

Sleeping with Elephants

"Living next to the United States is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt." That was how Pierre Trudeau, former Canadian Prime Minister summed up the country's relationship with America.

That relationship has been especially evident in the movie industry. For example in 1977, of 970 films distributed here, only 2.5% were of Canadian origin, and about 50% were imported from the US. During 1979 almost all royalty payments went to copyright holders outside of Canada. In 1990 over 90% of screen time in Canadian theatres was taken up by foreign films. So why is it that the Canadian film scene was and is so dominated by American imports?

It has been suggested that Canadians just like American films better, but that is only part of the story. In a 1978 poll about 40% of Canadians said Canadian films were inferior to others, but about 35% said they were the same as or better than those from elsewhere. In any case, many Canadian films have received critical acclaim around the world, and been supported by audiences here in Canada.

Part of the reason is the generally American flavour of Canadian society and hence the similarity of individual expectations and so forth. In 1950 the American author Horace Sutton noted how Canadians had "adopted American commerce and culture." For this reason the flow of information between the US and Canada is fundamentally much easier than in many other cases, the English speaking portions of the Canadian and American populations share both language and culture. The significant linguistic, cultural and religious obstacles which might act as a barrier to foreign penetration of the market elsewhere do not operate here (outside of Quebec at least).

Another reason is simply (or perhaps not so simply) commercial competition; TV, radio and film can be provided more cheaply by outlets of American networks because they can recoup their costs in the US market and thus run their foreign operations more cheaply and profitably. Certainly they own a huge proportion of the Canadian cinema industry.

According to Dave Barber of Winnipeg Film Group, one of the biggest problems in Canada is publicity. Hollywood does excellent publicity work for its releases, Canadian films are relatively poorly advertised. In fact Barber says it is difficult to get air time and media space for Canadian films at all. He has to "hound" the media to get any kind of coverage for many of the films he deals with. The result is that people are far more likely to know the names of the reviews of Hollywood films, than they are of Canadian ones. That is probably one reason the cinema chains use so few Canadian films. In fact Barber feels that Canadian films are more appreciated outside Canada than inside Canada.

[There is an argument that the overwhelming influence of the US media is not merely due to good business. Some in the US have viewed the expansion of the media as a duty "a sacred duty," a part of the "worldwide ideological struggle for the hearts and minds of men."]

The debate about foreign influence in the film (and other) industries is an old one in Canada. The Liberal Trudeau government took legislative steps to regulate foreign ownership and influence, the Conservative Mulroney Government negotiated the Free Trade Agreement. Both were aimed at promoting the best interests of Canadians and their industries, working on different assumptions of what these were and how they would be best served. In fact even the outlook of individual Canadians has been different depending on their circumstances. For instance years ago Cineplex (a major cinema chain) appealed to the Restrictive Trade Practices Commission for help against the power and practices of foreign interests (i.e.. US based film production-distribution companies) which kept them from prospering in the Canadian market. With this help Cineplex-Odeon became a prosperous company and a major circuit for American films. The same entrepreneur who had courted government intervention some years earlier, now talked about government measures to help the indigenous film industry as "alarming", "unethical", and generally a bad idea. If you are looking at the balance sheet for a large vertically organised and foreign based corporation that makes, distributes and shows films, then to maximise your returns you don't want other film makers and distributors taking a slice of your market. (Hollywood has strongly resisted the idea of a quota system for Canadian films - such systems do exist in some countries). If you can exclude them from your cinemas you do, and if you can keep some sort of monopoly over showing major films you do that too. (Which is one of the reasons Cineplex originally sought government help to defend and strengthen itself in the market). If you are a small independent film maker, then making films is much more of a gamble than for a large organisation which controls both production and distribution. You might like the government to impose on the distributors a quota of independent films, so your products would reliably make it to the screen and some of the financial risks of film making would be eliminated. Not only that, according to Barber the funding situation for independent film makers is relatively very poor here in Canada (in the US for example there is more private and foundation money which can be accessed).

Some put the dismal showing of the smaller independent companies down to the issue of competition, access to a market which is effectively controlled by a powerful oligopoly. In that view the "free" trade model, simply maintains the dominance of a powerful segment of the industry (meaning the large scale, vertically integrated corporations in this case).

On the other hand we do have the National Film Board, set up by the government in 1939. It is the best known producer of Canadian films. But Barber told me about some outstanding independent film makers you might want to check out. Sharon Jennet (from right here in Winnipeg), John Cozak and Guy Madden. There are, in fact, Canadian films around, many of them are excellent, but a fair proportion of them never make it into the public eye here in Canada.

or what it's worth this is a list of some of the better Canadian films (in no particular order). Try a few. Decide for yourself if like Canadian films.

Jesus of Montreal

Who Has Seen the Wind

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz

I Heard the Mermaids Singing

My American Cousin

Ninety Days

Careful, Archangel, Tales From the Gimli Hospital (Guy Madden)

Dog Stories (Sharon Jennet)

- Dr. Euan Taylor, Winnipeg, Canada

Sources

Embattled Shadows, A History of the Canadian Cinema. Peter Morris, 1978.

Canada's Cultural Industries. Paul Audley 1983. Canadian Dreams and American Control. The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry. Manjunath Pendakur, 1990.

My very special thanks also go to Dave Barber, Programmer and Co-ordinator at The Winnipeg Film Group (running the independent cinema Cinematheque here in town). He provided me with much valuable insight and information.