Canadian Films Meet the Press

by Brian Lewis and Jamie Gaetz

We're probably going to see The Quiet Earth. It looks very depressing, and I heard it's a film about the end of the world, so it should go with my mood.

-A Patron of Montréal's Cinéplex, June 15, 1986

Oh, why not. There are lots of reasons to see a movie. But the implications of the fact are enormous. The multi-billion dollar theatrical film industry, the economic well-being—and quite often the egos—of hundreds of thousands of creators, artists, agents, technicians, distributors, public relations executives, accountants, lawyers—the prosperity of Southern California itself is essentially dependent upon such arbitrary and idiosyncratic decisions on the part of millions of individual cinemagoers.

It would be so much easier for everyone if people could be forced, compelled to go see certain movies; but they must feel impelled to pay a ticket price; they must be seduced or compelled to go to see certain movies; but they must feel impelled to pay a ticket price; they must be seduced or

haphazardly outside of several Montréal theatres in late June, why they had decided to see the films they were seeing that night—what, in particular, had influenced them? Nineteen had no idea. One cited the name of a director, and one gave the name of an actor. Two mentioned the subject matter. Four mentioned seeing previews or advertisements. Seven mentioned "word-of-mouth" recommendations by friends or family. And six suggested that they had been influenced by newspaper reviews.

While the film industry cannot easily control the largely spontaneous decisions of individuals choosing to see or not to see a particular film on a particular night, it does its best to influence those decisions using time-proven tools of mass seduction. Two of the most powerful are the presence of stars on the screen, and publicity campaigns in the mass media.

A third factor, the newspaper review, has a curious status. Partly public service announcement, partly cultural news, partly analytical, partly manifesto, a review is, from the industry perspective, largely unpredictable. It is not as easily controlled.

American producers and distributors are masters of the persuasive tools which they can control directly: the star system and the public relations game. The producers sign the stars. The larger distributors have the resources for massive promotional campaigns. They continually throw at the public known quantities, known formulas, promoted and hyped to the gills. Under these circumstances, the unpredictable and largely independent effect of film reviews can be rendered trivial. Given a big star, enough promotion, and a 1600-line print release, even a moderately expensive horror can recoup its costs in the few weeks before critical response and "word-of-mouth" could work to kill it at the box office.

Just how influential are the critics? Everyone we talked to had a personal story or two, either about the power of critics to make a film, or their inability to make any difference at all. On the one hand, the phenomenal success of Le Déclin de l'Empire américain was largely attributed to the critical acclaim the film received in newspapers and at festivals, and to subsequent, snowballing, word-of-mouth recommendations. Ron Base, film critic for the Toronto Star, cited The Grey Fox and My American Cousin as two more Canadian films pushed towards success by the critics.

On the other hand, critical response to The Peanut Butter Solution made no difference at all, according to the producer Rock Demers. The film was a great box-office success in Quebec where it had negative reviews. Conversely, in English Canada, where the film was largely well-received by the critics.

The powers of the critic to educate and ultimately to influence individual decisions can obviously be rendered insignificant or trivial by factors such as a big promotional campaign, the release date of the film, the subject or theme of a film, the reputation of a director, and the presence of stars on the screen.

Those powers are limited, too, by the fact that people have idiosyncratic attitudes towards film reviews and film reviewers. If, as a consumer, I will usually look at the ads, then read the reviews when I am trying to choose a film, my father will only look at the ads. Sixteen of the 40 cinemagoers we talked to rather forcefully declared their absolute independence from reviews, denying they would ever allow themselves to be influenced on any occasion: "It makes no difference what they say," "We decide for ourselves, really," "I make my own decisions."

People who do read the reviews tend to have quite personal relationships with specific film critics—the review is associated with an identifiable personality, whose credibility is factored into the decision-making process. Some critics people love to hate, which means that they will read them, but not necessarily be inclined to follow their leads. Other critics are more clearly "consulted" by cinemagoers.

If the powers of the critic to influence filmgoing decisions are clearly limited, there is nonetheless consensus in the industry that there is a type of cinema whose success is more closely
linked to and dependent upon critical reception...in the 1600-print, overpromoted Hollywood release, the unknown cinema, lacking stars, underpromoted, largely ignored. This is the situation of most non-American foreign films in Canada, and, ironically, most Canadian films as well.

Ray Mainland, owner and manager of the independent Ridge Theatre in Vancouver, says that for his business, "Re-vissions are very, very important. The movies we play are not your regular run-of-the-mill Hollywood movies that people are aware of, with publicity that's done from Hollywood. The movies we play are alternative movies, with small advertising budgets, and for the most part the titles are completely unknown. Without getting movie reviewers to give us a hand to explain their films, it would be very, very difficult for us to survive."

Victor Loewy, president of Vavafilm, put it this way: "Does it matter what the critics say? Of course it does, but it depends on the film. If it's a film like Hold-Up, which has a broad comedy appeal, it doesn't make any difference what the critics say. On the other hand, if it's a quality film like Pourvoir I 'ndependant, which is a first-time film, the critics have great power. That makes or breaks a film...in general terms, the critics can certainly make or break a Quebec or Canadian film. If people haven't heard anything about a film before, they won't go. It's as simple as that. My American Cousin is a good example. The critics created this film."

When asked whether the film critic perceived any sort of bias, pro or con, towards the Canadian cinema in the popular press, Ron Base (Toronto Star): "I think that these days if there's a bias it's probably in favor of Canadian films. I think there was (an anti-Canadian) film bias in the late '70s...there was a feeling that people like David Cronenberg were terribler filmmakers, and you knew, there was the infamous piece in Saturday Night by Robert Fulford, over a Cronenberg movie that said something like 'My God, if this is what Canadian films are all about, the government shouldn't be giving money to these sorts of things. It's a terrible, horrible, horror of horrors.' I think this was the general view of Canadian films...Well, since then, things have changed. For one thing, there's a whole new generation of film critics at work...and I don't think any of us came in with any of those biases. In fact we've probably given as much to Canadian films...One of the things that has happened is that Canadian films have also happened to get better. I don't think anyone walks into a Canadian film anymore with their teeth gritted. There's a certain amount of excitement."

Sheila Benson (Los Angeles Times): "When I approach a Canadian film I have no particular attitude, absolutely none at all. What I look for in a film is that it succeeds on its own terms. That's part of it - and then I guess where it stacks up with films in the history of films, so that you don't judge Once Upon a Time in America with Stranger Than Paradise. I look where it's coming from, sure, but not geographically..."

Michael Wilmington (Los Angeles Times): "When I think of Canadian film, of course I think of the Canadian Film Board...In more recent years, I tend to think of sort of lyrical films set in the outdoors, or dealing with memory, like the Phillip Borsos films and some of the French-Canadian films from before that.

Those are just general expectations I tend to bring...I think Canadian films don't really have much of a national identity...It's hard to say what Canadian films I've liked recently, because I have to think what's Canadian and what's not...The Grey Fox - of course that was several years ago. That was very good, but I would say that it had almost no Canadian identification in anybody's mind. Even the Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz, I remember that played here with no Canadian identification at all. It seemed to be set in Canada - I didn't know that it was a Canadian film until years later."

Jay Scott (Globe and Mail): "Indigenous critics are harder on indigenous work than critics from other countries. I think that's always true. The reason is that if you grow up in a society you have a certain concept of it, and you have a real strong sense of what is realistic/unrealistic, believable/unbelievable about the dramatic presentation of that society...So you have more prejudices, if you will, of what is possible within the framework of your own country...Fascinatingly, we don't receive any good reviews in Germany because his films were taken by German critics to be much more naturalistic, much more about Germany than they were...And mostly it's the American critics who are much harder on American films than critics in almost any other country are about those same movies...All countries I think tend to look at the products of their own society much more critically than they do what is imported."

The question of press bias is an important one, particularly for a Canadian cinema which is still largely unknown, and underpromoted, and, thus, largely dependent upon critical response and word-of-mouth recommendations. There are clearly differences of opinion within the film industry. These quotes suggest a range of critical approaches, from a straightforward enthusiasm for the Canadian cinema as it is now emerging, to a detached, neutral stance, to a startlingly to an absolute condemnation of the genre and the filmic qualities of a film, to the suggestion that a critic might inevitably be more critical of his or her own national cinema.

The critics we talked to also had different opinions about the purposes of film reviewing. Some tended to see a review as a simple consumer service: will the target audience enjoy the film? Should they spend the money? Others saw themselves as facilitators, preparing the audience to appreciate more readily the themes and formal strategies of a film. A few saw themselves as educators, using the film of the moment to produce a more general kind of knowledge: about the cinema itself or about issues raised in the film - "giving people something to think about."

An approach might be imposed by a critic's work situation: a "consumer guide" complained that the space limitations of his newspaper and the assumed popular readership dictated that he handle the films as he did. But it is often the result of a conscious choice: a "facilitator" found the idea of the "educator" film critic to be a patronizing concept.

As there are multiple points of view about the general purpose of film criticism, so too critics bring to their work different expectations, concerns, presuppositions, and experiences. A film is just a film, a piece of plastic until it is projected. A review reflects a relationship between the critics and the film - it intellectualizes and objectifies experience which happens in the body and mind of the critic in contact with a film. A review depends as much upon what the critic brings to the film as it does upon what the film brings to the critic.

A common complaint in academic
institutionalized bias; no matter what types of films Canadians make, they will normally be judged against expectations developed in relationship to standard models, standard genres of film practice. Sometimes, as in this case, they will come out on top. Usually they won’t. Canadians quite often make different kinds of films, films for which the standard assumptions and vocabularies of most popular critics, even the most intelligent, are simply inadequate.

One of the Canadian films we decided to investigate was Scanners, because there really isn’t very much distinctly Canadian about it. What would be the point of view towards a Canadian film which looked American but happened to be Canadian?

Scanners was David Cronenberg’s fifth commercial release. Produced in 1979 for about $4.5 million, it was launched simultaneously in 46 American and Canadian theatres in January, 1981. Cronenberg was sent on an 80-city tour. The second week after its release, Arco Embassy, the American distributor, printed a favorable review of the film in the two-page newspaper ads in New York and Los Angeles. It quickly became the top-grossing film in the U.S., finally taking in about $18 million.

Reviews of the film were generally most favorable in the big U.S. cities. Pierre David finds American critics more “entertainment-oriented” than their Canadian counterparts. “It’s very, very visible in Los Angeles, where I live, that if you have a movie that is made for a certain audience, like Scanners, the reviews look at it from that perspective; not from an overall ‘cinema’ perspective. They will say, ‘Scanners delivering in the horror category.’

Not that there was unanimity in the U.S. “Don’t let anybody tell you that Scanners is a superior horror movie. It’s just another blood-and-guts extravaganza from David Cronenberg, the Canadian prince of shock,” (Atlanta Journal). But most of the American reviews were ultimately appreciative, and as you move to the New York, Washington, and L.A. critics, you begin to find unashamed praise for the film. Vincent Canby is a lonely exception. While he appreciated the film’s direction and special effects, he didn’t like unnecessary script complications, which “thicken the plot” and undermine the movie’s “essential foolishness.” Foolishness was less important for Archer Winston of the New York Post than the “gigantic goings-on of horror” produced by the special effects. Gary Arnold of the Washington Post described the film as “unsuavely brainy.” After a long analysis of the plot, the dialogue and the special effects, Arnold concluded that Scanners is “an authentic, astonishing filmmaking style,” a “remarkably cinematic mind” likely to secure a place in mainstream filmmaking. Pat Dowell (Washington Star) liked Cronenberg’s talents to those of Hitchcock and De Palma. Sheila Benson of the Los Angeles Times loved the humour and visual style of the film. “Scanners is first-class in its effects. Almost nothing is said in the U.S. press about the fact that the film is Canadian.

In the Canadian press one finds more emphasis on this fact. Reviews are often accompanied by interviews with Cronenberg, and long feature articles, full of references to the astonishing financial success of a film made in Canada. But, with a couple of exceptions, few critics seemed to really like the film. One of the exceptions was Bruce Kirkland (Toronto Star). Kirkland loved it. In a feature article, Kirkland cited Cronenberg’s belief that “the Canadian temperament, restrained, conservative, cautious – gives him problems he doesn’t face when his films show in the U.S. and Europe.” Said Cronenberg to Kirkland: “You know what is said: ‘A prophet is without honour in his own land.’ But it hurts.”

That Kirkland doesn’t challenge Cronenberg’s sly statement perhaps reflects the fact the film’s supporters found themselves in more or less a defensive posture in Canada. In fact, in his review of the film, Kirkland seemed apologetic to his readers – each glowing praise accompanied by a kind of warning: “It harbors no moral, no redeeming social value, no reason to be, other than it exists to shock your sensibilities...” “The story itself is inventive, albeit lacking in passion, emotion or even traces of what we fancy is the human essence...” “If you accept the right of horror films to exist, then Scanners rates with the best of the genre.” It seemed to be the genre itself which horrified most of the Canadian critics. No matter how many times Cronenberg might say, “The metaphysics are what really interest me, that makes the movie worth doing” (interview with Bruce Bailey), you aren’t going to find a lot of “human essence” or philosophical wisdom in the film – just plain, foolish fun. Kirkland had fun. So did Richard Labonte (Ottawa Citizen), who correctly assessed Cronenberg’s considerable talents as a “horror-suspense film stylist.” Labonte loved the film without apology: “sensational... but not sensationalistic.” He refused to make excuses for Cronenberg either, calling him “the most professional and the most profit-minded of Canadians at work these days.”

But Scanners was not Bruce Bailey’s idea of fun (Montreal Gazette): “The film caters to people who get a kick out of pulling wings off flies.” And Gina Mallet (Toronto Star) smugly dismissed the film. She brought to it whole sets of unrequited and unreasonable expectations – she simply wanted to see a different kind of movie. At best, she was looking for a kind of philosophical depth and a logic which a Cronenberg film is not likely to provide. “Naturally these dangerous humanoids wish to take over the world. Why, one always wonders! No, at least you get right down to it, they almost seem to be so much more motivated when they’re on the outside. What will they do when the mundanity of ordinary human life hits them?” The very least she expected was a film which works in the same way a Hitchcock film works: “What is truly frightening, as the master Alfred Hitchcock taught, is what is most ordinary. A successful suspense film is anchored in a reality as familiar as an old shoe.” Scanners was simply neither authentic nor subtle enough to be good.” Noting the presence of Mavor Moore in the film, he said, “The critics generally affected the success of this film for better or for worse: as a rule, teenagers don’t read film reviews at all.”

Les Bons débarras is a film which could not try to compete in the standard genre. Its case presents an entirely different perspective on the importance of film criticism. The critics by and large loved this film, and producer Marcia Couelle had no doubt that success in the press was crucial to success at the box office.

She particularly attributes the comeback of Marcia Couelle to the impact of the American critics, describing a kind of rebound effect. The reviews in New York were positive and provocative. This led to a nine-week run in New York, and a successful run in Boston, Los Angeles, and other large American cities. The enthusiasm was picked up in national magazines such as Woman’s Wear Daily and Glamour. “Critics generally affected the success of this film for better or for worse: as a rule, teenagers don’t read film reviews at all.”

Marcia Couelle’s handling of the film might indeed blush to see Canadian culture reach so low a point.” Scanners was not a film with a high Canadian-identity quotient. The lead heavy of the film, Canadian actor Mike Ironside, called it a “six-block movie. You have to accept it or rip it off. You feel embarrassed. After it’s over, you walk about six blocks and go in and have a pizza.”

The major American critics, whether they liked the film or not, were content to accept and to evaluate the film on the “universal” norms of the horror-thriller. While they mentioned the fact that Cronenberg is a Canadian, the Canadianism of the film was not an issue for them. They were interested in ideas, plots, or con. And under such conditions the film must compete on equal terms for entertainment dollars – and for critical comment – with the major, large-budget Hollywood kind of publicity doesn’t...

We found that any critical bias concerning the Canadianism of the film was likely to come from the American critics themselves, and was likely to be negative. Less than 30% of the American critics, describing the fact that Canadians would be playing this game, even if they played to win. Occasionally in the American press we found outrage that such films should be made at all. In the Canadian press we found this compounded with the outrage that a Canadian should be making such films. In any case, according to Pierre David, it is unlikely that the response to a critic’s work affected the success of this film for better or for worse: as a rule, teenagers don’t read film reviews at all.

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Le débarras avait été nommé pour onze Genies, l’un des cinq qui n’ont pas été remportés.

Les critiques québécois ont été unanime à dire que les films de l’année sont L’été ou l’importance de ce film? De et L’été, ou l’importance de ce film? De...
GOLDEN SHEAF AWARD WINNERS

Best Production of Festival / Best Drama over 30 minutes / Best Editing / Best Script / Superchannel Best Script Award

IKWE
Norma Bailey, Director / National Film Board, Prairie Region
Best Editing, Laura Mazur / Best Script, and Superchannel Award, Wendy Lill

Best Documentary Under 30 Minutes
RETURN TO DRESDEN
Martin Duckworth, Director
National Film Board, Montreal

Best Health and Medicine
AIDS, A FAMILY EXPERIENCE
Robin Weatherstone, Director
Weatherstone Productions, Toronto

Best Experimental Production
ON LAND OVER WATER
Richard Kerr, Director / Video Department, University of Regina, Regina

Best Instructional & Educational Production
SCIENCE FAIR KIDS
Michael Mirus, Director
New Science Films, Winnipeg

Best Drama Under 30 Minutes
THE CONCERT STAGES OF EUROPE
Gilles Walker, Director / Atlantis Films Ltd.
6 National Film Board, Toronto

Best Nature-Environment Production
ISLANDS AT THE EDGE
James Murray, Director / CBC, Toronto

Best Promotional Production
SASKEXPO '86 – WELCOME
Larry Bauman, Director / Camera
West Film Associates, Regina

Best Animation
TABLES OF CONTENT
Wendy Tilly, Producer and Director / Vancouver

Best Documentary Under 30 Minutes
LA FAMILIA LATINA
German Gutierrez, Director
National Film Board, Montreal

Certificate of Merit
LE GROS DE LA CLASSE
Spiral Film, Quebec City

BLUE SNAKE
Rhombus Media, Toronto

THE PRICE OF DAILY BREAD
Galaia Films, Winnipeg

Craft Awards
Best Cinematography
Richard Leiterman, Curtis Peterson
Best Sound Editing
Robert Leach, Jane Tattersall
HERMAN BULUS HANGA PARBAT
Wacko Productions, Jasper

Best Direction
Paul Baillargeon
Best Performance
Kim Yariot-Bahnsen / SONG
National Film Board, Montreal

Best Original Music Score & Certificate of Merit
Michael Baker, Charles Williamson
EMERGING NORTH
Yellowknife Films, Yellowknife

Antoinette (Nette) Krysty
Canadian Heritage Award

AGAINST REASONS: A PORTRAIT
OF JACK MCELLENN
Close Up Productions, Toronto

Yorkton Short Film & Video Festival Inc.
49 Smith Street East
Yorkton, Saskatchewan 306-782-7077

May 20 - 24, 1987
evaluated Les Bons débarras “from the outside,” applying supposedly objective norms, based on genre considerations (in this case the intimate, family-based psychological drama), and more or less pure entertainment value criteria. These critics appreciated the performances, the themes, the camerawork — but wasn’t the film just a bit too long, a bit too episodic?

If Les Bons débarras was a sign of a phenomenon which the Québécois critics had long been waiting for, The Grey Fox was really its English counterpart. In a special feature for the Toronto Sun, Ron Base claimed that The Grey Fox “... heralds a new beginning for Canadian film.” His statement reflected a general feeling in the industry — The Grey Fox is seen by many to mark a change. Negative attitudes towards Canadian film permeated the industry. Rassment followed upon disaster, for Canadian film a tw-and-a-half stars Consumer Guide awarded it, calling it “just a movie, and not a good one.”

Bruce Bailey, writing for the Toronto Sun, was one of many who viewed the film as a “beacon” for the industry. “Virtually every imaginable obstacle before it was finished and released. Commercial release did not come until April, 1983, although a one-week run at Toronto’s Fine Arts Theatre in the fall of 1982 allowed Canadians to qualify for the Genies.”

Perhaps because it came on the heels of the tax shelter period, when Canadians had long been waiting for, The Grey Fox was simply “good.” In the enthusiasm. He liked its makers have provided each character with small, realistic details.”

While The Grey Fox was apparently not a smashing commercial success, indications are that it was profitable. One Hollywood Reporter article claimed that it brought in $6.5 million in theatrical markets. There is not much doubt that good press helped this film. Although Farnsworth was a semi-known quantity — having been nominated for several Oscars — Borsos was for the most part an unknown. The press functioned as a kind of calling card for the film.

Ina Warren stated it plainly in The Globe and Mail: “The Grey Fox gets some help from U.S. critics.” Warren described the enthusiastic response of “big gun critics” in New York, like Rex Reed and Vincent Canby. She described Chicago critics Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel “gush(ing)” in tandem on their syndicated reviews shows. There seems to have been a direct correlation between press and box office receipts: in Montreal, where the film received minimal critical exposure and enthusiastic reviews, it didn’t do well at all; the film did best in cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, New York, Chicago and San Francisco, where it received voluminous and very positive, press comment.
Winning seven Genies certainly helped the film. As one Canadian distributor active in the business told us, "If you can say that it won the Canadian equivalent of an Oscar, you’ve got another selling point." Without the promotional budget of a large American release, every one of these selling points counts.

Basically, critics on both sides of the border responded to the same elements of the film: Richard Farnsworth’s acting, Frank Tidy’s cinematography, Phillip Borsos’ directing. The major difference was their attitude towards it nationally. There was a definite positive bias towards this film in the Canadian English language press. Vaunted as a genuine Canadian film phenomenon by the Canadians, The Grey Fox was simply not evaluated from this context by the Americans. Rather, it was evaluated as one film of a genre, the small-budget, low-budget Canadian film. The Grey Fox was simply not seen in the context of a genre, and as a film which artistically fulfilled the characteristics of this rather marginal genre. In English-Canada it was credited as an authentic Canadian expression, a sign of vitality in the Canadian film industry, and at the same time a compelling and virtually unique movie.

My American Cousin is a film which panned pavement for two years, until she eventually found backing from Peter O’Brien (The Grey Fox, One Magic Christmas). The $1.3 million budget was put together with a $400,000 CBC pre-sale, Telefilm support and private investments. The production depended mostly on unknown, non-professional talent. There were no big-name elements or quantities to sell, and as O’Brien says, "without selling elements... you have to work a little harder, using sweat instead of cash. The risk paid off artistically - the film was credited as an authentic Canadian film. In Toronto Festival of Festivals, where it opened in Vancouver, it took six Genies including best film, best director, best actor, and best actress - and seems to be paying off commercially as well - the film grossed $100,000 in Canada, and reached break-even point on March 23, with a reported $650,000 videocassette deal. The film premiered at the 1985 Toronto Festival of Festivals, where it shared the International Prize with The Grey Fox. It was then launched commercially in Toronto on November 1, 1985, closing on June 26, 1986. It opened in Vancouver one week after then theatres in New York. The Times named the film "pretty much Hollywood fare."

The American release pattern has been slow and cautious. It opened in the Seattle-Portland area - a traditionally good market for Canadian films, and particularly appropriate for My American Cousin - in March, 1986. It didn't open in New York until August 15. Subsequent releases largely depend on the enthusiasm generated by the New York run. As Robert Garock of Scanners, New York, explained to us again, "Good reviews in New York... will pretty much carry the film all across the country.

My American Cousin is arguably the most overtly Canadian film to come out of English Canada for some time. Yet in the reviews of this film we found the same types of patterns at work which we had found in the critiques of the other films. Generally speaking, Canadian and American reviewers shared similar thematic, stylistic and production concerns, but contextualized them differently. American reviewers mentioned that this was a Canadian film in passing, if at all - much as they would a film from Great Britain or the Netherlands, the English-language Canadian critics emphasized that fact, and it became an important part of their evaluative criteria. The Americans looked for universals and genre characteristics. The Canadians focused on particularities and differences behind the universals.

Archer Winston (New York Post) headed his review "Fine First Film from Canada" and concluded it: "Canadian as the picture is, it does tell a universal truth..." The only mention of the Canadian fact of the film in Nina Darnton's New York Times review comes as a passing remark in the second paragraph. In the New York Daily News, Kathy Carroll leaves it to her readers to assume the nationality of the film from its British Columbia location; she doesn’t bother to mention it! Many of the critics, both American and Canadian, commented upon the fact that the film was Wilson's first feature, commented upon the success of the unknown actors and actresses, and commented upon the film's loving portrayal of a particular time period. But the Canadians were, by and large, more interested in the specificities of these facts. While Darnton, for instance, talked about the film evoking a period of life "many of us still blush to remember", (universals) Canadian critics would appreciate and marvel that, in addition to this, the film provided a portrayal of the Okanagan Valley at a certain moment in time. To the Americans, Sandy Wilson was a talented young director; to the Canadians she was a talented young Canadian director - which made her all the more remarkable and interesting.

While My American Cousin was not exalted in the press as a "great Canadian film phenomenon," it is not surprising that one generally finds more enthusiasm among the English-language Canadian critics than among the American critics. From the English-Canadian perspective - focusing on specificities and differences as well as genre qualities and universals - there is simply more to appreciate.

Bruce Kirkland called My American Cousin "a textbook example of how to break a hit movie in Canada with no money, no stars, no hoopla, no Hollywood." Feature articles and interviews, particularly in the Toronto and Vancouver press, were used to build up interest in the film in the six months before commercial release. The film was launched only after its Festival of Festivals success, and then to selected theatres in selected markets, where it would likely arouse enthusiasm and play for a long time. Reviews were positive. Genies were won. More interest was generated, and word about the film continued to spread. Only then did the film open in New York, in preparation for further penetration of U.S. theatrical markets. Each step builds upon the previous step. And all down the line, critical response in the press, as a catalyst and as a prod, keeping the whole lumbering machine going.

Does it matter what the critics say? Of course it does, but it depends on the film." (Victor Loewy). Scanners was not released in a typically controlled, low-budget Canadian pattern: theatre by theatre, city by city, relying on the effect of critical response and snowballing word-of-mouth. Scanners didn't have to be promoted this way. Its major appeal was an already known quantity - the appeal of its genre, of its vampire shock and horror film. Scanners was released in 400 prints before the critics even saw it.

But the impact of the critic is clearly important in the case of most authentic Canadian films. We found this to be the true for Les Bons débarras, The Grey Fox, and My American Cousin. We suspect it to be true for Le Décnil de l’empire américain. The success or failure of such films largely depends upon the response of the Montreal critics - the French-Canadian market, the Toronto critics in English Canada, and the New York critics in the U.S. These films are, comparatively speaking, "underpromoted" and "understarred." Their major appeals are not the classical Hollywood genre appeals. They look different and feel different from typical Hollywood fare. In the case of such films, distributors rely on a snowball effect. And at the center of the snowball, critics play the role of making unknown quantities known. Recalling Vincent Canby's remark that "Decline... is like finding yourself as a dinner party host at the very least a film review provides a kind of carte de visite; at its best it generates interest in and facilitates access to new patterns, new and authentic models of film practice. "Calling cards," "making the unknown known," "facilitating access" - these words perhaps, but at its best, film criticism can be seen as a radical, even subversive activity. Everyone has been talking lately about the profound structural imbalances in the Canadian film industry. The distribution sector is essentially an oligopoly controlled by foreign interests. Screens are dominated by foreign products. Box office revenues leave the country to undercapitalize in all of its sectors. Clearly, it has never been in the interests of the American Majors who dominate film distribution in Canada to...
promote the Canadian cinema.

These problems are being studied and confronted in Ottawa and the provincial capitals. The critics, willingly or not, knowingly or not, are on the ideological front lines of the conflict. “Making the unknown known,” critics have the power to help nurture a public “Making for the Canadian cinema, simply by introducing and making accessible to cinephiles the possible values of new and culturally authentic models of film expression.

Looked at in this light the question of bias seems more complicated and more important. Clearly, according to our findings, Canadian critics are more often “biased” than their American counterparts, that is, they will incorporate into their evaluative criteria the “ Québécoisness ” or “Canadianness” of a film, normally in favor of the film.

Clearly, as well, the American critics are less obviously implicated or partisan towards film from Canada. To use Pierre David’s words, they are more “entertainment-oriented.” But where, finally, do they come from – these supposedly standard norms of entertainment value to which most of these critics refer – norms which say, for instance, that plots must be tight, questions must be answered, and conflicts resolved? Are these norms truly basic and universal to good, entertaining cinema; or have we simply been bludgeoned into believing that by the pitiless repetition of the same American models, the same patterns, the same genres, over and over again on the screen?

We are confronted with a true hegemony of discourse. There are models of films which we have learned to expect and learned to love, to the exclusion of all others. The standards and norms of the critics are largely derived from these models – their judgments reflect expectations based upon the current, dominant modes of film practice. Critics are not actually “unbiased,” but their bias is an institutional one, so big as to be invisible, so pervasive as to seem natural. These individual, “unbiased” critics operate within a discourse, a set of paradigms which is itself a bias.

And, like all “institutions,” this one supports itself. The objectified, “universalized” expectations applied to films in the popular press, helps to assure that films in the future will look more or less the same as films today, and films forevermore. There is a vicious circle here: reflecting institutionalized expectations in their critical statements, the critics merely work to reinforce and to perpetuate them.

Who can break the circle? Canadians quite often make different kinds of film – films for which the standard critical assumptions and vocabularies are largely irrelevant or simply inadequate. Operating within a discourse, a set of models which is itself biased against these types of films, most of the “objective” critics do the best they can in their search for entertainment-value qualities. And so, even in the critical response to films such as Les Bons débarras and Le Déclic, it is the search for universal thematic and stylistic elements which prevails. We find genres into which they fit. We find a kind of stylistic flair and a kind of classical mastery of the materials we can praise and hold on to. We find themes we can believe in. And thus our films, while occasionally appreciated, are reduced, compared and flattened into the same old things.

It is the blatantly “biased” critics who show themselves to be more capable of getting at the truth, the reality, and the value of these alternative modes of film expression. While their bias in favor of the Canadian cinema is more obvious, more partisan, it does work to allow an appreciation of the specificities and differences inherent in new forms of film practice. To that extent, their commitment to the Canadian cinema can be seen as a liberating phenomenon, stimulating new patterns of thought, new sets of expectations. It is often only when they rise to their full, most subjective passions, that we glimpse the critics in their most subversive and potentially most important role.

“With Les Bons débarras, Quebecois cinema finally delivers the goods it’s been promising for twenty years.”

“Dialogue like we’ve never heard in Quebecois cinema. Mankiewicz figures among the most talented filmmakers in Quebec.”

“A great Quebecois film, if not the greatest Quebecois film.”

“How to describe all the film’s grandeur and importance without getting people fed up, to tell all we love that Les Bons débarras must be seen because it is of rare beauty and this kind of cinema is not made often and it is not made everywhere. For the first time, we want to, and can say: The best cinema in the world is Quebecois cinema.”

“No rhythm, no distinction, no flair.”

“The Grey Fox is the Genie’s false glory. Shot after shot, an impression of emptiness installs itself.”