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## **The Man Who Wasn't There? Larry Kent and his Early Vancouver Films**

### **Abstract**

The article examines the early feature films by Larry Kent, *The Bitter Ash* (1963) and *Sweet Substitute* (1964). Shot in Vancouver, both independently produced and financed films offered viewers an unusually frank look at the life, problems and values of the West Coast young. The author briefly contextualizes the films and comments on Kent's authorial approaches and thematic preoccupations. The article aims at reinvigorating interest in Kent's work, for this idiosyncratic director played a major role in Canadian cinema of the 1960s and deserves recognition as one of the personalities heralding the renaissance of Canadian feature film. In the final section of the article the author discusses possible reasons for the apparent neglect of Kent's work by many Canadian film historians and critics and remarks on the multifaceted mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion at work in the world of Canadian film criticism and production.

### **Résumé**

Cet article vise à relancer l'intérêt pour le travail du cinéaste Larry Kent. L'article examine les premiers longs métrages de Kent, *The Bitter Ash* (1963) et *Sweet Substitute* (1964). Tournés à Vancouver, ces deux films proposent un regard inédit et original sur la vie, les problèmes et les valeurs des jeunes de la côte Ouest. L'article contextualise brièvement les films, précise les options cinématographiques et les paramètres distinctifs de l'approche de Kent, et focalise sur les préoccupations thématiques du cinéaste. L'interprétation proposée fait de Larry Kent un réalisateur singulier qui a joué un rôle majeur dans le cinéma canadien des années 1960 et mérite d'être reconnu comme l'une des personnalités qui annoncent la renaissance du long métrage canadien. Dans sa dernière partie, l'article examine les raisons possibles de la vague indifférence pour le travail de Kent affichée par de nombreux historiens et critiques de films canadiens. De manière générale, l'article contribue à démontrer que cette négligence n'est pas légitime.

### **I.**

Towards the end of Larry Kent's *The Bitter Ash* (1963, henceforward *TBA*) the viewers get to see a rent party organized by two of the film's protagonists, the beatnik couple Colin and Laurie. Here the following incident occurs. A previously unknown character named Lee surveys the scene: in their late-night fatigue the party-goers are leaning against the walls of the living room, some are just crouching in collapsed drunken silence, which is only overcome by the omnipresent

jazz soundtrack. The scene abounds with signs suggesting that the gathering is about to break up. Lee comes to the bathroom where – with a warm smile – he locates the person he has been looking for. A young man called Conrad is sitting on the toilet bowl with an empty beer bottle on the wash basin by his side. Lee suggests that they leave the party together for there is “nothing left to drink”. He expresses, furthermore, his admiration for his friend. Lee’s pass provokes some contradictory feelings in Conrad. On the surface he is repulsed by Lee, and yet he also likes him. He admits that both of them are very much alike. Then he threatens to hurl the bottle at Lee, an exchange that gradually gains strong erotic overtones.

Obviously, Lee is a gay character who has come to terms with his alternative sexual orientation while Conrad is the one who appears to live in denial of his queerness. This scene takes only about two minutes and a half and in the context of the whole film occupies but a marginal position. It stands apart from the main narrative line and involves previously unseen characters that never reappear. If the scene were cut out, the overall interpretation of *TBA* would remain more or less the same. When the scene is over, the viewers are not even told whether Conrad has actually thrown the bottle and whether the two men left the party in each other’s arms. Such an unmotivated moment can be viewed in several ways. It can be regarded as a writing flaw, for the two men have absolutely nothing to do with the overall architecture of the plot. In a more positive reading it can be tolerated as backdrop, illustrating the lifestyle and experiences of certain bohemian circles in Vancouver. But to me it means rather more. It suggests the perspective of a perceptive filmmaker who has a strong desire to depict unadorned life realities, of a taboo-breaker ready to reveal previously ignored or suppressed experience; a visionary who manages to express himself by means of a medium of his own choice – the narrative feature film.

According to traditional accounts of the rise of Canadian feature film, its renaissance was heralded in 1964 by Don Owen and Gilles Groulx. The considerable success of Owen’s *Nobody Waved Goodbye* and Groulx’s *Le chat dans le sac*, we are usually told, opened the gates to other Canadian filmmakers eager to venture into the realm of narrative film. Canadian film historians and scholars display a singularly persistent tendency not to include Larry Kent in the picture, although his independently produced and financed film *The Bitter Ash* predates the other two features by a year. From the considerable amount of critical writing on Canadian film, one can name only a handful of publications (or events) that would give this pioneer filmmaker his due. The year 1984 brought some interest in Kent’s work as his films *The Bitter Ash*, *Sweet Substitute* (1964), *When Tomorrow Dies* (1965) and *High* (1967) were shown during the Toronto Festival of Festivals, which offered an overall retrospective of the early Canadian masters. In a major article following the retrospective, Piers Handling, the festival programmer, attempted to reappraise the career of the forgotten filmmaker, reminding the readers of *Cinema Canada* that during the 1960s, only “Jean Pierre Lefebvre made more films [in Canada] than Kent” and that the filmmaker “was displaying a talent that like Owen’s would go sadly unrewarded” (Handling, 1986, 10). The year 1996 saw the publication of Dave Douglas’s insightful summarizing article on Kent’s early films and in 2003 David Spaner, in his *Dreaming in the Rain*, added an informative chapter based on interviews with Kent and other people involved in the production of the Vancouver films. Two years later Brett Enemark focused on the representation of the city in *TBA* as captured by Kent’s cinematographer Richard Bellamy.



However, these rare efforts at Kent's critical rehabilitation and acknowledgement of the pioneering role he played in the development of the Canadian feature film are a mere exception to the rule: his considerable achievements are normally either mentioned in passing or completely disregarded. Even quite recent and otherwise representative publications on Canadian cinema fail to mention Kent's work. Jerry White's 2006 volume *The Cinema of Canada* contains essays on twenty-four important Canadian film but not even a single bibliographical entry on Kent, George Melnyk's *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (2004) likewise ignores him. Speaking about the new beginning of Canadian feature film Melnyk highlights solely Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Goodbye* as "the hallmark film in the resurrection of Anglo-Canadian cinema in the 1960s" (Melnyk, 2004, 101). Even publications focusing more specifically on the feature film industry in British Columbia disregard Kent. Mike Gasher's *Hollywood North* (2002), for instance, fails to even acknowledge the existence of Kent's early films and the only mention the filmmaker merits in the book is a place in a table of films produced in British Columbia with the assistance of the CFDC/Telefilm Canada (Gasher, 2002, 65) (for the production of his 1978-9 film *Yesterday*). For someone as painfully aware of this blind spot on the collective retina of the Canadian critical establishment as myself, it comes as no surprise at all that Eugene P. Walz's collection *Canada's Best Features: Critical Essays on Fifteen Best Canadian Films* (2002) does not include a single essay on a film by Kent, although his experimental 1967 feature *High* – to name just one work – would easily deserve to be included.

In this article, therefore, I join ranks with those scholars who are aware of not only of the mere existence of Larry Kent but at the same time regard him as "a key figure in the Canadian cinema of the 1960s" (Handling, 1986, 10). By commenting on some of Kent's authorial approaches and preoccupations as they manifested themselves in his first two films, shot in Vancouver, and briefly contextualizing them, it is my intention to reinvigorate interest in his work. With the fiftieth anniversary of the premiere of *TBA* rapidly approaching, it is an opportune time to remind ourselves of the importance of this marginalized – but by no means marginal – figure. In so doing I will provide a possibility of discerning some of the multifaceted mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (and canon formation) at work in the world of Canadian film criticism and production.

## II.

In order to be able to assess Larry Kent's achievement one has to remind oneself of the context of the day, cinematically and otherwise. In 1963, Canada has no indigenous feature film production to speak of (Melnyk, 2004, 100); to even entertain such a possibility seems but a far-fetched dream. The National Film Board is as ever firmly dedicated to the idea of focusing solely on animated films and documentaries as the two privileged forms of national cinematic expression. Canadian cinema-goers have to rely on the customary supply of American films with an occasional specialty from Europe for the art-house audiences. The Production Code is still officially in place and in the overwhelming majority of mainstream film productions determines what manifestations of human behavior (or the human body) are permitted to be represented on the screen. The sixties may have started on the calendar, but Canada's cultural

landscape has yet to experience any substantial changes as the traditional, culturally conservative attitudes of the nineteen-fifties still predominate when Kent begins making films.

Larry Kent was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1939. Via England he came to Canada in 1957, choosing Vancouver as his place of residence. At the University of British Columbia he started studying theatre and philosophy. His first major artistic attempt was the writing and production of an anti-apartheid play called *Afrikaaner* (1962), which he staged at the local theatre department. However, he did not find this experience entirely satisfactory, largely due to the rather conformist atmosphere of the place (Hays). He started to look for an alternative way of expressing himself (Kent qtd. in Boake) and the medium he settled on was film. His decision to make a feature, which would be independently produced and financed, represented a step into virtually uncharted territory: *TBA* became the “first BC film shot, funded and screened in the province in over 30 years” (Boake). The magnitude of Kent’s audacity becomes even more apparent considering the fact that at the beginning of the 1960s Vancouver was not the Hollywood North it is known as today but a filmmaking wasteland with “no film schools, film equipment, film actors, directors or crews” (Spaner, 2007, B3).

It is therefore not surprising that Kent’s early films are by no means paragons of technical accomplishment. The filmmaker and his collaborators, largely recruited from the UBC theatre department, lacked solid financial backing (the film cost as little as 5000 CAD and was financed largely from the filmmaker’s own pocket), up-to-date recording, editing and synchronizing equipment, and to some point even the requisite technical and acting skills taken for granted in a mainstream film production. Yet they managed to turn these seeming deficiencies to their favour.

The narrative of *TBA* focuses on two young couples from different social spheres: the working-class couple of Des and Julie and the beatnik pair Laurie and Colin Willard. In the movie Kent skilfully contrasts their values, lifestyles, aspirations and attitudes. The film opens with an early morning scene of Des and Julie waking up in bed. The camera observes the girl during her morning make-up and follows her to witness the conversation with her partner before her departure for work. Julie informs Des of her possible pregnancy and in quite unequivocal terms proposes that they had “better do something about it” – meaning marriage rather than abortion. Des does not seem to be overjoyed. This relationship is not exactly a warm one.

Elsewhere, on the outskirts of the city, overlooking the Canadian Pacific Railway yards, we encounter the other two principal characters of the film, Colin and Laurie. Colin is an aspiring playwright working on his would-be breakthrough piece, the absurd drama *The Man Who Killed Horses with Green Tails*, while Laurie is trying to juggle the multiple requirements of the family’s economic survival, household chores and looking after their infant child. The combined strain of working as a waitress and Colin’s domestic servant gives Laurie practically no pleasure in life. To make matters worse, in the course of the film she informs her partner of her new pregnancy. The humbleness of the place they inhabit is suggested by – among other things – the crack in the window pane through which they command an unobstructed view of the railway tracks with moving engines and freight cars.

After the first scene Julie disappears from the picture and for the rest of the film we follow the remaining three protagonists as they go about their lives. Kent contrasts Des’s working class existence with Colin’s bohemian lifestyle. While Des works as a printer, Colin meets sim-



ilar-minded friends to discuss philosophy, art and his play. Kent devotes a substantial amount of time to capturing the atmosphere of the printing workshop, the uninspiring nature of activities taking place there, the slowly passing time during the afternoon shift. At the same time the filmmaker mocks the emptiness and superficiality of the beatnik babble which Colin and his company relish. At one moment Kent cross-cuts between two conversations: Des telling his co-workers about his past career as a boxer and Colin pointing out the key ingredient of his play: violence. This detail will become quite important during the climactic moments of the film.

On a visit to a friend dying of leukemia, Des encounters Laurie and takes her for a joyride in his sports car. The speed of the drive and the stretches of the marvellous BC landscape around Vancouver bring an exceptional moment of respite to the girl. Stopping on a scenic point the two protagonists discuss their lives, dreams and disappointments. In a flashback Laurie compares her current situation with the period of courtship with Colin. Then she invites Des to a rent party organized in their place and Des accepts.

The extended party sequence, where the plot finally climaxes in sexual encounters and violence, allowed the viewers a peek into Vancouver's Bohemian underbelly. Colin and Laurie's house is swarming with guests, who smoke, drink, dance, discuss – and apparently also consume drugs – and lead a swinging sex life. Following yet another argument over money, Colin prostitutes himself with Antoinette, a flashy older party-goer nicknamed “the vulture”, while Laurie ends up in Des's arms. The next morning we find out that the fleeting moment of passion failed to bring Laurie any happiness and she feels bitter about this experience, upon which the cynically-minded Des reacts with indignation. When Colin returns, a fight breaks out between the two men with a fairly predictable outcome: the theoretician of violence is overpowered by the manually working ex-boxer and ends up on the floor of the porch. “There is violence for you. Now you can really write about it,” says Laurie in a sarcastic voice. “What do you want?” asks the humiliated Colin through his bloodied nose. In the next brief scene we see Des calling up Julie and proposing marriage. The film closes with the final shot of Laurie, alone, crouching on her bedroom floor, looking sad and exhausted, saying: “I don't know” and burying her face in her knees.

After the film's premiere on October 7, 1963, word of mouth on the UBC campus spread quickly: during its initial run on the campus the film was seen by some 8000 students. Half-way through its first week the university authorities put a halt to the showing of *TBA (The Ulysses)*, October 11), but later retracted their decision amidst fierce debates concerning academic freedom on the campus. However, for reasons of censorship the film could not reach the downtown viewers, although it was reviewed by the local press and for a time became the talk of the town. Equally extreme was the debate about the film's merit and artistic value. The downtown press viewed the film with considerable hostility. Les Wedman's assessment in the *Vancouver Sun*, for instance, among many other things deplored the film's deployment of profanity:

The vulgarities are used deliberately for shock effect and they are an inexhaustible substitute for the screenwriter's inadequacies....The people involved sound ludicrous and look embarrassingly silly because of what they say and do and when the occasional idea crosses director/writer Kent's mind it is gone before his players can get it across. (Wedman)

In a similar vein an amateur reviewer complained to the editor of the UBC student paper *The Ubysey*: “The film is woefully written and performed by emotional dunces; it is phony, trivially obscene....The embarrassed caperings of unappealing pubescents may interest the social worker, but hardly one who cares for expression, who is fond of honest film and artists with largesse” (Conner, 5). On the other hand there were also other voices that objected to the charge that the film was pornographic, proclaiming *TBA* “a discerning documentary produced by a man in empathy with his time to a depth not frequently reached” (Halfnights, 5).

Such extreme positions were hardly to be reconciled and what one would have wished was first-hand experience to be able to form one’s own opinion. However, the citizens of British Columbia were soon deprived of such an opportunity as the film was banned in the province on grounds of its unprecedented sexual openness and profanity. Other bans were soon to follow, even on the campus circuit: the University of Alberta, University of Winnipeg, University of Saskatchewan and University of Toronto (Kent qtd. in Hays). The censors’ intervention throughout the country created a strong viewing incentive for students at those universities where the film was allowed to be shown: at the film’s premiere at McGill in January 1964 the crowd waiting for the screening was so large they damaged the doors of the theatre in the crush to enter (Kent qtd in Boake).

Clearly Kent had tapped into something with *TBA*. The desire to gaze at topless screen nudity and sexual behavior with a strong authentic feel must have been a major draw in the days of the Production Code, but this can hardly be the whole story. The film addresses many other pressing problems: alienation in the workplace, social stratification, commodity culture, gender relations and the crisis of the nuclear family due to unequal distribution of power (and education) within this traditional institution. Des resents his job and cannot hope to transcend the boundaries confining him to his position in society but is forced to continue with this unsatisfactory existence in order to pay for his living expenses, drinks and the fancy convertible he drives; and he is painfully aware that once he gets married there will be many more additions to the list. Kent meticulously highlights all the above: a filled out cheque apparently to pay for his accommodation, the whisky he gulps down during the party. On the vista point overlooking the sea Des and Laurie speak about dissatisfaction with their lives. There Des highlights the importance of his car, which may not make him happy but he prefers it to “being unhappy and having no car” (*TBA*).

During the same conversation Kent also focuses on Laurie, whose flashback brings in some other important points. The filmmaker draws a contrast between her current position and the moments of delight during her courtship with Colin. Kent situates the flashback in the scenic nature surrounding (and also penetrating) the city: Stanley Park, the trails around the UBC campus. The setting here is imbued with clear symbolism: the past feelings of happiness within the bosom of unspoiled nature give way to feelings of fatigue at her job and entrapment in her household with its broken window pane. Likewise the shared joy of equal partnership changes into clear masculine domination. “Laurie you have not pressed my scarf, it’s all creased,” says the parasitic, egocentric Colin in his very first sentence in the movie.

Further in the flashback Kent portrays Laurie’s family as dysfunctional, devoid of any mutual affection, with not even a semblance of mutual respect: the alcoholic mother desiring young men and the materialistic, womanizing father seem to be staying together solely out of



habit, either due to the property they amassed over the years or because of the sheer lack of other life options. While they serve as an example of what to avoid for the teenage Laurie, the narrative present provides ample signs that her own marriage with the beat playwright has not fared any better. As the movie closes with a shot of Laurie feeling wasted and alone in her pitiable apartment, viewers can ask: is Laurie – like the mythical bird Phoenix – going to rise from the bitter ashes of her marriage? Kent refrains from suggesting any such possibility.

Throughout the narrative of *TBA*, and most of Kent's subsequent work, one cannot help noticing a distinctly feminist strain. Colin's reluctance to assume responsibility for the well-being of the family is but one point among many. Another point frequently made is the stress on women's education and professional training. It is particularly the women, who – in typical Fifties fashion – tend to settle down as housewives, are the most obvious victims of its lack. During the visit to the dying friend Johnnie, Laurie and Des drink coffee with his wife Bonnie. Quite rightly, Bonnie is apprehensive about the future. We find out that upon marrying Johnnie she dropped out of high school. With no marketable skills to speak of the likely death of her husband would mean not only emotional but also economic distress for the unhappy woman.

Kent may not be subtle in characterization, nor convincing in some of the dialogues. The flawed lip-sync may complicate the viewing experience for some viewers. Yet the realities portrayed must have appeared relevant as the viewers recognized some of their own feelings, problems and life experiences, something that they were typically denied in the mainstream Hollywood fare. Some young people must have indeed felt alienated from and disappointed by their complacent, materialistic parents; some of them smoked, swore, drank and experimented with drugs; some were sexually frustrated and as a result of this frustration slept around: but what a surprising thing to see in your campus theatre! How refreshing it must have been to recognize not only one's common life situations, but also the familiar places in and around the city! The sheer visual pleasure of seeing your own place presented on the screen!

### III.

After the controversial success of *TBA* Kent moved quickly to the production of another youth-oriented feature, *Sweet Substitute*, which was ready to be screened the next year. Along with the same target audience, Kent keeps a similar range of themes, character types and methods. As in the case of *TBA*, the plot rests on a triangular base formed by three characters, only this time their gender identity is reversed. Likewise the range of issues under scrutiny remains unchanged: materialism, conformism, class stratification, marriage, the unequal position of women in the society, the strong urges of human sexuality and the problems associated with coming of age.

At the centre of Kent's narrative is a good-looking male character. Tom is a student, geared up for gaining a fellowship that would further finance his university studies and lead him to his envisaged career as a teacher. He moves among several other characters: the dark-haired friend and study companion Kathy; the blond, sexually desirable Elaine; his buddy Bill and a couple of other friends. Presenting his young protagonists as they try to find happiness (or

at least some satisfaction) during the painful stage between adolescence and adulthood, Kent makes an important point: life happens everywhere but at the university. It happens during the forays into the night city as the young studs trot along the sidewalks under the neon lights, eyeing lustfully the female passers-by; it happens during the phone conversation with a prostitute as the sexually hungry heroes engage in the unsuccessful project of trying to negotiate the price; it happens while dating at the Pacific National Exhibition fair, licking the ice cream with distinctly erotic undertones. Tom's dour university professor, on the other hand, represents the antithesis of what it means to be alive: he is neither engaging nor inspiring; he does not even appear intelligent. Obviously, Kent uses this character to get even with the university and what he sees as its conservative and conformist atmosphere.

Throughout the film Tom's character is likewise associated with conformity, materialism and moral weakness. Although he would like to travel, he decides to stay home, gain the fellowship and enter college, not least because he has been promised a car from his father, which appears more appealing to him than the idea of seeing the world. We follow his gradual attempts to seduce the girl he desires: the voluptuous, manipulative Elaine. For the calculating Elaine – and for her class-conscious, social climber of a mother – Tom's courtship represents an opportunity to break out from the confines of their working class (or lower-middle class) existence. As the mother points out, Tom's prospective job would provide the couple with security of employment while at the same time relieve Elaine from the necessity of pursuing a career of her own. Elaine's approach to achieving this goal is disarmingly effective in its simplicity: "first marriage, then sex".

Kathy functions as Elaine's antipode (while at the same time serving as the mouthpiece of the filmmaker). Whereas Elaine's ambition is to quit working as a secretary and become a middle-class housewife, Kathy believes that "a woman has a useful role to play in society", far beyond her contribution as mother. Kathy is friendly and sharp. Her enterprising, inquisitive and morally unblemished nature is suggested by her desire to travel "somewhere where no-one has been before, some place unspoiled". During the conversations with Kathy Tom is relaxed and comfortable, while the moments with Elaine are filled with tension. Moreover, the range of available topics to discuss with the buxom blonde is considerably circumscribed by her limited intellectual horizon. In two washroom scenes Kent draws a telling contrast between the two girls. First he depicts Elaine's competence and pleasure at embellishing her face with make-up and later he has Kathy stand in front of the same mirror, hesitating with a lipstick. An instant before she was reprimanded by a fellow student for being careless about her appearance. In a moment charged with heavy symbolism she applies the lipstick first only to wipe it away in defiance a couple of seconds later.

The plot then runs along its predictable course. Tom, frustrated by Elaine's resistance, sleeps with Kathy, causing her accidental pregnancy. Under the influence of his pals, however, he repudiates her and continues his relationship with Elaine. Kathy, the sweet substitute in a moment of Tom's grave physical need, is discarded and left alone.

Kent's feminist critique does not stop with what he suggests through the characters of Kathy and Elaine. The deep intertwining of male sexual gratification with the possession of certain desirable products signifying one's status within Western commodity culture is illustrated by another telling scene. It involves another girl, whom Tom, Bill and two other friends



visit in the hope she might be available to gratify their desire. As they ride up to her house and ask her to come down, and the leader of the group starts negotiating, Kent stresses this interconnectedness of sex and status by the display of various looks: while the eyes of the eager young men in the car feast on the girl's body, the girl, with obvious appreciation, surveys the expensive automobile they arrived in. Having assessed their wealth, she consents and asks the boys up for individual favours.

Again, the film is interesting much less for its plot structure or character development than for its treatment of sex, its feminist perspective, its employment of music and its cinema vérité camerawork. The hostile reaction of the Canadian mainstream to Kent's first feature had left an impact: shots of topless torsos and wild sexual acts disappeared from the screen. Yet the combined forces of acting, setting, editing and framing communicate as before the message of the centrality of sex for people (typically of the male gender) at this particular stage in their lives. At the same time, however, the film offers considerably more food for thought. The issue of Tom's moral dilemma and his failure to rise to the challenge and do the right thing, along with the film's meditation on the role women play in society – whether they contest social expectations like Kathy or play by the rules like Elaine – elevates *Sweet Substitute* far beyond the genres in whose proximity it might be located: the erotic drama or teenage sex comedy.

And the language of both films was – despite all the problems – refreshingly different, too. “There was a real boredom with Hollywood films at the time. There was an explosion, what with the Italian neo-realists and the French Nouvelle Vague,” says Larry Kent about this (Kent qtd. in Hays). Particularly notable is the use of the subjective perspective at various moments: “They are restless films, mirroring the psychological agitation of the characters, shot and edited with an apparent randomness and energy that is reminiscent of *Au bout de soufflé* or *Jules et Jim*” (Handling, 1986, 11). During the party scene of *TBA*, for instance, the camerawork and editing create a sense of extreme subjectivity, surveying the surroundings first from Des's – then briefly from the gay character's – and finally from Laurie's point of view. Using a Bolex camera, the cinematographer Dick Bellamy moves between the chatting, smoking groups of party-goers, and his cinema vérité style of shooting creates a heightened sense of immediacy. The spontaneity of the moment is further enhanced by Jack Dale's original free jazz soundtrack, which throughout the whole film subtly underlines most represented actions. In many of these respects Kent's early work paralleled – in its treatment of the subject matter, style, technique, use of music and improvisatory nature – the work of such notables of American independent cinema as John Cassavetes (particularly his landmark film *Shadows*, 1959) or Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie (*Pull My Daisy*, 1959). All this shows the West Coast self-made man and his collaborators well in tune with major developments in North America and elsewhere.

#### IV.

Speaking about the various mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion at work in Canadian film historiography and criticism, Peter Morris uses an earlier article by Geoff Pevere to identify certain typical properties for a film to have so that it can be safely admitted into the national

canon. This analytical framework includes the Canadian realist tendency; the cultural distinction of French and English Canada; and the behavioral characteristics of Canadian “heroes” as victims and losers (Pevere qtd. in Morris, 1994, 30). Furthermore, Morris maintains that if a film does not provide the interpreter with sufficient material to match all of the above analytical principles, its inclusion into the canon may be prevented; if the work is not downright ignored, then it is deemed of lesser significance. While Morris’s objective is not to rediscover lost and forgotten film, it is “one of why these films have been generally considered of lesser significance than films included in the canon”. (Morris, 1994, 31). As Handling and Douglas have already pointed out, Kent’s early films feature “an active camera, one quite at odds with the dispassionate recording that a director such as Don Owen employed in *Nobody Waved Goodbye*” (Douglas, 1996, 92). On this count, certainly, Kent’s work refuses to fit Pevere and Morris’ analytical criterion of realism (although at the same time it has a strong air of authenticity), which would explain its marginal position in regard to the Canadian cinematic canon.

This intrinsic criterion, however, does not suffice to fully explain Kent’s marginalization. There are some other notable extrinsic criteria to keep track of. The most important element is certainly his independent status as far as production is concerned. It is important to remember that Canada is a country where most films have traditionally been produced within the framework of the national and (later also) provincial film institutions, the NFB, CFDF/Telefilm, Ontario Film Development Corporation, and so on. The Canadian film world is very small, consisting of relatively few directors and producers, officials and cultural policy makers, film critics and academics, who tend to form a relatively close, tightly knit organism, with for the most part shared perspectives on what kind of films ought to be made and what constitutes true artistic merit. The smaller the community (and the more central its location) the more it becomes necessary for a person to be situated inside, rather than outside of such an institution; for outside there is the proverbial Canadian wilderness (or simply nothing). Institutional affiliation certainly entails the requisite connections that would help one to be assigned to various projects. Furthermore, they may positively affect the overall reception of the work. Kent’s position outside the NFB at the beginning of the 60s certainly damaged the reputation of the filmmaker and his work (or rendered it next to invisible). Let us remind ourselves of one telling detail: the only mention Kent warranted in Mike Gasher’s *Hollywood North* (2002) was for the production of his 1978-9 film *Yesterday*, one he made with the assistance of the CFDC/Telefilm Canada (Gasher, 2002, 65)!

The visibility of Kent’s early work also suffered from its being located in Vancouver, the westernmost edge of Canada, a place in a province far away from the actual centres of Canadian cinema of the day, Montreal and Toronto. Larry Kent’s films are thus triply marginal: by virtue of being Canadian, by virtue of being West Coast and, most importantly, by virtue of being produced independently, outside the National Film Board.

Many scholars dealing with Canadian cinema (including myself) have described the process of how the NFB and (later NFDC and Telefilm Canada) employed film in the service of national self-expression. If the films’ themes, values and attitudes correspond to the prevailing preferences and tastes on the part of the Canadian cultural establishment, their inclusion is smooth. On the other hand, films that do not conform to such expectations tend to be ignored: too strongly do they contest the traditional Canadian image of itself, their narratives



being much too transgressive, provocative, violent, “tasteless” and so on. Kent’s openness in matters of youth lifestyle, the crisis of the family, the position of women within the context of patriarchal culture and above all his general scepticism about available options for social reform appear quite at odds with the nationalist, liberal orthodoxies of the critical establishment of the day.

In the realm of reception by the Canadian mainstream press, Kent also fell victim to the negative bias toward domestic film production that was quite apparent during the 60s. As Wes Wedman’s reviews for the *Vancouver Sun* suggest: Kent’s work always provided plenty of technical deficiencies to be criticized. But the implied comparison one feels from the reviews between the craftsmanship of the standard Hollywood offering (or the exceptional art films coming from Europe) and Larry Kent’s inexpensively produced independent features strikes one as singularly lacking in perspective and critical judgment.

The drawbacks of the position outside the official structures of Canadian film have been mentioned, some of the probable causes of Kent’s marginalization have been named. Yet there is also the obverse side, the opportunity that such a position bestows on the imaginative individual. It is the creative control one has, the pleasure to explore whatever subject matter on one’s own terms. The possibility to choose one’s cast, the opportunity to be involved in a collaborative effort with like-minded souls. Kent’s decision to keep his creative freedom is best expressed by the fact that filmmaking was not his main career. Like the character of Des in his first film *The Bitter Ash*, Kent made his living – and retired – as a printer.

Earlier, I claimed that Larry Kent was well in tune with cultural developments of the day. In other respects Kent was way ahead of his time. He was the first to demonstrate the viability of independent film production, a concept that became increasingly popular among aspiring Canadian filmmakers on the fringe. Says fellow Vancouver filmmaker Jack Darcus about Kent’s influence:

The guy was a madman to think he could do what he did, but none of us would be making films in Vancouver if Larry hadn’t gotten of his arse and made the first one. He just stood up one day, declared himself a genius, and did it. You can do that in Vancouver. So Larry’s approach is very tempting. (Darcus qtd in Douglas, 1996, 89)

It is precisely for this achievement that Larry Kent will be remembered most: as the father of the Vancouver independent scene and father of all independent filmmaking in Canada.

## Works cited

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