

Rick Groen, *The Globe and Mail*

Considered in theory (where the light is always clear), the question is as trite as the answer. Should a Canadian critic treat a Canadian film differently than any other? Of course not. To use a shorter, more lenient measure would be patronizing and culturally defeating. To use a longer, more exacting measure would be perverse and culturally defeating. The critic, and (to the extent their functions overlap) the reviewer too, are obliged to bring their usual standards to an indigenous movie, giving Podeswa and Greyson no more or less respect than Scorsese and Kiarostami, moving (as ever) from the particular to the general and back again – that is, evaluating the aesthetic merit of the specific film, then placing that evaluation within the broader context of both the principals' previous work and the attendant cultural surroundings.

So much for the theory. Is the practice more difficult in the fragile case of Canadiana? Obviously, criticism is a subjective craft and we all have our aesthetic biases (favouring narrative over visuals, or action over dialogue). There's nothing necessarily wrong with such leanings, as long as they're consistently displayed. What changes with Canadian film is the greater possibility of indulging in social or political bias – favouring Winnipeg over Toronto, or French over English, or the director who lives next door over the one who doesn't. To give into those temptations may make you a proud Westerner or a kind soul or a fast friend, but it's got zilch to do with criticism. Similarly, this sort of non-aesthetic bias can get dressed up in the bright robes of cultural nationalism, whereupon a Canadian critic might seek to play a proactive role in the nurturing of a Canadian cinema – arguing for more screens, for more coverage, for attention to be paid. This is laudable, and has the happy result of conferring upon our plucky activist an instant elevation in status: to determined lobbyist, to adroit politician, to media pundit, to noble defender of the arts, to all-round sublime human being. Yes, worthy vocations all, yet criticism it assuredly ain't. That's a separate job, which may or may not be best performed from a separated distance.



Brian D. Johnson, *Maclean's*

Do I give preferential treatment to Canadian films? Yes and no. Yes, I pay more attention to them, but no, I don't relax my critical standards to give them an easy ride. Unlike the newspapers, *Maclean's* does not review every movie that gets released. There simply isn't the space. So part of my job is to decide which films I'll write about, and I favour those that are good, or significant, or unusual...or Canadian. I try to find room for every Canadian movie that receives national distribution. In a magazine with a national focus, Canadian films deserve more thorough coverage than Hollywood fare, although there are exceptions. I may not fight for space in the magazine to trash a mediocre film from here that has no hope of finding an audience. Canadian cinema has evolved to the point that it no longer needs coddling.

When I began reviewing movies about 15 years ago, I was lucky to see one or two Canadian movies a year that were worth writing about. They had to bear far more than their own weight in expectations. But even now I see no point in being unduly vicious and nasty to Canadian filmmakers, or to any independent filmmakers (manufacturers of Hollywood's toxins are another matter). Criticism should be fair and constructive – Patricia Rozema once thanked me for a negative review of *White Room*. The sticky question is this: In a tight-knit film community, based heavily in Toronto, how do you review films by people you've become friendly with over the years? For some critics, the answer is simple: don't go to film-festival parties, don't socialize with filmmakers, i.e., live in a safe, esthetic bubble. But I'd rather take my chances. I'm not only a critic, I'm a journalist, and I enjoy plunging into

the fray. That's where the good stories are. I like the buzz, the discourse, the gossip – everything that makes a film festival more than just a series of screenings. Sure, I've been known to engage in friendly conversation with the likes of Atom Egoyan, Don McKellar, Bruce McDonald, Patricia Rozema and even Robert Lantos, but these are primarily professional relationships. I want their films to be good. It's no fun being disappointed – and at Cannes, where art becomes sport, a winning Canadian film makes for a better story. But I'd be doing directors a disservice by protecting them with dishonest reviews. And you have to remember you're serving the reader, not the industry. Needless to say, if you become so fond of a filmmaker that you can't bear to point out that his or her latest work sucks, you should get someone else to review it.