

# The 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of THE FILM STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF CANADA / ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DES ÉTUDES CINÉMATOGRAPHIQUES

BY CHRISTINE RAMSAY

Allan King presented the following paper and a screening of his film *Maria* (1976) at the 25th anniversary of the Film Studies Association of Canada/Association canadienne des études cinématographiques (FSAC/ACEC) in Quebec City in May of 2001. King was invited by the FSAC/ACEC and the Society for Socialist Studies to be part of a special series of discussions about images of the working class. *Maria*, a film about a feisty young Italian-Canadian who leads a group of striking garment workers in 1970s Toronto, holds up remarkably well as a "social realist" docudrama. "Whereas African-American rap culture now supplies the defining image of potency youngsters crave," King said, in his time, "workers were 'it' when I was a kid." His decision to tell the story of the working-class Canadian labour movement through the lens of gender, ethnicity and family is testimony to King's sensitivity as a filmmaker to the social and emotional stakes underlying political activism. The film's stunning black-and-white aesthetic ("no one, but no one, shot black and white anymore," King recalled) cinches his reputation as "one of the most significant innovators in direct cinema," according to professor Peter Morris in his *The Film Companion* (published in 1984). But the film itself now stands at the centre of an amusing paradox. As Peter Harcourt\* observed during the lively post-screening discussion, "It's a wonderful film about unions. But we can't screen it in classes anymore because we can't afford to pay ACTRA's fees!"

FSAC/ACEC was founded in 1977 by a group of university professors dedicated to "foster and advance the study of the history and art of film and related fields" in Canada, and Canadian film culture would be impoverished without the contributions made by academic film people. The critical discourse they stage in the classroom creates an awareness of Canadian cinema for our youth, and they also play an important role in educating our future filmmakers, critics, administrators and scholars. The 25th conference included a special plenary panel to review the Association's history, celebrate its achievements and strategize for the future. Participants included founding members Seth Feldman, Peter Harcourt, Peter Morris, Graham Petrie, Zuzana Pick and William Wees. But, as Harcourt insisted, attention should be paid to our role as public intellectuals, positioning ourselves as educators at the centre of a living dialogue on cinema in Canada for Canadians. Bruce Elder's "Cinema We Need" debate launched in *The Canadian Forum* in the mid-1980s is now over 15 years old; we need to renew our commitment to spreading "affection" for the film medium and for Canadian cinema particularly, and produce not only academic publications but articles in magazines such as *Take One*, *POV*, *MacLean's*, *CineAction* and *Borderlines*. We also need to work as activists to network and lobby for the important issues affecting film culture in Canada, Harcourt concluded.

This is not to overlook the Association's many achievements, such as the annual Martin Walsh Memorial Lecture, the Gerald Pratley Award for studies in Canadian cinema, and the

*Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques*. "Martin Walsh," Seth Feldman reminded the plenary audience, was "the one white Rasta" in London, Ontario, in the 1970s. "Everyone smoked his dope, drank his wine, listened to his records and saw the 16mm films he projected down his hallway." A British ex-patriate professor of film studies at the University of Western Ontario, Walsh was the first president of the Film Studies Association of Ontario (FSAC/ACEC's precursor) and an enthusiastic contributor to the original *Take One*, who really knew how to inspire affection for film. Like his friend, the artist Greg Curnoe, he was a member of the London Centennial Wheelers, and in 1977 he died tragically in a road accident. Over the years, 23 Martin Walsh lectures have been delivered in his memory by such figures as Stephen Heath, Robin Wood, Al Razutis, Michael Snow, Trin T. Minh-Ha, Alanis Obomsawin and, of course, Allan King.

The Pratley Award was instituted in 1992 with funds from Telefilm Canada and the Ontario Film Development Corp. to honour the work of Gerald Pratley. Also a British ex-pat, Pratley, who was the founder of the Ontario Film Institute, which became The Film Reference Library and Cinematheque Ontario, was made a Member of the Order of Canada in 1984 for his service to Canada through film appreciation. Ten outstanding graduate students engaged in research on Canadian film and television have received the award since its inception. While budget cuts caused sponsors to withdraw support in 1997, the Pratley Award continues, funded by individual donations. One of the immediate challenges facing the FSAC/ACEC is lobbying Canadian cultural institutions to reinstate their support of this important award.

*The Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques* was established by FSAC/ACEC in 1990 to advance the study of Canadian film in Canada and internationally. Building a living culture of Canadian cinema has been a challenge, which depends not only on the work of our talented filmmakers, producers, distributors and exhibitors, but on the intellectuals and reviewers who talk and write widely, critically and affectionately about it. FSAC/ACEC is proud of our past, and looking forward to the institutional cross-pollinations and networking that must come with the next 25 years of Canadian cinema.



\*Peter Harcourt is widely known in Canadian cultural circles as the spirit behind the founding of film studies in Canada. In 1967, he returned from several years in Britain working with the British Film Institute to introduce film to Queen's University. In 1968 and 1969, courses followed at Brock, Guelph, McMaster, University of Western Ontario, and Atkinson and Innis colleges, which have since grown into vibrant film studies, degree-granting programs. Many former students of Harcourt are now important figures on the Canadian film scene

in their own right, including Wayne Clarkson, Piers Handlingi, Geoff Pevere and the Genie Award-winning filmmaker Brenda Longfellow.

TAKE ONE