



by Geoff Pevere

Independent' 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

Geoff Pevere is a film critic and teacher, and a programmer with Toronto's Festival of Festivals.

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, independence 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 Chbib to indulge in non-linear, ensemble experiments like *Memoirs*, *Evixion* and *Seductio*; 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 Stratyck to reconceptualize 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 high-minded 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

What is an Independent Film?

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 encouraging frequency 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 scotch-taped, 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* inconceivable yanked from Cape Breton and Halifax. *Low Visibility*, Patricia Gruben's parable of radical social withdrawal, would be significantly less pow-

erful 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 Paizs' *Crime Wave*, Alan Schinkel's *The Caretaker*, and Perry Stratyck'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 really 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 cur-



The Independent Scene In Their Own Words

rent crop, but with a significant difference.

While the previous works were largely characterized by a romantically melancholy 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 occasionally even positive terms. With revealing frequency, many contemporary Canadian independent features (including *Family Viewing*, *Faustus*, *Life Classes*, *Mermaids*, *Tuesday Wednesday* and *Savannah Electric*) deal with states of chronic alienation: like their antecedents, the Canada they reflect is a place where authority is both absolute and indifferently, 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 defeatism, and approach it with an eminently (de)constructive arsenal of denaturalizing devices such as irony, humour and satire.

Mermaids and *Life Classes*, for example, both deal with women characterized by a feeling of profound social ineptitude — nothing new for Canadian movies, apart from the significant fact the protagonists are women. But both also chronicle the process by which this alienation is turned into a triumph of sorts: *Mermaids* concludes with an exhilarating reification of the fantasy-prone heroine's right to fantasize, and *Life Classes* lets its pathetic, barefoot and pregnant subject blossom into a confident artist. While these are perhaps the most blatantly upbeat examples of the recent transformation of Canadian cultural alienation by contemporary independent films into something altogether different — something almost positive — they aren't alone.

All of the films mentioned here (and some that aren't) indicate a striking collective refusal of the profound pessimism that once served as the defining theme of Canadian feature filmmaking. But it's not a passive refusal, expressed in the turning of heads the other way. Recognizing that this, perhaps more than anything else, is the prevailing condition defining Canadian culture, these filmmakers face the fact and, on the pathway to alternative models, work their way through it. In doing so they are not only pointing the way out of the paralyzing darkness of Canadian cultural defeatism, they're challenging the formal boundaries of Canadian feature film practice.

Finally, I guess it boils down to this: films like these haven't been made in this country before, and, if it weren't for the determined efforts of filmmakers working self-consciously in particular contexts while exploiting the expressive potential offered by limited conditions of production, they wouldn't get made at all. That's what I call independence.



Bachar Chbib

I am again pacing between my two storefront offices, wondering how far I got that day on the European leg of the Canadian Independent Film Tour: from frustrations, to anxieties, to interspersed moments of success.

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 MainFilm. There exists no such thing as a 'film industry' and never will. 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 stable 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 significant enough to make the investment return a 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 taxbreaks 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 Valenti's men from gobbling up 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 CRTC out of its impotence so that it may reinforce these laws; we need television on the side of Canadians; we need to own our own theatres; we need government 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 other words educational regression is alive and well on the tube. How can we advance as a nation with such an ideology? Pay-TV, multiple channels, 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 differences 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 southern 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 respected and were welcomed with open arms — the long-term benefits they bring 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 actuality, it is unable to secure young innovative 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 independents 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 off broadcast 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 PAFST 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 1972 in some post-mythopoetic structuroformalist limbo.
- The CRTC fears 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 Lise 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.

Bachar Chbib ●