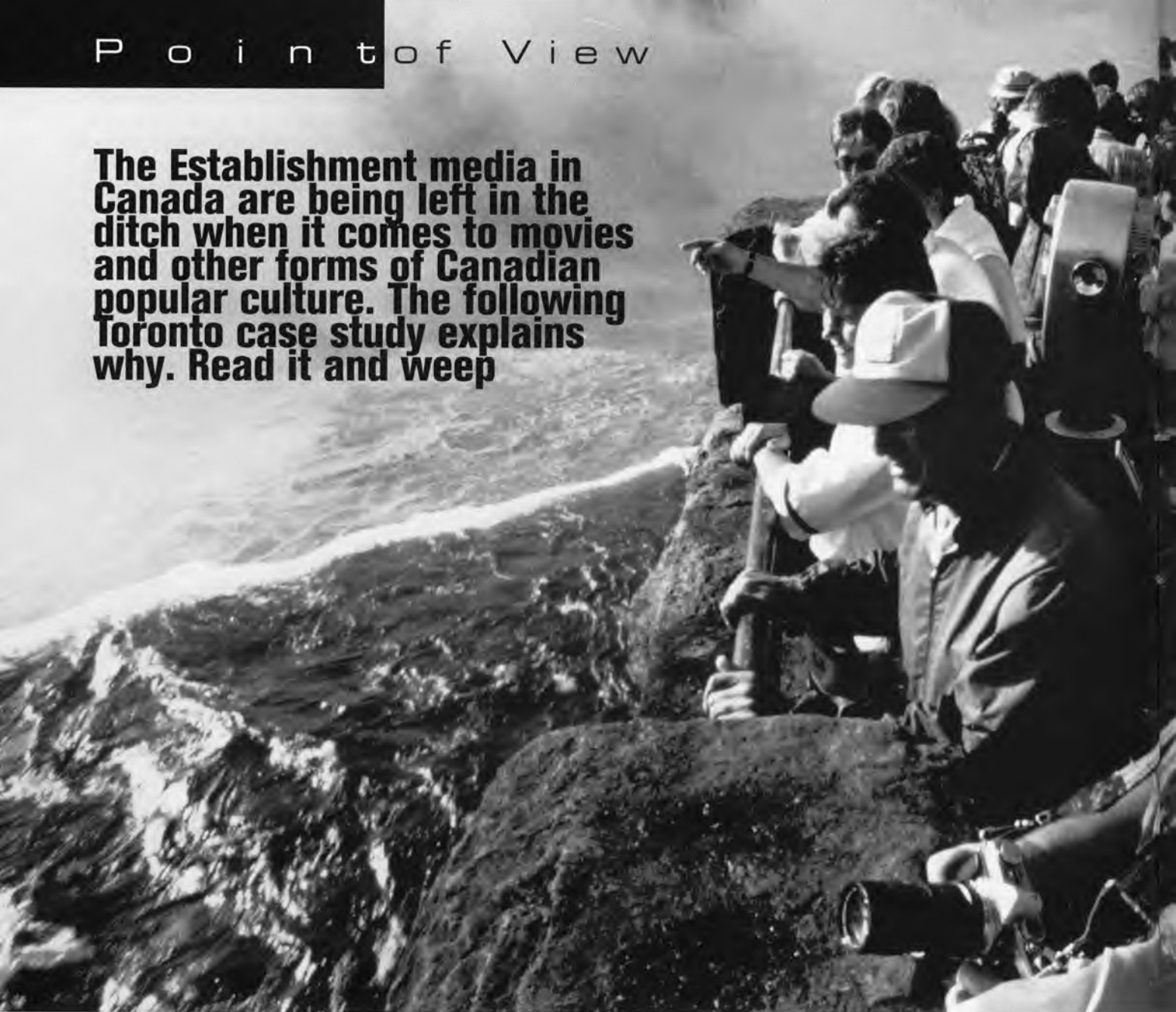


**The Establishment media in Canada are being left in the ditch when it comes to movies and other forms of Canadian popular culture. The following Toronto case study explains why. Read it and weep**



# Asleep at the Wheel

**I**n November, 1992, *The Globe and Mail* columnist Robert Fulford wrote of an ongoing “orgy of self-celebration” at *The Toronto Star*, a reference to the editorial tub-thumping that marked the paper’s hundredth birthday. A former *Star* man himself, Fulford began his critique by insisting he “remain(ed) grateful” to his old employers at One Yonge St. Grateful?

Fulford’s column was a free-ranging rant, critical, especially, of what he saw as the *Star*’s ritual double-dealing in matters cultural: “Sometimes its institutional contradictions are obvious to thoughtful readers: the editorial page, for instance, insists that



Kevin McMahon's THE FALLS

## by Craig MacInnis

Canadian culture is enormously important and must be protected against the Americans by every possible instrument of government, while the entertainment pages clearly embody the belief that

almost anything done by Americans is more interesting than its Canadian equivalent."

The views expressed by Fulford are typical of Canada's Eastern Cultural Establishment, a sniffy cadre that looks to those twin pillars of authority, *The Globe and Mail* and the CBC, for a sense of what is "important." From Bronwyn Drainie's paean to Official Culture in her weekly *Globe* column to Peter Gzowski's folksy maunderings on CBC Radio's *Morningside* (a patriarchal Canada On Parade that runs the gamut from marmalade recipes to nostrums for national unity, all in the same soothing – some might say anaesthetizing – tones), the defenders of Establishment Culture would have us believe they're the only ones with a clear view of the scene. Umpires of the Empire, as it were.

If Gzowski were to limit his grizzled enthusiasms to politics and homemade jelly, probably no one would care. However, he's just as apt to bluster into the cultural arena, interviewing the actor Henry Czerny, the singer Margo Timmins, the playwright Judith Thompson, the painter Alex Colville, the writer Margaret Atwood or the filmmaker Patricia Rozema. In fact, anyone who'll sit still for his febrile enquiries. (Gzowski's rock interviews are the worst: a gluey mix of condescension, cluelessness and smarm.)

Drainie, who recently sat in the vacationing Gzowski's broadcast chair for a week, wrote a December 22, 1994, *Globe* piece about her on-air experiences. The title of her encomium – plastered across the bottom of the *Globe's* "Arts +" front page – was "Counting Our CBC Radio Blessings," in which she gushed that "it is Gzowski's particular genius to make the whole of Canada feel like his kitchen table," which might be a good thing if he were *The Urban Peasant's* James Barber instead of the Corp's multi-disciplinary gatekeeper, a man who singlehandedly sucks up 20 hours of airspace each and every week.

The fact is, a revolution has gone on while the Gzowskis and Drainies and Fulfords were holding court in their kitchens. A new generation of Canadians, eager for something – anything – to grab onto in the media, has increasingly turned away from the staid offerings of the Establishment press. And who can blame them when even the Establishment press admits it has had its collective head up its collective posterior? Last year, Harold Redekopp, vice-

president of the CBC's English radio service, told members of Parliament examining the Corporation's future that there was trouble on the horizon. Redekopp characterized most Canadian twentysomethings as "a lost generation for us – we don't serve that audience very well."

Robert Benzie, a Gen-X columnist for *The Ottawa Sun*, wrote last October that "the CBC showed its true feelings toward young listeners when it cancelled Geoff Peveré's excellent [radio show] *Prime Time* (in 1993).

"That nightly show," Benzie continued, "with its brilliant forays into contemporary culture, was axed and its time slot handed over to *The Best of Morningside*. Needless to say, killing Peveré's program only turned away more young (taxpaying) listeners off the CBC."

What Peveré's nightly *Prime Time* did was to take elements of the current and recent pop culture – film, rock music, fashion, etc. – and treat them not as entertainment per se, but as signifiers, the way that earlier generations had turned to politics as the "window" on the outside world. In this schema, movies weren't just movies any more, they were clues to the zeitgeist. Canadian cinema was especially valuable – the films of Atom Egoyan, Bruce McDonald, Patricia Rozema, Deepa Mehta, Jean-Claude Lauzon, Léa Pool, among others – because it helped draw a bead on our elusive national character.

Peveré wasn't the only one trading in this. Daniel Richler, the former TV rock journalist turned literary critic and author, posited similar connections as the host of TVOntario's *Imprint*, a book program which – at least during Richler's tenure – wasn't afraid to drag rock music, sex and movies into the weekly parsing of CanLit.

Meanwhile, our filmmakers were busy redefining themselves in ways that justified the new attention to their work: Srinivas Krishna with his Hindi-inflected spoofs of official multiculturalism in *Masala*; Bruce McDonald with his deep-themed merger of film technique, rock video editing and post-punk iconography; Atom Egoyan with his cryogenic surveys of modern sexual pathology. In *The Adjuster* and *Exotica*, Toronto's conceptually bland surfaces are revealed as a kind of "id lid" under which a mass of human longings and delusional phenomena heave and rattle. As a sign of cultural drift, it was pretty compelling as was *Highway 61*, McDonald's film that wilfully blurs the line between narrative

experience and video-mediated “adventure.”

Egoyan’s, Krishna’s and McDonald’s movies aren’t alone in challenging the complexion of Canadian cinema, a cinema that the Establishment culture – long neglectful of pop trends, particularly in music – is ill-equipped to monitor and has all but ignored for that very reason. One is reminded of Drainie’s *Globe* column last year, in which she seemed boastful that she’s never heard of Brian Eno – “Wha-a-a? Who’s Brian Eno?” – the electronic music pioneer who broke onto the scene with Roxy Music a quarter of a century ago.

Examples of music-movie hybrids in new Canadian cinema abound. *Léolo*, Jean-Claude Lauzon’s mordant child’s fantasy, which draws much of its power from a soundtrack that veers from tribal chanting to Tom Waits and the Rolling Stones; Kevin McMahon’s “non-fiction movie” *The Falls*, which grafts Kurt Swinghammer’s surging electro-pop onto the movie’s cascading shots of Niagara; *Hurt Penguins*, which chronicles the comic misery of two aspiring rock musicians (Daniel Kash and Michele Muzzi) and their efforts to secure a recording contract.

We’re talking big changes in the thing we call Canadian cinema. And when the basic vocabulary of a medium is seen to be mutating before our very eyes, is it not crucial to ponder the larger questions that attend these changes?

If you’re the CBC, apparently not. At least that was the impression given by Bill Terry, former senior director of (radio) programming operations, when he blithely explained, in a *Toronto Star* article written by Greg Quill, that the cancelled *Prime Time* “didn’t have the corner on this material,” noting that pop culture’s caseload would, in future, be borne by *Morningside*, *Basic Black* and *Gabereau*. “Popular culture will be well served elsewhere,” Terry told Quill, apparently without blushing. (He has since retired, so it’s no longer his problem.)

The effect of this decision was to either trivialize pop culture (anyone who has heard Vicki Gabereau cackle and guffaw her way through an interview with a serious musician or actor knows of what we speak) or ghettoize it, as the barren Saturday afternoon slot for the “pop culture” show *Definitely Not the Opera* makes plain. What the Corporation’s radio nabobs were saying was: pop culture isn’t important; pop culture contains no meaning beyond its obvious

entertainment value. If they thought it did, do you think they would have handed it over to Gabereau and Arthur Black?

When I left the rock beat and became the *Star*’s film critic in 1990, I was surprised at first by the arrogance of some of the Hollywood studios and their branch-plant ambassadors in Toronto. There seemed to be an assumption – passed along in their tone of voice rather than in their actual words – that film coverage was synonymous with coverage of studio movies, and that anything else (like, say, Canadian cinema) didn’t really count. Because their press offices were well staffed and regimentally dedicated to promoting their “product,” these studios had, and continue to have, an effect on what gets covered in the media, which depend on the studios for advance screenings, press material and access to celebrities.

However, even if Hollywood sharks weren’t lurking in the local reeds, there would be no shortage of American bumpf in Toronto’s dailies, *The Globe and Mail* included. It is the job of mass-market publications to review what they perceive their readers want and –

whether it’s a good thing or not – more people are interested in the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger epic than they are in the scratchy Oedipal intrigues of a Guy Maddin. Still, that doesn’t mean Canadian artists – returning to Fulford’s argument – have been neglected or diminished in the *Star*’s entertainment pages, or that the sum of our efforts “embodies a belief” in U.S. entertainment.

In recent months, I have been able to write reviews, columns and feature stories on such people as Atom Egoyan, Bruce McDonald, Peter Mettler, Kevin McMahon, John Greyson, Deepa Mehta, Maury Chaykin, Shereen Jerrett, John Pozer, Arsinée Khanjian, Don McKellar, Stephen Williams, Peter Lynch, Gary Farmer, Craig Pryce, and Dave Bidini, whose band The Rheostatics scored the movie *Whale Music*. While some of these stories reflect, or follow, a filmmaker’s commercial achievements (Atom Egoyan, for example), a good many others anticipate a film’s success or a director’s importance.

In 1991, John Pozer’s debut feature *The Grocer’s Wife* was the cause célèbre of the Toronto film festival after Egoyan made the showy gesture of turning over



**WE'RE TALKING BIG CHANGES IN THE THING WE CALL CANADIAN CINEMA: from left, Srinivas Krishna's *Masala*; Atom Egoyan's *The Adjuster*; John Pozer's *The Grocer's Wife***

a \$25,000 cheque to Pozer, the cash prize that Egoyan himself had claimed for winning the festival's Toronto-City Award for *The Adjuster*. Egoyan later admitted he hadn't yet seen *The Grocer's Wife* when he made his uncommonly generous donation to Pozer's film future.

In fact, the only advance cover of *The Grocer's Wife* had been in a black-line story in the *Star*, where I had enthusiastically reviewed the film and written a profile of the then-unknown B.C. director. The story in the *Star*, which proclaimed the \$57,000 black-and-white movie "a tiny masterpiece," helped Pozer claim the recognition he deserved (including his capture of the Academy of Canadian Cinema's 1993 Claude Jutra Award as the country's most promising young director). When Telefilm Canada dragged its heels over the financing of Pozer's second (and as yet unreleased) feature *The Michelle Apartments*, I was able to write another piece in the *Star* (complaining about the inexplicable funding delay) which went some distance in getting the agency off its duff.

The foregoing may seem self-serving, but that couldn't be further from my

intentions. The point is, the critical press has a responsibility to see that good work – particularly work by young, unchampioned Canadians – does not go unnoticed. Without public attention, most artists are destined to starve. I'd like to think that at least half of what I do for the *Star* reflects a commitment to Canadian cinema – and before that, as a rock critic, to Canadian popular music. Not merely the "winners," but the ones whose work shows promise. Before last May's Cannes festival, I filed a major section-front profile of the Norwegian-born Vancouver filmmaker, Karethe Linaae, whose astonishing debut short film *Off Key* had been selected for Cannes' Critics Week sidebar.

While the *Star* was busy devoting hundreds of column inches to Linaae or Atom Egoyan, who was in Cannes with *Exotica* (the first English-Canadian film in ten years to gain a berth in the festival's Official Competition), *The Globe and Mail* – "Canada's National Newspaper" – was getting by on reports from an American stringer, Sheila Benson, a former writer for *The Los Angeles Times*. Nothing at all was written in the *Globe* on Linaae, and what was

written on Egoyan seemed strained, as if the writer hadn't quite come to terms with the director's work.

*The Toronto Sun*, meanwhile, was going hammer and tong with the *Star* at Cannes, represented by its reviewer Bruce Kirkland. When Egoyan won the vaunted International Critics' Prize – arguably the festival's most important award after the Palme d'Or – a next-day story ran in all editions of the *Star*. The *Sun*, for whatever reason, missed it. Given its tabloid persuasion, one might figure the *Sun* to be at best a half-hearted champion of Canadian culture abroad. So what if it dozed through the Egoyan win? But a *Sun* editor with whom I was acquainted later confided there was some considerable regret – that's not how he really put it, but never mind – at having missed the story. It seemed Canadian cinematic achievement had joined sports and crime as one of the hot zones of competitive mainstream journalism. (We exaggerate, for effect.)

The point is, the *Sun* and the *Star*, along with Moses Znaimer's Citytv in Toronto and *Take One* are the new front-end hustlers in Canadian cultural coverage, identifying the players and

**A cinema that the  
Establishment culture  
is ill-equipped to  
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but ignored**



**Asleep** tracking their progress while the Establishment media lag further and further behind. After last December's Genie Awards, where *Exotica* pulled down eight prizes for Egoyan and his team, *The Toronto Sun* was the only one of the city's three dailies to have a colour picture of the triumphant Egoyan as its "main art" on the front page the next day.

Some might scoff that a front-page picture is little more than a gesture, an easy way of waving the flag for Canadian culture without wading too deeply into its meanings. But at least the flag is being waved now, and at least the coverage of the Egoyans in the mainstream media has been shuffled to the "front of the book" where it's more likely to be noticed, which is the first step in building a broad base of support and empathy for our artistic endeavours. On television, last year's Toronto International Film Festival enjoyed wide exposure on Citytv, which devoted a full hour of prime time coverage to the Perspective Canada party that followed the opening night activities. The effect was to glamorize Canadian cinema by paying attention to it in a way that had not been done before. Citytv is also the busiest promoter of Canadian cinema year-round – look at the sheer volume of good Canadian movies (*Pour la suite du monde*, *Goin' Down the Road*, *The Falls*) that it puts on the air.

And where was the CBC in all of this? Newsworld's weekly movie showcase, *On the Arts*, was handcuffed, as usual, to the broadcast of American movie clips (*The Shawshank Redemption*, *The River Wild*, etc.) culled from the all-expenses-paid junkets that the publicly financed Corporation regularly accepts from Hollywood studios.

Junketeering needs its own essay on Ethics In Modern Media, but for our purposes it's worth noting that our tax-funded broadcaster suffers no apparent crisis of conscience in taking Hollywood's handouts. It seems entirely typical of the lazy self-aggrandizement that characterizes so much of what passes for Establishment journalism these days. The fact is, the Establishment press has been dozing for so long that it's forgotten how to speak the language of modern culture, championing standards which no longer apply, singing the praises of a windy little elite whose game is definitely up ●

*Craig MacInnis is a movie critic for THE TORONTO STAR.*

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