



# on building a canadian film library

You can't sit around watching movies all the time. Sometimes you just have to get out and do something else: like making them, or writing them, or reading books about them.

But if you're interested in Canadian film specifically, there hasn't been much around to read. That dusty space on your bookshelf with the lonely copy of Eleanor Beattie's *A Handbook of Canadian Film* sitting beside a pile of indexes and Canadian Film Institute pamphlets, can now be wiped and readied for a tiny onslaught of new Canadian film books!

The two first are Robert Fulford's collection of writings under his *Saturday Night* nom de plume, *Marshall Delaney at the Movies* (published by Peter Martin Associates in conjunction with *Take One*: no. 3, 237 pp., indexed) and John Hofsess' collection of Maclean's pieces expanded and organized into a thesis, *Inner Views* (pub. McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 224 pp., illustrated). A third is soon to follow from Martin Knelman, film reviewer once for the University of Toronto's *Varsity*, then the *Toronto Star*, and currently the *Globe and Mail*.<sup>1</sup>

We may lack books but we don't lack writers. There are a number of capable journalists, researchers, critics and philosophizers on film in Canada. Note, for instance, the three books by the Ontario Film Theatre's Gerald Pratley published by Tantivy Press: *The Cinema of John Frankenheimer*, *The Cinema of Otto Preminger*, and the ditto of *David Lean*. OFT Co-director, Clive Denton, is responsible for a delightful section of the 2nd volume in the Tantivy series *The Hollywood Professionals*, on Henry King, and may have work on King Vidor and James Whale to publish also.

York University professor Peter Harcourt's book, *Six European Directors*, on Eisenstein, Renoir, Bunuel, Bergman, Fellini and Godard, is a series of provocative open-ended arguments on themes, styles and semiotics which is fascinating, and Film Department Head, John Katz, has compiled a useful text for film study, *Perspectives on the Study of Film* (pub: Little, Brown), among the number of books written on film by Canadians.

But for collections of reviews of Canadian films and some kind of analysis or conjecture on the subject of the Canadian film, the Canuck has had to rely on meagre mounds of filmmags: some *Take Ones*, *Cinéma Québec*, *Motion*, all *Cinema Canadas* and the earlier *Canadian Cinematographer*, and various periodic efforts like *That's Show Business*.

And, of course, the publications of the Canadian Film Institute. (Write 1762 Carling Ave. Ottawa for a catalog.) These include Peter Morris' early monograph on *Canadian Feature Films 1914-64* updated later to 1913-1969 (no. 6);

the now out of print *The Film and Ron Kelly* (no. 2), the reprinted NFB *The War Years* (no. 4), the 1966 pamphlet on Terrence McCartney Fillgate, (also out of print I believe), Bruce Martin's long interview with Allan King, plus filmography (no. 5), and Janet Edsforth's enthusiastic study of *Paul Almond*, plus comprehensive filmography (no. 11). Their publication, *Film Canadiana*, begun in 1969 as a periodical, now a yearbook, has been invaluable, and we hope it continues.

For your new additions you can't go wrong with either the Fulford or the Hofsess book, but if you're only going to guarantee yourself one first edition of an early Canadian book of film criticism for your collection (penny pincher!) then the Fulford book wins hands down.

"Robert Fulford has been the editor of *Saturday Night* magazine for the last six years. His weekly column on the arts appears in the *Toronto Star*, the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Montreal Star* and he frequently contributes to radio and television programs. He has written for a wide variety of publications — among them *Down Beat*, *Art News*, *Chatelaine*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Tamarack Review* and the *Canadian Forum* — and he was for eight years a daily columnist on the *Toronto Star*. He is the author of *Crisis at the Victory Burlesk* and *This Was Expo*." (from the jacket)

His book begins with a fat section on the Canadian Scene (unfortunately without a detailed contents) which offers pieces written for *Saturday Night* from 1965 to 1974, occasionally prefaced and up-dated with italicized comments. He opens, appropriately, with a general piece on the budding Canadian film industry of 1965, entitled "Someday, Soon, Our Own Movies" in which he suggests, among other titles, that someone ought to make a film of Richler's *Duddy Kravitz* or Ross' *As For Me and My House*, one day.

From the general he moves to the more specific scene with some pleasurable pieces on "A Day at the Flicks," "Seeing Movies at Expo," and "My Life Underground." Having thus established himself as a Canadian man of concern, a film buff, a neat writer and no snob, he launches into his first discussion of a film with "Almond's Unpregnant Pause," a 1968 comment on *Isabel*.

"My own view," he says, "is that *Isabel* is one of the year's most painful experiences in the cinema."

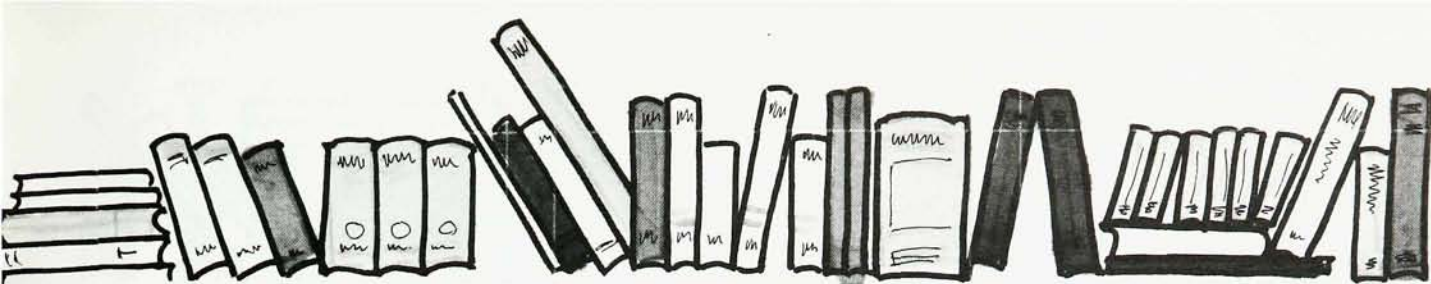
Well, readers always seem to like vitriol and verbal violence more than reviews written bearing in mind *Grandma's Admonition*, (If you can't say something nice then don't say anything at all,) so here Fulford pleases the reader by showing he can be as rough as Nathan Cohen was as well as turn a phrase as neatly as Andrew Sarris.

"Worst of all, perhaps, Almond makes everything last too long. He is the master of the unpregnant pause."

And in case you might wonder if he changed his opinion, he follows this piece with one out of chronological order (1970) on *Act of the Heart*, called "Paul Almond in Sunday School" in which he remarks "... a stink of overweening self-importance arises from whatever he does."

Readable, perhaps, but this curled-lip approach to another man's work, derogatory and sneering, is hurtful without compensating illumination, and the inclusion of these pieces at the beginning of this section makes Fulford-Delaney seem a little petty, and anxious to prove how tough and consistent he can be.

1. Also forthcoming is Peter Morris and Kirwan Cox' *Dreamland: A History of Canadian Movies 1895-1939*.



On the other hand he modifies his favourable over-reaction to Allan King's *A Married Couple* in 1969 with an up-to-date preface. "I seem to have been more enthusiastic . . . than late events justified." He imagined that in a decade the film would be studied in university film courses. He may well be right; certainly the film remains a fascinating experiment which exposes not only the mores of the times but those of the audiences viewing it. Already audience reactions have shifted visibly toward the contestants and their situation.

For the rest, he sneers at *Explosion*, the first exhibited CFDC-aided film, and encourages Morley Markson (*Zero the Fool*), Iain Ewing (*Kill*) and David Cronenberg (*Stereo*) with his comments, almost as if testing his pieces for their effects and power as well as general information and entertainment value.

You'll recall some of the Canadian films of the last four years, while reading or re-reading these articles from *Saturday Night*, now in chronological order. You can once again note the pleasurable reception of *Goin' Down the Road* a touch of praise for Markowitz' *More than One* (his new film on Stephen Truscott should appear soon), a brief word (thankfully) on *The Reincarnate*, seen at a drive-in, and a surprisingly positive reaction to Kramer's *Bless the Beasts and Children*, couched in a discussion of resources available to filmmakers in an unfortunate comparison with Shebib's *Rip-Off*. ("In approach, *Rip-Off* is warm and promising, but the development of the material, and the execution, are persistently mediocre.")

The work is mostly opinions, of course, but the opinions are fun to read whether one agrees or not. *Mon Oncle Antoine* "is as close to a masterpiece as the Canadian cinema has yet attained," while *Foxy Lady* and *Face-Off* inspire Fulford/Delaney to exclaim, bristling imaginary moustaches, "If we are to have a Canadian cinema then no doubt we must have trash; but can't we have good trash?"

Other Canadian films of this period receiving either the pat-on-the-head or the kick-in-the-pants Delaney/Fulford style, are *The Rowdyman* ("... a modestly enjoyable film"); *Wedding in White* of which he comments that the film doesn't lack good qualities ("it has several of them") and *August and July* ("... *A Married Couple* for lesbians").

By 1973 Delaney/Fulford seems to be less anxious to brutalize the baby industry. He is gentle with Potterton's *The Rainbow Boys*, paternally patient with *Pleasure Palace* as a new-porn Canadian effort, and saves his furious scorn for such receptacles as *The Neptune Factor* as a failure and one that, like Till's *A Fan's Notes*, is made with Canadian Film Development Corporation backing, but American stars and control. And finally, by late 1973, in writing about Shebib's *Between Friends* we notice that both the Canadian film industry, and Fulford/Delaney's critical contributions to it are established enough for him to start surveying the themes of a director's work, though not yet the overall themes of Canadian films as a whole. This perhaps must wait until Bob Fothergill gets all his ideas on his little-brother-thesis of Canadian creativity worked out and into a book.

The brevity of the pieces is both a blessing and a curse. Approximately nine-hundred-word pieces are just too skimpy for more than a nostalgic reminder of some films and their immediate reception. His comments on *Paperback Hero*, *Kamouraska* as considered in terms of Michel Brault's

camerawork, *Slipstream* and *Duddy Kravitz* leave us hungering for more.

And fortunately, whether we agree with the critic's conclusions, or of his use of his influential position in Canadian arts, his writing style is a continual pleasure, generally breezy, compact, and with that apparently effortless readability that other writers labor so hard to achieve. Even his peculiar habit of using "say" with great frequency, becomes a friendly familiar mannerism that gives him, say, a quaintly neighborhood quality.

The other two-thirds of this collection deal with "The Hollywood Versions" and "The World Out There", that is, American and Other films. His comments here are on subjects frequently discussed and criticized, and it is good to see that his work compares favorably with much of that written on some of these films. Though extremely brief, his terse remarks on some of Godard's work are perceptive and astute, for instance.

There are all kinds of film critics of course, from those who write for daily papers, or weeklies, to magazine writers, film journal contributors and authors of books. Fulford rather clearly disassociates himself from the superficial reviewer whom he apparently considers one of the curses of our paper polluted world.

"Movie reviewers for the newspapers, most of whom are emotionally paralyzed and intellectually stunted . . ." he begins at one point, adding to the opinion suggested in a former comment in which he stated that "Myra Breckinridge proved it was still, thank God, possible to get at someone: that last bastion of uncomprehending high-mindedness, the middlebrow newspaper reviewer."

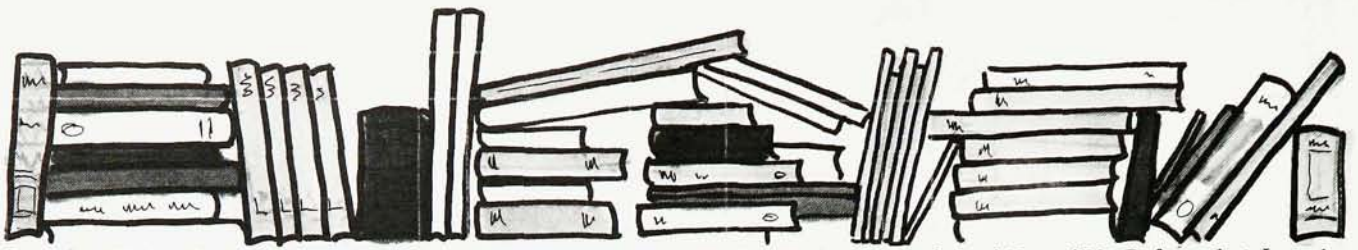
But whether you find Fulford/Delaney an upper middle-brow reviewer with Good rather than High or Low taste, (with a lusty ability to enjoy the Low as well as not be overwhelmed by the High), and neither emotionally paralyzed or intellectually stunted, you'll certainly find him an observant, opinionated and eminently readable author. And his book, this collection from the pages of the threatened and perhaps extinct *Saturday Night*, is not only an excellent discussion point for film-classes and groups, but of the greatest interest to Canadians interested in their culture, and a valuable asset to the library of books on Canadian films and filmmakers which we shall all acquire over the next few years.

For a book that concentrates more on the filmmakers than the films, we can turn to John Hofsess' *Inner Views*, a collection of ten articles written from thoughtfully worked interviews with various directors and writers, prefaced by an argumentative thesis on Canadian film, past, present, and future.

"John Hofsess is a prize-winning Canadian film director" the small point italicized line under his page on film at the back of Maclean's proclaimed, back in 1971 when few knew, or remembered, the young innovator whose *Columbus of Sex* and ensuing censorship keffuffle first brought him to public attention.

By 1973, however, the italicized identification read simply, "John Hofsess is a Canadian film director and critic." He may not be known as the former, yet he is certainly known now by anyone in the business or near it, and a large public, as the latter.

The back page of Maclean's carries a lot of wallop; even more than the studious pages of the temporarily defunct



**Saturday Night.** For all those who deny themselves the Canadian Comment in Time through a point of pride, or principle or just plain ignorance, **Saturday Night** and **Maclean's** represent our two major national gossip lines on what our country is up to and about.

In the last four years Hofsess's writing has cooled down, gotten more polish, become more like, say, Delaney's. (As a matter of interest, Hofsess uses that distinctive "say" breather in just one place in his book, and one wonders if it is an unconscious homage to Delaney!)

Back in 1971 Hofsess opened a piece on heroes with "In the classic western the hero was unemotional, stoically asexual and did most of his thinking as if he had a bullet lodged in his brain."

There isn't that kind of sharp sprinty stuff in this collection of pieces on Canadian filmmakers. Working with interview material from each artist, he sounds a bit stuffier, more defensive, argumentative and less witty. Furthermore, he introduces these sections with a very lengthy discussion of the current picture in Canada, the American power people, money and all, with a pedantic thoroughness that makes the reader long for the confines of the old back page.

The argument, based on interesting historical perspectives, presents the case for Canadians to continue to make low budget distinctively Canadian features or shorts and forget about the big competitive world markets for the time being. It is reasonably well presented, but one feels a small surge of automatic resentment at the suggestion, however kindly given, that it is better to play tiddlywinks at home than go out and gamble with the big kids. We can't make it, we'll only fail, he hints. He wants to ignore the so-called "North-American" picture, and though one may usually agree, yet when he says, "There is no such thing as a North American identity. If you're not Canadian, or American, you simply lack identity," he goes too far, and sounds as if he simply has never spent much time living in Europe or Japan or Australia.

The sections on various creative people include researched background information, quoted comments and a general to specific run-through on most of their works. It is most useful, and one would wish more people were included. As it is we have Claude Jutra, Allan King, Don Shebib, Jack Darcus, Graeme Ferguson, Frank Vitale, William Fruet, Paul Almond, Denys Arcand and Pierre Berton.

*Pierre Berton!* you say? Well, the list's like that: arbitrary.

He defends his choice, explaining these are "ten of the most original and innovative of Canadian film directors and the ones who seem likeliest to continue producing bold and fresh work." He dismisses Larry Kent, John Trent, George Kaczender and even Gilles Carle and others by determining to concentrate on people who are "... cutting a new path." They are helping to define what *Canadian* means. ... and finally summing up his selectivity with:

"In the future when people talk about Canadian movies, and really mean *Canadian* movies, these are the film directors, and these are the influential films, that are bound to be discussed. For these are the dreamers of independent mind and unique vision who said "No," to American mass culture; thus a new culture began to germinate."

How well qualified is Hofsess for this kind of evaluation?

"I've been with Maclean's since 1970. I was with Take

One before that, from '67 to '70. Before that I made films. One, called **Palace of Pleasure**, I made in '67. It won some awards, made the rounds. Then in '69 I made one which was called **The Columbus of Sex** which was seized by police and there was a big trial in Hamilton and the film was destroyed. So I approached Maclean's and asked if they would like a story on the proceedings. They said no, in fact, but **Saturday Night** said yes. Then Maclean's came along and said that what they really wanted was someone to write about film, so they hired me and from that point on I have functioned as a critic, primarily of Canadian film."

"I never foresaw a career as a critic, and I'm not sure I am entirely or exclusively a critic now."

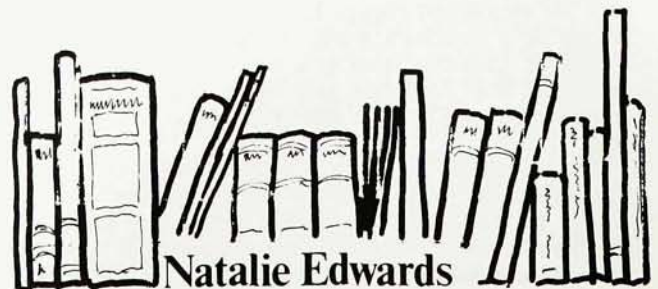
From November 1974 NFB magazine **Pot Pourri**

He seems to be a man who loves to take ideas and fling them off into space to see how far they'll go. Occasionally one turns into a boomerang. For instance he says "I don't believe that any Canadian could dream up **The Exorcist** (though quite a few could copy it) and even if there were such a writer, or director, he would probably be turned down by the Canada Council (for being such an unpromising, lurid, vulgar hack) and the Canadian Film Development Corporation (for writing such a weak script, rescued only by its obscenities) and therefore the film would never be made." Yet meanwhile the CFDC was backing **Black Christmas**.

**Mocking the Afflicted: A Study on Canadian Film** was the title he intended for a book he was working on (for publication by New Press) back in 1973. He said, "The afflicted is us. We don't have any heroes or winners in our films. Most of our characters are losers on the down and out. The book will get into the reasons for this." It appears the present volume is the distillation of the thought that preparing that book plus many hours of talking and interviewing, involved.

Though Hofsess doubts that his work in Maclean's has very much influence on potential audiences, he feels there is value in the illumination he offers. His book is like that too. It's not going to sell Canadian films anywhere perhaps, or turn a lot of people onto them who are presently ignoring our own films, but it does illuminate the thinking and effort involved in some of our movies and it does show a compassionate, interested and opinionated viewpoint from which new discussions and evaluations can evolve.

To hell with budget blues, depressive times, Christmas bills and January blahs. Buy the books anyway. Be perverse. And remember, it's never a bad time for a new book on our favourite subject - Canadian film. □



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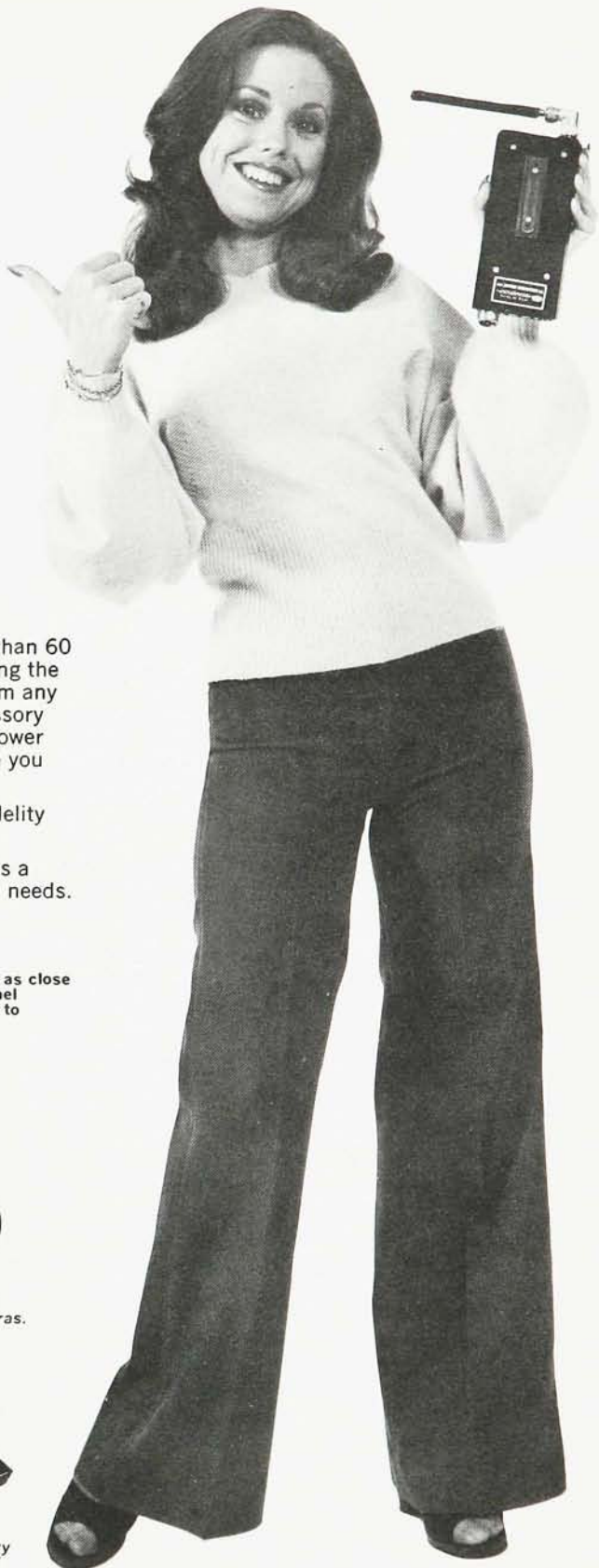
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