



What triumph? Whose cinema?

BY SETH FELDMAN

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In 2000, Daniel Drache, who was then director of the Robarts Centre, asked me to serve as the Robarts Chair in Canadian Studies for the upcoming academic year. I had proposed a year-long research project titled “The Triumph of Canadian Cinema.” The proposal was the product of a quarter-century of studying, writing on, and teaching the subject. As was customary for the Robarts chair, the project consisted of a series of guest presentations culminating in a research paper representing the chair’s own research.

THE TRIUMPH OF CANADIAN CINEMA

“The Triumph of Canadian Cinema” was, with all due modesty, a bit of a triumph. We began the year by arranging a panel discussion of prominent Canadian directors that took place during the Toronto International Film Festival. For the remainder of the year, we brought some of Canada’s best-known film personalities to campus. The paper presented by the Robarts chair toward the end of his tenure received a polite round of applause from those present.

One of the highlights of our program was an appearance by Norman Jewison. Having begun his career at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Norman later worked as director in American television and then directed and produced decades’ worth of high-profile Hollywood films: *In the Heat of the Night*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Agnes of God*, and *Moonstruck*, among many others. His work had earned him lifetime achievement awards from both the American and Canadian directors’ guilds. He also worked as an educator, serving as chancellor of Victoria College at the University of Toronto and as the founder, mover, and shaker of the Canadian Film Centre, which has honed the talents of a long list of Canadian filmmakers. He was recognized in his home and native land by an appointment as a companion in the Order of Canada.

We lost Norman on January 20, 2024. It was a loss marked not only in Canada but in places around the world familiar with his work. Those obituaries were unanimous in citing him as not only one of Hollywood’s most reliable craftsmen but also one of its most progressive voices. *The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming* (1966) imagined a small American town ignoring the Cold War to make peace with a stranded Russian submarine crew. His 1967 film, *In the Heat of the Night*, offered an explosive pairing of a Philadelphia detective and a sheriff deep in the Jim Crow American South. When taunted with the line, “What do they call you in Philadelphia, boy?” Sidney Poitier answered with one of the most memorable lines, not only in Norman’s oeuvre but in all the films of the civil rights era, “They call me Mister Tibbs.”

LIVING IN HOLLYWOOD’S SHADOW

Now, the question: in what way is Norman Jewison, Canada’s most celebrated contribution to Hollywood since Mary Pickford left Toronto for her career in American photoplays, to be seen as part of

the triumph of Canadian cinema? Here is a hint: 23 short years after the Robarts program, the CBC's Peter Knegt and Eleanor Knowles compiled and published a list of "The Fifty Greatest Films Directed by Canadians." Having seen 44 of those films and taught a couple of dozen in my Canadian Cinema classes, I would credit 30 of the films with being recognizably Canadian—that is, being set in Canada, telling this country's stories, and addressing its concerns. At the same time, the list tells us that some of the best-known Canadian filmmakers—David Cronenberg, Ivan Reitman, Denis Villeneuve, James Cameron—still had to go to Hollywood to achieve major league status.

Having pointed to these numbers, I would still say that there is a meaningful difference between the Canadian film world of a quarter-century ago and what we see today. We have a generation or two of filmmakers—Atom Egoyan, Sarah Polley, Xavier Dolan, Denis Arcand, Guy Maddin, Zacharias Kunuk, and the fast-emerging York graduate Matt Johnson—who have been able to make internationally recognized work while remaining in Canada. What this tells us is that the millions of words spilled, and the millions of dollars spent in creating a national cinema has had an effect. Canadian cinema has, at the very least, attained the stature of the other national cinemas that live within Hollywood's shadow. Like most of those other cinemas, we have earned a place in the international festival and art house circuit. Instead of groping for recognition (which can get kind of pathetic), we have become part of the discussion.

There is even better news. Streaming services have, for motives of their own, created the inkling of a world cinema culture. We have gone beyond the British films and television series that have helped to keep us sane as movie theatres have been taken over by comic book movies. During the three pandemic years, the quarantined population had access to a variety of Indian, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Korean, Mexican, Norwegian, and Danish films and television series. There has been an unusual amount of Icelandic spoken on my television and computer screens. At the same time, the perennial problem of being able to access Canadian content has been at least partially solved.

A WORLD BEYOND FEATURE FILMS

One more aspect of Canadian cinema must be kept in mind: ours has always been a fragmented cinema operating around the edges of what most people think of as films, namely, the world of feature film entertainment. After sporadic attempts at a Hollywood North, the modern Canadian cinema was born with the creation of the National Film Board (NFB) in 1939 (three years after the creation of the national broadcaster). During the Second World War, the NFB distinguished itself by producing two weekly newsreel series and several hundred short films on Canadian topics. Almost all of these came under the heading of documentary, although at the time "documentary" could include staged scenes. In the late 1950s, NFB filmmakers pioneered what they called "candid eye" filmmaking, which would later come to be known as *cinéma vérité*. The NFB was also a major player in the development of artistic animated films (as opposed to Saturday morning cartoons). Our enlightened public funding of the arts has made Canada a good place to make avant-garde (a.k.a. experimental) films. Like the documentaries, the animated films and experimental films—and the Canadians who make them—are important to anyone interested in those genres. They are often important enough to draw general audiences and win major international awards.

So, has there been a triumph of Canadian cinema? If survival is the measure of success in Canadian culture, there is no question but that there has been. If measured by excellence, there are more than enough examples to cite. If measured by domination of the world's large and small screens, not so much. In sum, what you can say of Canadian cinema today is that it has grown into the wider perspective of what cinema can be, to the point where it can reward those who make it and view it. ■