

TAKE ONE

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WYNDHAM WISE

What is Canadian Cinema?



The star of *The Kiss*, the scandalous Edison short shown in Ottawa and Toronto in the summer of 1896, was singer-comedienne May Irwin, a popular Broadway actress from Whitby, Ontario. Since then, Canadians have contributed enormously to American and International cinema; however, the emergence of a distinctly Canadian cinema did not occur until well into the second half of the movie-making century, long after every other technologically advanced nation.

This paradox—that Canadians have played a large part in the world of film since the very beginning yet lacked a national cinema for so long—is due to one inescapable fact: that we rest next door to the most successful movie-making nation in the world. American interests in both distribution and exhibition have dominated the business of film in Canada. Indeed, American distributors have always considered Canada as part of their domestic market, a sort of 51st state by proxy. When the Ontario government purchased the Trenton Studios in 1924, the Provincial Treasurer noted in an opening speech that: "not one per cent of the pictures shown in Canada were Canadian made." Today, 72 years later, Canadian movies occupy 2.5 per cent of Canadian screen time. This damning statistic tells you just about everything you need to know about the progress of filmmaking in Canada.

But does this mean that we are inherently incapable of making popular and entertaining movies? Influential figures have always thought so. Ben Norrish, head of the Associated Screen News in Montreal (the biggest Canadian producer of theatrical shorts, newsreels and industrials from the 1920s into the 1950s) once said: "this country [can] no more make movies than grow grapefruit." John Grierson, the founder of the NFB and Canada's first Film Commissioner, felt American films were so superior that it would be ridiculous for Canadians to even try. The general thrust of this philosophy was repeated years later by Minister of Communications Flora MacDonald, when she introduced her ill-fated Film Products Importation Bill, which died on the order paper. She held a press conference in Toronto in 1986 and said that she looked forward to the day when Canadians could produce a popular international success like Australia's *Crocodile Dundee*, which was doing big box office business at the time.

What the Minister didn't realize was that Canadians had, indeed, produced, written and directed a much bigger success than *Dundee* in *Ghostbusters* two years earlier—but they had to go to Hollywood to do it. Does the fact that Ivan Reitman and company (Dan Aykroyd, Rick Moranis, Dan Goldberg, Joe Medjuck) made *Ghostbusters* with American money make them any less Canadian than David Cronenberg, or, indeed does the fact that Cronenberg has directed American films (*The Dead Zone*, *The Fly*, *M. Butterfly*) make him any less Canadian than Atom Egoyan, who, after all, was born in Cairo?

Echoing Norrish, Grierson and MacDonald is an influential group of critics, academics and programmers who are comfortable in their rigid definition of Canadian movies: those made here on a limited budget with little or no chance of making a commercial success in Canada or abroad. When the Art Gallery of Ontario launched its prestigious Oh! Canada project this spring, the multimedia show included a selection of Canadian films, or more precisely, experimental shorts, animation and documentaries, which the program notes proudly proclaimed were the "three genres [that] almost define Canadian cinema."

Of course, we make wonderful animated, documentary and experimental films, but Canadian filmmaking can no longer be defined so narrowly. Denys Arcand, David Cronenberg, Atom Egoyan, Michel Brault, John N. Smith, Patricia Rozema (and many others) have repeatedly demonstrated that Canadians are as capable as anyone of producing quality feature films which have broad box office appeal. The talents of Ivan Reitman, James Cameron and Norman Jewison (and many, many others) were nurtured in Canada and demonstrate that we can compete with the very best when it comes to making world-class cinema.

We, at *Take One*, think the 100th anniversary of film in Canada is a good time to reinvent the notion of exactly what constitutes Canadian cinema. We don't come to any conclusions; we just offer the evidence and 100 Canadians who have made a significant contribution to the world of film.

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