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Sam Kula's recent readings have led him to reflect upon questions of identity and of minority cinema, and to ask the question 'where is here'. Believing that Canadians should insist upon a cinema which mirrors their society, he states his case.

# national image, national dream

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by Sam Kula

There has been a boom in the image building business in recent years. The national consciousness, while hardly in danger of succumbing to vertigo, has been raised to a level generally associated with the transfer from colonial status to branch plant control. While it is no longer necessary to define "Canadian" entirely in negatives (not American, not British, not Ukrainian, not very interesting) it is still, however, more than a little difficult to couch the distinctions in positive terms. The time has long since past, of course, when the "One Canada" theme could be hummed from sea to shining sea, but among those of us whose persuasion is the English language, this matter of identity is more than just a passing fancy. In the seventeen years I sojourned in foreign lands conserving other peoples' filmic heritage I never considered myself a closet Canadian, even though the maple leaf was never a conspicuous part of my wardrobe, but in struggling to comprehend the native film scene, both past and present, since my homecoming two years ago, I have been experiencing the urge to step out and declare myself.

Insulated from the liberating effects of the soaring sixties, when half the population reluctantly began waving a new flag while the other half tearfully stopped singing "God Save the Queen", Quebec was massaged by Lesage and shaken awake by Lévesque, and at least the second half of the twentieth century seemed to belong to Canada. I was ill-prepared to share the frustrations of my colleagues reacting to English Canadian film. At first glance their level of expectation appeared absurdly high, given the poverty of numbers, and they seemed to be articulating a need for a cinema which would match their aspirations for themselves and for their country, however amorphous those visions might be, which the films patently failed to deliver.

Along with Germaine Warkentin (*An Image In a Mirror*) they demanded if nothing else, a reflection of themselves, no matter how flawed. "No other country cares enough about us to give us back an image of ourselves that we can even resent... With what are we to identify ourselves?" The kind of cry *The New Yorker* (and the rest of us) would seriously doubt ever got cried, but a simple enough statement when compared to the conundrum posed by Northrop Frye in *The Bush Garden* – not so much "Who am I?", but "Where is here?"

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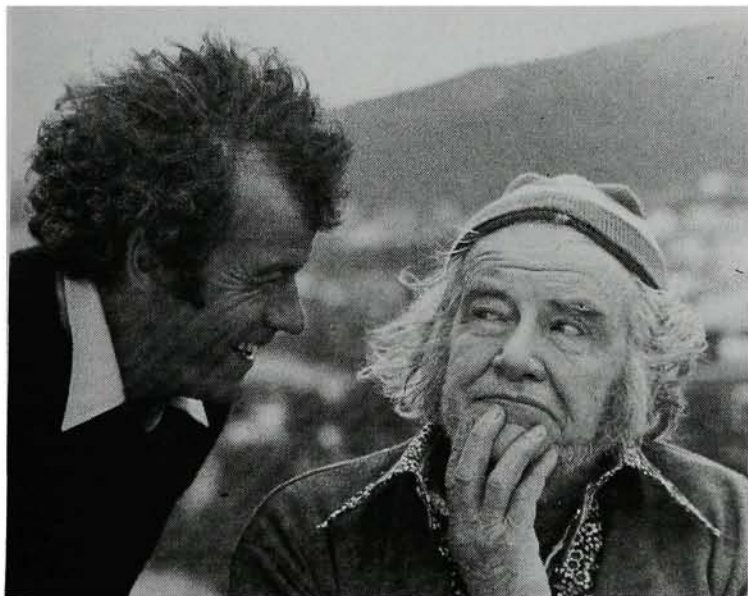


The films of the period, **Goin' Down the Road**, **The Ernie Game**, **The Rowdyman**, **Nobody Waved Good-bye**, **The Hard Part Begins**, **Paperback Hero**, **Between Friends**, were hardly positive images (they seemed bent on proving Margaret Atwood's thesis that physical, social and spiritual survival is *the* dominant theme in Canadian filmmaking as it is in literature, with the loser as anti-hero as leitmotiv), but they were a step in the right direction. They threw into sharp relief two paradoxical views of the "black hole" that represented the English Canadian feature film between **Carry on Sergeant!** (1928) and **Drylanders** (1961) – 1. that lacking a feature film industry with mass audience potential, Canadians derived little or no part of their self-image from motion pictures; or 2. that Hollywood in an endless series of mindless clichés, working like water on a rock, was a significant factor in the national psyche remaining as depressed as the national economy.

In the preamble to his collation of interviews, *Inner Views*, John Hofsess reminds us that "there is no such thing as a North American identity. If you are not Canadian, or American, you simply lack identity". He then goes on to postulate that while Canadians may be unaccustomed to viewing themselves as a minority group, in the economics of mass media in North America that is precisely what they are. It is thus logical to conclude, as Mr. Hofsess does, that a truly Canadian cinema is now possible because a minority cinema is now possible. Which places us, I suppose, in with the feminists, Blacks, sado-masochists and homosexuals who have found a voice, of sorts, in the films of the seventies. The economics of theatrical motion picture production, it would appear, make for strange bedfellows (or is it bed-peoplens?).

Mr. Hofsess is aware, as the Canadian government is painfully coming to accept, that "the making of a Canadian movie-market cannot be made by the movies themselves. It is a political, sociological and psychological process."

The Black experience in media has thus more than passing interest for Canadians who concern themselves with image and the quest for cultural identity. Mr. Hofsess may be overstepping his argument when he suggests that "it is no coincidence that Canadians and Black Americans (two groups of similar size, between 20 and 25 million) should have gained access to the modern 35mm film at the same time" (there are a host of historic economic and socio-political factors that were also at work – not the least of which in the Canadian experience was the contribution of the National Film Board and the Canadian Film Development Corporation), but there is a just parallel in fact between the systematic exclusion of Blacks from not only a participatory



Gordon Pinsent (Will Cole) and Will Geer (Stan) talking on a hillside in **The Rowdyman**.

role in filmmaking, but from an honest representational role in film playing, and the colonial status imposed on Canadians in the first sixty years of feature film production in North America.

Daniel Leab has recently documented the Black film experience in *From Sambo to Superspade*, and persuasively illustrates the radical transformation in the image, if not in the actual treatment of Blacks in America, since the first Black stereotype was encased in celluloid by Thomas Alva Edison in 1894 (the catalog reference is **The Pickaninnies Doing a Dance**). With monotonous regularity the most appalling racial caricatures represented Blacks to the world around them, and to themselves, in what was rapidly becoming the most pervasive medium of communication in human history. It is obviously impossible to ascribe to any one phenomenon, such as the denigrating treatment of Blacks in American movies, the poor self-image sociologists have discerned as limiting the horizons of young Black Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. The pattern of discrimination in the ghettos of the rural South and the urban North alike were devastating enough. The cumulative impact, however, of the persistent dehumanizing treatment of Blacks (denying them not only a positive role but any *real* role in society) in the only entertainment medium most Blacks could afford cannot be dismissed. On direct effects alone a strong case exists for linking the enormous popularity of Griffith's **The Birth of a Nation** with the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the years following that epic's release in February 1915. The film's audience in its first year of release is estimated at upward of five million, or roughly 6 percent of the population of the United States in 1915.



Chuck Shamata (Chino), Henry Beckman (Will), Bonnie Bedelia (Ellie) and Michael Parks (Toby) in **Between Friends**.

As Leab sums up the impact: "The power of any single movie to influence a viewer permanently is limited, although repetition obviously has its effect. Constant repetition that emphasizes certain stereotypes is overpowering. And this reinforcement has residual effects when the stereotypes have begun to change." In the legally segregated "colored only" cinemas of the South and the de facto segregated ghetto cinemas in the North, the movies totally ignored the realities of Black life while they reinforced White American prejudices. According to the Hollywood image there were no Black union workers, no Blacks in business or industry, no Black policemen or firemen, no Black troops in WWI, and scarcely any in WWII (and certainly no Black heroes). Again and again the Black role was confined to the faithful retainer, the surrogate mothers and fathers in a thousand domestic dramas who evidently had no family of their own and whose every happiness flowed from the success and



happiness of those they served. The only acceptable Black in Hollywood's America was not only an "Uncle Tom", but an "Uncle Tom" so obsequious and servile he is a caricature of the stereotype established by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Leab's research is definitive, and the examples he cites in the chronology appear even more grotesque as the films themselves grow more sophisticated, more subtle as reflections of American society. The rules proscribing anything but "I got rhythm" roles, the prohibitions against any hint of miscegenation, were about the only aspect of the various production codes adopted as self-censorship to which the industry rigidly adhered. When the myth of the Southern box-office (Southern audiences would not accept Blacks in positive roles) was finally buried by the returns from Black audiences in the North and South it was not surprising that "Sambo" stepped into a telephone booth to emerge as "Superspade". The pendulum had a long way to swing. *Variety* coined "Blaxploitation" to sum up the shafting that followed, as white producers and distributors skimmed the cream off the new market, but at least a nucleus of Black performers and creative personnel broke through into the lily-white industry and a balanced, realistic reflection of Blacks in American society became a possibility (**Sounder**, **Raisin in the Sun**), if not yet a frequent occurrence on world screens.

A people's self-image, a nation's image are hardly the product of one medium's interpretation. In the total communication matrix that defines and sustains that image (the home, school and work environment) the impact of any one medium is extremely difficult to isolate and assess. The contribution of moving images to what is discerned as our moral and spiritual decline since the Devil punched the sprocket holes in Mr. Eastman's nitrocellulose is still being proved (violence in the media is only one of the more visible points of inquiry - Garth Jowett at the University of Windsor has traced that concern back to Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* in the 16th Century), but both the NAACP and the CRTC have what now can only be categorized as a gut reaction that the content of that media experience must be significant. The policy planners in the Secretary of State Department share that reaction, attenuated as the gut may be at this stage, and their view is reinforced by the marked improvement in the Canadian media image that has taken place since federal and provincial regulatory agencies began seriously questioning the content, and to some extent the values, being conveyed by the equivalents to Hollywood's program features that make up so much of prime time television. It appears to matter in television because we control the delivery systems (even if an unhealthy percentage of the primal programs are foreign) and because there is no dearth of statistical and sociological data proving how "meaningful" the viewer/video symbiotic relationship can be. It mattered in film as well, but somehow the fact that more people, literate and illiterate, were going to the movies prior to 1950 than were exposed to all other cultural manifestations combined (including books, magazines and newspapers) failed to signify. If the Canadian content of the books and magazines is considered, it thoroughly justifies the conclusion that more Canadians witnessed the Hollywood distortions, week after week, than read the few poets and novelists relating to the Canadian experience.

The facts are all in Pierre Berton's *Hollywood's Canada: The Americanization of Our National Image*, an impressive accumulation of data that makes its point (much like the films themselves - through the sheer weight of repetition) with depressing clarity. There was an image of Canadians in the feature films of the first half of the twentieth century, but it was neither cracked, crazy, cloudy or whatever else happens to mirrors - it was simply made in America. As Atwood makes clear in *Survival*, "if the viewer is given a mirror that reflects not him but someone else, and told at the same time that the reflection he sees is himself, he will

get a very distorted idea of what he is really like. He will also get a very distorted idea of what other people are like: It's hard to find out who anyone else is until you have found out who *you* are." Which may be part of the answer to Frye's question: "Where is here?" - a little South of where we actually live.

Berton's findings, and those of his researcher, Barbara Sears, in the National Film Archives, and in repositories in the United States and England, leave little room to contest his conclusion that the image of Canada projected on Canadian as well as world screens was consistently false, persistently wrong in both minor and major detail, and frequently defamatory. One can fault Berton's tone perhaps, and a tendency to overstress his points (the mark of a broadcaster eschewing the historian's equivocation that would otherwise mar his style) but on the basis of any acquaintance with the films he has surveyed one cannot reasonably argue with the accuracy of his content analysis.

Apparently, however, one can argue with the meaning of it all. In reviewing the book (*Toronto Globe and Mail* 13 September, 1975) William French contrived a double-edged swipe that queried whether anyone really cared about the factual errors since so many of the films were inconsequential; and even if the films taken cumulatively do present a vast distortion of our history and our character, did help shape a false world view of Canada and Canadians - "even if he's right, so what. Do we care what others think? Surely this is another manifestation of the old Canadian inferiority complex." Well if the question isn't merely rhetorical flourish, we do care, we should care about how others perceive us, and more important how we see ourselves and our national image. If our imaginations have been colonized, in Peter Harcourt's phrase, if like Rick, in Peter Pearson's **Paperback Hero**, we model our behaviour on myths derived from foreign cultures, and we do not care enough to represent ourselves in the media that helps define our status as a nation, then we *will* end up embodying the old saw: "You haven't got a complex, you really are inferior!"



Keir Dullea as the **Paperback Hero**.

In this respect the Canadian experience closely parallels the minority experience in media. If women can be classed as a minority (as historically they can in all but number) the recent studies by Mollie Haskell (*From Reverence to Rape*) and Marjorie Rosen (*Popcorn Venus*) illuminate how self-image is a combination of childhood conditioning (which itself is media orientated), life experience, and identification with media models - with films as a powerful influence. The recent studies on the "childhood" concept as an invention of the nineteenth century, and "adolescence" as a product of the twentieth century, and the role played by mass communication in disseminating these "roles" is indicative of



how fundamental these influences, sustained over time, can be. It is hardly revolutionary any longer to report that women have traditionally behaved as they were taught men expected them to behave and then conditioned their daughters to follow in their footsteps. The self-image was consistently negative, horizons were limited, achievements matched the low level of expectation and if the language is familiar it emphasizes the commonality of the minority experience in films.

Berton found, as Leab, Haskell and others had found, that taken individually no single picture, flawed though it may have been (or however absurd artistically – it is content alone that is being surveyed and in the vertically integrated industry all films received wide exposure) damaged the image. The combined effect of 575 movies, however, (the number surprised us all, particularly in comparison with the level of Canadian production) has been devastating. The films have given the world *no* real image of Canada – in many ways more damaging than a false image – except that of a geographical absurdity – a vast, empty, snowswept land of mountains and pine trees. All of Hollywood's Canada was the West, an unbroken wilderness, untamed, unsullied by man or social graces, where a primitive people wrestled with a hostile climate to win a fortune in gold or furs from the virgin land. Like the Blacks in America we too can ask where our history went: where were the urban poor (or any class in urban Canada); where were the union leaders and the labour movement; where were the soldiers sailors and airmen in two world conflicts; where was the revolutionary struggle that achieved responsible government, and the political battles that finally threw off Dominion status?

The rhetoric and the hyperbole of the movie ads and the dialogue in the films themselves, roll on unchecked through the years, and they are the only voices one can hear. For as Berton points out, "just as Canada was emerging from colonial status, the most powerful educational device was in the hands of a friendly, but foreign power. We were, in American movies, a nation of primitives living on a permanent frontier, with all the attributes of American frontier mythology and we were really Americans. We could not recognize a distinctive Canadian identity because Hollywood pretended it wasn't there". And in ways we may not be able to measure with any precision, the omission did matter and we are living with its effects.

Whether or not a native Canadian film industry producing distinctly Canadian films would have emerged if American and British interests had not dominated Canadian screens is somewhat irrelevant in trying to comprehend the Canadian film experience. The "ifs" of history are always fascinating games, but not even the allegation that much of the CFDC investment program has produced only Canadian equivalents of the American trash Berton so soundly condemns in any way diminishes the significance of Berton's findings. The 575 films *were* made, and *were* seen in Canada and throughout the world by what amounted, until 1950, to a statistically predictable, almost captive audience.

We may never refine our research methodology to the point where we can objectively measure the impact of Hollywood's image of Canada. To take only one example (and one that understandably angers Berton, a devoted son of the Yukon), one of the values consistently propagated in American films is the resolution of human conflicts through violent action. The rule of law simply did not exist in American frontier mythology, and thus did not exist in American films ostensibly set in the Canadian West. Despite the obvious fact that the critical difference between the frontier movements was the presence of the law in the shape of militia or RCMP before the settlers arrived in the Canadian West, the gunfights in the Canadian equivalents of the O.K. Corral still took place with monotonous regularity in Hollywood's version of the Canadian West. The blurring of

these vital distinctions in the Canadian historical experience must have had a profound effect not only on native-born Canadians, but on the millions of immigrants whose first introduction to Canada was probably fabricated in Hollywood. If the 49th parallel represents only an artificial barrier separating a people who share the same traditions, the same values and a common culture in the minds of millions of Canadians and Americans the films have played their part.

The films are part of history now. It may still be possible to make a Mountie movie with the "redcoats" singing their way through the endless north woods, just as it may be possible to make a Hollywood comedy with a smiling "Beulah" cooking up a storm for "her" loving white family, but it is doubtful whether they would be as unthinkingly digested as their counterparts were thirty years ago. That battle has been won, it would appear, and now, perhaps, we Canadians can seriously examine our fascination with the "loser", operating in a culturally and physically hostile environment, and work our way to a cinema that reflects all aspects of Canadian society. Surely there is more in the fabric of Canadian society than alienated adolescents contemplating their navels and finding them wanting.

I have been struggling for years with the diabolical assertion that by and large a nation gets the leaders it deserves, refusing to accept my share of the blame. If the thought holds true for films we would do well to try to understand the Canadian media experience (and, may I add, to collect and conserve the films and programs that constitute that heritage). There is more involved than the fortunes of a relative handful of filmmakers. In demanding a cinema that mirrors our society and speaks to and for our aspirations as a people we are really asking that Canadian films help, rather than hinder, our slow progress toward control of our future. □

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