



• Are critics worth reserving seats for? Ron Base and Alex Barris say 'Yes'

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

OK, 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 to see certain movies; but they must feel impelled to pay a ticket price; they must be seduced or inspired, tantalized, piqued, attracted negatively, or attracted positively to a film.

We asked 40 cinemagoers, chosen

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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-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 press, it flopped at the box office. Launched in the Christmas season, when the best screens are dominated by new American releases, the film never had a chance.

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 often 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 response than 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.

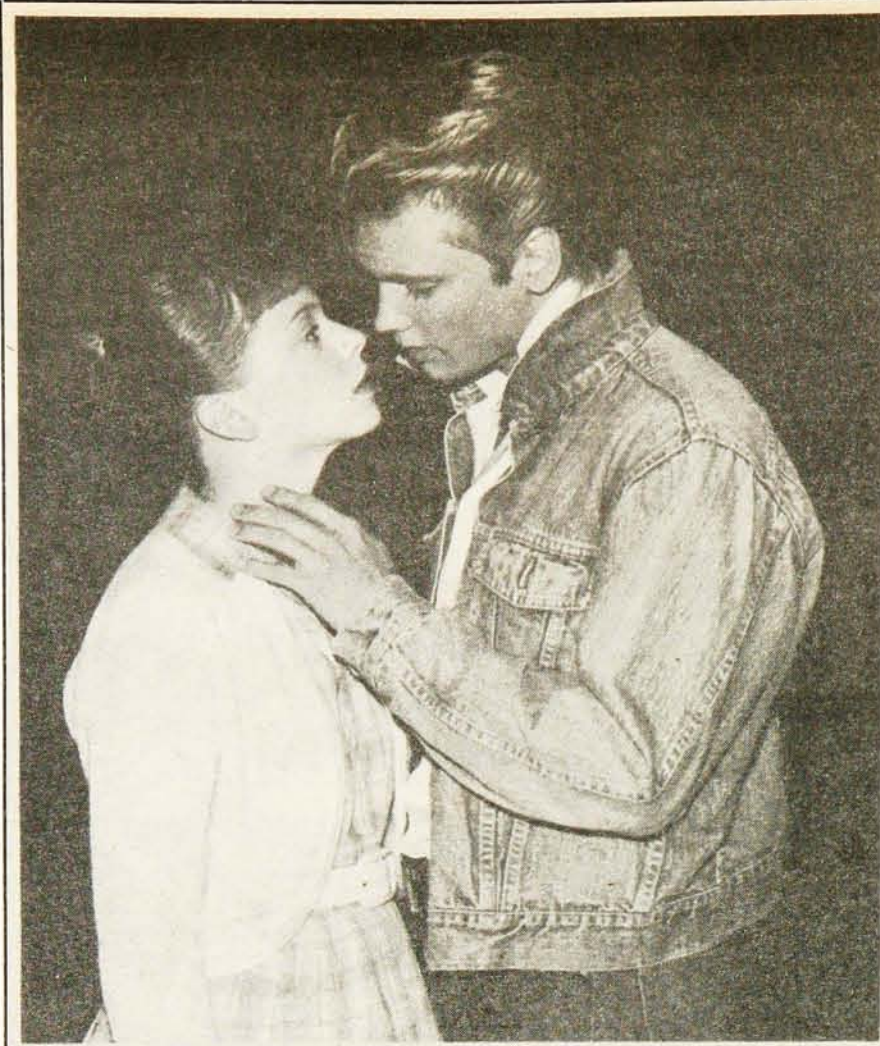
Ray Mainland, owner and manager of the independent Ridge Theatre in Vancouver, says that for his business, "Reviews are very, very important. The movies we play are not your regular run-of-the-mill Hollywood movies that people are aware of, with publicity that's done from Hollywood... The movies we play 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 them to their readers, it would be very, very difficult for us to survive."

Victor Loewy, president of Vivafilm 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 **Pouvoir intime**, which is almost like 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 Québécois 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."

We asked critic Jay Scott what he perceived as the critic's influence on the public: "As nearly as I can tell, in the case of major Hollywood movies there's no power at all. Audiences tend to seek out what they want, and a good example is **Rambo**, which to my knowledge, has not gotten a good review hardly anywhere in the world... And it's one of the biggest hits of all time. There's no power there. The power that does come into play is in the case of films that people have never heard of, you know, not Hollywood films: foreign films, marginal films, avant-garde films, art films — where the review itself becomes a kind of greeting card saying that the thing actually exists."

If criticism is an important factor in the success of certain types of films, it is precisely for the types of films which Canadians are now making, films which share the qualities of being unknown, underpromoted, and understared. As "explainers" or "greeting cards," critics can help "make or break" Canadian films. Perhaps to a larger degree than in the American film industry, the overall health of the Canadian film industry is closely linked to the response of individual critics to individual films. Faced with a Canadian film, the critics have a larger role to play.

With this in mind, we asked several critics whether they brought to their treatment of Canadian films any sort of *parti pris*, or whether, more generally,



• Critics helped make **My American Cousin** a hit

they 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 terrible filmmakers; and, you know, 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 very much like David Cronenberg... 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 I'm open to any place the film wants to take me. I like to see a good screenplay, I like to see good acting, lyrical or dynamic photographic style, a director who can pull all of those elements together, but there's no specific genre or territory that I want to see covered. Basically I want to see intelligent films with feeling."

Walter Goodman (*New York Times*): "No, I have no expectations or biases when I review a Canadian film... No, I don't see Canadian films very often. I see them whenever they open in New York — we review everything that opens in New York. But I haven't been struck by any particular number of Canadian films. I can't remember one. I can remember seeing Australian films, New Zealand films, British films of course — but I can't remember the last Canadian film I saw... I don't think about movies that way (i.e., as foreign films). Canada, it's a foreign country, but it's so close to us that it's not as foreign as some countries. It wouldn't have any effect on the review in any case."

William Arnold (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*): "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 just 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. Fassbinder almost never received 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 by critics from other countries. American critics 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 press itself about press bias. 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 based on supposedly universal considerations of genre and the formal 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 guidist" complained that the space limitations of his newspaper and an 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 enormously different personal concerns, presuppositions, and expectations. 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 and 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

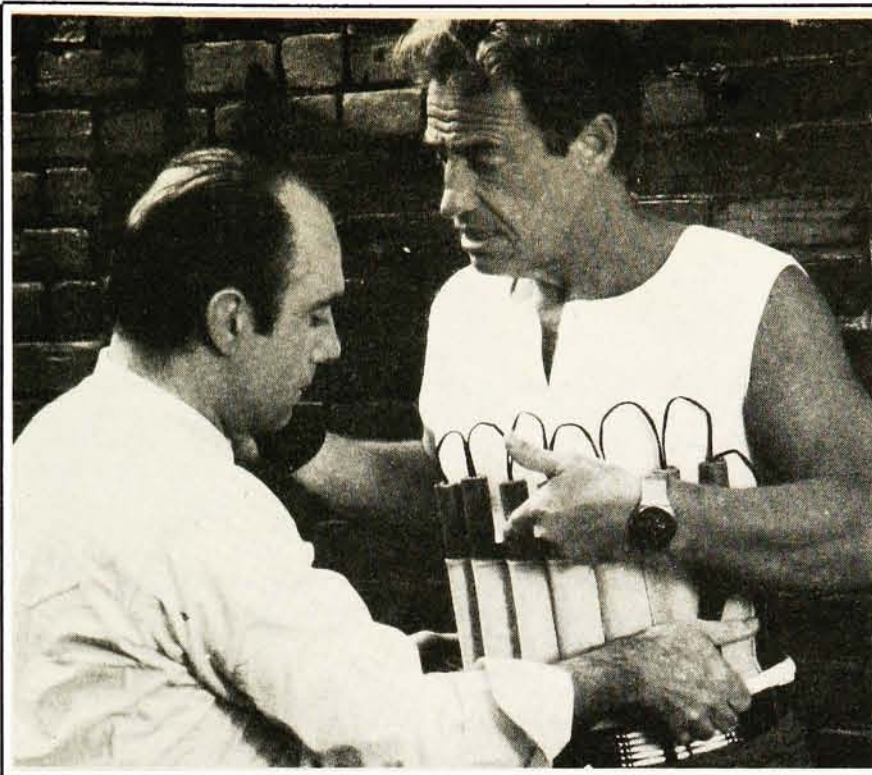
film circles is that it's almost impossible to keep up with the literature of film analysis. The critical paradigms – the assumptions, the methodologies, even the vocabularies – found in the journals of film analysis change radically every few years. The films remain the same – **Psycho** remains **Psycho** – but **Psycho** is a very different film from formalist and feminist perspectives. A formalist critic may love it, a feminist may not. They both are probably “right.” While the film hasn't changed, the presuppositions and the expectations brought to the film have.

A film critique is an argument, grounded in institutional and personal perspectives. There can never be a definitive critique. Certain critics are primarily concerned with the truth-value of the film, what it teaches us; others are more interested in the aesthetic experience created by its formal play; others are more concerned with the work done by the film to secure, support or subvert the myths which hold together our social and political systems. Critics can bring any of a dozen points of view to their analyses, depending on what they expect of art, of film and of their readers – and depending as well upon what their institutions (newspapers, magazines, academic institutions) expect of them. Each approach asks something different of a film. Each entails its own assumptions, in fact its own language.

Academic film criticism is, for the most part, single-minded: applying a single critical language, with its appropriate set of assumptions and methodological principles, the critic analyzes the film in depth. Popular film criticism differs from academic film criticism not because mimetic or aesthetic or feminist or ideological or any other of these concerns is by nature foreign to it, but rather because, as often as not, it is open – it mixes them all up together, in the attempt to enumerate the “good points” and “bad points” of a film. Single reviews reflect multiple perspectives.

Criteria of evaluation thus tend to be unstable, shifting, in the film reviews found in the daily newspapers. We wondered, nevertheless, if it would be possible to discern in the Canadian or U.S. press, any general biases, pro or con, based on the simple Canadianness of a film? Hoping to shed more light both on the importance of the press to the Canadian cinema, and press bias towards Canadian films, we looked at the newspaper reviews of four Canadian movies, representing Québec and English-speaking Canada over the last five years, and representing several distinct styles or genres of filmmakers. We chose films which were released in both the United States and in Canada, limiting ourselves to those for which we could collect significantly large press files in each country.

Le Déclin de l'empire américain was not one of these films. As of the writing of this article, it had not yet



• Belmondo models latest critics-wear

been commercially released in the U.S., so we were unable to find enough critical material from that market. The film was, however, shown at the New York Film Festival. Vincent Canby's review, “**Decline, a Comedy by French-Canadians**,” published in the *New York Times* on September 27, 1986, has many of the characteristics which we found to be typical of reviews published in the press. As a model of the “typical film review” it is worth looking at closely.

The title of the review emphasizes the foreignness of the film. This concept is taken up immediately in the first three lines, but it is deflected in a new direction: “Denys Arcand's **Decline** isn't easy to know at first. It's like finding yourself at a dinner party where

you're the only stranger among intimate friends. They're a tight little band.” “Foreignness” is in fact less a function of “Québécoisness” than of being outside of a particular bourgeois milieu, and a particular circle of friends.

The question of nationality is largely dropped. The origin of the film, the national and historical roots of the characters are in fact incidental – less important for Canby than certain universal qualities and situations which they incarnate. In the second paragraph, Canby introduces the central theme and central “universal” of the film: Dominique's thesis that, “when people become more concerned with their own appetites than with their responsibilities to society, the days of that civilization are numbered.” Canby interprets the entire

film as a working out of this principle: “With one exception, everybody in the film, including Dominique, seems determined to prove her right.”

Canby continues to describe the film thematically and stylistically. “From start to finish (the film) is nonstop talk, and the talk, which is of very high calibre, is almost exclusively concerned with the characters' obsession with sex...”

The next several paragraphs introduce the individual characters, their relationships, the plot lines, and indicate how the film's bouncy optimism descends, finally, into disquiet and spite: “The days of the tight little band are numbered.”

The last three paragraphs of the review focus on a grab-bag of elements. Canby likes the intelligence of the film, the humour of the dialogue, and the essential reality of the characters. He hints at a genre of comedy to which the film might belong: “Not since Allain Tanner's **Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000** has there been a comedy that so entertainingly and successfully expresses itself through intelligent characters defined entirely in their talk.” He offers a final interpretation of the theme, and he concludes with a rundown of the “excellent” cast.

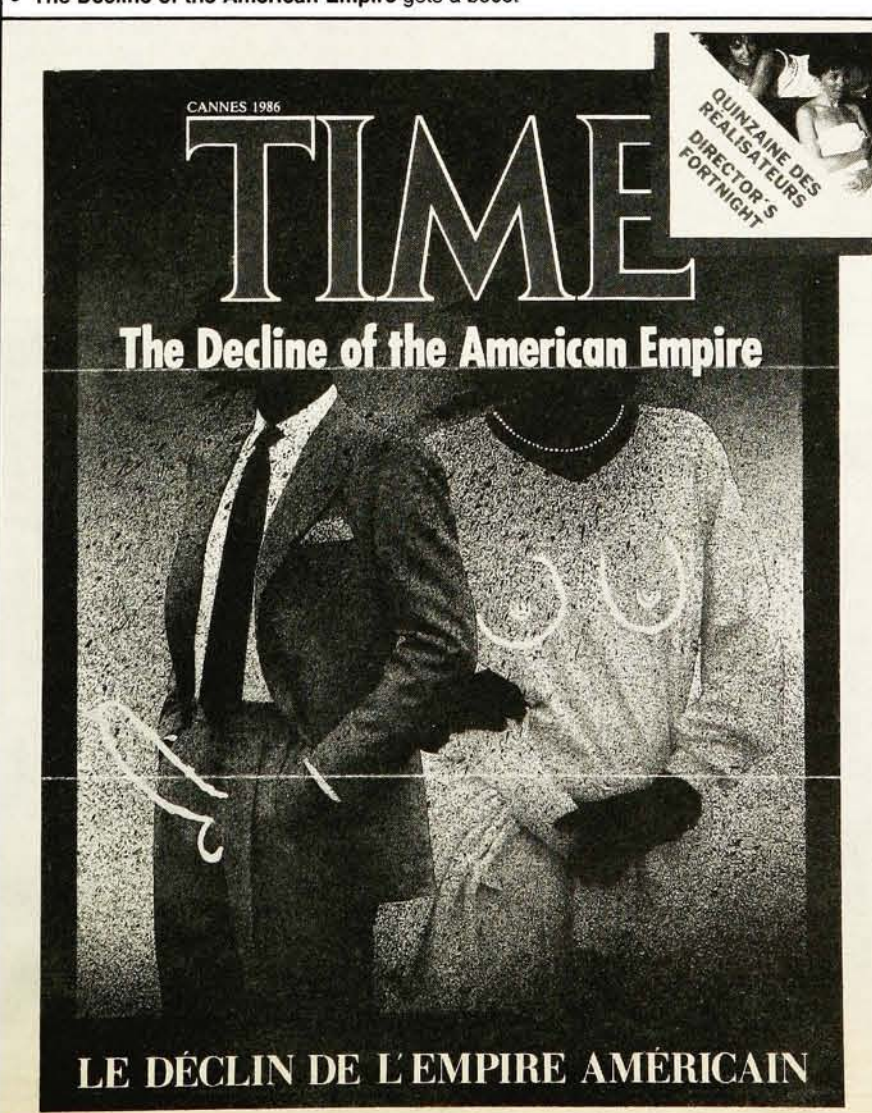
This is a rather typical film review. A film review is often a kind of consumer's guide. Readers now know what to expect and what not to expect: a talky film, very little action, concerning sex, full of good humour and excellent performances.

And like many film reviews, it is slightly more than a consumer's guide. It explains the themes, making the work more “accessible.” Readers now know how to interpret the film.

It is typical of the American reviews we looked at in another sense as well: while Canby recognized that the film is from Québec, he did not actually evaluate it in that light. Instead, he emphasized the film's “universal” entertainment-value qualities: the kinds of human themes, technical norms and formal qualities one expects of certain modes of popular film practice. We found that most U.S. critics thus tend to privilege similarities over differences. But when you think about the experience provided by this film, and think about the critique, it is not hard to see that there is something missing in this approach. Focusing on the presence of “universal” thematic and stylistic elements, a critic can lose a sense of particularity, of history, and especially a sense of difference. The review is fair, honest, and valid, but ultimately it seems to have very little to do with the uniqueness of the film, or, at the bottom line, with one's personal experience of the film. The particularities and magic of the film are gone, replaced by a rather inadequate account of its discursive and formal elements.

There is no evidence of specific bias, pro or con, towards the Québec cinema. But the approach does suggest an

• **The Decline of the American Empire** gets a boost



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 distinctively 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 400 American and Canadian theatres in January, 1981. Cronenberg was sent on an 86-city tour. The second week after its release, Avco Embassy, the American distributor, used quotations from favorable reviews to promote the film in 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 reviewers will look at it from that perspective – not from an overall 'cinema as art' perspective. They will say, 'Is *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 schlock." (*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 unabashed 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 underline the movie's "essential foolishness." Foolishness was less important for Archer Winston of the *New York Post* than the "gigantic goosepimples of horror" produced by the special effects. Gary Arnold of the *Washington Post* described the film as "unusually brainy." After a long analysis of the plot, the dialogue and the special effects, Arnold concluded that Cronenberg was an "authentic, astonishing filmmaking stylist", a "remarkably cinematic mind" likely to secure a place in mainstream filmmaking. Pat Dowell (*Washington Star*) likened 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 field." 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 Sun*). 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 silly 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, what 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 Labonté (*Ottawa Citizen*), who correctly assessed Cronenberg's considerable talents as a "horror-suspense film stylist." Labonté 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 unrequitable 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? When you get right down to it, they always 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?" At the very least she expected 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 (then chairman of the Canada Council), Mallet revealed what might be her key preoccupation: "... the Canada Council... 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 don't feel ripped off... You feel entertained. 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 Canadianness of the film was not an issue for them. There is no nationality bias, pro 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 genre productions.

We found that any critical bias concerning the Canadianness of the film was likely to come from the Canadian critics themselves, and was likely to be negative – defensive or overtly critical of 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 of the critics greatly 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 doesn't try to compete in the standard genre game. Its case presents an entirely different perspective on the importance of film criticism. The critics by and large loved this film, and producer Marcia Couëlle has no doubt that success in the press was crucial to success at the box office.

She particularly attributes the commercial success of the film 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, after New York, to successful runs in Boston, Los Angeles, and other large American cities. The enthusiasm was picked up in national magazines such as *Women's Wear Daily* and *Glamour*. "That kind of publicity can't be bought," says Couëlle. The film soon found an important place on the "art-house" circuit, attracting cable and pay-TV contracts along the way.

Originally, *Les Bons débarras* had found favor at the Berlin Film Festival, and subsequently, had been a great critical success in Quebec. (The film opened in Montreal in February, 1980, and in New York in January, 1981.) But according to Couëlle, "The people in English Canada do not read the French press from Quebec." Couëlle believes that the "crossover into English Canada could not have been done without the support of the American press... it ricocheted back from the U.S."

The distribution deal for English Canada was only finalized two months after the film opened in New York. By that



• Some critics thought Duddy Kravitz had no Canadian identification at all

time *Les Bons débarras* had been nominated for eleven Genies, had been chosen to represent Canada in the Academy Awards competition, and Marie Tifo had been selected best actress at the Chicago Film Festival.

"It's very expensive to open a film in New York," says Couëlle, "very very expensive. If it hadn't gone well, the distributor would have been showing it at universities for decades before he ever made his launch money back." It was a calculated risk. Alternative films especially need the support of the big critics — like the pebble at the center of the snowball. Without the critical response in New York, they might never have been able to book the film in Chicago, Boston or Los Angeles, or, for that matter in the English-Canadian market. The snowball started in New York: "No matter how successful a film is here in Quebec — no matter how much the press is raving about it — that type of news does not necessarily travel into English North America."

The critics in Quebec did in fact rave. The film played the Cinéma Complexe Desjardins for 18 weeks. In interviews and feature articles, director Francis Mankiewicz became a kind of folk hero on the cultural pages — his unusual biography, his rejection at the National Film Board, his struggles to find funds, etc.

The reviews published in Quebec have many points in common. The film was universally appreciated for the authenticity, humanity, and poetry of Réjean Ducharme's script, for a depth of sentiment and passions which lifted it well beyond a mundane portrait of mundane lives. Most of the critics described how they were moved by the relationships of Manon, Michelle and Ti-Guy, and frankly dazzled by the stunning performances of Marie Tifo and Charlotte Laurier. Many described the masterful, sensitive direction of Mankiewicz, and the extraordinary camerawork of Michel Brault.

Above all, among the Quebec critics the film became a rallying point for those who had always believed in the possibility of an authentic and intelligent Quebec cinema. It was evaluated especially in this light, against the hopes, aspirations and somewhat sparse accomplishments of a struggling national industry. "Avec *Les Bons débarras*, le cinéma québécois livre enfin la marchandise qu'il promet depuis vingt ans,"¹ wrote Luc Perreault in *La Presse*. In *Le Devoir* Richard Gay described "Des dialogues comme on n'en a jamais entendu au cinéma québécois. Mankiewicz figure parmi les cinéastes les plus doués du Québec."² Also in *Le Devoir*, Nathalie Petrowski described the film as "un grand film québécois, sinon le plus grand film québécois..."³

The exuberance, the enthusiasm for the film found among French-Canadian critics is perhaps best summed up in this quote from Louis-Guy Lemieux (*Le Soleil*): "Comment dire toute la grandeur et l'importance de ce film? De



• Reviews of *Scanners* O.K. in U.S. but film gave Canuck crits convulsions

quelle façon insister sans tanner, pour dire à tous ceux qu'on aime qu'il faut absolument voir *Les Bons débarras* parce que c'est d'une beauté et que du cinéma comme ça, il ne s'en fait pas souvent et pas partout. Pour la première fois, on a envie et on peut dire: le meilleur cinéma au monde, c'est le cinéma québécois."⁴ The Quebec critics were passionate about it — as a beautiful and moving film, but equally as a sign of something they had long been waiting for.

This perspective might mean something to a Quebec cinemagoer, might ultimately impact on the success of the film in Quebec, but not in New York. The film opened at the Cinema Studio in January, 1981. Although Marie Tifo had by then won a Hugo for best actress at the Chicago Film Festival, and the film had received quite positive press at both the Chicago and San Francisco Film Festivals, success was still a long shot. Rick Kogan, a critic for the *Chicago Sun Times*, who had been surprised and delighted by the film at the Chicago Festival, lamented that, "It is unlikely that the film will ever have a commercial run in Chicago," because foreign films were almost never shown there.

The New York critics changed all that, and once again by focusing not on the Québécois fact of the film, but on the universal entertainment qualities of theme, dramatic intensity, performance, and direction.

Approached from this context, the film is originally at somewhat of a disadvantage, because it doesn't follow traditional models. There is no "big story" to be found. Janet Maslin (*New York Times*) regretted the "inadequacies of the narrative." "The film remains at the vignette level..." "The events in the film are so small they're barely events at all." And yet, she went on, "they linger." She described the immediacy, the intimacy established between the characters and the audience, attributing this to Ducharme's script, to the performances and to Mankiewicz's direction. She becomes a hesitant convert: "The results are truly memorable at times." David Denby, critic for *New York Magazine* evaluated the film favorably, from the

context of Cocteau films and poetic intensity: "The precocious child of *Les Bons débarras* is a little monster, yet so beautiful and imaginative she breaks your heart." In *Women's Wear Daily*, Howard Kissel praised the authenticity of the film and its "complex, arresting characters." He found the story "chilling and moving." Kathleen Carroll (*New York Daily News*) vaunted Charlotte Laurier as a possible "Geneviève Bujold of the '80s!"

Not surprisingly Andrew Sarris (*Village Voice*) is the one American critic who attempted to put the film into a Canadian context. "There are two kinds of Canadian films: tax-shelter productions in which too much is going on, and ethnographic exercises in which not enough is going on." Ultimately, like Maslin, he saw the film fitting into the latter category. "The program with the narrative is that it starts too late in the lives of the characters, and ends too soon, with none of the dangling conflicts resolved. The effect...is to enhance the behavioral at the expense of the dramatic." But his long review is largely explanatory, and ultimately, appreciative. He focused particularly on the authenticity of the film. "The local is unmistakably Canada's Laurentian Mountains, not downtown Toronto masquerading as downtown Houston. The characters and performers are unmistakably French-Canadian, not a prefabricated mix of Canadian exiles and Hollywood has-beens. Above all the film is intellectual rather than exploitative." "For what it is, *Les Bons débarras* is mesmerizing in its slightly kinky vitality and in the seeming inexorable obsessions of its characters."

The New York run was accompanied by a barrage of interest-generating interviews with Mankiewicz. Ultimately it generated comment in magazines from *Glamour* to *The New Republic* to *American Film*. By the time it came out in Boston, Miami, Chicago, and L.A. and other large cities with "art houses," the film had acquired some nice, standard critical handles: generally speaking, it was described as a film with a personal, intimate style, and/or a film about obsessive love and family relations (Boston's *Real Paper* titled their review

"Freud in French Canada"), and/or a film remarkable for its extraordinary performances. Almost all of the critics praised the poetic intensity and authenticity of the film. "Among the minor wonders of the film is the way in which the filmmakers have rendered (the world and the characters) absorbing and, somehow, of universal interest." (*Miami Herald*).

Certain supposed flaws came up again and again as well — such as "there's too much mood, too much meandering, and not enough hard plot" (*Real Paper*); or, that some sequences were too long and strangely edited. But these comments were almost inevitably followed by a standard corrective — that "the best moments linger." Only a few critics, such as Pat Dowell (*Washington Star*) actually suggested that the film might not be worth seeing. He found it tedious.

The film was launched in Toronto in late February, 1981. The way had been well prepared: it had been nominated for 11 Genies a few weeks earlier and, of course, its New York run was an unheard-of success for a Quebec film. In an introduction to the Genie nominations, to the film, and to Mankiewicz, Jay Scott underlined this fact.

Not surprisingly, some of the English-language Canadian reviewers tended to share the outlooks and concerns of the Quebec critics, while others tended to follow the American lead. The former group, adopting the film as their "own" — as an authentic "Canadian" expression — had a better time with it. Bruce Kirkland wrote an absolutely glowing review. "Magnifique! Incroyable! *Les Bons débarras* (*Good Riddance*) is a stunning new Canadian film, one of the best this country has ever produced." Kirkland emphasized the reality and depth of the themes, and the authenticity, sensitivity and poetry of their cinematic treatment. "The roots of this movie are deeply embedded in the cultural sense of rural Quebec. Yet *Good Riddance* speaks to the world about relationships and love. Manon and Michelle... represent a slice out of all of our lives." In *Toronto Life*, Martin Knelman wrote that "the extreme integrity of this film's sense of place is almost miraculously gratifying." In the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, John Kiely deplored the fact that the film wouldn't get the distribution it, and local moviegoers, deserved. "French-Canadian films, even though they are generally the best films made in the country, do not sell in Ontario... Ontarians don't like French on cereal boxes and they don't like to hear French at movies." But this film, argued Kiely, is "expansive in the same way that O'Neill's family was expansive, representative in the same way that Flannery O'Connor's southern crackers are representative." "We are missing a film that stands with the best produced anywhere last year, and a film that is both undeniably Canadian and still universal in theme."

Other English-Canadian critics

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 Drama Under 30 Minutes

THE CONCERT STAGES OF EUROPE

Giles Walker, Director/Atlantis Films Ltd.
& National Film Board, Toronto

Best Fine Arts

LE REVE DE VOLER

Helen Doyle, Director
Productions Vent d'Est, Montreal

Best Health and Medicine
AIDS, A FAMILY EXPERIENCE

Robin Weatherstone, Director
Weatherstone Productions, Toronto

Best Nature-Environment Production
ISLANDS AT THE EDGE

James Murray, Director/CBC Toronto

Best Public Affairs

STEVEN HAWKING'S UNIVERSE

David Cherniak, Director/CBC Toronto

Best Experimental Production
ON LAND OVER WATER

Richard Kerr, Director/Video Department,
University of Regina, Regina

Best Promotional Production
SASKEXPLO '86 — WELCOME

Larry Bauman, Director/Camera
West Film Associates, Regina

Best Production for Children

Queen City Junior

Film Society Award

OWL — TV, EPISODE 4

Various Directors/CTV Toronto

Best Instructional &
Educational Production
SCIENCE FAIR KIDS

Michael Mirus, Director
New Science Films, Winnipeg

Best Animation
TABLES OF CONTENT

Wendy Tilby, Producer and
Director/Vancouver

Special Jury Awards
Festival dedicated in
Memory of Linda Joy Busby
LINDA JOY

Picture Plant, Halifax

Best Documentary Under 30 Minutes

LA FAMILIA LATINA

German Gutierrez, Director
National Film Board, Montreal

Certificate of Merit

LE GROS DE LA CLASSE

Spirafilm, Quebec City

BLUE SNAKE

Rhombus Media, Toronto

THE PRICE OF DAILY BREAD

Galacia Films, Winnipeg

Craft Awards

Best Cinematography

Richard Leiterman, Curtis Peterson

Best Direction

Paule Baillargeon

Best Sound Editing

Robin Leigh, Jane Tattersall

Best Performance

Kim Yaroshevskaya

HERMAN BUHL'S NANGA PARBAT

Wacko Productions, Jasper

SONIA

National Film Board, Montreal

Best Original Music Score &
Certificate of Merit

Michael Baker, Charles Williamson

EMERGING NORTH

Yellowknife Films, Yellowknife

Antoinette (Nettie) Kryski

Canadian Heritage Award

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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 camera-work – 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 a Canadian movie one finally can cheer for, a demonstration that there is life in an industry that until last month would seem to have been finished."

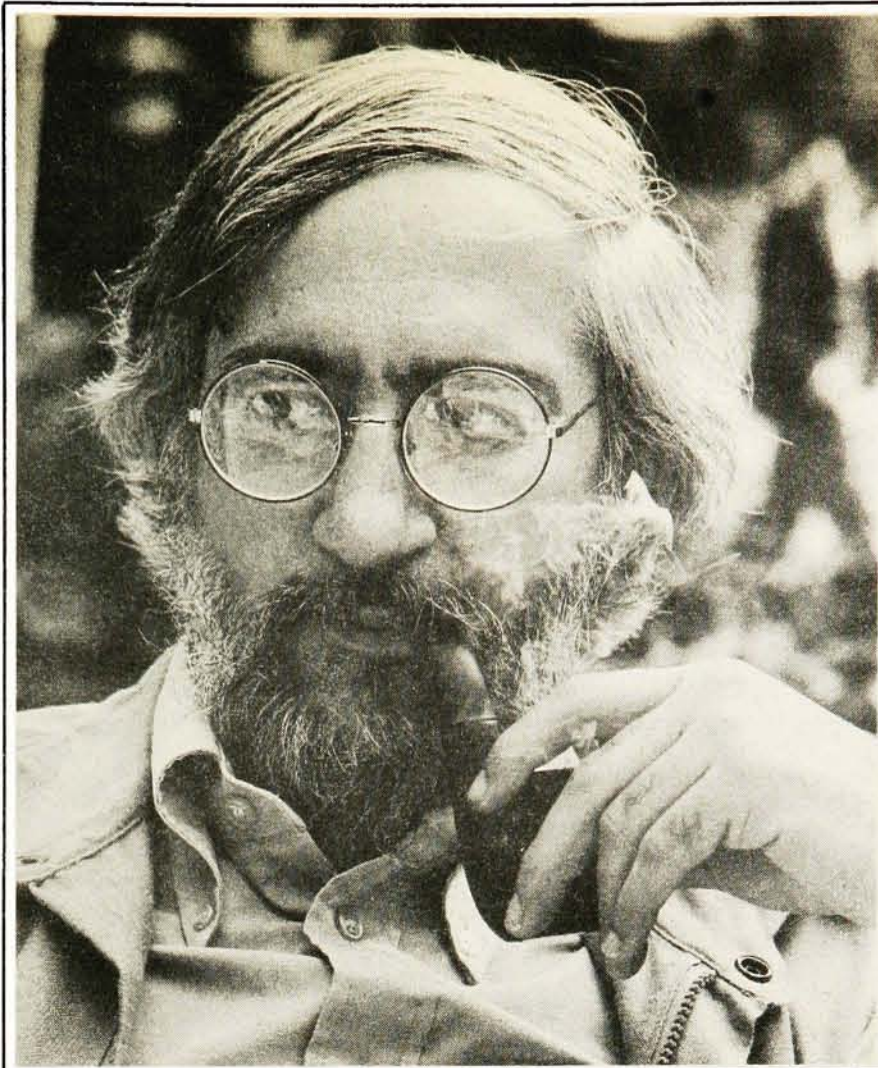
Produced in 1980 for about \$3.5 million (several other reports indicate another \$1.5 million was added before completion), the film encountered every imaginable obstacle before it was finished and released. Commercial release did not come until April, 1983, although a one-week run at Toronto's Fine Arts Theatre in the fall of 1982 allowed the film to qualify for the Genies.

Perhaps because it came on the heels of the tax shelter period, when embarrassment followed upon disaster, Canadian critics were more than ready for a change. Negative attitudes towards Canadian film permeated the industry. *The Grey Fox* is seen by many to mark a turning point away from a negative critical bias in the English-Canadian press – coincident with a change in the style and the quality of films being made here. *The Grey Fox* immediately assumed almost a symbolic nature for critics in English Canada.

Virginia Kelly, working with the distributor at the time, saw it this way: "It wasn't just a film, and films (like *The Grey Fox*) still are not 'just films' when they get reviewed... They are phenomena if they're good." In one interview, producer Peter O'Brian referred to the film as "a beacon." Virtually all of the English-Canadian critics – unlike the American critics and unlike the French-Canadian critics – proclaimed the film a "Canadian film phenomenon," and treated it as such, not as "just a film."

Bruce Kirkland entitled his full-page article in the *Toronto Sun* "*The Grey Fox: More than Just Another Movie*." He described it as "quite simply one of the finest films ever made in this country... from the soul of Canada, unlike anything Hollywood would ever make from the same story." Mark Henderson's review in the *Ottawa Citizen* was headed "*The Grey Fox: Epic Grandeur truly Canadian*," and ended with the statement "It should be seen and remembered as a film that cares about its subject in a way that is truly Canadian."

The Globe and Mail's Jay Scott con-



• La Presse's Luc Perrault was dazzled by the performances of...

tinued in the same spirit, but put the film in a more international, more philosophical context: "*The Grey Fox* provides that truth with an artistry that transcends nationality. Like Australians, Canadians have at long last found the quiet confidence to assume that the rest of the world may be interested in knowing about Canadians. That kind of confidence may not be an especially Canadian trait, but it's a damned healthy one."

Bruce Bailey, writing for the *Montreal Gazette* was about the only English-language critic who did not get caught up in the enthusiasm. He liked "the sensitivity and beauty of the cinematography" (which was, of course, highly praised by almost every other critic as well), and gives credit "to the director,

screenwriter and leading actor." But he was not happy that the film was awarded seven Genies, and he gave it only a two-and-a-half stars consumer rating. Overall, Bailey felt that "all of this talent can't save a story in which little of any great interest happens and none of the principals seem to have much depth."

The French-Canadian critics, as a rule, reflected the same lack of enthusiasm as Bailey. It wasn't a phenomenon for them, just a movie, and not a very exciting one. In *Le Devoir*, Richard Gay compared the film to Gilles Carle's *Maria Chapdelaine*. He enjoyed Frank Tidy's cinematography, and felt that, like *Maria Chapdelaine* it was a very beautiful film, but it had "aucun rythme, aucun relief, aucun élan."⁵ Luc Perreault



...Marie Tifo and Charlotte Laurier in *Les Bons Débarras*

dismissed it as similar to an American western. In Ottawa's *Le Droit*, Marthe Lemery combined a review of the film and a review of the Genie awards under one heading, "*The Grey Fox et la fausse gloire des Génies*." Her overall impression: "Plan après plan, une impression de vide s'installe."⁶

By and large, the American critics appreciated the stylistic qualities and landscapes of the film. Once again, however, they gave very little attention to the fact that it was a Canadian production. Some seemed totally unaware that they were dealing with a "foreign film". In other cases it was simply irrelevant to them. Vincent Canby threw the fact out casually, calling it "Phillip Borsos' Canadian film." He then went on to dwell on the acting of Richard Farnsworth, the American who played the lead. Peter Rainer, in his review for the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, simply referred to "Pacific Northwest" locales and to "British Columbia naturescapes so glorious that you want to inhale the screen." William Arnold (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*) glorified the Pacific Northwest landscapes as well, contrasting the film with *An Officer and a Gentleman* and other films which, though shot in the Pacific Northwest, could have been shot anywhere. But the Canadian fact of the film was given only passing notice by Arnold, who referred to it as an "irresistible little Canadian-financed, filmed-in-the-Northwest Western." Sheila Benson (*Los Angeles Times*) did, at least, clarify that the director Borsos was a Canadian, and that it was his first feature. Like Jay Scott, Benson found a sense of truth in the film in "the way 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 television show." There seems to have been a direct correlation between press and box office receipts: in Montreal, where the film received minimal critical exposure and unenthusiastic 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.

photo: Michel Gravel

Winning seven Genies certainly helped the film. As one Canadian distributor active in the U.S. 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 great 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, new-styled western. Benson and Arnold had both likened the film's visual quality to Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. In the U.S. *The Grey Fox* was credited 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 both *Toronto Star* critic Ron Base and distributor Victor Loewy described as created by its press: a first feature by an unknown Canadian woman director, launched on a small promotional budget, it was the press which made the difference between success and disaster at the box office.

Writer/director Sandy Wilson pounded pavement for two years, until she eventually found backing from Peter O'Brian (*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'Brian says, "without selling elements... you have to work a little harder, using sweat instead of cash." The risk paid off artistically – the film 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 \$900,000 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 Critics Prize. It was then launched commercially in Toronto on November 1, 1985, closing on June 26, 1986. It opened in Vancouver one week after Toronto, and ran there for 34 weeks. Eddie White of Spectrafilm told us, "Extended runs like that are exceptional no matter what kind of film you're looking at."

On the other hand, in Montreal, where it was largely ignored by the



• Richard Farnsworth in *The Grey Fox*, "A Canadian movie one finally can cheer for."

French press, and greeted in only lukewarm terms by Bruce Bailey in the English-language *Gazette*, *My American Cousin* had only a brief run at the downtown Cineplex, just after its Genie victories. Like *The Grey Fox*, it failed to crack the French-Canadian market.

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 Spectrafilm, 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 stylistic, thematic 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*, Kathleen Carrol 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 lunch 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 generate 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 is important, 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, the teenage 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 the case for *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*. The success or failure of such films largely depends upon the response of the Montreal critics in 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 at a dinner party where you're the only stranger..." 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" – innocuous 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 recapitalize foreign businesses, while the Canadian industry remains permanently undercapitalized 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 for the Canadian cinema, simply by introducing and making accessible to cinemagoers 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 expect-

tations 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 Déclin*, 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 roles.

¹"With *Les Bons débarras*, Quebecois cinema finally delivers the goods it's been promising for twenty years."

²"Dialogue like we've never heard in Quebecois cinema. Mankiewicz figures among the most talented filmmakers in Quebec."

³"A great Quebecois film, if not the greatest Quebecois film."

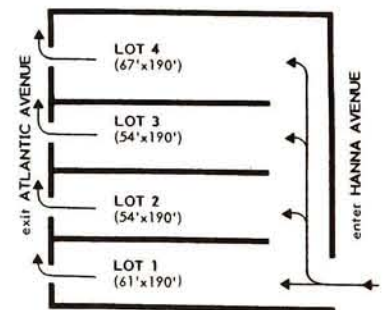
⁴"How to describe all the film's grandeur and importance without getting people fed up, to tell all we love that *Les Bons débarras* must be seen because it is of rare beauty and this kind of cinema is not made often and it is not made everywhere. For the first time, we want to, and can say: The best cinema in the world is Quebecois cinema."

⁵"No rhythm, no distinction, no flair."

⁶"*The Grey Fox* is the Genie's false glory. Shot after shot, an impression of emptiness installs itself."

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