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## Representation of the other in Canadian film

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## V.1 Introduction

It is a rare occurrence for a Canadian feature film to reach Canadian theater screens. When asked to name several indigenous film directors, most Canadians would probably find themselves at a loss. Even naming a single person would represent a most daunting task for the average Canadian. Canadian film fans enjoy – with a somewhat resigned sigh – pointing out the paradoxical practice of some video shops of keeping the domestic product in the “foreign” section. Should it not be located there, one is less likely to find it among the regular mainstream movies than in the various “specialty” or “rarities” sections. Canadian feature film production thus survives on the margins, mostly neglected by the Canadian general public, available for viewing during the festival runs in the major cities, and subsequently on television. The impact of Canadian cinema upon domestic audiences thus can’t be compared to that of many other national cinemas including that of the Czech Republic, where the local film production is not ignored and represents a viable alternative to the omnipresent offerings of Hollywood studios.

Nevertheless, in spite of the relatively marginal position feature films occupy in Canadian culture, I find them relevant to the discussion of the various aspects that contribute to the shaping of Canadian identity. There are several reasons why.

- 1) Film texts allow us to analyze – in a variety of ways – how the identities of individual characters are constructed, how they regard themselves, how they relate to others, how they communicate with their environment and so on. Analyses of the film representation of the Canadian identity in selected films thus might be extrapolated and – with utmost caution – applied to the society at large. The film image is naturally an image that is mediated, conveyed by means of a specific film language. Nonetheless it does provide the attentive reader with an opportunity to discern dominant (as well as marginal) attitudes and values of the members of a certain national group and assess their transformation over time. Naturally, the claim that narrative films can provide an unproblematic look at the characteristic features of Canadians would be naïve. Nevertheless they can show us, in a mediated manner, how Canadians represent themselves, how they regard themselves and what their dreams and aspirations are. Likewise they have the capacity to communicate something about their fears as well as the traits and attitudes they would like to avoid or suppress.

- 2) Films result from the joint efforts of various people: screenwriters, actors and directors with their crews; in Canada they also come into existence thanks to various national or regional film institutions. These bodies project their agendas onto their production, thus exercising a considerable influence on what kind of films will be made, what genres will be given preference, what messages will prevail. A closer look at the *National Film Board/Office national du film* will allow us to follow how its liberal and nationalist spirit impacted the nature and message of the films made there; how these films were specifically designed to influence the understanding of Canada in its unity and later in its regional diversity, how descriptive and prescriptive they were in informing about the lifestyles and attitudes of the Canadian population. Such investigation goes beyond a static summarization of preferred identification marks of “Canadianness” and focuses predominantly on the origin and development of such characteristic traits, which were predicated upon the changing political, social and cultural climate that exercised a direct or indirect influence upon the functioning of these institutions.
- 3) “Define or be defined!” The suggestion of the Czech philosopher Václav Bělohradský how to survive as an at least partially autonomous agent in the contemporary world saturated with images and competing versions of reality is crucial both for Canadian film and also for the screen representation of Canadians. As long as an audience has no opportunity to view, or interest in viewing films by indigenous creators – films that would address the Canadian realities and problems from the vantage point of their own experience – its identity position will be negatively affected. Either the Canadian experience never reaches Canadian screens (thus contributing to one’s feeling of marginality and insignificance), or it is formulated “from the outside” by someone else. If the domestic film industry cannot provide adequate film representations of “Canadianness” – or if these representations are rendered invisible by the realities of the marketplace – such images are provided by the creators on the payroll of the Hollywood studios. The film text, the film industry (and film institutions) and the film audience form three apices of an imaginary triangular base, upon which contemporary film scholarship rests. Identity-related questions are inherently contained in all three.

When addressing the phenomenon of Canadian film, one has to proceed with a considerable degree of caution. The validity of the concept of “national cinema” is no longer as unproblematic as it once used to be. As, for instance, Andrew Highson notes: “To *identify* a national cinema is first of all to specify a coherence and a unity; it is to proclaim a unique *identity* and a stable set of meanings. The process of *identification* is thus invariably a hegemonizing, mythologizing process, involving both the production and assignation of a particular set of meanings, and the attempt to contain or prevent the potential proliferation of other meanings” (Highson, qtd. in Marshall, 1993, 13). Peter Morris approached the matter in a similar vein pointing out the various hegemonizing and mythologizing tendencies in the creation of the canon of Canadian film. He has pointed out that a certain kind of feature film is more likely to be admitted among the body of works deemed representative from the point of view of an implicitly shared understanding of “Canadianness”. If their themes, values and attitudes correspond to

the prevailing preferences and tastes on the part of the Canadian cultural establishment, their inclusion is smooth. On the other hand films that do not conform to such expectations tend to be ignored: too much do they contest the traditional Canadian image of itself, their narratives being much too transgressive, provocative, violent, tasteless, etc. The Canadian canon thus safely contains Jutra's earnest and realistic feature *Mon Oncle Antoine* (1971) but has no place for Cronenberg's early exploitation film *Shivers* (1975). The creators of the Canadian canon claim that the new Canadian feature film was born in 1964 with the films *Nobody Waved Good-bye* by Don Owen and *Le chat dans le sac* by Gilles Groulx, completely ignoring the fact the Vancouver-based Larry Kent had created his independent film *Bitter Ash* a year before (Morris, 1994, 30-31). Thinking about the canon thus involves not only what has become part of it but also what failed – for whatever reason – to qualify. Such omissions are often quite telling.

The notion of national cinema is understood as a collective cultural construct resulting from diverse institutional decisions and discursive practices. Nonetheless one should not refrain from the necessary project of describing the collective body of work by Canadian filmmakers, even though such description inevitably entails the practice of selection and interpretation, which are based, for the most part, on purely subjective criteria. The following text will thus, directly or indirectly, address the following questions. Can a specific Canadian cinematic handwriting be ascertained? If so, what are its characteristic features? What are the topics and genres privileged by the Canadian filmmakers? What kinds of characters predominate in the corpus of Canadian cinema and what does it communicate about the creation – and understanding – of Canadian identity at a particular historical moment? To what extent did the political, economic and cultural situation of the day influence Canadian films, their production, distribution and also interpretation?

One chapter does not provide sufficient space to cover as much ground as one would wish to; indeed, the selected thematic territory is almost as vast as Canada itself. Yet the description of some characteristic features of Canadian cinema, a brief outline of the history of its institutions and their leading personalities, as well as four case studies of selected Canadian films should suggest to the reader some major tendencies characterizing the idiosyncratic body of film work labeled “Canadian cinema” and its transformation over time.

## V.2 General Characteristics of Canadian Film: Themes, Characters, Traditions, Genres, Language

Traditional criticism has pointed out several characteristic features of the Canadian film canon: “stark, if not ‘depressing’ social realism; documentary flavor; eccentric and off-beat characterizations; contemplative treatment of the landscape” (Ramsay, 1993, 34). Canadian films (both documentaries and feature films) frequently offer the point of view and life experience of ordinary, even marginal people and their everyday troubles. Should a Canadian character find him/herself in an extreme situation, he or she is not endowed by his creators with unusually heroic traits. Don McKellar's apocalyptic feature

*Last Night* (1998), for instance, postulates the situation when the world is bound to end, for an unknown reason, perhaps due to an unavoidable cosmic collision. Everybody has advance warning about the impending catastrophe as well as about the exact time. Unlike his Hollywood equivalent, however, McKellar's hero (played by McKellar himself) does not deal with the question of saving the Earth. In a marked contrast to the tradition of American masculine heroism of the Bruce Willis kind, he is trying to settle a most delicate problem whether to spend the Earth's most historic moment with his parents (as they would like him to) or whether to spend it in the privacy of his own home, alone (as he wishes).

Canadian heroes are typically characterized by a high degree of shyness, scruples and lacking self-confidence. The autobiographical feature by Sandy Wilson *My American Cousin* (1985) for example focuses on an adolescent Canadian girl growing up on their parents' ranch in British Columbia. The tranquil atmosphere of a boring summer is interrupted by the arrival of her cousin Butch from California, whose character – obviously inspired by the looks, body language and charisma of James Dean – becomes the target of Sandy's fascinated admiration. At the same time he represents her exact antipode. Both protagonists thus initially personify an almost clichéd contrast between the Canadian and the American identity: the self-conscious, provincial Sandy is confronted with a seductive, self-confident and worldly rebel Butch in a red convertible.

The products of popular culture created and consumed by Western patriarchal culture are highly prescriptive in regard to the qualities an ideal male should possess. One celebrates heroes who are brave, decisive, fast and strong. A preferred masculine type is a bold larger-than-life character with a wry self-confident humor and an impressive, gym-trained body. Such an exemplary character is a natural born leader, a loyal friend and an exquisite lover. The Canadian males, by contrast, are frequently presented as an exact antithesis of such an ideal: they lack muscles, verbosity and self-confidence; likewise their erotic exploits are somewhat less glamorous. In Bruce McDonald's road movie *Highway 61* (1991) we encounter the character of a young virgin barber named Pokey, who lives alone in Pickerel Falls, a forgotten place at the end of the line in Northern Ontario. The narrow horizon of Pokey's existence is filled with exercising an ordinary and repetitive profession and with playing the trumpet in the local jazz band. Being an enthusiastic amateur player, Pokey is a great fan of the culture of the United States. No wonder that when the drug-trafficking femme fatale Jackie drifts his way, he heeds to the call of the moment, takes out the ancient American freeway cruiser he inherited from his parents and sets out on the journey of his dreams, along the mythical highway 66, all the way down to New Orleans. An intentional construction of his character as a person with no special skills, heroism or prowess represents a playful variation on a worn-out Canadian stereotype – that of the male loser.

Naturally, both examples remind us of another recurrent Canadian theme: its problematic and ambivalent relationship to the United States. Pokey and Sandy share a deep and uncritical admiration for the products of American mass culture, their bearers as well as the country itself. The shy barber writes home to his friend about the fascinating sights he has seen on the way while the images supplied by McDonald to these voice-overs speak a different, more somber language; likewise Sandy immediately falls for the rebel stylization of an older American teenager and the seductive signification of his red

coach. Toward the end of both films, however, the filmmakers have their characters jettison their initially uncritical attitudes; the films in fact call into question the traditional notion of American superiority and fully side with the traditional Canadian virtues of reliability and overall decency. At the end of the day, their characters learn to appreciate their ordinary Canadian identity and existence.

In addition to colonized consciousness, Canadian filmmakers provide their viewers with a variety of representations of a colonized culture, society and economy. The question of a colonial past and dependency has been a most relevant Canadian theme ever since the beginning of white settlement in North America. Indeed, it would be surprising if Canadian filmmakers ignored such a vital aspect of Canadian identity. The colonial position of Canada has been traditionally determined by the forces of the former colonial powers on the one hand and by Canada's relationship to the economically and culturally dominant United States on the other. Colonial-related problems from the past thus can be found predominantly in Canadian historical narratives, yet they can also be discerned in many movies situated in the more recent past or in the present. For instance the historical coproduction *Black Robe* (1991) based on the novel by the Irish writer Brian Moore, takes the viewers to the Quebec of the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The film portrays the attempts at Christianization of the French Jesuits who set out North to establish a mission in the Huron territory. The film shows the link between the intense religious fervor of the main hero, the Jesuit father Laforgue, and the larger colonizing project of the white settlers, and can be read as a meditation on the barriers dividing people from different cultural backgrounds, particularly the whites and the Native Americans. Neither party is capable of compromise; in particular, the devout ascetic Jesuit hero fails to relinquish his extremely held Christian worldview and accept the indigenous people as equals. Unable to open up to the otherness they represent, Father Laforgue's mission is bound to fail.

The post-colonial cultural status of Canada's more recent past represents a minor theme in the satirical comedy *No* (1998) by the Quebec director Robert Lepage. The plot is temporally situated in October 1970 when the province of Quebec saw the culmination of the October Crisis (see IV.2.2., pp. 61, 70), while on the other side of the globe the city of Osaka was hosting the EXPO. The narrative centers on a young Quebec actress in trouble: alone in Japan, representing Canada at the world's fair she discovers her pregnancy yet she is uncertain about the identity of the father. This intertextually rich, multi-layered film posits a whole series of national and international themes; for this moment, however, the relevant point is the theater piece chosen to represent Canada. Canadian culture is not represented by any authentic indigenous play but by a flawed staging of a farce by Feydeau.

A frequently mentioned attribute of Canadian feature film is its propensity to represent everyday life in a realistic way. The most probable cause of this tendency can be found in the Canadian tradition of documentary filmmaking. Two of the first new Canadian feature films Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Good-bye* and Gilles Groulx's *Le chat dans le sac* started as documentary projects, and many of the leading directors on their way to international fame (Groulx, Jutra, Arcand) started their careers as documentarians. The Canadian realistic tradition has successfully survived to the present millennium, as can be demonstrated in the best Canadian film of the year 2001, the Inuit drama

*Atanarjuat, Fast Runner* (2001). While being a heroic story set in the timelessness of myth and oral history, at the same time it offers a most authentic look at the conditions and lifestyle of the Inuits before contact. The film's director Zacharias Kunuk is so obsessed with a meticulous representation of the realities of the Inuit existence that his epic narrative at times reminds the viewers of Flaherty's classical documentary *Nanook of the North* (1922). Out of the two, it is paradoxically Kunuk's acted feature film that makes a rawer and more immediate impression.

A central position in Canadian life and imagination has traditionally been occupied by nature, its sublime beauty as well as its various dangers, which at times can become fatal. Probably the most notable moment in Kunuk's masterpiece involves the main character, the fast running Atanarjuat, barely escaping an ambush by members of a rival family. The stark naked hero outruns his three well-armed pursuers, yet as he heads toward the horizon, it becomes apparent that the greatest danger to his life is no longer coming from the three men with spears: he must survive without any clothes and protection in this enormous land of ice and snow! Twenty three years prior to the premiere of *Atanarjuat* Peter Morris wrote: "This special Canadian naturalism, whose essence is the sense of the environment having a determining and decisive effect on the individual life, found its most powerful formal expression in the documentary, dramatized documentary, or documentary-drama. This is so consistent throughout the history of Canadian cinema that it is impossible not to identify it as the quintessential Canadian film form" (Morris, 1978, 241). As the success of Zacharias Kunuk's film demonstrates, this tradition continues.

A similar role in the Canadian imagination is played by the overwhelming size of the country. Cynthia Scott's film *Strangers in Good Company* (also *A Company of Strangers*, 1990) portrays the stranding of a group of retired ladies following an engine breakdown. Suddenly the ladies find themselves outside of civilization with no immediate rescue in sight. They find refuge in a deserted house and the days spent in separation from the comforts of their home life with its daily routine provide them with an opportunity to share thoughts, talk about their dreams and desires, and discuss the past and the future. Like many other Canadian films this subtle feature combines a fictitious event with a possibly authentic take on reality. Cynthia Scott's cast does not consist of professional actresses and the feelings and opinions voiced in the film apparently correspond to the actual thoughts of the women themselves. This strategy was further underlined by Cythia Scott's decision to use the actresses' real names. At the same time another typical feature of Canadian cinema can be discerned here: the focus on traditionally neglected areas of human experience. Indeed, it would be hard to find a similarly serious examination of the theme of ageing in, for instance, the realm of a Hollywood film. Another characteristic feature is the attempt to delve deeper into the psychology of the characters. What the movie lacks in action and suspense, it makes up for in thought and empathy.

Another hallmark of Canadian cinema rests in its tendency to accentuate the plight of generally underprivileged groups. A marked sympathy for the social and economic underdog manifests itself in many Canadian documentaries (in particular the ones made in Quebec), yet is also frequently apparent in narrative films. The film *Margaret Museum* (1995), for instance, tackles the issue of work security in the coalmining industry in Nova Scotia in the 1940s. The story of the young heroine illustrates the brutal toll the miners

and their surviving relatives were asked to pay so that there was energy and warmth on the one hand and wages and profits on the other. The museum opened by the deranged Margaret following the death of her next of kin serves as bizarre memorial of those she has lost.

While many Canadian filmmakers focus, by means of realistic narrative devices, on everyday situations of ordinary people, it does not necessarily follow that they ignore questions of the representation of their characters' subjective dimension. Canada, in fact, can boast several notable features that unflinchingly examine the subjective point of view of the characters whose distorted visions go way beyond the standard deformations of an ordinary commonsensical brain. In David Cronenberg's psychological sci-fi *Videodrome* (1983) the main character is Max Renn, director of a cable TV channel in an unidentified North American city (the Torontonians naturally recognize their familiar streets). When Max intercepts a secret transmission of an underground s&m station named Videodrome, sinister events start to unfold. Constant exposure to Videodrome's violent content causes the main hero to hallucinate and subsequently turns him into an unthinking killing monster, programmed and reprogrammed by various factions behind the transmission. The subjective nature of the feature is so elaborate that the recording of "objective reality" merges with Max' warped perception until it is impossible to tell one from the other. A high degree of epistemological uncertainty – provocative and unsettling as it is – will form the basis of a few of Cronenberg's later films, as well.

An important part in assessing Canadian identity is played by technology. The question of technology was at the heart of the work of leading Canadian theoreticians of culture (and media) such as Harold Innis, George Grant and Marshall McLuhan. Perhaps for this reason several important Canadian films examine how technology determines the way one's identity is formed and perceived. Next to Cronenberg, such ideas manifest themselves particularly in the work of another Canadian auteur with a wide international reputation, Atom Egoyan. The problems of identity in a world dominated by media images form one of his most obsessive preoccupations. Again and again Egoyan points out that in today's modern world nobody is free from the domination of the image, from the various mediated versions of reality. However, as a complex creator he does succumb to the temptation to one-sidedly criticize this dominant movement of our civilization. Indeed, such a gesture would be too dishonest, for his contemplative features could only be made thanks to the benefits of modern technology! Egoyan's relation toward technology as it manifests itself in his work is therefore marked by thorough ambivalence: our identity is permeated and formed by media images; there is no way out into an imaginary prelapsarian state where the electronic screens and recording devices would not matter. Yet cameras and projectors at the same time represent relatively potent means of storing memory, seeing images from one's past, and many other pleasures – while also being instruments of manipulation, coercion, control and aggression, invading the most intimate spheres of the individual.

A specific aspect of Canadian cinema is also its recurrent thematic focus on a variety of personal obsessions, frequently of a sexual nature. The main heroine of the film *Kissed* (1996) by the Vancouver director Lynn Stopkewitch is a young woman suffering from necrophilia. In the movie *Crash* (also 1996) David Cronenberg examines the lifestyle and sexual practices of the subculture whose members find fulfillment in real or staged car



crashes. The thematic privileging of non-standard sexuality in Canadian film has become so conspicuous that it even found its way into the title of a recent book on Canadian film. Katherine Monk chose for her popularizing work a name that is both apt and catchy: *Weird Sex and Snowshoes*.

Recent Canadian film caters for a wide variety of tastes and has the capacity to satisfy vastly different target audiences. On the one hand Canadians become involved in large scale co-productions (such as the ambitious project by Francois Girard *Le violon rouge* [1998]), on the other hand they produce film specialties specifically tailored for a single market segment (the werewolf cult series *Ginger Snaps* [2000-2004]). The body of Canadian cinema also has its vital regional dimension. Most provinces can boast locally based directors who, by more or less realistic means, articulate the local experience and identity: the films of the Calgary director Gary Burns tend to be set in Calgary, Bruce Sweeney typically situates his movies in Vancouver and the idiosyncratic personality of the unforgettable experimenter Guy Maddin is closely tied with the production site of his native city of Winnipeg.

The early nineteen nineties saw the beginning of the tendency to capture Canadian ethnic and racial plurality. As opposed to earlier times when the multicultural character of Canada was only mentioned in passing or completely ignored, today it occupies a privileged position in an imaginary store window the now officially multicultural Canada displays to its own population and to the world. The marked novelty rests in adopting the previously neglected point of view of a representative of a certain Canadian minority and in the overall distribution of sympathies: this time around they are fully on the side of the minority heroes and heroines. The previous negative stereotyping is carefully avoided and should any stereotyping occur at all, it has a distinctly positive slant. Filmmakers such as Deepa Mehta, Shrinivas Krishna (Indian and Indian-Canadian experience), Clément Virgo (African Canadian experience), Mina Shum, Julia Kwan (Chinese-Canadian experience) and Ruba Nadda (Arabic-Canadian experience) present Canada as a multicultural country which has yet to free itself from prejudice, cultural misconceptions and misunderstandings, and even the most obvious forms of prejudice and racism. Their young and likeable minority heroes suffer from various identity problems stemming from their cultural, ethnic and racial difference, while at the same time at home they get drawn into typical – but no less painful – generational struggles caused by their different degree of acculturation to and acceptance of the values of the Canadian mainstream. No matter how hard the adversity, eventually they do find peace of mind, an understanding partner, a fulfilling life and hope for the future. The cinematic rendering of gay, lesbian or transsexual identity questions has also reached the Canadian screen, thanks to efforts of filmmakers such as Patricia Rozema, Anne Wheeler, Léa Pool and John Greyson.

The canonical preference for realism in Canadian films should not entirely eclipse the presence of a vibrant experimental tradition, out of which particularly Michael Snow, Mike Holbloom and R. Bruce Elder have earned a well-deserved international reputation. Straddling the gap between the traditions is Vincenzo Natali, author of the original sci-fi thriller *Cube* (1997). This intelligent feature made on a minimal budget became one of the most commercially successful Canadian films of all times and soon it was followed by a Hollywood sequel. Natali's next film entitled *Nothing* (2003) did not repeat the suc-

cess of the earlier feature, nevertheless Natali managed to retain his reputation of an inventive experimenter with mainstream potential.

Since most Canadian films are made thanks to the support of national and provincial institutions combined with various creative grants, their character is mostly non-commercial. The institutional support liberates the filmmakers from the necessity to flatter complacent viewers and provides them with more creative freedom. Thus various subjects are taken up that in the purely commercial arena would hardly be covered and most Canadian filmmakers aim at complexity with an apparent artistic ambition. Some of them claim (Egoyan or Greyson) that theirs is the ideal creative situation: the artist is not forced into compromises and can fully concentrate on the quality of the film. According to Greyson,<sup>1</sup> the filmmakers stand less in mutual competition than in a relationship of mutual support for they feel a shared responsibility for the common goal of maintaining and spreading further the project of Canadian cinema. Naturally, some other filmmakers and actors demur and claim that the generosity of the sponsoring bureaucratic institutions is not equally distributed and that neither a good artistic standard from the past nor an original idea automatically guarantees the allocation of the necessary financial means. It is also important to be institutionally well connected, to suggest a current topic that fits the agenda of the moment and be located in one of the central cities, preferably Toronto or Montreal.

Canadian films address their viewers by means of images, yet a no less important role is played by their language. If in the earlier years Canadian cinema was tied to the languages of the “founding nations”, today it does not automatically follow that a film’s soundtrack must necessarily be in English or French. Naturally both languages are still dominant. However, in the films that address the minority experience other languages are spoken. Their characters change the communication code depending on what environment they find themselves in. Also the different degree of language acquisition and fluency functions as an important marker of one’s Canadian acculturation. Thus the ambitious and independently-minded heroine of Mina Shum’s *Double Happiness* (1993) responds in English while her father’s questions and orders initially come in Chinese. The necessity to constantly switch communication codes contributes to the heroine’s latent identity conflict.

Similarly, works by first nations filmmakers add an important ingredient to the traditional domination of Anglophone and Francophone film in Canada. It is for instance the figure of Alanis Obomsawin that stands out in this context. While being an activist in various Native Canadian causes, Obomsawin is a diligent collector and communicator of the Canadian Indian experience by means of her educational films. Obomsawin’s most notable achievement so far is the film *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993), which describes, from the point of view of the Mohawks, the 1990 Oka crisis resulting from a land dispute between the Quebec Oka community and members of their nation. In the film “Obomsawin offers a substantial, biting critique of the way in which nationhood is defined, an especially important point of dissent in a country like Canada, which prides itself on the looseness and diversity of its national identity” (White, 2002, 364). Probably the most impressive achievement among the feature films that portray the life and myths

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1) Based on my private interview with Greyson.

of the first nations is the above mentioned *Atanarjuat* by Zacharias Kunuk. Its authenticity is underlined by the fact that throughout the whole duration of this powerful three-hour narrative not a single English word is spoken.

The above text naturally does not provide a complete description of the main schools of Canadian narrative cinema, neither does it fully enumerate its privileged themes, nor does it provide a definitive list of its traditional character types. Nevertheless it aims at presenting a rough outline, a map that captures several crucial thematic and artistic tendencies of Canadian film. Even though the catalog of the mentioned artists and their works represents but a fraction of Canadian film production, in regard to questions of the cinematic representation of identity, however, this fraction is deemed appropriate and relevant.

### V.3 Canadian Film Institutions and the Production of Canadian Identity

Until the mid nineteen-sixties nearly all feature films with a Canadian setting originated in the land of Hollywood imagination. A complete count was undertaken by Pierre Berton: “Between 1907 and 1975, Hollywood moviemakers made 575 movies specifically set (although not usually filmed) in Canada” (Berton, 1975, book cover). Berton also pointed out that in most of these films Canadians look and act like Americans, these distorted images representing Canada in the world. Berton’s book is permeated by a naïve belief in his own knowledge of the undistorted Canadian reality and of some essential basis of “Canadianness” (his book dates back to 1975). However, his delineation of the most blatant stereotypes in regard to the Canadian space and people is still quite usable, as well as his description of how the Canadian image has frequently been bent to suit certain genre requirements. Berton illustrates the omnipresence of deeply ingrained ideas: in the Hollywood films French Canadians were passionate, half-breeds were treacherous, Canadian Indians looked and acted exactly the same as their American Indian movie counterparts and the Canadian North displayed a considerable number of attributes borrowed from the American West. Likewise, members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were as tough and strong as American sheriffs and immediately reached for their guns...

There are several books that provide in-depth analyses of the reasons why Canada had not developed a self-sustaining tradition of narrative film, why the country had to wait until the Sixties and Seventies. A detailed description of the relevant circumstances that prevented the rise of Canadian narrative film would exceed the scope of this subchapter. The ensuing explanation, therefore, is to be understood solely as a gross generalization, which can by no means take into account all relevant economic, political, cultural and identity aspects responsible for such a lack. Neither can it fully recapitulate the various contradictory interpretations that compete with each other in the academic marketplace.

Peter Morris, who closely examined the period between 1895 and 1939, explains the absence by pointing out two basic congruent factors: 1) “Canada never, at any time, came

close to developing a centralized, monopolistic structure in its film industry“(Moris, 1978, 239) as existed in many other countries. The production of films remained local, isolated within the individual provinces; their financing depended on modest and unstable resources of the local investors. “The Canadian insistence on both regionalism and possessive individualism at a time when the trend was the converse” (Morris, 1978, 240) proved to be a poorly chosen strategy. Faced with the competition of the highly concentrated film production within consolidated Hollywood studios under financial backing by strong Wall Street investment groups, the Canadian film’s chances of survival were extremely slim (see Morris, 1978, 238-40). A significant factor in this process was the vertical integration of the Hollywood studios when the individual studios started to control the entire process of film production from the film’s inception and shooting through its distribution and exhibition in its own theater network. Only in highly exceptional cases could Canadian independent producers and distributors succeed on such parceled out, monopolistic territory. 2) The other important factor is “the fact that the federal and provincial governments did not, in the Twenties, legislate effective protection and support for the production, distribution, or exhibition branches of the [indigenous film] industry“ (Morris, 1978, 238). In other words the Canadian political representation was less interested in the protection and development of the domestic film industry than in guaranteeing the American studios freedom of trade and thus maintaining good neighborly relations with the United States. The government basically accepted the incorporation of the Canadian market into the wider North American distribution and projection territory where it still belongs today.

An explanation of why Canadian governments have failed to protect local filmmakers is offered by a prominent advocate of the so called dependency theory Manjunath Pendakur. This scholar carried out a detailed analysis of a variety of economic data and political circumstances that contributed to the unhappy condition of the Canadian feature film industry. He particularly blames the historical dominance of American monopolies and points at the limited sovereignty of the Canadian representation in economic matters: “Furthermore, the power the monopolistic sector brings to bear on the Canadian State to influence government policy in the motion picture industry is critical in understanding Canada’s historic dependence on the U.S. film industry” (Pendakur, 1990, 42).

If Pendakur’s interpretation stresses the negative role of the Canadian state as an instrument of outside economic and cultural dominance, Ted Magder’s assessment of its role is less pessimistic. He agrees with Pendakur that the relationship toward the United States, marked by dominance and subordination, is quite central for understanding the condition of Canadian cinema. At the same time he stresses the fact that any understanding of the state as a kind of mechanical lever of foreign influence is imprecise. Indeed, states are complex structures where countless disputes, negotiations and conflicts are carried out on many levels; they are sites where various agendas and interests of a multitude of people, groups and parties mix. The result of such diffuse functioning can never be entirely unproblematic and clear. It follows that the assessment of the role of the Canadian state cannot be wholly dismissive, either. It is true that on the one hand the state did not initially guarantee the necessary conditions for the Canadian feature film industry to survive. On the other hand it is precisely thanks to the state sponsored

agencies and arts grants that Canadian features have started to be produced (Magder qtd. in Dorland, 1998, 31-32).

Even in the regional, decentralized world of Canadian cinema between the wars feature films were made. Particularly legendary was the silent feature *Back to God's Country* (1919) with Nell Shipman. This adventure film set in the Canadian wilderness was independently produced by Shipman's husband Ernest and was shot by the Lesser Slave Lake in central Alberta under winter conditions so gruesome that one of the actors died of pneumonia following his involvement in the project. The story about the brave attractive Dolores became a hit in 1919. It was shown in many countries of the world and within a year after its premiere had made 1.5 million dollars (Morris, 1978, 106-7).

Great ambitions were also invested into the Canadian war film *Carry on, Sergeant!* (1928). The silent feature glorifying a Canadian hero, however, did not survive long on national screens. One of the reasons was the fact that this silent film reached theaters at a time when talkies were gradually becoming the norm. It did not help the film that it was lambasted by Canadian critics on grounds of its supposed immorality. The feature was distributed by the American company Famous Players Canadian Corporation, which may have further hampered its performance in the marketplace. After several weeks of being shown in Toronto, Montreal and some smaller Ontario towns the company did not give the film another chance and withdrew it rapidly (Morris, 1978, 79). The failure of this independently financed movie had a detrimental impact on comparable future projects and essentially marked the end of the production of indigenous feature films: "Raising funds for Canadian feature film production after *Carry on, Sergeant* was a practical impossibility". (Morris, 1978, 72)

The Twenties in Canada also saw the making of some notable film documentaries, particularly the famous look at the life of the Inuits *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert Flaherty. It was precisely the documentary genre that was to prevail for many years as the most characteristic form of Canadian film expression. For the local elite it became a privileged genre thanks to its capacity for creating and communicating the specifics of the Canadian lifestyle and identity.

### V.3.1 National Film Board, Office national du film, NFB/ONF

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 led to the establishment of the National Film Board/Office national du film. The NFB/ONF was created with the assignment to turn out motivating propagandistic films covering the war effort of the allies, such as the series *Canada Carries On* and *World in Action* (Gittings, 2002, 80). In the course of time, however, it developed into a respected institution that gave rise to many a notable film. A key role in its foundation and subsequent development was played by two Scots, John Grierson (1898-1972) and Norman McLaren (1914-1987). "Together, they created the legacy of the National Film Board, with its success in the documentary tradition and animation." (Melnyk, 2004, 58) Grierson was known as "the father of the documentary"; he is also attributed with the formation of the neologism "documentary." Prior to his arrival in Canada he shot several documentaries himself and for the rest of his career he became one of the major proponents of the genre. The creative genius Norman

McLaren worked in the realm of animation. Following Grierson's invitation he joined the Film Board in 1941 and soon became the driving force behind its vastly successful animation department.

It is Grierson's contribution in particular that bears considerable relevance for the assessment of how Canadian identity was shaped by and reflected in Canadian film. In comparison with the Hollywood product Grierson considered documentaries much more valuable. They did not capitalize on emotions, erotic innuendos or dramatic action. Their *raison d'être* was not shallow entertainment but education, the dissemination of information and the cultivation of the audience. Grierson's attitude was well reflected in his conscious use of terminology: when referring to the commercial Hollywood product he used the word "movies"; it was only the documentaries that could claim the status of "film". According to Grierson, the task of the documentarians was to offer information about developments in this vast country, capture its regional diversity (its landscape, flora and fauna) and, most importantly, present the attitudes, values and lifestyles of its inhabitants. A typical NFB/ONF documentary had a crucial role to play in that it was supposed to objectively inform the inhabitants, help them understand the world and provide them with hope. Vital ingredients in such narratives were not insignificant doses of optimism and upbeat endings. "The main thing is to see this National Film Board plan as a service to the Canadian public, as an attempt to create a better understanding of Canada's present and as an aid to the people in mobilizing their imagination and energy in the creating of Canada's future," (Grierson qtd. in Fetterling, 19-, 66) wrote Grierson in a key program proposal entitled *Film Policy for Canada*, prior to his being named head of the Board. Grierson's imposing and energetic personality thus was a crucial influence in the formation and character of the Canadian documentary tradition. The state documentary then became "valorized as the *essential Canadian form*" (Magder, 1993, 250).

After the war Canadian documentary established itself as an important channel of communication that addresses the Canadian population and is related to some innermost Canadian characteristics. The documentaries of the time are descriptive for they present the country to its inhabitants, focusing on its regional variety. At the same time they are also prescriptive in that they help construct and confirm a certain shared imaginary identity of the nation by implicitly defining some desirable norms of "Canadianness". A textbook example how the ideology of building the nation manifested itself in film is a short documentary about a Polish immigrant *Paul Tomkowitz, Street-railway Switchman* (1954). The Winnipeg switchman, who night after night removes snow and ice from the tracks, is naturally an ordinary Canadian, one of the many "Faces of Canada" (his portrait was part of a series of the same name). His selfless nightly activity and his level-headed, calm monologue at the same time express important values that Canadians appreciate, such as rootedness in a place, persistence and contentment. Indeed, "balance and compromise are a reputed part of the Canadian identity that *Paul Tomkowitz* represents" (Hankox, 2003, 26). Situating Tomkowitz in the geographical center of Canada is equally important for he becomes a solid part of the imaginary central axis around which the country is turning (Hankox, 2003, 27). In such a manner hundreds of other NFB/ONF documentaries contributed to the Canadian project of nation building.

The year 1951 saw the issuing of the so called *Massey Report* (Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, Sciences, 1941-1951), the “first full-scale assessment of the policies for the cultural development of Canada and a reflection on their future orientation” (Dorland, 1998, 14). This government document was of crucial importance because it recommended the foundation of Canadian television broadcasting; at the same time the text was permeated by nationalist anti-American rhetoric. In regard to film the report complains: “The cinema at present is not only the most potent but also the most alien of the influences shaping our Canadian life. Nearly all Canadians go to the movies; and most movies come from Hollywood [...] Hollywood refashions us in its own image” (qtd. in Dorland, 1998, 14-15). The authors of the report on the other hand spoke appreciatively about the documentaries of the NFB/ONF, praising their educational character, cultural value and realism. The report concedes that Canadians are interested in commercial feature films, yet as to the possible support of indigenous feature films no recommendations were made. Feature films were supposed to stay in the commercial sphere (Pendakur, 1990, 143). As for the expression of one’s life experience and identity, Canadians had to do with the documentaries of the NFB/ONF.

The report functions as a crystal ball distinctly visualizing the attitude of the Canadian elite toward the situation of the nation as well as toward the national identity. The definition of “Canadianness” is based on the opposition to the “Big American Other”: the Canadian identity and values are considered clear and unproblematic. The attitudes of the Canadian establishment are of course somewhat elitist, echoing Matthew Arnold’s belief in the civilizing potential of high culture. They had then important repercussions for the future of narrative film in Canada: if the United States was dominated by the industrial aesthetic of narrative film, Canada was to become the promised land of socially constructive documentaries. If the bottom line of American cinema was commerce, Canadian film was to rest on the selflessness of public service. If American films appealed to the lowest, gut level feelings, Canadian films were supposed to encourage reflection. They were to help viewers become good and informed citizens who have good reasons to be proud of their country. Only such films deserved state support and subsidies. It therefore comes as no surprise “that when the Canada Council was finally established in 1957, as a source of financial aid to the ‘arts’ in Canada, feature filmmaking was not one of the cultural activities deemed eligible for support” (Magder, 1993, 240).

The culturally nationalist *Massey Report* did not examine the economic causes of American cultural dominance; neither did it venture an explanation why American films are so popular with Canadian viewers. However, it did suggest concrete measures to counter the strong American cultural emanation and eliminate the danger of the loss of Canadian cultural sovereignty. Its proposal for the establishment of national television proved crucial for several reasons. Beginning with the following year (1952) Canadian TV started its transmission on two channels and created a steady market for the film material produced by the NFB/ONF. Even more important was its existence for further definition of national identity in both Anglophone and Francophone Canada. It was particularly in the province of Quebec where TV “opened up nothing less than a direct channel of communication that competed with the traditional channels of communication represented by the Church, the school, and the family” (Véronneau, qtd. in

Dorland, 1998, 16), thus preparing the ground for the processes that subsequently led to the Quiet Revolution.

Another important date in the history of the NFB/ONF was the relocation of its central offices from Ottawa to Montreal in 1956. The following year, headed by Michel Brault and Gilles Groulx a new generation of filmmakers appeared, among them Claude Jutra (Marshall, 1993, 20). The production became more flexible, the filmmakers abandoned the traditional didacticism as well as the style of presentation that rests on the assumed omniscience of the filmmaker, who has unquestioned authority that manifests itself by his godlike voiceover. There is an apparent aspiration to authentically capture the portrayed reality; the contact between the filmmaker and his subjects becomes closer and more equal (Marshall, 1993, 20-1; Leach and Sloniowski, 2003, 5). These developments were made easier by the more modern, light-weight equipment that started to appear at the time. Compared with the production in English Canada, the French Canadian films of the day displayed more openness in examining questions of nationhood and addressed in a frank manner, question of social injustice (Leach and Sloniowski, 2003, 8). The first short illustrating these new approaches (usually referred to as *cinéma direct* or *le direct*) was Brault and Groulx' documentary about the annual snowshoe festival in Sherbrooke entitled *Les Racquetteurs* (1958). Of considerable importance for the suggested trends were also the documentaries created by the NFB/ONF's Unit B. The most well-known among them was the *Candid Eye* series that was shown on Canadian TV in the years 1958/9 (Leach and Sloniowski, 2003, 6).

The year 1965 brought about another impulse for the development of Canadian film with the establishing of the NFB/ONF provincial centers in Halifax, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver (Gittings, 2002, 93). The existence of the regional centers strengthened the tendency toward decentralization: this manifested itself also in the approach toward the filmed material. Whereas the original NFB under Grierson stressed the common features all Canadians supposedly share, the new regional centers accentuated particularly the local aspects characterizing the respective region and the different lifestyle, experience and culture of its people. The resulting notion of the country is one much less marked by homogeneity than one that highlights its heterogeneity, its regional variety, and different identity experience of the local population.

From the beginning of the 1960s onwards filmmakers of the NFB started to lobby for the opportunity to shoot feature films. They were convinced that the traditional avoidance of feature films in favor of documentaries was no longer tenable as a reasonable film policy. One of their arguments was the rather diffuse borderline between both genres. Many of them were well aware that this division could not be plausibly sustained for they realized that their treatment of the portrayed realities was by definition subjective, contaminated by their point of view and by the necessity of structuring their material along the lines of a certain stable and fairly predictable narrative progression and naturally according to their authorial (and political) vision. Nor in the case of the portrayed subject could one speak about unmediated, authentic existence/reality that just happened to be captured by the camera for it was impossible to eliminate at least some stylization. And it was precisely the blurred borderline – or rather continuity – between documentaries and feature films that played a significant role in the rise of the new Canadian film. It was in 1964 that Don Owen and Gilles Groulx began to work on docu-



mentary projects that in the course of the shooting morphed into features (Leach and Sloniowski, 2003, 9). It is symptomatic that both filmmakers proceeded surreptitiously without notifying their superiors about the modified nature of their projects (Magder, qtd. in Gittings, 2002, 89). Their clandestine operation resulted in two landmark films, *Nobody Waved Goodbye* and *Le chat dans le sac*, whose considerable success heralded the renaissance of Canadian feature film.

The trend to try out new things and call into question dogmatically enforced truths of the past is inseparably linked to the atmosphere of the Sixties. It also left its mark on the development of Canadian features. “[the] Massey Report’s view of popular culture’s inferiority had been called into question; the speeches of Maurice Lamontagne, Canada’s first ‘minister of culture’, revealed a new orientation toward the development of Canada’s cultural industries and popular culture as a means of establishing a national identity” (Magder, 1993, 241). The radical reassessment of the originally hostile attitudes of the Canadian establishment toward domestic feature film production finally found its institutional expression in the passage of the law concerning the *Canadian Film Development Corporation* with the newly established organization being immediately endowed with ten million dollars for the development of Canadian feature film (Gittings, 2002, 94; Melnyk, 2004, 107). From that moment onwards the definition and expression of Canadian national identity – or rather identities – is linked with the existence and support of the domestic feature film.

To be sure, the growth of Canadian feature films and its institutions does not stop around 1968. Since that time one has witnessed a relatively flexible response of the Canadian establishment to social and technological developments and to the evolution of the identitary self-reflection of society. This resulted in a series of legislative measures, the establishment of various new institutions and the transformations of those already in existence. One such milestone in 1974 was the creation of Studio D, an independent unit within the NFB/ONF that – as the first production organization in the world – supported work by women filmmakers (Gittings, 2002, 90). Unlike in earlier times when the production of the NFB/ONF was dominated by the male perspective, now women were gaining an opportunity to define their own filmmaking agenda and be in charge of their own image. At the beginning of the Nineties a restructuring of Studio D was carried out with the aim of providing a more nuanced rendering of the plurality of women’s lives in Canada and of moving away from the originally somewhat monolithic construction of the female image in which other important identity categories were not sufficiently accentuated. The focus thus shifted towards productions that stressed the regional, racial, lesbian female experience, etc. Studio D was closed down in 1996 due to economizing (Gittings, 2002, 92).

In 1984 the *Canadian Film Development Corporation* was renamed *Telefilm Canada* in order to give better expression to the reality that “most Canadians view Canadian film not in the cinema but via broadcast, videocassette or DVD” (Gittings, 2002, 99). The main reason is legislative regulation of Canadian TV, which states that 60% of all aired programs between 6 p.m. and midnight must be produced domestically (Magder, 1993, 213). TV therefore represents a significant market for Canadian production companies and filmmakers while theater distribution remains quite negligible and in the non-regulated marketplace cannot compete with that of the movie blockbusters made in the United States.

*Telefilm Canada* attempted to resist this traditional domination by establishing a 65-million dollar fund aimed at supporting domestic film production (1986), by granting loans to Canadian distribution companies (1998) and also by means of a system of grants supporting the distribution and marketing of Canadian films (Gittings, 2002, 92). Between 1998 and 2002 Canadian filmmakers participated in 44 co-productions with partners from 52 countries (Gittings, 2002, 100). The strategy also has its problems. A co-production can secure more means and know-how so that a more substantial foreign distribution and higher level of visibility is achieved. The production teams can't, however, afford to take unnecessary risks, which frequently leads to the close resemblance of the resulting product to the mainstream movies whose dominance in the market the co-production alliance attempts to challenge. The necessity of creating a narrative clearly understandable to international audiences also complicates attempts to address, at any depth, specifically domestic issues (Gittings, 2002, 100). The suggested problems can be well exemplified by the most expensive Canadian film ever made, Francois Girard's *Le violon rouge* (1998). This grand historical spectacle, full of picturesque locations, exquisite costumes and seductive images, is set in three different continents but any Canadian themes are conspicuously absent from the screen. The only remaining Canadian attributes of the production thus are the Canadian passports of the director and of some other members of his production team.

## V.4 Four Key Canadian Feature Films

### V.4.1 Introduction

A discussion of identity and identity formation in narrative film obviously requires a definition of its central term. Human identity is understood as shaped by the mutually intersecting aspects of one's class, education, gender, age, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and religion, as well as by one's relationship to the place where one is located. While not being entirely subjective, it does have a significant subjective dimension, as it represents a fundamental aspect of one's personal continuity, providing people with the possibility to understand themselves (provisional, to be sure) as well as a vantage point for observing and comprehending the world. Never entirely fixed, a person's identity is constantly in the making, predicated on complex processes of the struggle over meaning within the larger social fields of interpersonal and institutional relationships. A discussion of the nature of identity would be impossible without due attention to the wider question of its discursive formation by means of language and representation.

Being just imaginary signifiers on the celluloid strip, mere spheres of action carrying out a limited set of narrative functions, film characters have no subjective identity. But for most of us they appear real enough, providing us with material for empathy and – in the case of the best films – an opportunity to reflect on the moral dilemmas of humans in a complex and contradictory world. Such films offer us valuable material for musing about the eternal questions: Where does love come from? What are the sources of responsibility? Why do we have to die? By means of their characters, screenwriters,

directors and their teams provide us with a certain version of life and the world. The key to the comprehension of the identities, social roles, motivations and feelings of these imaginary (at least on this level of interpretation) characters is the same set of categories: class, gender, nationality, age, place, memory, etc.

It has been said that commercial narrative films offer their viewers a more or less comprehensible image of the world. The construction of this image is naturally deeply problematic. It results from multiple negotiations within the production teams; it depends on various agendas of the sponsoring agencies or individuals and, of course, on the capability or willingness of viewers to accept such a picture. Likewise the viewers' approaches are subjective, determined by life experience and education, and belonging to a certain interpretive community sharing the same attitudes, beliefs and values. It is not my ambition to provide here a comprehensive theoretical description of the processes of film creation and reception. I will limit this brief expose to the declaration of my belief that narrative film can legitimately be used for the purpose of describing a certain country and its culture. Naturally a description of a nation's past or present by means of any film – documentary or fictional – is never unmediated and purely authentic, but always unstable, multifaceted and frequently contradictory. Nevertheless, provided the analysis is cautious and takes into account the various relevant contexts, it can still yield valuable historical lessons. Films are historical documents that give us insight into the life of a certain country and its attitudes and values at a particular historical moment. It is much less the moment where the narrative is temporarily located. Films speak much more about the times when they were made.

When looking at four representative Canadian works from three different decades, the following questions will be asked: What is the identity construction of the main characters? What features are highlighted as important for their interpretation? What are these characters' relationships to the others and how do they communicate? What are the power relations between them? What was the reception of the film? In what way was it significant as an expression of a certain identity situation in the country at a particular moment? And furthermore, what particular bearing do these films have on our general understanding of the Canadian nation – its society, politics, culture and institutions as they evolve through time?

## V.4.2 Realistic Beginnings of the Canadian Film Revival: Don Shebib, *Goin' Down the Road* (1970)

Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* has traditionally been described as one of the films that started the history of Canadian narrative film. From the set of identity categories Shebib accentuates social, regional, and educational and gender problems. The narrative, describing the unsuccessful attempt of the two main characters, Pete and Joey, to start a new life in Toronto, can be clearly read as a visualisation of the dramatically disparate economic and cultural situations in individual Canadian regions and a condemnation of Canada's insurmountable social cleavages. The film was characterized by the

employment of a strong documentary aesthetic that became a central attribute of local cinematic production even in case of feature films.

Pete and Joey are young working class men from Cape Breton Island in the Eastern province of Nova Scotia. The beginning of the narrative shows them getting into their large convertible and setting out on a journey to Toronto. Several shots communicate the reason for their trip: Cape Breton and its surroundings is a region in decline that has little to offer to its inhabitants in the way of professional growth or interesting future life. On the other hand the skyscrapers of the Ontario capital in the ensuing sequence beckon to the eager travellers. They symbolize the metropolis' potential to make all their hopes and expectations come true. Pete and Joey's initial optimism is dampened instantly: the only occupation they can find is temporary, badly-paid and monotonous work in a lemonade factory. Likewise their new female partners are not glamorous trophy women but ordinary girls with a comparable social background. While Joey is sufficiently realistic to be content with the situation, Pete is a dreamer who hopes for better things. His ambitions, however, soar far too high for a man of his education and working skills. His failure to find employment in an advertising agency is paralleled by his disappointment when trying to date an attractive secretary from the headquarters of his company. Both deeply embarrassing events teach him a lesson that with a background such as his he will never be able to aspire for more than a manual job. Nor will he make enough money to be of any interest to a sophisticated sexually desirable middle class lady.

The pregnancy of Joey's partner Betty brings about marriage and the couple move to a small but cosy rented apartment. Yet this idyllic arrangement does not last long. At the end of the summer season Pete and Joey lose their jobs. Joey and Betty are unable to make the payments and the three friends find a less expensive room in a run down boarding house. Pete remains the only working member of the small community picking up skittle pins in a bowling alley while Joey becomes gradually apathetic, drinking and watching TV. With the biting Canadian winter approaching and no occupation in sight the desperate friends decide to steal in the supermarket for a Christmas feast. While trying to make their escape with the stolen goods they seriously wound a shop assistant, run away and spend the night in the car. The next morning they return to their place and discover their possessions on the sidewalk: an unmistakable sign of eviction. Since Betty found refuge with her parents, Pete and Joey decide to hide from the law and try their luck elsewhere. They move further west, once again goin' down the road...

The film was shot on a limited budget of 85.000 Canadian dollars (Melnik, 2004, 110) and is marked by a minimalist style. Shebib's aims at a possibly authentic representation of reality using black-and-white film stock, and shooting on locations with a light, hand-held 16 mm camera. The unpretentious acting of his ordinary protagonists has a life-like air that at times resembles improvisation. The feeling of authenticity is further underlined by the actors' colloquial, unschooled accents. The overall feeling is thus strongly reminiscent of a documentary.

Both the realistic aspiration of Shebib's film and its thematic focus on the underside of contemporary society corresponds well to the historical and cultural context in Canada and elsewhere. A new and at times much more realistic approach to film was manifesting itself in American independent cinema (John Cassavettes); likewise, representatives of the French (and later Czech) new waves were attempting, by means of various methods,

to capture reality more precisely and accurately. The early works of Miloš Forman, for instance, were characterized by their immediate style; Forman's casting of partly improvising non-actors also created the impression of a documentary, or, to use a more up-to-date terminology, a kind of crazy reality show featuring scenes from ordinary people's lives.

Equally important were questions of social justice. Canadian documentarians of the 1960s – particularly in Quebec – did not hesitate to take strong positions on matters of social inequality and discrimination. Even the Hollywood studios stopped relying solely on impressive historical dramas, socially irrelevant musicals and shallow comedies and heeded the call of the moment with films such as John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), which represented a relatively strong condemnation of social conditions in the United States. Moreover, against the commercial imperative of this branch of the entertainment business, it lacked a happy ending. The similarity of *Midnight Cowboy* and *Goin' Down the Road* is striking for both films share the same basic thematic structure: they show the arrival of naïve, uneducated, provincial protagonists in a big city and depict the fast demise of their great expectations. They visualise their severe social exclusion and make a relatively frank statement about the existence of marginalized people in the context of an anonymous metropolis. These similarities are so apparent that Shebib's film can be regarded as a Canadian variation on the same theme, one that is less emotionally appealing, and thanks to this fact perhaps even more authentic.

The film *Goin' Down the Road* is important for a variety of reasons. A very important issue for Canadians at the beginning of the Seventies was Shebib's construction of masculinity, which came to be interpreted as an important sign of a certain essential "Canadianness". In this generalizing interpretation the film corresponded to an age-old cultural stereotype of the Canadian male as a weak, failing loser. The canonical standing of the film in the history of Canadian film – according to Christine Ramsay – became further solidified as both unhappy protagonists correspond to another favorite Canadian image of itself: that of victim. Influential descriptions of Canadians along these paradigmatic lines have been provided by Robert Fothergill and Margaret Atwood. A combination of these two traditional characteristics – that of failing masculinity and the idea of a victimized nation – then translated "across the terms of gender identity into the even broader notion of Canada as a 'feminized' nation" (Wilden, qtd. in Ramsay, 1993, 36).

Ramsay is, of course, correct in pointing out the gross distortions of such an interpretation. Not all the males in the film are the 'typical Canadian losers'; it will suffice to recall the character of the interviewer from the advertising agency who, situated in a well equipped office, ironically questions the naïve Pete. This self-confident Canadian is everything else but effeminate and defeated. He works in a modern high-rise, the ultimate phallic symbol of the power of multinational corporations; the nature of his work makes him an effective part of an aggressive and sophisticated system of manipulation. His figure is not one of a mere passive unskilled wage-earner who sells his own manual labor on the job market. Rather, he is a successful manipulator who provides the most important ingredients allowing his employer to flourish: if his enterprise is engaged in the production of symbolic images for the sake of growing consumption, he makes sure that only highly creative people (possibly without scruples) are offered the job.

If critics in the 1970s subjected the film to a certain generalizing interpretation which

ten years later was successfully refuted, this alteration speaks volumes about changes in the way the notion of Canadian identity has been understood. Initially it was discursive strategies aiming at the identification or accentuation – or perhaps even more precisely, creation – of the elements “common” to all Canadians, attempts at a definition of some kind of shared basis of “Canadianness” everyone is endowed with. Thus originally one identified some kind of essence of the nation, one that was pervaded by a strong sense of male insufficiency marked by considerable weakness and a feeling of failure. At the time of the post-modern turn, however, when a higher degree of caution toward such generalizing strategies began to appear, these homogenizing interpretations were contested and subsequently abandoned in favor of the readings that accentuate dimensions that are individual, particular and local. The shared sign of common Canadian identity (and experience) then, paradoxically, is located in its plurality, heterogeneity and its contradictory nature.

The traditional characteristic of the failing victim, however, is still safely applicable to the Maritimers who lack education, advanced skills and cultural capital. In this more subtle reading Peter and Joey are no longer representatives of the nation as a whole. Their fictitious story can be interpreted as a disturbing statement about the uneven economic, cultural and educational levels of the individual provinces at the turn of the Sixties and Seventies, about the internal colonization of the marginal regions by Ontario and its capital. Shebib’s message is dispiriting: to his anti-heroes he offers neither hope nor redemption. The scenes depicting their attempts to escape the trap of their social determination and exclusion present Canada as a country where social identity is permanently fixed, where upward social mobility is impossible. Shebib does not offer a single sign that somewhere down the road his sad protagonists can find a better deal.

One of the first full-fledged Canadian feature films thus resonated with the uncertain economic, political and cultural situation at the turn of the Seventies. It was characterized by cinematic elements that would predominate in the future: a thematic focus on ordinary people, attempts at a possibly authentic capturing of reality and the presence of social critique.

### V.4.3 Canadian Auteur Film in the Nineteen-Eighties

#### V.4.3.1 Denys Arcand, *Decline of the American Empire* (*Le déclin de l’empire américain*, 1986)

Canadian cinema can boast an array of remarkable filmmakers. Patricia Rozema, Jeremy Podeshva, Anne Wheeler, Guy Maddin, Bruce MacDonald, Robert Lepage, Léa Pool or Zacharias Kunuk (to name a few) are notable creators whose works are aesthetically pleasing and intellectually stimulating. The films of these filmmakers are typically idiosyncratic and complex texts with a distinct authorial handwriting. Yet despite numerous significant features these filmmakers have produced (and that were awarded many national and international prizes) they have not reached a permanent international standing comparable to the triumvirate of Canadian filmmakers of world renown, Denys Arcand, David Cronenberg and Atom Egoyan. The following chapter will focus on two

of the three, Arcand and Egoyan. By means of a brief analysis of one of their representative film texts I will outline the general characteristics of their work and comment on the distinctiveness of their authorial style as well as favored methods and thematic preoccupations. It goes without saying that an important object of inquiry will be the question of identity both on the personal and on the national level.

Denys Arcand's reputation attained an international dimension with the outstanding commercial success of his conversation comedy *Decline of the American Empire* (1986). This by Canadian standards immensely profitable feature was followed by the moving parable *Jésus de Montréal* (1989). The triptych of Arcand's international successes was crowned by the Academy Award winning *Les Invasions Barbares* (2003). The decision of the Film Academy certainly did not have its sole basis in the merit of this particular film. The members of the academy probably also took into account Arcand's entire life work, which had been consistently marked by a high degree of political involvement and social critique as well as high artistic achievement.

An attempt to regard Arcand's work through the prism of his three best-known features would be, to some extent, a distortion as the filmmaker has also created a number of notable documentaries. As early as 1963 Arcand started to work for the NFB/ONF where he made short films about Canadian historical figures as well as about contemporary issues (Heide, Kotte, 2006, 70). He earned a reputation as an unflinching political commentator with the almost three-hour-long documentary *On est au coton* (1970) about the conditions in the Quebec textile industry. The film "conveys the sense of frustration felt not just by the workers depicted in the film but also by the filmmakers, who were appalled by what they discovered in making it" (Leach, 2003, 88). Arcand's film was so radical in taking a critical stance toward the portrayed realities that initially it was banned, despite its high cost of production and the fact that it was made under the auspices of the NFB/ONF. Yet the film continued to reach viewers by means of video distribution as "illicit video copies were circulated and widely screened, with the result that, according to a 'conservative estimate,' at least 20,000 saw the film before the NFB lifted the ban in 1976" (Leach, 2003, 88). The suppression of this radical film during the politically volatile period of the fall of 1970 – marked by the October Crisis and the briefly invoked War Measures Act by Prime Minister Trudeau – led to charges of censorship. Arcand's ensuing political documentaries were *Québec: Duplessis et après* (1972) and *Le Confort et l'indifférence* (1981). While in the former he offered the viewers a look at the provincial election campaign of 1970, in the latter he analyzed the causes of the defeat of Quebec separatists in the 1980 referendum on provincial independence. During the Seventies Arcand's attention also began shifting toward feature films, which resulted in the production of several genre movies that, however, at times transcended their genre boundaries: *La Maudite Galette* (1971), *Réjeanne Padovani* (1973) and *Gina* (1975). His major breakthrough came in 1986 with the release of one of the most commercially successful Canadian features of all times, the satirical comedy *Decline of the American Empire*.

Arcand depicts here a weekend meeting of eight for the most part academic friends in a luxury summer house near Montreal. Most of the narrative is taken up by the characters' conversations about gender relationships and sex. The film has a clear easily discernible structure. It opens with a long tracking shot of the seemingly endless halls of Montreal University. Finally the camera reaches two women: Diane, a lecturer in the

History Department of Montreal University, is taping a radio interview with her professor, Dominique, who has just published a book entitled *Transformations of the Notion of Happiness*. Its thesis statement has found its way into the film's title as the author maintains that "when the sense of personal happiness takes precedence over the well-being of society, that particular society is in decline". Since the entire feature depicts nothing but the carefree gratification of the individual needs of the main characters (combined with mostly superficial conversation on the same topic), it is not difficult to decipher Arcand's principal message: the decline in question concerns Western societies in general and that of Quebec in particular.

In the first part Arcand presents two intersecting narrative strains with two different groups of four characters. While the men in the summer house are preparing an exquisite dinner, their female counterparts make use of the university fitness facilities with their ample opportunities to run, swim, sweat, work out and relax. In parallel editing Arcand shows the conversation of both groups, consisting almost entirely of petty stories depicting – in a rather clichéd way – their erotic and sexual adventures. Arcand checks the veracity of his characters' rhetorical escapades and subverts their frequent exaggerations by means of flashbacks.

Halfway through the film the women join the men and the company is complete. It includes successful history professors Rémy and Pierre, the arts-history professor Claude and the graduate student Alain. Among the ladies there are Dominique and Diane, Rémy's wife Louise and Pierre's partner, the graduate student Danielle. The careless conversation over salmon coubilliac and select wine continues, but now its flow has moved to academic waters until the entrance of Diane's boyfriend Mario halts its course. If the others are erudite, sophisticated, ironic and polite, Mario's stylization is different. In his macho stance and directness verging on insult Arcand presents a different kind of man. Unlike the others he does not use neutral French but the Montreal dialect joul; nor does he eat coubilliac or drink wine. When he gets his beer he complains about the imported Pilsner Urquell; it is obvious that he harbors feeling of sheer resentment for the genteel academics. Rémy, Pierre and the others are intellectuals, people living by words. For this company reality as such is frequently less important than a brilliant and pointed verbal formulation, life itself is less important than propositions about it. (It is significant – as Mario himself aptly points out – that the foreplay full of teasing conversation on sex is not followed by an orgy, but by a decent dinner over fish and wine.) Mario, on the other hand, is a man of reality. In his world utterances – straightforward grunts, minimalist simple sentences – do not form a part of a sophisticated intellectual game without consequences; they are the basis of a clear-cut gender and class attitude.

The relationships within the group of academics are not quite harmonious, either. While Rémy, Pierre, Claude and Dominique are safely tenured and their careers have brought them many intellectual and pecuniary rewards, Diane is a mere lecturer employed on a limited contract with a much more modest salary. Diane belongs to the same generation as Rémy and Pierre; she is their obvious intellectual match. She sees herself as a victim of gender discrimination for while the others were enjoying their prestigious Ivy League fellowships she accompanied her husband "on his communal trip". Instead of working on degrees she looked after their two children: from the career standpoint a clear waste of time. Now she has to teach more and earn significantly less than her equal-



ly gifted colleagues. That is why she is also moonlighting, preparing academic programs for Radio Canada's Montreal office, which further complicates her academic prospects by depriving her of her precious time. Diane's romantic relationship with the adamantly plebeian macho Mario does not lack a certain logic: occupying the lowest position in the university hierarchy she is the one most capable of bridging the gap between the elite intellectuals on the one hand and ordinary Quebecers on the other.

After dinner the company sets out on a walk to a nearby lake and the mood changes. The overall spirit of frivolity disappears, the characters become somber and depressed. After their return the friends listen to Dianne's interview with Dominique. Louise somewhat ineptly disagrees with Dominique's central thesis. As a housewife and part-time music teacher she lacks the necessary vocabulary to prove Dominique wrong. Thus she only resorts to the claim (which is certainly justified) that there must be many scholars in the world who would be able to prove just the opposite. Then she proposes a theory that the pessimistic visions of contemporary intellectuals stem from disappointments in their private lives. Dominique is quick to retaliate: as part of her intellectual argument with Rémy and Pierre she mentions in passing that she has slept with both of them. Rémy's wife Louise is shocked. Her bitter disappointment reaches its climax later in the night when she overhears Dominique's conversation with Alain where the experienced professor explains to her naïve Ph.D. student that marital betrayal is Rémy's lifelong habit for he likes sex too much.

With the lightheartedness of the day gone, the couples retire to their rooms. Rémy tries to calm Louise down. Unable to sleep the desperate housewife leaves her husband and looks for comfort in the company of the gentle gay character of Claude. Alain sleeps with Dominique, Diane spends the night in apparently rough lovemaking with Mario. In the morning the company meets at breakfast and the conversation resumes its careless drift from the day before, this time on the topic of erotic exploits at conferences. Louise, however, can't come to terms with the loss of illusion concerning the character and nature of her husband and the state of her marriage. The last interior shot shows Louise in dark glasses engaged in playing a piano duet with Danielle, while the others continue their trifling conversation about symposium love affairs. The film closes with a series of exterior shots: the summer scenery with the house changes into the fall; the final shot shows the same location covered with snow.

The main theme of the film, a weekend encounter of a group of friends with a shared generational experience, had appeared several years before in John Sayles' American independent feature *The Return of the Seacaucus* 7 (1980); the same situation also formed the basis of Lawrence Kasdan's studio feature *The Big Chill* (1983). Both films were ensemble pieces populated by likeable protagonists in their early thirties, whose meeting outside of the context of ordinary life provided them with an opportunity of assessing their positions in life, of confronting their past plans with their current professional and private lives. In the case of an intensely idealistic generation growing up in the 1960s such confrontations were not always very easy. John Sayles in his film offered a whole series of possible responses to the crisis of early middle age and the retreat from former radicalism: one character fails, another remains unchanged clinging to the adolescent hope of making it in the realm of folk-music, while the others prepare for "the long march through the institutions", more or less merging into the system they previously

resisted. The problems of the characters of Kasdan's Hollywood feature find a pleasing solution of an emotionally-sexual nature: accompanied by period sentimental songs most characters end up in somebody else's bed. "*The Big Chill*, then, actually exemplifies what *Le déclin* brings under critique, the dissolution of politics into personal happiness" (Testa, 2002, 189).

*Decline* can be read as the Quebec variation on the same theme, as the director's critical commentary on the French-Canadian elite in the 1980s. His characters belong to the same generation as their counterparts from the American films. (In Sayles' feature they are about 30 years old, in Arcand's film they are approximately 10 years older.) The experience of Arcand's heroes, however, goes beyond the ordinary baby-boomer experience in North America because of the ingredient of local specificity that so strongly affects their identity. "Socially, Arcand's characters are members of the "*génération lyrique*," those who, in the 1960s, were the first to enjoy the rapid cultural and political modernization of Québec following the Quiet Revolution." (Testa, 2002, 189) A part of this elite was actively involved in the radical fight for independence in the 1960s and later supported Parti Québécois in its bid in the referendum. Its failure in 1980 brought about a collapse of hope and the considerable energy stored by the movement was discharged for a while. Arcand's film is situated in the historical moment when the wave of activism recedes and apathy sets in. *Decline* thus represents a fictitious illustration of – or sequel to – Arcand's documentary about the causes of the referendum's failure, *Le Confort et l'indifférence*. The Quebec professors enjoy the luxuries of life of the international theory class; their original idealism is replaced by a mixture of political sobriety, intellectual skepticism, cynicism and hedonism. Quite telling in this respect is a brief expository scene depicting Rémy's lecture on history. There he stresses the importance of numbers. His understanding of historical processes appears to be based on quantifiable entities, such the size of a population, the GNP, etc. The crucial role of ideas – or important personalities – he seems to ignore...

*Decline* offers a limited set of characters, some of which are even employed at the same university; at the same time it depicts a number divisions running across society along professional, gender, generational and class lines. When at one moment Pierre expresses his fondness for the assembled company, there is no reason to doubt his sincerity. Sharing his mode of thinking, taste and values, these people are certainly closer to him than his own family. Yet the position of a safely tenured professor without children is diametrically different from the position of a divorced working mother earning about one-fifth of his salary. And to make matters worse, there is no tenure in sight. Diane's interpretation of how the social and professional roles are divided within their institution – and within the society at large – is therefore much more critical. To her character Pierre's rather sentimental confession will undoubtedly sound hollow and false.

Louise and Mario are the only figures who are not professionally associated with the university; they represent the rest of the Quebec world. At the same time they signal a strong sense of apartness of the world of academe – and by extension the whole of the Quebec elite – from ordinary life. Louise's naïve belief in the quality of her fifteen-year marriage, her faith in the possibility of romantic love, her non-ironic attitude toward life in general, and her trust in the basically positive development of Western civilization make her a pure antipode of the others. The scholars, however, know that reality

is much more complex than it seems at first sight for their main preoccupation lies in unveiling the various ideologies of the commonplace. But at the end of the journey of endless problematizations of widely accepted certainties, of subversions of the traditional notions of people, their institutions, beliefs and artifacts, and of deconstructions of anything transcendent or sublime there lurks the danger of bottomless relativism and the loss of real values, which leads, in turn, to the banality of erotic adventures and hedonism. Arcand thus depicts a relevant postmodern dilemma – and the choice between the morally attractive but hopelessly naïve attitude of Louise and the critically aware but quite nihilistic stance of the others is not particularly appealing.

The construction of Mario's character as a person who is fundamentally different reminds the viewers that the portrayed characters represent but a part of the overall social reality of the province. While Mario intentionally identifies with the place where he lives, its language and culture, the university figures belong to the global culture. They are certainly aware of the specific features of the Quebec identity. At the same time they regard such notions as historically determined and rather contingent cultural constructs, which for them lack the visceral appeal experienced by ardent nationalists or local patriots.

The main characters' emotional barrenness and cynicism has been pointed out. Sobriety and skepticism are somewhat more understandable in the case of the members of the older generation. But are the younger characters more idealistic? Does Arcand attempt to present any youthful figure by means of which he could attack the sterile middle-aged crowd for their lack of genuine involvement in anything but their own well-being and careers? Does he counterbalance their emotional hollowness by offering us any hope for the future by means of the idealistic young? Unfortunately not. The members of the younger generation appear quite passive. "Near silent witnesses of the behaviour and ideas of others, these younger characters follow in their well-trodden path." (Pérusse, 1995, 85) This aspect of Arcand's message contains a high degree of skepticism regarding the future of Western society in general and that of Quebec in particular.

The generation of the main heroes is also Arcand's generation; the filmmaker appears to be sharing with his ensemble of characters not only age but also some attitudes. In an interview he even claimed that "first and foremost the film [was] about [him]" (Loiselle, 1995, 153). This statement has a certain logic. Taking into account the context of Arcand's work, it becomes apparent that the filmmaker's oeuvre develops along similar lines. This manifests itself in the choice of the film genre, in the intensity of the artist's political involvement, in the degree of open social critique as well as in the employed film language. One can discern a shift from the activism of angry documentaries to the more subtle and seemingly less political statements of his feature films, where the social critique is somewhat hidden beneath the teasing surface of sex conversation, only to be uncovered by active viewers who are well aware of the relevant political, social, cultural and academic contexts of the day. In comparison with the traditional American mainstream fare, *Decline* is much too conversational and lacks the vital ingredient of dramatic action. Nonetheless Arcand's film expression does become more traditional, more balanced, generally palatable and thus significantly more commercial. In this reading the film represents much less an angry attack on one's own generation than a confession, a sigh over the current stage of one's life and the general state of things. The old aphorism about young revolutionaries who in their old age become court councilors finds here

a more up-to-date illustration: with the example of Quebec society from the sixties to the eighties, Arcand provides variations of basically same life trajectories: young radical thinkers – old tenured professors; young Marxist filmmakers – old Academy Award Winners.

#### V.4.3.2. Atom Egoyan, *Family Viewing*, 1987

Atom Egoyan is a filmmaker of unusual complexity, whose films address most relevant questions of identity formation. Being of Armenian-Canadian descent, Egoyan frequently explores themes of cultural difference and alienation. He shows that the question of one's identity is inextricably linked with one's personal – as well as collective – memory, with the history that shapes us and exercises considerable influence over us even in radically different contexts. Thus, in the film *Ararat* (2002), the history of the Armenian genocide enters contemporary multicultural Canada and despite its considerable temporal and geographical remoteness plays an important role complicating relations among the characters. The film *Calendar* (1993) highlight the issue of identity as related to the place where one is located and whose culture and stories one is capable – or incapable – of accepting and absorbing. A crucial aspect of one's identity is also the position one occupies within one's family, the role one is assigned by its other members. Egoyan recurrently depicts characters suffering from various forms of loss, such as the loss of a beloved person or the loss of “memory” stored on videotapes. His characters are not one-dimensional figures exercising their traditional functions within the clear structural confines of a common genre narrative. Typically they are psychologically complex personalities, internally divided, torn by their various obsessive desires, attempting to gain “mastery” and “narrative control” (Tschofen, 2002, 173).

Egoyan keeps pointing out the impossibility of an unproblematic approach to reality: in a society saturated by media images no one can have an unmediated take on the surrounding world any longer, including the image of oneself. For the formation of one's identity image the question of mediation thus attains crucial importance. The body of Egoyan's work suggests a deeply ambivalent attitude toward contemporary communication and recording technologies. Egoyan demonstrates how their products – telephone, television, camera, videocamera – pervade the daily lives of the people of the Western world and offer them the possibility of communication, a sense of togetherness. On the other hand they also contribute to the fact that some people become even more secluded, isolated from the surrounding world. They help people preserve recordings of their own past (thus representing an aid to one's self-definition); at the same time they represent a means of clandestine observation and spying. They provide us with another dimension of erotic stimulation, while also being instruments of abuse, surveillance, control, discipline and power. So much depends on the context of the moment!

Egoyan's feature film *Family Viewing* (1987) contains most of the above mentioned recurrent themes and figures. In the movie the filmmaker examines the various uses of modern audiovisual technology and points out numerous pressing problems of the Western World: patriarchal domination, the abuse and exploitation of women, and the impersonal, technocratic functioning of social institutions and the indifferent approach

of their staff; it also posits the question of responsibility within the family, particularly in regard to the elderly.

The main conflict of the film is between the authoritarian father Stan and his maturing son Van. Their oedipal war is waged on two fronts. Van disagrees with the fact that his bed-bound Armenian grandmother Armen (she is Stan's mother-in-law) lives in a retirement asylum spending her days in bed. She does not communicate and her blank face is constantly turned to the TV screen. The young and sensitive Van attempts to persuade Stan to take Armen home. The other conflict is fought over videotapes with the recordings of past family life. For Van the tapes represent a valuable document of private history, a promise of comprehending one's past and, in particular, finding out the reasons why his mother left the family. He regards the recordings as important material for his own self-definition. Upon finding out that his father reuses the old family material for home pornography he records with his partner Sandra, Van starts switching the original tapes for blank ones. Another act of resistance to Stan's patriarchal dominance is the fact that Van and Sandra are occasional lovers.

On his numerous visits to his grandmother's bedside Van encounters Aline, the daughter of Armen's room neighbor. Aline works as a sex-phone operator and Van's father Stan is one of her customers. Since Van is unable to persuade Stan to take the old lady home, he resorts to a complicated scheme. When Aline leaves on a business trip, her mother commits suicide. Van, who happens to be present at the time, swaps the dead body of Aline's mother with that of his grandmother with the result that Van's grandmother assumes the identity of Aline's mother. Van organizes the burial of the deceased lady and makes a video recording of the event. Upon her return Aline is shocked to find out what has happened. Nonetheless Van persuades her to take his grandmother out and together they move into Aline's apartment. Van starts working at a hotel. At home he plays Armen the old videotapes he took from his father and the condition of the lady significantly improves.

Stan starts to make inquiries into the question of his son's whereabouts. He comes to Aline's apartment where he meets his phone-sex services provider in the flesh. Van understands that his father is getting close to unveiling the secret about his grandmother and decides to move her to a suite in the unused wing of the hotel where he is employed. Stan discovers what has happened and demands admittance to the hotel room. Having anticipated this, Van manages to remove the old lady in time; Stan finds the room empty and collapses from exertion. At the end of the narrative Van, Aline, Armen are miraculously reunited with Van's mother: a new family comes into existence, one that may live freely without an authoritarian father figure.

A key role in the film is assigned to the electronic image: there are only a few scenes without a TV screen or camera. The characters frequently watch television while the programs they follow parallel – or ironically comment – on their situation: the films from the old people's home are accompanied by documentaries about the life of predators; when Aline's mother passes away, the TV shows the Canadian flag and plays the national anthem, signifying the end of the day's broadcast. TV viewing in Stan's family indicates the emotional emptiness and alienation of the family members: except for laconic commentaries on the action there is very little the characters can say to each other. The camera pointed at Stan and Sandra's bed functions as an additional

element in their sex life. Another key ingredient here is Aline's voice on the phone: the satisfaction of Stan's sexual needs thus appears to depend on the combination of three elements: the body of Sandra, the voice and fantasies provided by Aline, and the running camera.

The scene in the TV and video store when Van plays Aline the video footage of her mother's funeral suggests that for the young man the recording of an event has the same value as the event itself. Van reassures Aline that the funeral was good and that thanks to the fact that the event has been captured on the video she can experience it not only once but repeatedly. Although Aline finds such argumentation abhorrent and at that particular moment obviously detests Van, later into the film she does use the recording as suggested. Van's trust in modern technology's capacity for storing memory lies at the heart of his struggle for the old family tapes. Van hopes that by gaining the old footage he will gain better knowledge of his lost mother, of himself and of the past family reality. On the other hand Stan, who lives only in the present, has no use for this history. In his current situation it rather represents a burden; thus he suppresses it.

The old videos in the world of *Family Viewing* have a certain informative value and beneficial effects. Aline can view the funeral of her mother, Van can witness long forgotten scenes from the idyllic past life of his family when he as a little boy played in the garden and the family was still together. Exposure to this material markedly improves the condition of his up-to-then vegetate grandmother. Yet even here Egoyan expresses his complex and ambivalent attitude: among the footage Van discovers an image of his tied and gagged mother, silently staring into Stan's lens. Is it a recording of consensual sadomasochistic play or rather evidence of Stan's domestic violence? The image itself does not yield any clear unambiguous answer to such questions. Similarly the language of parts of the recording – Armenian – erects a most difficult barrier between the observer in the present and the historical record he hopes to use to gain knowledge from. At no moment in the film is there a clue suggesting that Van understands Armenian. Being temporally, experientially and linguistically isolated from the past family history, Van gains a recording that is basically worthless for the purpose of clearly and unambiguously understanding the past. Without the knowledge of language and the relevant family context, determined by his contemporary situation, age and experience, Van does not possess the magic key to a definitive comprehension of his family history. He only has its incomplete, unstable, two-dimensional representation flickering on the TV screen. The people in the picture are known to him, just as he recognizes himself. This recognition, however, does not guarantee a direct link to one's past.

In his films Atom Egoyan consistently examines "the crisis of representation as a key sign of modern aesthetics" (Kraus, 2000, 102, translation mine). A stress on the themes of alienation, migration, exile, and cultural dislocation, and his constant highlighting of the central role communication technologies play in the life of (post)modern people makes his work timely, topical and internationally relevant. His constant accentuation of the role of modern technology for the shaping of one's identity situates him in the proximity of the representatives of Canadian technological discourse (George Grant, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan), who from various points of view have examined the role of technology (and the media) in the contemporary world as well their impact on the formation and functioning of the Canadian nation.

In his complex work Egoyan shows the difficulty of defining one's identity as a diasporic subject in the context of pluralist and culturally heterogeneous society. Finding an unproblematic fixed state for one's identity position is chimerical; rather one is engaged in a continuous formulation. One's identity can never be regarded as unchanging and stable; on the contrary it results from an ongoing series of conscious and unconscious decisions, personal performances, reconfigurations and interpersonal negotiations. The persistence with which Egoyan keeps returning to the mutually interconnected questions of identity and representation show that these questions are deeply personal for the filmmaker.

#### V.4.4 Canadian Post-modern, Ethnic Film: Shrinivas Krishna, *Masala* (1991)

With the passing of the Multiculturalism Act in 1988 Canada proclaimed its allegiance to the ideals of racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural plurality. The act acknowledges the cultural and racial heterogeneity of the country and at the same time formulates the objective to further sustain and support Canadian diversity. From the point of view of national identity this represented a daring legislative deed as from this moment the ideal of a multicultural society became the new cornerstone of Canadian national identity. It is hardly surprising that in subsequent years a series of films appeared that captured Canadian cultural plurality from the point of view of previously invisible – or stereotypically presented – minorities. There were feature films made by Indian-Canadian filmmakers – *Sam and Me* (Deepa Mehta, 1991), *Masala* (Shrinivas Krishna, 1991), Chinese-Canadian filmmakers (Mina Shum's *Double Happiness*, 1994) and African-Canadian filmmakers (Clément Virgo's *Rude*, 1995). More recent representatives of the genre include films such as Julia Kwan's *Eve and the Firehorse* (2005) and Ruba Nadda's *Sabah* (2005).

These films share a number of common features and work an identical thematic territory. Their protagonists typically come from culturally different immigrant groups and negotiate problems stemming from cultural dislocation and conflict. Their inner struggles are caused by the tensions between the values and expectations of their own family on the one hand and those of “mainstream” society on the other. An important act of their self-definition is the partial rejection of the morals and values of the doctrinaire authoritarian figure of the father (brother, uncle, etc.) and the opening up of oneself to *the other*, such as a likeable unprejudiced white suitor. The multicultural character of the films also manifests itself in their formal aspects: the filmmakers tend to mix various film traditions: Hollywood, Bollywood, European art film and American independent film. Some of the films are playfully ironic, intertextually rich, and enjoyably hyperbolic. From the above mentioned feature films it is particularly Shrinivas Krishna's *Masala* that represents one of the most noteworthy achievements of the genre.

As can be inferred from the title, Shrinivas Krishna's film focuses on the life of Canada's Indian community in Toronto. The fast-paced, ironic, and at times eccentric satire involves the experience of an extended three-branch family that encompasses a variety of class affiliations. The savvy sari merchant Lallu Bhai Solaski is politically

well-connected and very prosperous, while his brother-in-law Hariprasad Tikkoo represents the less successful side of a potential Canadian career. Working at a post office, caring only for his stamp collection, Mr. Tikkoo is drawing dangerously close toward eviction. The third branch of the family is represented by Krishna, the only surviving member, for his immediate kin lost their lives in the 1985 mid-air explosion of an Air India plane. Krishna is a young anti-establishment figure reminiscent of the characters played by James Dean, this time around with a hyphenated cultural background. Unlike the other members of the family who lead, for the most part, purposeful lives, Krishna is a mere drifter, not well adjusted to his environment. While not being certain about his life aims, he appears to be quite sure about what he rejects: the materialism, duplicity and pragmatism of the older generation, the self-gratification of his prosperous uncle Lallu Bhai, and the lack of ambition and courage of his impoverished uncle Hariprasad. It is only through his emotional attachment to Mr. Tikkoo's attractive daughter Rita that he appears to overcome his survivor's guilt and finds a way out of his restlessness. However, it is impossible to tell whether this was meant to represent a permanent turning point in his life as toward the end of the film he is killed in the street by a teenage racist.

In the multitude of colorful characters populating the world of *Masala* three more characters deserve to be mentioned: Grandma Tikkoo, mother of the passive postman Hariprasad; Lord Krishna, blue-skinned comic book version of the most venerated Hindu deity; and the Minister of Multiculturalism, Gerald, a pragmatic white politician. When grandma asks Krishna to help the Tikkooos out of their financial difficulties, the good-natured god arranges for the Tikkooos to receive a dead letter with an ancient Canadian beaver stamp worth five million dollars. Initially, Mr. Tikkoo resists the authorities and refuses to relinquish the stamp for the benefit of the national heritage collection. Later, however, he consents to its permanent display at the newly erected museum of multiculturalism, a building designed – as the Minister of Multiculturalism puts it – “to truly celebrate Canadian diversity”.

In the film Krishna shows several possible variations of Canadian minority experience. On the one hand there is the well-connected entrepreneur Lallu Bhai and his family, on the other side of the social spectrum there are the Tikkooos. (Both parts are played by Saeed Jaffrey, who also gave a congenial performance as Lord Krishna.) The successful sari merchant Lallu Bhai does not suffer from poverty, persecution, discrimination, or even identity uncertainty. His prosperity and high social status set him apart from the class of people who have to face open racism or discrimination. Hariprasad's self-image, on the other hand, suffers from his social insignificance and poverty and in the streets he has to endure verbal – and sometimes even physical – attacks. Krishna thus demonstrates a characteristic paradox of the seemingly perfect multicultural society: while for one person the visible minority status is an obvious liability, for another it represents a valuable political asset. In the situation when the governing elite proclaims the principle of multiculturalism for its new state idea, the skillful materialistic Lallu Bhai becomes a valuable ally, functioning as a bright store window of the national identity project. His connections with the establishment, such as the Minister of Multiculturalism, make him an important member of the local establishment. In the final moments of the film Shrinivas Krishna ironically portrays Lallu



Bhai as expressing a wish to make his not quite talented son Anil the next Minister of Multiculturalism...

Located between the extreme poles of Indian-Canadian success and failure is the character of Krishna's cousin Rita. She works as a clerk in a travel bureau, but talking calmly to capricious customers is hardly her idea of a permanent occupational pursuit. She dreams of succeeding on her own and her ambitions soar high: she cherishes the dream of taking up flying lessons. Being able to determine her own life-choices (both professional and sexual) is her most important desire. Rita's ambition to become a pilot can certainly be read symbolically as an expression of a woman's wish for full equality since currently she suffers from double discrimination: as a woman in a patriarchal society and as a member of a visible minority.

The targets of the film's numerous attacks are not only the racism of some intolerant Canadians and the blasé pragmatism and insincerity of the Canadian political establishment. Its sarcasm also cuts into the values and attitudes of the Indian-Canadian Diaspora highlighting the various cleavages among its groups. In addition to the differences of class and political outlook Krishna addresses the theme of generational conflict, particularly in regard to the question of marriage formation. He debunks the practice of arranged marriages, which may be well-established in India, but lacks any kind of appeal to second-generation Indian Canadians. Krishna's presentation of the practice is viciously ironic: he portrays the two families as engaged in a straight-faced bargaining, which is reminiscent less of a meeting of concerned parents over the emotional well-being and mutual future of their children, than of a company merger – or even a more dignified version of a cattle market. However, having been brought up in a wider context where the pursuit of individual happiness is as legitimate a goal as the pursuit of financial security, the superb bride rejects Lallu Bhai's not so bright and handsome son.

The basic experience of immigrants from countries with considerably different cultures is the tension between the values of one's country of origin and the country one currently resides in. "What happens to Indians who leave abroad? They lose glamour and composure. They pester me for explanations. They should pray more." (Krishna, 1991) It is significant for the general nature of Krishna's critique that the filmmaker illustrates Lord Krishna's complaint by the example of the matriarchal figure of Grandma Tikkoo. Her authoritarian character is by no means a venerable Indo-Canadian mother, a traditional reservoir of wisdom and spirituality; nor is she a person of modesty and humility. On the contrary, she is the most materialistic member of the family. Speaking with Lord Krishna she does not seek to be spiritually uplifted, nor does she pray for any kind of enlightenment: instead she has very concrete demands and asks for monetary assistance. Her position between cultures is also symbolized by her wish to equip the kitchen with the most up-to-date electric grinders and mixers because, according to her, it is only with their aid that an ideal mix of masala can be prepared.

One of the highlights of Krishna's idiosyncratic narrative is the manner in which he lets Lord Krishna deliver the vintage beaver stamp. The scene opens with the image of the mail delivery van. All of a sudden Lord Krishna appears from the fog ahead wearing the uniform of the Toronto Maple Leafs. He shoots the puck at the van. The frightened driver crashes the van; mail is scattered everywhere. The postcard with the philatelist trophy is magically taken by the wind to be delivered to the Tikkooos.

The question of Canadian cultural hybridity transcends such obvious symbolism and enters the formal structure of the work. Krishna makes use of the traditional Bollywood convention of interspersing the narrative with song and dance numbers. The existence of this element of estrangement reinforces the idea that the film cannot be read quite realistically. Krishna obviously distrusts the traditional Canadian documentary aesthetic and rather than an earnest attempt to record truthfully the Indian-Canadian experience he offers an exaggerated, playful collage, consisting of a variety of genre elements: in the film we discern features of a teenage cult movie, family drama, social satire and, most obviously, crazy comedy. The elements of playfulness and comedy can't entirely dispel the generally pessimistic message of the film. According to Krishna the situation is quite serious: Canada is by no means the multicultural paradise it purports to be. It is a country of multiple inter- and intracultural tensions and conflicts. Krishna stresses that underneath the polished discourse of multiculturalism – with its high sounding and predictable rhetoric, sympathetic smiles and temple opening ceremonies – the same prejudices linger on. Behind the kind façade of political support for diversity that manifests itself, for instance, by means of the shining happy face of an ethnic festival, there lurks the reality of pragmatic political deals and calculations, unholy coalitions and brutal racial violence in the streets.

The harshness of the critique of the Canadian situation in general and the multicultural establishment in particular sets Krishna's feature apart from other films dealing with cultural conflict, where identity related problems of minority heroes and heroines are tackled. Films such as *Sam and Me*, *Double Happiness*, *Eve and the Fire Horse* and *Sabah*, tend to accentuate personal conflicts of the main characters stemming from the collision of the value systems they are expected to respect with those they are tempted to live by. They succeed in capturing the profound uncertainty concerning one's identity and the pain caused by the necessity to choose between mutually incompatible systems whose bearers are people one respects or loves. Their overall outcome is nevertheless much more conciliatory than Krishna's sharp postmodern satire.

Krishna's condemnation of the Canadian situation and institutions may be excessively harsh, yet such a voice is very useful. Instead of a well-intentioned fairy tale for adults about cultural conflicts that – provided there is good will on all sides concerned – will eventually be overcome (as in the film *Sabah*, for instance), Krishna's hyperbolic film shows that certain problems do not disappear that easily. Indeed, the identity programming of people of various cultures may be so different that it can't be solved by the passage of any particular act, no matter how well-intentioned, at least not in the short term. Another problem is the inherent conflict between the generally acknowledged rights of individuals and the particular rights and privileges assigned to various groups on a collective basis with the objective of preserving their cultural specificity. But if such specific features entail practices such as arranged marriages, are they indeed worth the effort? Likewise Krishna reminds his viewers that people in charge of the implementation of the multicultural program are not always unblemished idealists; more often than not they are ordinary mortals desiring career advancement, influence, power, prosperity and many other usual things people attempt to gain. And this whole conflicted landscape – its "mainstream" as well as its colorful ethnic and racial "margins" – is pervaded by the spirit of Western

materialism, pragmatism and egotistic utilitarianism, which represents its ultimate defining force, having a major impact on everything from the functioning of the political system to the kitchen practices of the Indian Diaspora. Krishna's pointed satire thus can be appreciated as a valuable antidote to some of the other film texts about cultural difference that in accordance with the official doctrines offer clearer, less problematic and basically optimistic solutions. The drawback of these films is that they usually do not examine in greater depth more general questions concerning the interconnectedness of the issues of identity, ethnicity, race and culture with those of economy, politics and power, and thereby reduce the complexity of the problem of multicultural coexistence to the individual sphere of likeable heroes and heroines and their immediate familial surroundings.

The whole group of films focusing on minority experience and cultural difference in Canada has nonetheless provided a screen reflection of a fact that even the least attentive traveler to the country will not fail to miss: the most characteristic feature of Canadian social reality is indeed its racial, ethnic and cultural plurality. Defining one's identity position against the background of such dizzying diversity frequently entails the painful problems that these films focus on: their minority protagonists suffer from the tensions between the various competing value systems and are repeatedly confronted with the necessity of deciding who they are, where they belong, etc. The outcome is usually found in one's opening up toward *the other*, in accepting the otherness of the pluralist Canadian mainstream, while not completely jettisoning one's original identity, attitudes and values. What is rejected, however, is the dogmatic, uncompromising defense of one's traditional values verging on intolerance as well as the belief in their unchanging nature and inherent superiority.

## V.5 Conclusion

In Francois Girard's biographical feature *Thirty Two Short Films about Glenn Gould* (1993) the authors intersperse enacted episodes from the life of the famous Canadian pianist and idiosyncratic genius with documentary footage of observations, reminiscences and anecdotes of Gould's friends and associates. The employment of a traditional documentary element in an acted biopic is significant here. While Canadian cinema boasts an impressive variety of themes and authorial approaches, its documentary tradition and the tradition of feature films with a marked documentary aesthetic remains one of its most typical features. The privileging of documentary style and the thematic focus on the ordinary lives of ordinary people in Canadian film stems from the tradition of documentary film that asserted itself in Canada in the nineteen-forties and became for a quarter of a century the dominant mode of film expression in the country. Films produced by the National Film Board (Office national du film, NFB/ONF) presented the vast country to her inhabitants, highlighting its landscape, climate, flora, fauna, its regional diversity and above all the way of life of the Canadian people. In a subtle manner they offered their viewers answers to the uneasy questions of who a Canadian is, and what the common attributes of the people inhabiting this enormous and geographically varied territory are. By defining certain desirable signs

of “Canadianness” these films were instrumental in attempts to create and define the Canadian identity.

An important part in defining (and portraying) one’s identity is played by the image of *the other*. In the Canadian feature film of the last quarter of the 20th Century *the other* is not a member of the other founding nation, as portrayals of Francophones in Anglophone film and vice versa are quite rare. It seems, rather, that both dominant film traditions of the country coexist, without excessive reflection of the other side. The function of *THE OTHER* that serves as a vantage point for one’s – positive or negative – self-definition has been taken over by citizens of the United States and their culture. It is within this framework that one can understand the decision to promote the production of serious educational programs for they represented a way of resisting the cultural dominance of the United States by one’s own, nationally specific means. The post-war ideology of the Canadian elite thus draws a sharp line between film production in the United States, against which it warns, and domestic film production, which it promotes. If American films belong to the sphere of commerce and typically offer viewers a mixture of superficial entertainment and cheap thrills, the purpose of publicly funded Canadian films is meant to provide a public service through the dissemination of information and education, and the cultivation of the public. The *Massey Report*, published in 1951, thus highlights the negative influence of American films on the Canadian population, particularly in regard to the Hollywood representation of Canada and Canadians, and warns against the possibility of losing one’s own national identity.

When examining the interconnectedness of films and identity formation in the nation one can not only learn from the film texts as such, but also draw useful lessons from their reception. Here, too, symptomatic shifts and breaks can be ascertained. If, for instance, the discussion of Don Shebib’s *Goin’ Down the Road* (1970) in the Seventies was marked by generalizing approaches presenting its main characters as a synecdoche of the whole Canadian nation, the late Eighties saw the rejection – or successful contestation – of such homogenizing readings. Concepts such as the nation, national literature, national cinema (or the traditional division of culture between high and low) became subjects of critique, some accentuated their provisional nature and the various discursive mechanisms of their formation; others preferred texts expressing minority points of view and the experience of reality from the margins that provided various novel and revealing vantage points for the study of the subtle and multifaceted functioning of power. In the situation when the concept of Canadian identity as something shared by all Canadians lost its credibility, it was paradoxically its very cultural plurality, heterogeneity and contradictory nature that became a primary attribute of both “Canadianness” and, by extension, Canadian cinema (see the post-modern, non-national paradigm).

Nonetheless, Arcand’s *Le déclin de l’empire américain* (1986), among other things, states that acceptance of the post-modern, non-national paradigm is not universal and will vary between various social groups. The construction of the character of the macho Quebecker Mario points at the coexistence of various paradigms in a society fragmented along various lines of class allegiance, education, etc. While Mario remains faithful to traditional nationalist values and attitudes (the national defense paradigm), the university

teachers are well aware of their theoretical obsolescence: Quebec identity, like any other identity, is but a contingent cultural creation; thus it is not necessary to suffer or sacrifice oneself for its sake. The shortcoming of such an attitude is, according to Arcand, certain emptiness: when all the values are successfully deconstructed, when all certainties are skillfully undermined, when the scholars grow mature and lose their original vigor and illusions, they resort to the mere mechanistic satisfaction of their needs, the cultivation of their bodies and hedonism. If such an attitude prevails among the elite of a certain society, this society is declining.

The work of the foremost Canadian filmmaker Atom Egoyan draws attention to the central role of electronic media and modern recording and communication technologies for our self-understanding as well as for our understanding of the world. Egoyan stages the new situation diagnosed by the Canadian sociologist of culture and electronic media Marshall McLuhan. According to McLuhan electricity gradually transforms everything, particularly the way people think, and makes the search for absolute knowledge ever more uncertain. Thus in the film *Family Viewing* (1987) we follow the struggle of the main hero Van to preserve the video recordings of the scenes from his childhood that should help him better understand his past. Although Van succeeds, the tapes containing episodes from his family history do not allow for the full and unambiguous comprehension of the past reality. If the recording of the past reality does not enable the protagonist to gain full access to his past, even his identity becomes somewhat unstable and mysterious in its nature. The crisis of representation in the media age is one of Egoyan's most persistent preoccupations. In the work of this complex auteur we also frequently encounter the themes of alienation, mental imbalance, compulsion, loss, cultural dislocation and conflict.

Srinivas Krishna's crazy satirical comedy *Masala* (1991) is representative of the large group of Canadian films that focus on the Canadian minority experience. These films capture the multicultural aspects of Canadian life, which manifests itself in two ways: 1) the films typically describe the tensions between the values of the protagonists' original culture and those of the Canadian mainstream 2) the theme of cultural hybridity and strife is paralleled on the formal level. The classical approaches of Western commercial film are enriched by some Eastern elements, such as the employment of the Bollywood convention of including song and dance numbers. The necessity of defining oneself as a self-confident subject of the Canadian multicultural society leads the young protagonists to resist the characters that personify the traditions and values of the original country (or the dogmatically enforced values of Christianity). The films representing the latent – and sometimes painfully open – conflict between the defensive identity paradigms of ethnically and racially marked immigrants on the one hand and those of majority society on the other can generally be interpreted as a declaration of tolerance toward *the other*. It is precisely the multicultural non-national paradigm that becomes the hallmark of the ethnically and culturally varied Canadian reality as captured in these film narratives.

A brief description of typical Canadian film themes and genres and of the roles played by Canadian film institutions, as well as commentaries to four selected films and analysis of their scholarly reception cannot possibly provide a complete map of the complex and dynamic world of Canadian film. Nonetheless it describes its devel-

opment from the dogmatic insistence on the production of documentaries to the acceptance of feature film production as a legitimate way of formulating the Canadian experience, from the idea of the nation as a natural formation to an emphasis on its contingent, imagined nature, and from attempts at a cinematic construction of the nation as a possibly homogeneous entity to the energetic embracing of the idea of one's cultural plurality and diversity.