

BY GEOFF PEVERE

Cyndy Preston and Maury
Chaykin in Richard Lewis's
WHALE MUSIC

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PHOTOGRAPH BY D. CURRAN

"We're here to entertain, not to heal." from EXOTICA

Not a Toronto Canada '94

The extent to which Canada can be said to have a film consciousness, it's a consciousness borne less by tradition than events. We tend to celebrate and promote our films not in terms of where they've come, but by how large a splash they make when they land. While this emphasis on our cinema as a series of discrete happenings - such as the Genie Awards, film festival debuts, or screenings in the south of France - serves as an effective and sadly necessary quick-jolt reminder that yes, Canadians-still-make-movies, it's taken a toll on our sense of history. Since the nature of these events is to position themselves as the most significant manifestation of their kind so far, they are necessarily disinclined to trumpet anything that came before. Canadian cinema seems to exist in a strange eternal present, a bubble inflated by hype which bursts every time the event is over, leaving only drips on the ground as proof of its recent existence.





clockwise, Don Owen's *NOBODY WAVED GOOD-BYE*, Don Shebib's *GOIN' DOWN THE ROAD*, Gilles Groulx's *LE CHAT DANS LE SAC*: where are our pieces of packaged visual history?

It was the 1994 Perspective Canada Program which brought these thoughts to mind, but only because it evoked other examples of how a promotionally inclined film culture foreshortens historical consciousness. In the room where I work, a full shelf is occupied by volumes on Canadian film, most of them long out of print, many of them dog-eared and irreplaceable. My copy of Feldman and Nelson's *The Film Reader*, published in 1977, is adorned by dense marginalia I scribbled there while at university (e.g. "cinema as purveyor of ideology...indoctrinative role"). This year, there are numerous new books on Canadian cinema – Michael Posner's excellent *Canadian Dreams*, Ted Magder's *Canada's Hollywood*, Coach House Press's handsome publication of Atom Egoyan's *Speaking Parts* script, and Peter Steven's *Brink of Reality* – but most of these are either contemporary or industrial by inclination. There are no recent books which have recreated a past for our cinema, and there are no books of criticism. Both require a certain removal from the moment; neither easily qualify as an event.

One thinks of the relentless anniversary-marking that goes on in American cinema, and how masterfully that culture makes a marketing event even of its history: 50th Anniversary re-releases and video editions of classics, favourites and never-weres; in-your-face reminders of the historical significance of movies barely important enough to remember. While it's true history may only matter in post-Reagan America insofar as it can sell something, even its tai-

lored presence preserves some sense of culture as a continuum. Where are our pieces of packaged visual history? Where was the twentieth anniversary re-release, followed by videocassette and laser disc editions, of Claude Jutra's *Mon oncle Antoine*? Where is the collector's series of Canadian classics, available on video or disc, packaged with production stills and liner notes? How about interactive, CD-ROM versions of the works of Norman McLaren, Michael Snow, or (just imagine it) David Cronenberg? My video shelf, which contains special anniversary editions of *Lawrence of Arabia*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *The Last Picture Show*, also has a copy of Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road*, which was completed in 1969, and which observes the twenty-fifth anniversary of its release in 1995. I taped it one winter afternoon from Citytv and while I'm happy to have it, I'm put off by the effort to fast-forward through the barrage of dish detergent and sugar-free gum commercials. Still, it's better than nothing, and nothing is the only alternative. Even what's arguably the most important English-Canadian film of its era is unavailable on videocassette.

1994 represents another significant but unmarked anniver-



Ryan Black and Adam Beach in Bruce McDonald's *DANCE ME OUTSIDE*

Events insist that each previous moment is merely an evolutionary step on the ascent to the present one. Which means that nothing is forgotten more completely than past events, and no film culture may be more cruelly forgetful of its prior glories than this one

sary in Canadian film. If you turn to another long out-of-print volume on the national cinema, a 1980 Canadian Film Institute-produced anthology called *Self-Portrait* (edited by Pierre Veronneau and Piers Handling), you'll find an essay by Peter Harcourt called "1964: The Beginning of a Beginning." Difficult as it is to process, it's been thirty years since the release of two NFB-produced dramatic features which for Harcourt stood as paradigms for the French and English Canadian cinemas to follow: Gilles Groulx's *Le chat dans le sac* and Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Good-bye*. For all intents and purposes, whether one invests the films with the same significance or not, the 1964 films (both documentary-influenced studies of alienated young people) did mark the beginning of the national cinema we now have. Thirty years. *Front Page Challenge* is older. That's roughly the length of a generation, and a pretty scant flicker of history to be forgetful of. Still, I know of no one who even commented on the anniversary, and the most recent edition of *Perspective Canada* was understandably too busy making events of new Canadian movies to be bothering with the old. Still, it is interesting to note that the *Perspective Canada* program itself

began in 1984 (on the twentieth anniversary of Harcourt's "Beginning of a Beginning") and it was launched concurrently with *Northern Lights*, one of the largest retrospectives of Canadian film that had been offered anywhere up to that point.

Events insist that each previous moment is merely an evolutionary step on the ascent to the present one. Which means that nothing is forgotten more completely than past events, and no film culture may be more cruelly forgetful of its prior glories than this one. Whereas filmmakers of historical significance are the beneficiaries of respect and retrospectives in most countries, here they face oblivion unless they can keep producing events. Both Groulx and Owen currently have inactive filmmaking careers, and they head a long list of Canadian filmmakers whose accomplishments, were apparently never great enough to warrant long-term historical respect. What would pass for a pantheon in other film cultures reads like a trivia quiz in Canada. Remember Gilles Carle? Pierre Perrault? Paul Almond? Allan King? Jack Darcus? Jean-Pierre Lefebvre? Claude Jutra?

One wonders if our current auteur stars such as Atom Egoyan, François Girard, Guy Maddin, Jean-Claude Lauzon, Patricia Rozema, or John N. Smith would be stars then if they didn't keep producing events. Commanding as Egoyan's output is, to what extent is his national status dependent on the fact that they love him at Cannes? Could we, as a culture, see the value of his work if it wasn't (to borrow a festival programming term) pre-selected for us? Let's say Egoyan's next two films, unlikely as it sounds, don't get invited to prestigious showcases in other parts of the world. Would Atom Egoyan go the way of Don Shebib?

It was possible to find links to the past in this year's *Perspective Canada* program – or near it anyway – but you had to supply the chains yourself. For example, one of the

spots in the coveted Gala program, which is largely given over to small Hollywood films, huge art movies, or Canadian movies deserving special treatment, was filled by a low-budget, high-altitude mountain adventure called *The Ascent*, directed by Don Shebib. At a press conference for the movie, which shares nothing with *Goin' Down the Road* apart from the director and some first-rate location shooting, Shebib was asked by an American journalist what he's been up to since *Road*. Shebib, who has worked steadily since that film and must sometimes regard it the way Johnny Depp regards his "Winona Forever" tattoo, paused before answering graciously and quietly. "I stayed in Canada," he said. The implication being that if you want to find a good place to be both famous and forgotten, you could do a lot worse than right here.

If history is hard to come by in Canadian cinema, it's a condition not exclusive to our movies. Just as our film cul-

expect a Canadian historical genre anytime soon.

It's not that one laments the absence of historical spectacle in Canadian movies necessarily – god knows we've made some lousy (see *Bethune: The Making of a Hero*) costume pageants – it's just that the conditions which have foreshortened our sense of historical connectedness have also made themselves vividly felt in our cinema. I'm not just talking about costume drama here, but the way that history as an absence has become an active theme in many of our movies. This is not surprising when one considers the inextricable relationship between past and present in the process of self-knowledge. You can't know who you are until you learn where you come from. And Canadian films, to one extent or another, have always been about the impossibility of knowing oneself easily. The current relativising of history in Canada, which is an ideological phenomenon supported by bureau-



Atom Egoyan's *EXOTICA*; Charles Wilkinson's *MAX*; Robert Morin's *WINDIGO*

ture is primarily a matter of government legislation, so has our memory been shaped by government agendas. Strictly in film terms, this meant most of our history was for decades interpreted by the institutional imagination of the National Film Board. And since the glory days of the Board (roughly 1939 to 1970) correspond with the least productive feature-producing period of our history, it was largely left to the bureaucratic spawn of John Grierson to determine how the visual history of Canada would be both presented and interpreted. Even when something like a national film industry did struggle to its knees during the 1960s, it was rare that the movies dealt with historical subjects. Partly this is due to cost, costume dramas being a luxury a handout industry could ill afford, but this situation, too, may have had legislative support. Certainly Trudeau's multicultural policy (which emphasized the validity of group over national affiliations) did nothing to strengthen a sense of historical connection. History itself became a relative phenomenon – history became histories. Like fingerprints, it was assumed everyone's was different. Today this has evolved into a form of narrative hypersensitivity that retards the development of a historical sense. Now one tells stories involving the experiences of others at one's peril, which makes the development of stories about history and culture almost impossible. We're thus left with the dubious charge of only telling our own personal stories, and these too must pass muster with the bureaucrats who police the intersection of state legislation and cultural expression. At the very least, this leaves one ill-advised to

cratic mandate, has given Canadians yet another reason to make movies about alienation.

In no other Canadian director's work has the past functioned as quite as vivid an absence as it does in the films of Atom Egoyan – it's everywhere and nowhere. And in the sinuous *Exotica* (which was discussed at length by Kass Banning in *Take One No. 6*) the past is cast in one of its most complex roles yet. While everyone in the film bears the current scars of past events and are dramatically defined by the desperation of their strategies for denying the past, they are the products of a historical rootlessness. If it weren't for the fact that one's past is considered a dispensable psychic accessory, there would be no attempt to bury it. Not that you can, of course, and the tragedy of memory's persistence is at the core of Egoyan's drama. But the act itself suggests a cultural climate in which history is something worth losing, like baggage or midriff bulge.

The past and present are subject to alteration in the ludicrous *Max*, in which disgruntled baby boomer R.H. Thomson decides to board up the present and move back into the past. A successful businessman with a suburban playhouse and picture-perfect family, he decides to get back to the garden of counter-culture bliss when his son is diagnosed with a mysterious but possibly fatal disease. Another movie might have used the selfish folly of such an idea as fodder for subversive melodrama or high farce (see Kubrick's *The Shining* and Albert Brooks's *Lost In America*), but not this one. *Max* ends up vindicating Thomson's character not just

PHOTOGRAPHS: LEFT, BY JOHNNIE EISEN; MIDDLE, ASTRAL FILMS; RIGHT, BY ATTILA DORRY

by presenting his justifiably furious wife as an unreasonable killjoy, but by offering the ultimate spectacle of counter-culture rebirth – thanks to Dad, Max lives, apparently cured by the relocation into a mythical past. In other words, we're talking Egoyan in reverse. Where the attempt to deny the past is what wounds *Exotica's* characters in the present, redemption in Max is attained by denying the present and living the myth of a better, earlier time.

The past plays a particularly evasive role in Bruce McDonald's *Dance Me Outside*. Based on a story about native teen-agers by W.P. Kinsella and set on a Northern Ontario reservation, the film seems fully aware of both the real and the mediated history of its aboriginal subjects. It's not that one experiences this awareness literally. Instead, one feels it in its strenuous absence. Having set itself the goal of de-mystifying native culture by offering it as something only



The apparent absence of history from Canadian cinematic experience has ensured the preservation of one of the most persistently Canadian traditions in our movies...alienation

marginally more exotic than teen-age culture anywhere, the film winds up implying that culture and tradition themselves are far less potent forces in the lives of these kids than the perennial adolescent pursuits of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. They, the film screams, are just like us! The end result punctures the multicultural myth in an inadvertent manner by suggesting that the most interesting thing about these kids is how much like suburban white kids they really are. White culture still winds up setting the standard for normal. In order to accept its characters as just plain kids, *Dance Me Outside* asks us to check our historical memories at the door.

It's fitting that Robert Morin uses a nautical metaphor to fictionalize the Oka crisis in his ambitious but wobbly *Windigo*, as it reminds us again how adrift contemporary white filmmakers seem to be when it comes to dealing with Native issues. Like McDonald, Morin attempts to elucidate the Native Canadian experience by using a white cultural model. But where McDonald's means of familiarizing his characters consists of borrowing from teen-flicks and music videos, Morin borrows from the tradition of imperialist literature itself. The story of a representative group of mostly white, status quo reps (a journalist, government flacks, a federal agent, and one compromised former Native activist) who travel upriver to confront a militant separatist who has declared an independent nation, *Windigo* steams toward *Heart of Darkness* via *Apocalypse Now*. Potentially it's an apt conceit. After all, Conrad's novel is one of the great accounts of the failure of the imperial dream and one of the first to

point to the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of European world-building. The problem is, however, Morin's vision runs aground precisely where Coppola's did. When, after miles of moody drifting through the Northern Quebec wilderness, we finally arrive at the camp of the Kurtz-like separatist guru, the movie concludes with a giant shrug, and gets back into the boat. Having finally come face-to-face with the mysterious force of Native sovereignty, the film has nowhere to go except home. Strangely, the history evoked by *Windigo* is less aboriginal than imperial: thanks to Conrad, we're reminded of the futility of white imperialism; but like Coppola, we're brought no closer to the object of all this liberal white concern. When we finally get to where we're going, we meet yet another variation on the Indian as Unknowable Other. That's travelling a long way only to wind up where you started.

Like François Girard's Glenn Gould in *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould*, the protagonist of Richard Lewis's *Whale Music* is a reclusive, eccentric genius. Once a radically innovative, Brian Wilsonesque pop musician, Des Howl (Maury Chaykin) now lives a Kane-like existence in a west coast mansion crammed with the artifacts of spent genius. When he isn't noodling away on the musical magnum opus from which the title gets its name, he's talking to psychic ghosts or floating blissfully in his stagnant swimming pool. A creature of historical significance, he's retreated to a state of solitude that preserves his particular historical moment but protects him from any others; his home is a museum in which he's the principal exhibit and into which no outside visitors – or history – may intrude. That changes with the unlikely arrival of a nubile young runaway (Cyndy Preston) who eventually brings him back to the brink of active social engagement. (You could say she does so by rekindling Des's dormant sense of artistry, but it probably helps that she sleeps with the old guy.) *Whale Music* is thus also about history as a malleable concept, to be remade or avoided depending on the subject's needs. What Des Howl needs is both: to remake his own past into a protective, hermetically sealed bubble, and to avoid any other histories which threaten his own. The curious thing about the film is how it ultimately winds up endorsing Des's misanthropy at the same time it attempts to cure him of it: Des finally seems content to live alone in a semi-narcotized state surrounded by ghosts and gold records, and the film's happy ending is only happy insofar as it convinces you that Des will be just as happy reconnected with the human race. It doesn't.

The apparent absence of history from Canadian cinematic experience has, ironically, ensured the preservation of one of the most persistently Canadian traditions in our movies. To have a sense of the past is to know who you are. To live only in the present is, of course, liberating. It frees one to reinvent one's self according to the needs of the moment, but it is also to live in a sense of constant uncertainty, a dread of plummeting into nothingness for the lack of any roots to cling to, which, of course, is the heartbreaking plight of the walking dead who populate Egoyan's films. In this, if nothing else, the Canadian cinema clings to a tradition. Three decades after "the beginning of a beginning," we're still seeking an evasive sense of self. It may only be alienation, but dammit, it's ours ●