

The Beginnings of the Beginnings: CANADA'S TOP 10 Fiction Feature Film Debuts Since 1968

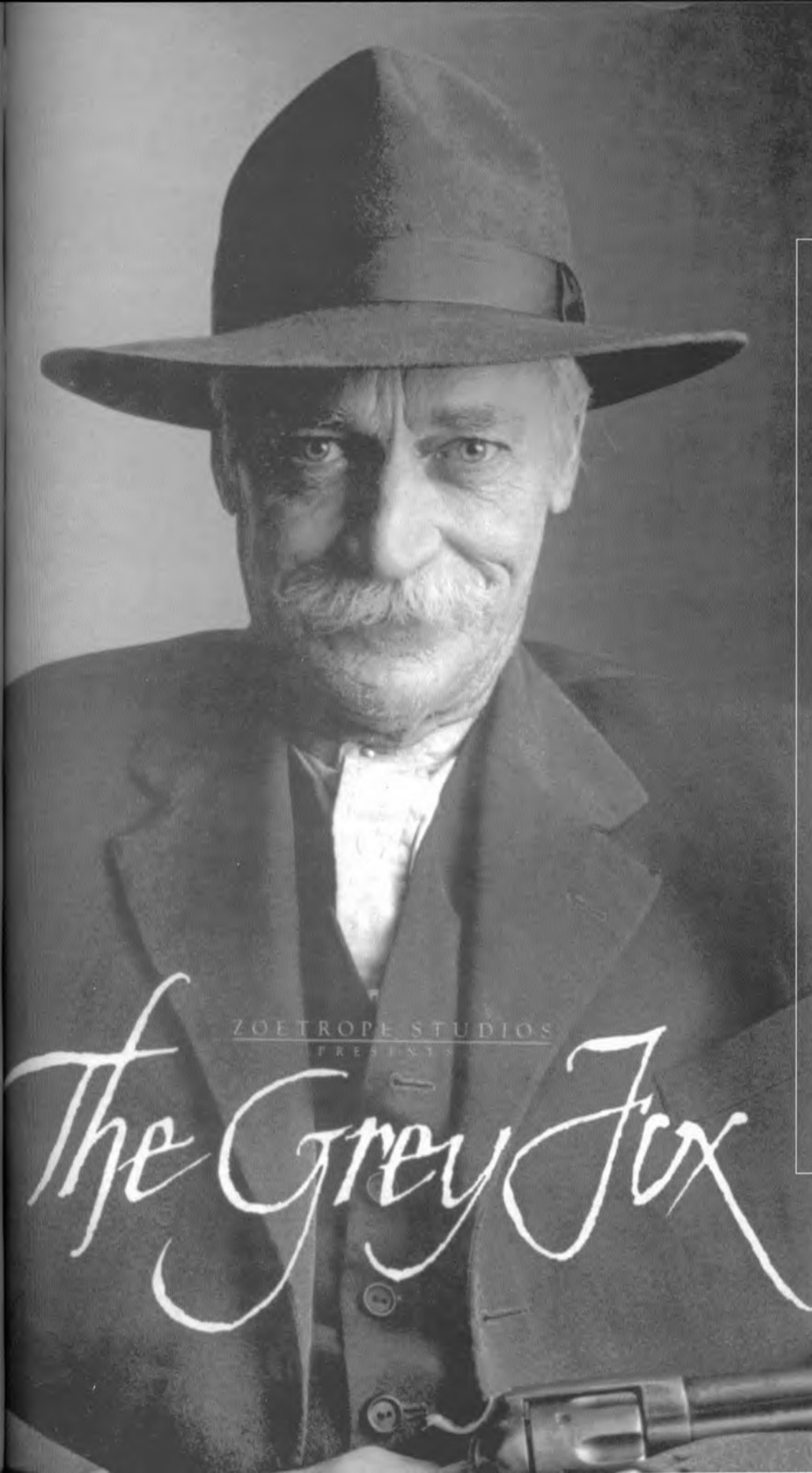
In thinking about a list of the Top 10 debut fiction features since 1968 from the perpetually troubled, utterly indomitable Canadian feature film industry, it is appropriate to borrow the title of Peter Harcourt's seminal article comparing Gilles Groulx's *Le Chat dans le sac* and Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Good-Bye*, two remarkable first features that arrived four years earlier. In "1964: The Beginning of a Beginning," Harcourt identifies the cultural and political implications of the start, however accidental and clandestine it may have been (given both films were intended to be documentaries), of something vitally important to a still very young Canadian cinematic culture: the possibilities of creating relevant, recognizably Canadian fiction feature films.

A lot has changed in the almost four decades since 1964, Canada's cinematic *annus mirabilis*. Arguably the most crucial change was the opening-for-business of the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) in the spring of 1968. Now known as Telefilm Canada, the CFDC was founded—in the finest Canadian traditions of the "mixed economy"—to invest public money in a fledgling private sector Canadian film industry to create, with varying degrees of success, a reasonably constant level of production of Canadian feature films. Since then film festivals and cinemathèques have arrived to increase exposure of Canadian film, modest alternate distribution circuits have come onstream, independent film co-ops have burgeoned from coast to coast, film schools and training centres have been established, specialty television has arrived and production studios have emerged in several Canadian cities.

Happily—and unfortunately—a lot has remained the same. There is still much promise and possibility in the arrival of new filmmaking talent. There have been and continue to be great beginnings. There remains, too, however, the reality of Hollywood dominance of Canadian distribution and exhibition, continued audience indifference (at least in English-speaking Canada) and a popular film media whose subconscious, to quote Wim Wenders, has long ago been colonized by the Yanks. (Ben Mulroney, are you reading this? No, I didn't think so.)

This particular Top 10 list, initiated by the Canadian Film Centre on the 10th anniversary of its Feature Film Project and, coincidentally, the 35th birthday of Telefilm Canada, focuses its attention on the best debut fiction features produced in this country since money first began to trickle out of the CFDC. Film Centre executive director Wayne Clarkson realizes full well that Canadian feature film history did not begin with the CFDC, but, as he says, "it did begin to become more consistent in terms of actual production activity with respect to feature films."

Moreover, in any process of list-making, Clarkson emphasizes, there is that inevitable "combination of pleasing thoughts about what's included and the disappointment of what's not. For example, we should make special mention of three films in particular that came very close: Michel Brault's *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* (1968), Thom Fitzgerald's *The Hanging Garden* (1997) and Don McKellar's *Last Night* (1998), which I consider one of the best debut films ever. Whatever the frustrations of exclusion, and lists are always to some degree arbitrary, this one does reveal the rich tradition of first features in Canada. Hopefully, this list will generate, like the Canada's 10 Best lists at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1984 and 1993, a renewed demand to see these films and will stimulate people to think about them again." And so let us begin at the beginning. Again.



ZOETROPE STUDIOS
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The Grey Fox

1.
The Grey Fox

1983 91m *director* Phillip Borsos, *screenplay* John Hunter. Even now, it is difficult to believe that this is a first feature, so mature and elegiac is its tone, so assured is its pacing, so authoritative is its narrative structure. And yet a first feature it is, from a filmmaker whose previous films were short subject documentaries on the manufacture of wooden barrels and nails. The late Vancouver director Philip Borsos's extraordinarily rich and resonant first feature delivers all the depth and wisdom of a late period John Ford in its unhurried and poetic dissection of the early 20th century mythic West, the Westerner, and the idiosyncrasy of life along the Canadian-American frontier.

2. *Atanarjuat*

2002 172m *director* Zacharias Kunuk, *screenplay* Paul Apak Angilirq. Winner of the prestigious Camera d'Or at Cannes, Kunuk's towering first feature merges ancient and modern in not only its traditional Inuit narrative of fraternal rivalry, but also in its rendering on digital technology, a tale as complex and potent as Shakespearean tragedy. For all its Arctic exoticism (at least in some southern eyes), this epic drama of violence and revenge is a quintessentially Canadian one in its identification of the dangers of individual desire supplanting communal harmony. *Atanarjuat's* triumphant arrival announces the birth of a Canadian film genre long overdue: the Northern.



3. *Goin' down the Road*

1970 87m *director* Donald Shebib, *screenplay* William Fruet. For a certain generation, the Canadian cinematic equivalent of Lacanian psychology's "mirror" moment ("Hey, that's me up there!"), Shebib's legendary first feature is and remains a potent portrait of displacement, marginality, and, more clearly as the years go by, masculinity in crisis. Pere and Joey's hoser odyssey is also the archetype of that insistent Canadian interpretation, dramatized over and over again, of Arthur Rimbaud's famous phrase, "Life is elsewhere." One can only hope they've found peace out west, somewhere. If the English-Canadian cinema has an instantly recognizable signature—like, say, a Tom Thomson tree or Gordon Lightfoot's voice—it's still *Goin' down The Road*.





4. *Un Zoo la nuit*

1987 116m *director and screenplay* Jean-Claude Lauzon. Immensely talented and dangerously fashionable, Jean-Claude Lauzon moved from directing television commercials to become a self-styled *enfant terrible* of 1980s Quebec cinema. A designer down-and-out Montreal noir, a peculiar and promiscuous combination of *Miami Vice* and *La Bête lumineuse*, his first feature is a tale of a father-son reconciliation. At once an indulgent macho fantasy and a tough/tender meditation on the tangled roots of machismo itself, *Un Zoo la nuit* is a startling debut from a filmmaker whose career, not unlike Borsos, ended as it was beginning. Lauzon was killed in a plane crash in northern Quebec, having made just two features, *Un Zoo* and *Léolo* (1992).



SELECTED
FOR DIRECTORS
FORTNIGHT CANNES 1987

SHEILA MCCARTHY

I'VE HEARD
THE MERMAIDS
• SINGING •

ISN'T LIFE THE
STRANGEST
THING YOU'VE
EVER SEEN?

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY
PATRICIA ROZEMA

• LE CHANT DES SIRÈNES •

WITH PAULE BAILLARGEON & ANN-MARIE MACDONALD

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY DOUGLAS KOCH MUSIC MARK KORVEN

ART DIRECTOR VALANNE RIDGEWAY EDITOR PATRICIA ROZEMA

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER DON HAIG PRODUCERS ALEXANDRA RAFFE & PATRICIA ROZEMA

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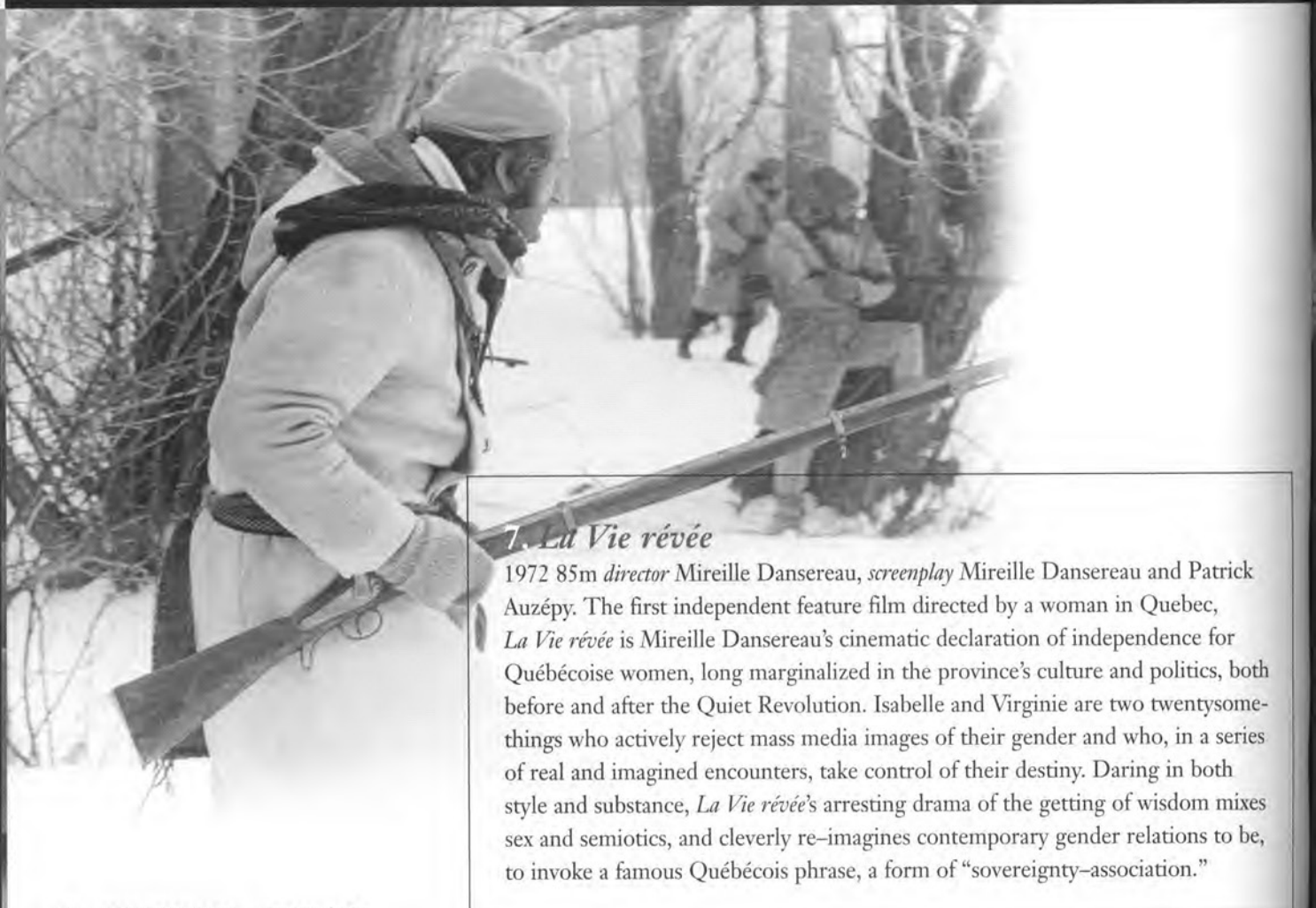
CANADA COUNCIL-ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL-NATIONAL FILM BOARD 94FFP

5. *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*

1987 84m *director and screenplay* Patricia Rozema. Lauded at Cannes in 1987, the likeable and fey *Mermaids* carried much hope for a promising new generation of independent Canadian cinema upon its gossamer wings. Perhaps too much. The rather slight feminist fable of Polly, a temp who falls in love with her boss, a sophisticated art gallery owner, *Mermaids* examines Polly's rich fantasy life as well as her less than glamorous "real" life. Rozema's first feature is at once cloying and sentimental, intelligent and honest. With its inspired fabulism and a winning performance by Sheila McCarthy it also signalled, both inside and outside the frame, a quiet confidence in being Canadian and being independent.

6. *Shivers*

1975 87m director and screenplay David Cronenberg. Although Cronenberg made two early medium-length films, *Stereo* (1969) and *Crimes of the Future* (1970), *Shivers* announces unequivocally the arrival of a singular vision in Canadian and, indeed, world cinema. The story of a sexually transmitted parasite infecting, in the ickiest manner imaginable, a nondescript singles apartment complex, *Shivers*, in all its B-grade horror glory, is a prescient and unsettling tale of nature and nurture gone awry. In addition to his expert deployment and simultaneous subversion of the codes and conventions of the horror genre, Cronenberg's film is suffused with a pervasive Canuck fatalism also found in films by virtually all of his 1970s contemporaries.



1. *La Vie rêvée*

1972 85m director Mireille Dansereau, screenplay Mireille Dansereau and Patrick Auzépy. The first independent feature film directed by a woman in Quebec, *La Vie rêvée* is Mireille Dansereau's cinematic declaration of independence for Québécoise women, long marginalized in the province's culture and politics, both before and after the Quiet Revolution. Isabelle and Virginie are two twentysomethings who actively reject mass media images of their gender and who, in a series of real and imagined encounters, take control of their destiny. Daring in both style and substance, *La Vie rêvée's* arresting drama of the getting of wisdom mixes sex and semiotics, and cleverly re-imagines contemporary gender relations to be, to invoke a famous Québécois phrase, a form of "sovereignty-association."

FAVORITE
PICTURES
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He
was
a
quiet
man...

CRIME WAVE

Eva
KOVACS
John
PAIZS



DARRELL BARAN
JEFFREY OWEN MADDEN
TEA ANDREA TANNER
MARK YUILL
and NEIL LAWRIE as Dr Jolly
Written, Produced and Directed by
JOHN PAIZS

TRADE



MARK

8. *Crime Wave*

1985 80m director and screenplay John Paizs. Utterly original and almost excessively inventive, John Paizs's debut feature is self-consciously erected upon his mastery of B-movie and television narrative and stylistic conventions, here relocated in the day-glo colours of suburban Winnipeg. The story of aspiring colour crime movie writer Steven Penny (played to mute perfection by Paizs himself) who can only write beginnings and endings for his movies, not middles, *Crime Wave* is a formally freewheeling rumination on the processes of cultural imperialism, on life in the margins, on the nature of cinematic experience itself, and on the inexhaustible possibilities of pop culture recycling.

9. *Le Confessionnal*

1995 100m *director and screenplay*

Robert Lepage. Québécois theatrical wunderkind Robert Lepage's first foray into the realm of cinema, having for years incorporated its techniques so extravagantly and brilliantly in his theatre work, here renders an impressively multi-layered tale of a young man's return to Quebec City to attend the funeral of his father and to search for his adopted brother. Weaving this contemporary story together with his family's gnarled past, which not coincidentally involves Alfred Hitchcock's shooting of *I Confess* in Quebec City some four decades earlier, Lepage delivers a moving investigation into origins, identity and the complex relationship between cinema and memory. *Je me souviens*, indeed.



10. *Stations*

1983 86m *director* William D. MacGillivray, *screenplay* William D. MacGillivray, Michael Jones and Lionel Simmons.

William D. MacGillivray's astonishing first feature, a quietly rendered epistemological jigsaw puzzle, is a film waiting to be rediscovered. *Stations* is an intricate, intelligent tale of a troubled television journalist heading home to St. John's from Vancouver by train, making a documentary about his journey. As he travels, he remembers, records and reflects on his life, the suicide of a friend and his role as a journalist. Framing his absorbing existentialist drama are meditations on the significance of technology, of the moving image and of that vast tenuous relationship between time and space we call Canada.

Tom McSorley is *Take One's* Associate Editor.