

The 1989 Canadian Student Film Festival

BY PETER WINTONICK



From *Castaways*

The conventional wisdom states that watching 89 student films would be something akin to a masochistic nightmare. We all think we know what a student film is: something to be avoided like an ozone plague. But I volunteered to cover this year's Canadian Student Film Festival because avoiding conventional wisdom is a genetic trait of mine. I have recently kicked the habit of watching the more "mature" and commercial art films that frequent international festivals and world screens. At this year's student fest, an annual rite of summer passing or autumn falling, I was subjected to nine programmes screened under the auspices and guiding wing of Daniele Cauchard's World Film Festival. The kiddie festival is curiously older than its parent. Having celebrated its 20th anniversary this year, it pre-dates the WFF by several years.

I accepted this mission because I wanted to immerse myself in the spirit and light of adventure that characterizes the best of student films. As well, being a professional filmmaker, I wanted to steal their bright ideas. Advertising spot makers, music video directors and fiction filmmakers do that all the time. They prey on the

feeding ground of the experimental film genre (of which student film is a sub-set), knowing that it won't fight back. I also happen to genuinely like students and their films. I've even tried to teach the critters a thing or two about documentary film history in Concordia University's Film Studies Department.

In the typical student film we can see the future of our nation's film culture at work - what it is and what it wants to be. Reflected on the student screen are the trends and tendencies of the media community at large. We can see worlds of wonder collide with idealism and reality. We remember when we too, were younger mythmakers. In fact, we are now entering an era when many of this country's more famous producers, directors and technician-artists can claim to be products of the film school system. Their films once won prizes at the Student Film Festival. Some would argue that it was their best work. I know it was mine. At risk of sounding like the old man that I am, ahhhh

I remember when I was just a little tyke, fresh

Peter Wintonick is a filmmaker who lives in Montreal.

Jean-François Pothier's *Le Bonheur et Rita Rose-en-talle*



"That the artist must serve the highest bidder is an American axiom. Practicality is our most essential trait. Surely, one could not expect our artists to be so idealistic as to serve art."

Emma Goldman in her *Mother Earth* magazine 87 Novembers ago.

into film, and my first experimental documentary won a prize. It was a collectively made film (remember collectivity?) about a poet-harmonicist who played *amateur* hours in Ottawa's sleazy nightclubs. Those days and those clubs are gone. I went on to make a documentary about a clown who still gets more work than I do, and then I became a clown myself. My final film *d'étudiant* (I promoted the auteur theory in those days) was an ambitious and surreal film about death and destiny. I figured that death was, and still is, the only subject for any film. Once you've done it, why do it again? Since those student salad days, it's been all downhill and vinegar.

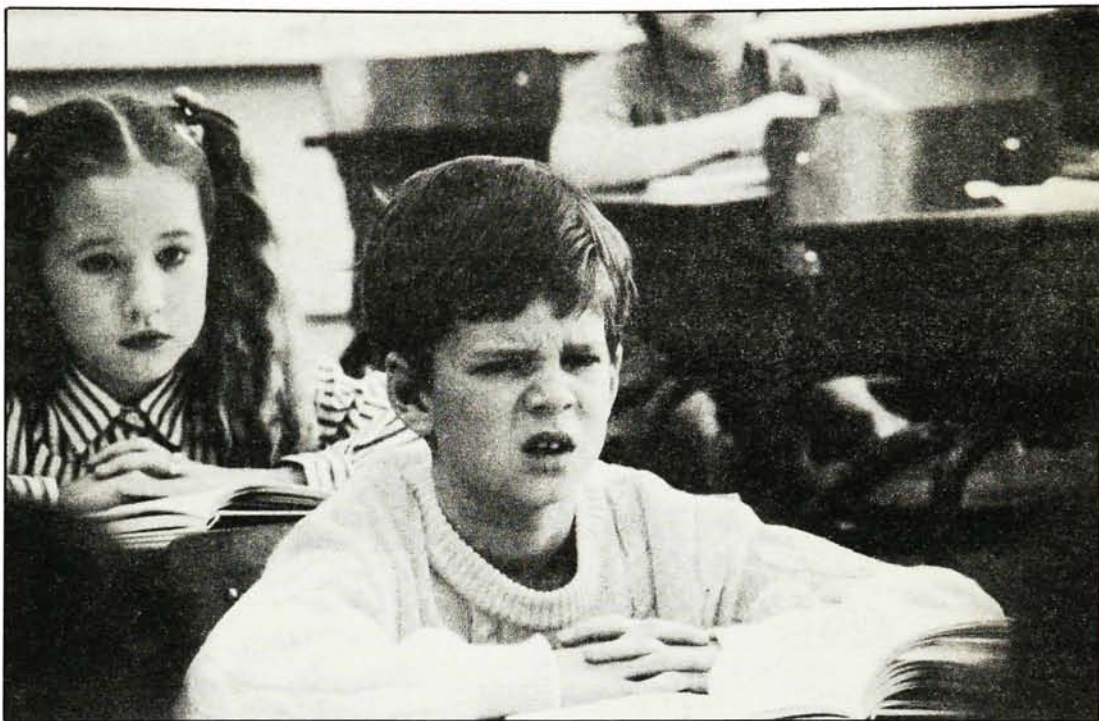
DISPROPORTIONATE REPRESENTATION

As I settled down into the back row of the Parisien Cinema, strategically situated for quick escape, I scanned through the list of titles in my student programme book. From A through Z, an alphabet of good intentions. The buzz and electricity that went through the SRO crowd reminded me of fans cheering for the university football team I never made. Whether as a result of pre-selection, lack of interest or entries, more than half of the fourscore and more films emerged from five schools in Quebec, a third of the total from one school - Concordia. Now either Concordia is a powerhouse of cinematic intellect, or every student from Toronto has moved to Montreal because the bars stay open later, and they can't afford the rent in their own hometown.

There was less than proportional representation from the five Ontario schools that made it into the finals. A disproportionately large number of films came from B. C., with the Emily Carr College of Art and Design leading the pack, particularly strong in animation and experimental work. ECCAD was joined by its Western playmates, the newly emerging industrial Vancouver Film School, and traditional favorites Simon Fraser U. and U. B. C. We were honored by single selections from Regina and Alberta, but large areas of the country were not represented, and I'm not talking about parliamentary democracy either.

Where were the films from the Arctic Tundra Universities of the nation, from the Maritimes, Manitoba, Newfoundland? As many of our nation's cultural agencies are wont to ask, "Where is the east coast anyway?" It is also strange that nothing came from Norman Jewison's industrial jewel in the capped and corporate crown of Canada, The Centre for Advanced Film Studies. I guess the students at the centre think they're not students, or perhaps they don't believe in unfair competition.

As in the film world at large, males numerically dominated this competition, showing more than two-thirds of the films entered. Not surprisingly, a majority of males were attracted to the fiction genre. Fiction films



From Barb Harwood's *One Small Step*

stroke the ego, and are generally easier to make than experimental or documentary films because they hold fewer surprises. Female directors, either by choice, enforced institutional inequity, or tradition, found themselves making animation and experimental films, resulting in the more important work of the festival. The video section was more egalitarian, perhaps reflecting its false economy. There were also admirable attempts at collaboration with a number of dual-directed cross-gendered offerings (too much of a mouthful to be a category in and of itself).

FUTURE FELLINI

As a result of watching over 80 works, I thought it might prove revelatory to compile some data into my old brain and emerge with a generic student film that touched every subject and style of the competition. To put the whole mish-mash into a blender and come out with some cuisine-art. A film that'll either stick to, or kick you in, the ribs. With no risk of copyright infringement, plagiarism or special favors, I offer you here, tongue firmly in cheek, a peek at the future Fellini.

The generic film is made by a kid 21 going on 45. It is written, directed, produced, shot, edited, and sound edited by one person - a male person. It is as fictional as you can get these days, with a running time of half an hour, which is about 29 minutes too long. It is financed with money from one's own family. It has a title like *Bleak Vision* or *Fog*. The title has very little to do with the subject of the film. It is usually

competently photographed by one's best friend. Little attention is paid to costumes, make-up, or design. The music is lifted gratis from a famously obscure contemporary synth-band, or one's second best friend. The lead actress is either your girlfriend or would-be girlfriend. The extras are what's left of your peer group after asking them to work on your film for four weeks without pay. In the worst-case scenario, you have to ask your mother to play roles she wasn't meant for.

You can't afford the time or money it takes to integrate wild ideas, special effects, or animated experiments. You play safe. The script, which was written overnight on a napkin in a café, favours bad dialogue where it exists at all. There is heavy emphasis on a chase scene. The film is sexless. The plot involves infant memories or elephantine, cumbersome suspensions of either this or that belief. The movie is well-intentioned but not so well-intentioned as to be called a documentary. It may be thematically responsible, but the sound still sucks. It may be about childhood, absence or loss, or a quirky dream you just can't forget.

It is slow as in s-l-o-w. It takes the "moving" out of the term "motion picture." It is aimed at an audience of intelligent kids, but the script is primitive, exhausting too many ideas in too few minutes. The list of credits must necessarily be too long, because you have to thank everyone who was ever nice to you. But in the end, despite adversity, and the fact that you had to write five term papers, three essays and memorize Nietzsche while you were shooting,

The Official Winners of the 20th Canadian Student Film Festival

The members of the Jury were: Therese Descary, producer at the National Film Board of Canada; Martin Barry, filmmaker; Jean Roy, film critic and delegate of the Cannes Film Festival "Critics Week".

Best Experimental Film: "You Take Care Now" by Anne Marie Flemming (Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Vancouver)

Best Animation Film: (two films ex-aequo) "The Bug" by Sheila Smart (Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Vancouver)
"Premier regard" by Pierre Sylvestre (Concordia U., Montreal)

Best Documentary Film: "Barker" by Donna Barker (Concordia University, Montreal)

Best Fiction Film: "Absolute Trash, A Recycling Story" by Mark Savoyers (University of British Columbia, Vancouver)

Norman McLaren Award (\$1000, offered by the NFB): "Evening Rain" by Brian Berger (Humber College, Rexdale)

You Take Care Now

Here are some of the words used by prizewinner Anne Marie Fleming in her startling film. You can imagine the images for yourselves.

"..... Tourist season is over. And you're alone in a city that everyone has been telling you is the armpit of the world. The travel agent takes pity on you, and offers you his place to crash, have a shower, store your stuff. He calls a cab to take you there. The driver knows the place. Oh, I almost forgot. You're female, and you're twenty-two.

(PICTURE) And so you're writing, after a lunch of fresh steamed prawns and enough coffee in your body that you feel yourself burning inside. You're in his room. You want to leave but you just can't think. So you stay anyway. Because you don't trust your intuition. And the locked door turns open and the first fire starts. Now the next bit is a little hard to explain. You get the idea, don't you? You get raped. now you're lying there waiting for something violent to happen, to be hit or beaten or for yourself to do something, like scream or fight or maybe pull out a Swiss Army knife. But nothing like that passes. Because you're afraid you might hurt him, or you're afraid he might get angry and hurt you, or he'll call the police and tell them that you stole something, and you don't speak Italian. And you've heard all about the police. And you lie there, passive and violated, feeling like someone told you you were going to win an award, and then you didn't get it. Except the award was your dignity, your sanity, your middleclass inviolability.

..... Okay, you know what happens next. You feel this great black force hitting heavy against your hip, and you think "Omigod, I'm hit." In the ambulance the attendant keeps repeating, after he threatens to tie you down if you don't stop jerking up with pain, "You know, you look familiar? Do I know you from before?" And you say, "It must be the mask." And they leave you in the hospital and say, "You take care, now". Like that wasn't what you'd been trying to do all along. And all you want to do is sleep but the pain won't stop, and it won't stop for months now. And you wonder what you ever did to get raped and run over in one lifetime. And you realize that there is only one. You go home, and get on your bed and Ross takes a picture of you. You lie back there, small and helpless and black and white. And it looks like this: (PICTURE) And you think, "wow, pictures don't tell you anything."

you end up with a multiplanar, seriocomedic, surreal, post-post-modern masterpiece. And you know, it's not that bad at all. And it only cost nine hundred dollars.

FILMS WITH A BULLET

At the award ceremony on the final day of the festival, several of the announced winners were booed by the partisan audience. Hey, this is just like Cannes, I said to myself. Granted that the Jury had its work cut out for them, their scissors obviously had misappropriated a few prizes. In an attempt to rectify and subjectify the situation I offer you these, Peter Wintonick's top student films, divided into the five categories of the festival competition.

- In the animation section I was particularly impressed by Pierre Sylvestre's *Premier Regard* produced at Concordia. This was a flawlessly written humorous film, impressionistically animated from a baby's point of view, with a little bit of social context thrown in for good measure. *Bug* was ECCAD's Sheila Smart's smart film designed from a bug's point of view. It was ridiculously funny and compassionate. Runner-ups were ECCAD's George Ashcroft's bathtub sink *Castaways*, Concordia's Sandra Eber's *Just 5 More Minutes* and the collectively created *Animathon* produced by a consortium of Quebec universities and colleges, a marathon co-operatively demonstrating that there are no solos in filmiland.

- Several fictional works point to happy and promising careers for their directors and crews in the unreal world of Canadian feature filmmaking. The student films were aided and abetted in some cases by the National Film Board's program aid to private films and filmmakers.

While I endorse the active engagement of the NFB in film training, the NFB-supported films looked so much better physically than their poorer cousins that one must question the wisdom of judging them together in the same category. *Le Bonheur et Rita Rose-en-Talle*, by 23-year-old Jean-Francois Pothier of Concordia, was the best of the best. A surreal period piece allegory, complete with special effects, great casting and cinematography, *Le Bonheur*... will mean lots of happiness for its makers. The hyphenated John Martins-Manteiga from Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnical Institute stunned many with his brilliant *Mario Lanza Story*. Owing much to Fellini and MuchMusic, the film is a Ry-High hybrid of dream journey and parody.

Also of interest were Concordian Peter Mantello's imaginative *Another Green World* and SFU's Carla Wolf's *Where Movies Come From*. UBC contributed John Tarver's *White on White*, Jean Paul Faubert's *Ike and the Aliens* and Barb Harwood's *One Small Step* to my list of favorites. Concordian Andrea Sadler's *Mythologies*, *Pate Chinois et Crocodile Kiwi* from U de Montréal's Renaud Berube and the Vancouver Film School's

Jonas Quastel's *The Man Who Walked Backwards*, were also in the running. Concordia's strong fictional bias informed Joseph Balass' *On a Very Violet Night in the Appartements Daphne*, Francois MacHabee's *The Director*, Mireille Rico's *Ressac* and Stev'nn Hall's *Delta Dusk*. Humber College's Brian Berger contributed *Evening Rain*, a moving interior story which eventually won the Norman McLaren prize.

In the relatively thin documentary section only Concordia's Donna Barker's mockumentary *Barker* and Jerimiah Haye's experimental documentary *Elephant* were of note. Maybe next year both teachers and students will realize that the documentary form in this country is in danger of being destroyed forever by the atomic bomb of television, and will resolve to mobilize around its resurrection.

- In the more daring video department, I was attracted to the University of Regina's Michael Dancok's *Embryonic Development of Fish*, which reduced 24 hours of material to 90-second repeated cycles, which is no mean feat. ECCAD's David Tuff produced a tough *Are We Going Backwards*, a preGodardian, Van der slamming video about Bill 34, a quarantine and isolation bill in British Columbia. *Rustlings* was Concordia's Maurice Mather's evocative interpretation of suicide.

- The most important student work is being done in the Experimental category. ECCAD's Michael Smart's *Shaving and Dreaming* by the University of Alberta's David Antonelli were noteworthy as was a large contribution from Concordia, including Dominique Lemay's and Eric Trudel's *Cumulon-Nimbus*, Scott Prentice's *Blueprint*, Sheila Morrisette's and Adina Hecht's *Between Bengta and Celine Bissonette's Voie du Silence*.

- Out of the nearly 100 works that I viewed, the most impressive single film came from the heart and mind of Emily Carr's Ann Marie Fleming. Her 10-minute experimental *You Take Care Now* won the award in its category. It is a personal expression about violation. It is about rape and being run over by cars in Vancouver. It is a cinematic film about the human experience, voyeurism, and universality.

Fleming's film works on many levels. It brought to mind the image-memory of a Zen exercise. Its discourse is an emotional one, it refuses categorization. It takes its language from many tongues and stretches out. It successfully and strategically combines film, video, animation, text-on-screen, quotation, live action, re-recreation, and found materials. It is what would have happened if you'd armed Marcel Duchamp with a movie camera, or let John Cage out of his music cage.

In her acceptance speech Fleming managed to thank the audience for supporting her and her colleagues and then, embarrassed, fragmented her thoughts in mid-sentence and left the stage. Such shy behaviour belies a woman of assertive conviction. In conversation later in a low-life bar

on Montreal's Main with several student filmmakers, I found Fleming to be an open and articulate representative of this new generation of Canadian filmmakers. Her words, like the text in her film, are powerful, sardonic and mature. She talked about the politics of art, the lack of money, and her aspirations. (She's now working on a multi-level psychological low-budget fiction, so if anyone's willing to invest)

Ann Marie Fleming is a 27-year-old B.C. student, who once upon a time lived in Toronto. She studied English before finding herself at ECCAD, as did her mentor, award-winning animator Wendy Tilby. She wants to produce 'moving art. She feels honest. She doesn't tan. She detests the vacuous. When asked about her film she says: "I wanted to make a film that I myself would like to watch. I wanted to move beyond categories, beyond feminist doctrine. I don't want to be branded or ghettoized as 'experimental'. My aim is to challenge." These goals seem valuable both for students and for those of us who are students of life.

MEDIA-OCRITY

To misquote the Bard, "CV or not CV, that is the question." In other words, should our educational institutions have as their main goal the production of career-orientated clones or thinkers?

As is evident in student work, a desire to produce, promote and encourage media-ocrity with an industrial bias dominates our nation's film schools. As they mimic other cultural agencies, should our colleges and universities play an elevated societal function, or should they create an elite cadre of uncritical artist-producers whose main goals are self-enhancement and advancement? Far from being in an open-ended environment where orthodoxy is challenged and where the heart rules the head, students find themselves preparing to work in an industry without either. If they're lucky they'll find a niche in the television industry, or in media management, serving the state of things. Some will lay bricks in the walls of Telefilm and the CBC where they will be expected to conform to standardized goals.

Educational bureaucracies feel a responsibility to provide technical fodder for the commercial industry. Must it remain so? On the ground level, the burden and responsibility for change may lie with the instructor. But too often overworked teachers have retreated into film schools, burned-out by the real-world hustle. As a result, education is left to esoteric and arcane academics treading in the waters of McLuhan, Foucault, Barthes and anyone else with an exotic name to give to an "-ism." As well, the overemphasis of the fiction form in our film schools creates a void in the skills necessary to produce meaningful documentaries.



Delta Dusk, by Stev'nn Hall

What should be the role of the film school? I would suggest that these institutions teach students how to perform higher acts of experimental subversion. To give them all the technical training, equipment and money necessary to define their own visions. To let them loose on the world without having to pass their scripts through the filters and levels of prior

approval, without having to model real life. Without pressuring them to create professional-looking films to add to their industrial product reels. Do they really need jobs directing car commercials? Does the world really need another car?

In all filmmaking, what rests between intention and reality is the screen. Sometimes it

is a hall of mirrors distorting truth and ringing false. Other times it is translucent and transcendent. In most good films we find our lives and an equation is made. The process of watching a good film then becomes both a personally and socially synthesizing experience. When they were good, the films of the 20th Student Film Festival were that good. Imagine.

A treatment for a student film

The plot: On Christmas Eve a milkman and his best companion – a musical dog, get lost in a big store, engage in a search for possibility, and then transmute into black and white to meet a dream girl who lives with a strange family, and whose memory mirror has cracked to freeze time in a world beyond this. A death mask leads them to happiness but changes into a spider. The alcoholic father marries an old actress who lives in a demolished hotel whose films keep on repeating the same old formula. Meanwhile in a Viking village, imagination clouds the mind with failure, and a couple of bad jokes lead to a special effects scene, out of focus, with a nod to an odd political event or two, while sex roles are reversed. The elephant (what elephant?) commits suicide on a subway while looking at a book of photographs. The camera spins: grotesque adolescence becomes a macho machination; poets commune with aliens; relationships break down. Meanwhile... the audience, waiting for something to happen, goes to sleep. Finally a Buddhist monk who can walk backwards phones a talk show, while famous Italian tenors sing on and on about laundromats, water, enlightenment, sight, dyslexia, declining birth rates, baseball, babies, the apocalypse, shaving, fear, and materialism. And on the backstairs of the hotel, the Third World is thrown in for good measure. The milkman finally finds his milky way. But his memory fails him, and he lapses into silence – a blank canvas in the museum of life. While his dream girl bathes in the light of human kindness, others are homeless, are raped, are treated like Siamese twins, obsessed fish, or neglected superheros.

– P. W.

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