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cannes 1979

# canada at the crossroads (again)

This year at Cannes, Canada made «gigantic attempts» to go «international . . . that is, in the 'Hollywood' mode,» writes film critic Marc Gervais. But Hollywood won the lion's share of the prizes.

by marc gervais



Oscar in a scuffle, from Schlöndorff's winning adaptation of *The Tin Drum*



For some years now, Cannes, as no place else, has played the role of Great Situator. After the two week total immersion, one returns to the home ground with a whole set of brand new, or not so brand new, insights concerning film around the world. What is the state of the art? And what about world film as industry and commerce? Or how is a certain country evolving?

That is why, paradoxically enough, Canadians go to Cannes to find out just what Canada is about in the great quest for feature film. Certainly, a context is created for evaluating the Canadian effort, the quality of its products and the relative merits. For Canada is, now more than ever, inextricably bound to the world scene; and success or failure – our future, really – is scarcely a private national affair.

Before delving, however, into the fascinating Canadian performance and the range of Canadian attitudes about our immediate future, one may well pause to reflect on a few aspects of the wider scene. For surely that is the major consideration, at least in terms of world culture and world economics and in terms of film excellence.

Cannes presented us with what might be called a final equation, one that is obvious. It is not a new one, but never has this writer found the basic fact so overwhelming: the U.S. now totally dominates the world film scene. We'll be getting back to that shortly.

Canada, then, is hardly unique in its poor-sister role in seeking world markets. Along with so many other countries, we have a feature film industry that is growing. There is plenty of activity. And in many of the countries there is some quality output as well. But one gets the distinct feeling that the others are scrambling for left-overs. "Hollywood" is what everyone wants, whether it is American products to show on the screens back home or the American market to expose one's own product.

Cannes, however, serves as a more strictly cultural thermometer as well, and certain trends were clearly in evidence at that level. The Year of the Woman (of very recent memory) seems to have paid off handsomely in feature film, for women directors were in evidence as never before. Of course, the Women's Movement is presently the central focus of intellectual activity in Paris. As Paris goes, so they used to say...

And films all over the world are doing a lot of soul-searching as regards the past. It may be a more nuanced – and more honest – exploration of World War II, the society at the time, or some such thing. In most instances, the heavy ideological re-writes of history are toned down, and the complexity of human motivation and behaviour heightened. The cinema seems to be taking quite seriously the question of who we are, and how we have been shaped by our history.

Perhaps because of this similarity of concern, many films regardless of nationality, have a similarity of texture about them. The formal experimentation of the sixties, to be sure, has long been absent from Cannes' screens. But now more than ever, shock and contestation have been replaced by a certain literary-ness, lush colors, smooth slow rhythms – and a meditative turn.

Maybe the over-all tone is one of greater gentleness and friendliness. Certainly this was reflected in the general atmosphere of the Festival itself, and in the film folk in attendance. The numbers were blessedly down, there was less hustle and bustle, there were more festive occasions, and the beautiful, sunny weather was reflected in the relaxed behaviour. People

actually seemed to be enjoying themselves, bringing the Festival dimension back to the occasion.

Or was this all merely a typical manifestation or symptom of seventies' socio-psycho-emotional fatigue?

Be that as it may, many of us conscientious scribes did see films, with the concentrations and (alas) omissions that the Cannes *embarras du choix* makes inevitable. A few brief comments from this writer's particular Cannes horizon, then, served up as symbols, perhaps, of larger situations within the over-all world film life:

Eastern Europe – or some of the film countries controlled by Communist regimes. Whatever the reasons may be, Cannes has not been blessed for the last decade or so, with many significant offerings from countries that had furnished us with magnificent moments in the fifties and sixties. Maybe that helps explain this year's Jury awards (as we shall see).

Czechoslovakia – a ray of hope? Jiri Menzel (remember *Closely Watched Trains?*) returned with a charming piece, *Those Magnificent Young Men With Their Movie Cameras*, a harmless offering which raised timid hopes among some that possibly the excessively repressive film situation in Czechoslovakia may be loosening a bit.

Hungary presented its usual aesthetically opulent offering, Miklos Jancso's *Hungarian Rhapsody*; and the USSR lumbered in with a heavily clichéd, but fitfully impressive epic, Andrei Mikhalkov Kontchalovsky's *The Siberiad*. This was my first taste of Kontchalovsky, who I had read was almost in the class of his colleague, the great Andrei Tarkovsky. Quelle déception! However that may be, both Jancso and Kontchalovsky are the fair-haired boys of their respective regimes. And so, it seems, a Festival bent of reassuring the Party saw fit to reward them with special prizes.

What makes all of this rather shabby is the treatment accorded to a far finer movie, Andrzej Wajda's latest exploration of Polish society. Fittingly enough, his film is called *Rough Treatment*, and it afforded one of the rare instances in Cannes of genuine contestation of an existing situation. Wajda dares to ask the relevant questions with intensity and dramatic power. What makes the performance especially noteworthy is Wajda's radical change in style. Wajda is 51, and for almost a quarter century has been considered Eastern Europe's greatest film artist, even though he is relatively unknown (thanks to our absurd distribution patterns) in North America. His initial reputation was built, in great measure, upon the brilliance of his romantic baroque. For the last few years baroque wildness has yielded to a sparser, more austere and contemporary direct cinema approach, perfectly suited to the kinds of questions that now obsess him. As a result, of course, Wajda makes the Party bosses uneasy, and his life as an artist is rendered correspondingly precarious. It was surely the most unsavory aspect of this year's Cannes Festival that such an artist was ignored in the prize awarding. Or was it that the Cannes people knew that any award might prove extremely embarrassing to Wajda?

The Scandinavians had many films in the Market and even as part of various manifestations, but failed to elicit much

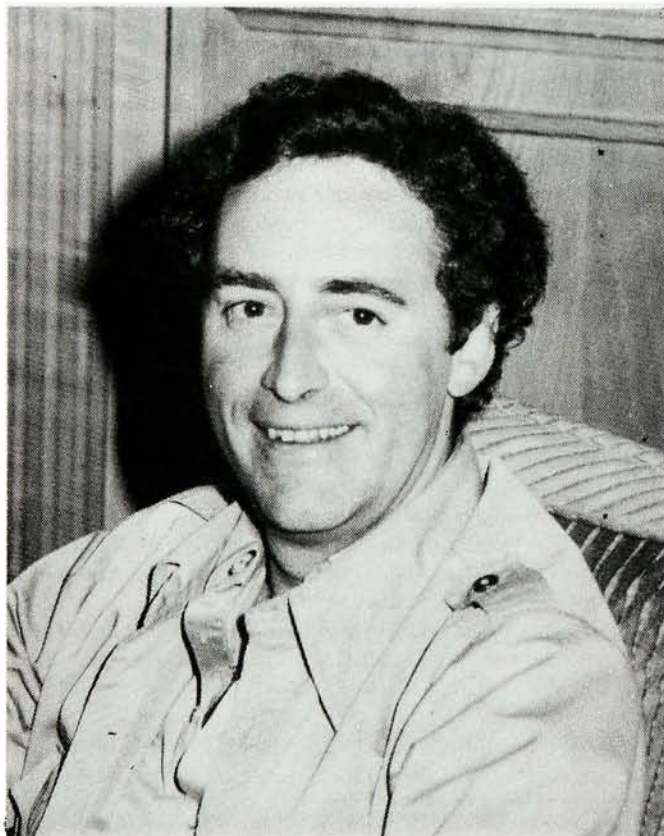
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response. This in spite of the fact that Swedish films are now achieving what is considered impossible in the "western" world: their own films are actually outdrawing Hollywood at the box office back home. Unfortunately, Bo Widerberg's *Victoria*, filmed (disastrously) in English, enjoyed the dubious privilege of being the Festival's major disappointment, Widerberg's romanticism having succumbed all the way to soft, lush silliness. Sweden, by the way, is embarking upon a series of film weeks in Canada's major cities in early fall; and a few Canadians were busily helping in the planning both in Cannes and, later, in Stockholm.

The Australians, whose achievements have been extolled by this writer for the past three years, are hardly any longer the unknown, sweet young things of world cinema, whose every cinematic move elicits appreciative ooh's and aah's. Consequently, the critic's attitudes grow tougher, more demanding. It seems to me that the Aussies are in a bit of a bind, relying too easily on a kind of filmic naiveté. What is needed now is a little more aesthetic daring and experimentation, variations on what may have become predictable formulas. Australian films, facing problems similar to our own, nonetheless still compare very favourably with the Canadian output.

Italy will be duly celebrated in a few months at the Montreal Film Festival. One hopes that the Italian films will be of a higher order there than those presented at Cannes. Not that Rosi and Risi and Commencini's work was shoddy; it was merely uninspired and uninspiring. There was, however, one lovely Italian event, Federico Fellini's return to nuance, wit and human dimension in his *Prova d'Orchestra (Orchestra Rehearsal)*. This may be "only" a 70-minute made-for-TV



Jean Lefebvre, director of the Film Festival's Bureau (known as Cinema Canada abroad), coordinator of the federal presence in Cannes

exercise, but what a welcome release from the turgid aesthetic elephantitis of *Casanova*! A return to grace by the *maestro*, no less.

The hosting French entries deserve little comment, but West Germany was very much in evidence. Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu* is already a hit of sorts in Europe, but his official Cannes entry, *Woyzech*, rivalled Widerberg's film for let-down — a sort of aesthetic indulgence of another kind. The controversial Fassbinder, of course, had some three films floating around Cannes, continuing that director's policy of deliberate unevenness, provocation, distanciation, and the aesthetics of anything-I-do-is-worth-recording. But it was Volker Schlöndorff's *The Tin Drum* (from Günter Grass' novel) that elicited the greatest enthusiasm, actually sharing the Grand Prix du Festival. And so the Germans continue to impress. But in their hermetic stylistic gropings and down-beat themes they still fail to meet a broad-based audience. More often than not, German films continue to be alienated, agonized communications of a still fractured national psyche, at times seemingly the fruit of what one might exaggeratedly term the psychotic sensibility.

Of course, there were so many other films and other film cultures struggling for attention at the Cannes festival; and hopefully other scribes will highlight this or that aspect that deserves notice. However, it is time, in this article, to face up to the unavoidable fact mentioned earlier on.

To put it this way — can anyone fault Canada for going the Hollywood route when one experiences the extent of Hollywood's success at Cannes, that incomparable arena for comparison and evaluation?

Some of the facets of Hollywood's phenomenal domination over the years are well known to be sure. The Americans seem to have a stranglehold on financing, distribution, and the like. And for decades — even before the twenties — Hollywood has mastered the technique of appealing to the masses, all the masses, one is tempted to say, across the face of the earth. What is it about Hollywood stories and Hollywood heroes and heroines that appeals to the universal human imagination? How does the psyche find itself so readily in Hollywood's mythic incarnations and representations?

There has to be an answer, and this has resulted in Canada's gigantic attempts at going "international" — international, that is, in the "Hollywood" mode. As has been reported at large, the Canadian effort has met with staggering success. One hears figures of Canadian international sales and foreign investments initiated this past May at Cannes amounting to some 12 to 15 million dollars — when only twelve months ago, Canada's finest financial showing to date at Cannes had amounted to 3 million! Add to that some \$125 million pre-Cannes international money and one gets an idea of the enormity of the success story. Government policy, tax deferments, the over-all politique of the Canadian Film Development Corp. under Michael McCabe and Michel Vennat seem to be paying off, to put it mildly. Put it more strongly, and it goes like this: not long ago, "Canadian" in film finance circles meant sure death. Now, in finance circles, the same word starts a stampede to get in on the action.

Bravo! Well, maybe... and maybe not so bravo. For one sensed a very intriguing feeling of "yes, but..." among well-placed, knowledgeable Canadian types at Cannes' Carlton terrace or various other watering holes and restaurants where the folk meet and more or less confide. The business side is happy,



whether it be the veterans (say, Pierre David, Denis Héroux, David Perlmutter), or comparative rookies pulling off significant coups (such as John Danylkiw and John Cressey). But the "quality" boys and girls (critics? certain officials? etc?) are less than ecstatic. This group obviously does not wish to knock a good thing... yes, we are all happy that film *is* happening, that people *are* working, that experience is a-growing with expertise at all levels. And yes, I admire Michael McCabe when he says that Canada must soon attempt at least a few quality films a year to go along with the boom.

But booms tend to poop out if the grounding is insubstantial. And truth to tell, it was extremely difficult to take any of Canada's dozen or so commercial films shown at Cannes this year with any kind of seriousness. A co-production such as **Murder By Decree** is the exception. But while one can admire the commercial intelligence behind **Wild Horse Hank** – surely it will work this summer in the drive-ins – the unlikely mixture of **My Friend Flicka**, women's lib, and truck driver ethic is a bit much. **Running** furnishes another example. Full of excellent things – notably Michael Douglas' lead performance and the inclusion of the Montreal Olympics – the film nonetheless shamelessly goes for the hankerchief syndrome, using every tried-and-true tear-jerking technique known to the cinema. I loved it, I wept – and the critic super-ego in me screamed in protest.

One could go through the list of Canadian films shown at Cannes, highlighting pertinent aspects. And surely each deserves far more individual and serious and thorough treatment than is possible in this kind of article. But the danger signs are there: Canadian films tailored to what certain film people judge to be Hollywood models are pretty unimportant fare, to judge from recent examples.

And here a parenthesis – the *Québécois* situation is a different one, somewhat similar, perhaps in its commercial manifestation (say, Jean-Claude Lord and Denis Héroux's co-productions), but radically dissimilar in what one might call the seventies, cultural inheritance of Quebec's film explosion in the sixties.

In the latter category, Canada had three films invited to three of the prestigious side manifestations. Of course, as always, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, the most remarkably independent and individualistic of all Canadian film directors, had yet another film in Cannes, this one an austere, unrelenting study of today's CEGEP youth-victims, **Avoir 16 Ans**. Jean-Pierre is still the poet of life's sad folly, only now he can look *back* on a younger generation, and feel the loss there, a sadder and more mellow man.

It was two Quebec *women* film directors, however, who received the greatest positive response. Diane Létourneau's **Les servantes du Bon Dieu**, an affecting documentary on a community of nuns in Sherbrooke, Quebec, proved a most unexpected hit. And Anne-Clair Poirier's **Mourir à tue-tête**, a hard-hitting docu-drama on rape, scored both as cinema and social controversy.

All of these films assuredly testify to the fact that serious Quebecois cinema is far from dead, and that in Poirier and Létourneau women-in-film is now a solid reality chez-nous. Over-all, there are signs even of a Quebecois film renaissance of sorts.

End of Quebec parenthesis, and back to the "central fact" – Canada's main-line effort at imitating Hollywood recipes



Diane Létourneau eats with Louis Marcorelles from France's prestigious *Le Monde* and a French psychiatrist (top) while Jacqueline Brody from Cinema Canada schedules interviews with Anne-Clair Poirier (middle). They don't seem to disturb the placid Jacques Dick who keeps all the accounts in order. Below, Tony Kramreiter asks Claudie Delahaie for assistance in the Carlton Hotel Canadian headquarters.

in order to capture the American and "international" markets (an economic necessity) seems to be paying off financially right now, to be sure. And as far as filmmaking is concerned, it is solidly based on *one* aspect of the successful "American" formula. Hollywood, it seems, has gone on captivating the universal human heart – and capturing the lion's share of the



world's film market — by remaining steadfastly true to certain sure values.

Hollywood, that is to say, hardly ever forsakes obvious story, character, external action, highly dramatic and spectacular conflict and violence. European cinema was extraordinary in the fifties and sixties, probably the most brilliant film explosion in history, precisely in adventuring out into more "artistic," "personal," "inner," "social" dimensions. But the success did not last: the inner probe, the more delicate approach, the ideological drive, describe it how you will — apparently do not enjoy comparable mass appeal. Simple stories, basic emotions and sentiments, more or less archetypal action figures — that's entertainment. And so Canada, which never succeeded before in following this popular movie fiction route, is now turning with a vengeance to the Source, the Perfect Example, for its models.

But the catch is that Canada seems to be emulating Hollywood "B" films (at best). We are simply not doing the good things that Hollywood does. So what happens when our international buyers get stung with too many "Canadian" B products... where goes our credibility, and our movie boom? Not to mention specifically "Canadian" cultural values (the eternal question)!

True, Cannes' Market had many examples of "genuine" Hollywood B exploitation flicks. But by and large, these are not the movies that make it big at the box office. These are not the films that everyone — public and critics alike — wants to see in preference to almost any other films. What makes Hollywood so viable a phenomenon is precisely its good movies. And, quite simply, Cannes 1979 was a testimonial that these good Hollywood movies are not only the most "popular," but also artistically, culturally far and away the best in the world right now.

I am not referring here to rather "special" categories. John Huston, for example, was given a prestigious homage, highlighted by the world premiere of his latest movie, *Wise Blood*. Here is a strange, very personal film, made peculiarly interesting when viewed within the context of the old master's other works. Well, Hollywood has room for that.

Or take the case of *Northern Lights*, a social justice movie about mid-West America and the labor movement around 1915, created by beginners John Hanson and Rob Nilsson. This film was very well received in most quarters and testified to yet another aspect of feature film vitality in the USA.

It is, however, in the main-line, big, "commercial" films that Hollywood in the late seventies towers above everyone else. Almost all of the big American official entries shown in Cannes have already been seen in major Canadian centres. A little reflecting on them reveals that, yes, they do in great measure adhere to the sacrosanct popular elements mentioned earlier — i.e., story, character, external action/conflict, emotion, heart — but they are something else as well: exciting, beautifully created manifestations of some deeply in-felt and meaningful aspect of American life today, or American history. Or let's say simply life, culture, social justice — you name it. Not all masterpieces, admittedly, but films with size and intelligence and an appeal totally beyond what we seem to be trying to imitate in Canada. And so, the Cannes, American roll-call: *Norma Rae*, *Days of Heaven*, *Hair*, *The China Syndrome*, and Woody Allen's marvelous *Manhattan*.

And above all, one other film, not yet completed, not to be shown, presumably before autumn, the most eagerly awaited

event of the festival — and far and away the hit of that event, its fulfilment, and winner of the Grand Prix (which it should not have had to share), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.

Here is a film destined to become one of the great war movies of all time (immeasurably superior to the grossly over-rated *Deer Hunter*), a deeply human groping with America's traumatic, recent experience in Vietnam. Coppola's baroque, popular artistry absorbs T.S. Eliot and above all Joseph Conrad's "The Heart of Darkness" in the ultimate statement on the absurdity and evil of war. Beginning as a typical war adventure, *Apocalypse Now* broadens into surrealist nightmare, finally to narrow into a river journey that plunges profoundly into the darkest areas of the human soul. The result is unforgettable, meaningful art, human, "popular," "commercial" (one hopes) — and Hollywood.

It is unreasonable, perhaps, to ask a young Canadian feature film industry to match the Hollywood models just proposed. But if imitate we must, then that is the Hollywood we must aspire to — and not the cheaper, shoddier aspects of Hollywood we now seem dedicated to re-incarnate.

So the hope is not that unreasonable, surely, After all, a culture is measured by its aspirations. There is no law that says, Canada cannot have a Fellini, a Coppola, an Allen, or a Wajda. As part of a continuing, self-examining and re-thinking process, Canada's official agencies had better look at the question in more all-encompassing perspectives, even if that means sacrificing some of the quick-gain, but ultimately dead-end, enterprises. □

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