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Going Down the Road for the Red Violin: A Certain Tendency in Recent Canadian Cinema

Abstract

The contextualized case study of Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) demonstrates what film characteristics came to be especially valued by the Canadian critical establishment in the early 1970s. It is precisely thanks to the presence of these characteristics that this feature has been singled out as a foundational film of the Canadian canon. Also, the author comments on a most significant shift in critical reception of the film from the 1970s to the 1990s, one that reflects the same shift in the understanding of the Canadian nation as a whole. The discussion of the film *Le violon rouge* (François Girard, 1998), on the other hand, provides opportunity for commentary about the state of Canadian cinema at the turn of the millennium as well as about the pitfalls that lie ahead for Canadian filmmakers in the globalized cultural marketplace. The article is concluded by a brief summary of significant achievements and problems in the realm of Canadian feature film.

Résumé

Le cas contextualisé de *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) de Don Shebib démontre les caractéristiques cinématographiques particulièrement estimées par les critiques canadiens dans les années 1970. C'est précisément grâce à la présence de ces caractéristiques que ce film a été choisi comme exemple fondamental du canon canadien. En plus, l'auteur commente un changement signifiant dans la réception du film dans les années 1990, un changement qui reflète une position nouvelle dans la conception du Canada comme nation. Une discussion sur le film *Le violon rouge* (François Girard, 1998), d'un autre côté, fournit une opportunité de commenter et l'état du cinéma canadien à l'aube de nouveau millénaire et les obstacles que auxquels les cinéastes canadiens sont confrontés dans un marché culturel globalisé. L'article s'achève sur un bref sommaire des accomplissements signifiants, mais aussi des problèmes dans le film canadien.

Introduction

When applied to the Canadian feature film, the metaphor of the road should not suggest the image of an endless straight line cutting across the prairies, a line that is impressive, yet simple, clean and clear. Rather, one should imagine a winding, meandering side road dotted with a variety of places of their own unique character and beauty. The differences among the individual locations are sometimes so vast that one fails to acknowledge the existence of any common feature these places may share (save for the fact of being connected by the same road).

Numerous attempts have been made to describe Canadian cinema as a whole. Christine Ramsay saw Canadian cinema as marked by “stark, if not ‘depressing’ social realism; documentary flavor; eccentric and off-beat characterizations and contemplative treatment of the landscape” (Ramsay, 1993, 34). Peter Morris pointed out that Canadian films are “characterized by a special Canadian naturalism, whose essence is the sense of the environment having a determining and decisive effect on the individual life” (Morris, 1978, 241). Yet numerous other examples can be drawn where these claims simply do not apply. The least problematic solution, then, appears to have been taken by Katherine Monk, who suggests that Canadian Cinema as a whole is united by a “diversity of approach, individual voice and ambiguity” (6).

My approach to film in general and Canadian film in particular is for the most part extrinsic. Along with Quart and Auster, David Cook, Peter Biskind, Margaret Miles – and many others – I believe that “films, like painting and plays, are not timeless objects; they arise in, and respond to concrete historical circumstances. Thus, they cannot be adequately analyzed without reference to the social anxieties and aspirations that prompted their production and that had a great deal to do with whether or not they became successful at the box office” (Miles, 1994, 18). I believe, further, that the shape of a particular national cinema at any given historical moment does not only depend on the array of available talents (although their presence is vital), but also on a complex interplay of national cultural policies, various economic stimuli, and institutional practices. Likewise, the reception of the films is to a large degree less dependent on their intrinsic quality than on a host of other factors impacting their visibility, general reception, and inclusion in the national “canon”. Reviews appearing in the cultural journals and in the mainstream press, festival selections, nominations and awards, and the academic discourse are the key factors here.

Bearing this in mind it is my intention to discuss two key Canadian films. The contextualized case study of Don Shebib’s *Goin’ Down the Road* (1970), will allow me to demonstrate what characteristics came to be especially valued by the Canadian critical establishment in the early 1970s. It is precisely thanks to the presence of these characteristics that the film has been singled out as a foundational film of the Canadian canon. Also, I would like to comment on a most significant shift in critical reception of the film from the 1970s to the 1990s, one that reflects the same shift in the understanding of the Canadian nation as a whole. The discussion of the film *Le violon rouge* (François Girard, 1998), on the other hand, provides opportunity for commentary about the state of Canadian cinema at the turn of the millennium as well as about the pitfalls that lie ahead for Canadian filmmakers in the globalized cultural marketplace. The article is concluded by a brief summary of significant achievements and problems in the realm of Canadian feature film. But first some institutional history...

Compared to most other advanced countries Canadian feature film is a relatively new phenomenon. It came into existence in the fermentation and upheavals of the 1960s when the National Film Board abandoned its stubborn insistence on the production of documentaries and animated experimental films as the sole means of Canadian cinematic expression. The founding of the *Canadian Film Development Corporation* in 1967 represented the official seal of approval that from then onward the Canadian government agreed to – and was determined to – support the domestic feature film production.

The mid-1960s saw another important institutional development that would prove signifi-



cant in the years to come: the establishing of the provincial centers of the National Film Board in Halifax, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver (Gittings, 2002, 93). Whereas the original NFB under its founder John Grierson tended to stress the common features all Canadians supposedly share, the new regional centers accentuated particularly the local aspects characterizing the respective region. The resulting image of the country was one of regional variety, and different experience of the local inhabitants.

In 1984 the *Canadian Film Development Corporation* was renamed *Telefilm Canada*. This change lends 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 the regulation of TV according to which 60% of all aired programs between 6 p.m. and midnight must be produced domestically (Magder, 1993, 213). While in multiplexes across the country distribution of domestic films remains negligible, TV represents a significant market for the Canadian production companies and filmmakers.

Don Shebib, *Goin' Down the Road*

Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) has been traditionally described as one of the founding features that started the history of Canadian narrative film. Shot on a miniscule budget of 85 000 Canadian dollars (Melnik, 2002, 110) and employing a strong documentary aesthetic, it describes the failed attempt of its two protagonists, Pete and Joey, inhabitants of Cape Breton Island, to start a new life in Toronto.

Shebib aims at a realistic representation of reality. The film is characterized by minimalist style, is shot on locations with a light, hand-held 16 mm camera on black-and-white film stock. The unpretentious acting of its ordinary protagonists has a life-like air that at times resembles improvisation. The feeling of authenticity is further underlined by the actors' colloquial, un-schooled accents. The overall impression is thus strongly reminiscent of a documentary, the quintessential Canadian genre.

Both the realistic aspiration of Shebib's film and its thematic focus on the underside of contemporary society correspond 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 (for example, with John Cassavetes). In Europe, too, various attempts were made to avoid traditional cinematic procedures and to capture reality more precisely and accurately, the most notable example being the Cinema vérité style of documentary filmmaking in France.

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, musicals and comedies and produced films such as John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), which represented a relatively strong critique of the social conditions in the United States. The similarity of *Midnight Cowboy* and *Goin' Down the Road* is striking: both films share the same basic thematic structure: they show the arrival of naïve, provincial protagonists in a big city and depict the fast demise of their great expectations. They address their

severe social exclusion and make a 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 because of this fact perhaps even more authentic.

The film *Goin' Down the Road* is important for a variety of reasons. At the beginning of the 1970s some influential interpreters – such as Robert Fothergill and Margaret Atwood – believed to recognize in Shebib's protagonists some typical national traits: his unhappy heroes fitted into what was then seen as essential “Canadianness”, as they corresponded to the age-old cultural stereotype of the Canadian male as a weak, failing loser, or perhaps even a feminized figure. The canonical standing of the film in the history of Canadian film was further solidified by the fact that both Pete and Joey correspond to another favorite Canadian image of oneself: that of a victim (Ramsay, 1993, 36). At the beginning of the 1990s Ramsay then critiques such homogenizing reading of the film with obvious arguments: certainly not all Canadian males portrayed in the film are victimized and feminized losers (though the two protagonists, Pete and Joey are).

The change of interpretation of Canadian national identity as reflected by the reception of the film by the Canadian critical establishment is quite telling. At the beginning of the 1970s we saw strategies such as that mentioned above, aiming at the identification, accentuation – or more precisely creation – of the elements “common” to all Canadians. In the early 1990s, at the height of the post-modern turn, however, such homogenizing interpretations were attacked and abandoned in favor of readings that accentuate aspects that are individual, particular and local. The shared Canadian identity (and experience) is then, paradoxically, seen in its plurality, heterogeneity and its contradictory nature; the reception of the film by critics exhibits this turn.

The traditional characteristic of the failing victim, however, is still safely applicable to the Maritimers who lack cultural capital and advanced skills. In this more subtle, more nuanced, reading Pete and Joey are no longer representatives of the nation as a whole. Their story can be read as an accusatory statement about the disparate economic, cultural and educational levels of the individual provinces at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, about the internal colonization of the marginal regions by the province of Ontario and its metropolis. 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 present Canada as a country where social identity is permanently fixed, where upward mobility is impossible (a classic example being the scene in the record shop where Pete listens to the music of Satie and enters into conversation with a well-heeled woman; she immediately turns away when she hears his class-revealing accent). Shebib does not give a single suggestion that somewhere down the road his sad protagonists can find more prosperity and happiness.

One of the first full-fledged Canadian feature films thus resonated with the uncertain economic, political and cultural situation of the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. It was characterized by cinematic elements that would be strongly represented in many future Canadian productions: a thematic focus on ordinary people, attempts at a possibly authentic capturing of reality and the presence of social critique.



***Le violon rouge*, François Girard, 1998**

Between 1998 and 2002 Canadian filmmakers participated in 44 co-productions with partners from 52 countries (Gittings, 2002, 100). The strategy of forming co-productions has undisputed advantages. Compared to strictly national productions of smaller countries, a co-production can secure significantly more means and know-how, the presence of well-known actors from two or more countries increases the film's attraction for international audiences. This has a positive impact on the foreign distribution and overall visibility of the feature.

This was the case of one of the most expensive and ambitious Canadian films ever made, François Girard's *Le violon rouge* – a film (as will be seen presently) as different as can be from the *Go in' Down the Road* and, for that very reason, suitable for highlighting the changing cinema landscape in Canada. This grandiose production was shot on three continents in five different languages (French, German, Italian, Chinese and English), subtitled in English. Its (by Canadian standards) handsome budget allowed the casting of internationally recognizable stars including Samuel L. Jackson, whose global reputation has certainly contributed to the film's international appeal. The film could boast its own pre-recorded and separately sold soundtrack. It campaigned for an Academy Award and carried the day at the 1998 Genie Awards, receiving 8 Genies and two more nominations.

The episodic narrative follows the journey of a magical instrument across various spaces and times. It is created in the 17th century by the Italian master violin maker Niccolò Busotti as a gift to his yet unborn child. As his hopes for the child are great, the instrument is not to be just another violin, but a true masterpiece. Yet both mother and child die at childbirth, leaving the bereaved craftsman alone with his crowning achievement. The last finishing touch that remains to be done is the varnish. Using his dead wife's blood Busotti creates an instrument whose quality now transcends his craftsmanship. The loss of his wife and child is all of a sudden not meaningless, they symbolically exist in the red hued violin; their death becomes sacrificial, imbuing the violin with its mysterious power.

In the next episode the violin gets to an Austrian monastery where it is played by Caspar, a highly talented child musician with a weak heart. Pushed beyond the limits of performance, he dies. The instrument is buried with him but it does not remain in the grave. For a couple of generations it comes into the possession of wandering Gypsies (unfortunately no episode is devoted to this stage of the instrument's journey). The next time we follow the violin's fate, it now in the possession of the English virtuoso Frederick Pope, in true romantic fashion, a genius musician and a passionate lover. After Pope's death the violin is smuggled into China where we later encounter it at the times of the Cultural Revolution. Needless to say, the magical instrument is in grave danger there for the local Red Guards have little appreciation for classical music coming from the West. Having been hidden away for fifty years, the instrument finally reaches Montreal where it is sold at auction. There it is recognized by the New York art appraiser Charles Morritz (Samuel L. Jackson), who in the final sequence of the film swaps the violin for a perfect replica, and leaves the premises with the precious instrument to be used as a gift for his daughter. Like Bussotti, Morritz, too, is a connoisseur of art, someone who can appreciate its sublime quality. Symbolically, then, the red violin finally reaches its destination for it was created by an art loving parent for his

child, a musician to be, and is rediscovered by a similar kind of person and used as a gift with the same kind of recipient and purpose.

Save for the detour to Shanghai, the red violin follows the westward trajectory of where the center of music and high art lies in the respective era. Europe, represented by Italy, Austria, and England, with its elegance, grandeur and style, is a thing of the past. Now, without any doubt, the action has shifted across the Atlantic to North America. We can even go as far as to say that after a long and arduous journey the instrument has finally reached the Promised Land in the New World.

A question remains: this exceptional instrument has produced not only heavenly music but also caused premature death of some of its players. This is not surprising for it is precisely death – symbolized by the blood varnish – that bestows on its music its mysterious value. Will this ultimate price be also required in the postmodern carefree world of North America? The creators of the film leave this question unanswered.

It is hard to imagine two films more different than *Goin' Down the Road* and *Le violon rouge*. If the former focuses on ordinary people and attempts to capture unpleasant social and economic realities from a socially critical perspective, the latter depicts extraordinary people and events, deriving its appeal from a time tested repertoire of images, characters and motifs from popular mythology. The grainy, black and white image suited the former just as the rich colorful costumes characterize the latter. Both films used location shooting but whereas those in Shebib's film are still clearly recognizable even to casual visitors of Toronto, the international locations of Girard's film can only have one function: to serve as an exotic backdrop designed to saturate the sight of the viewers with something irresistibly pleasing. Unschooled acting vs. schooled acting; English vs. Italian, French and Chinese; local vs. global, unhappy ending vs. happy ending. It would not be difficult to list many more differences but the above will suffice.

Le violon rouge is not as irrelevant to a specifically Canadian cinema as it might seem at first sight. While not addressing any pressing social concerns, it can still be used to illustrate certain realities – or dilemmas – concerning national filmmaking today. Its relevance resides less in its plot than in issues concerning its production. On a more general level it illustrates a certain tendency in international cinema in general and in Canadian cinema in particular, the tendency to form co-productions.

The reason behind co-productions is to pool talent and resources of a variety of smaller cinemas to be able to achieve at least some visibility on the globalized marketplace, where only large scale productions seem to count. However, given the considerable investment, the production teams do not usually take unnecessary risks by tackling unpleasant realities in any controversial manner (this, of course, is not a wholesale condemnation of coproductions). The necessity of creating a narrative well understandable for international audience also complicates attempts to address, at any depth, specifically domestic issues (Gittings 100). The same goes for agreement within nationally and culturally diverse participating teams. Again, a more general, universal story appears to be the safest bet. Such strategies consequently may lead to a close resemblance of the resulting product to the mainstream (read: American) movies whose dominance in the market the co-production alliance attempts to challenge.



International cinema provides a great many notable exceptions to this bleak assessment. Every year, co-productions that do provide cinematic difference are made. However, François Girard's *Le violon rouge* (1998) is not among them. His spectacle offered us conventional wisdom, conventional images, conventional beauty and a conventional happy ending. Moreover, any Canadian themes were conspicuously absent from the screen. The only remaining Canadian attributes of the production thus were the Canadian passports of the director and of some other members of his production team.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to briefly address the question of the dynamics of the discipline of Canadian film. Among the major achievements there is undoubtedly the acceptance of feature film production as a legitimate way of formulating the Canadian experience and the government support of the domestic feature film production. One can congratulate Canadians on the wide variety of topic, genres, approaches that can be found in Canadian film and particularly on the personalities of some of their filmmakers. It is directors such as Cronenberg, Egoyan, Arcand, Lepage, just to name a few, that make Canadian cinema thought-provoking, socially and morally-relevant, and artistically thrilling.

One can also appreciate recent Canadian attempts to energetically embrace and display their cultural diversity, which has found its expression in the works of 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). These filmmakers present Canada as a multicultural country whose young immigrant population has to negotiate multiple tensions and identity problems stemming from the contradictory cultural forces that in one way or another determine and claim their lives. Canada in these films is a country which still has to free itself from prejudice, cultural misconceptions and misunderstandings, and even the most obvious forms of prejudice and racism. But one can certainly see that the Canadians are trying to address these issues.

If there is one major problem to be dealt with for the future, it is the fact that Canadian feature films are unknown to the general Canadian population, which indiscriminately consumes the standard Hollywood fare (the notable exception being Quebec, where local films do enjoy a considerably higher degree of popular attention). Unlike in countries such as France, Germany, Spain, or the Czech Republic, where domestic production represents a viable alternative to the omnipresent offering made in (or by) the American studios, Canadian feature films are by and large ignored at home. (It has become a frequent practice of mine to put down a list of ten "must see Canadian movies" for my Canadian acquaintances who do not happen to be film buffs or work in the humanities.)

The recent practice of combining resources and talents with the objective of creating large scale international productions that would be noticed and accepted worldwide does not have to be, by definition, detrimental. However, as shown by the example of François Girard's *Le violon rouge* – and example that can be taken as representative – co-productions are prone to

eradicate the local themes, characters, issues and agendas. Moreover, a co-production partnership may also endanger some other traditional hallmarks Canadian feature film has become noted for: an idiosyncratic approach to directing; sensitivity to questions of social and ethical responsibility; the realistic mode of representation; and attention to the daily situations of ordinary people.

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