

Ken Eisner, *The Georgia Straight*

The argument that film criticism can be divided into Canadian and non-Canadian categories seems a spurious one. Writers rarely go in for a task this thankless because of intense loyalties or long-standing vendettas, so regional and tribal inclinations only tend to show up later, after learning a battery of otherwise useless skills. In fact, the whole notion of reserving special judgment for one's own national cinema is highly condescending, a trap many American critics are able to avoid only because, like their new president, they've been largely spared the knowledge that other nations exist. With Hollywood's polyunsaturated breath forever on our necks, it's hard to be so sanguine up here. In that sense, arts writers can't really be blamed for a slight tilt toward boosterism. In practice, however, the leaning has been the other way, with the tall-poppy syndrome more evident than any patriotic fervour.

Anyway, small Canadian films rarely make it past the festival circuit, in which they are competing with European and

Asian fare that critics also know will probably not return. Although there are the occasional small *causes célèbres*, such as last year's *New Waterford Girl* or the recent *Protection*, which lightly penetrate the public consciousness, critics know their words will make little difference, except to the press-hungry filmmakers themselves. Thanks to an overall tone of know-nothingism, fostered by dumbed-down dailies hiring "critics" better suited to a college paper rock column and weeklies that substitute institutionalized crankiness for informed discussion, much of this ink is of little lasting value. In fact, perhaps only the odd review by Montreal's Brendan Kelly or myself carries much show-business weight, and that's merely because we're the two north-of-the-border critics regularly contributing to *Variety*, a trade publication specifically aimed at American distributors.

This is discussion running parallel to a more urgent one that should be had about the government funding bodies

that add up to a de facto studio system in Canada. A while ago, one Telefilm-type confided in me, without apparent irony, that with the money-spending mandates they're given – generally relating to Canadian content and other non-aesthetic elements – such government agencies would rather fund 10 *Rupert's Lands* than one *Shakespeare in Love*. Feel free to substitute other titles, but the result is a lot of product that doesn't play as if it were made for anything like an actual audience. In the end, regardless of personal prejudices or limitations as writers, motivated moviegoers are still the crowd we're writing for. And I doubt if many of us think of them as Canadians. We'd prefer to think of them as ours.



Katherine Monk, *The Vancouver Sun*

The biggest challenge facing any critic is finding the right balance between intimacy and distance. On the one hand, you want to have an intimate connection to the work; on the other, you want to pull back far enough to see how it lives up to esthetic concerns of the day – which have huge historical value. For instance, the early work by Group of Seven painters was criticized by established Canadian critics of the day for being too unfinished. Now, the art is seen on its own merits. In such cases, the critics tell us more about the nature of the

Canadian identity than the work itself. So even though mainstream film criticism has become little more than a schmooze-op, it plays a sizable role in establishing and defining the popular current tastes.

When it comes to Canadian film, the function of the Canadian critic becomes even more important because suddenly, we're not operating in the open ocean of international film; we're in the primordial mud puddle called home, where new film species are beginning to pull themselves out of the slime. Do we help them out with false praise? Or should we be extra tough to make sure they have what it takes to survive? It comes down to balancing the two sides of the critical equation, which gets rather blurry on home turf. Not only are most Canadian critics on a first-name basis with the majority of filmmakers in this country, but the work itself is unique and doesn't seem to fit in to any established tradition. As Canadian critics, we have the ability to read our films better than anyone else because they reflect our landscapes and our sensibilities, but we apparently lack the desire to interpret them on their own terms. We damn them for their non-linear approach and overly cerebral stance. We refuse to make the leap of faith and meet the filmmaker halfway. If we don't make that leap from formulaic expectation, how on earth can we expect the audience to do it on their own?

For Canadian film to thrive, we need to guide audiences into a new appreciation of the work, the same way critics decoded the radical brushstrokes of the Group of Seven. Yes, the films are hard to read. Some of them work. Some don't. But we have to see them as artifacts from a distinct cultural tradition that embraces difference over sameness and ambiguity over closure. If we as critics, can celebrate these differences, audiences will as well. We have everything to gain, after all. The biggest problem facing Canadian film isn't the films – but the lack of audience interest.