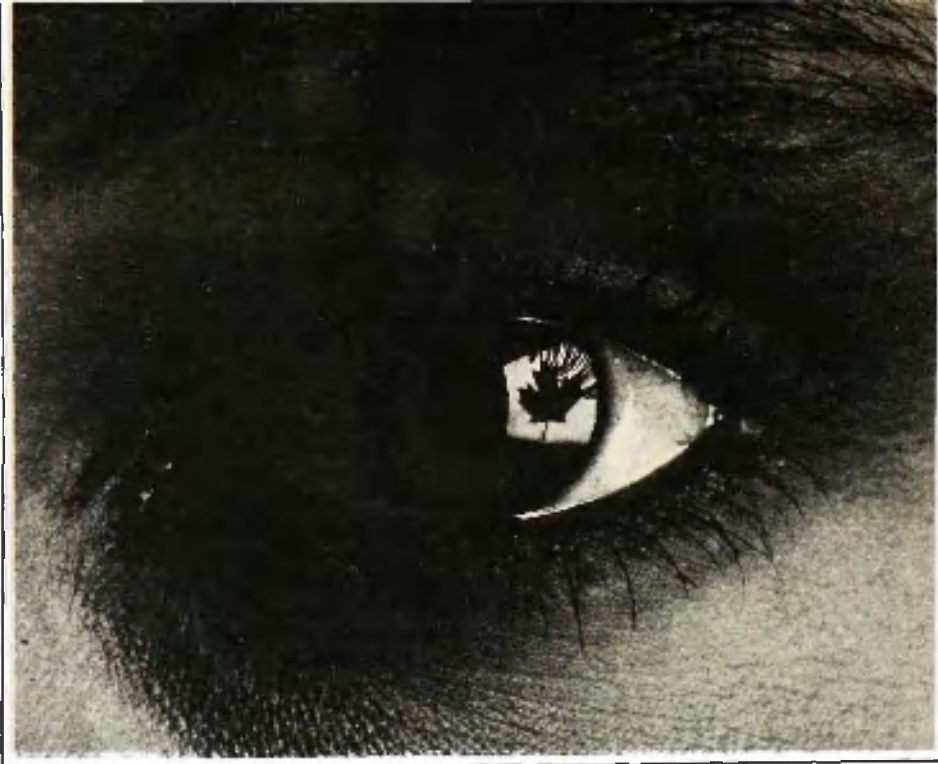


Photo: Ron Levine



Seeing eye-to-I

Notes on Canadian identity

by Michael Dorland

A chill wind blasted between the office buildings along Bloor St. on the last night of the 9th Festival of Festivals. At the Towne Cinema, theatre personnel were ripping down the plethora of posters advertising festival films, schedule changes and hatred for Ontario's film censor. Further along, in front of the University Theatre, the rent-a-searchlights, that for the past 10 evenings had beamed their gala beacons into the Toronto sky, were extinguished. On the theatre marquees, the half-replaced letters INDIANA JO signalled the return of business as usual. In the morning, these theatres, like so many others across the land, would again be showing American films to Canadian audiences.

The Festival was over. But for 10 glorious days, Canadian cinema, in the largest public showing it has ever received, lived as it has never lived before: in the glow of admiration and the celebration of its film directors; above all, in the seeing of itself as good. For 10 unforgettable days, Canadian cinema existed in a condition of normality, as Canadian audiences and Canadian films encountered one another in a spirit of eye-opening discovery. For 10 days, the extraordinary became the ordinary as, in the heart of this most American of Canadian cities' downtown theatres, screens flickered from morning to night with images of Canada from the 1890s to the 1980s. Perhaps not since the days of the National Film Board's travelling projectionists had the power of Canadian been so apparent. For while the festival lasted, it was as if the movies themselves had single-handedly succeeded in overturning the falseness of what which claims to be reality. After all, are not American movies just as illusory as Canadian movies? That last chilly night on

Bloor St., watching the return of the American illusion, it seemed that the problem had less to do, in the end, with movies in themselves than with the spirit through which they are seen – or rendered invisible.

"Nothing is as foreign to Canadians as Canadian culture," writes Seth Feldman in his introduction to *Take Two*, one of two books on Canadian film published in conjunction with the 1984 Festival of Festivals' 259-film hurrah to Canadian cinema.

The statement is as harsh and as blunt as it is true. While the Festival was running, the Art Gallery of Ontario "for the first time in recent memory," according to the *Globe and Mail's* art critic, opened an exhibit to contemporary Toronto painters. That the newspaper art critics hated it is only another measure of the foreignness of Canadian culture and the depth of the problem.

A second example deals with literature, via one of the films in the Festival's Northern Lights retrospective (a title that refers knowingly to the celebrated collection of Canadian writing that established the existence of Canadian literature). In a memorable scene in Larry Kent's epochal *When Tomorrow Dies* (1965), a film that played commercially for one week (!) before vanishing into the archives, one of the characters, who teaches literature at UBC, tells his class he's going to do something unheard of: add a Canadian novel to the course. There's no reason, he tells the class, why this novel should not be taught, for it is perfectly competent, "as competent," he adds, "as it can be coming from a country that systematically refuses its own greatness."

Painting, writing and filmmaking are those arts that reflect, in verbal, painterly

or moving images, both the eye and the I of how we live in this country. But to exist (as we do) cut off from one's own visual arts (using this term in the widest possible sense) is to live in the formal separation of eye from I on the levels of landscape, language, and gesture – that is, on the levels of eye-identity and eye-identification – that constitute the only authentic separatism at the heart of the Canadian problem.

In the pathological absence of self-images, the eye, because it must nonetheless see, will accept as real whatever else is there. It will eye-identify with its own alienation and attempts to alter that identification (Canadian content, for instance) will in turn seem foreign and alienating. Furthermore, since the separation of eye from I requires the maintenance of de-dramatization (as the encounter of eye with I is essential a dramatic one), a preference for the undramatic and factual becomes the dominant style of identification that leads to such things, for example, as the documentary tradition in Canadian filmmaking or, more to the point, in the case of Canadian television, the noted preference for news and sports, while drama and entertainment are supplied by the Americans. A third manifestation of the preference for the factual confers a privileged status to newspapers and newspaper accounts of things, which, particularly when one is dealing with national culture, amounts to a self-perpetuating structuring of the communications bias that favors the factual in the first place.

In this sense, it was not surprising, if one judged only from the Toronto press coverage of the Festival, to read that it was on the whole business as usual, with the usual fawning before American stars, and no inkling that something quite dif-

ferent was taking place at the *Canadian* part of the festival. By and large – and for the same reasons – this was also the case for the business-end of the Canadian film industry, with the entire spirit thoroughly well-captured by a Sid Adelman column entitled "Canadians eat canapes, Americans dine in style."

But this was, significantly, not the case for Canadian filmmakers seeing their films, nor for the public. Not for nothing did the Festival advertise its Canadian retrospective with the slogan "Two hundred answers to the question of Canadian identity." For the first time on such a scale, Canadian film culture would, in ceasing to seem foreign, have answered the question of Canadian eye-identity.

There was, among the Festival organizers, some fear and trembling over the size of the Canadian retrospective. A first in the nine-year history of Canada's two major film festivals, Toronto this year devoted 65% of the programming of 400 features and shorts to our national cinema.

But last year a Canadian documentary retro of some 60 films had been a big disappointment, attracting little interest and even less public. So there was concern that this year's large display of Canadian films would be, as chief programmer Piers Handling put it, "overdoing it with a massive thing this size."

The gradualists among the organizers favored steady year-by-year increments leading, five years down the road, to the large retrospective that would actually take place this year. Immediatists wanted the large retrospective now. But this was not a battle between some people more in favor of Canadian film than others. Both positions had their advantages and disadvantages. If the immediatist approach won out, this would prove equal-

ly to the satisfaction of the gradualists. For the problem was not internal to the Festival organization which, from the Board of Directors through festival director Wayne Clarkson, was, as all the organizers of the retrospective agreed, completely supportive. The problem lay in the nature of doing something unprecedented. For example, in programming the Experiments series, Bruce Elder found that he could have put together 50 programs as easily as the 20 finally agreed upon. What should the proper balance be without draining material from the other programs? Handling mentions "there was a point when we realized that we were holding 13 separate screenings per day in the Canadian retrospective as compared to only five in the Contemporary World Cinema program. Were we stretching the audience too much?"

What was involved. Handling explains, was nothing less than "the whole process of defining Canadian cinema" - of being representative and programming good films at the same time, and this within the limitations of faithfully attempting to reflect the range of Canada's 1100 feature-film history from an available sample of about 10%.

"Looking back from 1984," says Handling, "it seems clear that the years 1963-1975 were a period of extraordinary growth in the modern Canadian cinema. I wanted to give a sense of that, to celebrate what we've done best. The films themselves need no apology. In fact they constitute one of the most stimulating national cinemas in the world."

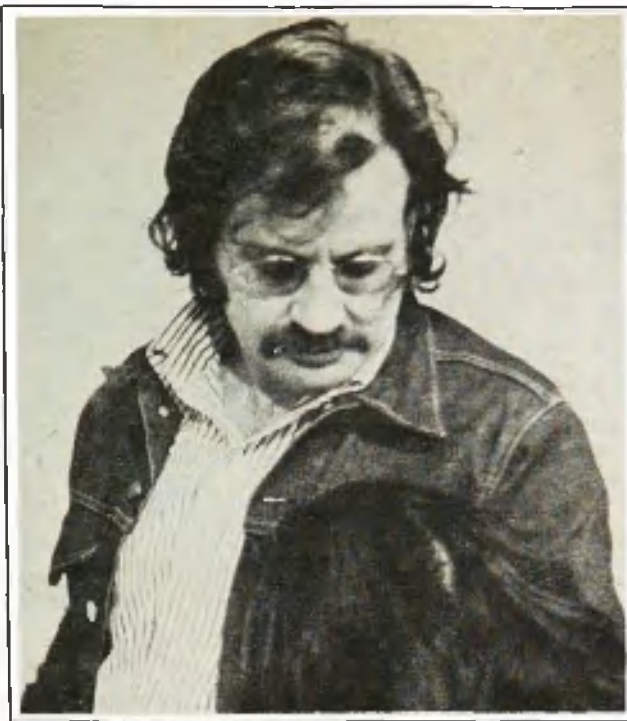
But knowing that as a critic or teacher would be one thing and knowing that as programmer of the largest Canadian film retrospective ever would be another - as Handling admits, describing how he felt as the Festival got underway.

"I was petrified, totally numb. I couldn't sit through a film. It took me three days to screw up the courage to go see what was happening. By Monday, I knew. The cinemas were packed and the people were applauding the films. I couldn't believe it. It was noon and the cinemas were packed. That Monday, three days after the Festival opened, was the biggest high of my life."

The difference, of course, was that the films were at last reaching a public, and an enthusiastic one. As Handling put it: "Seeing the films in a screening room, usually alone, is one kind of experience. Seeing the films with 500 people is totally different."

Perhaps it was this difference that would prompt Festival board of directors' member Bill McMurry to respond to journalistic criticism of the retrospective with these words: "People who complain about it don't know squat about cinema."

It's not that the films change so much (though each viewing of a film always reveals a different film), it's that you are changed: the films become your eyes as eye and I meet and suddenly you can see. In such a context the films escape from the ghettoization of being part of a minority culture and, thus freed, begin to refer to each other: at times they seem to echo one another quite deliberately. For instance, a shot of a park in Lea Pool's *La Femme de l'hôtel* (1984) will refer to the same park in Michael Snow's *One Second in Montreal* (1969). Not only do the films begin to converse among themselves, they also speak



by Dot Tuer

It was a young and frustrated Larry Kent, prompted by the banning of his film *High* in 1968 by the Ontario Censor Board, who was quoted by the *Toronto Star* as shouting "I'm 30, and I'm not waiting around until I'm 45 when I'll be making films as bad as they are now. I have my talent now. I want to be seen now!"

Sixteen years later, these words have an ironic overtone for those of us who 're-discovered' his now obscure films during the retrospective of Canadian cinema at this year's Festival of Festivals. For despite the notoriety and acclaim Kent enjoyed in the '60s; writing, directing, and producing *The Bitter Ash*, 1963; *Sweet Substitute*, 1964; *When Tomorrow Dies*, 1965; and *High*, 1967; the only surviving prints of these films in the '80s are to be found in historical safe-keeping at the National Film Archives in Ottawa.

Badgered by censors, and beleaguered by inadequate distribution facilities and lack of support in Canada for independent features, Kent turned in the '70s to the National Film Board and outside producers. His subsequent films lost the stamp of Larry Kent's original sensibility, and his name and work dropped literally from sight. And while the Festival's dedication to resurrecting the 'buried treasures' of our cinematic past has given these four independent features by Kent momentary recognition and public viewing, it seems a bittersweet requiem for what should be widely distributed films by one of the major and currently eclipsed talents of Canadian cinema.

From the vantage point of the '80s, the sensibility which characterized these first features is in every way as relevant today as it was to Kent's contemporaries of the '60s. The intervening years, however, have altered the way in which his once scandalous subject-matter is received and perceived by an audience and critics. For Larry Kent's troubles with the

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The resurrection of Larry Kent

censor boards and his hostile encounters with the mainstream press were a result of his proclivity to portray individuals who were lured by the promises of a counter-culture and trapped by the social and economic realities of a larger society.

His characters were one way or another outsiders; whether it be the listless rebellion of a bored housewife in *When Tomorrow Dies*, or the desperation of a woman married to a selfish Beat in *The Bitter Ash*, or the abhorrent lifestyle of two hippies in *High*. This led to his reputation as an 'anti-establishment' filmmaker who was disseminating an insidious immorality through his work. Yet, in retrospect, it is clear that Kent was using the context of a counter-culture as a vehicle to examine the crises and degeneration of individuals in any society who struggle with the recognition of oppression and the choices this recognition offers. Far from immoral, his films are in many ways harsh indictments of the lives of his characters who seek an alternative existence to the status-quo by adopting the ideas of a counter-culture. But his films are an equally harsh indictment of the hypocrisy and oppression engendered by the establishment's values.

Kent's originality - he is a South African expatriate - lies in his acute perception of our society as an economic and social structure that is patriarchal and limiting, so pervasive in its materialistic ideology that even the ideas of the counter-culture turn sour and oppressive. It is this sense of complex and sophisticated dialectic between idealism and its practical realization that perhaps horrified the censors unknowingly in the '60s, and it is certainly this sensibility which has created works which still have the power to shock, and to question, our choices and dilemmas as individuals today.

Of the four films screened at the Festival of Festivals, *The Bitter Ash* is the most raw and biting realization of this morally ambivalent dialectic, and perhaps the most remarkable of his cinematic achievements. His first film, and the first feature to be produced on the West Coast in 33 years, is an inspirational example for any

filmmaker struggling to make independent films in Canada. Filmed while he was a student of theatre and psychology at U.B.C., Kent used student actors, an amateur crew and a wind-up Bolex camera to create a fictional document of the Beat era which rivals Robert Frank's *Pull My Daisy*.

Influenced by Cassavetes' *Shadows* and Fellini's *La Strada*, this film reveals a gritty realism and original editing style that distinguishes Kent as a unique talent in Canadian cinematic history. Utilizing a complex cutting and flashback structure, Kent traces the concerns of two couples living in Vancouver's lower economic fringe. The themes of their existences revolve around the boredom and monotony of office and assembly-line work, and the inevitability of pregnancy which forces them to marry. But while one of the male characters sees his only escape from the system in the acquisition of money and material goods, the other has rejected these values for the 'freedom' of a bohemian lifestyle. What becomes evident during the evolution of their characters, is that either choice by a male doubly traps the females, who are oppressed by a society which offers them no option except marriage, and in turn are oppressed by the demands of their egoistic spouses to morally and economically support their 'freedoms.' As the events of the film lead to a beat party where all of the characters' lives intertwine, the powerful ironies and frustrations of their worlds unfold during one of the most originally filmed parties in cinematic history. And it is indicative, not of the film, but of the state of Canadian cinematic institutions, that a subdued and modestly surprised Larry Kent seemed almost bewildered by the excitement of the audience who gathered around him to praise this film during its screening at the Festival.

Encouraged by the enthusiasm of the crowd, Larry Kent, at 45, is thinking of striking a print of the film for distribution. Sixteen years later, Kent's plea that he "wants to be seen now" may finally come to pass.

beyond themselves, addressing a future still remote when the film itself was made: the shadow of October 1970 already hangs over *Le Chat dans le sac* (1964), or feminism in Larry Kent's *The Bitter Ash* (1963) or *When Tomorrow Dies* (1965), or modern nationalism in Wieland's prophetic *Reason Over Passion* (1969). In each other's presence, the films become less the orphans in search of significance that they are in solitary viewing situations; instead they are part of a noisy and numerous family. They have an *air de famille* that provides a context, a commonality that not only protects and enhances them, but support them as well: call it a landscape of film.

Not only do the films emerge from specific settings (e.g. Montreal, Vancouver), but each film creates and re-creates its own definition of that setting, sometimes uniquely, sometimes in conjunction with other films. Gilles Carle's use of the autoroutes around Montreal in *Red* (1970) to define a view of that city's dynamic modernity had always struck me as unique. Seeing Arcand's *La Maudite Galette* (1972) showed me how another filmmaker could use more or less the same setting to create the completely opposite effect. In both cases, the two films were adding to a cultural definition of Montreal.

This can be done in endless ways. Michael Snow's *One Second In Montreal* took a city with which I am rather familiar and made it utterly unfamiliar, a marvelous effect that is difficult to achieve. Léa Pool in *La Femme de l'hôtel* could not recreate that unfamiliarity so hauntingly present in her 1980 film *Strass Cafe*.

The most startling rediscovery of landscape for me was in Gilles Groulx's *Le Chat dans le sac* when Claude leaves the city for St-Charles-sur-Richelieu, mythical scene of a brief victory for the 1837 Patriotes, and scene for me of my adolescence. To see that highway preserved circa 1963 as I saw it weekend after weekend (though none of it, from the road-signs to the road itself, exists any longer) was an extraordinary thrill. It was as if a part of my past had unexpectedly been returned to me.

I can say something similar for Jack Chambers' experimental *The Hart of London* (1970) which in 80 rivetting minutes gave me every image I needed to understand why I've never gone back to the city of my birth.

These are only two immediately personal examples of something of the mnemonic landscape that films can evoke, of the manner by which filmic representations do become entwined with the personal, and gain the power to claim a place in the national imagination. For a Canadian film can say something quite specific to one growing up or living in this country in a manner that not even the greatest masterpieces of world cinema could ever hope to. But in order to do that Canadian film would require what it does not possess and what for 10 days the Festival gave it: inklings of a national film culture.

Such a film culture need not be in the personal style of this, that or any particular filmmaker. Indeed filmmaker and theoretician Bruce Elder has argued - and the masterful series Experiments which he programmed for the Festival demonstrated - that Canadian visual art need not be realistic at all: in order to become I, the Canadian eye does not have to define itself through realism but can instead manifest itself as an awareness of its own self-conscious-



Without eye-identity the body is just a photograph, as Lefebvre argues in *Ultimatum* (1971)

ness. The main thing is that it manifest itself and that it have the opportunity to be seen in its manifestations.

Yet if the festival showed what a genuine national film culture could be like, it also showed what obstacles to that film culture remain, aside from the lack of access to Canadian images. For part of the difficulty of approaching Canadian film begins on as mundane a level as proper subtitling. If the I cannot see, the ear will not hear, and on the whole the quality of English subtitling from Quebecois was surprisingly poor. Gilles Carle pointed this out seeing *Red* in Toronto (the first time since the film's release 14 years ago) when he wondered aloud why so many meanings in French were completely reversed in English. He gave the example of someone saying "Bonjour" only to have it subtitled "Good evening," only a slight exaggeration. With the exception of Robert Gray's subtitles for *La Femme de l'hôtel*, every one of the eight Quebecois features I caught contained similar major reversals of meaning, as well as other instances of 'creative' translation such as turning an ordinary Quebecois name (Rosaire) into an Anglicism (Sam). The flip side of this complaint, perhaps, is that only a festival such as this one could provide the opportunity to notice.

For what the festival underlined, again, was the desperate need for continuity of

all kinds in Canadian film in each and every one of its manifestations, including film festivals (not to mention government policy or the commerce of film production, distribution and exhibition). For only such a continuity can create the Canadian film culture - the ways of seeing ourselves - that can orient the future of Canadian filmmaking because it reflects an awareness of Canadian cinema's past.

As the retrospective showed, it is not a monolithic past by any means. For a film past with so few resources, it is something of a model of tolerance of different approaches to filmmaking: from the beginning it grants a space to the Ernie Shipmans, the George Martons (*Whispering City*) and other forerunners of Heroux-Greenberg internationalism. On the other hand, this pluralism has not been returned by Canadian filmmaking's industrial turn, as has been stressed by every personal filmmaker again and again, and most recently by Micheline Lanctôt at the press conference in honor of her Venice Silver Lion for *Sonatine*. "Make your films," she said, "make any kind of film you want, just don't take from me my right to make my kind of film."

Curiously, in the light of the festival retrospective, it is federal government film policy (or the lack of it) with its unerring nose for creating bureaucracies on the one hand, and for interfering when it shouldn't (as with tax-shelter legislation) and not interfering when it should have (in distribution as of the late '40s) that emerges as the chief

butcher of Canadian cinema, far more than the havoc perpetrated by a new breed of producers whose 'commercial' triumphs, mind, were not exactly in centre stage at this retrospective.

If nothing else, the major achievement of Northern Lights was to demonstrate that Canadian cinema's past is something to be profoundly proud of - and to disregard that past is to deliberately close one's eyes to Canada's eye-identity.

So, as Margaret Atwood might have said, how does one go from there to here?

That of course was the question on many people's minds as the festival drew to a close. It was on the minds of those filmmakers who saw their films come alive again on the screen, and realized that they had been right all along in what they were doing. It was on the minds of the retrospective's organizers who were, rightly perhaps, leery about drawing conclusions as to what it all meant. And it must have been on the minds of the Festivals Board of Directors, as Toronto will next year celebrate the Festival of Festival's 10th anniversary.

In the immediate future, the 10 best Canadian films will, thanks to the contribution of Labatts, tour the country. Requests to extend the tour have come in from some U.S. states, as well as from overseas, from Britain, France and Italy.

For next year and every year thereafter, the program Perspectives Canada, thanks to another corporate sponsor, Imperial Oil, will offer a permanent festival window to current Canadian film production.

But is that really enough - especially when the 1984 Festival was without a doubt the single biggest vindication of the Canadianess of Canadian cinema ever? Surely the point of the retrospective amounts to something more than a passing corporate pat on the back of Canadian film before reverting to the business as usual of celebrating international cinema and international unity a l'américaine? Surely in this country someone must be prepared to face the fact that what happened at the 1984 festival was an authentic cultural turning-point?

What if the Festival had, almost without knowing it, discovered that magical key that everybody from the DOC to Telefilm Canada to the CBC have been desperately searching for - namely, how to successfully market Canadian cinema to Canadian audiences? And if that were the case, would this not mean that Toronto had almost miraculously gained the power of life and death over the future of Canadian cinema: it can either help launch the rebirth of a genuine Canadian cinema, aware of itself, or complete the job of the lingering death already so familiar to Canada's best filmmakers.

Canadian culture, it has been said, will either be nationalist or will condemn itself to eternal cosmopolitan exile. It would be more than ironic that the Toronto festival, in the past so successful at promoting cinema's cosmopolitan exile, may have at last discovered its true vocation, perhaps even its destiny, as the national showcase of Canadian cinema.

But then, walking along Bloor Street that cold and windy evening, it was not the ironies that were lacking. For it seemed, for a moment, that perhaps the Festival was not over; on the contrary, it had barely even begun.