

Point of View

BY DOUGALD LAMONT

TELEFILM'S HIDDEN AGENDA:

NO MORE ROUGHING UP THE SUSPECTS ● ● ●

Margaret Atwood wrote that the great theme of Canadian literature is survival. From the writing of Susanna Moodie and Elizabeth Parr Trail, straight through to the 20th century with...um...all those other people, battling the elements is the common thread. Canadian film is another story. It might seem hard at first to find a common theme between the work of Atom Egoyan, David Cronenberg, Jean-Claude Lauzon and Don McKellar, but if we analyze them in terms of their effect on the audience, a pattern comes into relief. The dominant theme of Canadian film is confounding masturbation.

Witness the relentless logic of my argument!

Weird sex is supposed to be one of the hallmarks of Canadian film. The depiction of desperately unerotic sex seems to show itself at every turn, in English and French, across a range of directors and genres. Atom Egoyan's body of work is practically defined by his habit of playing the incest card (over and over); David Cronenberg's *Crash* was simply the culmination of an oeuvre in which, from *The Brood* onwards, sex has been a mixed-media affair (cars, tentacles, televisions, mutant-man-insects, etc.). *Kissed* featured a necrophiliac undertaker, and there are plenty of Québécois films (*Léolo* and *Post mortem* for example) with some twisted sexuality as well. By twisted, I mean activities that are prosecutable under the modern-day Criminal Code, so don't think I'm just being prudish.

Artistically, what do these films have in common? They have all been green-lighted for funding by Telefilm Canada. Telefilm is not just any government agency: it's a government agency with script approval. Canadian films rely on government funding and approval to be made. Making commercial films only became a department priority within the last year. In the past, Telefilm focused on funding art-house films like those of Egoyan and Cronenberg, rather than popular films that people pay to see because they might enjoy them.

But box-office receipts are themselves an impossibility: Canadian films have little distribution to speak of. Kid No Longer in the Hall Scott Thompson's habitual reaction on hearing Genie nominations is: "Never heard of it. Never heard of it. Never heard of it. French. Never released." *The Score*, set in Montreal, but starring, written and directed by Americans, is probably the most expensive "Canadian" film ever made. If you want to see a Canadian film, it won't be in a theatre. It will most likely be on late-night television, on the CBC or *Showcase Review*.

The people who are watching late-night films such as these are students, insomniacs, shift workers and the unemployed.

Not having seen the demographics, I will bet you dollars to doughnuts that the target audience for *Showcase Review* is a guy in his sweatpants with a box of Kleenex at hand, hoping that all the arty stuff will pay off with some nudie shots.

This evidence might seem to indicate that the Government of Canada is promoting deviant sexual behaviour by encouraging citizens to whip up a batch while watching car crashes, necrophilia and incest. Do not be deceived! The effect is rather the opposite. For the solo viewer of these flicks, initial arousal at a scene showing erotic potential swiftly sours as it turns creepy. Muttering "What the...?" to himself as things go from bad to flaccid, the behaviouristic effect on the viewer is clear. Rather than encouraging profligate wantonness, the effect of these films is to disabuse the viewers of self-abuse. No more pulling the goalie for you, young man. Under the guise of promoting "art films," which leave the beret-and-black-turtleneck crowd swooning, Telefilm has been honing another tradition in Canadian film: propaganda.

Canadians like to say that the documentary is the Canadian medium, which is making a virtue of a necessity: documentary, like talk, is cheap. The history of film in Canada is the history of propaganda. Lest we forget, the NFB, too, was founded by a Brit shipped over to rouse the colony from its slumber and start sending the boys "Over there!" Film was seen as a medium of mass communication and therefore of social control. The NFB continued to make films throughout the 1950s on how to live your life, so-called documentaries, but which were actually social-hygiene films.

Social-hygiene films were the product of a tiny Ottawa movie studio that cranked them out at such a rate that Bytown was once known as Hollywood North. These flicks were once the key weapon in a propaganda campaign designed to keep the youth of Canada from "square dancing too close to their period or shooting heroin before the big track meet," as Joe Queenan put it. We Canadians might chuckle at these films today, mistakenly thinking that they were a product of a Yankee state department that was totally squaresville, man. Turns out it was our fault. Whoops!

It became clear throughout the 1960s – because of them, in fact – that social-hygiene films of the 1950s had been a dismal failure. Rather than strapping on cardigans and girdles, an entire generation became dirty hippies and messed about like minks. Clearly, if propaganda and social control was to work, it had to be subtle, and it had to hit the viewers where they lived – on a couch, keeping their eyes peeled for pelt on cable specialty channels.

The evidence is circumstantial, I'll admit that. But I think if you watch these films you'll start to see what I mean. Especially if you're wearing sweatpants.

TAKE ONE