Mari Kuttna

Edinburgh - The way out Film Festival

A festival in which social issues, political or psychological, are brought forward in one film after another. . . films which do not aim to dull perception or coarsen emotional response with over-indulgence in kitsch or cliche. . . Such was the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1977. In recent years, Edinburgh has developed into the most alive and alert of film festivals, not concerned to publicize the current commercial output, but rather to examine, and present, the uses of film in social contexts.

Parallel to the screenings, each year a series of discussions are arranged on some central theme. Last year's series was called The Psychoanalysis Event. This year, the lecturers, mainly cinema theorists, turned back somewhat on themselves in a series of talks followed by discussions on the interrelations of History, Production and Memory. While the surprisingly crowded morning and late-night lectures-and-discussions offered various approaches to some general questions of aesthetics and theories of history, the mainstream of the Festival, and its even more valuable attraction was its assemblage of films offering political, social and psychological perspectives. Some of these films were from archive material, others were new films fresh from the European festivals, but in the context of the Edinburgh programme, they coalesced into a statement about the use of cinema as a social force.

There were some 130 films screened: it would be boring to catalogue, and impossible to analyse them all. Besides, *Self and Society* is not a film magazine: as your Film Correspondent, I only ever write about films which seem, to me, to succeed in expanding awareness, in promoting an emotional understanding by artistic means. Of the thirty or forty films at the Edinburgh Festival which indisputably succeed in this way, it is difficult to pick out a few without seeming to belittle the others. At the same time, a festival which is aimed at bringing new films to a new audience cannot be structured like a university course: one must be able to look at any part of it, whether a single film or a series of programmes, on its own merit.

Political documentaries. . .

To establish a mood of political commitment, the Dziga Vertov restrospective was the festival's caviare. Vertov, a contemporary of Eisentstein, Pudovkin and Kozintsev, was their equal in importance in creating what has been described as the heroic age of the Soviet cinema. Vertov created a montage style both in newsreels and documentary films which hammered through the revolution's message with poster-like clarity and intensity.

Rounding out our education in early political films, there were series of British newsreels and documentaries of the 'thirties showing strikes and hunger-marches; and there was a great deal more current and recent material including Patino's *Songs for After A War*, a study of Spain after the Civil War, and a Marcel Ophuls retrospective, including *The Sorrow and the Pity*,

about the collaborationists in occupied France, *A Sense of Loss*, about the current war in Ulster, and *Memory of Justice*, about the Nuremberg trials.

History, politics and social documentary merge in *Harlan County, USA*, by Barbara Kopple. This film is the story of a year-long strike, in 1975, with flashbacks to the struggles of the 1930's. The strike-breakers still carry guns, and a young miner is killed on the picket line. There is a sub-plot about the replacement of a corrupt Union boss. But it is not the subject matter, but the immediacy, or intimacy of the film which is so marvellous: it opens up a new reality, the inside story of the American miner, with faces, accents and fates quite unlike the America of fiction films.

. . . and others

Not all our battles are fought on picket lines: our oppressive institutions depend for their power on our weakness, our inner divisions, our depressed acceptance of unhappiness. It is in the interest of big business to keep us dependent on drugs, on escapist art, on emotion-surrogates provided by pornography or kitsch. Healthy individuals may, perhaps, be capable of creating a healthy society; but where should it start? According to R. D. Laing, it could, and should, start at birth.

Birth is the first of what is hoped to become a series of films on "Foundations of Mental Health". It was directed by Sam Pillsbury, and produced by Helen Brew, a psychotherapist from New Zealand, with nothing less than crusading zeal. There are two ideas, both intensely humanistic, which are brought together. Laing's idea that the trauma of being forced out of the womb, with the violent cutting of the umbilical cord, and being taken away from mother's warmth into a sterile, antiseptic, cold and hostile baby-care unit is damaging to the psyche, is combined with the dissatisfaction of mothers with current hospital practice. This includes unnecessary indignities like being shaved, being strung up in stirrups like a trussed chicken; the frequent induction of labour to suit the working hours and convenience of doctors and staff; and at being deprived of their babies immediately after birth. The combination of Laing's plea for gentle birth, with the growing and spreading rebellion of mothers against the male-dominated, alienated obstetrics of modern medicine is perhaps too much for one film of 58 minutes: but at least there is no time to unhook from it. It is not going to be shown in West End cinemas, nor, owing to the opposition of our gynaecologists, on the BBC; but the 16mm version can be hired from the Concord Film Council, (Ipswich 76012).

According to *Birth*, parturition is a nasty business in the hospitals of New Zealand, Australia and Great Britain, but at least, the mechanistic interventions pilloried in *Birth* are free of charge and while they may do psychological damage to mothers and babies, they do not murder them with puerperal fever, identified by Dr. Semmelweis in Vienna in the middle of the nineteenth century. According to *The Chicago Maternity Center Story*, the women of Chicago in the 1970's, like the Viennese over a hundred years ago, prefer to have babies at home, as there are still significant numbers of deaths from puerperal fever in the public wards. The home delivery service which was

operated from the Chicago Maternity Center for 70 years was always supported by charitable committees, ran by the wives and sisters of Chicago's industrial magnates. In recent years, the charitable ladies have been replaced by their businessmen husbands, who look on health care as just another high-yield investment. Connected with profiteering on every level - drugs, equipment, building, furniture, supplies - hospitals have become part of big business: while raising eight million dollars to build a women's hospital where a middle-class baby can be born for abour $2,000, this charity board can no longer find the $10,000 or so needed annually to run the tried, tested and beloved Maternity Center. Babies, like any other American product, are processed for the maximum profit of investors; while the poor, who have no profit potential, can take a running jump, or if they like, crowd into the infected public wards.

Another cautionary tale from the USA is *Methadone*, subtitled The American Way of Dealing, produced, directed and edited with skill and dramatic force by Julia Reichert and James Klein. It is a concise, one-hour film about the Federal Government's attempts to reduce heroin addiction. Methadone helps heroin addicts to overcome withdrawal pains. It is orally administered - dissolved in sugared water and swallowed, thus also cutting down the risks of needle infection; and it can keep addicts on an even keel for months on end. However, methadone is a depressant: it does not give the "high" that is the lure of heroin: many patients at the methadone clinics only stay until they recover some semblance of health and economic viability before returning to heroin. Besides, no one has discovered as yet how to withdraw patients from methadone. By 1974, twice as many people died of methadone poisoning in New York as from heroin. The film-makers also explored a drug-free rehabilitation centre in Washington where intensive therapy is used for the emotional reorientation and political education of former junkies. There is a glimmer of hope in these methods of humanist therapy: but such a care centre can only cope with a few dozen cases in a year, compared to the thousands who can be turned into quiet zombies by the high-turnover methadone clinics.

Not all the documentaries were good; some, with laudable aims, like *Self-Health*, which shows a woman's group learning to examine their breasts, their genital and cervical area, could have been interesting; but the ineptitude of the text, direction and photographic angles made it embarrassing and off-putting instead. Perhaps it should be seen all the same, to encourage someone else to do it better.

The feature films

No matter how rousing the documentaries are, the mainstay of a major film festival is still the choice of feature films. Edinburgh strengthened its selection from Cannes and Berlin with a complete restrospective of Wim Wenders, starting with his most recent work, *The American Friend*, and working backwards to his early short films. Wenders is one of the most fascinating directors in Europe today (see *Kings of the Road*, reviewed in S & S in July 1977) and his retrospective set perhaps too high standards for the new works by less experienced directors which made up most of the programme.

Three autobiographical films, retaining the quirkiness of the author-director's own preoccupations, stand out by simply defying all comparisons. *The Perfumed Nightmare*, by Kidlat Tahimik, from the Philippines, tells the story of a young Philippino's infatuation with the scientific wonderworld of the USA, and his slow disillusionment with technological progress when he finally reaches Europe.

An American autobiography by Ron Taylor, called *Suckalo*, is constructed from the methods and metaphors of gestalt therapy: his film traces his life in a quick montage of freely associated imagism superimpositions and confusions clearing once in a while, then closing up again in neat, cyclic patterns.

The third, *The Old Country Where Rimbaud Died*, by Canadian director Jean-Pierre Lefebvre tells, on the surface, the story of a visiting Canadian's involvement with two French women; but beneath the surface, it is an analysis of a colonial's love-hate reactions to his 'ancestral' country.

These three films, with all their faults, succeed in creating an intimate, personal approach by which the audiences are challenged to respond to the ideas as well as the personalities of the makers: to identify or to argue. At the same time, new directors are still finding new ways to make films in which the sheer sweep of melodrama undercuts all intellectual response: there is still scope for originality in the "entertainment" film. One such original talent is Mark Rappaport's. *Local Colour* is his third feature film: it is about emotional and sexual permutations among eight people who form several overlapping relationships. In black and white, acted in unreal surroundings like almost-bare stage sets and played with the stiff anti-naturalism of a psychodrama class, *Local Colour* is riveting, like a game of billiards. The players collide with a click, set one another in motion in random patterns: there is a carefully built up feeling that the game has rules, only we can't guess what ther are, and that somewhere, a score is kept, but even the players don't know where.

On the other hand, *Outrageous*, a Canadian parody of the grand tradition of the Hollywood backstage-musical, is cocking a snook at every Hollywood value: retaining the format, and mocking the content. Lisa, a young girl, escaping from a lunatic asylum, holes up with Robin, a gay hairdresser. She encourages him to turn from drag queen into night-club performer; he loses his hairdressing job, she gets pregnant off a one-night stand; he goes to New York while she has a stillborn baby and turns catatonic with despair, and all these events are chronicled as a hilarious, flip musical comedy! Everything is caricatured: Robin's movie-queen impersonations, belting out sexy, sentimental numbers, and Lisa incomplete surrealist stories for herself parody even the myth of you-can't-keep-talent-down; the boy-and-girl romance is parodied by Lisa and Robin's fey, but supportive relationship ("Robin and I", Lisa tells the psychiatrist worried about her morals, "sleep in different worlds,") yet they parade their shortcomings into an indelible effect of sheer pathos. *Outrageous* was written and directed by Richard Benner, who was last seen talking to the owners of The Gate Cinema. If the film comes, don't miss it.

And, next year, take a look at Edinburgh's way-out films festival. It's for the likes of us.