



MY
BIG FAT
CANADIAN

IDENTITY THEFT

In 1975, Mordecai Richler, along with Lionel Chetwynd, was nominated for an Academy Award for the screenplay of his novel, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. *Duddy Kravitz* had been Richler's breakthrough novel in 1959, the story of a young wheeler-dealer growing up on and around St. Urbain Street, in the heart of Montreal's poor Jewish area of town. It wasn't the story of Richler's life, but it was the story of his people and his neighbourhood. Richler had a soft spot for Duddy who kept turning up unexpectedly in other novels such as *St. Urbain's Horseman* and *Barney's Version*. So Richler was amused when a producer told him that if only he had set the story in Chicago, the film would have made a fortune.

Nia Vardalos, who wrote and starred in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, didn't make the same mistake. Made for \$5 million US, it is now the most successful independent film of all time, having (as of this writing) grossed over \$270 million. Vardalos grew up in Winnipeg's small Greek community and based (very loosely) her story on funny family conflicts from her own marriage to a non-Greek, who, like her film fiancé, converted to the Greek Orthodox religion for her sake. Many of the characters, especially the father, are based on her family who still live in Winnipeg. A large part of the cast and all of the locations are Canadian (the film was shot in Toronto), but rather than set the movie in Winnipeg—which Vardalos said might make the movie “too specific”—the location was changed to Chicago, which is more “universal” or “generic.”

Being “generic” is a luxury reserved for American cities. Los Angeles, New York and Chicago are considered “universal” or “anyplace” because they have been portrayed and mythologized so many times in television and films. They already occupy a space in the consciousness of the world film audience. So do great cities like Rome, Paris and London; however, these are also considered exotic and legitimately foreign in a way that Winnipeg and Toronto are not.

Is there an “Idea of Canada” in the global consciousness? Only the one still left over from Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald movies—mountains and Mounties. Directors such as Atom Egoyan and David Cronenberg have received critical acclaim, but have done so with their own idiosyncratic vision. Their films are art-house generic and come from no place special. Hollywood television and films, on the other hand, are unabashed advertising for America. They assert America to itself and to the world. If you're a Canadian producer looking to sell your show to an American distributor, you'd better leave out the Maple Leaf and that funny-looking Canadian money. The end product has got to pretend to be American, or at least be generic in a way that viewers will understand, by default, that it is set in the United States. In response to these demands, when money changes hands, it's U.S. greenbacks. In Toronto and Vancouver, you get used to the American signifiers being shoehorned into view by film crews: American flags are draped in the background and sidewalks are studded with U.S. post boxes. Goodbye Canada. Hello Anytown, USA.

Aside from this geographical and cultural annexation, Hollywood has always appropriated world history on behalf of the United States. The Second World War has provided America with a lot of heroic fodder. Tom Hanks has both starred in and produced films—*Saving Private Ryan* and HBO's *Band of Brothers*—whose blinkered take on D-Day makes it appear that the United States won the war single-handedly. Watching *Private Ryan* or *Band of Brothers*, you would never know that Canadians fought in the Second World War, to say nothing of having their own beach on D-Day.

In the recent submarine-thriller *U-571*, which is based on actual events, the nationality of the submariners who boarded a German submarine to obtain the Enigma decoding

machine was changed from British to American. In *Pearl Harbor*, an American pilot (Ben Affleck) goes to England to fly in the Battle of Britain. Considering America's isolationist stance at the time, this distortion is outrageous. (Needless to say, there are no films in the works portraying America's isolationism. The two years between the outbreak of war in Europe, September 1939, and the American's entry into it, December 1941 after the Pearl Harbor bombing, is one big lost historical weekend.) Mel Gibson's American Revolution saga *The Patriot* features a scene in which British troops burn a church filled with women and children, a barbaric act that never occurred but, instead, was cribbed from an atrocity committed in the Second World War by the Nazis.

The idea of England as a place with its own character survives the Hollywood treatment. This is in part because the English have distinctive accents (the posh ones activate American class insecurity), but also because they have cranked out enough great popular music, television and the occasional film to make a dent in the American psyche. Canadians, however, are usually perfectly happy to erase themselves and churn out generic "cultural product." To paraphrase actor Bill Needle, Toronto seems incapable of putting on a decent performance, even as itself. Despite having the biggest Pride Day parade in North America and a huge gay population, the Americanized version of the British hit show *Queer as Folk*, which is shot in Toronto and is filled with Canadian actors, is set in Pittsburgh, which has virtually no gay community.

Why does any of this matter? You can't blame Americans for wanting to see American stories, and while we might hope that Hollywood won't revise Canada out of world history, we can't expect it to tell our stories for us. But it does matter culturally, nationally, spiritually and even economically. Having a film or television show set in your city is a statement of that city's value, a status symbol just as surely as a professional sports franchise or arena is. In other words, it keeps you from being nobody, because just as Hollywood is advertising for America, television and movies are advertising for your country or city. It is a statement and affirmation of identity.

Americans understand this. Australians understand this. The British understand this. Canadians and their cultural-funding agencies do not. Canadian production is split in two: either pointy-headed artistic excellence with a relative-small audience, or generic television schlock in the form of countless movies-of-the-week or low-rent series. The split is a result of government incentives. On the one hand, a cultural policy of grooming art-house directors like Atom Egoyan and Guy Maddin, and on the other, tax breaks and subsidies for industrial "Canadian" productions with no cultural worth.

The result is that while Egoyan, Maddin and Cronenberg make brilliant but idiosyncratic films that please those among us with a taste for cinematic art, huge amounts of money go to making "generic" garbage that is very often an American production with a shell-Canadian production company and a local producer hired on as a means to soak up Canadian tax subsidies. The fact is, either way, we never see ourselves on television or in the movies. In Norman Jewison's *Hurricane*, there is a scene in which Canadians bring the American boxer Rubin Carter a gift in prison. Audience members at a Toronto screening recognized the gift-wrapping and excited whispers of "It's an Eaton's box!" rustled through the theatre, followed by a wave of bashful titters. This is the depressing state of Canadian identity in film.

If the federal government and the various provincial governments are interested in actually promoting the idea of Canada and its cities as actual places, separate and distinct from the United States—or any other place—then the solution is fairly simple. On the one hand, keep grooming for excellence; Egoyan is good for the country's reputation. But change funding criteria to fulfill three simple criteria: it has to be a good story, the characters have to be mostly Canadian and it has to be set in Canada. Whether it's a Canadian crew, director or writer, it doesn't matter. In other words, if Steven Spielberg wants to make *Fifth Business* starring Harrison Ford, Matt Damon and Heather Graham, fine. Give him the money, as long as the film set in Canada. If George Lucas wants to shoot *Star Wars, Episode 3* in Vancouver, fine, as long as Luke and Leia are born in British Columbia.

For a Canadian nationalist, there is a good deal of frustration watching *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. It's a good movie; conventional, but with enough funny twists to make it stand out. It's not a slick, overworked, focus-group tested piece of Hollywood garbage. It has a kind of integrity that makes it work. It's filled with Canadians—Vardalos herself, Jayne Eastwood, Bruce Gray, Fiona Reid and others—pretending not to be Canadian, and in a shot of Vardalos waiting in a car, the subtitle that tells us it's Chicago hovers over an Ontario licence plate. There's the American flag and the U.S. dollars taped to the wall behind the restaurant counter. But the travel agency she works in is across from the Pappas Grill on the Danforth, in the middle of Toronto's Greektown, and when her mother gives the standard speech about the freedom her family found coming to "this new country," the country I think of is Canada. Funny thing is, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is about accepting and embracing your roots and your family, even though you find them a little embarrassing. Too bad we're all so ashamed of being Canadian.

Dougald Lamont lives in Winnipeg, where he is working on a documentary about the use of banned substances in sponge hockey.