What is an Independent Film?

by Geoff Pevere

I ndependent is a tough word to toss around in the Canadian context. Given the perennial status of Canadian feature films as foreign products within a national market, owned and controlled by others, most Canadian films are, by that definition, independent. But even that distinction begs others surveying the spreading serpent's nest of film and television-related activity in Canada, one encounters a revealing versatility in the word 'independent'—like 'God' and 'truth', it's a hugely accommodating concept that assumes different characteristics depending upon the requirements of the user. That's why, for example, everyone in this country from multi-million dollar entertainment factories (like Alliance and Atlantis), to internationally-bankable directors (like Cronenberg), to low-budget equipment leasers (like some of the folks we'll look at shortly) feel perfectly entitled to the term. (No doubt lawyers, surely the most lucrative of the current showbiz boom's ancillary professions, have their own ideas.)

As a critic, I opt for an ideal definition of 'independent'. Ideal and backwardly arrived at: for the purposes of this piece, I've considered a number of contemporary or recent features, pondered their (often remarkable) similarities in attitude, content and aesthetic, and called them independent. (Finding films to suit an a priori definition would be the more customary and credible approach.) And, while the titles under scrutiny do meet certain conditions that (I like to think) even the most literal-minded of industry observers would insist upon, I am frankly as interested in their apparent independence of attitude as I am in their technical suitability to the term (although I'm sure the two must frequently align, my definition, while political and aesthetic, pretty well excludes the kinds of artistic compromise necessary for big-time, big-budget, decidedly non-independent cashing in.) For me, that is, in-dependence is suggested by the presence of certain intra- and extra-textual characteristics, all of which may not be sufficient for an acceptable definition of Independence, but some of which are certainly necessary.

Most of the more interesting recent independent productions I've seen, for example, are relatively low-budget—ranging in production cost from $4,000 to $2 million. This modesty of budget is necessary not because it satisfies certain romantic notions of starving artistic bohemianism (I don't think starvation feeds anything, the muse included), but because it facilitates certain kinds of artistic practice and freedom not permissible within the terms set by the high-investment, commercial industries. It allows, for example, Montreal's Bachar Chibib to indulge in non-linear, ensemble experiments like Memoirs, Evison and Seduction; or Fredericton's Jon Pederson to seek out a filmic corollary to David Adams Richard's minimal literary rhythms in Tuesday, Wednesday; or Toronto's Atom Egoyan to etch Canada as an ethnically-diluted, electronically-crippled urban wasteland in Family Viewing; or Winnipeg's Perry Mark Stratychuk to reconfigure the Manitoba prairies in post-Apocalyptic, spaghetti western terms in Savannah Electric. It's not just that these films benefit aesthetically from the intensely frugal conceptual strategies necessitated by their relatively highminded ambitions, it's the simple fact that, as blueprints for big-budget commercial movies, none of them would have been made. In other words, not only are they more interesting for it, they exist because they're cheaply made.

The relationship between low budgets and relative aesthetic freedom introduces another, purely practical element necessary to independent practice in this country (or independent practice as it's being demarcated here): by making films on the cheap, these filmmakers can work with a certain degree of impunity from The Bottom Line—in these days of increasingly multiplying and lucrative ancillary markets, returns on modest investments are pretty tough not to make back. If the best of these films take risks and blaze trails (and with encouragement they do) their license to explore is, to a certain extent, granted by thrifty productions. The delirious, anarchic originality of something like Mike Jones's The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood, as pure an example of nickel-and-dime filmmaking as one is likely to find, is the direct result of the film's economic undernourishment. Without its scotchstapped, jerry-built formal strategy, the film is unimaginable. (It will therefore be interesting to see what will happen—as it inevitably will—to the films of filmmakers such as these when confronted by larger budgets and profit-hungry production terms.)

It's the budgetary tightness of something like Faustus Bidgood that contributes another significant element in this ideal definition of the Canadian independent cinema that matters: working on the cheap, these filmmakers can stay home (or must stay home), and make movies that come from where they live. Much of the best recent Canadian independent cinema is regional cinema in the best sense: not only do the films come from particular places, they are, to a certain extent, informed and determined by the places they come from. Here's the test: if the film in question would be altered in form or content by a transposition to, say, Toronto ( alas: where else?), then it's a film with regional, as well as formal and intellectual, independence. Just as Faustus is unimaginable apart from Newfoundland, so is Bill MacGillivray's Life Classes inconceivably yanked from Cape Breton and Halifax. Low Visibility, Patricia Gruen's parable of radical social withdrawal, would be significantly less powerful stripped of its menacingly mountainous B.C. setting. Perhaps the most impressive use (given the context) in recent Canadian independents can be found in Patricia Rozema's I've Heard the Mermaids Singing and Atom Egoyan's Family Viewing, both of which actually evoke a particular (if peculiar) sense of place from that most placeless of places, Toronto. Tellingly, the regional distinction posited by both films is defined negatively, by the city's capacity to alienate and isolate.

One of the more curious expressions of regional specificity is evident in a number of a recent independents from Winnipeg. What binds a number of otherwise diverse films (such as John Kozick's Celestial Matters, Guy Madden's The Dead Father, John Paisz's Crime Wave, Alan Schinkel's The Caretaker, and Perry Stratychuk's Savannah Electric) is a fascinating sense of utter placelessness: while the narrative specifics vary, each of these films occupies a hermetically-sealed, artificial space, as though filmmaking weren't a way of responding to and artistically processing one's environment, but a particularly efficient way of shutting it out.

Lest this meditation on contemporary Canadian indies seem too economically anchored, I'd like to introduce what I think is the most important, distinctive and purely exciting development shared by a reasonably astonishing number of recent works—and it's a purely artistic development to boot. While, obviously, particular conditions of financing, production, ideology and politics make these films the specific products of a specific period, they're definitely the offspring of what came before. If previous generations of Canadian cinema were characterized by a clinging obsession with alienation, failure and the impossibility of individual rebellion (see Goin' Down the Road, Mon Oncle Antoine, Nobody Waved Goodbye, Wedding in White, Paperback Hero, The Only Thing You Know, et al.), so is the current...
The Independent Scene In Their Own Words

Bachar Chbib

In this massive northern land with its immense distances, its vastness, you can only imagine the Kuujjuaq cinema's problems. To lower the depth of the truth, the Kuujjuaq cinema needs a degree of help that it doesn't have. A perfect world, perhaps, but also a world that doesn't exist. Only the Kuujjuaq cinema is looking for it.

While the previous works were largely characterized by a romantically melancholic and politically paralyzing solipsism, many of the new films take the culturally defining fact of alienation (while this, more than anything else, is what makes Canadian culture Canadian, we tend not to boast about it), and cast it in critical, ironic, and even positive terms. With revealing frequency, many contemporary Canadian independent features (including Family Viewing, Faustus, Life Classes, Mermaids) deal with states of chronic alienation: like their antecedents, the Canada they reflect is a place where authority is both absolute and in different, where the family is oppressive and where respite for individuals is found only in dreams, genuine escape being apparently impossible. But many of these new films demonstrate an unprecedented self-consciousness about this inherited state of alienated docility, and approach it with an eminently (de)constructive arsenal of devices such as irony, humour and satire.

On Independent

Low-budget and not independent filmmaking is the right term to use in our society. None of us are independent in making mass media films — not I, not Alliance, not Rock Demers and not even Massey Film. There exists no such thing as a film industry and never will it. It's all one big government hoax. The words 'film industry' seem to be more glamorous than Unemployment Insurance. An industry arises out of a long-term staple demand for a product such as oil, steel, textiles, food... not Canadian entertainment. Only in the United States, India and a few other countries has it become a national industry, due to the large markets they each hold.

In this massive northern land with specks of people, and an 'industry' that cannot approach a worldwide appeal, we are still grappling with the question of profit that will make the industry survive independently from government, the notion of a Canadian Film Industry is a waste of taxpayers money. We have yet to see a government-subsidized industry stand on its own two feet. Finance Minister Wilson's eventual abolition of the tax breaks is a sign of hope for a national industry. Telefilm's mandate already has been outdated in the late '80s.

Putting our money in entertainment under the guise of culture in order to prevent Valentine's men from glooming our national identity is an expensive way to avoid the truth of the matter. We need our money to be spent on creating a 60 per cent Canadian content law in our communications industry; we need our money to erect the CRTF outside of its impotence so that it may reinforce these laws; we need television on the side of Canadians; we need to own our own television stations. We need intervention in corporate mergers, monopolies and conflicts of interest, but most of all we need to get rid of the cowards running our federal and provincial communications portfolios.

Television, with its patriarchal history, developed an ideology in which pleasing the simplest audience meant pleasing all the viewers. In others words, educational regression is alive and well on the tube. How can we advance as a nation with such an ideology? Pay-TV, the 'upstream' community programming, satellite transmission, and VCRs will slowly bring that age to an end. Intellectuals say Canadian identity is on the verge of collapse with the advent of Free Trade. I believe we will be coming out of these years more aware of our cultural identity than ever, more Canadian than ever.

Canadian, for me, is a land of many people sharing their cultural identities and living together without the insecurities that produce national barriers. We are an example to the world. This is our greatest national export product. Our cultural neighbour thrives in a similar environment. However, their monolithic national ideology makes it very different from Canada.

Here we can retain our multicultural identities without selling our soul to a common cultural currency. These were the liberal Trudeau years that I was raised in. Then, immigrants were welcomed and perfectly integrated into the Canadian culture. The long-term benefits they brought were understood by Canadians. In those years the National Film Board of Canada had a mandate that reflected these times and our hopes for the future, presenting us with films that teased our day-to-day reality, showing us what we are and what we can become. Now drained in bureaucratic hogwash, it has lost its power to mirror reality, it is unable to secure young independent filmmakers that reflect the new generation, and it barely survives the present political harassment. The educational values of the '60s and '70s films have disappeared. The NFB now produces, at best, mediocre work.

We are low-budget. We are independent because the 'industry'. Telefilm, the Film Board and television no longer reflect Canadians truthfully. We may be unseen. We may be poor. We may be a little bit of a good quality. But we are Canadian cinema, real Canadian cinema.

We are sprouting from the underground, from the provinces, from the Arctic, from the ethnic communities, from the co-ops and from the storefront businesses. One of these days bureaucrats shall be dead. Long live our cinema!

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• Telefilm Canada still won't recognize small-business independent filmmaking.
• The PAPST grant at the Film Board is still frozen to low-budget independent features since last year due to increased pressures from private sector labs, they say.
• The Canada Council is as incestuous as ever, and the clock stopped ticking there in 1973 in some post-mythopoetic structureformalist limbo.
• The CRTF fees that 60 per cent Canadian content means that the Inuit are going to take over the airwaves.
• The co-ops can't get organized because they don't know which ass to lick.
• And I'm still trying to squeeze money out of the following institutions for the European leg of the Canadian Independent Film Tour: Telefilm Canada Ontario Film Development Corporation Société générale du cinéma du Québec Canada Arts Council The Honourable Lisa Bacon The Honourable Flora MacDonald The Manitoba Arts Council Dept. of Culture, Recreation and Fitness, Nova Scotia Ministry of Tourism Cultural Services B.C. Arts Abroad Ontario Film Manitoba and Ontario Arts Council.