

the world film festival of montreal

a time of transition

by kevin tierney

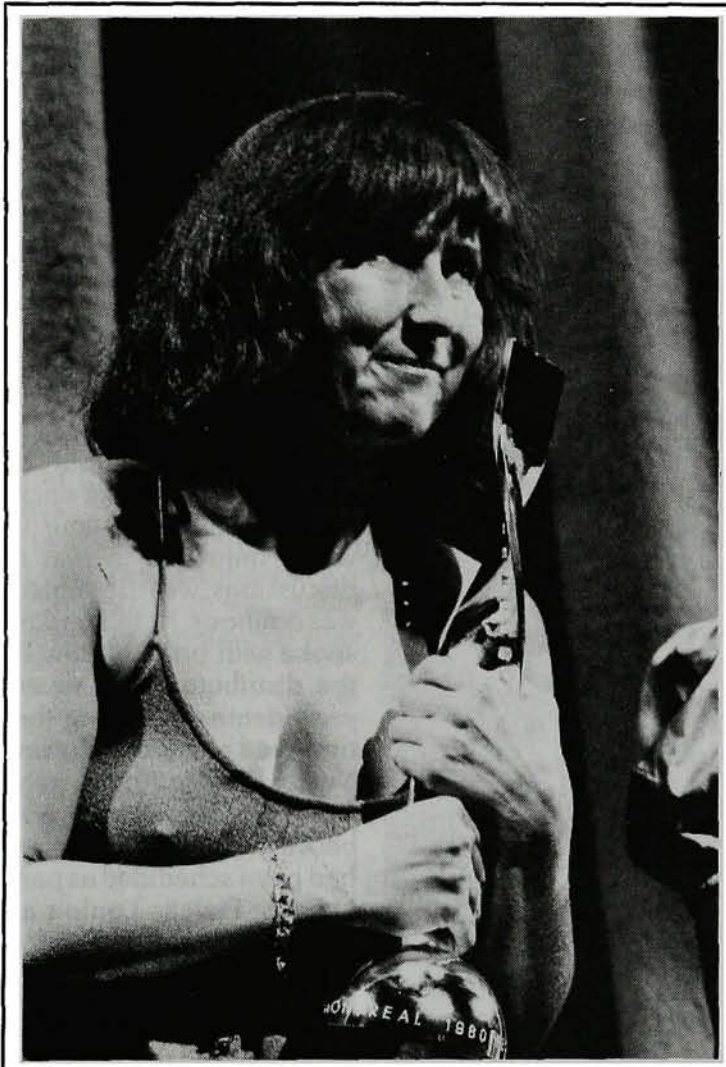


photo: Lois Siegel

Pleased as punch, Louise Carré clasps her award for the Best Canadian Film Out of Competition at the World Film Festival

Montreal's World Film Festival aspires to be a competitive arena and a full-fledged marketplace for both national and international films. As such, the problems it faces are the natural by-product of its ambitious character.

Now that this year's version of the World Film Festival of Montreal is over, one would think that its mentor and driving force, Serge Losique, could relax. But that just isn't his style: before announcing the winners of this year's competition, he made another announcement — the fifth World Film Festival will be held next year from August 22 to September 1, and will pay homage to German Cinema.

Despite this announcement, it is doubtful that Losique's version of the festival will continue unchallenged next year. Before lending its support this year, the Quebec government requested that the 1980 festival be transitional — though in what way was never made clear. It remains a festival that has no center, no vital core. Nevertheless, optimists are quick to point to its age, and defend its potential: the world's only existential film festival — it exists, while still trying to discover its essence.

Pessimists, however, claim that without a solid identity this Montreal event will only be considered a good place to visit because, as one Italian producer so eloquently phrased a stupid, but nonetheless cogent comment, "You're only 45 minutes from New York."

This year's festival was leaner than its predecessors: it lacked the glitter, the stars, and some would say, the quality. There was no single runaway success like last year's *The Tin Drum*, but the added screenings of three popular films did indicate that film is alive in Montreal.

In effect, the real winners of the festival were the filmgoers themselves — whose support of the films has possibly assured the festival's survival. Their enthusiasm harked back to a time when Montreal was considered a fine town in which to see movies. Sadly, this is no longer the case. If it takes this festival to rekindle that spirit, and enable those truly interested in cinema to see what the rest of the world is doing, then let's hope it lives. All sorts of other special interest groups, from jocks to flower lovers, have their activities subsidized by various governments, so why shouldn't movie fans?

Max Fischer's *The Lucky Star* — Canada's only entry in the feature film competition — opened the festival, and despite having received schizophrenic reviews, found its audience. *Mon oncle d'Amérique*, directed by the dean of French directors, Alain Resnais, proved through its popularity that criticism from Cannes is seen here as canned criticism. *Palermo or Wolfsburg*, a sprawling and ambitious film of the German New Wave, never once, in all of its 175 minutes, tries to console the viewer. Still, the audiences went, indicating clearly that they were in search of cinematic excellence.

In addition to the screenings, audiences were also involved in two different symposia. The first, "The Influence of the Film Critic on Today's Cinema," chaired by Charles Champlin for the *Los Angeles Times*, was remarkable for two reasons: not a single Canadian critic was present on the dias, and neither were any filmmakers. As a result, the guest critics and producers argued about the difference between cinema and movies, and whether or not critics should, or do, keep ticket buyers away from, or running to

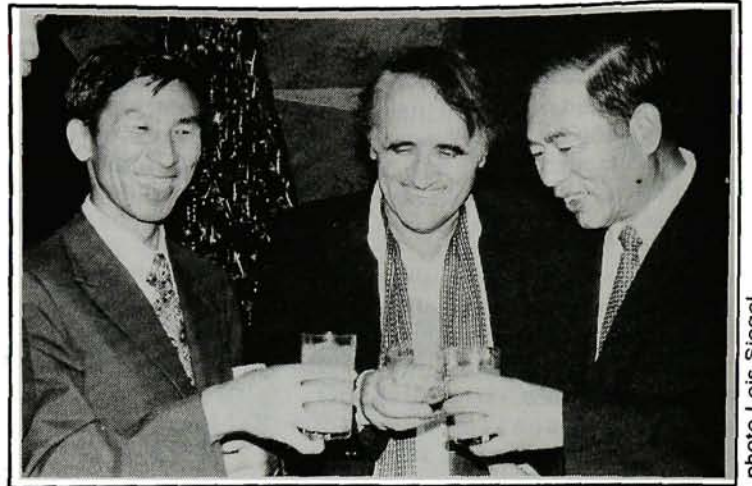


photo Lois Siegel

A moment of good cheer for festival president Serge Losique and two of the Chinese buyers

the theatres — virtually ignoring the larger question of whether or not critics actually influence the direction and form of cinema.

The second symposium on "State Aid to the Development of National Cinema" was notable for different reasons. Representatives from Australia, Sweden, France, Germany and Canada addressed themselves to the topic by either reading to the assembled listeners, or offering more information than anyone would want to know, without shedding any new light on the complicated nature of support, tax shelters and capital cost allowances. Essentially, it all ended where it had begun — with the realization that, without state assistance, we can only look forward to the further encroachment of American culture.

One common theme which was not dealt with, but which managed to rear its ugly head in both of these discussions, was the subject of distribution — and the tone was ominous. Kathleen Carroll of the *New York Daily News* spoke with pride of how the New York critics had defied the distributors and saved *The Great Santini* from an early death by lending their pens of praise to a film that deserved attention. However, on the same panel sat Mme Yvette Mallet, the person responsible for Gaumont's American operation. She sadly informed her listeners that because of negative criticism, two Gaumont films which had been scheduled as part of the Homage to Gaumont — Maurice Pialat's *Loulou* and Fellini's *City of Women* — would not be shown.

The Homage to Hitchcock had a better reception and was, at one point, being touted by rumor-mongers as the real hit of the festival.

Quietly plodding along was the film market, where the biggest question seemed to be what the three-man delegation from the China Film Corporation would buy to take back with them. As it turned out, they enjoyed many films, bought none, but confirmed that they had made "good contacts" and would be back next year. Participants seemed divided as to how much action the market had generated: certainly nobody was wearing that ear-to-ear grin a big sale usually brings with it. Despite the market's low profile, most sellers made ends meet, and then some. This year's sales' volume was higher than that of any previous year.

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The festival started out with 23 feature films in competition for Le Grand Prix des Amériques, but ended up with 22, following the unexplained withdrawal of France's *La petite sirène*. (Rumour had it being withdrawn here so that it could be entered at the Venice Festival — a rumour with decidedly bad implications for the prestige of this festival.) In a repeat of this year's Cannes Festival, the jury came up with a tie: *Fontamara*, a film which was shot simultaneously for two media — a four-hour version for television and a two-hour film version; and *The Stunt Man*, directed by Richard Rush, an American film that, like the other U.S. films entered in competition (*Health* and *The Great Santini*) has experienced enormous difficulties in finding distribution.

Best Actor was Robert Duvall for his bravado performance as *The Great Santini*; Best Actress went to Ana Torrent, a young Spanish actress, who was very good in *El Nido*. The jury handed out two other prizes for: *A Distant Cry From Spring*, from Japan, directed by Yoji Yamada; and *The Wild Hunting of King Stakh*, from Russia, directed by Valérie Roubintchik. *Sunday Daughters*, from Hungary, directed by Janos Rozsa, received a special mention and also won the Ecumenical Prize.

In the Short Film category, the Grand Prize of Montreal was awarded to *La découverte*, directed by Arthur Joffe of France, while the Jury Prize went to *Score*, directed by Arthur Everard of New Zealand.

The critics voted their award for the Best Canadian Film out of Competition to the Québécois film *Ça peut pas être l'hiver, on n'a même pas eu d'été*, directed by Louise Carré; and the announcement at the closing ceremony was greeted by shouts of approval.

In contrast, the film chosen to close the festival, *The Apple*, directed by Menahem Golem, was hardly given the same reception: when not being booed, it was being hooted — ending this year's festival on a somewhat sour note.

From Our Mailbag

The following open letter was sent to the World Film Festival of Montreal.

Your selection of the film *The Apple* as the screening to close your 1980 Festival with seems completely incredible to me. How could any one with any sense of taste, of integrity or respect of the arts deliberately choose to screen a work that is so outrageously bad that one cannot only take it seriously enough to critique? It constituted not only a grave and irredeemable insult to the name of your festival, but it was also a blatant insult to the kind of audience you must have anticipated would attend such an event. It was this particular screening which more than any other reflected the cinematic notions of the festival committee. The effect is anything but complimentary; in fact, it is my express hope that the reaction to this kind of vulgar and insensitive management is sufficient to make this the final year for your film festival.

Dwight W.A. Smith



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