

# Peterborough: 3/7/80 Black Friday

## Elliott Lefko

Can we as Canadians produce an alternative cinema to the U.S.? What will be the role of criticism in the development of such a national cinema? Last Friday, the Peterborough Film Festival ("Canadian Images") brought together three of North America's finest film critics in an attempt to answer these questions.

In attendance for the debate were Andrew "Waiting for Godard, resident fascist, devil's advocate, unprofessional American" Sarris, Village Voice film critic and also professor at Columbia U; York's Robin "Challenge, attack, and re-think dominant sexual norms" Wood; and Peter "The Canadian film industry reeks" Harcourt, film professor at Carleton U. Although the proceedings were informative, the organizational structure of both the seminar and the festival kept it from outstepping its boundaries and becoming a truly radical forum.

As the festival was poorly advertised, there were few people present from outside Trent U. The panel discussion was poorly attended, which was strange, given the stature of the attending guests. And the forum itself was brief, ending without rebuttals between the panelists, and a general disregard for questions from the audience.

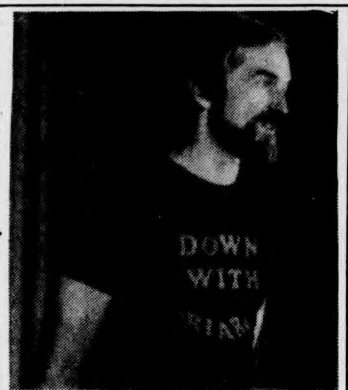
Did the panel change anything? I hardly think so. Andrew Sarris led off with an address that, while colorful and charming, was almost totally void of any substance. Sarris appeared ill-prepared, sleepy, and not really attentive to what either of his fellow panelists was trying to say. Sarris spoke, then closed his eyes, put his head in his arms, and went to sleep.

Sarris entered the proceedings with a thick skin, a reaction to an anti-American paranoia he was harbouring. Later in the day, he

was to remark: "I feel like one of the hostages, and you (the audience) are the people of Iran."

The essence of Sarris' self-indulgent meanderings was a discourse on what makes American films great. He suggested that people all over the world watch American films because they are fantasies, and fantasy is a universally-sought commodity.

Canadian films totally lack fantasy, says Sarris. Because of the tradition established by John Grierson of the NFB, films will continue as critical dissections. Because of that restrictive tradition, English Canadian films will never be a success.



Rebel Robin Wood

Robin Wood continued the debate with a well-prepared discourse on how film criticism and film education could be enacted to form a thriving national film culture. Unlike Sarris, Wood spoke pointedly, using as his example the British National Cinema. He suggested two sets of changes, one concrete and the other a set of tantalizing intangibles.

First, says Wood, a central body must be formed for coordination of film institutions and organizations. Media education is needed. There should be papers written, courses offered, week-end and summer courses available.

The Ontario Film Theatre, thinks Wood, does not come close to filling its responsibilities, the way a National Film Theatre in Britain does. The OFT doesn't show enough films, it needs mini-festivals and nightly screenings.

Wood suggested that the search for a Canadian image is a search for a phantom. Wood offered that as long as we pattern ourselves after American cinema we will, like them, be a systematic repression of radical alternatives to existing culture. Wood admires Quebec's revolutionary cinema program which is concerned with other forms of social organizations.

Wood called for a cinema of conscious and deliberate alternatives—Marxist, Revolutionary, Feminist, and Gay. He proposed an interesting theory, suggesting that we already may be on our way to seeing alternative Canadian cinema. According to Alan Fothergill, characters in Canadian film are usually radically inadequate moral protagonists, incapable of mature (missionary, non-subversive, etc.) loving relationships. Wood asked whether maturity is achieved through domination.

In conclusion, Wood called out for filmmakers to challenge present roles. He pleaded for the need for media studies and cautioned against the abuse of constant advertising. Even teachers should be re-educated on the dangers of advertising. Suggests Wood: "Through ideological awareness comes social revolution."

The third member of the panel, Peter Harcourt (Six European Directors), mixed Wood's idealism with Sarris' lack of focus. Although a professor, and used to addressing large groups of people, he seemed very unenthusiastic about the possibilities of a seminar. His intentions were to mix some

levity and a lot of despair about the Canadian cinema.

In a later seminar that day, Harcourt compared the tax-sheltered Canadian film boom to that which went on in England a few decades ago. According to Harcourt, the Americans went in and made some big films, and then left, industry in tow. The same fate will befall the Canadian film industry, predicted Harcourt.

The despair and dejection about the Canadian film industry that Harcourt bears lies in a lack of confidence on the part of native filmmakers. He also saw a Canadian identity crisis, spurned on by the temptation of big American dollars. Either Canadians should join the U.S., as a branch plant for the major studios, or, they should pull out, change their base, and make independent films.

The base which Harcourt wants to change is our culture as described by the Cinema. He wants a thinking, culture-reflecting, culture-changing, cinema. Here, Harcourt agreed with Wood, half-joking, that with Montreal Main and Outrageous, Canada was on its way to becoming known as a radical gay cinema.

"Why not make American films work for us?" was one positive note in Harcourt's appeal. Use the cinema as a consciousness raising tool. Make aware the possibilities. The CBC, says Harcourt, should be making a dozen feature films a year. We should be able to tell the CBC what we want to see.

Harcourt finished by saying that we're living in a capitalist society with band-aid-like organizations such as the CBC and the NFB. Either we need more of these organizations, or we destroy them and become Americans, and not Canadians.

The brief question and answer period yielded some sober

comments from the panel. Sarris: "The levels of journalistic film criticism has improved. The best critics are in small papers. Canadian criticism is of a much lower standard than in the U.S." Wood: "The enemy here is the middle and upper class Canadian. The standard reviewer is ignorant." Harcourt: "Canadian films are bourgeois in narrative. It's ideological manipulation."

Festivals, like Peterborough, are vital for their examination and presentation of film and film culture. Having the opportunity to view hundreds of fine Canadian (as well as Cuban and French) films and discuss topical ideas with distinguished speakers and interested participants is invigorating dope for the film attic. But, once you are there, in the pit, you might as well bring out the hard stuff. Real questions should be asked and answered. Going over the same tired speech every year is useless.

At York we have a good film program, yet students are blind in their knowledge of world film theatre, as well as Canadian film theatre. Most do not know The Tin Drum, and probably most have not heard of Skip Tracer. We need film culture to rise and meet the growing interest of the public and participants.

As the industry progresses and more films are being made, we must decide if we should allow the Americans to come in and constantly scoop the meaty jobs. And what are the possibilities of further co-productions with countries such as France and Britain, or even Switzerland.

The crossroads are at hand in Canada. Crossing them is a difficult task. We're going to see some landmark films in about five years hence. They are going to be successful. But, just what kind of success, I wonder?

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