

FATHERS AND FILMS

Winnipeg Film Group Premieres
June 30 - July 9, 1989

REVIEW BY K. GEORGE GODWIN

The Winnipeg Film Group followed up its January "We're in the Movies" showcase with midsummer premières of six new local films. While this fresh batch of works failed to match the highs—and lows—of the earlier event, the six films continued to display the range and variety of local film-making.

The series included three WFG workshop productions, group efforts made under the supervision of experienced film-makers. *Swanson's Nightmare*, with John Kozak in charge, is a functional little thriller about a man driven to death by his own paranoia. Rather predictable and talky, its chief distinction is an over-the-top performance by Rick Match as Swanson; Match seems to subscribe to the Bruce Dern flare-your-nostrils-and-bare-your-teeth school of acting.

The two brief documentaries produced by the Janis Cole workshop were slight but well made. *When Worlds Collide* pays an amusing visit to the locker room of an amateur hockey team and gets the players to explain why they play the game—for the fun, the exercise, the camaraderie. Then it shows the disintegration of the game into a brutal fight—also, as the goalie explains, a bit of fun. In *Death: The Impossible Escape*, the film-makers have captured a rather engaging and articulate interview with escape artist Dean Gunnarson, who in explaining why he does things which seem completely insane makes them sound quite reasonable.

The main points of interest in the series, however, were two longer films. Allan Schinkel's *The Monster in the Coalbin* is an effective little children's film about overcoming fear. An eight-year-old boy whose parents have recently separated comes to focus all his insecurities on the monster he's been told lives in the coal-bin of his new house. When it becomes certain that his father won't be coming home again, he gathers his courage and goes to confront the beast, which vanishes in the face of his growing maturity.

Schinkel exhibits a fine grasp of traditional narrative technique; his camerawork and editing are impeccable as he constructs the simple story through details of character

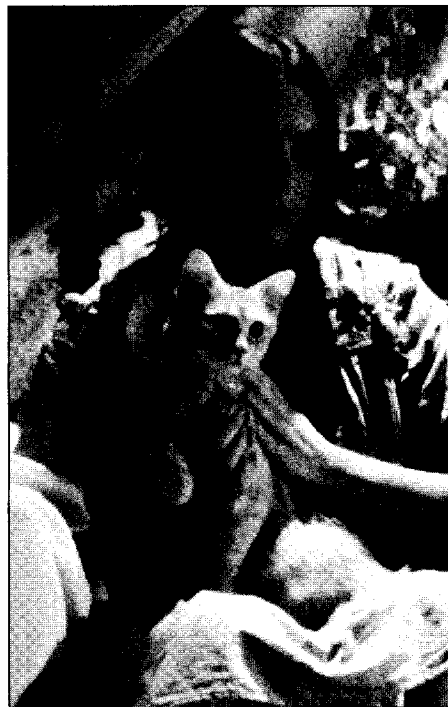
and setting. His work with the actors (particularly the children in the cast) is assured; the film gains much of its charm from relaxed, natural performances.

At the opposite end of the scale is Laurence Mardon's *The Sad Fate of the Girl, Justine, at the Hands of the Marquis de Sade*. More interesting but less successful, this first film is nothing if not ambitious. Mardon has set himself the task of making a "film of ideas," embodying an argument in images. To this end, the film's structure is highly schematic. But because the four characters are for the most part underdeveloped ciphers, in the end the point of the argument remains vague.

The action revolves around the deathbed of the Marquis de Sade (a quirky performance by Michael Saurette). A pompous

for an ally against degeneracy, but he's drawn to the erotic Juliette. She offers to help her sister gain his attention (by bringing Justine's repressed sexuality into play). The priest rejects Justine in horror and de Sade strangles her before dying himself.

De Sade and the priest are mirror images, both rife with the same libidinal energies. But the priest is contained within a cocoon of hypocritical religious and social rules. His religion is a tool for disguising/repressing his desire; his defence is to project that desire onto Justine, the blank screen of innocence. This theme of projection is central to the film: in two major scenes, Plato is quoted (first by de Sade, then by the priest). The chains which bind the slaves in Plato's cave, the film says, are the constricting rules of society. What the



The Sad Fate of The Girl, Justine, at the Hands of the Marquis de

priest (the entertaining Allen Mills) arrives to administer the last rites, but finds the debauched de Sade unrepentant. Despite the title, the film actually centres on the figure of the priest. Bound by the rules of religion and social rectitude, he represents the world against which de Sade has rebelled. As a final act, de Sade intends to shatter that world in the priest. His tools are his two daughters, the sexpot Juliette (Miranda Flatt) and the innocent Justine (Jennifer Griller). Justine looks to the priest

slaves see are the distorted shadows of their own true desires. By destroying the "innocence" embodied in Justine the priest is ultimately freed from his hypocrisy and liberated from the cave into the light of truth.

But of what does this liberation and this truth consist? It's at this point that the film (and de Sade) become really problematic. There is, in de Sade's idea of freedom, a fundamental contradiction. Not simply because this freedom is purely reactive, a negative image of the existing social order

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and thus a dead end; its inner contradiction is that it requires victims. In order to have this freedom you must enslave and sacrifice others (women, of course, and other powerless elements in the existing order).

The film's argument resolves itself into a conflict between the father as protector and as destroyer. ("Father" is the most frequently repeated word in the film.) Since this figure, however, always demands total obedience, the protector is actually a hypocrite. There can be no "good" father except a dead one. De Sade hates the father, then becomes him and finally dies in order to make way for his successor. In other words, freedom means becoming the father (thus excluding women who become the sacrifices which confirm paternal power) and becoming the father means death.

as well give in to those libidinal urges. As presented in the film there is no political content in de Sade's philosophy, just a depressing focus on insatiable personal desire. In other words, conceived as an answer to a repressive social order, it is itself repressive and finally has nothing to say.

Even though the film runs itself into a philosophical cul de sac, it manages to achieve a visual elegance quite impressive in a first effort. Although the editing is at times jarringly crude, the black and white photography by Michael Marshall and the production design by Gordon Wilding are imaginative and effectively dreamlike. Perhaps the film's intricate structure would not seem quite so strained if the unresolved ideas had been buttressed by a fully

THE ESSENTIAL ENIGMA OF GLENN GOULD

Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations
by Otto Friedrich
Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989
441 pages
Hardcover, \$27.95

REVIEW BY ROBERT QUICKENDEN

It has been seven years since Glenn Gould died. The interim has been marked by collections of articles and a sustained attempt to probe his private world. Now comes the official biography, a book far more interesting and less pretentious than that designation implies.

Otto Friedrich begins his book with a review of the strange afterlife of this reclusive man. In September of 1987 the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art presented eight concerts by Gould, projected on a screen 20 feet high. In the Netherlands, a Glenn Gould Society has been formed, complete with a regularly published glossy magazine. There are frequent colloquia and symposia hosted by various international organizations. And then there is the archive itself in the National Library of Canada which contains everything from his famous scarves and mufflers, to letters, cancelled cheques and a curious book of blank pages entitled *Essence of an Enigma*. And, of course, there are the recordings and the documentaries, all of which can be heard at the flick of a switch.

These opening pages present a kind of cultural phantasmagoria, a reminder that the visual and aural technologies of our time create a world of perfect simultaneity where the profound and the absurd are common bedfellows.

Gould loved that simultaneity (whether in the form of listening to several conversations in a diner, or the contrapuntal talk of the radio documentaries) and he lived within a labyrinth of sound which ensured his privacy and nurtured his genius. He was always revealing and concealing himself, and technology allowed him to play that game in ever more elaborate forms.

Gould used the word "autobiography" frequently in his essays and interviews, and understandably so: every recording was so unmistakably his, with a style of performance that was inimitable even at its most



irected by Laurence Mardon, 1989. Photograph Gerry Turchyn

A question remains about the point Laurence Mardon is trying to make. He begins with a title saying that de Sade considered himself to be *the* philosopher of the French Revolution. Does this mean that the Revolution was corrupt from the start? Or that de Sade was deluded by his own fantasies? The film presents the Marquis's philosophy as a relentlessly nihilistic closed system; one can live either as a hypocrite or a libertine—but either way the end point is death, so one might

developed narrative and more roundly drawn characters.

In this instance, Laurence Mardon's ambition has exceeded his reach; I hope the next time out he can extend that reach rather than rein in the ambition. *The Sad Fate* holds out the promise of highly original work to come. ♦

K. George Godwin regularly reviews film for Border Crossings.