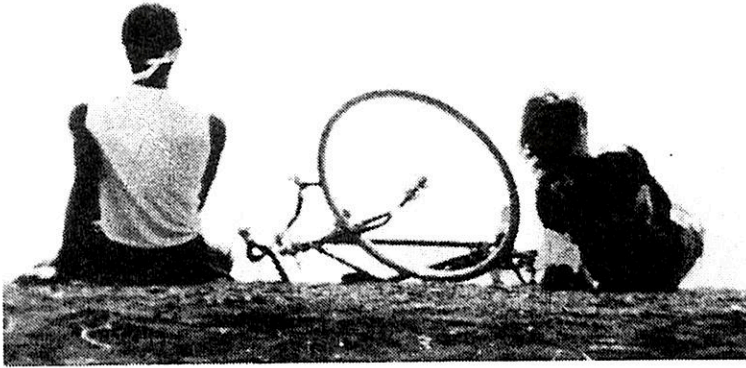


## LEAVING THE THEATRE

OUTLOOKS FROM ELSEWHERE

## FLATLAND



W. SCHEFF

**ALTHOUGH** widely varying in style, independent Saskatchewan-made films do share two or three thematic similarities: isolation, alienation, and a reappraisal of the environment. These themes have much in common with the predominant themes of Canadian art, but Saskatchewan films exemplify a strongly individual and regional approach to such themes.

**WITHIN** the context of film co-op production on the prairies, Saskatchewan films are quite distinctive in comparison with productions from Calgary and Winnipeg. Whereas the Winnipeg Film Group is developing low-budget 16mm narrative-based black comedies, specifically in the work of John Paizs, Guy Maddin and John Kozak, Regina seems to be defining itself as the major centre for experimental filmmaking on the prairies. The Regina-based filmmakers Richard Kerr and Chris Gallagher (Gallagher lived in Regina through the mid-80s, then returned to Vancouver in 1988) are nationally known and, along with Jean Oser at the University of Regina have laid solid groundwork for a personal and perceptual avant-garde cinema. Visits and screenings by filmmakers Bruce Baillie, James Benning, Joyce Wieland, Stan Brakhage and others have exposed Regina filmmakers to important work both of historical and contemporary

North American avant-garde cinemas.

**THE** narrative-based experimental/performance films produced at the Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers are also markedly different from Filmpool films. While the productions of the Calgary and Regina co-ops do share similar themes (notably our association with media and technology) their approach to these issues could not be more different. It is impossible to locate any specific sense of place in the CSIF productions of Berg, Berquist and Bienvenue - we find ourselves trapped in an anonymous urban environment overwhelmed by media, technology and internationalism. The Saskatchewan Filmpool productions, when touching on these concerns, do so from a more personal and distinctively regional orientation. Joanne and Steve Reilly's *Message for Shamus* and Gerald Saul/Brian Stockton's *Wheat Soup*, for example, locate the influence of media and technology within a distinctive prairie setting. Before discussing individual productions from the Saskatchewan Filmpool let us first retrace the history of this filmmakers' co-operative.

**THE** Saskatchewan Filmpool Co-operative began in the fall of 1976 on the set of Alan King's independent feature film *Who Has Seen The Wind* which was shot in Arcola, Saskatchewan. Six local filmmakers including Don List, Charles

Konowal, Ian Preston, Brock Stevens, Bill Mills and Gerald Horne, approached Francoyse Picard of the Canada Council with the idea of forming a Saskatchewan based film co-op. A \$2,000 grant was received to undertake a feasibility study for the establishment of a film co-op in Regina. Will Woods was employed on this study, out of which came the incorporation documents for the Filmpool. On March 16, 1977 the Saskatchewan Filmpool was officially incorporated. The Filmpool's original function was as an equipment access centre for local filmmakers. As membership grew, expanded services such as film production assistance, workshops and basic equipment training,

a newsletter - SPLICE, exhibition programmes and distribution services were added to the Filmpool's activities. In order to establish a broader provincial base a second office was opened in Saskatoon.

**DURING** the early 1980s the Photographer's Gallery in Saskatoon ran an annual Super-8 film festival and in 1984 staged a video production workshop which created video access facilities for videomakers in Saskatoon. Through the mid-1980s, Nora Gardner organized video workshops in Regina. These workshops, which were organized alternatively through Filmpool and Neutral Ground, with assistance from Cable Regina, brought in videomakers and teachers from Calgary, Winnipeg, Vancouver, New York and Scotland. Unfortunately these workshops generated little enthusiasm among co-op filmmakers. In the past year a video group has formed in Saskatoon; it now seems likely that Saskatoon will become Saskatchewan's centre for video art and that Regina will remain a filmmaking centre.

**DON** List and Charles Konowal guided Filmpool through the early years and initiated a lot of activity. Given Saskatchewan's impressive social history: the birthplace of the C.C.F., election of Tommy Douglas, establishment of a socialist economy and society, the first



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arts council in North America (Saskatchewan Arts Board) and the pioneering social documentaries made in Saskatchewan by Evelyn Cherry from the early 1940s through to the late 1970s, one might expect a Saskatchewan film co-op to be inclined towards socialist realist documentary. From its earliest years however, Filmpool has drawn people to it who were interested in producing short, expressive, indigenous, experimental and dramatic films. The founding members of the co-op, Don List, Charles Konowal, Bill Mills, Ian Preston and Brock Stevens did however produce some strong documentary films. The most notable of these are Charles Konowal's striking film of the Ukrainian/Saskatchewan poet Andrew Suknaski *Passing Shadows* (once referred to as a 'Ukrainian voodoo film') and the Birdsong Co-op produced *Folks Call Me Tommy*.

**FILMPOOL** has created a strong sense of community for Saskatchewan filmmakers, initiating workshop productions (*Kori and Rita* in Saskatoon and *Jimmy's Game* in Regina) as well as providing assistance, equipment and distribution for young filmmakers. Just how strong this community is becomes apparent when one notices the crossover of personal styles in different films. In the early years the founding members often worked together on each others films. More recently we can see a similar carry over in the films of Gerald Saul, Brian Stockton, Angelos Hatzitolios, Spyro Egarhos and Will Dixon. Young filmmakers, drawn to the Filmpool for its facilities and community, initially began working on narrative based dramatic films. As their confidence and knowledge increases they become more aware of the possibilities of independent filmmaking, their work becomes more adventurous in its incorporation of experimental techniques.

**FILMPOOL** films are unified by a literalness - a refusal to abandon a realistic depiction of nature. Whatever sense of irony or despair most of these films evince, they are emblematic of hope and faith. The films propose neither transcendence nor abstraction but, instead, attempt a pragmatic engagement with the 'real' world.

**GIVEN** Saskatchewan's strong tradition of literary and visual arts ranging across internationalist (The Regina Five), naive realist (W.C. McCargar et al) and Native Indian art (Ed Poitras, Bob Boyer), there is a richness and variety in that province's art history which remains untapped by local filmmakers. But this is not only true of Saskatchewan independent films. An ironic or dismayed recording of themes of isolation and alienation are a general fact of Canadian independent film. The use of landscape as a motif of alienation is an interesting aspect of Canadian films. The unwillingness or inability of Canadian filmmakers to engage the formal features of the cinematic apparatus which these messages can be mediated through is, however, worrisome. The projection of these images, their mechanical reworking or possible sound/image dialectics are rarely explored. It is as if so many Canadian filmmakers have fallen into despair over the marginality of their place and vocation that they have taken the soft option of alienation within landscape without developing a systematic cinematic aesthetic through which these concerns could be mediated. Such an aesthetic would create a way of composing moving images which may help the viewer to make the imaginative and conceptual shift to a way of seeing which offers some hope for a different future.

**ARTISTS** have a privilege and responsibility as the protectors and interpreters of culture. We stand between history and the future, making representations of this time, based on the knowledge of our culture, for future generations. To be artists, we must believe in the future of humanity and work, in this time, to insure the survival of our species. It is not through feelings of impotence and alienation that our future will be realized but through concrete cultural and spiritual action which creates a living example of an art which can create hope in history.

**IN** a province with a native tradition stretching back over 20,000 years, and whose Native Indians comprise a significant percentage of the population, what representation is given to native faces and culture? Almost none at all. While white Canadian artists have catalogued their sense of alienation from

a death-dealing landscape, the alienation of the Native Indian has been not from nature but from a white culture which has not reconciled itself to this place. Shall we understand the work of independent filmmakers in Saskatchewan as a part of this oppression? The Native Indian artist has traditionally been concerned with presenting a unified oneness between humans and nature. For the native artist both world and artist are integrated subjects of representation. Nature is sought in oneself, rather than employed as a motif. Surely, to finally become 'at home' here, this is the sensibility that we few generations of immigrant culture also need to develop.

**THE** visual arts in Canada have given us, for some time now, in the work of Emily Carr, Daphne Odjig, Jane Ash Poitras, Ed Poitras, Bob Boyer, and others, such a powerful synthesis of European and Native Indian sensibility that we may hope that Canadian film artists will soon begin to reappraise their own dismay within a new understanding of native traditions and practise. The conceptual shift that will allow intercultural filmmaking to develop will work from post-modernism to post-colonialism. This necessary acceptance will lead to a redefinition of place, from separation to unity, from loss to gain, and the transference of guilt from Christian abstractions to an acknowledgment of our plunder of this continent.

**BUT** perhaps I ask too much from a young film community. The works from the Saskatchewan Filmpool co-operative are films which have arisen from a place where filmmakers work against tremendous obstacles, out of the immense cultural and economic domination of eastern Canada and the United States, small funding and a slight history of filmmaking. Despite these difficulties strong filmmaking has arisen on the prairies. The independent productions of the Saskatchewan Filmpool Co-operative offers to Canadians who care about their culture enough to put aside the hollowness of market driven media, the opportunity to see an indigenous body of work which resists the compromises of the film industry and seeks to create a unique western Canadian cinema.

Photo, page 29: *Wheat Soup*