

# BOOK REVIEWS

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## The Films of Don Shebib

by Piers Handling

Ottawa: The Canadian Film Institute, 1978, 148 pages, \$5.95.

## Richard Leiterman

by Alison Reid and P.M. Evanchuck

Ottawa: The Canadian Film Institute, 1978, 120 pages, \$5.50.

Two years after its publication of Maynard Collins' *Norman McLaren*, the Canadian Film Institute has released volumes two and three in its series on Canadian cinema. The books – Piers Handling's *The Films of Don Shebib* and *Richard Leiterman* by Alison Reid and P.M. Evanchuck – represent the most thorough studies to date of their respective subjects. At the same time, the two works raise questions concerning the roles of the figures discussed and the methodology to be used in the study of the national film experience.

Both books consist of introductory essays followed by lengthy interviews with the filmmakers, excellent filmographies and select bibliographies. In *The Films of Don Shebib*, Handling's auteurist introduction to Shebib's career represents the most systematic pursuit of the subject to appear in print. In rather poetically titled sections, Handling takes up Peter Harcourt's appreciation of the moments of meditation that appear in Shebib's films (see *Cinema Canada* No. 32). He, then, outlines the long string of documentaries to Shebib's four features and his television work. Throughout, Handling maintains an awareness of Shebib's development of a central concern, the "male bond," a subject he discusses in further detail in the third section of the essay. In an appropriately brief section, Handling notes Shebib's depiction of women. And, in concluding sections, he discusses the nature of the closed worlds in which the plots of Shebib's films are enacted and, also, the question of where Shebib's long string of loser protagonists fit in a larger Canadian milieu.

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Handling is honest enough to conclude that it "is difficult to evaluate the importance of an artist in a broader context, particularly when that person is still active and obviously will continue to make films for a good many years to come." *Goin' Down the Road*, we are told has already guaranteed Shebib a place in the history of Canadian cinema. "Hopefully," writes Handling, "the promise that this film held out will mature and evolve, or more specifically, be *allowed* to develop (Handling's italics)."

One wonders. Granted Shebib's work may qualify him as one of the few consistently productive directors outside of Quebec. But is there really evidence that Shebib's films continue to be a central influence in Canadian film production? Or does the nostalgia that pervades these films work its way into our assessment of them? And, if Shebib does indeed "mature and evolve" will this evolution be in a direction relevant to the increasingly sophisticated Canadian film audiences?

In his interview with Handling, Shebib himself provides the basis for a long overdue reevaluation. From his boundless dedication to classic Hollywood cinema to his overt flirtation with fascism, Shebib goes out of his way to define himself as an embarrassment to Canadian film culture. He not only dislikes almost every Canadian film discussed, but he seems to bemoan the very presence of others directors in this country. Shebib does little to contradict his widely publicized criticism of Canadian screen writers. Applying his ideas to Canadian film production, Shebib advocates the creation of large centralized studio facilities in Toronto and Montreal. Then, in a semi-rational passage, he equates any opponents of the idea with Croatia terrorists, Maritime separatists and all the individual and independent parties whom Hitler so rightfully despised.

To be fair, Shebib is not entirely pleased with his own work. He admits that the difficult circumstances under which he has worked – including the inadequacy of so many of his collaborators – have weakened his productions. He tells us that he cannot get the hang of working with actors, a tangential skill whose lack makes him look less talented than he is. And, when all is said and done, Shebib admits that despite his

radio reviews, he, himself, is not a critic. But then, after his description of the Toronto media, who would want to be?

To be really fair, it may be suggested that Shebib was not at his best during the hours that Handling spoke to him. Perhaps Handling probed too many nerves. Or, to be more generous, perhaps Shebib's answers were meant as provocations, put-ons designed to elicit support for the many victims of his attacks.

Generosity aside, the self-portrait revealed in this interview is that of a minor Howard Hawks who believes it would be all for the best if someone were to provide him with the facilities to develop his persona. And who are we to refuse him? Who would argue that it took a Hawks – or, more accurately, a Hawksian hero – to make feature films in this country years ago? If Shebib were *allowed* more regular feature production, he could be counted upon to bring forth the qualities of toughness and the moments of grace that may be found in his work to date. These are not small accomplishments. Yet one is left to wonder, amid the growing variety and accomplishments of English Canadian film, whether this Los Angeles world view will not occupy a shrinking niche in our consciousness. And, if we are to take Shebib's assessments and his politics at face value, we may wonder if his works will become tid-bits of the national cinema that are increasingly difficult to swallow.

The Shebib book, also, calls into question the concept of an auteurist approach to English Canadian cinema. As Handling's disclaimer implies, any director with a dozen or so years of experience and a bare handful of features under his belt, is at a disadvantage when scrutinized as if he were an established master. This is not to say that source material, critical essays, interviews, even collections of reviews are irrelevant. This sort of material – amply provided by the CFI's previous pamphlet series – is still far too sparse. But is there not a more profitable way to use limited resources to cover the subject?

Part of the answer to this is the Richard Leiterman book. The CFI's recognition of Leiterman as a central figure in the genesis of English Canadian, feature filmmaking marks the beginning of an alternative approach. The thorough research done by Reid and Evanchuck

goes far to argue for the validity of the study. Although their introductory essay is shorter than Handling's, it covers the range of Leiterman's work, while presenting a sophisticated discussion of his camera technique. In both their essay and the interview, the authors are highly conscious of Leiterman's interaction with directors such as King, Shebib, Fruet, Markowitz and Wieland. As a result, we get both new information and a new perspective on the production of major films from *A Married Couple* to *The Far Shore*.

In the interview, Leiterman presents himself as a quietly creative professional, as eager to discuss the concepts behind his work as he is to recount his widely varying shoots. Like Shebib, he is impatient with a lack of professionalism in some of his collaborators. Unlike Shebib, he acknowledges the talent he has found and, parenthetically, notes that he was just as happy that Shebib left him alone during the shooting of *Between Friends*.

If there is anything bothersome about the interview, it is Leiterman's conclusion that he would not like to find himself a 50 year old cameraman. The statement is a sad commentary on the lack of appreciation that he has been shown for his consistently superb craftsmanship. An equally sad commentary is the difficulty Reid and Evan-chuck had in compiling the filmography. It is as if no one ever thought it worthwhile to keep records of a cameraman's career.

It may be hoped that future volumes in the CFI's series will expand upon the ingenuity of exploring Canadian cinema through the perspective of figures other than our nascent auteurs. Possibilities that come to mind are: a group study of the Unit B producer/directors (Daly, Koenig, Kroiter, Low); a volume on the Canadian avant-garde; an overview of the Canadian docu-drama; television features; political film, etc. Beyond this, the most important work to be done in English-language film criticism is that of providing access to Quebec cinema. If the CFI series must, for some reason, continue to focus on individuals, the individuals it should be focusing upon are people of the calibre of Lefebvre, Carle and Jutra. An even more useful service would be to begin the process of translating the discussion of cinema in Quebec as found in the first issue of *Découpage* to the present. It would be a formidable undertaking, requiring, no

doubt, several carefully edited volumes. Yet the end product would not only change our understanding of the majority of this nation's films, but would also serve as a model for coming to terms with the problematical unities of the English Canadian, cinematic endeavour.

Seth Feldman

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Embattled Shadows

by Peter Morris

Toronto: McGill-Queen's Press, 1978,  
352 pages, cloth \$21.95, paper \$10.95.

Long overdue but well worth the wait, English Canada at last has its own history of filmmaking to 1939. Peter Morris' *Embattled Shadows* is a pioneering work in its field and will be useful to both Canadian film students and the general reader. The historical questions it raises also create a necessary perspective on the debate over the preservation and expansion of the Canadian film industry.

*Embattled Shadows* ambitiously tries to cover nearly a half-century of struggle, success, and failure in Canadian film. Thankfully, it does not fall back upon cheap sentimentality nor does it appeal to xenophobic nationalism to explain struggle and failure. Not surprisingly, we discover that success in film, infrequent as it was, seemed to be linked to the Canadian natural environment and its decisive effect on the individual. In the early years, this naturalism seemed to offer the world its window on Canada. The young nation, however, was wrestling with a British colonial tradition which militated against a specific Canadian identity. And simultaneous attempt to digest a population bulge of some two million immigrants between 1900 and 1914 did little to instill a sense of national place or self.

The fundamental question which Morris probes throughout is why Canada never centralized a monopolistic structure in its film industry. The answer, he implies, lies probably more in what Canada did *not* have than in what it did have. It lacked home markets and dense clusters of population. Also, in

the absence of a theatrical tradition, it failed to keep sufficient talent in Canada to make a viable industry. Then, significantly, there were problems in attracting sufficient capital to finance production. Add the final burden of inaccessibility to foreign, i.e., American, markets and one is left with a conclusion Morris reluctantly describes as, "a pretty cogent case for not attempting production in the first place."

Morris traces the history of Canadian film by relying heavily upon two trade publications, *Canadian Moving Picture Digest* and *Moving Picture Worlds*. They are at once the strength and the weakness of the book, for while they provide for a chronological narrative, they may have prevented the author from opening the structure to allow for a wider interpretation. For example, one wishes for a more substantial analysis of Canadian propaganda films in the First World War. The role of Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook) on behalf of the Canadian Government would have been a fascinating story, especially his connection with propaganda newsreels. Such newsreels were typified by a combattant's style that encouraged a heavy-handed and racist characterization of the enemy along with battle sequences that were staged to glorify war.

Even a comment on Canada's *Victory Loan 1918*, a film tag available for viewing from the National Film Archives, could have led to a more detailed discussion of the war propaganda film during this century's first world war. (The film tag shows a Canadian nurse dying a heroic death as her hospital is destroyed "under the merciless bombs of the Hun.") Thus, the author might have argued that the 1919 film treatment of the Red Scare in Canada, *The Great Shadow*, fits into a specific tradition of film propaganda generated by the Great War. Its abuse of communion and its vilification of Bolsheviks, in general, nodect a natural successor to the Hun-hating propaganda which preceded it.

Gary Evans lives and teaches in Montreal and has written about the documentary film in Canada.

In his treatment of why Canadian production failed to perpetuate itself, Morris demonstrates that Canada's production in the twenties faltered because of a tendency of promoters to "skim the cream" off of the production companies. Such unscrupulous practices by individuals with get-rich-quick mentalities played no small role in discouraging Canadian investment. To this dismal picture was added the spectre of Hollywood's giants, well along in their bid for complete vertical integration, squeezing out the independents, with only 75 percent of all films at this time reaching the screen.

The author wonders why the Canadian Government failed to become involved in private film production, especially since they were anxious to promote trade and tourism in their official films. Was it, he asks, Government's refusal to support the existence of anything outside their own bureaucratic circles or a sense that there was already sufficient private enterprise in the film industry which determined their policy? There is a simple historical explanation which may answer his question. Traditionally, Canadian Governments have not considered it legitimate to compete with private capital or to show profits, but to use state enterprise to facilitate the investment of further capital, often foreign, in the private sphere. Thus, it was not proper for Government to do more than to provide moral encouragement for private film production. Perhaps reluctant Canadian capitalists, having learned a costly lesson at the hands of unprincipled promoters, cannot be blamed for avoiding high risk enterprise like commercial film.

Morris quotes part of a revealing letter from Ray Peck of the Government Motion Picture Bureau which explains why the Government encouraged establishment of a Hollywood branch plant here in the thirties. A brief explanation of the Paramount/Famous Players stock manipulation deal of the early thirties would have sharpened the overall focus of this section, along with a description of blind, block and advance booking abuses. Still, the evidence remains indisputable: Canada preferred to continue its long-established role as a colonial pawn.

This is not to understate how mediocrity dogged Canadian film production in the interwar year. Morris touches an important point when discussing Canadian encouragement of a derivative Hollywood style; the quality of the films offered little that would earn them the chance for distribution or acclaim. One Canada began seeing itself as it was, rather than as a carbon copy of America, something began to jell. *Nanook of the North*, *The Silent Enemy* and *The Viking* revealed a self image which made Canadians curious about their relationship to their environment and survival. Thus the author correctly identifies the documentary and the documentary-drama as the "quintessential Canadian film form." His claim, however, that Robert Flaherty's approach seems more relevant to Canadian film than John Grierson's direct influence on Canadian documentary is most contentious. While he notes that Flaherty portrayed primitive traditions, and the former majesty and character of peoples whose lives were being changed by the intrusion of modern civilization, he seems to ignore the fact that it was a way of life which no longer existed. The romantic exotica of Flaherty's approach had little relevance to Grierson's indelible documentary stamp and his ability to interpret workaday Canada, its shirtsleeves rolled up, to itself and to the world. Such was the British tradition Grierson would transplant in structuring the National Film Board of Canada. But that story begins in 1939 where this book ends.

Significantly, Morris has broken ground in a rich new area of study and has provided the framework from which to build an understanding of this important aspect of Canadian social history.

*Embattled Shadows* was preceded by the ever popular NFB/CBC production, *Dreamland*. The book puts much needed flesh on the skeleton of that film. Its concluding assertion that it is to the documentary tradition that the Canadian film industry must look in the future seems fair enough. Few could deny that it has been primarily through documentary that Canadians have discovered and held steady the mirror they use to define themselves.

Gary Evans

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