

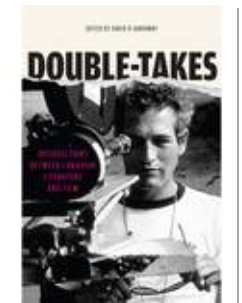


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READING CANADIAN FILM CREDITS: ADAPTING INSTITUTIONS, SYSTEMS AND AFFECTS

PETER DICKINSON

What makes a “creditable” film adaptation? On one level, textual fidelity seems less important than fiduciary responsibility. To explain by way of a reductive distinction between opening and closing film credits: In the Hollywood production model, opening credits signify “above-the-line,” marquee investments aimed at ensuring a profitable return at the box office. A star’s name, a director’s track record, even the acknowledgement of a prior literary pedigree: all participate in the branding of a film’s relative credentials for success—as, for example, a familiar genre vehicle, a sure-fire hit or a “quality” picture. Closing credits, by contrast, mostly reflect “below-the-line,” out-of-pocket expenses, the cost of building sets and props, designing costumes, renting equipment and locations, generating technical effects, feeding and watering cast and crew (see Glatzer). In Canada we haven’t quite figured out how to make this accounting system work, although not for lack of trying. Which is why in the debit column at the end of most Canadian films made since 1995 one sees routine acknowledgement paid to the following confidence broker: the Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit program (CPTC).

Then, too, for those of us who regularly sit through the entire end title sequence of a film, waiting to see by what strange monikers the gaffer or best boy seeks to be known, or to confirm that that was indeed Vancouver masquerading as Chicago, the brief space of impressionistic nullity we then occupy as we vainly struggle *against* the desire to communicate in words feelings we would prefer to keep to ourselves, tells us something equally important about our emotional investments in movies. That those investments frequently yield a *negative* return speaks as much to how different spectator communities come together through a process of strategic *dis*-identification with screen images as they do about the general perfidy of the following ques-

tion when applied to any film, let alone one adapted from literature: “So, what did you think?”

In this essay I approach the question of adaptation’s *credibility* in the Canadian context by teasing out the multiple meanings of “credit” (belief or trust in a story; acknowledgement of merit or services rendered; extending or authorizing financial payment). I first review the institutional structures at work in the issuing of tax credits for Canadian-made films, focusing on the tax-shelter era of the 1970s and early 1980s, and the CPTC’s much maligned precursor, the Capital Cost Allowance (CCA); I then briefly sketch some connections to the Conservative Party’s recently shelved plans to amend the CPTC by introducing what would have been a decency clause. Referencing select films from both periods, I suggest that the prioritizing of fiscal accountability over narrative content and artistic expression buys into an equivalency model that is just as bedevilling for corporate capitalism as it is for adaptation studies.

One of the legacies of the tax-shelter era, for English-Canadian film at any rate, has been the regular casting of foreign actors in lead roles, often in films adapted from literature. Their star wattage is meant to attract investors, distribution markets and the general paying public in equal measure. However, one can argue that this system has also produced an internalized cultural cringe, a tendency to diminish, or discredit altogether, the work of talented Canadian co-stars, or to insist that stardom at home must first come from elsewhere. In this regard, I focus the second section of this essay upon what the English-Canadian film industry can learn by adapting elements of the Québécois star system, using my own fan identification with Roy Dupuis to comment on how star-gazing operates across media, genre and gender.

In the final section, I explore what credit we give to our affective responses to film. I examine various anti-normative affects that I see constituting a larger theory of post-AIDS queer spectatorship, and that I locate in a series of post-millennial shorts and medium-length features adapted from literature. In treating emotion as a negative supplement to the viewing experience, I posit parallels with adaptation as a process of necessary repudiation, and suggest that reading Canadian film via its encumbrances (be they monetary or moral) may yield surplus benefits. Across all three sections I am attempting to engage with the recent “sociological turn” in adaptation studies, leaving aside the comparative (inter)textual readings across different media (e.g., novel and film) that have long dominated fidelity criticism, to investigate some of the individual, institutional and community stakeholders in what Simone Murray, for one, has identified as the “cultural economy” of the “adaptation industry.”

YOUR TAX DOLLARS AT WORK

In 1974 two films opened within months of each other in this country that, in addition to deserving more widespread attention by contemporary critics and audiences, share notable affinities in terms of production context and narrative content. Both films are exemplary adaptations that also made spectacular use of their local Montreal settings, exuberantly celebrated the foibles of the ethnic and sexual minority communities upon which they focused, earned critical praise at the two leading European film festivals of the day, and even turned a profit. Both also contain within their plots a meta-theatrical climax that in retrospect we might read as a symbolic comment on a Canadian film industry then about to embark on a massive rethink of its identity.

Il était une fois dans l'est, André Brassard's amalgam of several of Michel Tremblay's "Belles-Soeurs" cycle of plays, about the demi-monde of drag queens, prostitutes and working-class Québécois in Montreal's east-end Plateau neighbourhood, opened in February, screened in competition for the Palme d'Or at Cannes, and subsequently played in select cities across France and even a handful of theatres in the United States, helping it to recoup its \$300,000 production costs.¹ But, for my purposes, the film is perhaps most notable for the scene in which the bitchy queen Sandra (André Montmorcency) engineers, at the club that bears her name, the humiliating downfall of her rival, Hosanna (Jean Archambault), by having her fellow drag ball competitors dress up in even more spectacular versions of the costume Hosanna is convinced will win her first prize at the event: Elizabeth Taylor—as-Cleopatra. In the play, Hosanna's climactic removal of this costume to stand naked before her boyfriend, Cuirette, is meant to signify a rejection of the cultural imperialism embedded within the false icons of Hollywood (Tremblay, qtd. in Anthony). However, as I have previously argued, the film's focus on identity can be seen to shift from a statement about national authenticity to an interrogation of gender and sexual ambivalence (Dickinson, *Screening* 116–117).² And it does so in a way that can be read as Brassard's ironic comment on how the direct cinema and documentary roots of Canadian filmmaking can be fused with Hollywood-style spectacle to create a hybrid aesthetic that might resonate with local *and* global audiences. That is, just as Brassard's anthology film allows him to bracket the frenzied Chez Sandra scenes with single-take close-ups of the shy young waitress Lise (Frédérique Collin) talking directly to the camera about her reasons for seeking an abortion, so does the proliferation of Cleopatras on screen visually reinforce for the viewer not just what Judith Butler has called the imitative structure and radical contingency of sexuality and gender, but also what Christian Metz has identified as the "doubled

imaginariness” of cinema, where we willingly collude in accepting the copy as what’s real (see Butler; Metz). In other words, Hollywood excess need not be embraced or rejected wholesale; it can be adapted to local filmmaking traditions, as Brassard’s own titular homage to Sergio Leone’s spaghetti western, *Once Upon a Time in the West*, attests.

Two months after *Il était*’s premiere, in April 1974, the film adaptation of Mordecai Richler’s *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* opened. Directed with a sure hand by Canadian expat and long-time Richler friend Ted Kotcheff (who had previously helmed a television adaptation of the same novel for the BBC in 1961), boasting an award-winning screenplay by Richler and Lionel Chetwynd, and with a breakthrough performance by a young Richard Dreyfuss as Duddy, the film was both a critical and a financial success, winning the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, scoring an Oscar nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay, landing a US distribution deal with Paramount and, taking into account inflation and other market differentials, going on to become “one of the highest grossing films in Canadian box office history” (McSorley 53). It also contains a mordantly hilarious pastiche of a nascent Canadian movie industry torn between commercial ambitions and artistic pretensions in the film-within-a-film that Duddy produces and screens as one of his get-rich-quick schemes. Duddy’s fledgling venture filming bar mitzvahs and Jewish weddings is based on what he thinks is sound business sense: reflecting back to audiences more exaggerated images of themselves. But in enlisting the dipsomaniacal John Friar (Denholm Elliott) as his director for their inaugural commission, the bar mitzvah of mentor Farber’s (Joe Silver) son Bernie (Barry Pascal), Duddy is hiring someone far more wedded, if not exactly up, to avant-garde traditions, with Friar’s Buñuellesque flourishes (shots of bloody circumcisions intercut with a montage of Zulu warriors and swallowed razor blades) clashing with Duddy’s more genre-oriented impulses towards classic insider ethnography. Despite this apparent impediment, Duddy appears to have hit upon a winning production model when the local rabbi (Jonathan Robinson) unexpectedly pronounces a rough cut of *Happy Bar-Mitzvah, Bernie!* a “work of art.” And yet, as Duddy soon discovers, there seems little point in aspiring to auteurist greatness in the first place (he dubs his company “Duddy Kane Enterprises”) if one fails to control both the means of production (the company fails after Friar absconds with their only camera) and a method of distribution (Duddy soon discovers he can make more money screening Hollywood features at summer hotels for the well-heeled). Better to write off the whole enterprise and resort to more straightforward fraud.

Which is arguably the scenario put in place the very next year, when the government announced new Capital Cost Allowance (CCA) provisions to Canada's income tax regulations, permitting private investors to deduct in one year, and against income from all sources, one hundred percent of their investment in "certified" Canadian features (Wise 19). The legislation was retroactive to November 1974, too late to be of help to the makers of *Il était* and *Apprenticeship*, but ripe for abuse by scores of filmmakers far more unscrupulous than Duddy. While, as Wyndham Wise and others have noted, tax-shelter financing for Canadian films had been in place since 1954, prior to 1975 there was no distinction made between domestic and foreign product investment (18). The CCA changed this, reducing foreign film investment write-offs from sixty to thirty percent, and tightening the rules about what constituted a certifiable Canadian film (to be eligible, films had to be at least seventy-five minutes long, have a producer and two-thirds of creative personnel who were Canadian and have at least seventy-five percent of the technical services performed in Canada). As a result, film production in this country skyrocketed from three features and a total budget expenditure of \$1.6 million in 1974 to sixty-six feature films and a total budget expenditure of \$172 million in 1979 (Morris and McIntosh). However, with no real industry infrastructure in place to support this volume of production (especially in terms of trying to compete head-to-head with Hollywood), or, more crucially, any enforceable distribution and exhibition policies to ensure that local audiences actually saw the films their tax dollars were helping to finance, what began as an attempt by the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) to lobby the government to help kick-start the film industry in this country eventually devolved into a de facto Ponzi scheme, with fly-by-night entrepreneurs with little knowledge of, or interest in, Canadian film getting banks and government agencies to advance money for movie ventures that were designed from the start to fail.

The "received wisdom" on the tax-shelter era is that it was a low-water mark in Canadian film history that is best forgotten, and from which the English-Canadian industry, at any rate, has never really recovered. As Richler himself puts it in a 1985 issue of *Cinema Canada* on the occasion of the release of the second Kotcheff-directed adaptation of one of his novels, *Joshua Then and Now*, "I think they squandered a grand opportunity and it's largely the fault of producers who were shameless and greedy, people of dismal taste, who were more interested in making deals than films and who made a lot of money for themselves. And so Canadian films do not enjoy a larger reputation anywhere and it's a pity ... a lot of damage has been done" (18).³ Yet, as Peter Urquhart

has argued in his important article “You Should Know Something—*Anything*—About This Movie,” to dismiss out of hand this period is also to elide the important early work of maverick young producers like Robert Lantos, Garth Drabinsky and Denis Héroux; to diminish the extent to which tax-shelter financing nurtured the directing careers of David Cronenberg and Ivan Reitman and Francis Mankiewicz and André Forcier; and to fail to acknowledge that amid all the dross there were in fact some important films made, many of them, as Urquhart contends, expressly political in their cultural commentary on Canada and Quebec, or, in terms of my own interests, adapted from works of literature and filled with all manner of complex gender and sexual politics.

In revisiting the tax-shelter era here I simply wish to suggest that a closer look at the top-grossing domestic films during the period alongside some of their box-office and critical competitors is to be presented with a somewhat more complicated picture of an industry that was as divided as Duddy and Friar about its future direction. The Golden Reel Award (presented annually to Canada’s top-earning film) is a particularly useful index in this regard. Consider, for example, the list of winners from 1976 (when the award was inaugurated) to 1983 (when the tax-shelter program effectively collapsed):

- 1976: *Lies My Father Told Me* (dir. Ján Kádar, based on the story by Ted Allan)
- 1977: *Why Shoot the Teacher?* (dir. Silvio Narizzano, based on the novel by Max Braithwaite)
- 1978: *Who Has Seen the Wind* (dir. Allan King, based on the novel by W. O. Mitchell)
- 1979: No Award
- 1980: *Meatballs* (dir. Ivan Reitman)
- 1981: *The Changeling* (dir. Peter Medak)
- 1982: *Heavy Metal* (dir. Gerald Potterton)
- 1983: *Porky’s* (dir. Bob Clark)

The first three films, I submit, are not necessarily exceptions that prove the rule about commercial genre films winning out against more idiosyncratic literary adaptations, or, as Urquhart puts it, the Griersonian tradition of cinematic nation-building being jettisoned, willy-nilly, for crass populism. Indeed, as Martin Knelman suggests at the close of his contemporaneously published *This Is Where We Came In*, when considered alongside other films from the same period, including Jean Beaudin’s *J. A. Martin, Photographe* and Richard

Benner's *Outrageous!* (based on a short story by Margaret Gibson), *Why Shoot the Teacher?* and *Who Has Seen the Wind* are actually evidence of a new maturity in Canadian filmmaking, one that is able to balance national particularity with more popular appeal: "We go to see these films, not as a patriotic duty, but because we want to see them. After decades of deprivation, is it possible that the dream of a movie mythology of our own has finally come to pass?" (170).

For a while the answer to Knelman's question appeared to be "yes." In 1978, for instance, George Kaczender's *In Praise of Older Women*, based on the Stephen Vicenzy roman-à-clef, was released, earning Lantos a small profit, in part because of a shrewd marketing campaign that played up the film's literate steaminess, with Tom Berenger, a randy Hungarian Oliver Mellors or Benjamin Braddock to successive Lady Chatterleys and Mrs. Robinsons played by Karen Black, Susan Strasberg and Helen Shaver (who also appeared in *Who Has Seen the Wind*). In addition, films like *The Silent Partner* (1978; dir. Daryl Duke), *Murder by Decree* (1979; dir. Bob Clark), *Cordélia* (1980; dir. Jean Beaudin, based on the novel by Pauline Cadieux), *Atlantic City* (1980; dir. Louis Malle), *Les Bons débarras* (1980; dir. Francis Mankiewicz, with a screenplay by novelist Réjean Ducharme), *Tribute* (1980; dir. Bob Clark, based on the play by Bernard Slade), *Ticket to Heaven* (1981; dir. Ralph Thomas, based on the novel by Josh Freed), *Les Plouffe* (1981; dir. Gilles Carle, based on the novel by Roger Lémelin) and *The Grey Fox* (1982; dir. Philip Borsos) were all made between 1978 and 1982, and were all modest successes critically and commercially, nationally and internationally. This would seem to indicate that the dividing line of 1979—when the Canadian Film Awards were undergoing a rebranding that would see them re-emerge the following year as the Genies—was not necessarily an uncrossable Rubicon, and that Canadian auteurism could co-exist alongside more conventional genre fare. However, 1979 also saw the release of *Meatballs*. Made for \$1.6 million, and adapting the same sight gags and gross-out humour Reitman used in *Animal House*, the film went on to make more than \$43 million at the box office.⁴ Combined with a shift in management at the CFDC that saw National Film Board stalwart Michael Spencer replaced by Michael McCabe, a career bureaucrat with a background in investment marketing, the "interests" of Canadian film shifted markedly in the direction of the nakedly commercial (Wise 21). This culminated in the phenomenon that was *Porky's*, the highest-grossing Canadian film of all time, and one that saw director Bob Clark, who had previously helmed the critically lauded *Murder by Decree* and *Tribute*, do what appeared to be a complete volte-face in terms of his

earlier “literary” pretensions.

However, the co-existence of quality and commercial interests in Canadian filmmaking might yet have continued had not, during the same 1978–79 period, the federal government abandoned what was to be its final attempt for a decade of tackling the problem of domestic distribution and exhibition. As a result of intense lobbying from the Motion Picture Export Association of America and what Sandra Gathercole suggests was outright “sabotage” on the part of then finance minister Jean Chrétien, the governing Liberals abandoned a plan created by Secretary of State John Roberts that would have seen the voluntary (and basically unenforceable) quota system set up by his predecessor, Hugh Faulkner, with movie theatre chains Famous Players and Odeon replaced with a ten percent tax on distribution revenues for foreign companies in the Canadian marketplace, along with potential rebates aimed at functioning as a de facto quota system for getting Canadian films onto local multiplex screens (Gathercole, “The Best” 38–39). On top of this, Chrétien amended the CCA legislation to deny tax credits to certifiable films covered by some other form of cost recovery “guarantee” (Wise 20). An independently negotiated distribution deal was interpreted as one such guarantee.

The list of Golden Reel Award winners post-1984 points to another important internal industry division: Quebec consistently out-performs English Canada at the box office. In 2006 French-language films accounted for 17.1 percent of the total Canadian box-office market, earning \$22 million; English-Canadian films accounted only for 1.7 percent, earning \$12 million. This breakdown is illustrated even more starkly when one considers that the bilingual *Bon Cop, Bad Cop*, released the same year, earned \$10.6 million in Quebec to just over \$1 million in the rest of Canada (Téléfilm Canada). While Quebec box-office revenues did fall by almost half in 2008, ceding the 2009 Golden Reel Award to Paul Gross’s *Passchendaele*, its total box office is still “about 10 times the share held by domestic English-language features across Canada” (Yakabuski R1–2).

It was only in the 1980s, following the collapse of the tax-shelter boom, and in the wake of the CFDC’s morphing into Téléfilm, that our government introduced new policies aimed at trying to coordinate production, distribution and exhibition. These included the creation of the Feature Film Fund in 1986, followed two years later by a Feature Film Distribution Fund and a more comprehensive Film Distribution Policy. This policy addressed issues of foreign takeover and proprietary distribution, but once again failed to introduce any sort of quota and levy system of the sort that has been in place in virtually every extra-US film producing country in the world since the heyday of the

Hollywood studio system, and that has seen countries like France, Italy and Sweden, for example, consistently maintain a sizeable domestic share of total box-office grosses, while simultaneously exporting to the rest of the world masterworks of cinema by Truffaut, Fellini, Bergman and others. Instead, the Mulroney government, in the lead-up to NAFTA, again bowed to American pressure, squandering this country's last real chance at effecting policy change in distribution. Gathercole, writing in 1976 on behalf of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers (which issued its famous "Winnipeg Manifesto" in 1973), presciently sums up the opportunity that was lost:

One hundred and four countries discriminate against Hollywood films—usually in the form of quota restrictions on exhibition and a tax or levy on American box office revenues. Canada is not among the 104 countries, but remains the only film producing country without any form of protection for its own films, in their own market.... A quota would ensure that Canadian films were shown in Canadian theatres not just in major cities, but across the country and the people who had invested in them—the Canadian taxpayers—would at least have the choice of whether or not to see their investment. A levy would compensate for the low ration of return which afflicts those few Canadian films that are shown.... By ensuring a return 'off the top' on film earnings, a levy also dramatically increases a film's chance of paying back its investment and thus attracting new private investment for future production. ("Statement" 364, 367)

Which brings me, briefly, to the 2008 controversy around Bill C-10 and the attempts by the governing Conservatives to introduce standards of decency into the financial equations of the CPTC program that replaced the CCA in 1995. According to the amendments proposed by the Tories, the new legislation would have allowed an appointed government committee to cancel tax credits *after the fact* for film and television productions deemed to be offensive or not in the public interest. Never mind that such a system would duplicate the gate-keeping mechanisms already ceded to federally funded agencies like Téléfilm and various provincial certification and censor boards; or that such a policy likely would have scuttled some of this country's most acclaimed literature-to-film adaptations, including *Kissed* (necrophilia), *The Sweet Hereafter* (sexual abuse and incest) and *Crash* (omni-sexual car crash fetishists); or even that, in various guises, this proposal dates back to Sheila Copps's tenure as Heritage Minister. The real issue was that the legislation could be *retroactively* applied to deny credits to films that had *already* been approved for public

funding. In the absence of a distribution system in this country with any teeth, whereby private investors might at least be assured of a shot at earning back a portion of their financial outlay, such a policy would, in the words of *Maclean's* columnist Brian D. Johnson, amount to double jeopardy for filmmakers, meaning that “risky” projects like *Young People Fucking* (the film that got the most mileage out of the Bill C-10 controversy) might never get made, let alone seen. If that isn't censorship, I don't know what is.

Ironically, the controversy surrounding *Young People Fucking* resulted in an unexpected boost to its box office and a better distribution deal for the film. Originally scheduled for limited release in Canada in February 2008, the production company Maple Pictures inked a deal with Christal Films that instead saw the film rolled out in wide release across Canada and Quebec in mid-June, with opening weekend grosses of just over \$100,000, making it the eleventh most popular film in Canada for the weekend ending 13 June. It remained among the top twenty most popular films for the next three weeks.⁵ The film also opened in limited release in the United States, still rare for Canadian features. However, this is the exception rather than the norm. Consider, in this regard, the fate of another film released in the spring of 2008, this one Paolo Barzman's adaptation of Matt Cohen's novel *Emotional Arithmetic*. Produced by the experienced and pedigreed Triptych Media, boasting an all-star cast that included Susan Sarandon, Gabriel Byrne, Max Von Sydow, Christopher Plummer and Roy Dupuis, and with stunning visuals from *Away from Her* and *The Saddest Music in the World* cinematographer Luc Montpellier, the film received a glitzy premiere as the closing film at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) the previous fall. Despite these selling points, and despite having a script with a far more nuanced take on cultural memory and the Holocaust than the film that opened the 2007 TIFF, Jeremy Podeswa's adaptation of Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, *Emotional Arithmetic* played for one weekend in April of 2008 in select theatres across Canada, and then more or less disappeared.

BEING AT HOME WITH ROY DUPUIS⁶

Of course, *Emotional Arithmetic* is representative of another tradition in Canadian film and television that is as much a legacy of the tax-shelter era as Canadian cities masquerading as American ones: the presence of foreign, again usually (though certainly not always) American, actors in our English-language movies, many of them adapted from cherished works of literature. Taxonomizing this phenomenon by author, auteur and actor yields some interesting patterns and connections. Consider, for example, the American

mensches that have become a staple of Richler adaptations, working backwards, most recently, from the casting of Paul Giamatti and Dustin Hoffman in Robert Lantos's production of *Barney's Version* (2010), Elliott Gould as Uncle Abe in the television adaptation of *St. Urbain's Horseman* (2007), Gary Busey in *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* (1999), James Woods and Alan Arkin in *Joshua Then and Now* (1985), and Richard Dreyfuss, Jack Warden and Randy Quaid in *Duddy* (1974). But for the presence of Micheline Lanctôt in the latter film, one could be forgiven for thinking we were in the Lower East-side of Manhattan rather than the east end of Montreal.⁷ Woods, of course, has also worked alongside Blondie singer Debbie Harry in Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), whose early stunt casting of the late American porn star Marilyn Chambers in *Rabid* (1977) has steadily been superseded by an ever-increasing roster of A-list stars from the US and UK, including Jeff Goldblum and Geena Davis in *The Fly* (1986); Jeremy Irons in *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *M. Butterfly* (1993); Peter Weller, Roy Scheider, Judy Davis and Ian Holm in *Naked Lunch* (1991); James Spader and Holly Hunter in *Crash* (1996); Jude Law and Jennifer Jason Leigh in *eXistenZ* (1999); Ralph Fiennes, Gabriel Byrne and Miranda Richardson in *Spider* (2002); and Viggo Mortensen in *A History of Violence* (2005), *Eastern Promises* (2007) and—alongside Michael Fassbender and Keira Knightley—*A Dangerous Method* (2011). Finally, Miranda Richardson's Canadian film career is also worth noting, if only because her roles have all been in literary adaptations: as Sarah Maloney in Anna Benson Gyles's *Swann* (1996, based on the novel by Carol Shields), Miss Fowl in George Bloomfield's *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* (1999, based on the book by Richler), Yvonne/Mrs. Cleg in Cronenberg's *Spider* (2002, based on the novel by Patrick McGrath), and Mary Field in Scott Smith's *Falling Angels* (2003, based on the novel by Barbara Gowdy).

But why single out Richardson in *Falling Angels* and not the exemplary work of her Canadian co-star, Callum Keith Rennie? Richardson, Brenda Fricker and Michael Ontkean may have been the leads, but it was Canadians John Neville (as Cruzzi) and David Cubitt (as Brownie) who did the best work in the otherwise lamentable *Swann*. Why did *The Republic of Love* (2003; dir. Deepa Mehta), another adaptation of a Carol Shields novel, not make Bruce Greenwood a romantic superstar in this country? For the same reason we remember Christopher Plummer as Baron von Trapp in *The Sound of Music*, Mike Wallace in *The Insider* and the belated gay dad, Hal Fields, in *Beginners* (2010), rather than as the cross-dressing bank robber Harry Reikle in *The Silent Partner*, or as the detective investigating the cult murder of Karen Black in *The Pyx* (1973; dir. Harvey Hart). As with our meagre box-office

returns, stardom and celebrity only signify in English Canada when measured by Hollywood standards, something expressly thematized by *Degrassi* creator Linda Schuyler in her latest TV series, *The L.A. Complex*, about a group of aspiring Canadian expats trying to make it in Lotusland. Thus, while the presence of foreign stars in Canadian-made films speaks in part to our historical reliance on co-productions, it speaks as well to a concomitant exodus of talent south of the border, one that began with Mary Pickford and Norma Shearer, and that has continued steadily through to Ellen Page, Michael Cera and Seth Rogen.

From star-making performances like Pickford's in D. W. Griffith's *The Necklace* (1909; based on the story by Guy de Maupassant) to the casting of established box office draws like Shearer in prestige adaptations such as George Cukor's take on Claire Booth Luce's *The Women*, Hollywood has long used star personae (and often those attached to stealth Canadians) as a way of negotiating between the twin poles—and pulls—of (literary) authorship and (filmic) auteurship. Canadian and Québécois film is no different: think of how Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed*, based on a Gowdy short story, made a breakthrough star of Molly Parker; or think of the complex of expectations and identifications that swirled around Geneviève Bujold, newly apotheosized in Hollywood for her Oscar-nominated turn in *Anne of a Thousand Days*, when it was announced that she was to be cast as Elisabeth d'Aulnières in Claude Jutra's adaptation of Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*. At the same time, these two examples speak to an important difference in English Canada's and Quebec's relationships with celebrity: Bujold could in some senses afford to turn her back on Hollywood, knowing she could maintain a relatively robust career in Quebec; however, romping to box office success opposite the closest thing English Canada has to a name-brand leading man, Paul Gross, in *Men with Brooms* (2002) has not been enough to prevent Parker, like Greenwood, from continuing to chase TV roles in the United States. These differences cannot be explained away in terms of language, or geography, or the rest of Canada's animus towards the Toronto entertainment mafia (although such factors do complicate the English-Canadian celebrity scene). Rather, in this second section of my essay, I want to suggest that English Canada can learn a thing or two from Quebec's hothouse star system, and I want to focus on the career of Plummer's *Emotional Arithmetic* co-star, Roy Dupuis, to demonstrate this.

In so doing, I want to acknowledge at the outset my debt to a feminist and queer film studies tradition that takes seriously fan culture and the notion that star images circulate among and are productively engaged with by audiences as ideological texts of self-stylization and collective identification. If

we accept, following from Richard Dyer and Jackie Stacey, among others, that film stars can be read semiotically as clusters of signs that intersect with and communicate to spectators at given historical moments larger ideas and meanings about gender, race, sexuality, nationality and the like; and if we agree, moreover, that the phenomenon of celebrity that underpins the star system is in some fundamental way compensatory, speaking to various anxieties and/or voids in an individual's or a collective's social and psychic life, then how do we determine and interpret Dupuis' iconic star-making roles in film and television, as well as the equally various audience identifications they provoke? How, in turn, do those roles and identifications necessarily comment on the cultural/national nexus at the heart of an entertainment industry that has seen English Canada flummoxed by and Quebec flourish within a North American media universe saturated with American content? And how, finally, do those roles and identifications signify differently intra-nationally and internationally?

In addition to having a more robust film industry than its English-Canadian counterpart, Quebec's star system operates at a more fevered pitch, fuelled by television talk shows like *Toute le monde en parle*, and by celebrity gossip magazines like *Échos vedettes*, *7 Jours*, and *Star Système*—all owned by Pierre Péladeau *fil's* Québecor Inc (see Ross). Québecor also owns the tabloids *Le journal de Montréal* and *Le journal de Québec*; a chain of music stores; the television network TVA (upon which Julie Snyder established the standard for the outrageous celebrity interview on *Le Poing J*); the largest cable and Internet provider service in Quebec, Vidéotron; and a film distribution company, TVA Films. But media concentration is only part of the story here. Entertainment journalism and celebrity gossip in Quebec practically invented the concept of embedded reporting. Interviews with stars are authorized by publicists and producers in carefully managed situations that offer lots of Hollywood glitz but little substance or depth, and are more about promotion and general boosterism than serious news.

Thus, for example, Dupuis, who is notoriously media-shy, nevertheless submits regularly to the indignities of Quebec's publicity machine, tolerating a series of embarrassingly intimate and cloying questions about his sex life from reporter Michel Beauduin in a November 2002 issue of *7 Jours* in exchange for a plug for his upcoming movie, *Séraphin* (based, of course, on the Claude-Henri Grignon's novel *Un homme et son péché*). And for his at that time unprecedented second appearance on *Toute le monde en parle* in October 2005 to promote his new film *Maurice Richard*, Dupuis gamely sang along with the audience to Pierre Letourneau's popular 1999 song about The Rocket, put

up with host Guy Lepage and sidekick Dany Turcotte's bad jokes, and participated in a Richard trivia contest with the film's screenwriter, Ken Scott.

Modelled on the French program of the same name hosted by Thierry Ardisson, *Tout le monde en parle* has, since its premiere in 2004, become a staple of Quebec's celebrity diet, and an unavoidable stop for entertainment, sports and political personalities of all persuasions. Its popularity points to the fact that it is the medium of television, even more than cinema, through which Québécois invest collectively in the representation and reproduction of a national-cultural imaginary, and—as importantly—in the homegrown stars who bring it to life on the small screen. Statistical evidence shows that whereas Québécois have no qualms about shelling out twelve dollars or more to see dubbed Hollywood blockbusters, since the broadcast of the first *téléroman*, *La Famille Plouffe*, on Radio-Canada in 1953, they have consistently shunned dubbed American television shows in favour of locally produced French-language ones (see Nguyễn-Duy; and Tchoungi). Shows are made quickly and relatively cheaply, drawing on a deep pool of writing, directing and acting talent, and are broadcast across the province at the same time each week, creating a sense of “eventness” that contributes to a swelling of audience numbers. Stars who ignore this kind of exposure, or who dismiss the medium as lowbrow, do so at their own peril, and it is no accident that Dupuis has regularly taken on television roles throughout his career, nor that his performance in the hugely popular *Les Filles de Caleb* in effect made that career.

The recent success of the talk-show and sitcom formats notwithstanding, the television dramatic serial retains a special place in the history of Quebec popular culture. Thus it was that Dupuis was plucked from relative obscurity in 1990 and cast in *Les Filles de Caleb* as Ovila Pronovost, the brooding love interest of the show's willful protagonist, Emilie Bourdeleau. At that time the highest-rated series in Quebec TV history, *Les Filles* instantly cemented Dupuis' celebrity status, not least for the way in which, as Bill Marshall has noted, his role as Ovila, the often shirtless woodsman who works hard and loves even harder, consciously traded on various natural and “naturalized” codes of masculine and national authenticity (see Marshall). Dupuis has since gone on to star in several other Quebec-made TV series—including *Scoop* and *Le dernière chapitre*—and subsequently achieved even greater cross-Canadian and international stardom when he was cast as taciturn counter-terrorist operative Michael in the English-language series *Nikita*. But it was arguably *Les Filles* that established his star image both within and without Quebec.

With *Les Filles* we also see how genre is crucially implicated in the structure

of address mediating the reception of Dupuis as a star in Quebec. The spectacular success of the *Les Boys* franchise, as well as films like *Ding et dong*, or anything starring, written or directed by Michel Côté or Patrick Huard (including the aforementioned *Bon Cop, Bad Cop* and *Les 3 P'tits Cochons*), suggests Quebec audiences have an affinity for lowbrow comedy, or what André Loiselle, in a 1999 essay, has bluntly called stupid films. However, in terms of what Marcia Landy has identified as the “cinematic uses of the past,” the heritage film, or historical costume drama, also holds a special resonance within the Québécois national-cultural imaginary, its “transtemporality,” in the words of Marshall (55), that is, the doubled backward and forward movement of its narrative time and the time of its narration, establishing at once a nice myth of origins and the historical continuity of a core connection to place that underscores that myth. In other words, we look at Dupuis in buckskin or beaver pelts, and we are invited to identify with him not just as movie star, but as a *gen de souche*. Is it any wonder, then, that Dupuis, along with countless other Quebec film stars, has continued to don period dress throughout his career?

The biopic is as important in terms of illustrating how film genres participate in transtemporal relays between past and present, performer and role, on-screen spectacle and off-screen historical reality. And it is no accident that Dupuis has recently solidified his celebrity status in Quebec and Canada via his starring role in Charles Binamé's *Maurice Richard*, portraying a national icon whose professional successes and personal struggles were clearly meant to read as mirroring Quebec's collective throwing off of decades of national and religious repression in the years before the Quiet Revolution. (Dupuis' star turn as Roméo Dallaire, commander of United Nations forces in Rwanda at the time of the 1994 genocide, in Roger Spottiswoode's *Shake Hands with the Devil* [2007], arguably served a similar function for Québécois audiences split over Canada's combat role in Afghanistan.) Hollywood biopics of late have largely become exercises in actorly mimicry, and while Dupuis successfully avoids this trap in his performance as *The Rocket*, the publicity machines surrounding the film certainly traded on a certain identificatory slippage in Quebec audiences' connections to the overlapping star personae attending the screen image, a signifying chain that we can map along a continuum as performer–role–historical subject–national/cultural icon. That is, filmmakers were no doubt counting on audiences' de facto identification with Dupuis in the role. For Binamé's film is the third time Dupuis has played *The Rocket* on screen, having previously starred in Jean-Claude Lord's 1999 TV mini-series, as well as a 1997 Heritage Minute about the hockey icon.

To sum up the lessons for English Canada: George Strombouloupoulos needs a better time-slot and a sexually ambiguous sidekick; CTV needs to realize that the multi-tasking Ben Mulroney is no Ryan Seacrest, and should give more screen time to Canada's own Perez Hilton, Lainey Lui. Paul Gross should return to television, but without the Shakespearean entourage and preferably not dressed as a Mountie. Indeed, he should be mostly undressed. I see him in something that channels David Duchovny in *Californication* and/or Gabriel Byrne in *In Treatment*. Historical drama in English-Canadian television programming has too often been code for regionalist representation and earnest accuracy. We need instead to build on the successful model of co-productions like *The Tudors* and *The Borgias*. To this end, I recommend another take on Louis Riel, this time based on Chester Brown's acclaimed graphic novel, and playing up both the "bromance" with Gabriel Dumont and the madman/drunken demagogue parallels with Sir John A.

DANGEROUS DESIRES, OR, SHORT CUTS TO VISUAL PLEASURE

To a certain extent gender and sexual address overwrite national iconicity in the production of Dupuis as an (ex)portable object of desire who provides English-Canadian and transnational audiences alike with a reassuring fix on classic Québécois masculinity. That so many of Dupuis' roles are available for queer consumption and resignification has much to do with the fact that he famously starred (and got naked) in a film in the 1990s that was absorbed into the New Queer Cinema pantheon even as its resolutely Québécois plot—not to mention technical accomplishment—resisted the dominant politics and aesthetics of that cinema. The spectacular success of *Being at Home with Claude* on the international film festival circuit, including the international queer film festival circuit, combined with Dupuis' career willingness to tackle other queer-inflected roles (from his first film role as the tortured kid from the sticks in love with his best friend in Michel Langlois' *Sortie 234* [1988], through to the wayward son, Alex, who disrupts everyone's—male and female—emotional and sexual equilibrium in Langlois' *Cap Tourmente* [1992], and the bankrupt straight architect Dominique who pretends to be a gay antiques dealer in order to rescue his business opposite Patrick Huard in Claude Fournier's lamentable *J'en Suis* [1997]), necessarily adds another identificatory layer to his star image. Indeed, let me hazard to say, in making the transition here to the final section of my essay, that there is a definite connection to be made between "playing gay," film adaptations of literature, and different audiences' identification—including over-identification—with actor and role.

Part of this has to do with a queer cinematic public sphere that is still, *Boys Don't Cry* and *Brokeback, Milk* and *Monster* notwithstanding, relatively starved of images of same-sex desire (at least ones that don't end in violent death), and that must consequently continue to experience the act of spectatorship as a process of seeing double, of looking both at and beyond the screen. And that has likewise had to look to other media, including literature, as representational (re)sources. To go only as far back as *Being at Home*, we can see how, for example, the New Queer Cinema, in its unapologetic representation of gay male desire as a kind of negative supplement to bourgeois heterosexuality, frequently used works of literature as source material (Gus Van Sant's *Mala Noche* [1985] and *My Own Private Idaho* [1991]; Todd Haynes's *Poison* [1991]; Derek Jarman's *Edward II* [1991]; Todd Verow's *Frisk* [1995]). As well, in drawing inspiration from earlier gay filmmakers as diverse as Anger, Fassbinder, Pasolini, Visconti and Warhol, these and other NQC directors employed a self-consciously "literary" style in repeatedly depicting scenes of queer abjection, degradation, voyeurism and boredom. Would that this trend had continued. While many films with queer content that play the festival circuit and that, on occasion, are released in mainstream theatres, continue to be adaptations, broadly defined, they generally fall into one of three categories: the coming-out film, the historical epic or the sex farce. Most, I would argue, buy into a model of fidelity that extends far beyond the inter- and extra-textual relays that constitute the process of narrative transposition from one medium to another; by and large, they also reproduce a representational politics of gender and sexuality that is more respectful than recreant, more apologist than apostate, more ingenuous than inimical towards the regulatory regimes of heteronormativity. To state this more plainly, it seems to me that what such films are intent on showing, in their "sensitive" treatment of their source texts, is that queer people are just like straight people, and that the proof of this is that we do family melodrama, doomed romance and gross-out jokes just as well as Hollywood. In this system, a film like *Brokeback Mountain*, for example, gets read as a love story, *tout court*, rather than as a *gay* love story—until, that is, Oscar time. But I digress ...

In this concluding section to my essay, I want to focus very briefly on three post-millennial films that are exceptions to this rule, and that seem, in style and tone, to hark back to some of the darker representational concerns of the New Queer Cinema: *Touch* (Jeremy Podeswa, 2001); *Sugar* (John Palmer, 2004); and *Bugcrush* (Carter Smith, 2006). All three films toured the queer and independent film festival circuits to acclaim. All three films are based on stories by queer Canadian writers/artists: Patrick Roscoe, Bruce LaBruce and

Scott Treleven (the latter two themselves important queer filmmakers with roots in the DIY homocore scene in Toronto). Finally, all three films focus on shy, disaffected or alienated male teenagers and the dangerous older boys or men to whom they are attracted or psychologically bound. Through a comparison of the films I hope to show how the frequently disturbing images of queer desire they offer up challenge some of the received orthodoxies of mainstream gay and lesbian cinematic representation, producing what it only seems right to call a new genre, *the anti-coming-out film*.

First, a quick summary of the films. Winner of the Best Short Film Award at the 2002 New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Podeswa's *Touch* is anchored by the haunting central performance of Brendan Fletcher as Richard, a teenager who, after years of confinement and abuse at the hands of a mysterious older man whom he has come to regard as his lover, struggles to adjust to the dailiness of high school and life with foster parents, seeking out instead trace signs of the hard and painful love he craves in the bruises left behind by the tricks he turns downtown. Distinguished by its restless handheld camerawork, extreme close-ups, strategic play of light and shadow, and mournful score by Daniel Janke, the thirty-minute film also eschews dialogue in favour of voice-over narration that reproduces much of the poetic interiority of Roscoe's prose in "My Lover's Touch."

There is no such poetry in the raw, raunchy and collagist series of linked autobiographical stories published between 1985 and 1991 by writer, filmmaker and professional provocateur Bruce LaBruce in the queer punk zine *J.D.s* that he also helped to found. Together the stories form the basis for *Sugar*, Palmer and co-screenwriter Todd Klinck's only slightly more sanitized version of the story of a suburban gay teenager, Cliff (Andre Noble), who on his eighteenth birthday ventures downtown to get laid. There he meets Butch (Brendan Fehr), an older hustler who takes Cliff under his wing, introducing him to, but also protecting him from, the excesses of his world of prostitution and drugs. However, an increasingly strung-out Butch, who has so far refused to sleep with the besotted Cliff, betrays the latter's trust by conscripting Cliff into performing a sex act for the voyeuristic pleasure of one of Butch's clients. Soon afterwards Butch dies, and this marks, as well, the loss of Cliff's licit, object-oriented self—an embracing of the homosexual's abject, outcast state that is signalled syntagmatically in the film via the scene of toilet sex that follows Butch's funeral. *Sugar* won the Best Canadian Film Award at the 2004 Toronto Inside Out Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival, and is also notable for the fact that its star, Noble, died shortly after the film was released as a result of an accidental poisoning on a camping trip.

A member, like LaBruce, of Toronto's queercore scene (he edited *This is the Salvation Army* from 1996 to 1999), Scott Treleaven published his story "Bugcrush" in a 2002 anthology of "gay horror fiction" edited by Michael Rowe. At once a striking take on Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and the horrors of high school more generally, the story was turned into a short film by photographer Carter Smith that played the festival circuit in 2006, most notably scooping up the Short Filmmaking Award at Sundance. The film centres on teenager Ben's (John Barclay Caras) obsession with his classmate Grant (Donald Eric Cumming), a sexy delinquent whom Ben repeatedly observes disappearing into the forest with two creepy Columbinesque buddies who wear the same odd bug pendant as Grant. When, one evening after school, Grant and his pals ask Ben to drive them home, Ben discovers, too late of course, that the fulfilment of his crush will involve being literally bitten by a bug, this one a strange larval species that, once it pricks the skin, immobilizes its victim, but also provides intense pleasure, leading to a climax that, as with all great horror films (Carter Smith's included), is at once beyond representation and demands replication.

In adapting Treleaven's story, Smith demonstrates an intuitive grasp of the horror genre, using point of view shots, sound that seems to travel around corners with the camera, and especially the negative space of the black screen, to great effect. But even more daring is his—and Palmer's and Podeswa's—willingness to risk the *negative response* of his audiences by troping on the links between homosexual desire and disease, pain, torture, addiction and death. Rather than discussing in depth each film's exploration of these concerns, let me instead give an overview of the generic iconography that they share as anti-coming-out films.

First, in all three films parents or other substitute authority figures are either absent, ineffectual, or else, in the case of Cliff's loopy single mom Madge (Marnie MacPhail), benignly enabling of the hero's journey towards self-alienation rather than self-discovery.

Each film's narrative likewise unspools in a temporally suspended state. References are made to the protagonists' ages, to the regimented clock and calendar time of school and work, to past family episodes; but mostly we are presented with challenging and often painful durational portraits of queer adolescence where wanting is synonymous with waiting, and where any notion of a future filled with reward is discarded in favour of a continuous present that repeats the non-fulfilment of desire.

This characteristic of repetition without release is related to the way in which each film, as an example of the anti-coming-out genre, eschews the

standard structure of reflection, revelation and redemption. Secrecy and disclosure, knowing or not knowing, become secondary to the feelings or sensations—of attraction and repulsion—experienced by the characters *through* the repetition of their normatively anti-social behaviours, and by the viewers in watching, physically assimilating and judging those behaviours. In these films, then, Hollywood's winking epistemology of the closet is replaced by an ontology of the body that most certainly finds and leaves a mark. Thus, near the end of *Touch*, Richard asserts that he will know who among his tricks is his long-lost lover by the form and force of his blows.

Which leads me to my final point: in their clustering of a series of negative affects—shame, abjection and disgust chief among them—around the homosexual subject, these films are deliberately inciting in their viewers similar negative responses. They challenge us to remain disinterested in the objects and images we see before us on screen, forcing us to evaluate why we feel the way we do, and who else feels this way. In this way, the films are participating in a project of cultural analysis that resonates with recent work by theorists like Eve Sedgwick, Jonathan Dollimore, Ann Cvetkovich, Heather Love, David Halperin and Sianne Ngai. These critics are interested in how the group experience of what Ngai calls “ugly feelings” can paradoxically help to consolidate and collectivize sexual subcultures. This collectivization happens not from the knee-jerk, reverse analogical response of “we’re not really like that,” but rather from the more thoughtful—and painful—working through of the very intolerance of that response, a recognition that, as Ngai points out, a disgusted reaction demands the exclusion of the offending object (340–341).

And this, believe it or not, leads me back to adaptation, and specifically what we might call its “after-affects.” For adaptation, let me conclude by suggesting, is a process that involves a necessary disavowal of the idea of a faithful translation, a true copy. As such, it can be analyzed alongside a theory of post-AIDS queer spectatorship as a process of strategic, if not equally necessary, *disidentification* with dominant screen images. Disidentification, as defined by José Muñoz, involves “survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). In the case of film, this process requires a revision, in particular, of dominant Lacanian theories of phantasy that read the movie screen as mirror, through which we are made to (mis)identify with our screen surrogates, consequently feeling shame or self-disgust should we, as minority viewing subjects, experience interpellative processes of similitude as alienating and estranging. If instead we develop a theory of spectatorship

that, like a post-fidelity model of adaptation, rejects mimesis for a more complex blend of mimicry and remediation, then we can analyze such negative affects as symptomatic of a process not of failed identification, but of tactical disassociation, a recognition that what might be a source of “uncanny likeness” for some is a source of “uncanny unlikeness” for others.⁸

Would that politicians in this country understood such questions. For an emphasis on profitability and accountability (both monetary and moral) in our film industry has yielded only negative returns. Taking my cue from governments the world over that continue to enact billion-dollar stimulus packages and rack up unprecedented deficits in order to ward off a global recession, let me thus perversely suggest the value in trading credits for debits in terms of the economics of a film’s production, the poetics of its adaptation and the politics of its reception. In all three systems, an initial outlay of investment can never fully guarantee the desired return, only the return of desire. Indeed, in the Canadian context, where intra-national box-office returns are almost always inversely proportional to the international acclaim bestowed upon our films, and the dangerous desires represented within them, negativity can be read as a form of surplus accreditation akin to what we experience when we think a favourite book has been bowdlerized in being brought to the screen. Examining that deficit of positive feeling is what’s most productive, I always tell my students. In film and literature, as in politics, it’s when our expectations are met and the books are balanced that we really should be worried.

NOTES

- 1 See the Internet Movie Database, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071649/business>> (consulted February 2009).
- 2 For a reading of how different productions of *Hosanna*, the play, have accomplished similar allegorical shifts, see Schwartzwald.
- 3 For equally grim assessments of the tax-shelter years, see Pratley; Magder; and Pevere and Dymond.
- 4 As listed on the Internet Movie Database, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079540/business>> (consulted February 2009).
- 5 As listed on the Tribute.ca website, <<http://www.tribute.ca/movies/BoxOffice.asp?id=16313>> (consulted February 2009).
- 6 Portions of this section have previously appeared in my article “Being at Home with Roy Dupuis and Pascale Bussières.”
- 7 McSorley (55) notes the nationalist ire raised over Kotcheff and Richler’s casting choices.

- 8 Here I am adapting Ann Pellegrini's application of Muñoz to the solo performance work of Anna Deveare Smith; see Pellegrini 78.

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