country. wouldn't it? But it seems to be what just about everybody I know has done, except for a few real fanatics. Do you want to go to a Canadian film, I ask? And the answer, I'm sorry to say, is usually: Oh God. Another one.

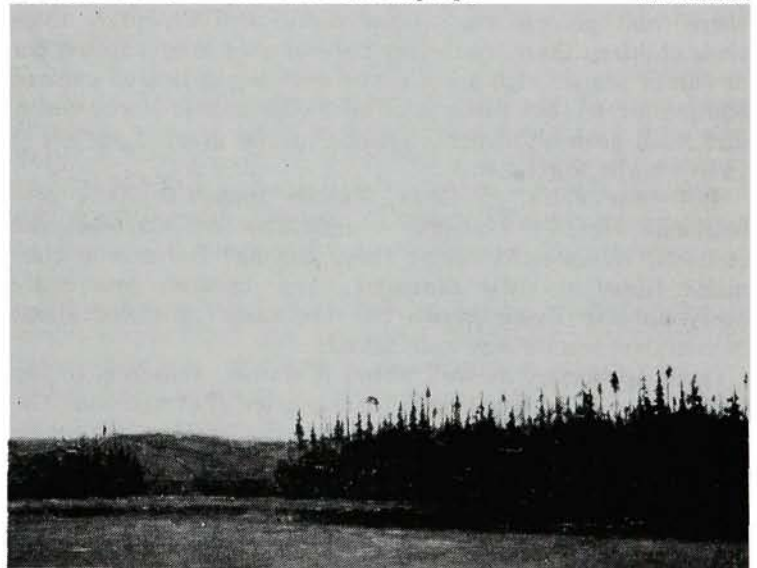
But I don't want to give up completely, really. I mean surely, in a country this big, with all of these Resources, and all of this Potential, there are a few people who could get together and make a good film. And it isn't as if there haven't already been a couple. *Goin' Down the Road*, for instance. And maybe *Paperback Hero*. But what else? Were they just flukes or something? Can't anyone just get down to brass tacks, and say something that's both interesting and straightforwardly honest, without feeling compelled to first wash it in warm pastels, or reduce it to political blacks and whites?

## IV

The answer at first glance, to go by the evidence anyway, is no. Then why not? Well, that's a question that seems to be asked a hell of a lot, isn't it, by those people who haven't given up completely I mean, and I'd be pretty pretentious if I thought I could supply the answer, wouldn't I? So I won't even try to do that. And besides, I confess that I've heard so many Answers already, from so many different people, at film schools, and universities, and conferences, that I'm just about overdosed on them too. You know the kind I mean. Like that the Americans have got us all intimidated. Or that we have to compete with their concept of mass appeal. Or... that there's too much caution in the way the money goes out. Or... that there are too many technicians who think they're Federico Fellini. And so on. No, there is no shortage of answers. Or of talk. Except that everybody's knowing what's wrong doesn't seem to have done buggar all to help us make better films. In fact, if anything it's made matters worse, because everyone is so damned self-conscious about knowing what's wrong, that they can't make films that don't insist on telling us what's right. And in the most heavy-handed ways imaginable. So in spite of all this knowledge, and the knowledge that everyone else has essentially the same knowledge, I still end up giggling every time I try to sit through one of those ridiculous films.

The Silent Lake : A northland without people

Tom Thomson



V  
And for that reason, writing about Canadian films is a rather difficult task. I mean, I feel sort of compelled to say something, but I can't help but feel too that it's pointless just to provide a few more answers that people can feel self-conscious about. And more self-consciousness is the last thing we need around here.

What to do, then? Well, in a way, it would have been a whole lot easier just to have stuck to writing the review of **The Far Shore**, if only to get rid of all the bad vibes that were left over after I saw the thing. But that's just more negativity, isn't it, and another way out. Another way of avoiding saying anything worthy of your time as reader, and my time as writer.

And yet... I don't want to let go of that film so easily.

## VI

**The Far Shore** is about North. North North North. Pine trees and crystal-blue lakes and pink as a baby's ass granite cliffs. This is a characteristic that it seems to share with a great many Canadian films. Why are there so many films made here about North? Surely it's not just because we're in the northern hemisphere. Sweden is in the northern hemisphere too, and they don't seem to feel compelled to talk about it all the time. Of course, they have their own preoccupations, but those are another matter entirely. No, it's here that North *really* means something.

What does North mean? Well, to Joyce Wieland, in **The Far Shore**, it seems to mean Everything We've Always Wanted to Have About Life, and Didn't. It means freedom. It means being surrounded, immersed, exuberantly smothered in Beautiful Scenery. It means a place where two such exceptional and clean-living people as her painter Tom and her spotless québécoise heroine Eulalie can drink Indian bark tea all day, and then submerge themselves to their necks in the waters of an ice-blue Canadian lake and ball for *ten minutes* without even getting cold. It means skies that never fill with clouds, and insects that never bite, and peace and tranquillity everlasting, to be broken only by the arrival of those rotten, low-down exploiters, The Capitalists.

That's an idea of North that a lot of people in Canada (sorry – translate, on this occasion anyway, Ontario) seem to have. Including the ones who make films. Somewhere, and for reasons too complex or idiosyncratic for anyone ever to understand, they seem to have got the idea that the Canadian North contains all the Romance and Adventure and Passion that life down here in this dreary old pressure-cooker Toronto is just never going to be able to offer. Of course, it's only a coincidence that most of those people live in Toronto, in quite comfortable dwellings at that, with all of the modern conveniences, as the saying goes, and have their studios there, and process their films there, and *definitely* raise their children there, but every once in a while, get into a car or van or plane, with all of that dandy sophisticated camera equipment, to take pictures of all the Romantic Northerners, and wish gosh-oh-jeepers, wouldn't it be great if *we* could go live in the North too.

But they can't, or don't. Family responsibilities, professional access, Careers – and after all, the Arts *are* centered in Toronto, aren't they, darling? So instead they make films of their fantasies. And because practically everyone else living South has the same fantasies about North, the films do very well indeed.

Or at least they do well where it counts. Which is to say with the civil servants and the agencies that give out the money. Because oddly enough, in point of fact, not quite everyone who lives South does have all those interesting fantasies about North. Surprise? Because there seem to be a considerable number of people who were born North, and came South. Or not just a considerable number. One hell of a lot. And they're still coming, in ever-increasing numbers,

their farms and land and big old Victorian houses being bought up by those ugly farming conglomerates (that we'll ignore for the time being, darling; they're inconvenient), and by, curiously enough, that growing number of people from South who don't care to live North all the time, but who would like to have a taste of it anyway. You know? So they can make some more wonderfully poignant and beautiful films about what the North is Really Like.

Have they ever bothered stopping to ask any of those people who have come South from North, though? Have they ever bothered asking *them* what North is really like? Try the little groups of Cree and Ojibway and Metis that hang out around the corner of College and Spadina sometime. They're usually good for a laugh or two. Or what about the winos sprawled in the grass around Moss Park Armouries (that's in the summertime, darling). When they're able to talk, they seem to know a hell of a lot about the mines, that just coincidentally happen to be Up North too. Or what about the factory workers, who live in dingy Cabbagetown apartments, or more likely these days anyway (darling), in those sprawling suburban wastelands that reach out in all directions from the city centre, but that (of course) few of our *very* sensible, *very* intelligent young filmmakers ever see, because it's so much more convenient, and *so* much more fun to live downtown.

Ah, but what the hell, eh? Why bother with any of those clowns? After all, what do they know about Art? Or Beauty? Or Good Taste? Most of them can't even frame a coherent sentence, let alone provide any Inspirations. They're lousy material for a documentary, let alone for a feature film.

(And besides, they do make us, uh, rather nervous, you know, don't they? Never know quite what to say to them, to sort of break the ice, to, uh, get inside their heads, the way, um, you're supposed to when you're making a film. Right?)

Ah, but then they wouldn't pay to see a Canadian feature film anyway, would they? They're too busy watching the Fonz.

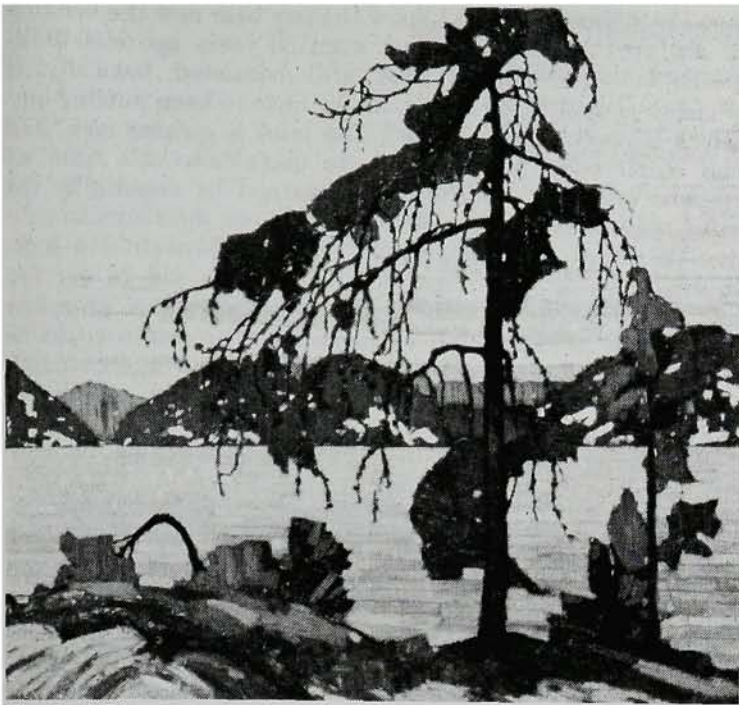
Thank God for Don Shebib. At least he tried. Once. And did a damned good job too. Those guys from Cape Breton Island were *real*. Has anyone ever bothered trying to figure out who went to see *that* film, and made it so successful? Because the point is that those two drifters were flesh-and-blood human beings, who had lived, and wanted something, and didn't know how to get it. Which is the position, if you stop for a moment and think seriously about it, that *most* of us, rich or poor, find ourselves in. Oh, it's so much fun to have been weaned on the tube at three, isn't it, and to have learned for the last 20 years to want the unattainable. And so much fun, too, to stay sucked in, to go on pretending, always, that it's still within reach, still just around the corner, still just a little bit farther... North.

## VII

God, I got sick of Ms. Wieland's version of North. Come on now, folks. Is it really like that? People complain about Canadian films being bland and complacent, and wonder whether Canada is really like that, and destined to remain so. Well, make no mistake about it. The films *are* bland and complacent. But there are several million people working and sweating their lives out, in the North too, of all places, enacting every day their own private dramas, each of which could tell us more about ourselves than a hundred or a thousand of Mr. Wieland's drooling, syrupy, self-indulgent Portraits of the Artist as a Young Suck.

But then maybe I'm missing the mark completely. Maybe the *last* thing we want to know is what we really look like. Because that might be embarrassing, mightn't it?

We English-Canadian folk so like to put on a face, and pretend we're other than what we are. Even a lot of those transplanted Northerners couldn't bear to be seen on the



The Jack Pine

Tom Thomson

streets without their London apparel, their Paris coifs, and their makeup from Diana von Furstenberg. There's just so little glamor in having to bear the burden of a past where Auntie served tea at three, and where the whole family settled down to the hockey game at eight, and where you and the boys snuck off to the park to gulp gin from a paper bag at 10. And after all that's what the name of the game is now. Glamor.

Except I wonder whether we're fooling anyone but ourselves. Because the poses for the most part are just a little bit too proper, the cool just a little bit too earnest. Beneath the sculpted profile and the angled cheekbones, the accent and the person both are as often as not vintage Sudbury. Clumsy, and more than a little bit sad. Playing a game in which he's scared to death of the next move, and at the same time, desperately, helplessly lonely.

Filmmakers play the game too, don't they, by appointing themselves *and* their films in a style blatantly lifted from the Hollywood of the '40s and the Paris of the '60s. And amid all of that pastel-tinted flamboyance, and single-minded striving after Significance, there is very little room for a realistic portrayal of this refurbished Hogtown of the '70s.

We're all so insecure and afraid here, filmmakers no less than anyone else. And what we seem to be most afraid of is that other people will see our fears, will see through the mask of laid-back savoir faire that we so like to project in both our behavior and our films.

Why are we so afraid?

## VIII

Ironically enough, it may be people like Joyce Wieland who can provide the clues. Because there's another side to her film career, that is patently different from the glossy rendering of banal fantasy that she gave to us in **The Far Shore**. After I sat through that particular debacle, and with a curiosity exceeded only by my capacity for punishment, I arranged for a screening of some of her experimental films, just to see whether I had been suckered completely by the advance publicity. And I did set myself up for a very disconcerting afternoon indeed. I saw three films, but I'm only going to talk about one of them here, because it plugs so directly into what Ms. Wieland later did to The North in **The Far Shore**.

The film was called **Reason Over Passion**, and was completed in 1968, a couple of years before Ms. Wieland began work on **The Far Shore**. It was 45 minutes long, and *highly* "experimental" in nature. In other words, Ms. Wieland seems to have dispensed with all concerns of conventional form and narrative syntax, and done whatever her instincts told her to. The contrast to the carefully contrived and manipulated scenarios of **The Far Shore** is remarkable.

The film begins with about 10 minutes of what would ordinarily be considered poorly exposed home movie travel footage, shot from the window of a rapidly moving car. People, and not even the slightest sign of human habitation. The chord that it struck, in my memory anyway, was of North, though I suspect that the actual subject may have been the east coast. But it was nevertheless an image of the Canadian wilderness that for me has been the cumulative impression of innumerable drives through northern Ontario and Quebec. Empty. Forbidding. And as often as not, dark and stormy.

But what made the film both interesting and disturbing was that Ms. Wieland refused to let the hills and lakes and forests speak for themselves. Sound familiar? Only this time, instead of endowing them with attributes approximating those of the Garden of Eden, she renders them into a cinematic vision of hell. The manner in which she accomplishes so cosmic a transformation is extremely simple: she wiggles her hand rapidly back and forth directly in front of the camera lens, so that it becomes a frantically jittering grey blur, that sometimes obscures the picture completely, that sometimes jumps like a demented raincloud, that sometimes (thank God) disappears for several seconds at a time, only to return suddenly, and without warning, just when one is beginning to appreciate (?) the grim monotony of underexposed skies and dim green hills that are traveling by onscreen at breakneck speed.

Whew. The experience was pretty exhausting, believe me. That grey blur was one of the most obtrusive and unpleasant cinematic devices I have ever encountered. Even when I closed my eyes to the actual film, the jittering patterns of alternating darkness and light were still there. The effect was inescapable, and cumulatively rather terrifying. I couldn't help but wonder what Ms. Wieland was trying to do.

The impression of this first 10 minutes of **Reason Over Passion** is of a desperate, crazy flight. But from what? Well, the only conclusion that I could draw was that there was something in the landscape itself that inspired Joyce Wieland to begin wiggling her hand in front of her camera, and so make a basically neutral countryside appear more malevolent than, in my experience anyway, it has ever been. And I can honestly say that I'm familiar with the full range of moods of the Canadian north.

No, there was something rather pointedly pathological in Joyce Wieland's treatment of North in **Reason Over Passion**, just as there was something pointedly dishonest about her treatment of it in **The Far Shore**. Or perhaps the two words can be used here interchangeably. Dishonest *and* pathological. Which adjective applies would seem to depend on the context in which each film is being discussed.

What I'm getting at is that in terms of the reality of North, both films are blatantly dishonest. It is not the North that Ms. Wieland is describing in either case, but rather her reaction to it, with no concessions at all to what anyone else might think. In **Reason Over Passion**, there are no people at all; in **The Far Shore**, they are directed as though they were marionettes. But if **The Far Shore** has the character of a highly personal fantasy, **Reason Over Passion** is a complementary, and equally personal nightmare.

And this is why I introduce the term "pathological". Neither film demonstrates the kind of give-and-take that is commonly equated with health. The Canadian landscape is either utterly evil, or utterly good. There is no middle ground. Neither are there any of the resiliency and strength that are required for an artist to step back from his own experience, and give an even-handed account that is going to be more than polemic, or cathartic, or a desperate wish fulfillment. Joyce Wieland, in these two films, tells us about nothing more than the inside of her own head.

## IX

Yet the films remain interesting, if only for the reason that the manner in which they are accepted by the society at large can also tell us a great deal about the insides of our own heads. Back to that penchant for glamorous illusion again. We thrive on it, don't we? As long as it makes us look more glamorous too. But what vengeance we wreak on our own much despised and yet desperately needed heritage. Of course we can't let go of it completely. Just as so many of those strutting Yonge Street mannequins retreat in their weaker moments to the familiar but loathed security of the Stanley Cup playoffs, so our filmmakers head North to affirm their Canadian Identity. But to a North photographed from only the best angles, and using only the most sophisticated equipment, please. After all, we'd hate the world to think that just because we're in the midst of all those lakes and trees, we're less au courant than anyone else.

And at the same time, we'll thank Joyce Wieland to keep her paranoid visions to herself, won't we? They're so embarrassingly frank, after all, and rather unpleasant to view. Not to mention highly lacking in propriety. Why can't she be like the rest of us, and save her nightmares for the psychiatrist's office, or better still ignore them completely, the better to carry on and have a good time of it? I mean, what else are we here for?

## X

There is of course little likelihood that Joyce Wieland's experimental films will ever be unleashed on the general public. And even if they were, they certainly wouldn't last long. No, they'll go on gathering dust in the basement of the Canadian Film Distribution Centre, along with hundreds of other rather unmemorable records of private dreams and nightmares. Because unfortunately, there are many hundreds of other such films, that dispense with all conventions of form, character, and plot, for the sake of recording its creator's particular vision of primal truth. And it's true that most of these films aren't terribly pleasant to watch because they offer neither the dazzling associations that make the best experimental film very good indeed, nor the comfortable distance that makes for the telling of a good story. What they offer instead are the often rather desperate attempts of a great many people, most of them young, to make some sense out of the world in which they are living. And yes. Most of them are embarrassingly frank. They suggest that beneath this country's calm and decorous official identity, beneath the simplified modus vivendi of glamorous pose and gesture... there is nothing. Only a dim world of randomly recorded impressions, orchestrated by precisely those raw emotions that our daily life deems so inadmissible. And we will hide from that world, and from that nothingness, and from those raw emotions at all costs.

Leave those films in the basement. Please.

## XI

But aren't we being unduly hard on ourselves? Yes, I know that we've come out of a vast and empty land, the land that inspired Joyce Wieland's terror-stricken flight in **Rea-**

**son Over Passion.** And I know that we bear now the heritage of the strict moral code that even 50 years ago was indispensable to a culture that still consisted basically of pioneers. But for God's sake, do we have to keep putting ourselves through it any longer? The land is quieter now, and the moral code has outlived its usefulness: it's time we stopped letting our feelings be governed by essentially the same manner of thinking that enabled our ancestors to subdue the forests. The preoccupation with glamour is a bore. It does to play what rigid self-denial once did to our ancestors' work: stifles it beneath a joyless pall of propriety and routine. Except that at least then, propriety could be identified with some kind of necessity. Now the preoccupation with it is merely oppressive in itself. And needless to say – transparently, pathetically – provincial.

A damning criticism, isn't it? If ever there was one.

## XI

But in circumstances like these, one simply cannot pull out all the stops. The culture's a little too schizy, a little too borderline hysterical for that. Or rather, perhaps one at some time or other needs to pull out all the stops, just to let go of some of that malignant emotion that's been suppressed for so long, but one should not be so bold as to call the outburst that results Art. Of course, a lot of people do persist in calling their various tantrums Art, and for that reason the word has in recent years undergone a considerable devaluation of meaning. But I do think that the word still means something, just as I think that film can be much more than lately it has been allowed to be in this country.

What then is an artist? Well, it seems to me that these days it's someone who's not content with mapping the interior of our collective asylum, from a perspective of one of the inmates. Neither is it someone who is paid a great deal of money to keep the asylum painted in pretty colors. It is someone who has the strength, as well as the good will and talent, to be able to look at an extremely complex culture – and still see people. And not just see them, but also help them to see one another. If artists have any redeeming worth in this latter day of a very unhealthy civilization, it's to try to get at some of the softness and warmth and love that hide in frightened silence beneath the hard shells we have to assume every morning to go about the various businesses and pleasures that go into keeping the society on an even keel. Because the only thing that can mitigate that terrible fear of nothingness that so governs our lives is the instinctive awareness that other people, beneath their poses, are as frightened and vulnerable and warm as we are. And that all of us are fumbling through the same blind maze.

## XII

One of the greatest strengths of narrative film is its ability to offer intimate glimpses into the lives of complete strangers. And such glimpses are exactly what are needed here. There is a vast gap in Canada between the socially sanctioned version of culture, and the lives that are being lived out amid the confusion of city streets, and in the mines and forests and factories of that very North that our filmmakers are so wont to turn into a projection screen for the contents of their own heads. Let them forget about their own heads for a while. We have immediately before us the potential not only for a strong film industry, but also for a revitalized vision of ourselves. Just now a filmmaker could provide no greater service than to help us see ourselves as we are, to show us our masks and our manifold self-deceptions, that we might at least begin to look at one another with the compassion we all deserve.

But that's going to take a lot more strength, a lot more humility, a lot more willingness to fade into the background and just listen, than filmmakers here have hitherto shown. □