



Denis Côté, *ICI*

Critiquing locally produced movies is an art. It is the artistry of measuring risk (I have had to dodge the bullets of vehement producers and filmmakers) as well as of pinning down the movie as metaphor in words and substituting constructive or humorous criticism for the negative. First rule of thumb is to keep my integrity and to take for granted that my reader is intelligent and discerning enough to recognize "his" critic's passions and personality, whereby a relationship of trust develops between us. When I write, I have, as well, an impulse for showmanship, a need to give insights different from that of other critics or columnists.

About 15 Québécois films are launched on our screens each year. For the past 20 years, the all-too-complicated network of government subsidized, state-controlled productions has put a damper on the emergence of uncompromisingly sharp, bold, even subversive works. From my perspective as a critic, who has taken assiduous notes on generally middle-of-the-road, bureaucratically condoned film products, I feel compelled to stir up the anger of a certain sector of the professional milieu as well as that of all-too-optimistic movie buffs. Faced with the artistic vitality of Iranian, Portuguese, Scandinavian, Hungarian or Asiatic cinematography, and so on, we must bow to the evidence (and write about it) that the "system" in Quebec has led to second-rate comedies and genre movies. It does not foster a taste for artistic risk, as it might, if, for example, some of our bolder directors were allowed to shoot a film more frequently than once every four years.

Confronted with nearly 400 screenings every year, I feel compelled to remind the reader of our cinema's lack of formal audacity and versatility. I feel ill at ease with the idea of giving more tolerant consideration to Quebec films on the pretext of their being national creations. The majority of columnists, who would pass themselves off as critics, and do the profession a disservice, fall complacently and ignorantly into this trap. The debate of "critics vs. auteurs" is an ancient one. To paraphrase the great critic Serge Daney, I would say that the critic bridges the gap between image-maker and spectator through meaningful dialogue. And there is precious little I can do for homegrown creators who all too easily get hot under the collar and refuse to play ball with the critic. **French text translated by Viviane Elnécavé.**



Matthew Hays, *Mirror*

I can read the responses from my peers now. Of course we would – and should – never, ever, judge Canadian films any differently than films from anywhere

else on the planet. Movies are movies, we're critics and it's our job to tell the public what they need to know. Straightforward, honest, consumer-report-style criticism should be devoid of any kind of nationalism.

It all sounds good enough, but I suspect that we all, at least to some extent and not necessarily on a conscious level, react to Canadian films in a slightly different way than we do films from elsewhere. In particular, my own careful analysis of my gut and cerebral responses to Canadian movies has led me to believe I do react quite differently to them. (Often times, this analysis entails looking at reviews I've written months ago, reviews I often had to write very, very quickly on deadline and thus had to respond primarily from my gut.) But I'd like to feel that it has

less to do with their being Canadian and more to do with their being independent and operating outside of the massive merchandising machine that is the Hollywood studio system. How can one possibly rate two different films – one starring Julia Roberts, say, and another starring a Canadian unknown – by precisely the same criteria? For me, the dichotomy comes not so much between Canada vs. everything else, as Hollywood vs. independent (though I realize the term independent has lost much of its meaning in the past decade and is somewhat problematic in and unto itself).

Having said all of this, I confess that I still try, very consciously, to judge a Canadian film on its merits as an independent film and avoid any flag-waving instincts that risk rising to the surface. Last summer, when I raved about *Maelström* in both the *Mirror* and *The Globe and Mail*, some doubted my sincerity. When the film made my Top Ten list in December, someone only barely facetiously suggested that it was there to fulfill a quota. Canadian films are vir-

tually always independent, and must be assessed as such. But by the same token, if we are to be believed as critics, we must try, as best we can, to hold out praise for the films that really deserve it. Allow me these two minds on the question; I acknowledge the bias, but try to temper it as best I can, whenever I can.