

Evidence: Race and Canadian Cinema

Some memories, not our own. Ten years ago, the

Toronto Festival of Festivals re-invented Canadian cinema

with a massive retrospective that broke open the floodgates of introspection. First came Bruce Elder (who had programmed the retro's experimental section), with his landmark manifesto in *Canadian Forum* called "The Cinema We Need." Elder



Who Has Seen the Wind: the cinema we had

took on Canadian film gurus Peter Harcourt and Piers Handling for championing realist narrative cinema, in a debate that came to include Robin Wood, Bart Testa, Michael Dorland, Geoff Pevere and others in the pages of *Cinema Canada*. Experimental cinema was pitted against narrative and New Narrative, realism vs. transcendentalism.

Re-reading that debate, it's the "we" in "The Cinema We Need" that cries out. As Pevere asked at the time, "just who are 'we' anyway? I don't think 'we' includes me or the guy who manages the Mac's Milk on the corner." We'd be surprised if Elder's "we" didn't include Pevere, but what about that milkstore owner? Maybe these are our memories after all.

This issue of *Take One* is devoted to the work of Canadian filmmakers of African, Asian, Latin American and Aboriginal origins. We've called it *Evidence: Race and Canadian Cinema*, because evidence is what we're both offering and searching for. Nearly a decade after Elder's manifesto, a half-century after John Grierson's prescriptions, we propose another re-evaluation of what has come to be defined as Canadian film.

To crack the vanilla shell of Canadian cinema with a word: *race*. A constellation of meanings, emotions, arguments and counter-arguments arises at its mere mention. Our view of race and Canadian cinema no doubt differs from other participants gathered within these pages; this multi-racial coalition of writers and filmmakers is brought together to create new, possibly variant critical and cultural spaces in Canadian cinema. For us, race is rarely about sociology, never about biology, and it's always political.

Of course, there are significant tears in the awkward banner, "People of colour and First Nations people." While Indo-Canadian filmmakers like Vic Sarin, Deepa Mehta and Srinivas Krishna have been the first to make features in Canada, and Black and other Asian directors have followed, it's one of this country's vicious ironies that Aboriginal features with high-powered producers and million-dollar budgets are still beyond us. And the rubric of Black and Asian Canadian film doesn't yet include those from Vietnamese, Somali and other recent immigrant communities. The torture and killing of Somalis by Canada's UN peacekeepers begs for a Somali-Canadian point of view, for instance, not another blanched movie-of-the-week.

There will be filmmakers of colour who want to ignore this issue and make films without regard to race or racism, illusory as that might be. Still, we understand race fatigue, and support the need to remain free from institutional biases about the sort of films we must make. A Black film needn't always feature black faces.

"Special issues" of magazines inspire ambivalence at best, because they can so easily reinscribe the marginalization they seek to address. We're hoping that long after this special issue is a back issue, *Take One* and other publications will still be covering the biggest change in Canadian cinema since the auteurs of the mid-80s (Atom Egoyan, Patricia Rozema, Guy Maddin, Bruce McDonald et al.), who arrived as if in response to "The Cinema We Need."

Change? Fast on the heels of Keith

Lock's *Small Pleasures*, 1994 will see the release of several new feature films by Black and Asian Canadian filmmakers. Midi Onodera's *Sadness of the Moon* takes the low-budget indie trail, while five others – Clement Virgo's *Rude*, Mina Shum's *Double Happiness*, Stephen Williams' *Soul Survivor*, Srinivas Krishna's *A Promise of Heaven*, and Deepa Mehta's *Camilla* – will be made with the participation of Telefilm Canada and provincial agencies. Five. That's more than in the entire previous history of Canadian cinema.

We're optimistic about this newest of waves. We hope that none of us – filmmakers, critics, distributors, money-holders – surrenders to cynicism. We're confident that funders will work to understand how their jobs must change. Filmmakers will distance themselves from the lure of "authenticity," because sociology is the dead end of Canadian cinema. Audiences will come to see these films, once distributors put them where audiences can see them. We're optimistic about all these things, but we're still looking for evidence.

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