



## To See or Not to See: Festival Fiction

Andrew James Paterson



James was experiencing a major writer's block at ten o'clock on the Wednesday evening before the official opening of the Festival of Festivals. Indeed, what had seemed at first to be a clever script idea now seemed to be a dead end, so he was not angry when the sound of Andrew's key negotiating the front door latch signalled an end to his working day.

"Ta da!" Andrew was bleary-eyed because he had sat through three consecutive press screenings; but he still looked terribly pleased with himself. He pointed to the press badge hanging awkwardly from his jacket lapels. But James was not about to be impressed.

"Andrew, you don't need to tell the public that

you are a member of the press. You have only to show your badge to the ushers."

But as he listened to Andrew argue that wearing his badge on his jacket lapel was the safest way of not losing it, James realized that Andrew wished for strangers and other pass holders to approach him in the queues. Andrew regarded to be a man whose opinion was sought out regarding this or that director's latest film or concerning whether or not a particular festival programme was indeed successful. Well, it was not James' concern if his room-mate wished to be surrounded by contradictory opinions and socially incompatible queue-mates. He himself had had enough of such aggravations during previous film festivals; and that was why he had chosen to take advantage of his room-mate's possession of a press pass in order to concentrate on his own script.

Actually James had toyed with the idea of attending the Festival's Trade Forum. Never mind the two hundred and seventy-nine films from thirty-eight different countries in eight exciting programmes; that was for those who had time and money on their hands. The trade forum was for those who wished to participate in the film industry. Perhaps next year, when he had finally completed a marketable script, he would attend. He would have a reason for attending seminars, workshops, and networking parties. Now if only he could get over his writing block.

In the morning James couldn't wait for Andrew to leave. His room-mate was going on as if he were embarking on a world-wide vacation; leaving James instructions as to what particular foods his cat preferred and remembering to pack Dexatrim tablets so that he could avoid all the fast-food outlets. James hoped Andrew would remember to pack breath mints; one of the most



irritating aspects of the Festival of Festivals is overenthusiastic cinephiles with severe cases of halitosis.

Now James had the apartment to himself again and slowly but surely an idea occurred to him. He had become bogged down on his script-in-progress because the script was not rooted in an obviously identifiable milieu. Now he had a milieu to work with. He would write a screenplay about a group of cinephiles reacting to the Festival of Festivals. It would be what was referred to in the trade as an "urban comedy," and Andrew's end-of-the-day dissertations would provide James with material. James was indeed feeling pleased with himself.

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land. And *Kino Eye*—a- previously somewhat- spirit of *glasnost*, mor- deed been trumpeted- Toronto festival durin- muttered, this was all- pino director Lino Br- thirty extraneous min- plot he had tacked ont- order to compromise- that momentarily tlea- when Andrew emphas- any vehement confron- and his viewers durin- the film, James decid- not provide him with

information for the expository scenes. He could predict that his room-mate would, after dutifully sitting through *The Mystery of Eva Peron* (Arg. Tulio Demicheli)—because of his life long obsession with dictatorial power and its excesses—then have to make a difficult decision between a restored print of *Blackmail* (GB, Hitchcock) and *Le Cri du Hibou* (Fr. Chabrol). Such decisions have always been *de rigueur* for festival patrons. While scanning the morning paper James had noticed that this year the *Globe's* Jay Scott was keeping a relatively low profile. Usually Mr. Scott provided patrons with a suggested itinerary and, like it or not, such "critic's" suggestions always helped eager patrons in making their selections.

By the time Andrew returned (only to go out to a party shortly afterwards), James had completed a few expository scenes which could easily be altered at a later date if necessary. Andrew, while preparing instant coffee, was recounting how he had narrowly avoided being caught between two hopelessly incompatible local cinephiles—Eric Everett Edwards and George Gordon Parnell—while waiting in line for *The Last of England* (GB, Derek Jarman). James smiled to himself. Such altercations were always good for laughs in conventional urban comedies such as the one he had decided to write. But where, James mused after Andrew had finished his vanity routine and had left for the party, is the conflict? No conflict, no script!

On the festival's third evening (second full day) Andrew had come home for dinner, too pooped for any more movies, let alone parties. He proceeded to pontificate about how the *Kino Eye* Soviet film retrospective was being marginalized due to its location in the out-of-the-way repertory Bloor Cinema and in the pocket-sized Cumber-

crepancies between catalogue notes and a film's actual content were not that unusual, although they were undoubtedly irritating to patrons.

The next day James decided to select six of Andrew's friends and then imagine their conversation as they stood in a corner of the Festival's Hospitality (or Hostility) Suite. The actual suite consisted of one large central room with a buffet and a bar, and two adjoining rooms where it was easier for, and two adjoining rooms where it was easier for, entourage to recede into a corner, lower their voices, and compare notes. Andrew and his friends would all agree that *A Short Film About Killing* (Pol. Krystof Kielsowski) was an amazingly visceral work despite the painful sincerity of the young lawyer whose character dominates the final third of the film. They would also be debating whether or not *The Thin Blue Line* (USA, Errol Morris) withheld as much evidence as it exhibited. James could particularly hear one of the seven, a journalist named Natalie, lecturing about how all of the Russian movies she has seen so far were about heroism (the conflict lay in the opposition of the personal and the private with the public and the state-sanctioned), and how it seemed so appropriate that the first Russian comedy on her itinerary (*The Adventures of a Dentist*, Elem Klimov) would depict an incompetent man who was mistakenly believed by the local politburo to be a hero. And so on. James was having fun appropriating the voices of Andrew's friends. They were all so full of themselves in the manner of Rohmer (or Woody Allen) characters. The seven were carrying on with their vodka-induced seminar, oblivious to the fact that the room contained a number of Latin American and Asian directors here with their films. Andrew and his friends were background action masquerading as foreground action. Now that was a comic situation!

woman had demanded that the director account for the piece of shit he was exhibiting. The director was a kid, and a member of the audience. He wasn't an icon like David Cronenberg (*Dead Ringers*) whose work is supposed to be disturbing and divisive. So Andrew and his colleagues were drunkenly arguing whether or not obvious camp was automatically dehumanizing, whether or not the film contained any discernible analysis as to just why women—for whom meticulousness and vanity were professionally demanded—were especially prone to *anorexia nervosa*; and whether or not any sympathy was possible for characters who were after all represented by Barbie dolls instead of actors. What really provided fodder for James was the fact that the kitchen debate was not strictly gender-polarized. Men attempting to accommodate the "woman's point of view" were always good for a chuckle.

But this was only a potential departure point. Where could James go from here? After approximating the kitchen table seminar, James tried to project his characters into emotional confrontations triggered off by their intellectual differences. But he felt stymied. He was after all dealing with a particular group of cinephiles who were notoriously constipated emotionally—although at last year's festival his freelance writer friend Dan had met and fallen in love with Mark Oliver, a gossip columnist for a Metro monthly. But the movies had always been a testing ground for seeing whether or not people's tastes would be compatible; and therefore potential relationships had a tendency to short-circuit. Damn!

Andrew was not making matters easy for James either. The fool was frying himself, taking in five movies a day and then coming home and promptly becoming comatose. The only thing worse than a lugubrious room-mate was a cata-



land. And *Kino Eye*—an extensive programme of previously invisible but now, in the spirit of *glasnost*, more visible movies—had indeed been trumpeted as a major coup for the Toronto festival during the summer. Yes, James muttered, this was all true but predictable. Filipino director Lino Brocka's public apology for thirty extraneous minutes of heterosexual subplot he had tacked onto his film *Macho Dancer* in order to compromise with his distributors—now that momentarily tweaked James's curiosity. But when Andrew emphasized that there had not been any vehement confrontation the director and his viewers during the question period after the film, James decided that this incident would not provide him with any material either. Dis-

But there was still no conflict. The spectacle of incompatible groups of festival patrons existing side by side while remaining oblivious to each other was only amusing up to a point. It wasn't until the end of the festival's third full day, when Andrew actually brought his friends home for nightcaps, that James was able to zero in on a potential conflict. Because Andrew was under the illusion that James was sound asleep, they all felt free to engage in vehement arguments about a short film titled *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (USA, Todd Haynes).

So far, this had been the one film which was immediately controversial. Usually post-screening questions are painfully polite, but this response was something else. Right after the film a

tonic one. Except . . . one morning Andrew had been in such a hurry to get out of the apartment that he had forgotten his pocket notebook. James became excited, but only before reading Andrew's barely legible scribbles. Then he became angry.

His room-mate was writing standard "criticism": the Festival of Festivals was "a time-compressed museum," and so on. This was of no use to him. James had already established the intellectual pretensions of his characters; now he needed to somehow explode them. He flipped the pages, hoping for something different. But Andrew had cluttered his notebook with even more gobbledygook about the festival as a vacation and the patron-as-tourist. Andrew was milking his

Lives; Virgin Machine; Hamlet Goes Business; Lightning Over Braddock; A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings.

Film stills from left to right: Distant Voices/Still

analogy beyond what it was worth. If patrons who primarily attended the galas were akin to tourists who brought their own instant coffee to Brazil, the cinephiles who went to subtitled movies without a working knowledge of the necessary languages were dilettantes. This was all very true but, since Andrew was indeed aware of his own dilettantism, why did he so relentlessly persist in it? Because Andrew would never change; and neither would his cinephile cronies and their ilk. And people who never change don't make good script material. Urban comedies of manners are one thing, but James needed a plot. So he decided that the Festival of Festivals was not such a great milieu for his script after all.

As Andrew became simultaneously more exhausted and more tired the festival shifted from being an eclectic itinerary to being a straight-forward marathon. He had already decided that this year's three major themes were: 1) "forbidden" films—films made under "difficult" or downright intolerable conditions; 2) films made in countries in which American economic domination created a tension between Hollywood and more idiosyncratic, "personal" cinematic language; and 3)—Andrew's favourite theme—movies concerned with the borderlines between private concerns and public spaces. Now Andrew had stopped taking notes in the ever-lengthening queues and begun to concentrate on enjoying as many good movies as he had the stamina left to enjoy.

Sure there were too many movies for the amount of available cinemas. Sure this was creating a situation in which many passholders with every right to see their first choice were lucky to even see their second choice. The Festival of Festivals is not a curated exhibition; it is an attempt by the City of Toronto to compete with all the other urban centres of the world. And competition requires accumulation, not reduction. Besides Andrew felt that since he was sampling an enormous number of movies without having to pay for anything but popcorn and caffeine, concentrating on obvious irritations about the festival was downright nitpicky and ungrateful to boot. When James glanced at Andrew's list of personal highlights he was angry at himself for missing the boat. Well, maybe next year...

Just for the record, here are some of Andrew's personal highlights, not necessarily in any order: *Virgin Machine* (FDR, Monika Treut); *Hamlet Goes Business* (Fin. Aki Kaurismaki); *Distant Voices/Still Lives* (GB, Terence Davies); *Forbidden to Forbid* (FDR, Lothar Lambert); *Latent Image* (Chile, Pablo Perelman); *Hard Times* (Port, Joao Botelho); *Talking to Strangers* (USA, Rob Tregenza); *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* (Cuba/It./Sp., Fernando Birri); and *Lightning Over Braddock* (USA, Tony Buba).

*Andrew Paterson is a Toronto writer and video and performance artist. His "detective" novel The Disposables (1986) is available from Art Metrolople. His video tapes may be viewed through V-tape in Toronto.*



Linocut by Malcolm Reid

## Chronique d'Amérique Writers!

### Malcolm Reid

**Who's Who in the Writers' Union of Canada,** a directory of members published by the Writers' Union of Canada (24 Ryerson Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, M5T 2P3), 1988. \$20.95.

The Writers' Union's new directory is out, and after being dazzled, like all its subscribers, by my own portrait of myself in it, by its pocket-mirror quality, I want to savour it. To sense Canadian writing through it. Canadian writing and Canadian personality.

It's not exactly a work, so not really suitable for praise or reproach. What it is is a window, a glimpse. It has been well and simply put together by a committee, Joan Clark and Valerie Frith leading things.

It's a wonderful textbook of Canadian literature and makes concrete for me my vague list of Canadian books I want to read. Concrete and compact for the first time, because of its neat absences: all that is *old* is absent. And the writers not described here—for a moment anyway—seem uninteresting, lacking the bare solidarity to join the union.

All except 120 who are listed at the end as members, but not directoried for some reason:

these include many of the stars.

All except them and Leonard Cohen. (Who will herein stand for the haughty who didn't care to join, but who in spite of me, come imperially to my mind.)

Then there are those who are in. Each is represented by a page, no more, no less, these pages written by themselves.

What do I feel about them, leafing?

(I say "I" where in a normal book review I would say, "What do we feel about them?" Can't say "we" here. For the very essence of the book is to convey to each writer: you're in this with all these others, sister; but you're *you*, they're *they*.)

I'm struck by how much writing is a woman's trade in Canada.

I'm struck by how many former Americans are part of Canadian writing. My long-held sense that the Vietnam era refugees have contributed to the tone of Canadian life is suddenly, clobberingly, confirmed. Cyril Welch, Audrey Thomas, Jane Rule, Irene J. Robinson, Betty Nickerson...I'm flipping at random. Californian by birth, born in Binghamton, New York, born in New Jersey, born and educated in California, born during a Kansas tornado, grew up in Oregon... These people came at different ages and in

different years, not years. Some seem to some fairly well-of note, avow, that the anyway their membership union avows it.

They all came from same Dominion, and more modulated countries, sometimes, perhaps, modulated at all, and which to blaze forth.

In an argument that said: "Free trade with the United States will be different countries, that isn't going to be see a considerable part of the U.S.A. breaking will come of this?"

There is a corollary.

There are groups striking, that are striking. So few Italian names. Chinese ones (have university corridor late Portuguese ones, or