One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema. *By George Melnyk.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. 362 pp. ISBN 080203568X.

George Melnyk's textbook *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* originates in the "diffuse, interdisciplinary universe" of Canadian studies that Melnyk says "finds the nation state to be a useful framework for understanding the project of national cultural autonomy in which an imagined community fosters its own creative interpretation in order to create a sense of bordered self" (p. 6). For Melnyk, Canada is a country where the cinema has yet to achieve a prominent place in cultural expression, but he acknowledges that Québec has been much more successful than English Canada in creating a distinct niche for itself in the overpowering shadow of Hollywood. According to him, David Cronenberg, more than any other director, liberated English-Canadian cinema from the documentary style and a somewhat heavy-handed dramatic realism in favour of dreams, fantasies, and the exploration of "libidinal trauma." In the absence of a deeply felt sociopolitical agenda, such as that shared by a large majority of the Québec cultural community in the 1970s and '80s, Cronenberg's films "allowed the weird to be equated with being Canadian" (p. 157).

One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema starts out by recounting historically the development of Canadian movies and movie-going. At the beginning of the twentieth century, France supplied a major share of the films exhibited in Québec, and some consisted of filmed treatments of biblical material. In English Canada, the Canadian Pacific Railway sponsored the production of the nation's first short films to encourage immigration and help settle the Prairies. From these unrelated observations, Melnyk concludes that two worlds were developing in the pre-war period: a Québec-based Catholic cinema that emphasized approved mythologies oriented toward entertainment; and an English Protestant cinema concerned with providing practical information at reasonable cost. But prior to the Great War, the concept of a national cinema had not taken form anywhere.

One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema describes 1920s English-Canadian identity as "a narrow colonized consciousness intent on assimilating its peoples to British imperial values," and says this heritage inhibited the development of a distinctive visual style and cinematic art. Not only did Canada lack a cultural or political avant-garde comparable to those in the major European countries, it also lacked a comparable sense of historical continuity. Together with the economic force of the Hollywood system, these elements of Canadian society impeded the development of an indigenous Canadian feature film industry.

While Melnyk emphasizes important contributing factors in the sociocultural realm, he makes no more than passing reference to economic forces of equal or greater importance. *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* contains no discussion of the economics of the feature film industry that helps to explain the industrial concentration of feature film production and distribution in Hollywood after World War I and the ensuing slow growth of indigenous production in Canada and elsewhere around the world.

In the silent film era, for example, the language of production played a relatively minor role in protecting a national cinema, since different language frames for titles and dialogue could be adapted with relative ease to any language. Once a significant portion of the total costs of a feature had been amortized in the domestic market, export to international markets represented an attractive opportunity. With a total population of only 8.8 million in 1921, the Dominion, composed of two language groups and two distinct entertainment communities, did not have a sufficiently large domestic market to finance the high costs of feature film production. Canada became a chronic importer of features; indigenous talent who wanted to work in the entertainment business, such as Marie Dressler and Mary Pickford, emigrated to the United States.

In the spring of 1939, the government of Mackenzie King enacted the *National Film Act,* which created the National Film Board (NFB), and appointed John Grierson as Canada's first Film Commissioner. Grierson's belief that Canada was incapable of competing with Hollywood for domestic theatrical feature film audiences and the NFB's dedication to agitprop during World War II has led some film historians to characterize Grierson as the key architect of Canada's marginal status in the film world and the NFB as the greatest obstacle to feature film production in Canada. In his initial discussion of the issue, Melnyk has the good sense to balance this view with a reminder of the persistence of Grierson's documentary vision long after his departure from Canada. However, he attributes the resilience of Grierson's legacy primarily to the reflection of Canadian identity in the NFB's activities. While there is truth in this, documentary filmmaking and the beginnings of the NFB's animation tradition were also encouraged by the small scale of activity they required, the absence of a strong indigenous theatre tradition comparable to that in Britain, and the readily accessible stream of high-budget popular movies flowing from Hollywood.

World War II produced another important effect on the development of Canadian cinema—the first wave of French-language feature film production. The existence of a large popular audience for Radio-Canada's domestic radio drama, launched in the 1930s, created a demand for Québec-oriented stories and helped to generate a pool of accomplished writers and actors before the war. Indigenous cinema, thereto overshadowed by imports from France, flowered in the vacuum occasioned by the war that commenced in September 1939. The interruption of transatlantic commercial traffic and the decline in French film production during and after World War II created a demand for French-language cinema that resulted in 19 Québec features over a 10-year period beginning with *Le Père Chopin* in 1944 and more or less ending with *Tit-Coq* in 1953. Following the launch of French-language television in 1952, and Radio-Canada's revival of drama programs, audiences and talent migrated to television. In the 1950s, indigenous television undermined the infant Québec film industry, and independent French-language cinema production disappeared once again in favour of popular movie imports from abroad.

The renaissance of Québec cinema in the 1960s benefited from the NFB documentary filmmakers' experience in the previous decade and coincided with new developments in France associated with *cinéma vérité*, *cinéma d'auteur*, the cinema magazine *Cahiers du cinéma,* and the *nouvelle vague* of French film directors. All of these trends represented a back-to-basics approach to filmmaking, emphasized the role of the director in determining the final cut, and reinforced the idea that a theatrical film represents a form of personal self-expression on the part of the director—relegating the rest of the creative team to secondary roles. The contribution of the writer, for example, was downplayed, reduced to ghostwriting services or taken over by the director—and most directors had no background in storytelling, the writing of fiction, or screenwriting. In many cases, the screenplay became simply a point of departure for an elaboration of the director's vision. Dialogue improvised by the actors, who often possessed little acting experience, was popular because non-professional or unknown actors offered more conversational, more spontaneous, and less stilted performances and, of course, amateurs accepted lower fees than did experienced professional actors.

Melnyk associates the work of David Cronenberg and Atom Egoyan, both schooled at the University of Toronto, with the so-called European model of *cinéma d'auteur* and says, "It has been through auteurism and its similarity to literary authorship that a distinct sensibility in English-Canadian film has been able to emerge" (p. 164). While this statement captures a certain truth, one could also argue that the excessive reliance on the director's vision to the exclusion of the screenwriter's vision has provided a handicap in Canadian cinema. The lack of narrative writing skills on the part of many Canadian film directors, and the absence of a commitment to the screenplay as written, has inhibited a connection

with the audience that storytelling requires. As much as the low-rent marginality of much English-Canadian cinema has permitted the incubation of the weird, it has also reinforced other less attractive tendencies including a disregard for writing skills and narrative story structure.

The organization of *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* evolves considerably over the course of the book. The early chapters are historical and present the English- and French-language Canadian cinema experience either together or in alternating chapters. Then, halfway through, the nature of the discussion shifts to focus primarily on the cinematographic histories of selected film directors—chapter 9: Pierre Perrault, Michel Brault, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, Gilles Carle, Claude Jutra, Denys Arcand; chapter 10: David Cronenberg, Atom Egoyan; chapter 11: Anne Wheeler, Patricia Rozema, Léa Pool, Deepa Mehta, Mina Shum, Alanis Obomsawin; chapter 12: Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Guy Maddin; and so on. One might quibble about certain groupings, inclusions, and exclusions, but a larger issue concerns the integration of these chapters into the rest of the book. As interesting as they are, no clear profile of Canadian cinema emerges from these diverse filmographies. Instead, this part of the book provides a synthesis of previous biographical studies in what Melnyk himself calls an "interpretation of interpretations" that relies on shifting points of view and reflects the absence of a unified vision of what Canadian cinema represented in the last three decades of the twentieth century.

In the final chapter, entitled "A History of the Future," Melnyk summarizes his argument with three generalizations that have not been developed in the core of the book and require considerable explanation and refinement the author does not provide: the powerful role of the state in defining English-Canadian and Québec cinema; the negative impact of the NFB's documentary and animation tradition; and the lack of audiences for Canadian cinema despite a significant volume of production during the last three decades of the twentieth century.

While it is true, as the author says, that as long as English-Canadian and Québec cinema are primarily art cinemas, they will not play the kind of role for Canadians that American cinema plays for Americans, one could hardly accuse *Séraphin—un homme et son pêché*, *La Grande séduction*, *Les Boys III,* or *Les Invasion barbares* of being art cinema.[1] It is also true that multiculturalism will not help overcome the marginalization of Canadian cinema. At the same time, to assert that, historically, Canadian film has been "foreign" to Canadians is simply a tautology.

In fact, the settlement pattern of immigrants has influenced the reaction of domestic audiences to English-Canadian cinema. One of the fundamental reasons for the differences in the consumption of movies and television programs between French-speaking and English-speaking Canadians lies in the differing demographic and spatial composition of the audiences that compose the two communities. Inspection of the census data for 2001 confirms that the French-speaking population is much more homogeneous in terms of ethnic and cultural background than is the rest of Canada and that its population is much more highly concentrated around a single city—Montréal. This has had important implications for the marketing, promotion, and viewing of audiovisual products in the two markets over the last three decades.

The relative homogeneity of origin among French-speaking Quebeckers helps to explain the popular response to certain cultural events, including the sharing of common experiences at the movies or on television. What tend to attract wide audiences in English-speaking Canada, with its high proportion of immigrants, are screen images that reach across geographic, cultural, and linguistic barriers—physical action and physical comedy, including blockbuster movies with popular stars. The U.S. studios produce most of these movies with budgets beyond the realm of possibility for the vast majority of Canadian filmmakers. Because movies with physical action and comedy reach across cultural barriers,

they typically sell well in Europe, Latin America, and Asia as well as in English Canada. As popular as Canada's French-language movies and television programs may be at home, the great majority, especially the broad comedies that rely on Québec's unique vocabulary, do not attract significant audiences outside of Québec's borders.

Another of the major problems for English-language Canadian cinema production has been the absence of an ongoing critical mass or cluster of activity than allows for a film culture to grow. Very few creators can make a career in the cinema alone, and without steady employment, the necessary skills are not adequately developed.[2] Although a critical mass of film production has more or less been attained on the technical side—considerably assisted by public policy and foreign location shooting—it has not been attained on the creative side. For creative people, to stay on in the film business usually means a slow inspirational death and many retreat to more solid ground in television or elsewhere.

A vibrant cinema culture cannot rely on the quality of production alone. It also requires advertising and promotion suited to the films and their audiences together with, as a counterpoint, knowledgeable film histories, criticism, conservation, and informed debate. Clearly and concisely written, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* contributes to these latter objectives.

This said, the absence of empirical analysis and informed critical discussion of government policy on the evolution of Canadian cinema is a disappointing feature of contemporary Canadian film historiography. In what ways did government policy affect the development of Canadian cinema in the 1980s and '90s? What was Telefilm Canada's influence, if any, on the development of the careers of David Cronenberg, Atom Egoyan, and Denys Arcand, all three of whose work evolved significantly over the course of the 1990s? "Could it be that the quota system, so feared by Hollywood, and so much avoided by the Canadian state because of American pressure, is an option that needs revisiting?" George Melnyk asks (p. 256). As it is, his limited discussion of policy issues provides little help in answering this kind of question. There is as yet no solid body of analytical literature regarding the impact of public policy during the last two decades of the twentieth century—a subject central to the Canadian cinema history that remains to be written.

Notes

1. These four Québec films appeared among the top 10 of all domestic and foreign films released in Québec, ranked by gross box office receipts, in at least one of the years 2001, 2002, and 2003.
2. In Québec, the problem of nurturing the small creative community dedicated to film has been addressed in part by the intersectoral mobility of the artists and the sharing of creative talent in cinema, television, music, and the theatre (all concentrated overwhelmingly in Montréal).

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