

are they watching in wichita ?

Gerald Pratley has been watching the Canadian scene long enough to have some firm and pertinent comments about the state of feature filming in Canada, and about the nature of national character in general.

by Gerald Pratley



The men from **King of Kensington** (Bob Vinci, Al Waxman, Ardon Bess and John J. Dee)

What is a Canadian film?

It should not be necessary to ask the question. No one should be expected to explain the qualities which make up a nation's life and character. They should be self-evident, a part of the individual's nature from the moment he is born, somewhere within the country he will likely inhabit until the day he dies. During this time, he lives and breathes within a society, which, with its own manners and traditions, shapes his outlook and way of life. Contributing to this in significant measure will be language, climate and the educational, political and economic systems which govern his life.

Any given people will evolve its own distinct arts, working within the forms which are common to most: through literature and music; through acting, singing, dancing; through painting, sculpture and other crafts. And in the work of every artist will be something of the spirit, the nature, the color, the life, the history, the character of the country he calls his homeland.

This is a quality which comes about naturally. It comes about not just as an accident of birth but as a result of hundreds of years of life and struggle on the part of ancestors who have adapted themselves through generations to their evolving system and changing environment. And during those years the accumulation of events become, over time, that fascinating chronicle of man's wretched or glorious existence we call history.

The motion picture uses all the arts that we are heir to, and in using them well it has become an art in its own right. On the surface, speaking of films at their best, they reflect the life of the individuals who are the subjects of any given film: from the sight of children in school with the flag in the corner of the classroom, or the portrait of a queen or president on the wall, to the buses people ride in, the uniformed policeman on the street, the interiors of homes, the conversations at mealtimes, the newspapers being read. At a deeper level they are an expression of a people's way of life, from the farmer on the land, the family facing death through illness or disaster, a child without a home, the father without a job, a wife who finds that happiness is an illusion.

It should be a perfectly natural act on the part of Canadian filmmakers to turn to subjects which are Canadian, a part of themselves, when they make films in this country. Why would they want to make films at all if this were not so? Conversely, if they are forced to go abroad, then they will naturally be expected to work on films set in the countries they have gone to live in; when they do this, they may achieve a high level of professionalism, but they will never create a film which is a natural expression of themselves and their native background. Furthermore, Canadians who make films outside Canada, even though they are organized and financed from Canada, have not necessarily made a Canadian film as such. It may simply be a film made abroad by a Canadian. This applies to all filmmakers. Thus, when a non-Canadian comes to work here, the situation works in reverse.

Surely the desire to write and make films springs from the deep inner consciousness of the individual writer or director to express himself in terms of his country's existence, whether it is a story of the past or the present. Surely, out of purely natural inclination, he would turn to the life he knows or which is part of his background and tradition. There should be no question of this; and it should follow that the people in front of his cameras would be played by the actors of his country, who are best suited to play the roles of their own people. Think of the films of Eisenstein, and

contemplate the natural expression of one's nationality in art of the screen.

It should not be necessary to point out any of this: the British do not make French films, the Americans do not make Russian films, the Spanish do not make German films. Why then should Canadians want to make American films – which is what so many English-language Canadian filmmakers feel bound to do these days?

The arguments will come thick and fast: art has nothing to do with it; money is all that matters. Certainly this is a major consideration. There may be many filmmakers among us who want to make pure films about Canadian subject matter, but cannot raise the money to do so. In this case the shame lies totally with organizations like the CFDC, the CBC and the private television companies, whose responsibility it is to create natural works. Many Canadian films are badly flawed by the introduction of non-Canadian players used to provide what is absurdly thought to be an easier entry to the United States market. This result is seldom achieved. What does result, however, is a film which is not true to itself, and is not a truly Canadian film. **Goldenrod** is a glaring example of this (and the public sensed its false characterization) and **Why Shoot the Teacher?** fails because its principal character, on whom the success of the film depends, and who should be totally imbued with a sense of being Canadian, is played by an average American actor with no sense of feeling for the role and its background.

The feature-length films of the NFB – from **Drylanders** and **The Merry World of Leopold Z** to **Why Rock the Boat?** and **The Heat Wave Lasted Four Days** – all have one common strength: they are naturally Canadian, making no concession to the so-called requirements of international box office. Whether they succeed or not in both artistic or financial terms is immaterial. These are the films which will live on, in which we can feel some sense of pride because they look, speak, feel and are indeed totally Canadian. Don Shebib's **Going Down the Road** is wonderfully and naturally Canadian. His last film, **Second Wind**, is forced and contrived and only marginally Canadian. It is a victim of the malady which now infects filmmakers everywhere: financial commitment to international box office, which has resulted in many films having no nationality whatsoever. A film like **The Cassandra Crossing** has been made by filmmakers of so many nationalities and financed by so many different countries it is impossible to give it a country of origin. There are many such films today and, while some make money, they are a credit to no one. They are simply business ventures by people whose only consideration is to make money. A James Bond film, on the other hand, does at least contain some sense of national character, even while being international in its changing settings.

The British and Americans can survive many international films simply through the strength of their players, who are either so well known or so recognizable as British and American actors that they themselves give their films a nationality. If Gregory Peck and Lee Remick made a film in China financed by Italians, most audiences would think it was American. We have no actors strong enough to do this for Canadian films (within the context of these "international" productions) and we never shall, to judge by the reluctance of our producers to develop and use Canadian actors.

This is why ACTRA is quite right in raising a fuss about the way CBC uses non-Canadian players. We all like Melvyn Douglas, but was it really necessary to pay his expenses and salary (larger than a Canadian player, no doubt) to play the grandfather who sulked in the attic in **A Gift to Last?** Through no fault of his own, he was an intrusion into what

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was an entirely Canadian story, a false thread which marred the fabric of the whole. But what can we expect from a generation of producers who have been raised on American films and TV and think only in terms of adding glamor to their work by using American talents and backgrounds? Those who criticize ACTRA on the grounds of narrow nationalism and keeping great talent out of Canada are those with the sellout mentality. No one asked the most important question of all: Are these roles which can and should be played by Canadians? Then we have the "internationalists" who bring up the number of Canadian artists working abroad, which they feel justifies the use of non-Canadian talent here. They forget that most of our artists who are successful elsewhere were not invited to play specific roles. They went and looked for them because there was no work at home. And while they may have found a place abroad, they are really so few among the total number of say, British and American performers, that they do not weaken the national character of the films or plays they appear in. Raymond Massey could play Abraham Lincoln without the Americans feeling that they were being subjugated by Canadian talent because he was only one non-American player among hundreds working in plays and films.

The strength of the American cinema has always been in its subject matter: when it goes naturally about its main purpose of making films set in the USA about every conceivable subject, it achieves the greatest results and becomes the mirror of the American way of life, from **Birth of a Nation** to **Network**. The fact that there are distortions in both (and in the thousands in between) does not weaken the presentation of the image of America. But when American filmmakers used to make pictures about other countries (notably Canada) they were invariably false.

At the other end of the scale the films of Canada's French-speaking filmmakers set almost entirely in Quebec with local players, have consistently conveyed a sense of place and character, and been true to themselves. On a long bus journey from Kapuskasing I sat next to a French-speaking woodsman who looked and sounded exactly like a character from a Gilles Carle film. Our English-language producers argue loudly that they cannot recover the cost of production from our small home market, that they are forced into using American actors in films whose backgrounds might well be

the United States. How is it, then, that the producers of the new Australian films, with a smaller home market than Canada, are making such remarkable national pictures, like **Caddie** and **Picnic at Hanging Rock**, most of which earn a profit in Australia from enthusiastic audiences and are extremely well received abroad? Why cannot we achieve, with the history, novels, and talent available to us, what the Australians have succeeded in doing with their artistic resources?

The influence of the United States and the terrible fear of not finding acceptance by American audiences is one real and negative reason, best illustrated perhaps in this recent happening.

The singer Patsy Gallant appeared on CBC's late-night TV interview program, *90 Minutes Live*, with host Peter Gzowski. She sang a raucous version of Gilles Vigneault's "Mon Pays" but surprisingly, the lyrics were in English, and even more surprisingly, it was now a song in praise of the USA, not Canada, with the main chorus including the words, "From New York to L.A.". In the desultory conversation which followed it transpired that the song had been rewritten into an English version. Finally (it seemed as though he would never ask) Gzowski enquired why the lyrics referred to American cities? The lady replied brightly, "We had to do that. If we sang 'From Vancouver to St. John's', the Americans wouldn't know where these places were, and then the song wouldn't be a hit in the States."

Now why did she grow up with this attitude and belief? Because Canadians in the main have so little faith in themselves and their country. If the song were to appeal to audiences anywhere in the world it would do so no matter what the place names are. And if they are Canadian, so much the better for an awareness of this country. How many countless American popular songs have flooded the world and made obscure places familiar names?

Dennis Braithwaite, who writes a very good column for *The Toronto Star*, called "On and Off the Air," and whose comments about Canadian character in life and art and popular entertainments are usually sound and sensible, fell down badly over exactly the same outlook as the singer. In praising **The Man Who Wanted to Be Happy**, he faulted it because a character described another as being "Just a little star. Fred Davis is a big star, Pierre Berton's a big star,



The fully Canadian and very entertaining **Why Rock the Boat?**

Peter Gzowski's a big star!" This won't do, says Braithwaite. In using these references "the show has disqualified itself from sale to American TV. It will never play in Schenectady."

Does it really matter? Must we use American names in order to sell it to them? Cannot we please our own audiences with references to ourselves? Is it not possible that the American will get the reference, if they see the play, even if they don't recognize the names? Criticisms like this make it even harder for writers who write in a Canadian sense to be truly Canadian. Would Braithwaite like to have heard Carson et al mentioned instead? How will our entertainers ever be known, if Braithwaite denies them the right to be mentioned in our shows and stories? I wish he was being facetious, but even so, this sort of comment is most discouraging. This was followed a few days later by the film reviewer for *The Globe and Mail* making inane comments about **A Sweeter Song**. He had been told that Canadian references had been cut from the print shown in the USA. "American audiences," he declared, "may have seen a better picture." A good Canadian film, he appeared to be saying, shouldn't have any Canadian comments. The only distinction this silly film had was its Canadian references. It is from these that a natural acceptance of our own background and events will grow. The fact that they may not all have been well done is no reason to excise them.

There was a flurry of anxiety when the CBC's **King of Kensington** was sold to some US TV stations. Would the Americans understand it? Would it have to be tailored to American tastes? Would they know that Kensington market was a part of Toronto? Where is Toronto? Should it be changed to an American city? This last piece of foolishness contains the key to our failures. If the Americans like **King**

Another John Schlesinger film, **Day of the Locust**. Would you say it's English?



of Kensington they will do so because of what it presently is: a Canadian situation comedy with Canadian players in a Canadian setting. Moved to an American city it would be neither genuinely Canadian nor American and would please nobody. This is why so many "Canadian" films (**Shoot, Breaking Point, Rituals** and others) have no audience and do nothing to express a Canadian identity because they are not naturally and honestly Canadian.

It is not pleasant for any one of us who expects to see the face of Canada and our people on our screens to write ungracious and seemingly carping and small-minded statements about the unsuitability of non-Canadian performers. We are forced into this so-called "nationalistic" stance by businessmen and investors, weak-minded producers and vacillating government officials, who have no faith in Canada and sell us out every time in the popular arts, many in pursuit of nothing other than personal profit. If nothing was said by any of us who care, the situation would likely be much worse. These exponents of "the industry" like to copy the Americans, but they have never learned that no matter how profit-minded the Americans might be, they never sell themselves out – instead they capitalize on what they are. This is a lesson which many English - Canadian filmmakers somehow fail to grasp. How many more times must it be said that art is international, but not as a result of copying the achievements of other countries? Art becomes international when its natural and finely realized native qualities bring it a universal recognition and acceptance.

Bergman, the early Fellini, Satyajit Ray, Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, David Lean, Truffaut, Frankenheimer, Scholondorff, Kurosawa, George Cukor and others are great artists in the cinema when they remain true to themselves. But if, and when, they stray from their countries, deny their roots and their background when filming abroad, then their films become little more than professional accomplishments imposed on an alien society.

A painter can paint anywhere, maintain his individuality, and remain true to his country. The same is true of writers and composers, but most prefer to sustain themselves within the cradle of their native lands. Filmmakers are no different except they are dealing with a visual medium – living pictures of people dealing with certain aspects of society. It must be one they are part of in some way or it will be a superficial statement. John Ford went to London to film **Gideon's Day**. It is never thought of as a Ford film. John Schlesinger, whose **Far From the Madding Crowd** is as English as Ford's films are American, went to New York to film **Midnight Cowboy** and **Marathon Man**. They are not Schlesinger films either. Renoir's American films (he was forced into exile as a result of the Great War) were not the true Renoir. And Bergman's next film, **The Serpent's Egg**, filmed in Munich, will be the first Bergman film that will not be true to him.

This national quality is hard to define. It is not a nationalism which proclaims itself by pasting flags on cars and camping kits, or by sticking maple leaves on everything irrespective of origin. It is that quiet, deep, contemplative feeling of nationality nurtured through the years by upbringing and education, by a sense of place and people, and which comes naturally to the surface when called upon to express itself in the artistic accomplishments of individuals.

Many who work in films will shrug all this off as being of no concern to them. They are businessmen, involved in making money with "products" which sell on "the marketplace" to the "consumer." They forget so easily that every make, every brand, must have its own name, style, character and distinctive qualities, to make them stand out among the hordes of others, to lure the purchaser. Imitations never last long, and make no enduring impression. □

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