

POV

TV Nation: The Answer to English-Canadian Cinema's Woes? The Boob Tube, of Course

IN THE PAST TWO YEARS, one thing has become painfully and undeniably clear for the Canadian film industry. Never have our Two Solitudes seemed so utterly and completely out of synch.

Quebec is on an astonishing roll. The most obvious example, of course, is *Les Invasions barbares*, which copped a truckload full of awards, including an Oscar and a few Cesars. Then there was the Sundance award-winning *Seducing Doctor Lewis*, as well as *Gaz Bar Blues*, *S raphin* and *Sur le seuil*, the English-language-remake rights of which were sold to Miramax. Rounding out the list is *Mambo Italiano*, proving that language doesn't answer the contrast-with-English-Canada question entirely; *Mambo* was shot in English and yet still did more than respectable box office within Quebec's borders. English Canada, meanwhile, has seen a stifling 24-month period where very little has stood out. The difference appeared all the more striking when I sat down to have coffee with a Miramax scout during September's Toronto International Film Festival. "If a film is Canadian," he said, "I always ask one question to determine whether or not I'm going to make time to see it. Is it in French?"

The reasons why recent Quebec cinema is kicking ass are probably as varied as the films I've listed. Cinema is a hugely complex thing and there is no tried and true formula to make a movie ignite and connect with an audience. But in all of the seemingly endless reports I read about Canada's cinematic dilemma and how to improve our lot, there is one constant: every onlooker has agreed that English-Canadian cinema suffers a severe profile problem. The issue? It doesn't have a profile.

This contrasts glaringly with Quebec's cinema. The television shows in Quebec reflect the populace's love of the movies. There are shows on the regular networks where hosts chat

about cinema (both local and American), and there are also junket-driven shows like *Box Office* on MusiquePlus, where Roy Dupuis shares equal time with Ben Affleck. Quebec media offer their audiences a regular diet of factoids, interviews and general hype about locally produced-and-shot movies, as well as the Hollywood stuff.

English Canada's answer to this? It doesn't have one. The CBC currently has no movie program. Nor does CTV. Or Global. (I'm taking the liberty of counting out the dreary *Entertainment Tonight* clones.) Hard to believe, but in a country that, on a per capita basis, consumes more films than the U.S. there is not one national movie show. Torontonians and Vancouverites have local movie shows but lamentably they don't reach a national audience. Despite the repeated calls for more and better promotion for our national cinema, a national television show on movies is not in the works, anywhere. This makes no sense. The filmmaking community should do nothing short of demand such a program. After all, our writers and publishers have benefited from CBC programs about books, like *Hot Type* and *Mary Walsb: Open Book*. Our filmmakers deserve the same treatment.

In order to work, the show would have to stick to certain guidelines. First, it would have to be international in scope, including Canadian movies as a key component but never restricting itself to them. (Sadly, Canadians have a long-standing negative attitude toward their own films.) Instead, such a show would operate on the TIFF model—harness the considerable Hollywood star power to reel in broad public interest and help

publicize lesser known, less star-driven movies (i.e. our own). Secondly, stop underestimating the intelligence of people who like movies. We are already inundated by the vacuous nature of *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood*. Think Evan Solomon, not Ben Mulroney. While maintaining a lively pace, this new movie show should avoid adding to the lightheaded, gossip-oriented pile of programs that already exist. Audiences, I suspect, are ready for something different.





Mary Walsh: Open Book

This show would operate simply and would not be expensive to produce. Each week would include a segment on the films that are opening and a feature interview with a director or actor. (Junkets allow for fairly easy access to such talent south of the border.) A second segment would allow several critics to discuss their views of various recent films; to avoid Toronto-centricism, the panel would be chosen from dailies, weeklies and magazines from across Canada. As well, such a show could include reports from festivals across Canada, from the Atlantic Film Festival through to the Vancouver International Film Festival. A final word on each show could highlight the week's DVD releases.

A show like this would do something key, something the Quebec media appears to have understood quite clearly. By placing local film acts in the same league as the American ones, they have created a greater sense of respect and importance to the homegrown talent. A national English-language program could do precisely the same thing, by offering reviews of the latest Jerry Bruckheimer blockbuster next to reflections on Don McKellar's new project; by reviewing, say, a DVD set of James Bond movies next to the release of an animation anthology DVD put out by the NFB. Every show would maintain a strict quota. One-third to a half of everything covered would be Canadian. This Trojan horse method of selling Canadian movies to Canadians may sound naïve and simplistic, but we already have an example of where it has worked, and it's within our own borders.

Among the many things Quebec has taught us in the realm of cinema, it's that aggressive promotional campaigns are crucial, and television, being such a far-reaching medium, is a pivotal part of that equation. The time has come for us to finally heed this lesson and get our films and filmmakers the attention and audiences they deserve.

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