

# BOOK REVIEWS

**Self-Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Quebec Cinemas.** Piers Handling, ed. Canadian Film Institute, Ottawa, 1980 \$ 8.95

A New York critic recently spoke of the "abysmally low reputation of English-language Canadian cinema," and wearily trashed yet another film that proves our "limited ability to restore conviction to derivative topical plots long since confined to TV movies." A few weeks later, reviewing his next Canadian clunker, he added that "Toronto is rapidly becoming the clone capital of North America."

Alas, it's only too true. The clones are everywhere and the government is aiding and abetting them as eagerly as Duplessis used to pay the multinationals to carry out our iron ore. The interesting Americans, like Richard Benner and Frank Vitale, have long since left, and the not so interesting Canadians like Plummer, Reitman and Bujold have all returned to circle the carcasse. Meanwhile, the exhib-distrib monopolies can't hide their glee that the restless natives are letting them off so easy. So what if Jack Lemmon praises the quality of our gofers and **Cinema Canada** fritters four pages away on how Canadians like chauffeuring Lee Majors around? Let's face it: the Canadian cinema is going through its most devastating Uncle Sam Attack since the days of the "quota quickies" and the Canadian Co-operation Project.

What has this got to do with the superb anthology on Canadian film history under review? Everything. Every page of **Self-Portrait** forcibly reminds you that the struggle against colonization has been the unremittant theme of Canadian and Quebec film history since the very beginning. And the book confirms in no uncertain terms that, contrary to the lies that tuxedoed crowd told us on the Genie telecast last spring, the situation is rapidly getting worse. Some

last-minute additions paint a picture of the "branch plant boom" of the last couple years that is very bleak indeed.

The only relief from the general note of despair is Louise Beaudet's cheery and knowledgeable survey of the Canadian achievement in animation, and in some of the coverage of Quebec film, which seems in some sense to have levelled off in the late seventies as a modest but vital national cinema, stimulated by responsible state support and a devoted public. The contrast, as usual, will make Anglo cinephiles green with envy. Even in the Quebec articles though, there are dire warnings — Michel Houle concludes his remarkably sharp-sighted essay, "Some Thematic and Ideological Aspects of Quebec Cinema," with the anxious thought that he'll be out of a job in as little as three years, with only TV programs to write about.

**Self-Portrait** is a slightly expanded English translation of an earlier volume edited two years ago by the gifted film historian Pierre Véronneau of the Cinéma-thèque québécoise. New additions include a fine article by Peter Harcourt on 1964's two seminal films within our two cultures, Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Good-bye* and Gilles Groulx's *Le chat dans le sac*; it's a very depressing article if you compare the euphoria that greeted those two milestones sixteen years ago with the current atmosphere of sellout and bad faith. There is also Kirwan Cox's well researched chronology of distribution in Canada which rather well explains why we never had a chance. Finally the lists of major filmmakers and films have been greatly fleshed out and will get dog-eared very quickly. The same goes for the bibliography, which, incidentally, suggests a next project for the CFI of ten published scenarios available, all are Québécois; I'm not recommending *Prom Night* for instant publication, nor, God forbid, *The Changeling*, but it would certainly be handy to have a few English Canadian classics lying around in book form, maybe *Nobody Waved Good-bye*, or

even *Paperback Hero*.

Though some basic gaps in English Canadian film studies are finally filled by this anthology, perhaps its greatest use will be the wealth of information and analysis about Quebec cinema, never before available in such quantity and quality in English. This work, covering the first wave of Quebec features thirty years ago as well as the most recent one, and going into great depth on Quebec's most important cinematic idiom and tradition, *Direct Cinema*, will add enormously to English Canadian consciousness of Quebec culture. This will be particularly true if the current trend towards making more Quebec films available with subtitles continues. The Quebec slant to the book, and its not unrelated emphasis on the economic, cultural and ideological elements of our cinemas, make it an excellent shelfmate to the **Canadian Film Reader**, published three years ago. There's virtually no overlap, since the **Reader's** emphasis was more "auteurist," concentrating much of its space on those promising directors whom the current boom has put out of work.

The only item that got left out of the new edition is a survey on experimental cinema, an unfortunate but necessary step, in my opinion, since the survey was erratic, to say the least. Otherwise, my only complaints are minor — some rough patches in the translation, a glaring misspelling or two of Quebec names, and stills that don't dazzle quite as much as the commendable reproductions in the French version.

All in all, **Self-Portrait** is another first-rate instalment in the CFI's series, spear-headed by miracle-worker Piers Handling, that has quickly grown to become the definitive body of literature in English on our struggling cinemas. Why doesn't the CFDC give some of its money to the CFI? — the CFI at least knows better than to pour it down the drain of the clone capital of North America.

Tom Waugh

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Thomas Waugh, film critic for *The Body Politic*, is taking a year's leave from teaching at Concordia University to finish a dissertation at Columbia on Joris Ivens, and an anthology on radical documentary.