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The Cinema We Want

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According to Andrew Higson, “very often, the concept of national cinema is used prescriptively rather than descriptively, citing what ought to be the national cinema, rather than describing the actual cinematic experience of popular audiences” (Higson, 53). In his article, “The Cinema We Need,” this is exactly what Bruce Elder does by advocating an avant-garde approach to Canadian cinema. As a nation, Canada is made up of a wide variety of diasporic communities, a fact that becomes more evident with every passing year. It is a nation in constant flux, thus, the culture within the country, and the face Canada shows to the world, are also changing at all times. Prescriptive ideologies, such as an idea of “the cinema we need,” are tempting, but ultimately unhelpful in determining the kinds of cinema that are and can be produced in Canada.

Elder’s argument brings up the old debates about cinema: is it art? Is it commercial product? Does it reflect reality or fantasy? Elder argues for film as art, and points to Canada’s rich tradition of avant-garde film as the ‘cinema we need.’ There are some fundamental problems with raising this one type of cinematic experience above another. First, whatever their merits, avant-garde films often present a challenge either too difficult or too theoretical to decipher for the majority of Canadians. How can a cinema claim to be “national,” when the majority of that nation cannot connect with the films produced under its aegis? Second, in order for a “national cinema” to be a healthy and productive industry, it needs the financial backing of government, which is (in theory, at least) democratically operated. Therefore, feature films need to appeal in some way to a wide audience, and since most avant-garde and experimental films are deeply personal, setting them up as the only type of filmmaking which should be funded is fiscally irresponsible. A publicly-funded Canadian culture is only as useful insofar as it describes the Canadian experience.

But what, exactly, is ‘the’ Canadian experience? Canada and Canadians are, ironically, best defined by what they are not: not English, not French, not American. Every region has its own unique problems and ideas of what it means to be Canadian, and these ideas change as the population changes. The country’s founding nations were Britain and France, but going into the 21st century, the diasporic communities from other nations have dramatically increased, bringing with them new approaches to, and new understandings of, Canada in a world context—as well as their own religious and cultural backgrounds which they infuse into the national consciousness.

The human way of making sense of the world, and of expressing itself, is to create narratives. Hindsight is 20/20, and we are often best able to understand ourselves and each other if we understand the decisions and events that have shaped us. It is a natural inclination to tell a linear story. The bulk of novels and plays have always been based on this inclination, and it has naturally been the main thrust of filmmaking since the early 1910s. Avant-garde and experimental cinema also create narratives using a variety of techniques to make impressions rather than explicit statements about the human condition. However, as I mentioned earlier, the majority of Canadians have difficulty understanding much of these works because they do not lend themselves to easy consumption. Whatever else cinema aspires to be, it is a product for
consumption. *Bon Cop, Bad Cop* (dir. Eric Canuel, 2006) is one of the most commercially successful films from Canada in the past ten years, and yet, its content and style drew inspiration from both sides of this debate. There are fantasy elements in the story, yet the film presents several realities about the perceptions of what Québec and the Rest of Canada are like. It is told in a linear style, but the lighting and editing techniques are pulled from the avant-garde.

The idea of a “national cinema” is ingrained in the idea that the nation has something to say for and to itself. The main problem with Elder’s article is how singular his argument is. Further, Elder’s approach is contradictory to the inclinations and aims of the national cinemas of most (if not all) other nations. Our films would be in danger of becoming insular and obtuse; our filmmakers lauded, but not accepted into a global film culture, and therefore, inaccessible to the outside world. If, as I have suggested, Canada is a nation of multiplicities, then ‘the cinema we want’ is a multiple approach to filmmaking, allowing for all types of films to be created and exhibited throughout the country, including, but not limited to, the avant-garde and experimental films. Canada’s constantly changing population may, in itself, be a good argument for Elder’s prescriptive idea of the ‘cinema we need,’ but because his argument is a concept which is applied externally, it cannot reach the majority of Canadians. The best way to do this is to allow for a multiplicity of expression and storytelling.
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