

Canadian Cinema in the Era of Globalization

Cine canadiense en la Era de la Globalización

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Abstract

In this article I will approach many of the currently dominant topics in relation to Canadian cinema: the impact on national cinemas and auteurism of international film festivals, shifts in distribution patterns, labour issues, production output, and globalised aesthetics, as well as other related issues, such as slippages in notions of populism and popularity. Also, I analyze the marks of globalization that are present in the Canadian film industry in the co-production treaties and financing exigencies, as well as they are in other countries. I base my research in the postulates of Hjort (2010), Iordanova (2010), Chow (1995) and Hansen (2010) among others. Global cinema becomes increasingly driven by genre, costly technologies, expertise, enormous budgets and superstars, but to trespass borders formerly marginal national cinemas may nevertheless transcend borders, cultures and ethnicities through dissemination via alternative channels, including the internet, film festivals, Iphone apps among others.

Key words:

Globalization, national cinema, Canadian directors.

Resumen

En este artículo abordo los tópicos más actuales en relación con el cine canadiense: el impacto en los cines nacionales y el cine de autor en Festivales de Cine Internacionales, horarios de trabajo, asuntos laborales, resultados de producción, y estética globalizada, así como otros temas relacionados, como el deslizamiento de las nociones de populismo y popularidad. Asimismo, analizo las huellas de la globalización presentes sea en la industria cinematográfica canadiense, en los tratados y exigencias financieras de las coproducciones, sea en las producciones de otros países. Baso mi investigación en los postulados de Hjort (2010), Iordanova (2010), Chow (1995) y Hansen (2010), entre otros. El cine globalizado está cada vez más impulsado por el género, los costos de la tecnología, experticia, presupuestos enormes y estrellas, pero para traspasar los límites geográficos, las culturas y las etnias a través de la difusión por vías alternativas, como canales que incluyen el internet, festivales de cine, aplicaciones del Iphone, entre otros.

Palabras clave:

Globalización, cine nacional, directores canadienses.

In recent years, there has been considerable academic attention to the impact of globalization on the international film industry.¹ While some see global statistics as confirmation of Hollywood's continued hegemony (approximately 70% of world box office receipts), others are optimistic about the potential of a diverse world market. Dina Iordanova, for example, declares, "It is about time to acknowledge the new realities. A quarter of the world's most commercially successful films come from sources other than Hollywood; many are more profitable and bring higher per-screen averages than the studio blockbusters. Not only are many more peripheral films being produced, many more of them are also seen and appreciated, due to the vitality of growing alternative channels of dissemination." (2010, p. 24). She notes as a salient factor "the increasingly interconnected festival phenomenon" as "an autonomous circuit with its own set of nodes, connections, and tenets." (2010, p. 30). She also cites the "export-import business model" of diasporic distribution, in which "film production centers may be located in one country, yet in planning and generating outputs they operate with the consciousness that the consumption of what is created 'here' will most likely be taking place somewhere else, among audiences who are scattered in different locations around the world." (2010, p. 30). Mette Hjort underlines this concept when she writes that "Multiple belonging linked to ethnicity and various trajectories of migration here becomes the basis for a form of transnationalism that is oriented toward the ideal of film as a medium capable of strengthening certain social imaginaries. The emphasis is on the exploration of issues relevant to particular communities situated in a number of different national or subnational locations to which the cosmopolitan auteur has certain privileged access." (2010, p. 20). As Iordanova puts it, the "ever-rising international presence of Bollywood' which caters to the twenty-odd million nonresident Indian communities scattered around the globe" is the most obvious example of diasporic distribution. (2010, p. 33).

In this article I will approach many of the currently dominant topics in relation to Canadian cinema:

the impact on national cinemas and auteurism of international film festivals, shifts in distribution patterns, labour issues, production output, and globalised aesthetics, as well as other related issues, such as slippages in notions of populism and popularity.

Although many national cinemas have been transmogrified in the era of globalization, Canadian cinema does not stand out among them. The marks of globalization are present in the Canadian film industry in the co-production treaties and financing exigencies, as they are in other countries. A Canadian production may have a director from France and stars from Hong Kong, the U.S. and Canada (*Clean*, 2004, d. Olivier Assayas, starring Maggie Cheung, Nick Nolte and Don McKellar, respectively) or an international cast including Susan Sarandon (U.S.), Gabriel Byrne (U.K.), Max von Sydow (Sweden) and Roy Dupuis (the mandatory Canadian) – *Emotional Arithmetic* (based on a Canadian novel, 2007). This sort of transnationalism, in its lowest form, is what Mette Hjort (2010, pp. 19-20) refers to as opportunistic: "Opportunistic transnationalism involves giving priority to economic issues to the point where monetary factors actually dictate the selection of partners beyond national borders. Opportunistic transnationalism is all about responding to available economic opportunities at a given moment in time and in no [way is] about the creation of lasting networks or about the fostering of social bonds that are deemed inherently valuable." Yet such co-productions are commonplace on a world-wide level now, and the marks of globalization have become somewhat different in other national cinemas.

While much has been written about the alternative exhibition circuit offered by international film festivals, shifts in distribution patterns, labour issues, and renewed questioning of the dominance of Hollywood, rarely do questions of style enter the discussion.² In a discussion of cinematic transnationalism, Mette Hjort delivers a taxonomy of pluralistic transnationalism, in which a quintet of types is articulated: epiphanic, affinitive, milieu-building, opportunistic and cosmopolitan forms of transnational cinema. Only the epiphanic, which de-

1 I owe thanks for research assistance to Christopher Heron, a former M.A. student at the Cinema.

2 See, for example, Scott, Allen J. "Hollywood and the World: The Geography of Motion-Picture Distribution and Marketing." *The Contemporary Hollywood Reader*. Ed. Toby Miller. London: Routledge, 2009. 162-184; Christopherson, Susan. "Behind the Scenes: How Transnational Firms Are Constructing a New International Division of Labor in Media Work." *The Contemporary Hollywood Reader*. Ed. Toby Miller. London: Routledge, 2009. 185-204; Iordanova, Dina. "Rise of the Fringe: Global Cinema's Long Tail." *Cinema at the Periphery*. Ed. Dina Iordanova, David Martin-Jones and Belén Vidal. Detroit: Wayne State U P, 2010. 23-45.

pendes upon the thematics of shared cultural knowledge, relates to issues of the visible marks of globalization on the surface of the films.

When formal issues are addressed, for example in articles on specific non-Hollywood films that have had a global impact, the critical instruments tend to point back to Hansen's vernacular modernism (2010), since the use of genre in these films is considered the way in which locality is 'translated' into global legibility. Challenging received notions of modernism as an elitist form, Hansen writes: "By contrast, I take one of the defining aspects of vernacular modernism to be precisely the way in which these films engaged with the experience and imagination of their audience. By doing so, they implicitly acknowledged, and helped create, a distinct kind of public sphere – constituted through the matrices of capitalist consumption, though not necessarily identical with and uncritical of it. Pragmatically, this orientation entailed working with genre formulas (both local and imported) and popular motifs, if not clichés; but it also meant putting them into play, twisting, denaturalizing, or transforming them, thus making them available for an at once sensorial-affective and reflective mode of reception." (2010, p. 302) In an elaboration on Hansen, Rey Chow (1995), for example, uses the concept of translation (from Benjamin) to discuss *Raise the Red Lantern* (d. Zhang Yimou, 1991) (Chow, 1995) and Mark Harrison (2006) extrapolates from Chow in an article on *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (d. Ang Lee, 2000).

And although he doesn't pursue it, Homi Bhabha makes a tantalizing remark about narrative structure in his article on cultural politics in a global age, considering narrative ambivalence as a structure typical of 'mondialisation': "The challenge of a mimesis of *mondialisation* (the practice of claim-making upon the 'global' as an aleatory, processual reality) lies in the *ambivalence* generated by the dynamic of global choice as a democratic practice, both deliberative and narrative. It consists in a structure of ambivalence – an ambivalence that I earlier associated with barbaric historic memory – that raises issues about the scale and measure of things that bear a relation to each other that may be epistemologically or ideologically 'assymetrical', while being ethically and affectively analogous." (Bhabha, 2007, p. 46).

Currently we recognize the inscription of globalization in the transmogrification of genres, formal strategies, production systems and budgets – all of which are legible at the surface of the films. The most prominent examples are films from China such as *Hero* (d. Chen Kaige, 2002) and *House of the Flying Daggers* (d.

Zhang Yimou, 2004), although other national cinemas have produced films that were not as successful, but just as clearly aimed at the global market. *The Fifth Element* (d. Luc Besson, 1997) is an example from France that took up different strategies but evinced similar global ambitions. "The success of such non-Hollywood blockbusters," writes Iordanova, "is signaling a bold move toward an increased heterogeneity that has been a feature of some of the established national film industries that, like France or India, remain marginalized in the wider global context and are eager to devise ambitious hits that nonetheless engage with specific cultural legacies and concerns." (2010, p. 28). Likewise Hjort recounts the strategies for global success through modernizing transnationalism in the example of South Korea: "The dramatic development of the South Korean film industry was largely the result of a wide range of government-based initiatives. The official desire...was to see South Korea emerge at 'the cutting edge of international film culture', and the creation of the Chonju/Jeonju Film Festival is to be understood in this light....[W]e witness a clear intention to promote a form of film culture that registers as cutting edge precisely because it is internally distanced from the concepts of the national that underwrite both national cinema and many a conception of international film." (Hjort, 2010, p. 25). Exceeding Hansen's vernacular modernism in regards to the deployment of genre conventions, these films are known to international audiences through high production values, spectacular special effects, mythic themes, and stars who are internationally known. This Hollywood-style combination often results in wide-spread distribution and substantial box-office returns.

In Canada, however, we have not experienced these particular shifts. What we have seen elsewhere as the over-riding forms of the globalization effect are not immediately observable in Canadian cinema. Most of the prominent Canadian films still have relatively small budgets, few special effects or stunts, and local and personal themes. The exceptions are David Cronenberg's films, which are, in Canadian terms, large budget productions, although they cost less than 25% of the now-standard \$200M budgets of the Hollywood blockbusters. Cronenberg's most recent film, *Eastern Promises* (2007), stars Viggo Mortensen (U.S.) along with an international cast including Naomi Watts (U.K.) and Armin Mueller-Stahl (Germany), with an estimated production budget of about \$50M. Based on a British screenplay, it is a police and thieves mystery about Russian gangsters in London – drugs, prostitution, guns, and a spectacularly choreo-

graphed fight scene. It was co-produced by Canadian, British and American companies and opened on more than 1400 screens in multiple countries.

Atom Egoyan also attracts substantial (i.e. non-Canadian) actors. *Where the Truth Lies* (2005) starred Kevin Bacon (U.S.) and Colin Firth (U.K.) and had a production budget of about \$25M. His most recent film, *Chloe* (2009), starred Julianne Moore (U.S.), Liam Neeson (U.K.) and Amanda Seyfried in a script by Erin Cressida Wilson (*Secretary*, 2002) and was produced by Ivan Reitman and Joe Medjuck, with Tom Pollock and Jason Reitman as executive producers – the team behind *Ghostbusters* (d. Ivan Reitman, 1984) and many other notable films. Even before its world premiere in the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival, *Chloe* had already made its budget back via international pre-sales. Few other Canadian films have such high-profile stars or generous budgets, since most Canadian films are funded through a variety of government agencies.

These recent works falls into the rubric that Mette Hjort describes as “auteurist transnationalism.” While Hjort specifically addresses the ubiquitous omnibus film, in which a selection of international filmmakers address a particular topic, her comments pertain equally to the international co-productions centred around auteurs: “Much as in the case of cosmopolitan transnationalism, the driving force in auteurist transnationalism is an individual director who is very much attuned to film’s potential for personal rather than formulaic expression....[A]uteurist transnationalism arises ...when an established auteur and icon of a particular national cinema ... decides to embrace a particular kind of collaboration beyond national borders.” (2010, p. 23)

Nevertheless, the prominent Canadian filmmakers are still the known auteurs of the past two decades: Denys Arcand, David Cronenberg, Atom Egoyan, Deepa Mehta and Patricia Rozema. Aside from these few, who command large-budget government funding and international co-production agreements, the Canadian films that circulate in international film festivals are relatively low-budget productions.

The impact of international film festivals on small national cinemas and auteurs has been regularly noted. Iordanova, for one, writes: “Festivals have been talked up as an alternative distribution network for a while now, yet they remain seen mainly as a showcase that may open doors to real distribution.... [However], besides the official film markets that accompany some of the big festivals and that remain the domain of film industry professionals and clear-cut distributors, there is

the informal but increasingly networked and efficient system of international flow through festival links, where a small film from an obscure source is picked up by a succession of festivals and shown consecutively in various countries, thus getting truly global exposure, even if this exposure does not bring along measurable financial gains.” (2010, p. 31) The Pusan International Film Festival, for example, showed *Normal* (d. Carl Bessai, 2007), a small ensemble film starring Carrie-Anne Moss, a Canadian “B-list” actor somewhat tattered from the many *Matrix* sequels and nearly a decade out from *Memento* (d. Christopher Nolan, 2000). Whether *Normal* was picked up for “real distribution” outside Canada or not, Iordanova is optimistic about other opportunities that film festivals offer. She goes on to declare that “Today, the international film festival circuit not only supports and facilitates the distribution of non-Hollywood cinema; it has also expanded sufficiently to be regarded as a distribution network itself.” (2010, p. 32)

Here I must take issue with Iordanova, for although small festivals may pay rentals for certain films, the large international festivals do not. On the contrary, as in the case of the Toronto International Film Festival, not only does the festival not pay rentals, but also independent films are charged a submission fee and pay their own costs for shipping and additional personnel such as publicists, without whom, in a large festival, the film may languish unnoticed. Thus although film festivals certainly can be regarded as an alternative *exhibition* circuit, the element of return on investment that putatively characterizes the *distribution* economy is markedly absent: on the contrary, it costs the independent film producer significant sums to exhibit a film in that alternative circuit.

Pusan also showed *The Age of Darkness* (2007), the final installment of Denys Arcand’s social trilogy, which included *The Decline of the American Empire* (1986) and *The Barbarian Invasions* (2003). Arcand has not made a feature since then, and does not seem to have anything in pre-production. Thus, despite his international renown, Academy Awards nomination and three Cannes film festival awards, Arcand’s output is typical of most Canadian filmmakers: a film every three or four years. Atom Egoyan, also an Academy Award nominee and Cannes prize winner, makes a feature film every two or three years, and he is one of the most well-financed filmmakers in Canada. It is apparent that Canada has moved neither to Hollywood-style budgets, themes and box-office returns nor to studio-system production schedules.

Unlike China or India, for example, the Canadian film industry has not developed a ‘popular’ cinema, even

within Canada. Outside of Quebec, English Canadian films remain auteur-driven art-house productions, largely government financed. In order to get funding, they must have a theatrical distributor that guarantees at least a week on the screens. But the distributors are at very low risk in investment, and promotion budgets are a fraction of those of American films. Nevertheless, box office returns on the first weekend determine whether or not the film will play for another week, which is a rare case.

Canada is not alone in falling short in box office returns for indigenous films; this problem plagues most national industries outside of Hollywood (which also must be counted as a national industry). Except for France, India and China, where indigenous cinemas are popular with indigenous audiences, few films do well at the box-office in their own countries of origin. Even fewer films find distribution outside their national boundaries. Only a handful of films attract more than 20% of audiences outside their national markets. In recent years, all of the 20 largest grossing films in the world box office were U.S. productions.³ China has been one of the few countries in the world in which indigenous films for many years have taken the lion's share of the box office, as they supported their indigenous industry with a 20% limit on foreign film distribution. Presently, however, even China is hurting. As a result, in critical and academic discussion, the definition of 'the popular' is undergoing transformation. Formerly, 'popular' cinema was defined as being about the 'populus', i.e. indigenous concerns.⁴ Now the critical definitions are shifting as the globalization effects of the world market are redefining the popular in terms of box office returns.

Many government-funded film industries (the majority of national industries) have changed their funding policies in response to this continued trend. Like Australia, Germany and many other countries, Canada has changed its funding formula from programs that fostered the development of auteurs (such as Arcand, Cronenberg, Egoyan, McKellar, Mehta, Rozema) to a new Canadian Feature Film Policy that de-emphasises auteur

films in favour of those that seek a commercial audience. The policy signaled a shift in the federal government's support of Canadian feature film from building an industry to building audiences.

The stated goals of the new program were to "Develop and retain talented creators; Foster the quality and diversity of Canadian feature films; Build larger audiences at home and abroad for Canadian feature films; Preserve and disseminate our collection of Canadian feature films for audiences today and tomorrow." (<http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/flm-vid/nwsrls-eng.cfm>). When it launched its policy, the Government set a target of 5% of the domestic box office in five years and a goal of increasing audiences for Canadian feature films abroad. To meet this goal, the Policy aimed to "Improve the quality of Canadian feature films by fostering an increase in average production budgets to at least \$5 million; and Encourage more comprehensive national and international marketing strategies by promoting an increase in average marketing budgets to at least \$500,000." (<http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/flm-vid/nwsrls-eng.cfm>).

The problems with this policy are immediately apparent to anyone who knows anything about the transnational film industry. First of all, the target of 5% of the commercial box-office to be achieved by Canadian films indicates how desperately low is the current audience share for indigenous production. That goal still has not been reached, despite all manner of stunt accounting in federal reports. Second, the aim to 'improve the quality of Canadian feature films' implies that quality is not high. This is not the case, as both Canadian critical assessments and international respect for our prominent and emerging filmmakers clearly indicate. The implicit aim is not 'improved quality' but popularity, largely achieved by many films through the presence of international stars, action, genre and aggressive promotion. Such a goal will never be achieved through increasing average feature budgets to \$5M; that is the budget of one weekly episode of the CSI franchise.⁵ A \$25M (U.S.) production budget is considered a credit-card movie - ultra-low-budget - in the

3 These are, by the way, the same statistics that Iordanova interprets favourably when she writes, "[C]urrently about 25 percent to 30 percent of the forty top grossing global films come from countries other than the United States or the United Kingdom. People who closely monitor the global situation described 2007 as a record-breaking year for the international box office. It is not that such trends were not there before; but it is only now that they are finally coming into the picture" (28-9).

4 This critical and academic issue was the topic of a one-day symposium at the Beijing Academy of the Arts (Autumn, 2007), at which I presented this paper for the first time.

5 CSI: Las Vegas, by the way, is the U.S. television series that was an early investment for Alliance-Atlantis, and made their initial fortune.

American industry, where movies that do well routinely cost \$200- \$300M.

Let me interrupt this lament with a comic interlude. When some well-financed Hollywood-Canadians⁶ stepped in as executive producers of a feature film made from a Canadian cult TV series, *Trailer Park Boys*, the Canadian producer/director submitted its \$5M budget.⁷ Well connected with long track records, the executive producers knew they could easily raise more than \$20M while still considering the film a low-budget production. They asked if the production could use more money. The Canadian producer/director replied that he guessed he could include a few car crashes, so maybe one more million would be useful. The executive producers just laughed, but knew ultimately that the partners didn't share common expectations. In Canada, the film was a relative success, grossing over \$1M on its opening weekend and nearly \$4M over the first two months. It was released in the U.S. on 's-elected' screens, but because of coarse language it had an R rating, ensuring box office damage.

Many countries can explain their low international box-office returns in terms of language differences, as few films are distributed outside their countries of origin on account of the necessity of subtitles. In the U.S., for example, only 3% of the commercially distributed films are made in languages other than English, and they are marketed as art-house films with English subtitles, with predictably low box-office returns. Canadian films made in Québec in French, if distributed outside Québec and France at all, are doomed to the art-house circuit.

But films produced in the rest of Canada are not foreign-language films, and they don't even have distinctive accents (as British films do). Canada speaks the same language as the U.S. Thus the Canadian film industry has a severe problem in relation to popular culture, addressed indirectly in the first goal of the federal program, to develop and retain talented creators. Canadian filmmakers, producers, actors and technicians who wish to or have a chance to 'make it' in popular culture simply move south. And there are many: at least 1M Canadians are making their way in the Hollywood movie and television industry. This refers to the most significant problem of the Canadian film industry: the retention of filmmakers who are 'talented' in the production of popular cinema.

Although the globalization effect may not be particularly marked in the aesthetic strategies, generic modes, production budgets or world-wide dissemination of Canadian films, there is another very important way that globalization and the 'free market' are reshaping the Canadian film industry. In the Canadian film industry, since the 2008 depression, we have seen significant shifts in labour conditions. Canadian currency climbed in relation to the U.S. dollar, reducing the numbers of runaway American productions produced in Canada, and crews were thus forced to compete aggressively for few jobs. Technical workers in the film industry are being squeezed harder and harder, with increasing demands for lower production costs, higher productivity, longer working hours, and the destabilization of unions. As Susan Christopherson explains, "dominant transnational media conglomerates (as opposed to their network of suppliers) do not passively accept the limitations or high costs associated with regional production complexes. Nor are they passive with respect to the need to solve the key problems and costs associated with creative labor force – labor force reproduction, wage control, and flexibility in production conditions. Instead, there is substantial evidence to demonstrate that transnational media conglomerates use their considerable political power to reconstruct the production environment, regionally, nationally, and internationally so as to increase both their profitability and their flexibility vis-à-vis product and labor markets." (Christopherson, 2009, p. 188). In order to negotiate successfully with producers, Canadian unions have had to relax their demands on benefits, hours of work, and real remuneration. Technicians – from production designers down to gaffers, grips and set dressers – work longer hours, travel longer distances to work, and are paid less than they were five years ago in real income. Moreover, as a result of the long hours and smaller crews, physical work-site injuries are increasing and the minimal disability benefits are available only as long as the worker stays off the job. A friend of mine reported the death of a fellow crew member: he had driven two hours to the location, worked twelve hours straight and faced a two-hour drive on a busy highway. He fell asleep at the wheel on his way home and died in the crash. This death is the direct result of globalization.

6 Joe Medjuck, Tom Pollock and Ivan Reitman, Executive Producers.

7 *Trailer Park Boys: The Movie* (d. Mike Clattenburg, 2006).

I would suggest that while the globalization effect is not particularly evident in the Canadian images that appear on the screen, other marks of globalization are increasingly clobbering the Canadian film industry. Direct outcomes of globalization are economic and cultural domination by the U.S., devaluation of indigenous culture, reactionary ideological drifts towards cutbacks in government funding, and the deleterious effects of the free enterprise model and the commercial market on quality of life for industrial workers.

Yet there are encouraging signs, according to some commentators, who see the future in the internet and other new technologies for film distribution that transcend geographies and national borders. "In the new mode of distribution they enable, a vast number of products are now obtainable from Internet-based distributors in command of huge on-demand inventories that expand existing markets and cater to niche consumer interests. Markets become liberated from the 'tyranny of geography': the new distribution set-up permits unrestrained availability of distinctive products, and the remote village residents can have access to cultural goods as easily as those in the most central metropolitan locations." (2010, p. 35) Others tout the artistic and economic freedoms that result from new production technologies, (Verninger, 2010, pp. 35-40) while some embrace the potential of revitalizing Canadian television through the available wealth of feature film production skills.⁸ Nearly everyone agrees with Christopherson that "At the heart of this restructuring is the ability of virtually integrated transnational media firms to use (or in industry jargon, to 'repurpose') products – film, television series, or documentary – across their multiple distribution outlets. Repurposing multiplies the revenues that can be obtained from any one product. It also reduces the transaction and direct costs associated with product acquisition for downstream distribution venues, such as DVD rental and sale."

Global cinema becomes increasingly driven by genre, costly technologies, expertise, enormous budgets and superstars. At the same time, while not achieving the box office returns of the top-grossing films, formerly marginal national cinemas may nevertheless transcend borders, cultures and ethnicities through dissemination via

alternative channels, including the internet, film festivals, Iphone apps, and whatever else is on the horizon. Rather than global reach, for Canadian and other national cinemas, we may look forward to transnational exposure.

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8 Christopherson says: "The inability of Canadian independent film producers to make a dent in US dominated film distribution in Canada ... moved them to turn their attention to television.... The Canadian media production workforce is trained to produce programming for television but these skills can be applied to feature film production for US-based [transnational media corporations]" (2009:199).