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MAGAZINE

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by Ian Rashid

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of Performance Duo

Shawna Dempsey and

Lorri Millan

Packaged For Export, Contents Under Pressure

*Canadian Film and Video in a
U.S. Context*

by **Laura U. Marks**



VOL. XVII NO. 1

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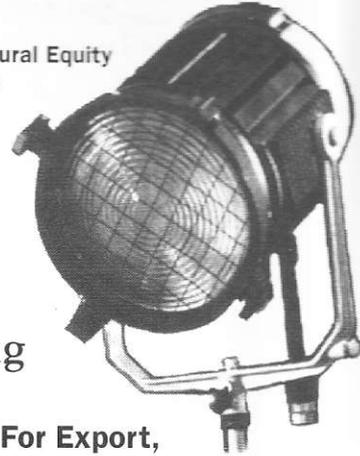
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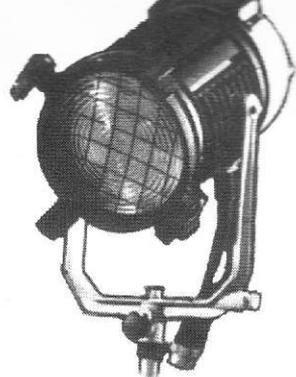
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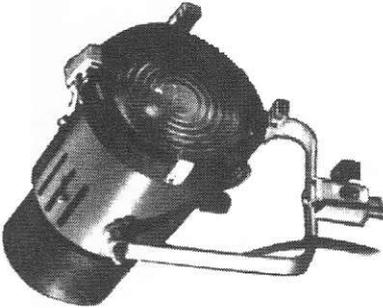
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Packaged For Export, Contents Under Pressure



Canadian Film and Video in a U.S. context



"IT LOOKS THE SAME, THERE'S JUST SOMETHING A LITTLE BIT...OFF," is what Americans say when visiting English-speaking Canada. What happens, I want to ask, when a Canadian image is presented in an American context? How do Canadian independent filmmakers cope with the representation of Canadian national identity? And how can media construct or demolish national identity? I want to suggest that when viewing artifacts of English-speaking Canada involves this little-bit-offness, it might be considered as an agent of political intervention. Aware that their work will be viewed in the culturally colonizing context of American exhibition, distribution and other support structures, Canadian media workers sometimes present images of Canada that both champion and dispute the notion of Canadian identity. By playing both sides of the coin, these artists are thus able to simultaneously assert and redefine national and local identities. At the same time, Canadian film/videomakers cross to and from the U.S. for recognition and support, and in these border crossings can also be seen to enact another aspect of their critical practice.

I want to look both at how Canadian independent filmmaking is perceived in the U.S. and how independent media represent Canada, with an eye to how these disguised and diffident packages of Canadian culture may become volatile in their reception in the U.S. This exploration is necessarily somewhat personal, because as a dual citizen of the U.S. and Canada I both identify with and fetishize Canadian nationality, and find that my insider-outsider relationship to Canada has informed an ongoing obsession with the breakdown of national borders and cultural boundaries.

The notion of Canadian national identity gets part of its resilience from the fact that "Canada" is a term that does not stagger under the burden of signification that "America" does, especially within the popular culture that permeates both countries. "Canada" has a more expansive quality, it is more open to interpretation and redefinition. Thus it is easier, in a way, for Canadian filmmakers to make a mark on, or a dent in, the national identity. In addition, this uneasiness with the notion of uniform national identity makes Canadians good at interrogating U.S. national identity: better than Americans are at doing it themselves.

Rather than attempt a survey, I've drawn selectively on work from English-speaking Canada, drawing on a series of interviews with Canadian film/videomakers who have had instructive experiences on both sides of the border: Helen Lee, John Greyson, Ardele Lister and Sara Diamond. It will not focus on work that represents Canada in terms of what (to outsiders as well as Canadians) is exotic about it, but at work that might "pass" as American. Canadian philosopher Robert Schwartzwald

writes, "as in the United States, the temptation has been to advance a national identity through the symbols of communities and peoples marginalized along the way, especially the continent's original peoples."¹ This temptation to specularize Canada in terms of its visibly exotic people must be avoided, largely because what this does is allow white power centres to continue to function, invisibly. Within Canada this invisibility functions to disguise power; but outside Canada it can work to subvert other invisible powers, Trojan Horse style. Canadian film, seen in the United States, can trouble the viewer's consciousness of American cultural and political centrality.

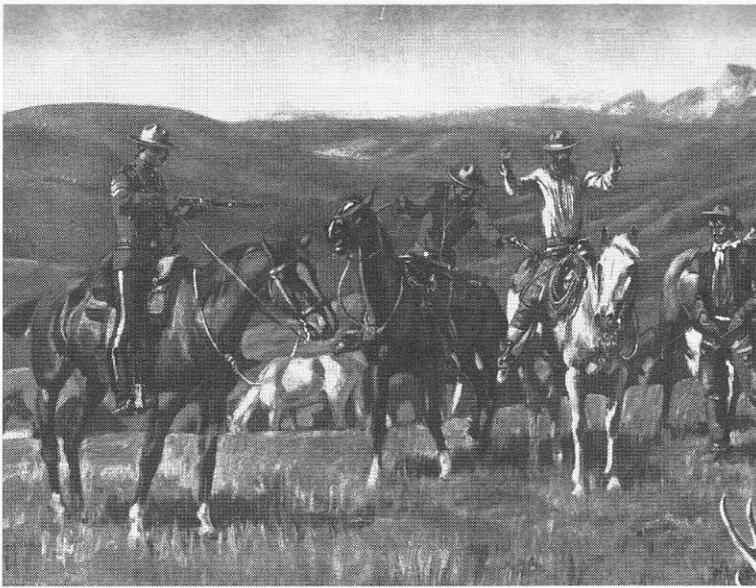
White Dawn, a short video by Kim Tomczak and Lisa Steele, speculates about how this little-bit-offness would look if the relations of cultural imperialism were reversed. It asks, what if all the American movies, TV shows, books and magazines got switched overnight for something that looked almost the same...but not quite? "It was like a dream I couldn't wake up from," says the narrator who has awakened in this doppelganger universe. "Everything was just...off." The narrator (a male figure with a female voice-over) realizes that s/he is in Canada. As books by Farley Mowat, Margaret Atwood and Robertson Davies wave across the screen, s/he complains: "These people are so dominating. They've made things, I don't know, so *familiar*. How come I know so much about Newfoundland, and Toronto?" Even with "American content" rules and stiff import taxes, dimly tiny proportions of "American" music, books, magazines and music make it onto local markets. Through this simple reversal, the tape suggests a way of turning the tables on U.S. cultural hegemony in order to supplant what is well known to U.S. viewers with something just a little bit different, and watch the productive confusion that results.

I got the run-around trying to rent *White Dawn* for a video series in Rochester, N.Y. recently because its U.S. distributor had stopped carrying it. This little problem is typical of the way Canadian independent media is viewed, or more accurately not viewed, in the United States. Canadian access to exhibition and distribution in the U.S. is abysmal, and this is perpetuated by patronizing American attitudes toward Canadian independents. Americans in the independent media scene tend to believe Canadian filmmakers are overfunded. A rare article on Canadian filmmaking in *American Film* in 1990, "They Always Get Their Film," conveys this and other misconceptions in its title-page spread that reads: "The Canadian government has sired [sic] a national cinema, but can a film industry survive when every taxpayer is a producer?"² The title, with its outlaw, Wild West reference, spreads over a production still in which samurai on horseback ride into a Rocky Mountains panorama: the connotations being that Canada is simultaneously vast wilderness, multicultural paradise and a place where the most outlandish funding proposals are nurtured to fruition.

While Winikoff's article supports the idea that government funding allows Canadian film to be more artful and complex than Hollywood product, it falls back on the notion that government funding impedes filmmakers from world-class achievement. "While a handful of those with international clout, like Norman Jewison and David Cronenberg, can make truly independent films, the vast majority—including those who've already taken home some major awards—are subsidized by the government." Winikoff's assumption is that commercial success is the result of individuals' ability to rise to the top. He ignores the fact that the industry is structured to ensure that virtually only Hollywood films make it into distribution and that independent production is seen as a training ground for Hollywood talent. American individualism is the lens through which this writer sees Canadian filmmakers as "making it" or not. At the same time, contradictorily, he seems to recognize that the (mythical) self-made filmmaker of the U.S. model somehow fails to achieve the aesthetically and intellectually rigorous standard upheld by the subsidized Canadians.

¹ Robert Schwartzwald, "an/other Canada. another Canada?, other Canadas," *The Massachusetts Review*, Spring–Summer 1990, p. 12.

² Kenneth Winikoff, "They Always Get Their Film," *American Film*, July 1990, pp. 26–30, 44–45.



Not only is the perception that Canadian media workers are rolling in lucre false, as we well know; it is also misleading to concentrate on the economics of production, in which it is true that —ignoring for the moment the economics of distribution that favour Americans in practically every way— Canadians do fare somewhat better than U.S. producers if they are willing to work within government funding guidelines. Of course, Hollywood utterly monopolizes the fare at the Cineplexes on both sides of the border, meaning that Canadian feature films do not have much theatrical exposure within Canada, let alone outside. While U.S. independents have a plausible chance of having their work shown on public television,

this opportunity is lacking for Canadians. But the exposure given to Canadian film by an article such as Winikoff's (who is a "Bronx-born...sometime playwright now living in Vancouver") perpetuates the notion that a free-market competition exists for filmmakers irrespective of national base.

Meanwhile, the advertising surrounding Winikoff's article in *American Film* is for Canadian film-production unions—the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), the Association of Canadian Film Craftspeople, and the British Columbia Council of Film Unions. Americans reading this article most likely have their eyes on Canada as a site for their own productions. Funnily enough, the background still of samurai riding into the sunset is from a film by Japanese director Haruki Kadokawa—evidence that the attraction to Canada for readers of this magazine may be more to Canada as raw material than to Canada as cultural site or cultural innovator. A sidebar article, "Luring Cameras to Kamloops," describes the joys of filming in B.C., Alberta (for westerns), and Toronto (for that urban look, at a fraction of the price). I don't want to make too much of this, but this combination of articles for American readers perpetuates the notions that Canadian film production is nurtured into somnolence, and that Canadian filmmaking is only interesting once it stands free of the crutch of government funding, but that Canada is pristine ground for American exploration! The subversive power of slight differences doesn't seem to amount to much when American movies shot in Canada go to pains to efface the difference. Filmmaker John Greyson jokes that whenever you see garbage on the street in Toronto, you know it's a "New York" film shoot.

What, then, is a more constructive notion of Canadian film that might be appropriate for export? A number of theorists and artists have argued that Canadian culture tends to be postmodern by virtue of its formation of a national identity in terms of its sense of otherness. In his 1985 manifesto, "The Cinema We Need," Bruce Elder argues that Canadian cinema is predisposed to be a postmodernist cinema.³ According to Elder, Canadian culture and philosophy never abandoned a premodern epistemology, one in which there persisted an intimate connection between humans and nature, rather than a radical separation. The epistemology kept us concerned with content, with narrative, with tangible links to the world around us. His thesis seems to be drawn from the sturdy old observation that Canadians have had to carve out a living in the inhospitable wilderness and hence have an intimacy with and respect for nature. So when the postmodern era rolled around, Canadian culture was in a position to embrace the otherness at its core because it never really left it.⁴

Elder's argument places Canadian (formalist, experimental) cinema nicely in the position of vanguard. However, he can only do this by perpetuating the frozen-North

³ Bruce Elder, "The Cinema We Need," *The Canadian Forum*, February 1985; reprint, *Documents in Canadian Film*, ed. Douglas Fetherling, (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1988), pp. 260–71.

⁴ This thesis, so popular among theorists of Canadian identity, sounds awfully similar to psychoanalytic theories of female identity. Girl children, because they identify with their mother, are never able to separate completely and form a coherent identity. Canada, according to such an argument, cannot enter modern culture because it cleaves to the Nature at the foundation of its identity.

image that has ceased to define Canada, except for the most uninformed outsiders. While conceptually, according to this argument, Canada nicely occupies the position of postmodern subject, it is only by virtue of being the "other" of a movement incubated somewhere else—Paris and L.A., not Vancouver, Toronto or Montreal. Elder's is a form of provincial postmodernism which does not accept that Canadians produce postmodernism, but only that Canada *is* postmodern. If we agree with Elder's argument, postmodernism would seem to inhere in Canadian culture not by choice but naturally, to bleed from our veins like maple sap. Geoff Pevere, an upstart on the Canadian film criticism scene when he joined the dialogue around Elder's essay, argued as much when he criticized Elder's imperious neglect of the role of the viewer in constructing the political efficacy of a film. Elder's manifesto, Pevere rails in proper in-your-face cross-generational fashion, promulgates "a view that seeks to establish a hierarchy of knowledge and privilege that exploits mystification as a necessary means of maintaining an imbalance of power between the exalted few that produce and comprehend art and the greater masses who do not. And, while we're at it, just what the fuck is 'art' anyway?"⁵

⁵ Geoff Pevere, "The Rites (and Wrongs) of the Elder or The Cinema We Got: The Critics We Need," in *Documents in Canadian Film*, p. 328.

⁶ Geoff Pevere, "An Outsider's Aesthetic: Contemporary Independent Film in Canada," *The Independent*, June 1987, pp. 13–18.

I would not go so far as Pevere in rejecting Elder's arguments for their aesthetic absolutism. I would, however, argue that Canadian cultures cannot be understood as postmodern without seeing the degree to which they are also postcolonial. Elder was right that the most successful works of independent Canadian cinema today are predisposed to a certain decentring quality. But this is not an effect of having to huddle against the raging north winds, at least not primarily. Rather, its cause is Canada's volatility in terms of cultural composition. The inherent otherness that Elder and others describe as making Canadian national identity more volatile, more prone to redefinition, is directly connected to the flow of new populations and subsequent processes of (second- and third-generation) hybridization. The "constants" of Canadian identity are as insubstantial as the cups of milky tea that are a postcolonial convention. Nevertheless, this latter motif impressed me profoundly as a adolescent immigrant from the States, discovering that her schoolmates, whose parents spoke Bengali, Chinese, Polish, or with a thick Scottish or Jamaican accent, all shared the custom of Red Rose and digestive biscuits in our identical Mississauga tract homes. It took me a while to realize that these lingering marks of empire were the constants of our shared culture, and that cultural imperialism indeed continued to play itself out in some of my friends' lives in decidedly less cozy ways.

Ultimately Pevere does fish the baby of Canadian subjectivity out of the bath water of formalist obfuscation, in a 1987 article in the U.S. magazine *The Independent*. Here Pevere's argument is reminiscent of Elder's emphasis on the Canadian as postmodern, focusing on the quality of alienation in Canadian independent cinema.⁶ This quality showed up in many works such as Atom Egoyan's *Next of Kin* (1984) and *Family Viewing* (1987), Patricia Gruben's *Low Visibility* (1984) and Bachar Chbib's *Evixion* (1987). "They demonstrate a critical awareness of how this exposure to the cultural products of an alien culture must necessarily lead to the chronic alienation from their own cultural context," Pevere



writes. "In other words, what this generation has achieved, and what simultaneously binds them to, and distinguishes them from, their predecessors, is a level of active auto-criticism of their inherited condition of cultural disaffection."⁷

This question of disaffection which is seen by Pevere and others as defining Canadian cultural practice, provides a structure for Ardele Lister's *See Under Canada Nationalism*, a tape that subtly deals with the notion that Canada is structured around a lack. I have a suspicion that *See Under* will always be seen as a work-in-progress, since its object, getting Canadians to define their nation, remains quite elusive. The tape is structured around a list of "Canadian" qualities that Lister uses to survey a variety of opinions and observations. Lister's interviewees are incapable of the windy generalizations of their American counterparts in her tape *Behold the Promised Land*. Instead, their terms are low-key and relative: "nice," "friendly," "not overly aggressive," "not as harsh as the U.S." Found footage is used in a manner which is similarly self-deprecating; the

voice-over accompanying a shot of bathers splashing in Georgian Bay asserts: "Canada was covered in ice for 20,000 years but has warmed up almost completely." The film, a '60s promotional film called *Helicopter Canada*, begins with the sound of yodeling. Yodeling? It is as though Canada can only image itself by association with other national traditions: and this in a film promoting tourism in Canada! Lister muses in the tape that "maybe Canada is one of the first post-modern countries. There's no metanarrative, or as Yeats said, the centre will not hold." Ironically enough, despite the difficult time her interviewees have with making generalizations about Canada, they come up with quite concrete reasons to

like their country, reasons such as gun control and socialized medicine.

Pevere's article captures a quality predominant in film works of the past decade. However, I would argue that the preoccupations of Canadian independent cinema, and the political agendas they support, have already shifted—as have the theoretical concerns with semiotics, psychoanalysis and feminism in film and media studies that Pevere rightly points out were ascendant "when this bunch [of filmmakers] would've been hitting the books." Now, it seems, as a result of work done in the last decade, the hot issues concern less a generalized alienation than an affirmation of local specificity. A useful maxim of '80s theory which still remains strong suggests that one cannot speak for others but may only represent one's own experience with any intimate authority. Many contemporary Canadian independent films define Canada precisely in terms of what it

⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

Top still from *Behold the Promised Land*, Ardele Lister (dir.), video, USA, 1991.

Below Patrick Tierney (l) and Berge Fazlian (r) in *Next of Kin*, Atom Egoyan (dir.), film, 1984.



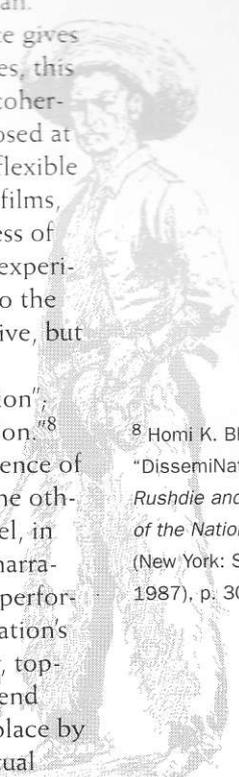
is not, focusing on regional or ethnic identity or local politics rather than by appealing to a generalized alienation. Most Canadian film/videomakers I have spoken to identify with a particular community before they identify their work as Canadian. Being part of a feminist, or Asian, or rural, or Queer or other specific experience gives one an identity more pressing than the abstractions of nationality. In many cases, this identity informs membership in a transnational community that threatens the coherence of national identity. This enables their work to dispute the identities imposed at national and international levels. What I want to argue is that Canada is more flexible with regard to such differences, indeed is even constituted by them. Canadian films, when they deal with national identity at all, *perform* it: there's a self-consciousness of the distance between the national symbols and one's personal and community experience. This is all to the good for the image of Canadian filmmaking, I believe, to the degree that the national image cannot be upheld as a pedagogy, a grand narrative, but is viable as performance.

The former is "the process of identity constituted by historical sedimentation"; the latter is "the loss of identity in the signifying process of cultural identification."⁸ A pedagogy of national identity insists in large terms, from above, on the existence of things that pull a nation together—flag, national anthem, common history. The other register in which national identity is (de)constructed is the performative level, in which individuals' daily actions elaborate, undermine, and redefine the grand narratives put in place by the pedagogical. The performative, dependent upon the "performances" of millions of individual actors, appears to be the means by which a nation's identity can get derailed or redirected. These two registers of national identity, top-down and bottom-up, work together like a scarf that's being knitted from one end and unraveled from the other. In one direction, the national identity is put in place by national holidays like Thanksgiving; in the other, it is reconstructed by the actual stuff people choose to put on their table.

Using Homi K. Bhabha's categories, I think it is possible to look at nations as differentially defined more in terms of the pedagogical or the performative. A nation with a well-defined national identity, such as the United States, is constantly involved in pedagogy, containing the disunity of its people in the unity of grand national narratives. By contrast, I would argue that the performative level of narrating national identity is more characteristic of Canadian self-definition, in which the nation as a whole is ill-defined precisely to the degree that groups within it are developing their own identities. Pedagogy situates the people of a nation as objects, receivers; the performative constitutes them more as subjects intervening in the definition of a nation. In short, the difference that makes Canada is in the details.

Relatedly, Schwartzwald refers to the notion of becoming as a seductive way to characterize Canadian national identity.⁹ The centre (of power, of cultural identity) is continually dissolved by the margins, by what it is becoming. And to the degree that in Canada the centre has never been fixed, except in terms of *what* it is becoming, national identity is fluid and volatile indeed. But it must be asked how much this volatility is the main thing going on, and how much it is a convenient screen for more stable powers. Transnational powers, for example.

Schwartzwald, a Canadian living and teaching in the States, suggests that two things characterize Canadian culture: simple envy, and the concomitant notion of "purity of origins," namely that Canadians, by virtue of being at the periphery of power of the United States, are innocent and free of evil (an attitude that Lister's interviewees seem to support). Both define Canadian culture in terms of a cycle of dependency. Schwartzwald argues that the way to get out of this relation is "neither by copying the discourses of others, nor by revaluing what is said but devalued within a discourse, but by excavating that which is repressed by relations of domi-



⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation," in *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*, ed. Timothy Brennan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 304.

⁹ Schwartzwald, p. 24.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 42.

¹² Michael Dorland, "The Shadow of Canadian Cinema: Bruce Elder's Immodest Proposal," in *Documents in Canadian Film*, p. 322.

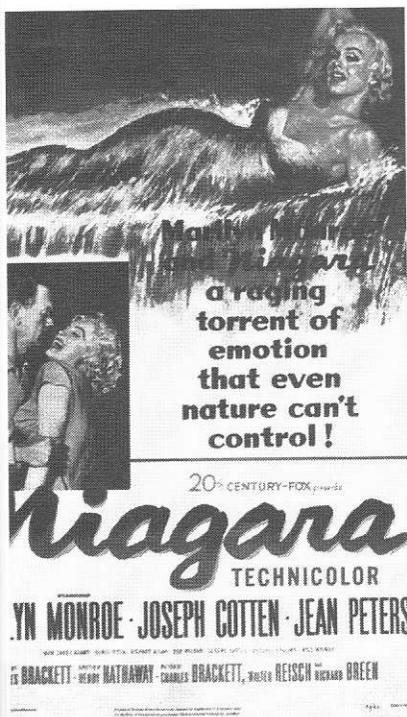
nance."¹⁰ In order to justify distinguishing ourselves from the homogeneous, apparently universal condition that the United States has created for itself (the hegemonic idea that the U.S. occupies such a universal position that it is not necessary to point to it), we have to justify our attachment to specific traditions. This is not "a simple rejection of universality...rather, it takes the form of an acceptance of the 'other' precisely in his difference, a defence of plural traditions, ethnicities and communities, that has been called a 'philosophical federalism.'"¹¹ The point is that particularity is what *defines* Canada, not in a contingent but in an absolute way.

Interestingly, the notion of Canadian identity as becoming which Schwartzwald pursues shows up in one of the most generous and productive readings of Elder's manifesto. Michael Dorland, who edited some of the Elder exchange in *Cinema Canada*, contrasts the angst about the disappearing subject fashionable in American cinema with "Canadian art [which] (as I read Elder) is a manifestation of the appearing subject-object as the dialectic between person, place and mind. His is a realism in which Canada is not a perpetual becoming or vanishing, but an integer."¹² Canadian identity understood as a ratio between disintegrating and coming into existence is an apt metaphor for the process of national self-creation. It offers a way for individual actions to be seen as part of the construction of nation. While it is easy to flirt with disintegration when you know you're at the stable centre—as is the tendency with American cultural production—when disappearance is a real risk, the acts by which identity is constructed take on more significance. The notion of Canada as becoming however avoids some of the negative construction of Canada as lacking and de-centred that these approaches loosely associated with postmodernism tend to share. Instead it ties into the much more productive idea of national identity as performed, an idea outlined above.

In addition to this difference between Canadian and American concepts of post-modern identity, there are somewhat more tangible reasons for Canadian disinterest in the wholesale disappearance of the subject, which came up in a conversation I had with videomaker Sara Diamond. Diamond points out (in an argument similar to Elder's) that the Baudrillardian influence still prevalent among U.S. video artists never took off in Canadian work. Baudrillard seems to have filled a gap for artists and theorists who want to critique the power of the image but have no faith in their ability to influence change. Hence the plethora, especially in the 1980s, of work by U.S. artists dealing with media appropriation and the illusory quality of representation. "Canadians' relation to media culture is different," says Diamond. "There have been public TV and public radio here for longer than in the U.S. We've been able to use and to trust the image a little more. Maybe Canadians have been less willing to buy into the notion that media constructs reality totally and insisted on placing media in an instrumental relationship to other forms of resistance."

In contrast, within Canada, Marxist traditions have continued to carry weight among artists. Because Marxist approaches have always had some currency in this country, while they were killed off for some time in the U.S., Canadian media work has been able to evolve formally while maintaining an interest in social content. As well, because media representation has not been so utterly bound up with consumer culture as it has in the U.S. there seems to be less despair that the image is irrevocably corrupted. The more integral relation of art to social content in Canadian video work, Diamond suggests, has to do both with intellectual traditions and with the material circumstances of media production in Canada. Consequently, there is a more integral relation of art to social content in Canadian video work.

Diamond's argument points to how it may be possible for artists such as those I describe here to continue to work politically while also interrogating representation, rather than having to choose one of the divergent paths of art or activism that seem



to characterize much independent video work in the States. "The division of labour between documentary, community-based work, and video art is very marked in the U.S. whereas they have never been completely separate in Canada.... People who did work like this in the States would have been marginalized—such as Martha Rosler, whose work would be typical here." Only recently, Diamond notes, have U.S. artists begun to collapse those categories, in work on AIDS and postcolonial issues. Diamond's comments suggest that the hot new American video work has an unacknowledged debt to ongoing explorations by Canadians.



Still from *My Niagara*, Helen Lee (dir.), film, 1992.

Helen Lee is a second-generation Korean Canadian who grew up in Toronto, studied film at New York University, and now, like other Canadian independents, has been moving back and forth between the two countries in order to do her work. Her 1992 film, *My Niagara*, both responds to American constructions of Canada and shows how "Canadian" identity is composed of specific local, regional, and ethnic identities and the conflicts among them. The film Lee's responds to is Hitchcock's *Niagara* (1963). In that film Marilyn Monroe plays one of several characters who, like many other Americans, makes it only as far into Canada as the title suggests; that is, only as far as the border city of Niagara Falls. Referencing and parodying *Niagara*, Lee's film fills the earlier film's bland, uniform image of Canada with a conflicted and multiple identity.¹³ *My Niagara* deals with the internal struggles of Asian communities in Canada. It interrogates Japanese racism toward Koreans, while also addressing the struggle to locate and maintain Japanese identity, never as a stable thing but always as a negotiation across borders. The film's emotional impact also has to do with cultural displacement; it is partly about the main character's struggle to figure out who she is when the person who embodied her cultural identity, namely her Japanese mother, is gone.

Lee says, "*My Niagara* is definitely set in Toronto for people who know Toronto. But I wanted it to be able to be read both ways, the character to be either Japanese Canadian or Japanese American. It's also a matter of political self-definition, of what it means to be Asian American or Asian Canadian.... It's a matter of dissolving boundaries, about collapsing categories, as much as about self definition." Lee uses Asianness as a category that crosses national boundaries, and her film's characters performatively establish the Canadian location as a permeable space.

Lister's *See Under Canada Nationalism* and its companion tape on American identity, *Behold the Promised Land* (1991) embody the difference between the broad-brushed rhetoric of American nationalism and the tentative demarcations of Canadianness. In *Behold the Promised Land*, Americans interviewed at Fourth of July picnics unselfconsciously mouth slogans about their national identity, such as the Brooklyn girl who defines the Fourth of July as "about independence. (Lister asks off-camera, 'Independence from what?') Benjamin Franklin and the government got together and signed a peace treaty ('With who?') with Abraham Lincoln...and that meant the slaves were free." Other Independence Day celebrants denounce welfare, extol Americans' freedom to work their way to the top, talk about defending their country, and otherwise have no trouble occupying the space created by nationalist rhetoric. Lister makes this alliance clear with footage culled from '50s educational films, which, for

¹³ The film may also be read as a collegial reference to Brenda Longfellow's *Our Marilyn* (1987) an experimental work about the alternative representation of femininity offered by Canadian long-distance swimmer Marilyn Bell.

Top still from *The Making of Monsters*, John Greyson (dir.), film, 1991. David Gardner (left) portrays Georg Lukacs as he fires Bertolt Brecht (the fish) while actor Joe (Lee MacDougall—far right) looks on. Photo: Guntar Kravis.

Below still from *Urinal*, John Greyson (dir.), film, 1989. Dorian Gray (Lance Eng) checks out his portrait.



all their Cold War hyperbole, reflect an attitude that is still alive and well among her contemporary interviewees.

These two tapes' different modes of expression correspond neatly to Bhabha's two ways of constructing national identity: the pedagogical and the performative. In Bhabha's pedagogy-performance model, can the little performances that constitute Canada insinuate themselves into the massive national fiction that constitutes the United States? And if such a subversion is possible, what politics does it serve?

Bhabha argues that the difference at the level of performance might, instead of being assimilated and neutralized, disrupt the commonsense nature of the performative. Lister's "Freedom from what?" for example, is a performative response that undermines the national pedagogy. That "little bit off" quality of Canadian images, seen from a U.S. perspective, is the detail that makes it possible to question the whole. The works I have been discussing perform the subversion of American identity by insinuating their differences into the national pedagogy of the U.S. Greyson's work, for example, which I will discuss in more detail below, is barely noticeable as Canadian, yet it is chock-full of references to specific locations in Toronto and Orillia, figures in Canadian media history from Claude Jutra to Barbara Frum, and specific Canadian products (like the white-chocolate mousse cake from Dufflet's Bakery on Queen Street in Toronto, featured in *The Making of Monsters*).

Given the superficial similarity between English-speaking Canadian media and U.S. media, it seems possible that a Canadian performative, as it "intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*,"¹⁴ could disrupt the American pedagogy. Within Canada, needless to say, middle-class urban dwellers of Anglo Saxon extraction occupy the power centre. But placed next to the more absolutely powerful—namely, the same sort of people in urban centres in the States—Canada's bland powerful can trouble that absoluteness.

Many Canadian filmmakers are not as sanguine as I am about the subversive potential of Canadian identity in American contexts. Greyson, for example, says that "Americans have an amazing tendency to assimilate Canadian work to American

experience. It's perceived as out-of-state work; I'd say we're seen as Midwestern. Canada doesn't exist as a national entity to the U.S. It's perceived as regionally other,

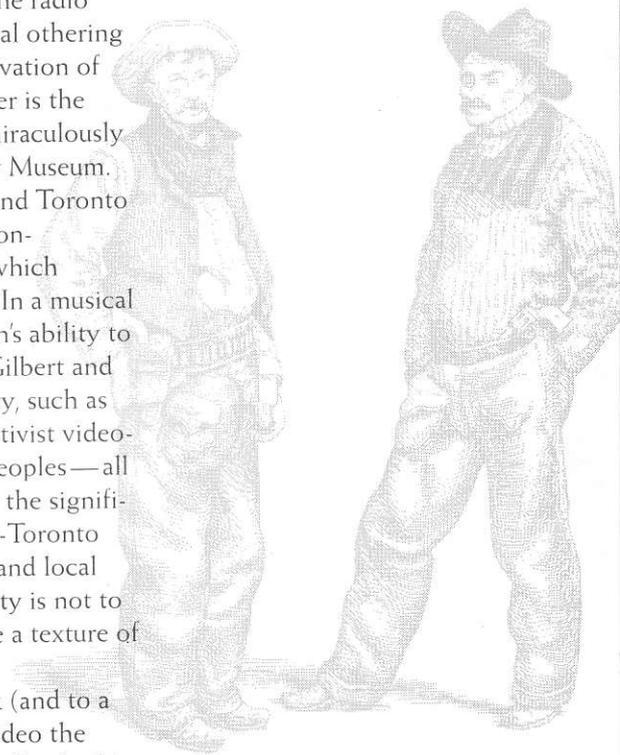
¹⁴ Bhabha, p. 305.

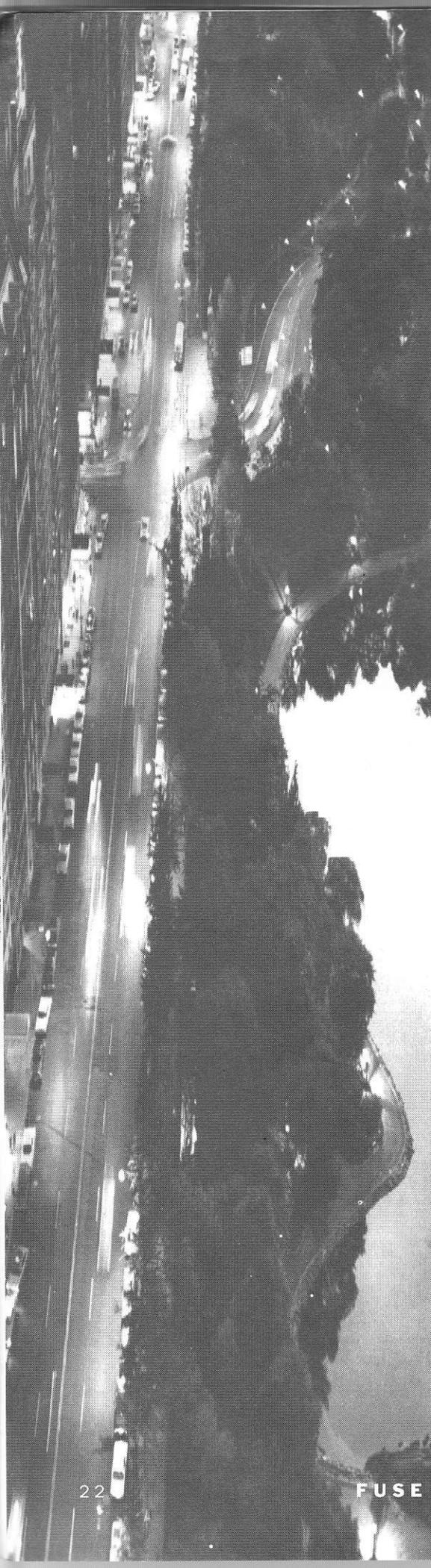
not nationally other." Yet Greyson's own work, by placing the localities and events of southern Ontario at the centre as though they were universal, does seem to unsettle the complacency of U.S. work that assumes to speak from the centre. Throughout his career Greyson's films have been aggressively local. They simply assume that viewers will care about bathroom raids in Orillia (*Urinal*), docudramas on CBC (*The Making of "Monsters"*), or exhibits at the "Toronto Natural History Museum" (*Zero Patience*). Greyson talks about "the authority of the local," the ability of small towns and obscure events to take on a mythic quality through their representation in literature or film. Specific, possibly obscure references have the ability to destabilize the fictive centre that New York independent filmmakers, no less than Hollywood, promote.

Greyson's new feature film, *Zero Patience* (1993) will probably be the film that propels Greyson to international acclaim, and so it is interesting to look at how the local, mostly Toronto, references that structure *Zero Patience*, operate without explanation or apology. The Canadian elements of the film are in part necessary, such as the fact the so-called Patient Zero was a French Canadian, and in part gratuitous, such as the ubiquitous references to the Canadian synchronized swimming team on the radio news. Greyson plays knowingly with the conjunction of sexual and cultural othering in the character of Patient Zero: and defaming the Quebecois is one motivation of the Toronto bureaucrats who take an interest in him. Its principal character is the nineteenth century Orientalist traveller and scholar Sir Richard Burton, miraculously still alive and working as chief taxidermist at the Toronto Natural History Museum.

As in Greyson's previous work, constant references to the Canadian and Toronto contexts privilege a viewer's own local knowledge and slightly estrange non-Canadians. *Zero Patience* also advertises the Toronto media community in which Greyson's work is so embedded, and this does so on the level of in-jokes. In a musical sequence about the dispute over causes of AIDS other than HIV (Greyson's ability to couch complex issues in the form of the musical number transcends the Gilbert and Sullivan-esque), the "bloodstream" is played by members of this community, such as former NAC (National Action Committee) president Judy Rebick, gay activist video-makers Andy Fabo and Michael Balsler, and Lisa Steele's daughter Larue Peoples—all floating amid red and white balloons in an indoor swimming pool. While the significance of these people will probably be lost on a non-Canadian, even non-Toronto audience, I think structuring the film around a specific, local community and local knowledges gives it a sort of cognitive density. The point of local authority is not to fetishize local peculiarities but to allow them to multiply until they create a texture of (un)familiarity.

Independent filmmaking in the U.S., is so heavily based in New York (and to a lesser degree San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago) that in film and video the experience of these places come to stand for "the city," and life in general. Partly this is a result of simple budget constraints on film- and videomakers (often students) living in these communities. Lacking means to travel or to stage environments, independent filmmakers make do with the city at hand: Central Park stands in for other expanses of trees and grass; tiny, crummy apartments stand in for "home"; and urban buildings festooned with posters and razor wire become the backdrop for all manner of not necessarily urban subjects. Thus New York (and to a lesser extent, other big cities) gains a hegemony on representation. Images of this city become naturalized, so that even when a work is not necessarily set in New York, the city's quite idiosyncratic qualities become the common denominator. Films made in New York end up being films about New York. The result, as Greyson points out, is that work that does not share these characteristics looks strange, hard to place, "out of state." The culture in which independents produce also has a particular, well-known cast in New York. Ideas of how artists look, what they eat, what they do for day jobs, etc., are natural-





ized in the weird and brutal environment of this town, producing wardrobe anxiety for all us of who work in the area of independent media in North America.

Canadian filmmakers are highly aware that "international" recognition really means making it in New York. As Greyson says, "Everybody's great goal is always to rush down to New York and have a great success there. I think the title of Serge Guilbaut's book says it all, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. I think it's really accurate on how cultural imperialism exports itself.... New York is brilliant at bringing the players from the periphery and constituting them in the centre, then sending them back out to the periphery."

Lee and Lister, two media artists who have experienced being constituted in the centre, corroborate this view. Interestingly, both their experiences reflect the value of being part of a more established media scene. Independent filmmaking in the U.S. has a longer history of involvement in the struggle to establish itself, to create institutional and media advocates, and to break into distribution. According to Lee, "If I hadn't gone to the States at all, that would have been a real handicap, I wouldn't have been part of as wide a circle. Being in the States [she really means New York] gave me exposure to work: in Canada (Toronto) you can see curated work at *Images*, etc., but there's more opportunity to see new work in New York..."

Lister, who is Canadian, has worked and taught in the U.S. for seventeen years. She tells how she left Vancouver for New York in 1975 in search of a community. "It was bad enough for men in Toronto," she says; "it was that much worse for women on the West Coast. At that time I didn't see that there was a very positive interest or support for the kind of work I was doing; feminist political work was not considered art, and the independent film scene was so minimal you didn't get heard. When the Reel Feelings collective showed *So Where's My Prince Already?*, nobody else was interested in considering it as a work of art or part of a dialogue with a community of artists." At the same time, the collective's film was selected for the third International Festival of Films by Women. The first of these New York-based festivals had stimulated the formation of the Vancouver feminist collective in 1973, and generally it seemed that the kind of work Lister was doing was much more part of a community in New York. "Lots of people in New York accepted that the words feminism and art could be said in the same sentence; there was a community dialogue that was attractive to me." Lister ended up moving to the States and using the experience she'd gained editing *Criteria* in Vancouver to revamp *The Independent*, the newsletter of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers. Because she was working illegally however, her name never appeared on the masthead.

The difference between Lister's and Lee's experiences (ten years apart) attests to the fact that a feminist film community, as well as other sorts of groups, are now easier to find in Canada. The Canadian brain drain to the States has abated somewhat since the rise of artist-run centres. But Lister's experience of the difference between Vancouver and New York in the '70s exemplifies how the ambivalence between Canadian and U.S. filmmaking is as much about cities as about national difference. The battle of representation between Canadian and U.S. films (a battle probably only perceived as such from the Canadian side)

is really more a battle between Toronto/Montreal and New York. Although Toronto is loathed as the highly funded, brain-draining centre of cultural production within English-speaking Canada, it is those qualities that give Toronto filmmaking a wedge in the image culture generated around New York. One hegemonic urban centre's images cannot be supplanted by those of a small town, rural area or mid-sized city, but another hegemonic urban centre has a fighting chance.

The fact that Lister was an "illegal alien" underscores the fact of American protectionism that ultimately blocks Canadians' sense of dual identity. Canadians feel we share American cultural identity, but if we try to move on it by working or living in the U.S., we learn that it's not transferable. Insofar as Canada fits into the American imaginary at all, the dynamic is quite different. To try to tease out that difference, let me indulge in one more dual citizen anecdote, which is funny because two events hinge on the same spoken word. An American friend of mine in Rochester knew me for about a year before I came out to her as a Canadian. She exclaimed, "I knew you were too funky to be just American!" About a year later, a Canadian acquaintance who also lives in Rochester found out I was Canadian too. She protested, "But you're too funky to be Canadian!"

While my friend's observations may not have proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that I am "funky," they do provoke speculation on how this elusive quality is perceived as part of national identity by Americans and Canadians. My American friend had a notion of American identity as something firmly held together from on high that didn't have room for such qualities as funkiness, which she perceived as nonconformist. My Canadian friend thought funkiness denoted a strong will, a quality that is part of the pedagogy of American identity. The moral, I suppose, is that there is no symmetry between two nations when one affirms its identity in a constant reenactment of national pedagogy, while the other constantly reworks its national definition at the micro-level, but if people think you are funky you can get by anywhere.

Michael Dorland argues that the discussion matters deeply because "now, more than ever before, it devolves upon the Canadian cultural project (as manifested by the Canadian artistic and intellectual imagination) to bear the entire burden of not only reviving, but enlarging what is left of the sense of Canadian difference." It will have become obvious that this is not my project here: I have been more interested to use the notion of Canadianness to reveal American not-sameness — the non-identity of "America" with its own narrative. Ultimately, the concern of this article has been not to defend a national identity but to suggest that the U.S. hegemony on national representation is a fragile construction, which Canadian cultural production is in a privileged position of being able to unbalance. Canadian culture need not, and probably should not, have this project as its primary goal. But the very ingredient that expresses Canadian diffidence, the performative quality of Canadian culture, catalyzes on contact the slow disintegration of the U.S. national narrative.

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