



Pete 'n' Joey

Have Grown Up.

Did Anyone Notice?

1972:

Will Cole, the irreverent, fun-loving Newfie, picks a fight with his ex-girl friend's new Toronto fiancé, disgracing himself and reaffirming his status as the town clown. **Fifteen years later:** John Munn, proud and loyal patriarch of an East Coast hamlet, finally comes to terms with the closing of the local mine. He leaves, taking a part of the island with him, retaining a stubborn loyalty to family and community.

1973: Chino, a tempestuous wannabe hood, goes nuts when he realizes his wife Elsie is sleeping with his best friend, Toby, from California. He recklessly screws up a holdup, resulting in his and another's death. **Eight years later:** Stanley Howard, an insensitive racing-car aficionado, finally matures upon realizing that his wife, Bonnie, is not carrying his own offspring. He sells his vehicle, abandons his buddies, and even changes his hair colour to match his newborn child.

1964: Peter Marks, a middle-class rebel without a cause, drives aimlessly down the highway in a stolen car, abandoned by his pregnant girlfriend, without a hope, without a clue. **Twenty years later:** Peter, now a baby boomer, calmly relates his story to Izzy, his own rebellious daughter. Not only does she abandon bombing an armaments factory with fellow militants, she even gets her activist boyfriend to follow suit as well.

Since its publication in the original *Take One* magazine (September 1973), Robert Fothergill's "Being Canadian Means Always Having to Say You're Sorry" (also reprinted as "Bully, Coward or Clown") has unofficially become one of the measuring sticks by which Canadian film continues to be evaluated.

For those unfamiliar with the article, Fothergill's thesis was essentially a lament on the condition of on-screen masculinity in

English-Canadian cinema. In contrast to the Québécois films of Claude Jutra or Gilles Carle, Fothergill scanned the entire repertoire of Don Shebib, Don Owen and company, to find one specific element wanting. If English-Canadian cinema was lacking in public enthusiasm, he argued, it was because audiences were being repulsed by the dismal state of the country's manhood on celluloid—symbolic of our own cultural emasculation, as it were. Or as Fothergill put it: "For a man, identification means involving oneself in the experience of impotence; for a woman it means sharing the discouragement which that impotence engenders." Assuming that the public could relate only to a collective image insofar that it was male, Fothergill concluded: "...it is very rare indeed to find an English-Canadian film in which a male character of some worth and substance is depicted as growing towards self-realization, achieving or even working towards a worthwhile goal, playing a significant part in any kind of community, or establishing a mature loving relationship with a woman." Dividing—or denigrating—

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the lead males into three categories—bully, coward or clown—he argued that such a low self-image resulted from being overshadowed by a superior sibling south of the 49th. Hence the “younger brother” thesis: whereas the older brother rebelled against the father country to rule the world, the younger brother has grown up with a painfully confined sense of his own capacity of self-realization. Putting the poor lad on the analyst's couch, Fothergill prescribed “more visions of emancipation and fewer fantasies of self-inflicted defeat.” In a later postscript, Fothergill clarified his position somewhat, even admitting that “the most interesting Canadian cinema will probably be that which bypasses the terms of my formula altogether.”

But **25 years later**, the theory of Canadian On-Screen Masculinity (COM) is still alive and kicking—or wriggling if you will. In “Gawking at Geeks” (the new *Take One*, Winter 1995), Anthony Andersen coughs up another variation of the same critique: “Canadian filmmakers are addicted to telling their stories through the eyes of Geeks. Single, if not asexual, devoid of charisma, hopelessly insecure, thoroughly polite, often non-verbal, almost always on the verge of flinching.” With the likes of *Family Viewing* and *Crime Wave*, Andersen concludes “The problem is that the relentless parade of Dweebs gives the impression that we’re a nation of bugs wriggling helplessly on our backs.” Since Pete ‘n’ Joey headed for the hills leaving Betty knocked up, nothing has changed.

Or has it? If one were to take a hard look at the lineup of Anglo-Canuck flicks over the last 25 years, it would appear that our “loser” has grown, achieving a degree of self-realization and proving to be worthy of another woman's standards in general accordance with Fothergill's terms. If you could identify the six titles at the beginning (*The Rowdyman/John & the Missus; Between Friends/Heartaches; Nobody Waved Good-bye/Unfinished Business*), you would notice the change in COM, coming from the same writers/directors (Gordon Pinsent, Don Shebib and Don Owen), and I offer the following additional examples as evidence for a much needed rebuke to the theory of COM.

If Rick Dillon, the hockey-playing, small-town “sheriff” in Peter Pearson's *Paperback Hero*, is caught in a downward spiral of terminal adolescence, Canadian hosers nowadays face the facts of life, often finding value in family or community. In *Train of Dreams*, it's a delinquent punk who finds his way through the juvenile penal system and eventually reunites with his family; in *Skip Tracer*, it's an amoral bill collector who repents and wipes out the debtor's records before walking out; in *Masala*, an orphaned hoodlum returns to his community, sacrificing his own life to protect his younger cousin; in *Rude*, a street artist risks his life to save his son from the claws of his former employer in crime; while in *The Hanging Garden*, it's the gay son of a dysfunctional family who comes to terms with his troubled past and kin. And if Canadian women could not find solace in the arms of Duddy Kravitz, at least the current crop is a lot more supportive: in *Milk and Honey*, a social worker gives up his career and citizenship for the sake of the Jamaican refugee he loves; in *Loyalties*, it's an abusive Métis husband who mends his ways, making it up with his ex-wife; in *Outrageous!*, it's a female impersonator who stands besides his schizophrenic roommate in good times and bad; and in *Kissed*, the male lover goes all the way to satisfy the spiritual needs of his sensually morbid girlfriend, hanging himself for the ultimate sex.

I reject Andersen's claim that today's male protagonist in Canadian cinema is capable only of inaction, “wriggling on their backs.” Regardless of their somnambulant visage or anemic complexion, they do, in fact, get off their hinds. In *Crime Wave*, Steven Penny survives Dr. Jolly's onslaught to write the script for his all-too-successful future; in *White Room*, the languid writer finally outsmarts a gaggle of reporters and even resurrects a desperate songwriter after she commits suicide; in *Family Viewing* and *Next of Kin*, the male leads take matters into their own hands for the preservation of the family and memory; in *The Silent Partner*, it's a pusillanimous bank clerk who outwits and outsmarts a cold-blooded crook; in *Whale Music*, a burnt-out rock star succeeds in overcoming his self-imposed isolation to rekindle his latest opus and win back his delinquent girlfriend; and in *Live Bait* and *Kitchen Party*, it's the atypical, frustrated teen who, after discovering that it's the parents who are at fault, expresses rebellion in his own particular way.

This is not to suggest that ineffectual male Canucks no longer exist in English-Canadian cinema, as films such as *The Lotus Eaters*, *Sitting in Limbo* or *Dancing in the Dark* prove, but in many cases, the failure of many on-screen protagonists reflects the influences of other factors—society, the church, the media or the environment. In *Lilies* and *The Boys of St. Vincent*, it's the Catholic church that drives its male figures to sexual repression and betrayal; in *Black Robe*, *Clearcut* and *The Traveller*, it is misplaced idealism that puts the white do-gooders out of touch with the native culture they struggle to identify with; in *Hard Core Logo*, it's the routines and lifestyle of punk rock that afflicts its central figures; in Cronenberg's films, from *Shivers* to *Dead Ringers*, it's the nature of disease or biological determinism that the likes of Roger St. Luc and the Mantle twins struggle against and fail; and in Guy Maddin's films, the protagonists' respective tragedies result by being stuck in communities stymied by ailments above and beyond their control. Such characters do not fail solely due to any inherent immaturity. Someone or something else is to blame.

It's also worth acknowledging those films in which the loser/winner scenario doesn't easily apply. Atom Egoyan's characters must engage in acts or lifestyles in environments that are either highly technocratic (*Speaking Parts* and *The Adjuster*) or emotionally dysfunctional (*Exotica* and *The Sweet Hereafter*): or the next-to-non-narrative scenarios of *Eclipse* or *Crash*, where both male and female undertake every possible act of sexual perversion to find themselves in exactly the same spot they were before. In short, nobody wins or loses. They only cope: or ponder the case of *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould*, where the



**Michael Park in *Between Friends*:
The quintessential Canadian loser.**

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ambiguities and the paradoxes of its central character are laid out in such a way to make it impossible to classify Gould as anything other than an enigma, as far from Will Cole as he is from Rocky Balboa.

I do not want to suggest that the above titles are all good films; only that there has been a real change in COM over the last 25 years.

Which prompts the question: Why do Canadian critics still insist that our men are perpetual losers? Even Geoff Pevere, who has written insightfully on the topic, prefers assessing any Canadian protagonist in light of Fothergill's terms. In fairness, he adopts a more positive attitude, seeing the loser as an act of defiance against the cultural domination from down South (he wrote in *Film Comment*, "...this long march of losers is not only comprehensible, it's necessary..."). While Pevere's approach—losers 'r' us, dammit—is valuable insofar that it exhumes what others would have gladly buried, it still pigeonholes the English-Canadian male into a thematic straitjacket, particularly in those aforementioned cases where our boy does make it after all. As Peter Morris aptly points out in "In Our Own Eyes: The Canonizing of Canadian Film," with the critical valorization of films like *Goin' Down the Road* and *Wedding in White*, many concluded that since those films were primarily focused on defeat and loss, they could only be evaluated in the negative. A certain "lament criticism" resulted, and, as Morris argues, such judgments "may ultimately have led to unwanted, even unwarranted conclusions: that Canadian culture was a lost cause and that Canadian films in particular were both predictable and dreary." Was it possible, Morris asks, that it was the critics themselves who were "living the dream life of the younger brother"?

To answer Morris's question, one might ask what concrete evidence did Fothergill offer for his thesis that Canadians, from Vancouver to Corner Brook, were being alienated from anything homegrown for the fear of partaking in "the experience of impotence" or "the discouragement which that impotence engenders"? I tried to find the affidavits from any citizen who could testify to this stance, but none were available.

The only real evidence Fothergill could produce was a personal account concerning *And No Birds Sing*, a 1968 student film made at the University of Manitoba. After describing the story of Joey, "a callow, mediocre university student who yearns wretchedly for Virginia, the sophisticated and beautiful arts Queen," producer John

Thompson (whom Fothergill incorrectly credits for making the film) is quoted as saying: "In essence, it's about a guy who realizes he's pretty much of a schmuck and there really isn't anything he can do about it." To add insult to injury, Thompson states: "it's quite close to being autobiographical for the man who wrote the script."

However, Thompson was not the director. Victor Cowie, an English professor at the faculty, acted as both writer and director. When I asked Cowie what his concept of the story was, he replied: "I saw the film as a kid's romantic quest that fails. Joey was yearning for an ideal fulfilment that was impossible, an ideal that is implanted in his mind by the very system that he is rejecting (ie, campus life). Though Joey is meant to be seen ironically, he's not meant to be contemptible. I didn't hold him responsible for any wrongdoing." *And No Birds Sing*, the first independent drama produced in Manitoba, still remains a lighthearted, beguiling look at student life in the late 1960s, not the morbid lump of male self-affliction that Fothergill would have it.

To equate male self-realization with box-office gold is a really iffy premise. English-Canadian cinema and its public perception of it has been plagued by bad distribution, substandard advertising and U.S. competition, as well as the twin frustrations of public and critical apathy. But there is no proven connection between the failure of Canadian cinema in terms of commercial or public appeal with its on-screen portrayal of the male protagonist. There is a tradition where our man does achieve heroic status, be it martyrdom or a gold medal: *Second Wind*, *One Man*, *The Terry Fox Story*, *Samuel Lount*, *The Boy In Blue*, *Malarek* and *Bethune: The Making of a Hero*. All these films flopped theatrically, barely remembered or cited respectfully today. Compare that lineup with those recent flicks that did achieve some measure of box-office success: *Exotica*, *Double Happiness*, *Margaret's Museum*, *When Night Is Falling*, *Kissed* and *Crash*. The lack of any on-screen charisma of Egoyan's dysfunctional denizens did not prevent *Exotica* from domestically grossing \$6 million in North America, whereas neither Donald Sutherland's fiery presence nor the heroic status of its legendary subject could rescue the costly *Bethune* from box-office disaster.

Whatever medicine Canadian film needs, it does not require a prescription concerning the self-image of our nation's on-screen masculinity—a prescription that was really a symptom of a whole other disease to begin with. "Bully, Coward or Clown" is an outdated artifact that no longer fits the current vogue, and film criticism in this country could experience real liberation by dumping the theory of COM into the paper shredder where it rightfully belongs. ■



Robert Carradine in *Heartaches*: Canadian losers nowadays face the facts of life, often finding value in family or community.