FILM IN CANADA

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Contents

Not Just Another National Cinema

> When one delves into the very notion of the thing called Canadian cinema, one is sinking one's rubbers in something much more sensitive, complex, and problematic than just another national cinema.
>
> —Geoff Pevere (2002a: 103)

> What is a national cinema if it doesn't have a national audience?
>
> —Andrew Higson (1989: 46)

National cinemas always turn out to be more complex and problematic than they first seem to be, but Canada's is certainly more difficult to pin down than most. It is far from the only national cinema to have difficulty finding a national audience, but Canada's status as part of Hollywood's domestic (North American) market has created a situation in which the achievements of Canadian filmmakers have been virtually invisible to most Canadian filmgoers. This situation is further complicated by the production of films in both of the nation's official languages, leading to divisions in an already limited market and provoking claims that there are two national cinemas rather than one. In recent years, thinking about the national cinema has also had to deal with Canada's increasing ethnic diversity and the emergence of a global media marketplace.

I will address all these issues in this book, but my main focus will be on the films themselves. Ideally, as Andrew Higson (1989) suggests, the study of a national cinema should take into account not only the films produced by the domestic film industry, but also the distribution and exhibition systems through which those films are shown (or not shown). In Canada, of course, these systems have been largely owned or controlled by the Hollywood studios, and, while it would be useful to situate Canadian films in relation to the Hollywood films in circulation at the time of their release, this will not be my main concern here. I will place the films in the context of the critical discourses and government policies that helped to shape them and their reception, and I have organized each chapter around a specific topic that raises important issues for understanding the national cinema.

In this introductory chapter, I will look first at how the situation I have just identified came about before moving on to deal with questions of national identity and the complex ways in which films engage with the political, cultural, and mythic dimensions of national life.

Blame Hollywood

When film was invented at the end of the nineteenth century, Canada was a vast and sparsely populated country and in no position to exploit the new technology on an industrial basis. In 1925, D.W. Griffith, who was probably the most famous film director in the world at that time, visited Toronto and told his Canadian audience that 'you should have your own films and exchange them with those of other countries' (Morris, 1978: 175). However, the Canadian government proved reluctant to follow the lead of other nations by enacting measures to protect the domestic film industry, which was, in any case, virtually non-existent.

The British government did enact a quota system in 1927 to protect Britain's more developed, but crisis-ridden, national film industry. British cinemas were required to screen a specified (and gradually increasing) percentage of British films, leading to a growth in the number—and eventually the quality—of films produced. As a result of a provision that allowed films made in the Empire to count as British for the purposes of the quota, Canada experienced its first production 'boom' when Hollywood producers came north to make 'quota quickies' in British Columbia. It came to an

abrupt end when the loophole in the British legislation was closed in 1938, and the low-budget productions that resulted were hardly calculated to convince skeptical critics and policy-makers of the value of a commercial film industry in Canada. Instead, the federal government chose in 1939 to establish the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) as a public institution geared to the production of documentaries in the national interest (see Chapter 1).

A few independent filmmakers did make feature films, but these were always produced in very difficult circumstances and never achieved the commercial success needed to sustain an industry.[1] The federal government came under some pressure to enact a quota system, but when it seemed that legislation might be introduced after World War II the Hollywood studios intervened and negotiated an agreement with the government. Under the Canadian Co-operation Project, which came into effect in 1948, the government dropped the idea of a quota, and, in return, the studios agreed to include references to Canada as often as possible in their films (to promote the tourist industry) and to make a few films in Canada—the most distinguished of which turned out to be *I Confess*, Alfred Hitchcock's thriller made in Quebec City in 1952.

Film audiences declined in Canada as elsewhere with the introduction of television in the 1950s, but the new medium provided an outlet for NFB documentaries and encouraged innovative approaches that finally paved the way for feature film production. In the early 1960s, several young filmmakers produced low-budget feature films using techniques and equipment developed originally for documentaries, and their modest critical and commercial success convinced the government that a film industry in Canada was now a viable proposition (see Chapter 2). Accordingly, it created the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) in 1967 to subsidize filmmakers and thereby encourage the growth of a private sector that would hopefully become self-sustaining. However, subsidies, unlike quotas, target production, rather than distribution and exhibition, and many films that received support from the CFDC were never shown in Canadian cinemas, and very few made money.

Hollywood has always claimed to give the people what they want, and the failure of the Canadian films was often attributed not to distribution problems but to their lack of appeal to audiences. The CFDC was faced with a contradiction between its economic and cultural mandates and came under attack for failing on both counts. On the one hand, the Corporation was responsible for investing public money and expected to generate a profit. On the other, as a public institution, it was under pressure to ensure that the films that it supported were culturally respectable and/or distinctively Canadian. It was open to attack when it invested in films with strong commercial potential but no apparent cultural pretensions, like David Cronenberg's *Shivers*, which sparked a lively debate in 1975; but it was also criticized for poor business practices when the films it supported did not make money.

As we shall see, the tension between commercial and artistic or cultural goals in Canadian film policy remains a highly contentious topic. Commercial motives came to the fore as a result of the Capital Cost Allowance Act, which allowed a 100 per cent tax deduction on investments in Canadian films and provoked a short-lived boom in

production between 1978 and 1980. This approach did produce some commercial successes—most notably teen comedies such as *Meatballs* (Ivan Reitman, 1979) and *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1981), and horror films such as *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, 1980) and more Cronenberg films—but most films were either never released or quickly forgotten (see Chapter 3).

The failure of most of the films produced under the Capital Cost Allowance Act, and the general disrespect for those that succeeded, led to a change of policy at the CFDC, accompanied by a change of name in 1984. Telefilm Canada, as the name suggests, envisaged television (and soon video) as a solution to the distribution problem, and the new body began to invest in smaller-budget films with explicitly Canadian settings and distinctive cultural identities. In addition to the money from Telefilm, the budgets for these films were often patched together from a number of different sources, including provincial initiatives to support local film production, regional arts councils, and television networks. Two early successes that demonstrated the potential of this approach were *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* (Denys Arcand, 1986) and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (Patricia Rozema, 1987).

The recent emergence of the Alliance Atlantis media empire—modest by Hollywood standards but a major player in the Canadian context—has provided a more secure basis for production and distribution. But the most publicized development in recent years has been the phenomenon of 'Hollywood North', a term that emphasizes economic factors but has taken on several different connotations over the years.

Originally it was used by those lobbying for the formation of what became the CFDC, simply to designate the goal of establishing a Canadian film industry. Thus Michael Spencer, the Corporation's first executive director, insisted that Hollywood North is 'not a location, but a concept: that the success, glamour, and all-American dream of the motion picture industry can be recreated in Canada' (2003: 1). In this vision, the concept was a highly positive one that envisaged no conflict between the American dream and Canadian reality. During the capital cost allowance years, however, it became attached to Canadian films that imported American actors and concealed their Canadian locations. According to Martin Knelman, the film industry at this time became 'an accidental comedy' (1987: 30), a judgement endorsed by Peter O'Brian's satiric comedy *Hollywood North* (2003), set during this period but released well after the term had acquired a third meaning.[2]

It now refers not to Canadian films at all but to the 'runaway' Hollywood productions that have brought a new prosperity to the film industries in many Canadian cities. The Hollywood studios were not slow to 'blame Canada' for perceived economic problems in an industry that had historically dominated film screens throughout the world, thereby inverting the long-established tradition of complaints by Canadian filmmakers (and critics) that Hollywood dominance worked against the development of a domestic film industry in Canada. In fact, the economic impact of Hollywood North on California has been greatly exaggerated, since employment rates in Hollywood remain high as a result of the demands of the burgeoning media industries. Ironically, one of the main effects has been that Canadian filmmakers now have to compete for crews, equipment, and studio space with Hollywood productions with much

larger budgets (Saunders, 2001: 97–8). In other words, the long-standing problem of competing with Hollywood has been internalized at the level of production as well as distribution and exhibition.

Screening the Nation

In the circumstances, blaming Hollywood is understandable and, to a large extent, justified. However, the frustration generated by Hollywood's business practices often leads to an indiscriminate denigration of its films and the people who consume them. During the first half of the twentieth century, commentators condemned commercial movies as products of a new 'mass culture' that undermined traditional cultural standards as well as distinctive national cultures, and there was widespread concern that popular movies virtually hypnotized their audiences, causing them to lose contact with reality. Canadian cultural policy was accordingly designed to protect the national culture, still largely identified with British and French traditions, from the supposedly shoddy and meretricious products of American popular culture. The popular appeal of Hollywood movies could only be explained by treating the audience as 'cultural dopes' who passively consumed the illusions concocted in the 'dream factory' and lacked the discrimination to appreciate true art.

When a film industry did eventually appear in the 1960s, this tradition encouraged filmmakers and critics to attribute the disinterest of Canadian audiences to the effects of Hollywood's cultural imperialism, an attitude hardly likely to convince Canadians to support a Canadian cinema that would rescue them from their own poor taste. The link thus forged between national identity and cultural standards is also apparent in the emergence in the 1970s of a critical canon that identified certain kinds of film as typically or ideally Canadian because they were more 'realistic' than Hollywood films with their emphasis on illusion and spectacle (see Chapter 2).

This prescriptive approach, based on judgements about what the national cinema should be, tends to obscure the full range of Canadian film production—English-Canadian and Québécois, documentary and fiction, commercial and avant-garde. However, any account of a national cinema is bound to be selective, especially if it does not want to become a mere listing of titles, and the main concern in my account will be with feature films, the fiction films that would be regarded as 'mainstream' if Canadian audiences had more chance to see them. Important areas of filmmaking will not appear (animation, for example) or will receive only brief treatment (documentary and the avant-garde), not because they are somehow less Canadian than feature films (indeed, many would argue the opposite) but because national cinemas are usually defined by the kinds of stories they tell and by the myths of national identity on which they are based.

Films provide spectators with cues that establish the terms on which they want to be judged, and I will attend to these cues through close readings of selected films (so there will be inevitable omissions even here). These films have rarely received close critical attention and are often dismissed as failing to live up to the standards set by

Hollywood popular cinema or European art cinema. While value judgements are important, Jim McGuigan has argued that 'a cultural performance may be deemed "good" or "bad" of its kind, that is, within its own discursive field' (1996: 45). I will thus also look at the 'discursive field' that frames Canadian cinema, notably the critical reception of the films, to suggest why they have so rarely been treated on their own terms. Of course, spectators do often read films in quite different ways from what their makers intend, and there is no guarantee that the cues given by a film will be coherent or in accord with the conscious intentions of the filmmakers. My strategy will be to suspend value judgements, as far as possible, in my initial response to the films.

One judgement that will be readily apparent is my conviction that Canadian cinema has produced many films that have been unjustly neglected, but I certainly do not believe that all Canadian films are equally valuable. I will discuss these films in relation to the cultural, industrial, and political contexts in which they were made.[3] The main focus will be on how they represent Canada visually and on the stories they tell about the nation, but this is not to suggest that the national context exhausts the interest of these films. I will not use the contexts to explain the films, or to argue that some kind of 'Canadian psyche' can be read off from the films in any straightforward way. I will also, for the most part, resist 'allegorical' readings that regard the characters in films as personifications of national traditions but that often close down meanings too quickly.[4] Rather, I will explore the complex and unstable relationships between the films and the already complex and unstable idea of the nation.

Identifying the Nation

In order to explore these relations, we first need to have a sense of what a 'nation' is. It has become customary to cite Benedict Anderson's definition, according to which a nation is an 'imagined political community' whose members have a sense of shared interests with other people with most of whom they do not come into personal contact (1991: 6). In this sense, the nation exists because people believe that they belong to it, and it thus becomes a component of their sense of personal identity. It is also a political institution, a symbolic apparatus usually referred to as 'the state', with a constitution and laws that establish its boundaries as well as the rights and duties of its citizens.

Both the imagined and the symbolic nations are essentially fictions, but they have a very real impact on people's lives. From a nationalist perspective, the ideal situation occurs when national feeling coincides with the political institutions of the state, creating a strong sense of the 'nation-state'. However, this is rarely the case, as people's personal interests often place them in a critical relation to certain aspects of national life and its political and legal systems, even if they still feel a strong attachment to the nation in principle. As Slavoj Zizek puts it, there is a 'gap that separates every particular nation from its ideal notion' (2001: 24), and this means that most people's sense of national identity involves elements of identification and criticism.

In Canada, the tensions between the ideas of nation and state are most apparent in the ongoing uncertainty about the status of Quebec. For many among the French-speaking majority in Quebec, the present political structure threatens the survival of their language and cultural traditions, and they regard Quebec as already a nation but not yet a state. The situation for the rest of Canada seems to be the opposite: there is a widespread idea that English Canadians lack a distinct cultural identity that distinguishes them from the larger and more powerful nation to the south. Indeed, Seth Feldman describes them as citizens of 'a nationless state', although he adds that 'in their daily lives, most individual English Canadians are sufficiently secure in their regionalism and ethnicity' to accept this situation (2002a: xii).

The troubled relations between nation and state in Canada also create problems of definition for any study of the national cinema. It is therefore necessary to justify my decision to treat English- and French-language films together in this book. The bilingual structure of the film industry divides the already small market for Canadian films and, for many critics, this division undermines any sense that we are dealing with a single national cinema. In one of the first books on Canadian cinema, published in 1968, Gilles Marsolais argued that we should speak instead of '*two* cinemas: the "Canadian" and the "Québécois", whose interests are divergent' (1968: 104). More recently, in a book called *Canadian National Cinema*, Christopher Gittings nevertheless adopts a similar position, arguing that there are 'two very different national cinemas: Québécois and Anglophone Canadian cinemas', although he does later admit that there are 'dynamic moments of intersection and imbrication' (2002: 77, 105). On the other hand, in her more imaginatively titled book, *Weird Sex and Snowshoes*, Katherine Monk affirms that, despite the 'obvious and distinct differences between the two cultures', their films 'offer more similarities than difference' (2001: 158).

The 'two cinemas' view receives support from two other recent books. In his Preface to his *Quebec National Cinema*, Bill Marshall discusses the implications of his title and reports that a publisher refused to consider the book for a series on national cinemas on the grounds that Quebec 'is not a nation' (2001: x). Marshall is well aware of the complexities, political and cultural, attendant on his project, and in his first chapter, entitled 'Producing and Envisioning the Nation', makes clear that he will be dealing with 'Quebec cinema not as coherence but as patterns of incoherence' (13). A rather stronger claim is made in the Introduction to *North of Everything*, an anthology of essays on recent English-Canadian films, in which William Beard and Jerry White justify their editorial decision to exclude Quebec cinema on the grounds that 'the idea that there is a coherent Canadian national self, composed of both English and French elements, seems to us somewhat naive' (2002: xviii).[5]

My decision to deal with films in both languages, and to discuss them together rather than in separate chapters, should not be taken to imply that I believe in 'a coherent national self'. Indeed, I would be skeptical of such a claim even if it applied only to English-language films, as Beard and White seem to assume (although the range of films discussed in their book proves otherwise). Nor should my approach be seen as a denial of the distinctive qualities of Quebec culture, which include a much clearer sense

of a 'national self' than in the rest of Canada. Whatever the differences, however, the situation is much more complex than suggested in one attempt to 'theorize the global range of national cinemas', in which English-Canadian cinema is consigned to the category of 'Imitating Hollywood', while Quebec cinema belongs in 'Regional/Ethnic Cinemas' (Crofts, 1993: 49, 56–7). Like most national cinemas, Canadian cinema is 'a messy affair' (O'Regan, 1996: 2), and there is a great range and variety of productions to account for in both languages.

Recent work in cultural studies and postmodern theory calls into question the existence of a coherent self even in individuals, and the idea of a 'national character' is best seen as a fiction or a myth, albeit a very powerful one, that seeks to unify a host of shifting, and often conflicting, identifications. Discussions of national cinemas often contribute to this unifying effort by distinguishing recurrent themes and motifs that are then interpreted as symptoms of the national character. In his pioneering study of German cinema, first published in 1947, Siegfried Kracauer studied the national cinema to discover why the German people succumbed to the National Socialist ideology. According to Kracauer, his method did not imply 'the concept of a fixed national character', but it did rest on the claim that 'the technique, the story content, and the evolution of the films of a nation are fully understandable only in relation to the actual psychological pattern of this nation' (1947: 8, 5).

Kracauer's approach has been widely criticized on the grounds that it uses films to explain social processes of which they themselves are a product. Few critics now explicitly acknowledge his influence, but the discussion of Canadian cinema is almost inevitably based on the underlying assumption that the films reveal something about the social and cultural context in which they appear. This assumption begs two major questions, which are relevant to most national cinemas but especially urgent in the Canadian context: How can films be said to reflect the psychology of a nation if most of the nation's citizens never see the films and often reject them when they do? In any case, is there really a single 'psychological pattern' that can account for the responses of citizens regardless of gender, class, racial, and linguistic differences?

The idea of a coherent national identity has also been disturbed by political, economic, and technological developments that place great pressure on the traditional forms of both nation and state. Several states—the former Yugoslavia, for example—have disintegrated because of an upsurge of national feeling among groups for whom the state no longer represented their 'imagined political community'. Similar feelings motivate separatist movements in many other states, including Canada, but these pressures from within have been accompanied by the establishment of multinational institutions, including political and economic unions such as the European Union and trading blocs such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, as well as business conglomerates that operate on a global scale. At the same time, the emergence of new communications technology—the proliferation of television channels, video cameras and recorders, and the Internet—allow for the sharing of images and information among groups with common interests throughout the world, unconstrained by regional and national boundaries.

Traditional concepts of national identity have also been challenged in many countries by the growth of diasporic communities founded by people who left their homelands to start new lives in safer or more prosperous nations. In Canada, the government sought to manage this challenge in 1971 by officially proclaiming Canada a multicultural, as well as bilingual, nation; and the members of these communities have become increasingly active and visible within Canadian culture. At the same time, Canada's Native peoples have claimed 'First Nations' status, calling into question the claims of English- and French-speaking Canadians to be the nation's 'founding' cultures (see Chapter 10).

All these complicating factors will be discussed in later chapters, but they do call into question the point of studying national cinemas at all in the contemporary context. Andrew Higson has argued, in the context of British cinema, that 'new types of film-making have embraced multiculturalism, transnationalism and devolution' and that 'such films should be seen less as products of a national cinema, more as post-national films' (2000: 35). This is an attractive suggestion in many ways, not only because it attends to the new developments but also because it acknowledges the contradictions and tensions already present within the idea of the 'nation'. However, rather than abandon the concept of national cinema and leave the field open to Hollywood—or perhaps we should now say the global media marketplace—it seems better to seek to incorporate what Higson calls 'the instability of the national' into our understanding of national cinemas and the myths of national identity they contain and with which they engage.

In the chapters that follow, I begin by destabilizing the notion that Canadian cinema has its roots in the realist tradition. Chapter 1 questions some basic assumptions about realism and traces how Canadian films, from the NFB's direct cinema documentaries to contemporary mockumentaries, have themselves questioned these assumptions. In Chapter 2, I examine the formation of the Canadian film canon around two direct cinema feature films, *Nobody Waved Good-bye* (Don Owen) and *Le Chat dans le sac* (Gilles Groulx), produced at the NFB in 1964 and argue that other films from the same year point in different directions. Since one of the tenets of the canon is that Canadian cinema is best seen as a regional cinema with a strong sense of place, Chapter 3 looks at the treatment of place in regional films in the direct cinema tradition and in films that conceal their locations either for economic reasons or to suggest the displacement of their characters.

While far from rejecting the importance of the realist tradition, I then go on to explore aspects of Canadian cinema that point in quite different directions. Chapter 4 explores the rich tradition of Canadian genre films, and Chapter 5 is devoted to the films of Gilles Carle and David Cronenberg as examples of the tension between the 'popular' and the 'national' in the discourses of Canadian cinema. In Chapter 6, I bring together a variety of films that are more concerned with imaginary worlds than external reality, from the fantastic cinema of Paul Almond to films that draw on Gothic and surrealist traditions.

The remaining chapters discuss groups of films related to specific topics that raise (sometimes awkward) questions about the national cinema. Chapter 7 discusses the

challenge to mainstream cinema (itself a problematic term in the Canadian context) from filmmakers working on the margins, including the avant-garde and the work of Jack Darcus, William MacGillivray, and Jean Pierre Lefebvre. Questions of national identity are also bound up with representations of gender and sexuality, and Chapter 8 engages with these issues in Canadian cinema, looking at the commercial exploitation of sexuality, the work of women directors such as Léa Pool and Patricia Rozema, and that of gay filmmaker Thom Fitzgerald. Chapter 9 turns to 'art cinema' and the auteur theory and relates them to two Canadian directors whose work is most often discussed in these terms, Denys Arcand and Atom Egoyan.

The topics treated in the last three chapters involve new challenges to national traditions. Chapter 10 deals with films from the diasporic communities that have changed the previous French/English basis for national identity, as well as the work of First Nations filmmakers who also challenge the old ways of seeing. In Chapter 11, I look at two related responses to the changing conditions in the film industry: 'stupid' films, such as *Les Boys* (Louis Saia, 1997) and *Men With Brooms* (Paul Gross, 2002), that defy the conventions of good taste and 'smart' films, such as *Kissed* (Lynne Stopkewich, 1996) and *Maelström* (Denis Villeneuve, 2000), that function as a kind of postmodern art cinema. Finally, Chapter 12 raises questions about the relations of the global and the local, through a discussion of the films of Bruce Sweeney and Robert Lepage, and examines the relations of body and image in contemporary culture as they appear in *Lulu* (Srinivas Krishna, 1995) and *Emporte-moi* (Léa Pool, 1998). This concluding chapter will also bring us back to the question of value judgements and their entanglement with perceptions of the nation.

CHAPTER
1

Realism and Its Discontents

The Canadian psyche seems better suited to information programming than to drama, partly because of the documentary traditions established in this country by John Grierson.

—Martin Knelman (1987: 103–4)

Realism is at the root of the Canadian psyche.

—Katherine Monk (2001: 10)

Alongside the absent audience, the other most salient characteristic of Canadian cinema is, according to most accounts, its roots in documentary realism. For many commentators, such as Knelman and Monk, this predilection derives from a specifically Canadian mindset that produces a distinct national identity. By such accounts, the realist bent did not originate with the NFB but rather provided a fertile ground in which John Grierson's project could flourish.

As we shall see in later chapters, the dominance of realism in Canadian cinema has been much exaggerated, but the persistence of this notion has played an important part in shaping how films have been interpreted and how questions about the national cinema have been posed. It is intricately entangled with the problem of the absent audience, since we might well ask why, if Canadians are such realists, they do not respond more enthusiastically to Canadian realist cinema. There is even the possibility that the perceived propensity towards realism accounts for this resistance: too many people regard Canadian films as 'depressing downbeat little pictures that nobody wants to see in our country or anywhere else' (Tadros, 1976: 37).[1]

I do not want to underestimate the importance of the realist tradition. In this chapter, I will argue that realist filmmaking in Canada is not the product of a naive belief that film can provide an objective view of reality. Rather, we shall see that this tradition, especially as it develops from the 1950s onward, becomes increasingly aware of the difficulty of adequately representing the real. The films are not straightforwardly realistic but investigations into the possibilities and limits of realism. Inevitably, the concerns at the core of this tradition have become even more urgent—to the point of throwing it into crisis—in the age of computer simulations and so-called reality television.

The National-Realist Project

The federal government established the National Film Board in 1939, acting on the advice of Grierson, who became its first commissioner. It was Grierson who first applied the term 'documentary' to cinema in 1927 and who famously defined it as 'the creative treatment of actuality' (Hardy, 1966: 13). He had already used state sponsorship in Britain to create a documentary film unit, working first for the Empire Marketing Board and then for the General Post Office. His goal was to intervene in well-established discourses of national identity and modify them in more progressive directions, balancing public relations with social change; in Canada the ties to the state were even more direct, but the myths of national identity were much less secure.

The NFB's mandate, as it was later defined in the Film Act of 1950, was 'to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations' (Morris, 1984: 283), and it had thus to foster a sense of an 'imagined community' essential to the survival of the nation. Grierson thought that documentary could provide evidence of shared interests among Canadians in different regions who had no direct contact with each other. I will thus refer to his vision as 'national-realist', on an analogy with the idea of the 'national-popular' developed at roughly the same time by the Italian political theorist Antonio