

# ABCs of the Canon

From *Whose Canon?*, an address by experimental filmmaker Mike Hoolboom to the Third Annual Perspective Canada Symposium held during Toronto's 1993 Festival of Festivals.

**A** is for all. We can't include it all, show it all, say everything. Because we can't do it all, we have to cut, to make a selection, to have a point of view. Because we can't do it all, we have to cut, to cut the body, and the wound is what we call the canon.

**D** is for the dead. Most people who have lived in the world are dead. Being dead is normal, it is the usual thing, the condition to which we aspire. We the living are the exception, while the dead are the rule. While we are alive we live among ghosts, images of the dead, books by dead authors. We use the canon to talk to the dead and then we use it to talk to each other, to prepare us for our own end.

**E** is the mark you get in school if you

fail. If you are getting E's, you will never be admitted into the canon. Unless you invent something. Like Einstein. Einstein failed math because he was about to reinvent it. The old ways are useless. Now the new ways are the old ways. How many Einsteins have we already failed this year? How many Einsteins will never get beyond their poverty, or lack of education, or the crime of being born in the wrong part of the city?

**G** is for going back. I go back to the 16th century and find just one person alive—William Shakespeare. He is the only person I know from that time, the rest have been forced through strainers like so many impure minerals. There are some centuries where no one lived at all. I wonder if it's possible, using the canon as a guide, to return to these un-peopled centuries and begin again.

**K** is for Kanada, Kanadian culture, Kanadian content laws. The American cine-

ma began without sound, but the Kanadian cinema began without images, searching in a dark others have learned to call home. How many times will we be made to relive the Vietnam War, or Watergate, or American comic book stars, or American gangsters of American love? And after all this time in the dark, when it finally appears, the Kanadian cinema, will we recognize it as our own, or will it seem like a child grown strange from neglect, an accident of birth? Having cut ourselves to fit an American mirror, when we turn to face our own, is there any way we could see ourselves except as monsters?

**L** is for the looking glass, the mirror, our reflection. When we look into it we see ourselves. When we look into the canon we see ourselves. And for works that survive it was the same 100 years before that and 100 years before that. How do these works endure? Is it because when we look back, we do so through the lens of the canon?

That the canon is all that remains visible. Or is it deeper than that still? Perhaps we could say that the canon is what makes the visible visible. It is not a description of the world, or a kind of shorthand summary of times past, but the synaptic fires of our perception, the possibility of our understanding anything at all.

**M** is for mourning. The canon is about going back, grieving, building altars to the dead. There are some who insist that all art is a kind of mourning, a building of monuments to honour the dead world. The canon is the shape of mourning, a ritual loss.

**S** is for sorry you didn't make it, sorry you didn't get in, sorry there's no room. The canon gains its strength from all those who are left out, from all the rejection notices and refusals. The canon is a class system without a middle class, either you're in or you're out.

**W** is for winning, the winner's circle.

The winner is the survivor, the first one to cross the finish line of history, the one whose picture you can see on t-shirts and bubble gum cards, bed sheets and beer coasters, baseball hats and matchbooks. The winner is everywhere, like an elevator fart, or gas blown into a closed container, the winner expands until it covers all the available space.

**X** is for experimental film. What does it mean to be part of a canon of experimental film? To be at the centre of a marginal practice? I spoke to a filmmaker at this year's festival whose film is showing in someone's top ten list. The film has now shown three times at the festival. For six years he has worked on a new film, and when it was done he submitted it to this festival. But it was refused. The festival only wanted to show his old film. Because he is married to the past, he has already become a ghost, eaten alive by his own history. Naturally, everyone envies him his success ●

