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The English Canadian Historical Film, 1970-2010:

An Enquiry into Marginality

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship of English Canadian historical feature films to Canadian cinema, historical subjects, and the formation of Canadian national identity. The thesis analyses key Canadian historical films from 1970 to 2010 that stand out from Canadian cinema's typically art-house fare, and includes original interviews with Canadian film professionals and a comparison of contrasting models in Quebec and the United States. This study concludes with an argument for this subgenre's marginality in Canada, which is rooted in the relationship of Canadians to their own history, a lack of "mythic nationalism" in Canadians' understanding of their identity, budget limitations, a reliance on state subsidies, and a general lack of interest in Canadian cinema. English Canadian historical cinema is anti-heroic, does not accept a single meta-narrative of identity, and is distinctly multicultural in its content, which contributes to the creation of a unique identity that reflects contemporary Canadian values.

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Chapter 1: Querying the English Canadian Historical Film

Canadian cinema is a cultural product of a nation with a conflicted cultural identity. Canada's film industry is divided between English and French sectors with little cultural interaction between the two.¹ The linguistic and cultural differences between English and French Canada influenced the development of two distinct film industries, with the French more ideologically focused on issues of nation and history, and the English more vague and uncertain in its engagement with nationality. Canadian audiences watch far more Hollywood than Canadian films, which instills Canadians with Hollywood-centric cinematic expectations, and contributes to an "absent audience" for Canadian films. The domestic historical film plays a different role within these two cultures, and this thesis places its focus on English Canadian cinema through a detailed examination of the marginalized English Canadian historical film.

During the formation of Hollywood in the first quarter of the 20th century and the subsequent exponential increase in American film production, Canadian forays into cinematic productions were relatively few and far between. No Hollywood-like mecca for Canadian feature film production was formed in the early 1900's, and unlike post-World War I Europe, no quota systems were established to enforce a minimum number of Canadian films on Canadian screens.² The establishment of the National Film Board (NFB) in 1939 was a major milestone in Canadian film production, but this federally funded agency was mandated to produce documentary and artistic films, rather than the dramatic, narrative feature films that the majority of Canadian audiences attended. John

¹ The majority of texts on Canadian and Quebecois film note the division of English and French cultures (Mackenzie, 2004; Melnyk, 2004; Pallister, 1995).

² In 1930, Great Britain instituted a quota in which domestic cinemas were required to screen a minimum 15% of domestic films (Melnyk, 2004, pp. 48–9).

Grierson, a Scottish documentary filmmaker and founder of the NFB, cautioned against the Canadian production of escapist, American-style feature films, which he chastised as reflecting a “silly inconsequential outlook on life” (Grierson, 1944, p. 4). Grierson doubted that Canada’s small motion picture industry could make films “big enough and bright enough” to compete with American pictures, and instead encouraged Canadian filmmakers to establish a reputation for the production of educational, factual, and imaginative films that would not compete with Hollywood but would still enable the country to build an international filmmaking reputation (Grierson, 1944, p. 8). Consequently, Grierson’s direction of the NFB and the continued dominance of Hollywood films on Canadian screens meant that no feature film industry developed in Canada between the 1930s and 1960s (Magder, 1993).

The Canadian tradition of government-sponsored film production began with the NFB and grew during the Second World War, when the NFB became one of the world’s largest documentary film studios (Melnik, 2004, p. 62). After the war, the NFB’s funding was reduced and Canadian film production slowed once again, until the establishment of the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) in 1967. Like the NFB, the CFDC allocated federal funds to Canadian productions, but instead of a focus on documentary or artistic works, the CFDC encouraged a focus on fictional feature length movies. The CFDC was born out of a cultural initiative for Canada’s centennial, where the federal government’s allocation of ten million dollars led to the production of sixty-four Canadian feature films over the next four years (Magder, 1993, p. 137). Although budgets for these films remained relatively modest, the CFDC allowed a new generation of Canadian filmmakers to make distinctive, typically auteur productions for a national

audience, and launched the notable careers of director David Cronenberg and producer Ivan Reitman. Between 1975 and 1984, a further federal incentive, the Capital Cost Allowance (CCA), allowed investors to make tax deductions of 100% of their investment in Canadian feature films until profits were earned (Morris & McIntosh, 2013). Although the CCA led to an exponential increase in Canadian film production, the movies produced during this “tax shelter boom” are frequently criticized for their general lack of artistic merit (Urquhart, 2003)³.

In 1984, the CFDC was reorganized and renamed Telefilm Canada, and the new organization broadened its focus to include the funding of Canadian television productions. Today, Telefilm continues to fund the production of Canadian films, such as the works of critically acclaimed directors Atom Egoyan and Guy Maddin. Telefilm currently administers a \$97 million Canadian Feature Film Fund, supports the marketing and promotion of films, and offers a number of film development programs (Telefilm Canada, 2011). Funding preferences for auteur productions over popular films has limited the audience for Canadian cinema, as the intellectual and critically praised productions funded by Telefilm rarely appeal to mainstream moviegoers. Since auteur films are typically written and directed by a single filmmaker and often feature personal stories in an unconventional presentation, they rarely compete with the huge budgets and star power of mass-marketed Hollywood films. Canada’s tradition of auteur filmmaking is therefore antithetical to the production of historical films, which are typically produced for a mainstream popular audience and focus on national, rather than personal stories. This is not to say that Telefilm refuses to finance films with commercial potential, as

³ Peter Urquhart is one of the few scholars to examine the often-neglected films of Tax Shelter Boom, and argues that these films frequently embody a thematic struggle between art and commerce that reflect the tax shelter era.

comedies like *Men With Brooms* (Gross, 2002) and *Bon Cop, Bad Cop* (Canuel, 2006) certainly appealed to popular audiences. These types of successes are rare in English Canada, however, and since the early 1990's, it is almost always Quebec comedies, such as the *Les Boys* series of films, that consistently earn the highest box office grosses in Canada.

In comparing Canadian cinema and the cinema of the United States, Canada appears as a relatively minor entity in the shadow of the Hollywood behemoth. The diminished presence of Canadian films on domestic screens is not indicative of a Canadian cinematic disinterest or lack of industry, however. Film industries with skilled artists, technicians and tradespeople exist in virtually every Canadian province and territory (although their continued employment often depends on the production of American films in provinces that offer lucrative tax incentives). Toronto and Vancouver are English Canada's largest film production centres, and Toronto ranks as the third highest North American city to receive direct expenditures for screen-based productions, after Los Angeles and New York (Toronto, 2012). Similarly, the shared time zone between Vancouver and Los Angeles, coupled with a historically weak Canadian dollar, helped transform Vancouver into "Hollywood North" during the 1990's. The city's frequent accommodation of American productions grew so popular that it even prompted concern from Hollywood over lost revenues (Masters, 1992; Sisto, 2004)⁴. Canadians are also keen cinemagoers and regularly attend screenings of the latest Hollywood films, where Canadian admissions are combined with American ticket sales to produce the oft-referenced "domestic box office gross" of mainstream American movies. The Canadian appetite for

⁴ In 2004, over 75% of American productions filmed outside the US were filmed in Canada. (Sisto, 2004, p.27)

Hollywood films, instead of truly domestic productions, generates what Charles Acland refers to as an “absent audience” for Canadian films, which remain completely dependent on the art-house cinema circuit (Acland, 1997).

Despite its lack of popular success, post-1970 Canadian cinema receives a considerable amount of scholarly attention, with particular focus on its lack of popular appeal. Jim Leach characterizes Canadian cinema’s failure to resonate with a national audience as a shortcoming of the CFDC, which, unlike Hollywood, did not “give the people what they want” and instead created a “tension between commercial and artistic or cultural goals” (Leach, 2011). Leach’s argument may be somewhat selective, however, as the CFDC allowed for the production of *Porky’s* (Clark, 1982) and *Meatballs* (Reitman, 1975), two teen comedies that critics reviled but young audiences clearly “wanted.”⁵ The non-existence of a Canadian feature film industry prior to the CFDC’s formation also suggests that Canadian filmmakers needed to hone their skills in the new industry before creating more resonant productions. For example, David Cronenberg’s early horror efforts, such as *Shivers* (1975) and *Scanners* (1980) may be seen as steps towards more critically and popularly acclaimed films like *The Fly* (1986) and later *A History of Violence* (2005). Conversely, David Pike links the lack of popular Canadian productions to the international financing needed to produce larger budget movies. Pike argues that fulfillment of international co-production requirements dilutes the “Canadian-ness” of domestic productions in hopes that the film will generate foreign ticket sales, and thereby makes the film less appealing to Canadian audiences (Pike, 2012, p. 7). As this thesis demonstrates, however, Canadian content does not necessarily guarantee a national

⁵ *Porky’s* remained the highest grossing Canadian film of all time until 2010, when the horror-thriller *Resident Evil: Afterlife* supplanted it at the box office (Adams, 2011).

audience, and international financing is usually sought for films with an international, rather than strictly Canadian story.

Rather than single out the problematic nature of institutions involved in Canadian filmmaking, most scholars link the conflicted and marginal nature of Canadian cinema with Canada's complicated cultural identity (Cagle, 1997; Melnyk, 2004; Pike, 2012). As a bilingual and bicultural nation-state, Canada is split into English and French audiences. In Quebec, the French population historically has a much higher attendance rate for domestic French language films (26% in 2005) than English Canadians do for English Canadian productions (1.1% in 2005) (B. D. Johnson, 2006). A sense of Canadian nationalism is further complicated by the divergent nature of English and French culture, whereby Quebec promotes a singular identity based on separatism, while English Canada tries to embrace both English and French identities concurrently. A further complicating factor in defining English Canadian identity is multiculturalism and the post-colonial presence of a large non-white immigrant population since 1980.

A clear definition of English Canadian cultural identity is ultimately elusive because of the social reality discussed above. This elusiveness gives English Canadian cinema a diversity that helps to define it. While in the past English Canadian identity was tied to Canada's British heritage, it currently is tied to dominant language and a sense of citizenship. For a Canadian film audience whose viewing has been constantly framed by Hollywood values and American nationalism, it is difficult to appreciate what Canadian filmmakers are saying about Canada, and it is this difference that this thesis explores. Film journalist Katherine Monk argues that Canadian cinema is a bold and uncompromising reflection of Canadian life, and while Canadians enjoy the spectacle of

Hollywood, they dislike the revelation of harsh realities when the mirror is turned back on themselves (Monk, 2001, pp. 4–5). In a country characterized as a multi-cultural mosaic, however, Canadian identity is not exactly clear-cut. George Melnyk contends that Canada's existence as a divided or conflicted nation state inherently complicates the formation of a clear national or cinematic identity, and that the many cultural identities within Canada, such as Quebec separatists, aboriginals, and non-European immigrants, are a few examples of marginalized peoples that strive for a voice on a national scale (Melnik, 2004, p. 5). Canadian cinema is therefore as complicated and ambiguous as the nation it ostensibly represents.

Although the scholarship that surrounds Canadian cinema tends to focus on auteur directors and their artistic merit,⁶ it overlooks the rare but important subgenre of the historical film. Canadian historical films are exceptions that stand out in a canon populated predominantly with low budget, art-house features. These historical films attempt to recreate events, personages, or eras in Canada's history, often using meticulous detail to craft a visual, aural, and narrative window into the past. In many ways, historical films are the antithesis of the typical Canadian film, as they often require large budgets, involve intensive research, and utilize extensive marketing campaigns. In 2008, when most Canadian film budgets were well below \$8 million (the maximum allocated by Telefilm Canada), the First World War film, *Passchendaele*, raised a \$20 million budget, almost seven times higher than the average Canadian movie's production cost (Binning, 2007). More significant than the cost of historical films, however, is the fact that they feature Canada more prominently than the majority of Canadian movies.

⁶ A variety of books are published on Canadian film directors (Baldassarre, 2003; Browning, 2009; Melnyk & Austin-Smith, 2010; Melnyk, 2007)

These films include attempts to explore aspects of Canadian identity, efforts to highlight a shared national past and ambitions to forge the notion of what theorist Benedict Anderson terms an “imagined community,” in which Canadians are united by common myths and principles (Anderson, 2006). Despite their cultural motivations, however, Canadian historical films are rarely seen on the big screen. Between 1980 and 2010, nine of the best picture winners at the annual Genie awards were set in the past, but only three of these (*The Grey Fox*, *Black Robe*, and *Passchendaele*) dealt with factual, rather than personal or fictional histories.

Given the marginal nature of these films within an already marginalized national cinema, and Canada’s reputation for directorially driven, auteur products, it is not surprising that Canadian historical films receive little, if any, scholarly attention. This thesis seeks to overcome this scholarly gap through the examination of major English Canadian historical films, their production and reception history, interviews with Canadian scholars, journalists, and filmmakers, and comparisons with historical Canadian television productions and American cinema and television models. This thesis focuses on five significant films produced between 1970 and 2010: *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Kotcheff, 1974), *The Grey Fox* (Borsos, 1982), *Black Robe* (Beresford, 1991a), *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (Cohn & Kunuk, 2006), and *Passchendaele* (Gross, 2008). With the exception of *Journals*, these films are the most costly Canadian productions of their respective decades, were advertised by large promotional campaigns, and swept the Genie awards in their years of release. In contrast to the typically low budget, art-house nature of Canadian cinema, these historical films are rare exceptions

that attempt to rally the population around a shared heritage and are produced on a scale meant to rival Hollywood productions.

Because English Canadian cinema is often portrayed as having failed to resonate with a national audience, historical films are important to study, for they represent rare and overt attempts by Canadian filmmakers to connect with a domestic audience and to generate sizeable box office returns. Only through the analysis of films, comparisons with similar media, and the opinions of industry experts can the forty-year marginality of the English Canadian historical film be properly addressed. The nature of the Canadian film industry's evolution since 1967, the political and cultural forces unleashed during this period, and the existence of alternate models are the key factors in explaining the marginality of the Canadian historical film. This study attempts to open up the field of English Canadian historical films to academic scholarship and endeavors to draw connections between Canadian cinema, history, and identity.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Since the subgenre of the English Canadian historical film has not received previous scholarly examination, this study utilizes a number of different methods to generate insight into the phenomenon and the causes of its marginal nature. These methods utilize scholarship on historical films, an analysis of selected films, interviews with film practitioners, and a comparative study with other national cinemas and Canadian television programming to explain the nature of English Canadian historical cinema. The methodologies include:

1. A literature review of relevant scholarship on historical films in Canada, the United States, and Quebec;
2. A content and contextual analysis of five English Canadian historical films from 1970 to 2010. These films are *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974), *The Grey Fox* (1982), *Black Robe* (1991), *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006) and *Passchendaele* (2008);
3. E-mail interviews with directors involved in the above films, Canadian film scholars, and a Canadian film journalist for their views on the status of the English Canadian historical film. The participants consist of Ted Kotcheff (director), Norman Cohn (director), Paul Gross (director), Jim Leach (scholar), William Beard (scholar), and Peter Howell (journalist);
4. A comparative study of historical material on Canadian television during the same period, as well as a comparative study of American television and American cinema's relationship to historical material.

The review of existing literature on Canadian cinema situates this study in a historiographical perspective and reveals both common approaches to Canadian cinema and the debates surrounding the subject. A historiographical approach also allows for the contextualization of my historical film selection, where I examine information on the social and political atmosphere that surrounded each film's production and release. The content analysis of the films in my study reveals how each production constructs notions of Canadian history and identity, which I extrapolate to draw conclusions about the nature of English Canadian historical films. The email interviews with Canadian filmmakers, scholars and journalists are crucial to this study, as they constitute original research with participants and close observers of the Canadian film industry. The interviews both confirm and complicate the conclusions reached in my film analysis and contribute to new research in this underdeveloped field. I also consult the scholarship surrounding American historical films, which is far more substantial, to discover theoretical and analytical approaches to this subgenre that prove useful in my historiography and analysis. To explore the differences between historical productions in Canadian cinemas and Canadian television, a comparison of the Canadian film and television industries is essential, as English Canadian television has a much larger audience in contrast to Canadian cinema. My consultation of American historical film literature also contributes to a comparative discussion on the presence of historical content on Canadian and American screens.

The Historiography of Canadian Cinema in the Modern and Postmodern Period

Although English Canadian historical films are largely unexamined in scholarly literature, much is written on the broader subject of Canadian cinema. Peter Morris' *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895-1939* (Morris, 1992) is the first and most detailed investigation into the early years of Canada's film history. Morris uncovers the pre-NFB period of Canadian filmmaking, with a particular focus on film production in English Canada. George Melnyk's *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (Melnyk, 2004) extends Morris' work into the twenty-first century and includes a greater consideration of Quebec cinema, film genres, and the personalities and politics that influenced the development of Canadian cinema. Melnyk argues that Canadian cinema is best examined from multiple perspectives, and encourages the use of a variety of linguistic, cultural, and international analytical lenses to draw conclusions about Canadian cinema and identity. This analytical approach usefully frames films within their cultural and political contexts, and is appropriate for the Canadian cultural mosaic.

Morris' and Melnyk's works are the most comprehensive examinations of Canadian film history available, but other works on the broader subject of Canadian cinema contribute greatly to this conversation. Jim Leach's *Film In Canada* (Leach, 2011) is a shorter survey of Canadian film history with a post-NFB perspective, where greater emphasis is placed on topical, rather than historical organization. Leach approaches Canadian films as texts that reflect the socio-political contexts of the time of their production, and attempts to decouple the concepts of national cinema and national identity in Canada. Jerry White's *The Cinema of Canada* (J. White, 2006) is

an edited collection of twenty-four essays on Canadian films (none of them overtly historical), which frames Canadian cinema as the product of three voices: English, French, and Aboriginal. The presence of Aboriginal productions is relatively recent in Canadian film history, yet White devotes a third of his book to these films in an ostensible attempt to canonize them alongside older Canadian productions. White avoids deep discussion of national identity, however, and its absence is certainly noted when compared with similar scholarly collections. Conversely, Christopher Gittings' *Canadian National Cinema: Ideology, Difference, and Representation* (Gittings, 2001) approaches Canadian cinema from a more theoretical perspective and examines a combination of well-known and overlooked films across a century of Canadian filmmaking. Gittings investigates the "significance of nation" in Canadian cinema and studies several films for colonial discourses and examples of nation building, including the historical film, *The Grey Fox*, which he positions as a Canadian contrast to American colonial narratives. Gittings examines both English and French Canadian films in his analysis, but he avoids debates about the existence of multiple Canadian cinemas, and instead seems to perceive Canada as a complicated cinematic whole.

More recent collections tend to focus on selective aspects of Canadian cinema and its history. Jerry White and William Beard's *North of Everything: English-Canadian Cinema Since 1980* (Beard & White, 2002) reverts to a bi-national perspective on Canada, with its focus placed solely on English Cinema. White and Beard include a variety of topics that range from histories, select filmmakers, Aboriginal films and the avant-garde, in a wide-ranging, if scattered collection. David Pike's *Canadian*

Cinema Since the 1980's: At The Heart of the World places its focus on what Pike describes as the “golden age” of Canadian cinema, roughly fifteen years between the mid-1980's and late 1990's (Pike, 2012, p. 2). Pike's work favours auteur Canadian directors over historical analysis, and revels in the sharp contrast that provocative directors like Denis Arcand, Atom Egoyan, and Guy Maddin make against formulaic Hollywood narratives during this period. Unlike White and Beard, Pike includes several Quebec filmmakers alongside their English counterparts, but does not distinguish Quebec as a truly separate nation. As an American, Pike is more concerned with how to define Canadian culture as separate from the United States', and he positions Canadian cinema as a unique, postmodern cultural product that rejects American stereotypes and distinguishes itself through a quirky auterism that reflects the country's “relative insignificance on the global stage” (Pike, 2012, p.16).

These diverse studies on Canadian cinema demonstrate certain organizational traits and recurrent themes useful to the methodology of this thesis. The research and consideration of the production, exhibition, and reception of films is vital to contextualize and understand historical films within their contemporary contexts. While some historical films are examined in the aforementioned texts, many are overlooked and will therefore benefit from a contextual analysis in this study. Another recurrent methodological consideration is the definition of a study's limits. As mentioned earlier, this study examines one film from each decade of modern Canadian filmmaking between 1970 and 2010, which are some of the most financially and critically successful English Canadian films of their respective decades (a distinction arguably aided by their historical narratives). The major

exception is *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, which is distinguished as both an Aboriginal film and an attempt to create a post-modern, art-house Canadian historical film. These limits place the study in both a context that is both historical and contemporary.

In the existing texts on Canadian cinema, another important methodological discussion centers on the issue of nation, voices, and national cinema. As stated in the introduction, Canada's status as a bilingual nation and the cultural differences between English and French Canada led to the development of two separate cultural industries. The distinction of largely separate English and French Canadian cinemas is undeniable, as evidenced by the success of French Canadian films in Quebec and the dismal theatrical performance of English Canadian films in the rest of Canada (B. D. Johnson, 2006). The focus on English Canadian cinema in White and Beard's *North of Everything* is described as a reaction to the disproportionate amount of existing literature on Quebec cinema (Beard & White, 2002). Although this thesis similarly acknowledges the differences between English and French historical films, it also examines Quebecois historical films as markers of a clear identity. Debates about the validity of Quebec's status as a nation are beyond the scope of this thesis, however, but Canada's status as a postmodern "nation-state" will receive consideration.

The Historiography of the American Historical Film and Approaches to English Canadian Historical Cinema

With the limits of this study and its relation to the literature on Canadian cinema now defined, it is important to consider common methodologies used to examine historical films. The literature on this subject is chiefly American, and historian Robert Rosenstone is typically cast as its pioneer scholar. In *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Rosenstone, 1998), Rosenstone argues that historical films should not be dismissed as inferior renderings of the past, but rather embraced as alternative, visual readings that complement written histories. This idea is termed “historiophoty” by historian Hayden White, a combination of historiography and photography that is further explored in the theory section of this thesis (H. White, 1988). In *Visions*, Rosenstone provides a methodological framework for the identification of historical films: the films must have a beginning, middle, and end in which a moral lesson is learned, must focus on individual characters rather than movements, must include narration that grounds the story in factual reality and highlights its emotional impacts, must make an attempt to accurately portray the look of the period in all aspects of mise-en-scène, and must provide an integrated, rather than selectively topical history of events in question (i.e. films should feature both political *and* social elements) (Rosenstone, 1998, p. 60). Rosenstone’s work is useful not only to define the historical film, but also to complicate the idea of historical truth in these films. Essentially, Rosenstone wonders if audiences are more receptive to historical films than historical texts, and this thesis therefore examines how Canadians consume history on the big (and small) screens, and which histories are

deemed important to tell. The analysis of box office attendance and the research of critical and popular film reviews will also help to shed light on the public's perception of the English Canadian historical film and its relation to Canadian identity.

Rosenstone's influence is acknowledged by film scholar Robert Burgoyne, who cites Rosenstone's *History on Film/Film on History* in his call for a deeper investigation of the generic properties of Hollywood's historical films (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 3; Rosenstone, 2006). Similarly, J.E. Smyth's edited collection, *Hollywood and the American Historical Film*, includes various attempts to organize and categorize American historical films, such as Westerns and Gangster films (Smyth, 2012). In both works, the consideration of how historical films manipulate their generic foundations is framed as a reflection of the socio-political culture that surrounded the making of the film, and the ways in which English Canadian historical films manipulate genre will receive similar consideration in this thesis. A rare, non-American work on historical films is found in Andrew Higson's *English Heritage, English Cinema*, in which Higson frames the British historical film as a product that can please both sides of the political spectrum: conservatives approve the depiction of "authentic" British life, while liberals enjoy the unpredictable historical narratives that often critique British society (Higson, 2003). Higson's approach ties into notions of political identity in historical films, and I will similarly speculate on the English Canadian historical film's ability to please broad audiences, and how this affects their domestic reception.

Methodological Conclusions

The examination of scholarly approaches to Canadian cinema, Canadian film history and historical film analysis aids in the formation of an appropriate research methodology for this thesis. The investigation and contextualization of the marginal nature of English Canadian historical films first requires a definition of what constitutes a Canadian historical film and a clear definition of the study's limits (1970-2010). Rosenstone's definition of the historical film is appropriate for this thesis, with its emphasis on a factual reality and the experiences of individual characters against political and social forces, and the contextualization of each film in their respective decades of Canadian film history is modeled on the historiographical approaches utilized by Morris and Melnyk. An original research component in the form of emailed interview questions to Canadian filmmakers, scholars and journalists will test my own conclusions about the nature of English Canadian historical films and their relation to Canadian history and identity. Finally, a comparative analysis between Canadian and American cinema and television models utilizes the selected studies on American historical films, and a brief contrast between English and French Canadian historical films compliments the aforementioned histories of Canadian and Quebecois cinema. Evidence of Canadian identity in these historical productions benefits from Higson's analysis of British historical films, and draws on more general scholarly approaches to national identity. The lack of general scholarship on Canadian historical films, especially when compared to their American counterparts, necessitates the broad methodology described above. Because of the lack of specific Canadian scholarship on this historical subgenre, the application of American

theorists should not be discounted as irrelevant. The historical subgenre is one that exists in many national cinemas and approaches developed in one country may have validity in another. This study's combination of Canadian cinema scholarship, film analysis, interviews, and contrasting models is an appropriate and grounded approach to this unexamined area of Canadian cinema.

Chapter 3: Theory

Introduction

The theoretical section of this study combines theoretical perspectives on historical films, scholarly discussions of the nature of national cinema and identity, and critical approaches to Canadian film and television. First, the historical film genre is positioned by American scholars Rosenstone and White as a legitimate, although underappreciated method for the preservation of history. Second, these arguments about historical cinema's relation to American national identity are applied to historical developments in Canadian film, including the distinct evolution of Canada's cinematic identity and how historical films fit or do not fit that identity. Finally, there is a discussion of the role of Canadian television's dissemination of historical material, in contrast to that of the Canadian film industry, and speculations on what this means for the future of the subgenre.

The Historical Film Genre

The scholarship surrounding historical films is a relatively recent but rapidly developing field. This area of study was confined to sporadic and isolated articles until December 1988, when *American Historical Review* published five articles on the subject in a special edition (Rosenstone, 1995). Following this publication, American academic interest in historical films greatly expanded, driven primarily by Robert Rosenstone and Hayden White. The vast majority of this new scholarship concerns American (primarily Hollywood) historical films, although a few notable works are dedicated to English "costume dramas." Currently, no scholarly examination of the Canadian historical film

genre exists, and any writing on English Canadian historical films is usually framed through discussions of their directors.

Often described as a filmic subgenre, historical films generally draw their stylistic influences from broader genres such as horror, action, or comedy. For example, the American Civil War is the backdrop that links historical epics like *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), historical dramas like *Lincoln* (Spielberg, 2012), and historical sci-fi movies like *Wild Wild West* (Sonnenfeld, 1999). Yet even within another genre, such as the Western (an ideologically historical genre), history can receive very different treatments, as seen in the adventurous Western, *Stagecoach* (Ford, 1939), the comedic Western, *Blazing Saddles* (Brooks, 1974), and the Western fantasy *Django Unchained* (Tarantino, 2012). Historical films are therefore rooted in a specific historical context, but cannot claim an entirely factual representation of history, regardless of their devotion to historical material.

While it is acknowledged that filmmakers are granted an artistic license to make historical productions, the degree to which they exercise this license is a frequent topic of debate. Oliver Stone's *JFK* (Stone, 1991) received heated criticism for its bold blend of fact and fiction in a conspiracy-theory portrayal of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (Toplin, 1996), and the shocking presentation of civil war history in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* has provoked accusations of racism for nearly a century (Smyth, 2006, p. 1). The deviation from factual "truth" in historical films is therefore one of the most easily and frequently criticized aspects of this cinematic subgenre. All historical representation, however, whether written or filmed, is ultimately a function of

social values and the information available to the author of the work. All historical representations are therefore a product of their time, and eventually become outdated.

Robert Rosenstone challenged the criticism of cinema's historical accuracy in his collection of essays, *Visions of the Past* (Rosenstone, 1998), and later in *History on Film/Film on History* (Rosenstone, 2006). Rosenstone questions the extents to which historians reveal historical "truths" using the traditional "just the facts" approach in written histories. Although he does not dispute the merits of epistemologically-driven history, he disputes the written approach as the only "approved" method through which history can be understood, and argues that words simply cannot convey the past in the same way as moving pictures, with their colour, sound, and lifelike presentation (Rosenstone, 2006, pp. 1–2). Any depiction of the past is certainly powerful when presented as a visual and aural cinematic spectacle, and it is difficult to imagine a written historical text that competes with the illusory "window to the past" that cinema provides. More broadly, Rosenstone's argument suggests that national cinemas without a strong historical subgenre lack an important component of identity building, an implication strongly evidenced by English Canadian cinema.

While the sights and sounds of historical films are arguably easier to reproduce on the big screen (one needs only to consult photographs or illustrations to aid in the design of costumes or sets, for example), the narratives of these productions often draw the most criticism, particularly in their deviation from historical fact, as *JFK* and *Birth of a Nation* demonstrate. Rosenstone acknowledges the need for dramatic narratives to supersede strictly factual story telling, for without dramatic intervention, most historical productions would likely bore, rather than entertain an audience (Rosenstone, 1995, p. 7). The degree

of historical manipulation rests in the hands of the filmmakers, and Rosenstone encourages the careful examination of which historical facts are and are not manipulated, and the consideration of the motives behind these decisions.

Rosenstone helpfully delineates the common scholarship on historical films into two basic approaches: the explicit and the implicit. In the explicit approach, historical films are examined as artifacts that represent the era in which they were made; for example, *Birth of a Nation* acts as evidence of prevailing racist attitudes in the early 20th century American South. In the implicit approach, the historical film is judged somewhat like a written history and is therefore subjected to similar factual and logical examinations. Rosenstone reveals problems with both approaches (the implicit positions written history as the only “correct” way to understand the past, and the explicit does not consider a film’s historical commentary), and recommends that scholars examine the historical world that a film creates, how that world is constructed, and how it can be judged. Only then, argues Rosenstone, may we ask how the cinematic historical world relates to written history (Rosenstone, 1995, p. 2).

Rosenstone’s recommendation is therefore not to examine historical films as pieces of history themselves, but to examine the historical arguments that these films present. It is arguable, however, that historical films must still be situated in the context of their productions, for given the often-high costs involved in making these films, the economic, political, and social climates in which they were made can yield insights into *why* these films were produced. Similarly, the consideration of the writers, directors, and producers of these films can also aid in the examination of a film’s historical world, and the research of a film’s reception can help to reveal its effect on contemporary audiences.

Essentially, the analysis of historical films requires the analysis of two histories and their relationship: the “historical world” as presented on screen, and the real-world history surrounding the film’s production and release.

Historian Hayden White provides another influential perspective on the historical film. Inspired by Rosenstone’s early work, White coined the term “historiophoty,” a combination of history and photography that refers to “the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse” (H. White, 1988, p. 1193). Effectively, historiophoty is the study of how history is presented on film, a cinematic counterpart to historiography, the study of how history is written in texts. White examines Rosenstone’s question of whether historiophoty can measure up to the complex and critical discussions of written history, and concludes that verisimilitude is impossible in either medium and that viewers should not judge the merits of historical films by their inability to create a true mirror of the past. White argues that meaning is constructed in both historical writing and film, but that films cannot be read in the same way as texts; rather, one must sufficiently analyze the visuals of a film, as well as the spoken dialogue, to properly detect historical commentary. Although White admits that the variable lengths of historical texts make for more detailed analysis, he correctly reveals that length is not directly related to quality, and that the two or three hour running time of films and their emotional emphasis is in no way “inherently anti-analytical” (H. White, 1988, p. 1197).

White’s defense of Rosenstone’s assertions helps to neutralize critical attacks on historical films and opens the filmic medium to a new mode of historical analysis. Like Rosenstone, White appears to advocate for the investigation of the construction of a film’s “historical world,” and to assess what is depicted on screen and how it creates a

commentary on the historical period, event, or person in question, rather than obsess about deviation from historical fact. An example mentioned by both authors comes from the film *Gandhi* (Attenborough, 1983), in which the title character is thrown from a train in the opening scene; the incident is not recorded anywhere in history, yet it encapsulates the political climate of the era and establishes the protagonist's social status within his own country. Historical analysis is certainly present in historical films to varying degrees, and the examination of their commentaries is far more useful than the simple revelation of factual deviation.

In the context of this study, Rosenstone's and White's most important arguments advocate the study of how history is presented in historical films. Because narrative feature films require a degree of dramatic license, their portrayal of history is bound to deviate from the factual record, and this study supports the concept that narrative accuracy is secondary to the portrayal of a broader historical truth. In my film analysis section, I examine the presentation of Canadian history in each historical film, but also consider the production and reception of each movie. This approach offers a balance of theory, historical analysis, and context, to help illuminate historical films and their relation to Canadian history and identity.

National Cinema, National Identity, and the Historical film

This study's focus on English Canadian historical films necessitates a theoretical examination of not only the historical film genre, but of the category of national cinemas as well. The concept of national cinema is difficult to define in Canada, due in part to its

nature as a bilingual country with an elusive national identity, but the “English Canadian” limits of this study allow for some discussion of the concept.

The issue of national cinema is contentious and often debated in film studies, primarily because of its relation to the complex idea of “nation.” Andrew Higson’s influential essay, “The Concept of National Cinema” (Higson, 1989), serves as an entry point into the topic, and extends the definition of national cinema beyond the simple categorization of films produced within a specific country. Higson illustrates four major discourses that characterize discussions on national cinema: economic (which concerns filming locations and the nationalities of the funders and filmmakers), textual (which examines a film’s content for national qualities), exhibition or consumption-based (what audiences tend to watch), and critical (a focus on “art-house” films instead of popular productions) (Higson, 1989, pp. 36–7). In an attempt to define a Canadian national cinema, it is evident that these four discourses can help define an English Canadian cinema. For example, an economically defined Canadian cinema theoretically requires films to be shot in Canada, by a Canadian producer and director, with support from federal funding agencies and provincial tax incentives. To accommodate a textual definition, however, the films also require Canadian settings and identifiably Canadian themes, which are somewhat vague and certainly debatable. From a critical perspective, Canadian films also need to challenge the audience through a distinctive, typically non-mainstream approach, perhaps like the films of Canadian directors Atom Egoyan or David Cronenberg, although even these directors’ films rarely utilize the settings or themes required by the textual definition. It is difficult for any single film to accommodate all of these distinctive elements of national cinema, especially the

consumption-based approach, for Canadian films do not account for even 5% of the domestic box office (Vessing, 2010).

To help identify a national cinema, Higson offers his own two approaches, although he admits they are not free from contention. One popular method is to distinguish a national cinema through comparison with the cinemas of other nations (Higson, 1989, p. 38). In this model, Canadian cinema would be identified through its difference from foreign films, certainly a challenge considering the cultural overlap between Canada and the United States. This identification through difference may help to identify what a cinema “isn’t,” but does not necessarily aid in creating a clear definition. Higson’s second approach is one of “looking inward” for evidence of the unique cultural and institutional properties that define a country (Higson, 1989, p. 42). In the case of Canadian cinema, this approach seems to reflect Higson’s textual definition, which considers cultural factors that suggest a “Canadian-ness” within the film. Perhaps the most influential part of Higson’s discussion is his question, “what is a national cinema if it doesn’t have a national audience” (Higson, 1989, p. 46), certainly a pertinent point in the examination of Canadian film. In a sense, Higson’s categories only contribute to the problematization of Canadian cinema as a national one.

A major complicating factor in the identification of national cinema is the concept of nation itself. The idea that a nation can be discerned through its films requires that nation to exhibit certain identifiable national characteristics, both in and outside of the cinematic realm. As mentioned earlier, the limits of this study to English Canadian historical films suggests something inherently nation-acknowledging or revealing in these works. Benedict Anderson, in his attempt to define the anomaly of nationalism, argues

that the concept is essentially a set of imagined ideals commonly shared between members of a community; these communities are “imagined,” because their populations are so large that the majority of members will never meet, yet are bound by the same commonly shared notions (Anderson, 2006, pp. 4–5). While this definition holds some merit, especially in terms of imagined connections, Anderson admits that it is limited, for it ignores issues of a population’s economic inequalities and political differences (Anderson, 2006, p. 7).

In the case of Canadian nationalism, Anderson’s theory is difficult to locate in real terms. Certainly the majority of the population shares a legal distinction of “being Canadian,” but what imagined ideals might we collectively possess? Recalling Higson’s argument, Canadians might define themselves through an oppositional comparison with Americans: we are a country peacefully founded by a charter, rather than a war of independence, we do not typically celebrate a militaristic past or present, and we have a parliamentary, rather than presidential system of government. These distinctions are not immediately informative, but may infer a “Canadian” difference. The celebration of Canada Day on July 1st seems more the commemoration of a free and peaceful nation, rather than a celebration of the document signing that led to that nation’s creation. This celebration therefore appears to exemplify Anderson’s theory, for Canada Day is more a recognition of the ultimately imagined community in which all Canadians reside, and does not directly recognize the many distinct aboriginal, founding, and immigrant communities that reside in the Canadian cultural mosaic.

Canada’s elusive national identity is partly due to the unique combination of its two founding nations, the English and the French, but is also emblematic of the larger

symptoms of globalization. British Cultural Studies theorist Stuart Hall addresses the effects of globalization on nationalism in his essay, “Culture, Community, Nation” (Hall, 1993). Hall integrates the early work of cultural theorist Raymond Williams with Anderson’s imagined communities to examine notions of shared experience and national identity in an increasingly globalized world. Hall argues that “revived nationalisms” and “the aspirations of marginalized peoples to nationhood” are “transforming the cultural life of modernity” (Hall, 1993, pp. 352–3), which is certainly recognizable in a Canadian context. The Quebecois separation referendums are evidence of “revived nationalisms” in French Canada, as is the recent “Idle No More” movement in which First Nations bands gathered across the country voice their dissatisfaction with the Canadian government.⁷ These marginalized peoples’ claim to nationhood complicates the formation of a clear Canadian national identity, especially given Canada’s ambitions as a multicultural mosaic, rather than the cultural “melting-pot” of the United States.

Hall also uses the traditional concept of a “nation-state,” which he applies to countries defined through ethnicity, language and culture, such as Britain, France and Spain. Hall recognizes that these nation-states are not completely hermetic as they participate in the import and export of cultural and capital goods and increasingly support capitalist globalization, which effectively dislocates their national character (Hall, 1993, p. 353). The concept of nation-state, then, perhaps better characterizes a nation’s established identity, however unreal it may have become. Using Hall’s definition, Canada is a complicated expression of a nation-state, for it is linguistically defined (albeit by two official languages) and participates in the flow of cultural and capital goods, particularly

⁷ The existence of over 630 First Nations in Canada further complicates any attempts at a clear national distinction.

in transactions with the United States, which greatly dislocates its national character. Critics of Canadian culture might point to a discrepancy in the Canada-US flow of cultural products, as American culture has an arguably greater impact in Canada than Canadian culture does in the United States. This is strikingly apparent in the motion picture industry, where Canadian movie theatres are dominated by American films and rarely, if ever, screen their own domestic productions.⁸

Hall acknowledges the desire of nation-states to forge a distinct identity, but explains that a “traditional” national identity cannot be formed without the exclusion of marginalized peoples, which in turn represents a great danger to the formation of any nation-state (Hall, 1993, p. 361). The perpetual existence of marginalized populations therefore creates a paradox in the formation of nation-states, for no population can ever truly exist without a marginalized element, whether distinguished by race, language, income, or a host of other discriminating features. It follows that a truly complete and cohesive national identity can never be achieved in a nation-state, and certainly not in a globalized world. Furthermore, those who immigrate to Canada seem to lose their “original” national identity and are labeled as distinct hybrid cultures, such as Indo-Canadian, Irish-Canadian, or Iranian-Canadian, based on perceived national and cultural differences. Hall does not lament the loss of old national identities, however, and concludes with the characterization of identity as an ongoing and unfinished game, “always under construction... [that] always moves into the future through a symbolic detour through the past” (Hall, 1993, p. 362). This evolving description of identity is certainly true in a Canadian context, and helps to situate the complicated, expanding, and

⁸ Quebec cinema is a very different case from English Canada, as Quebec films enjoy a notably higher provincial box office performance.

evolving nature of Canadian identity as a product of a globalized world. The contribution of historical film texts to this evolving identity is central to this study.

As demonstrated in this brief discussion, the concept of national cinema is difficult to clearly define, particularly in its relation to national identity. Cinematic studies frequently utilize national categorizations, however, and much is written on French, British, and Japanese cinemas, to name only a few. The examination of historical films further narrows this study in a specifically national context; not only are films produced in a single country examined, but these films are also *about* that country. The few scholars who attempt to extract evidence of national identity from historical films tend to adopt the “implicit” analytical approach outlined by Rosenstone, such as James Chapman, who frames British historical films as commentaries about the eras in which they were produced. Chapman argues that national identity is central to the historical film genre, in which a specifically national past is celebrated, especially with periods of national greatness, such as the Industrial Revolution and the World Wars in Britain (Chapman, 2005, p. 6). Chapman’s interest in the “attitudes, assumptions and beliefs” that inform filmed historical narratives are certainly important from a historiophoty perspective, but he does not necessarily speculate on what these films reveal about Britain in broad terms. In the examination of Canadian historical films, it is necessary to also trace Canada’s filmic characterization, rather than focus solely on these films as commentaries of their production periods as Chapman does. In short, this study requires a combination of implicit and explicit analysis to draw conclusions about the distinct nature of Canadian historical films. This distinctness results from Canadians’ unfamiliarity with

their own national cinema, the fact that Canadian film directors try to make non-Hollywood films, and that Canada has no tradition of triumphal nationalism.

Approaches to Canadian Cinema

Characterizations of Canadian cinema are as varied and elusive as the country's national identity. Only a small number of in-depth studies of Canadian cinema exist, namely the aforementioned Peter Morris' *Embattled Shadows* (Morris, 1992), George Melnyk's *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (Melnik, 2004), Jim Leach's *Film in Canada* (Leach, 2011), and most recently, David Pike's *Canadian Cinema Since the 1980's* (Pike, 2012). Some of these studies are more limited in their historical scope than others, but most typically categorize Canadian cinema within four distinct periods: the early period (the industry's birth to 1939), the National Film Board legacy (1939 to 1967), the birth of the modern industry (1967 to 1980) and the auteur era (1980 to 2000). Melnyk and Pike also examine the relatively recent rise of digital filmmakers that began at the end of the millennium, essentially a digital era (2000 to the present) that continues the auteur tradition with new technologies.

In many of these works, Canadian cinema is identified through its difference from American cinema, much like the comparative approach to national cinema outlined by Andrew Higson. While American cinema certainly includes a minority of independent filmmakers, the major comparisons between the two countries focus on Hollywood productions that dominate the big screens in both nations. Canadian cinema is frequently characterized as an art-house cinema, with distinctive films made by auteur directors with unconventional approaches to narrative and structure. These films aim to challenge,

rather than solely entertain the viewer, have lower budgets for production and marketing, and are consequently seen by far fewer people than multi-million dollar Hollywood films.

Canada's cinematic art-house reputation stems in part from the country's inability to compete against the Hollywood giant, and from the fact that most of its successes require some form of state assistance, which is ultimately limited. Although some Canadian features were produced in the first decades of the 20th century (the early period), no filmmakers or production companies were able to make a sustainable living in the Canadian motion picture business. Film historian Peter Morris argues that Canada's inability to form a central studio system in the 1920's resulted in fractured, regionalized filmmaking that could not measure up to the centralized output of Hollywood (Morris, 1992, p. 237). Evidence of this regional approach to filmmaking is seen in the few attempts by Canadians to make truly domestic pictures, and George Melnyk singles out three early Canadian historical films that "suggested that popular subject matter could be taken from Canadian history and attract non-Canadian audiences": *Wolfe or the Conquest of Quebec* (1914) about the British capture of Quebec, *Madeline de Vercheres* (1922) about an Iroquois attack on 1660's Montreal, and *The War Pigeon* (1914) about the Battle of 1812 (Melnik, 2004, p. 23). Despite the ambitions of these films, each of their respective production companies folded after their film's release, and never made another picture. Canadian-set movies still played on big screens in North America, but these were almost always Hollywood Westerns with a Canadian backdrop; by 1914, one hundred of these "northwoods" films were produced, but none of them were actually filmed in Canada (Clandfield, 1987). Morris places part of the blame for Canada's low feature film output on the inability of the Canadian government to offer state-sponsored protection for

Canadian films during these early years, such as quotas to require a minimum percentage of Canadian films be screened in domestic theatres (Morris, 1992, p. 243). Ted Magder combats this argument with the assertion that Canadian film companies did not lobby the government for special treatment at all, and indeed, from the government's viewpoint, the infancy and regional nature of the early Canadian film industry did not appear to necessitate any legal protection from Hollywood (Magder, 1993).

In 1939, Canadian state sponsorship of films began in earnest with the foundation of the government funded National Film Board. Although it produced some experimental films and animation, the NFB almost exclusively funded documentaries, to the extent that Morris claims the documentary as the "quintessential Canadian film form" (Morris, 1992, p. 241). Canada's successes in documentary filmmaking spurred a theory of documentary realism in Canadian film studies, which recognizes a realist perspective in many Canadian feature films, in opposition to the escapist traditions and happy endings of Hollywood (Gittings, 2001; Harcourt, 1980; J. White, 2006, p. 64). This realist view is most strongly associated with the films produced after the birth of the modern Canadian film industry in 1967, and the Canadian Film Development Corporation's \$10 million film fund. (Melnik, 2004, pp. 107–8). This novel form of state assistance allowed a new generation of filmmakers to make low budget but distinctly Canadian feature films that could be seen by national and international audiences.

Another characterization of Canadian cinema evolved alongside the modern industry's development: the Canadian hero as a "loser". Robert Fothergill's influential 1977 essay "Coward, Bully, or Clown: the Dream-Life of a Young Brother," noted a trend in Canadian cinematic protagonists as silly, weak, self-doubting, and altogether

very different from their often heroic American cinematic counterparts (Fothergill, 1977). While this characterization is debatable in more recent Canadian features, it certainly applies to many of the more notable films produced since the 1970's.

The establishment of Telefilm Canada in 1984 continued the tradition of state funding by awarding funds and tax incentives to films and television productions that met a specified number of Canadian content requirements. Telefilm saw the emergence of more auteur directors, such as Atom Egoyan, Guy Maddin and Gary Burns, and the organization continues to inspire similar directors today. As in the late 1960's and 1970's, these Canadian directors frequently receive critical acclaim but do not generate high numbers at the box office, which is due partly to the art-house nature of their films, and also to the inability of Telefilm to institute Canadian content requirements in domestic cinemas.

This brief history of Canadian cinema reveals a domestic film industry that only survives with state assistance, since English Canadian films seldom make a profit to fund future films. Even with this assistance, however, it is impossible for Canadian films to generate the substantial budgets of most Hollywood movies, and therefore the Canadian industry seems content not to compete with Hollywood, but to forge instead a distinct, artistic path, regardless of financial and popular outcomes, with art-house films rarely seen by Canadian audiences. Canadian historical films are a striking exception to this tradition in Canadian cinema. Their budgets are large, which allows their publicity campaigns to reach a wide Canadian audience. These big-budget historical films are infrequently produced, however, especially when compared to the number of historical

productions that appear on Canadian television. They are the exceptions that prove the rule of English Canadian cinema's domination by small-budget art-house films.

The Popular Presentation of History on Canadian Television

Far more historical productions appear on Canadian television screens than in cinemas, a phenomenon due in part to the mandate of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the medium of television itself. English Canadian television features a wide variety of programming genres, namely comedy, drama, reality, news and sports programming, with a small number of historical productions usually billed as dramas. Studies of Canadian television rarely examine programming content and instead traditionally focus on the developments and effects of policy and the changes brought by new technologies. Some scholars do explore television's relationship to Canadian identity, however, especially with respect to the influence of American programming on Canadian screens. Richard Collins states that even with the influx of American channels and television series on Canadian networks, Canadian viewers still seem to retain a nationalist sentiment (Collins, 1990, p. 18). Similarly, Marusya Bociurkiw argues that the continued existence of domestic programming is more important to Canadians than its actual viewership, and that the "awareness" of nationally-oriented television is enough to foster a national identity separate from the United States (Bociurkiw, 2011, pp. 9–10). The role of television in shaping Canadian identity is explored by a number of scholars, most notably Collins and Mary Jane Miller, who argue that the Trudeau era integrated nationalism with television more overtly than ever before, both from content and policy perspectives (Collins, 1990, p. 10). Others note the failed 1995 Quebec sovereignty

referendum as a nationalistic turning point, after which television viewers were exposed to an increase in “visibly Canadian elements” and a nation that presented itself as multi-cultural but nevertheless unified (Bociurkiw, 2011; Druick & Kotsopoulos, 2008, p. 10).

Although Canadian television content remains largely unexamined and studies on historical productions are virtually non-existent, the debates over Canadian content in television are very different from those concerning Canadian cinema. While cinematic scholars attempt to draw out clues of an elusive Canadian identity on the big screen, television scholars point to clear instances of national sentiment on the small screen, and debate when, not if, surges of Canadian nationalism occurred in television productions. The prevalence of nationalism in one medium and its absence in another is related partly to policy and partly to the medium itself. The medium of television is far more ubiquitous than cinema, located directly in its audiences’ homes, whereas cinema requires travel to a public location outside the home. The cost of movie tickets also steadily increases (currently almost \$25 for two adult tickets in Western Canada), whereas subscription-based television services cost much less per programming hour. It is no surprise, then, that Canadian television productions draw a much higher audience than Canadian films, especially in the case of the CBC, where government mandates and public funding ensure the broadcaster generates a large amount of national, and by extension historical, content.

The structure and mandates of CBC television make it markedly different from both the Canadian film industry and from other Canadian television networks. As a state-funded organization, the CBC received approximately \$1.8 billion across all its revenue sources in 2011-2012, which included \$1.2 billion of government funding, \$378 million of advertising revenue, and \$313 million of specialty services and other revenues. This

yearly budget, according to the CBC's mandate, is meant to fund productions that are "predominantly and distinctively Canadian, reflect Canada and its regions to national and regional audiences... [and to] contribute to shared national consciousness and identity," (CBC, 2011, p. 22).⁹ Yet, while a portion of CBC Television's operating budget is ostensibly earmarked for productions that feature Canadian content, the question of what this content is, and how it should resonate with viewers, is frequently debated. Historical productions are a natural fit for the CBC's mandate, as their source material makes them "distinctively Canadian," and thereby markers of national identity. Public broadcasters like CBC and PBS in the United States are therefore suited to tell the historical stories of their respective nations, and the inclusion of these channels in every basic television package overcomes the distribution challenges of cinema. No in-depth comparisons exist between Canadian television and cinematic content, and while this study attempts to compare the two via historical productions, a full comparison of content, nationalism, and identity would yield interesting results, particularly as the rise in digital content and video-on-demand services blur the boundaries between the television and the movie theatre.

Conclusion

The theories and methods outlined above aids in the following analysis of English Canadian historical films. White's concept of historiophoty and Rosenstone's suggestions for historical film analysis frames my approach to historical films and my examination of the historical world presented in each film. The production history of each film, as well as the social history surrounding its release, also factors into my analysis, as advocated by

⁹ No similar mandate exists for Canadian content in domestic cinemas.

Chapman and Toplin. Furthermore, each film is examined in relationship to its respective era in Canadian film history. This analysis will reference Canadian identity as revealed in historical films, explore how historical films either reflect or invent national images, and also compare cinematic historical films with historical productions on Canadian television. These comparisons will help to define Canadian historical cinema as a distinct, albeit small, aspect of Canadian cinema and suggest alternate strategies that allow the English Canadian historical film to contribute more to the formation of national identity.

Chapter 4: Film Analysis

Introduction

In this section, I examine five English Canadian historical films from four different decades: *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Kotcheff, 1974), *The Grey Fox* (Borsos, 1982), *Black Robe* (Beresford, 1991a), *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (Cohn & Kunuk, 2006), and *Passchendaele* (Gross, 2008) These films are examined in regard to their narrative structure and quality, production history, popular and critical reception, and their representation of Canadian history. As products of a popular medium, these films also had and continue to have the potential to contribute to a wider discussion of Canadian history and identity. My analysis indicates whether they have achieved that potential and highlights the challenges they faced at the time of their premieres, and the challenges they continue to face today. All of these films are canonical in the sense that they have received either critical or scholarly analysis, or both, as individual films. Because of this status, they represent the “best” of English Canadian cinematic forays into Canadian history.

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz: Vague Canadian Past, Popular Canadian Success

Filmography: *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (1974) was directed by Canadian Ted Kotcheff and produced by Hungarian-Canadian John Kemeny. The screenplay was written by Canadian-American screenwriter Lionel Chetwynd and Mordecai Richler (an adaptation of Richler’s novel), and shot by British cinematographer Brian West. It was distributed by Paramount Pictures, and premiered in North America on April 11, 1974.*

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (Kotcheff, 1974) is a coming-of-age tale closely adapted from Mordecai Richler's 1959 novel of the same name. The film follows Duddy, a young and energetic Jewish hustler whose ambitions for wealth and respect make him a polarizing figure in post-war 1940's Montreal. Duddy is driven by his grandfather's remark that "a man without land is nobody," and accordingly plots to buy the undeveloped property surrounding a pristine lake. Duddy's shameless quest to gather the purchasing funds draws the ire of his Jewish acquaintances, who accuse him of perpetuating the stereotype of the money-hungry Jew, but he presses on into a number of ventures, from a smooth-talking waiter, to an inadvertent drug runner, to a producer of humourously art-house home movies. As Duddy begins to buy up the land, he increasingly encounters moral dilemmas in which his desire to succeed on his own terms slowly alienates him from his girlfriend, his friends, and his family. The film ends on an ambiguous emotional note when Duddy's eventual purchase of the land is met with disappointment from his grandfather, who learns that Duddy made the final payment with a forged cheque. The final scene, however, shows Duddy putting his lunch "on credit" at his neighborhood diner, a sign that he has forged a trustworthy reputation in his community, despite his own moral dilemmas. Duddy then bursts out of the diner but seems unsure of where to go, as if lost after achieving his goal but losing the support friends and family. Duddy is thus presented as a complex character that leads audiences to both admire his tenacity and cringe at his egotism, a man who embodies the conflict between material and emotional riches.

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz owes its creation to the friendship of author Mordecai Richler and director Ted Kotcheff, two Canadians who lived as roommates in

England in the late 1950's (Spencer & Ayscough, 2003, p. 125). Inspired by Richler's manuscript for *Duddy*, Kotcheff promised to film it when he returned to Canada. The production did not commence as quickly as Kotcheff hoped, however, and after years of unsuccessful fundraising attempts, the opportunity finally came after the 1967 creation of the Canadian Film Development Corporation. A movie based on the work of a successful Canadian author and filmed by a Canadian director was a welcome fit with the CFDC's cultural ambitions. The organization committed \$300,000, which was supplemented by Montreal lawyer Gerald Schneider for a modest budget of \$650,000 (Spencer & Ayscough, 2003, p. 125). A young Richard Dreyfuss, fresh off the set of *American Graffiti*, took the title role but his manic portrayal of Duddy later filled him with self-doubt: "when it first came out I hated my performance, and said so for twenty years. Then I realized I was just nuts, and I stopped" (Pulver, 2013).

Contrary to Dreyfuss' reservations, the film received warm reception from critics and audiences alike. In Canada, the CFDC sought to release *Duddy* "the American way," and organized trailers, posters, press conferences and premiers across the country (Spencer & Ayscough, 2003, p. 126). The aggressive promotional campaign worked and the film earned a successful \$1.8 million at the box office, which made it one of the high grossing films in Canadian history (McSorley, 2002). The film received a sizeable release in the United States as well, where *The New York Times*' Vincent Canby admired it as "an alternately sad and hilarious movie of dreams rampant," (Canby, 1974), and Pauline Kael praised the film's wit and Duddy's character: "we feel with him every step of the way" (Film Forum, 2010). UK critics offered more mixed reviews, where *Monthly Film Bulletin* complained of a caricatured cast, but the overall response remained

overwhelmingly positive (Lewis, 1974). Despite the reviews, Michael Spencer, one of the CFDC's founders, was disappointed that Paramount, the film's distributor, did not put more effort into the film's promotion, and felt that the film ultimately underperformed in the US (Spencer & Ayscough, 2003, p. 127).

Duddy also netted a number of awards, including Best Canadian Film at the 1974 Canadian Film Awards, the top prize at the Berlin International Film Festival, and a nomination for Best Screenplay at the 1975 Academy Awards (it lost to *The Godfather: Part II*, another Paramount production). Today, the film is continually characterized as one of the greatest English Canadian films, and was recognized as a "culturally significant film" by the Audio-Visual Preservation Trust of Canada in 2002. Despite these accolades, the film's negative was nearly destroyed, but was rescued and restored as a digital print in 2013, following an impassioned plea from Kotcheff (Knelman, 2013). The film's near-destruction raises a paradox further explored by Tom McSorley; namely that, for all its successes, surprisingly little scholarly attention is given to the film (McSorley, 2002).

Duddy is the least overtly historical film of those discussed in this study,¹⁰ but it still meets Rosenstone's definition of a historical film. Although the film is not based on any significant historical persons or events, nor does it explicitly attempt to explain an aspect of Canadian heritage for future generations, it nevertheless embodies a moral lesson, places its focus on individual characters, features political and social historical elements, and grounds its story in a visual and cultural factual reality. The film expresses an implicit personal historicism, gleaned from Richler's reflections on the culture and

¹⁰ The film was produced 15 years after the novel's publication, which described a period similarly distant from its own time of writing.

experiences that surrounded him as an Anglo-Jewish boy in Montreal. The attention to detail in the dialogue and locations creates a distinct portrait of working-class life in Montreal, which provides a palpable cultural backdrop for the story. Questionable historical diversions emerge against this backdrop, however, most notably that almost no one speaks French, save for Duddy's French Canadian girlfriend, Yvette. Similarly, little mention is made of the Second World War, despite the late 1940's setting and Duddy's participation in a military march at the film's beginning.

From a narrative standpoint, the film downplays its Canadian setting, which is atypical of other English Canadian historical films. This is not to say that Canada is not present in the film, for Montreal is a major part of the narrative: Duddy's father frequents a diner with smoked meat sandwiches, Canadian hockey pennants adorn Duddy's bedroom, and he is chastised by antagonistic students from McGill University. Instead, the film seems almost at ease with its Canadian backdrop, and the filmmakers do not attempt to make any grand statements about Canada, nor use the characters to probe questions of Canadian identity. Duddy's father exemplifies working class life, but no exploration is made of the political or social forces that contribute to class distinctions. The only identity to receive in-depth attention is Duddy's distinction as an Anglo-Jew.

The film's characterization of Jewish life was perhaps more contentious in the 1960's and 1970's than audiences might find today. Duddy is constantly at odds with his cultural background: he refers to himself as the more Christian "Duddy Kane" in business transactions, and his obsession with making money is decried by others as "giving Jews a bad name." Duddy's financial motivation is perhaps more universal than cultural, however, for his desire to make a name for himself is also reflective of the American

dream in which hard work, perseverance, and unwavering self belief promise to yield personal rewards. This aspect of Duddy's character undoubtedly aided in the film's success, and its downplayed nationality is argued by Martin Knelman in *The Toronto Star* as another reason for the film's resonance: "it was definitive and emotionally important because, unlike other Canadian films, it came close to the lives of those who grew up in this country as the children of immigrants, belonging to neither of its two founding nations" (Knelman, 2013). In this sense, *Duddy* is a more relevant Canadian film than some historical films that followed, for it acknowledges Canadians citizens who may not subscribe to a clear Canadian identity, yet are removed from the cultural traditions of their immigrant ancestors. The film offers an unexpected antidote to the perennial question of Canadian identity, in that it opts to connect with a national audience on a more universal than historical level, and is concerned less about where Canadians come from and more about where they might go.

Duddy's focus on "ethnic" Canadian identity over a more generic Canadian identity suggests a successful direction for English Canadian historical films. The film's resonance with audiences indicates that an emphasis on Canadian multiculturalism and diversity is perhaps more appealing than the depiction of a more general, "national" history and identity. The depiction of ethnic aspects of Canadian people and history both acknowledges the diverse cultural identities within Canada, and presents them to a national audience in an engaging manner. In this sense, the vagueness with which *Duddy* approaches broad Canadian history contributes to the film's popular success, as it is counterbalanced by a strong focus on Jewish Canadian post-war life.

Almost no other English Canadian films resonated with domestic audiences on the same scale as *Duddy*, and its success remained an anomaly in Canadian film history. Because of the Canadian film industry's infancy and its state-sponsored structure, Kotcheff was unable to translate the film's success into funds for his next Canadian feature, a \$4 million version of Richler's *St. Urbain's Horsemen* with American actor George Segal (McLaughlin, 2004). Kotcheff's career continued in the United States, where he directed a diverse collection of films, including *First Blood* (the original *Rambo* film), the comedy *Weekend at Bernie's*, and several episodes for the spin-off television series, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. Kotcheff has not made another Canadian film.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which audiences viewed *Duddy* as a historical film, although its historical validity is undeniable. Richler's 1959 novel, while a work of fiction, paints a detailed portrait of post-war Montreal drawn from the author's own experiences. Kotcheff's decision to preserve the novel's time period (he might have lowered the budget by updating the setting to the 1970's) characterizes the movie as a social historical film. Unlike the other films in this study, which involve real historical figures or create composite characters from historical records, *Duddy* seeks to preserve aspects of Jewish life in 1940's Montreal through its narrative, its characters, its costumes and its settings. *Duddy's* careful attention to historical detail was one of several standards that future English Canadian historical films would follow. Besides the establishment of an aesthetic authenticity, *Duddy* set high revenue standards (motivated by a large budget and aggressive marketing campaign), and attempted to draw a wide audience through the casting of an American actor in the title role. The other historical films in this study

reflect *Duddy*'s aesthetic and financial ambitions, especially in the case of *The Grey Fox*, which also uses an American lead to promote a cross-border film to both American and Canadian audiences.

As a historical film, *Duddy* both problematizes and exemplifies Anderson and Hall's theories on nationalism. The nationalistic "imagined community" described by Anderson is complicated by *Duddy*'s portrayal as an Anglo-Jew in French Montreal, and the film only quietly features more overtly nationalistic Canadian elements like hockey and vast, unspoiled nature. Conversely, the film somewhat conforms to Hall's description of revived nationalism, for instead of excluding marginalized peoples, it focuses almost exclusively on *Duddy*'s marginalized cultural reality. This subversion of nationalistic ideals, coupled with the film's success, lends support to the argument that English Canadian historical films may succeed when they focus on micro, rather than macro Canadian cultural identities. Although other cultural identities are certainly excluded in this approach, the earnest focus on a single marginal identity as in *Duddy* appears more effective than an attempt to construct a broad Canadian identity, as will be seen with *Passchendaele*.

The Grey Fox: A Polite Canadian Western

Filmography: *The Grey Fox* (1982) was directed by Canadian Phillip Borsos, and produced by Peter O'Brien's Independent Pictures of Toronto. The film was written by American screenwriter John Hunter, and shot by cinematographer Frank Tidy.

Distribution was facilitated through Francis Ford Coppola's American Zoetrope, and the film premiered in Canada on December 16th, 1982, and on March 18th, 1983 in the United States.

The Grey Fox is the loosely biographical story of Bill Miner, an American stagecoach robber who spent 33 years in San Quentin prison. The film begins with Miner's (Richard Farnsworth) release in 1901 and follows the aging bandit's struggle to find a place in a changed world. After a visit to a nickelodeon, Miner is inspired by *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903) and begins to rob trains himself. When a Pinkerton detective investigates the robberies, Miner flees to Canada, where he works under a pseudonym in Kamloops, British Columbia. Miner begins a romantic relationship with feminist photographer Katherine Flynn (Jackie Burroughs) and befriends the local police corporal, but continues to rob trains until the Pinkerton detective arrives in Kamloops. Miner and his accomplices leave town but are soon captured by the Northwest Mounted Police. Miner is sent back to prison, but a postscript informs us that he escaped and possibly fled to Europe with Flynn.

Information on the production history of *The Grey Fox* is somewhat scarce, although Blaine Allan, Borsos' biographer, has undertaken considerable efforts to investigate the film. Shot on location in British Columbia, *The Grey Fox* used mainly Canadian actors, with the major exception of the American Farnsworth, although his nationality is certainly appropriate for the role. The film's \$3.48 million budget was drawn from the Canadian Film Development Corporation and Famous Players, and was one of the last films to benefit from the Capital Cost Allowance Act (Bartosh, 1981, p. 5). Despite its sizeable budget, Allan notes that the film was "chronically underfinanced... an arduous production and the most expensive Canadian film to that date" (Allan, 2002, p. 112). The difficulty of the film's production is further referenced by its composer, Michael C. Baker, who describes it as "torturous," but singles out the director, Phillip

Borsos, as a particular source of frustration: “Phillip, like so many filmmakers, wanted complete control and, even to the detriment of their films, would not allow the notion of someone else making a decision” (Baker, 2002, p. 3). Borsos’ desire for control is understandable as at age 27, *The Grey Fox* marked his first feature film, a much greater responsibility than the documentary and fictional short films he previously directed. Conversely, journalistic reports from the set describe a smooth shoot, with the cast and crew in high spirits, so perhaps most of the tensions arose in the film’s post-production phase (Bartosh, 1981, p. 6).¹¹

Critical reception of *The Grey Fox* was mixed. In Canada, the film received fairly positive praise for its story, cinematography and period authenticity (Harkness, 1983). In the United States, the setting of the film’s first act, critics applauded Farnsworth’s performance, particularly Roger Ebert, who awarded the film 3.5 stars and called it “one of the loveliest adventures of the year” (Ebert, 1982; Young, 1984). Overseas, however, critics took a harsher view. Richard Combs of the British Film Institute accused the film of a “squeaky-clean purity,” and labeled it as an inferior product of Canadian cinema, with “a corresponding coyness and eccentricity of character that takes the place of dramatic interest” (Combs, 1985).

The film feels like an earnest but early work of a director still honing his craft. The narrative pace often varies, some shots seem unusually long, and transitions between scenes are sometimes distractingly abrupt. The performances are also mixed; while Farnsworth and Burroughs are convincing, supporting characters such as Fernie, the Canadian police corporal, and Seavey, the American detective, are one-dimensional, and

¹¹ Bartosh’s article marks the production’s start in fall 1980, with a scheduled release for the following year: “its release, slated for September 1981, will be the final test of reality” (Bartosh, 1981, p.6). The film was not released until December 1982.

the minor characters, namely Miner's sister and the Canadian train workers, give unquestionably amateur performances. From a narrative standpoint, title cards that describe the action replace dramatic scenes that might have broadened the film's appeal. For example, Miner's narrow escape from the Northwest Mounted Police is described in text, supplemented by a mix of visuals from *The Great Train Robbery* and shots of Miner treated to match the 1903 footage. Similarly, at the film's end, Miner's escape from prison is described textually, and the only visual provided is a wide shot of the prison-garbed protagonist as he slowly paddles a small boat away from shore. The reason for this style of narrative closure is unclear, although Allan suggests Miner's muted but picturesque escape acts as a temporal link from the silent era that recalls early cinematic compositions and thereby "formally and stylistically [positions Miner] in two times" (Allan, 2002b).

As a Canadian historical film, *The Grey Fox* consciously locates itself in a historical past. Most prominently, the central character of Bill Miner is based on an actual person, and the film's narrative and dialogue are drawn from historical accounts and court transcripts that document Miner's incarceration, robberies, and escape to Canada (Bartosh, 1981, p. 6). The film also includes important aspects of not only Canadian history, but American history as well. Canadian history is seen in the development of the transcontinental railroad, which the character Flynn describes as bringing ideas as well as goods. Flynn is hesitant to laud Canada as a progressive country, however, and she is harassed for her contestations of the 1/3 wages that women receive for men's work and laments that "in this country you're not taken seriously unless you're Caucasian, Protestant, and most of all, male." These references to Canadian inequality are most

dramatically emphasized when Flynn is summoned to photograph the murder-suicide of a Chinese family on Christmas morning; the somber scene recalls the exploitation of Asian workers in the construction of the Canadian railroad. Although the citizens of Kamloops are largely portrayed as peaceful and friendly, the recognition of inequalities between gender and race are pertinent examples of how Canadians often criminalize, rather than valorize their past.

Conversely, *The Grey Fox* portrays American history through cultural, rather than socio-political references. The screening of *The Great Train Robbery*, which acts as a catalyst for Miner, references one of the most iconic early films of American cinema. The film is notable for its technical achievements, but in this case it acts as an early representative of the Western film genre in American cinema. The Western is inextricably linked to American history, inspired by the historical expansion of European civilization into the “untamed” American west, and infused with the myths of manifest destiny and the sagas of heroes and outlaws. *The Grey Fox* is often characterized as a Canadian Western, which is certainly justified by Miner’s role as an outlaw and by some of the generic Western tropes that appear in the film. For example, the trope of the vanishing frontier is recalled when Miner is released from prison and finds himself in a new century where the stagecoaches are “gone, just like the buffalo.” The generic trope of new technology is frequently emphasized in the first act of the film: an automobile surprises Miner after he exits the nickelodeon (itself a new technology), and a salesman sells Miner a mechanical apple peeler on a train. Perhaps part of Miner’s attraction to Flynn is her ability to bridge new technology with the old world. Flynn listens to phonograph recordings of operas that Miner attended in Chicago, and as a photographer,

she utilizes technology to preserve the past. The cultural elements of the American Western are appropriately combined with Canadian history in this cross-border story, which Allan describes as a “mythic past” derived from “local lore” (Allan, 2004).

While American historical myths are present in the film, Canadian cultural myths also appear in *The Grey Fox*, most notably in the stereotype of the “polite Canadian.” Fernie, the NWMP corporal, is the most emblematic of this characterization, with his friendly, almost shy demeanor. The Canadian rail workers exhibit a similar naivety when robbed by Miner, as if a train robbery was previously unthinkable in peaceable Canada: “I think we’re bein’ robbed, Herb.” Appropriately, Miner himself is introduced as “the gentleman bandit,” and his quiet, polite demeanor earns him respect from the residents of Kamloops. Like Fernie, the majority of Canadian law enforcement in the film is similarly kindhearted, and Vernon Young notes that Miner “was captured – politely - by the Northwest Mounted Police” (Young, 1984, p. 291). In fact, the NWMP are at their most aggressive when they chastise Miner’s dimwitted accomplice, whose leg is shot during an escape attempt: “You could’ve been shot in the head!” The pervasiveness of stereotypical Canadian politeness, whether or not the filmmakers consciously intended it, clearly distinguishes the film as “Canadian,” especially given the contrast with its American scenes.

Cultural tensions, often drawn from stereotypes themselves, are displayed between Canadians and Americans in the film. If Fernie is the well-meaning but naïve Canadian police officer, Seavey, the Pinkerton detective, is his American foil. Gary Reineke plays the detective as a sly and manipulative individual, who drives an automobile into Kamloops, where the local officers appear to travel by foot. Seavey tries

to intimidate Fernie with his authority, and when tensions develop between the two men, ironically enquires, “We are on the same side, are we not?” A perceived American dismissiveness of Canada is also subtly displayed when Miner comments to Flynn, “there isn’t much out here to take pictures of,” although the Canadian idealist counters, “you’re quite wrong... this is a country in transition, filled with beauty and despair.” Flynn also objects to Miner’s prideful claim that he fought with the US Cavalry in the “Indian wars,” and questions Miner’s participation with “the oppressors,” whereupon Miner backpedals to blame his youthful ignorance for his involvement. Like historical traditions of the Western, the stereotypes and inter-cultural tensions in *The Grey Fox* are perhaps historical myths themselves. Proud and intimidating Americans are contrasted with polite and educated Canadians, although, as in history, major conflict between the two nationalities is minimal.

The Grey Fox also exemplifies the changing historical contexts of the Western film genre. Hollywood Westerns of the 1950’s, such as *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956) are traditionally considered part of the genre’s “classical” period, in which the traditional cowboy vs. Indian narrative reached a creative and commercial peak, and embodied an “imaginative reinscription of history” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012, pp. 331–3; Langford, 2003). Social and political changes since the 1960’s, notably the Red Power movement, in which Native Americans publicly reclaimed their identity and history, subsequently led to a new post-modern discourse and a growing critique of the settlement of the American west (T. R. Johnson, 2009; Langford, 2003, p. 33; Teuton, 2008). As a “revisionist” Western, *The Grey Fox* reflects this changing tradition. Bill Miner is an aged bandit in a foreign time and place, a far cry from the archetypal “John Wayne”

cowboy. The frontier of the Old West is now settled, and Indians, a mainstay of many classical Westerns, are conspicuously absent from the film, although the Chinese murder/suicide scene demonstrates an effort to include the presence of subjugated peoples. Allan compares *The Grey Fox* favorably to American revisionist Westerns *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill, 1969) and *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah, 1969), and perhaps the film's focus on an old American outlaw, rather than a "young gun" is appropriate, given Robert Sieler's historical assertion of the cowboy as an "itinerant labourer who played a relatively minor role in opening up the Canadian West" (Sieler & Sieler, 2004, p. 155). Historian Pierre Berton notes Hollywood's use of Canada as the setting for "northwoods" films, northern Westerns made between 1920 and 1960, which failed to evolve alongside their southern-set counterparts (Berton, 1975, p. 236). *The Grey Fox* is potentially a belated response to this American view of Canada, an American genre given a distinctly Canadian voice.

As a Canadian historical film, *The Grey Fox* celebrates and appropriates personalities, histories, and myths that, for better or worse, are typically emblematic of Canada and the United States. The film's cultural impact on Canadian history and identity, however, is debatable. The film earned a respectable \$5.5 million at the North American box office (rare for an English Canadian film), and swept the 1983 Genie Awards, where it won Best Motion Picture, Best Achievement in Directing (Borsos), Best Supporting Actress (Jackie Burroughs), Best Foreign Actor (Richard Farnsworth), and awards for art direction (Bill Brodie), musical score (Michael Conway-Baker), and original screenplay (John Hunter) (Topalovich, 2000, p. 147).

Despite the film's financial success and industry accolades, its relevance to Canadian history is somewhat tenuous. Miner, after all, is not a central Canadian character, and he does not encounter any significant aspects of Canadian history. Historical events are certainly alluded to, but no new discourses emerge to enlighten or challenge the audience's preconceptions about Canada's past or identity. At best, therefore, *The Grey Fox* acknowledges a wider discussion of Canadian history and identity, but does not contribute to either discussion in a meaningful way. Furthermore, the film's foundation in an unequivocally American genre hinders its ability to be distinctly Canadian. The American Western had so pre-empted the genre that, despite its Canadian setting, *The Grey Fox* ultimately appears more American than Canadian. A truly distinctive "Canadian Western," in which an unsettled Canadian west is explored during the same time frame would need to look and feel markedly different from its American counterpart. While American Westerns typically mythologize the American past, *The Grey Fox* does not attempt to similarly mythologize Canadian history. Miner's escape at the film's end attempts to mythologize the American protagonist, but Canada's presentation in the film is far more factual than mythological. In this sense, *The Grey Fox* is a product of the changing American Western, as earlier discussed, but does not greatly subvert or contribute to the genre.

The Grey Fox also exemplifies Rosenstone's assertion that historical films should be analyzed for their historical argument, rather than criticized for their deviation from historical fact. A film's historical argument, Rosenstone argues, is determined through the examination of the film's historical world and its construction, which in *The Grey Fox* is created through Bill Miner's direct experiences with life in British Columbia. The

characters and circumstances that Miner encounters constructs the image of a largely peaceable Canada, demonstrated by stereotypically polite and amiable Canadians. This is also a Canada that can hold its own, however, as evidenced by Katherine's outspoken nature and Miner's eventual capture by the NWMP (significantly not the American detective). *The Grey Fox* therefore creates a broad cultural and historical world that embodies both a peaceable Canada as stereotypically understood by Americans, and a capable, intellectual Canada. The combination is certainly appropriate for a mainstream story set in western Canada, and told through the perspective of an American outlaw.

Black Robe: Re-visioning History

Filmography: *Black Robe* (1991) was directed by Australian Bruce Beresford, and produced by Canadian Robert Lantos. The film was written by Irish-Canadian screenwriter Brian Moore (an adaptation of his own novel),¹² and shot by cinematographer Peter James. Distribution was facilitated through the Samuel Goldwyn Company, and the film premiered in Canada on September 5th, 1991, in the United States on October 4th, 1991, and on February 27th, 1992 in Australia.

Black Robe (Beresford, 1991) premiered nearly a full decade after *The Grey Fox*, and treats Canadian history very differently than its predecessor. Telefilm Canada was the major funder, with aims to promote a distinct cultural nationalism through domestic and international co-productions. *Black Robe* follows the journey of Father Laforgue (Lothaire Bluteau), a French Jesuit priest, from a Quebec settlement to a Catholic mission in Huron territory in 1634. A small group of Algonquin Indians, led by the clairvoyant

¹² Moore's novel was inspired by his readings of the 16th century historical documents, *Relations des Jesuits de la Nouvelle-France (The Jesuit Relations)* (Moore, 1996, p. 8)

Chomina (August Schellenberg) is assigned to guide Laforgue and Daniel, his French interpreter (Aden Young), to the Huron mission. On the journey, tensions between Laforgue and the Algonquin arise over the Jesuit's religious convictions; some believe he is a demon sent to steal their souls, and Laforgue is constantly rebuffed in his efforts to baptize the Indians. The group eventually fractures and the main characters are captured by a band of Iroquois, who torture and kill all but Laforgue, Daniel, Chomina, and his daughter, Annuka (Sandrine Holt), who escape and continue towards the Huron mission. The mortally wounded Chomina bids Annuka to abandon Laforgue in accordance with a dream he experienced, and after her father's death, she and Daniel leave Laforgue to travel alone. When the Jesuit reaches the Huron mission, he finds that disease has infected the population, and convinces the Huron that only baptism will bring them salvation. The Huron are wary, but accept baptism after Laforgue professes his love for the Indians. The film ends with a title card that describes the massacre of the Huron by the Iroquois fifteen years later.

The production of *Black Robe* differs from *The Grey Fox* in that it was produced through a treaty co-production agreement between Canada and Australia. Irish-Canadian writer Brian Moore published *Black Robe* as a novel, and Canada's Alliance Communications purchased the motion picture rights. Australian director Bruce Beresford, who had previously directed socially-conscious period films *Breaker Morant* (Beresford, 1980) and *Driving Miss Daisy* (Beresford, 1989) was interested in *Black Robe* for its conflicts of culture and religion, and an international co-production treaty was established between Alliance and the Australian Film Development Corporation to generate an unprecedented \$12 million budget that neither country could raise alone

(Beresford, 1991b; Longfellow, 2000, p. 203). The film also utilized a \$2 million promotional budget, which billed *Black Robe* as a cinematic “event,” and highlighted its three-month shoot and the filmmaker’s careful attention to historical details, particularly in the presentation of the indigenous characters (Longfellow pp.203-4). David L. Pike notes that the production’s emphasis on historically researched Aboriginal portrayals fit an early 1990’s cinematic trend in which “revisionist representations [of Indians] were both commercially attractive and ideologically compelling for liberal filmmakers,” as seen in *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (Mann, 1992) (Pike, 2012, p. 252). Despite its publicity campaign, *Black Robe* failed to recoup its budget, and after an 11th place debut in box office earnings, it generated approximately \$8.2 million in Canada and the United States (Box Office Mojo, 2013). As an international co-production, the film was ineligible for the Genie Awards, although it did with the Golden Reel Award for highest grossing Canadian film.

Critics generally applauded *Black Robe*’s ambitions of historical accuracy, but found its narrative and characters less compelling. Comparisons with *Dances with Wolves* surfaced frequently, as the film also attempted a sympathetic but more naïve portrayal of First Nations peoples. In *Macleans* magazine, film critic Brian D. Johnson emphasized the differences between the two films, and argued that *Black Robe* lacked consequence and was “too dark, too disturbing and too painfully lacking in redemption” to reach as wide an audience as *Wolves* (Johnson, 1991). Similarly, Roger Ebert awarded the film only 2 stars and although he commended its authentic appearance, ultimately described it as “a bleak and dour affair,” with an ending that makes the entire film “a prelude to nothing” (Ebert, 1991). The film enjoyed a strong premiere in the UK, but faced similar

reviews abroad as in North America; *Sight and Sound* described Laforgue as too distant and uptight, and others complained that the characters were not as engaging as they appeared in Moore's original novel (Eagleton, 1992; Romney, 1992; Schwartzberg, 1992).

As a Canadian historical film, *Black Robe* is markedly different from the more commercial *Grey Fox* in its narrative style, characterization, and approach to Canadian history and identity. Spatially, the film's narrative follows the characters' journey from their Quebec settlement to the Huron mission, briefly detoured by their capture by the Iroquois. Laforgue's spiritual journey does not reflect his physical one, however, and his convictions in Catholicism appear unshaken at the film's end. While arguably more true to reality, the character's lack of growth, as noted by critics, leaves the viewer unfulfilled and generally indifferent to Laforgue. In contrast, Chomina, a supporting character, has a greater developmental arc, as he comes to believe that Laforgue is not a demon, yet still never adopts Laforgue's religious beliefs. Although the characters in *Black Robe* are fictional creations (with the exception of an early appearance by Samuel de Champlain), their characterization is perhaps truer to historical reality as we know it than Bill Miner's. Greater veracity does not necessarily endear films to audiences, which points to a larger distinction between *Black Robe* and *Dances with Wolves*: only in the mythologizing of history (heroic storytelling) does there seem to be material for audience approval.

Black Robe's much-touted attempts at historical accuracy reveal some of the abilities and limitations of Canadian historical films. The historical research that guided the film's production is often addressed by critics, such as the careful design of sets and costumes, the dialogue appropriated from historical documents, and the efforts that

ensured the Algonquin, Iroquois, and Huron characters spoke in their native languages. Naturally, exceptions are frequently noted as well, such as inaccurate portrayals of sweat lodge ceremonies and the aesthetic choice to shave the Algonquin's heads (B. D. Johnson, 1991, pp. 3–5). Perhaps the greatest anachronism, however, is that all the French characters speak English, although the film's commercial aspirations make this an understandable conceit.

Black Robe's status as a Canadian historical film is complicated by its international underpinnings. In certain respects, the film is an international product, as it was written by an Irishman, directed by an Australian, funded by Canada and Australia, filmed in Quebec and France, and distributed by American Zoetrope. Brenda Longfellow sees the Canadian-Australian partnership as an ironic example of post-colonialism, with “two ex-British colonies collaborating to produce a film about French colonialism with a subtext that addresses their shared history of genocide against aboriginal peoples,” and decries the use of English instead of French as “a blatant endeavor to homogenize history” (Longfellow, 2000, p. 204). Longfellow's accusations are overreaching in both cases. From a linguistic perspective, she overlooks the filmmaker's efforts to translate sections of the script into native Algonquin, Iroquois, and Huron languages, and to find actors capable of performing the lines. Furthermore, the use of French instead of English would not change the film's narrative in any way, and the marked cultural differences that form the film's foundation clearly complicates, rather than homogenizes, Canadian history. Longfellow also draws unfair conclusions about the filmmakers' motives. There is no celebration of the Jesuit attempt to convert the natives to Christianity, but rather a clear demonstration of the inability for two cultures to stray from their ingrained cultural

beliefs, or to clearly communicate with each other. The international effort that helped to realize this film strengthens it, and makes it a rare and valuable example of an English Canadian historical film.

Despite the *Black Robe*'s status as an international coproduction, many ostensibly Canadian elements exist in the film. In writing his screenplay, Moore complained, "Canadians don't realize the incredible difficulty there is putting their ideas out to the world" (B. D. Johnson, 1991), though what these "Canadian ideas" are is certainly open to interpretation, especially considering Moore's perspective as an Irish immigrant. *Black Robe* is set two centuries before Canadian confederation, so notions of Canada as a modern country are understandably rare. Frequent discussions of religion, both Catholic and indigenous, reveal the spirituality of those peoples who eventually became categorized as "Canadian," but apart from French Catholicism, the extent to which these religions played a role in shaping the Canadian nation is unclear. One might argue that the film's examination of religion is relatively fair and balanced, for religion is always explained through characters' perspectives, and their beliefs are never explicitly framed as "right" or "wrong"; for example, Laforgue argues with Daniel that "the devil makes [the Indians] resist the truth of our teachings," to which the Daniel responds, "why should they believe them? They have an afterworld of their own...is it harder to believe than paradise where we all sit on clouds and look at God?" While Daniel may embody "political correctness 300 years before its time" (Romney, 1992), perhaps the film's approach to religion reflects the relative spiritual freedom of Canada as a country without an official national religion (though dominant ones are certainly present). Religion and

spirituality are therefore given an ostensibly Canadian treatment in a less overtly Canadian film.

Another important Canadian element in the film is the indigenous characters that form the majority of the cast. The role of the various First Nations is the subject of a contested essay by Ward Churchill, a polemical and controversial American writer and advocate for Native American issues. Churchill objects to the presentation of the Iroquois as unconscionably violent to outsiders, the Algonquin as pathetic in their rebuffs of Christianity, and the Hurons as falsely sympathetic in their eventual acceptance of baptism (Churchill, 1996). Although he praises the attempts at visual accuracy, Churchill ultimately likens the film to anti-Semitic Nazi cinema. Churchill's claims are systematically rebuffed by Kristof Haavik, who argues that Churchill is "imagining offence where there is none," and generally misinterprets the intentions of the film (Haavik, 2007). Perhaps this controversy is expected in films that deal not only with the past, but with marginalized peoples as well. Johnson acknowledges the film's potential for controversy, but notes the positive development that indigenous stories nevertheless receive a sincere treatment, even if told by a non-indigenous filmmaker (B. D. Johnson, 1991, p. 5). On a broader scale, this dispute also illustrates how Canadian history garners debate, because it does not conform to a standard and typically flawed genre.

In the international co-production of *Black Robe*, Canada is perhaps portrayed through the gaze of an outsider "looking in," and is less of a Canadian story and more about the foundations of tensions, assumptions, and cultural complexities that continue to manifest themselves in modern Canada. The film's producers likely hoped the film would succeed at the box office based on its relation to two distinct factors: authenticity and

history. *Black Robe* certainly possesses visual authenticity with its natural landscape, costumes, and sets, and is possibly the first historical film of its scale in a northern climate. Its textual authenticity appears strong as well, at least from the Jesuit perspective, as Moore appropriated many of the scenarios and much of the language from the *Relations*. Furthermore, as the main character, Laforgue's presence gives the film a biopic feel, much like Miner in *The Grey Fox*. *Black Robe*'s dissatisfying resolution also seems to reinforce authenticity, for it does not conform to the typical Hollywood ending, in which the narrative is brought to a satisfying close. It also fits the Canadian model of cinematic anti-heroism discussed earlier, as well as Canada's cautious approach to mythologizing its past, especially when compared with Hollywood, which sees national heroes throughout American history. The film's final text about the massacre of the Huron settlement suggests a cold, dispassionate fact that is inconvenient in popular narratives and resembles a lack of closure that is also typical of many Canadian art-house dramas.

If the film breaks with authenticity in any major way, however, it is through its reflection of contemporary ideologies about First Nations people. The relatively equal voice given to the film's aboriginal characters seems to embody the rise of aboriginal voices in the public sphere during the 1990's, and the struggle for aboriginal rights in Canada (McCall, 2011). The equal perspective given to *Black Robe*'s aboriginal and French characters is perhaps disproportionate from a purely Jesuit standpoint, but is likely welcomed by audiences who appreciate a more egalitarian view of a typically subjugated minority. In the end, *Black Robe* demonstrates a key difference between American and Canadian historical films: whereas Americans tend to mythologize their

past, as earlier discussed with reference to the Western genre, Canadians tend to demythologize their history, and stick close to the historical record. The effects of this approach on historical remembrance and celebration will be discussed further on, where *Black Robe* serves as an important comparison with *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, another film about the clash of aboriginal and European cultures but told by native, rather than white, filmmakers. Many of the critical issues raised with *Black Robe* were addressed and overcome by *Rasmussen's* production, although the aboriginally-produced film had much less of a cultural and commercial impact.

Finally, *Black Robe* inadvertently exemplifies Rosenstone's support of the artistic deviation from historical fact. Rosenstone acknowledges the necessity of historical films to free their narratives from factual authenticity to keep audiences engaged within a tangible historical world (Rosenstone, 1995, p. 7). The aforementioned criticisms of *Black Robe* indicate that the film failed to fully utilize this artistic license, and that its focus on authenticity restricted the appeal of its characters and created a narrative that may be historically accurate, but dramatically limited. The film's historical world is visually constructed through impeccably accurate sets and costumes, but its narrative world is filled by characters with limited and opposing views, who do not grow or change throughout the duration of the film. *Black Robe* therefore proves Rosenstone's insistence that in historical cinema, facts are less important than the establishment of an emotional connection with the audience.

The Journals of Knud Rasmussen: Postmodern History

Filmography: *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006) was written and directed by Canadian Zacharias Kunuk and American-Canadian Norman Cohn, and was produced by Kunuk, Cohn, Elise Lund Larsen and Vibeke Vogel. Cohn also served as cinematographer and the film received distribution from Alliance Atlantis and SF Film. It premiered on March 11, 2006 in Igloolik, on September 7th, 2006 in Canada, on October 8th, 2006 in the United States, and November 10th, 2006 in Denmark.

The Journals of Knud Rasmussen (Cohn & Kunuk, 2006) is a historical film that is very different from those previously discussed. *Rasmussen* is an Inuit-made production inspired by the 1922 visit of Danish ethnographer Knud Rasmussen to the Igloolik area of present-day Nunavut. The story loosely revolves around Avva (Pakak Innuksuk), an Inuit shaman, and his daughter, Apak (Leah Angutimarik), as they struggle to maintain their traditional spiritual beliefs against the growth of Christianity among their people. Unlike Father Laforgue in *Black Robe*, whose mission is to convert the Indians to Christianity, Knud Rasmussen (Jens Jørn Spottag) and his two Danish companions play peripheral roles, and seek only to observe the Inuit and learn about their quickly changing way of life. As the film progresses, hunger and exclusion by Christian Inuit wear down Avva and Apak's resolve, until Apak partakes in an Inuit communion where she breaks a spiritual taboo and eats certain animal organs, thereby losing the ability to sexually connect with her deceased husband. The film ends as Avva's hunger overwhelms him and he is forced to send his spirit guides away and become a Christian; he watches mournfully as his spiritual companions wail and recede into the distance. A final wide shot shows a dog

sled arriving at the Christian Igloolik settlement, with another group of Inuit ready to abandon their traditional beliefs, so that they may eat at the Christian camp.

Unlike the more commercially oriented films examined in this study, *Rasmussen* is clearly an art-house production that does not cater to a wide audience. The story is slow in its progression, more concerned with observation than plot points, as if the filmmakers, much like the Rasmussen himself, primarily desire to preserve a traditional way of life.¹³ Directors Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn further distance *Rasmussen* from popular cinema through its visuals. The film was shot on high-definition video, which produces a smoother picture, very distinct from film, and utilized natural light, giving the film a documentary feel. The handheld shooting style continually reminds the viewer of the camera operator's presence, as do frequent zooms and the camera's shadow, which occasionally appears on actors close to the lens. Despite these modern influences, the film features carefully crafted costumes that appear historically accurate, and the arctic setting is striking in its vast and empty beauty. It is fitting that Kunuk and Cohn identify themselves as "video artists," rather than filmmakers, as *Rasmussen* is certainly an artistically-influenced departure from mainstream cinema (Cohn, 2008, p. 160).

The film's script was written by Kunuk and Cohn in English and Inuktitut, and is based on actual encounters between Rasmussen and the Inuit during the Fifth Thule Expedition. Rasmussen serves only as a supporting character in the film, which maintains a strong Inuit perspective, opening with narration from an aged Apak, rather than the words of the European ethnographer. The film also seems built on an

¹³ In a scene with Rasmussen, Avva delivers a monologue over fifteen minutes long, describing his life story and ascendancy to shamanism. The scene places the viewer in the perspective of the Danish ethnographer, carefully listening to a man whose traditions are fading into history.

improvisational foundation, for it differs greatly from the published script. Whole scenes and characters are excised from the finished product, but the narrative nevertheless follows a similar trajectory. The film was shot on location near Igloolik, a hamlet of approximately 2,000 people in Foxe Basin, and used locals as both actors and crew members. Kunuk and Cohn's production company, Isuma (the Inuktituk word for "to think") produced the film on an estimated budget of \$6.3 million raised through Telefilm Canada, and the film premiered on the opening night of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in 2006.

Kunuk and Cohn owe much of their professional success to their previous feature, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (Kunuk, 2001). *Atanarjuat* is a filmic version of an Inuit folktale, and is distinguished as the first film produced entirely in Inuktitut. The film won a myriad of awards, including Best Canadian Feature at TIFF, the Golden Camera at Cannes, and swept the 2002 Genie Awards, winning the top prize in the Motion Picture, Director, Screenplay, Music and Editing categories, as well as the Claude Jutra Award for best feature by a first time director. In contrast, *Rasmussen* won no major awards, and only received nominations for Best Costume Design at the 2007 Genies and Best Canadian Film by the Toronto Film Critics Association in 2006. Reviews of the film were appreciative but lacked the enthusiasm that surrounded *Atanarjuat*, with *The Globe and Mail* awarding three stars to the "mild (not major) disappointment" (Groen, 2006), and *Variety's* characterization of the film as "glacially paced and structurally lumpy" (Felperin, 2006).

Both *Atanarjuat* and *Rasmussen* were made by the same filmmakers, used many of the same actors and locations, told feature-length stories of the Inuit past, and yet

Rasmussen did not experience anywhere near the same success as its forerunner. Perhaps the major discrepancy between these two films is that *Rasmussen* is historical and *Atanarjuat* is mythological. One might argue that *Atanarjuat* is also a historical tale, albeit one passed down through centuries of oral tradition, but its foundation in folktales and the supernatural makes it a markedly different story. Joseph Campbell, in his writings on myths and their functions, argues that myths contain a universal quality from a foundation of common experiences that “deal with great human problems” and offer “clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life” (Campbell, Moyers, & Flowers, 1991, p. 5). This basic, universal appeal of myths is given a cinematic twist by George Melnyk, who further argues the connection between audience appeal and the mythological: “since the universal language of cinema is mythological, the appeal of films about the real depends on their degree of mythologization, that is, their recasting of real people in heroic roles” (Melnyk, 2004, p. 37). *Atanarjuat*’s mythic foundation, complete with heroes and villains, likely enabled its appeal to a wider audience, whereas *Rasmussen*’s narrow historical focus, internal conflict, and spiritual, rather than mythological elements seemingly hindered its impact. *Atanarjuat* was also the first film by an Inuit director about exclusively Inuit subjects, and *Rasmussen*’s similar style may not have carried the same impact as the original. As an aboriginally produced film, *Rasmussen* continues *Black Robe*’s cinematic deconstruction of historical native-newcomer relations, adding a rare and long-overdue native perspective. Both films emphasize a theme of failure in this respect, wherein the adoption of Christianity is framed as the only way Canada’s first peoples can hope to survive in a bleak future with Europeans. In contrast, the mythic figure of the Fast Runner triumphs at the end of

Atanarjuat, which further indicates the tendency of Canadian historical films to highlight the failures of Canada's past, rather than to mythologize Canadian history on the big screen.

In the context of this study, *Rasmussen* appears as a post-modern historical film. It offers a unique instance of agency, with colonized people preserving their own cultural past in a format and style very different from typical mainstream historical cinema. Notions of Canada are virtually absent from the film, which is understandable given the isolated location of the characters, and no grand historical narratives are addressed. The film approaches time as a fluid, rather than linear element, which is emphasized through Apak's erotic visitations from her deceased husband, and her statement at the film's beginning: "by remembering my youth, I relived it." This statement acts as a metaphor for the film itself, for its remembrance of the past, though in a clearly constructed fashion, gives the audience an opportunity to experience aspects of a foreign and distant world.

Rasmussen is similar to *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* in that it rejects any attempts to create a nationalistic Canadian identity and instead places its focus on a marginalized and isolated culture. Like *Duddy*, the film does not overtly attempt to revive nationalism in Hall's sense, nor does it attempt to create an "imagined community" as described by Anderson. In its rebuff of nationalistic ideals, *Rasmussen* demonstrates that a focus on distinct communities in Canada acts as a powerful method of historical revisionism against the Anglo-French grand narratives typically used to construct Canadian identity. The film is concerned more with the loss of traditional Inuit identity than the construction of any kind of Canadian identity, but despite its ethnic focus, it did

not appeal to broad Canadian audiences. *Rasmussen*'s art-house orientation and aesthetic similarities to *Atanarjuat* likely limited its popular appeal, whereas *Duddy*'s focus on an ethnic population, coupled with its mainstream narrative and origin as a popular novel, contributed to the film's success. Despite their differences, both films reinforce the notion that Canadian historical films are more powerful when they feature specific, often marginalized cultures, rather than attempt to create a unified and exclusive national identity.

Passchendaele: Valorizing the Past

Filmography: *Passchendaele* (2008) was directed by Canadian actor and director Paul Gross, and produced by Niv Fichman's Rhomus Media, Gross' Whizbang Films, and the Damberger Film & Cattle Company. The film was written by Gross and shot by cinematographer Gregory Middleton. Distribution was facilitated by Alliance Films, and the film premiered in Canada on October 17th, 2008.

Passchendaele (Gross, 2008), is a more overtly self-identified Canadian film than any others examined in this study, as it deals with Canada's national "coming of age" as an increasingly independent colony. *Passchendaele* is essentially a love story set against the backdrop of the First World War. Michael Dunne (Paul Gross) is a shell-shocked sergeant sent home to recover after driving his bayonet through the forehead of a young German soldier in 1917. In Calgary, Dunne faces ridicule for his psychological trauma and begins a relationship with Sarah Mann (Caroline Dhavernas), an army nurse whose father fought for the Germans at the battle of Vimy Ridge. When Sarah's young asthmatic brother David (Joe Dinicol) enlists in the army to impress his girlfriend's

father, Dunne volunteers to return to France and protect him in battle. The final act of the film occurs during the battle of Passchendaele, in which Dunne is mortally wounded as he rescues David from the German trenches. Sarah, who also returns to the front, comforts Dunne as he dies, moments before the Canadian victory at Passchendaele is announced.

Like *Black Robe*, the production of *Passchendaele* was promoted for its high cost and dedication to historical accuracy. With a budget of \$20 million, the film is the most expensive ever produced with solely Canadian funds. To fund the project, the producers received the maximum of \$8 million in federal funding through Telefilm Canada, which was supplemented with \$5.5 million from the Alberta government's legacy fund, as Gross, the star, writer, director, and a native Calgarian, ensured the story would feature Calgary and film in the province (Binning, 2007; Vlessing, 2008). The national sentiment evoked by the film's focus on Canada's involvement in the First World War helped sell eighteen shares in the film of \$250,000 to private investors, and an additional \$2 million was raised through a partnership with the Dominion Institute, a charity that enabled the distribution of tax receipts to donors (Binning, 2007). This unprecedented fundraising is visible in the film's opening credits, where a number of sponsors and partners are noted amongst the producers and distributors.

Gross wanted the film to "knock the audience out of their seats" when it premiered as the opening film of the Toronto International Film Festival in 2008 (Vlessing, 2008), but critical response was ultimately less enthusiastic. In Canada, Brian D. Johnson encouraged viewers to see the film but complained that Gross' character appeared too polished, as if "running for office in some imaginary election" (B. D.

Johnson, 2008), and Liam Lacey of *The Globe and Mail* conceded that some of the film's "scenes may be embarrassing, but at least Gross can't be accused of playing it safe" (Lacey, 2008). American critics reacted similarly, and complained that the film vacillated between positive and negative portrayals of war, and failed to achieve the cultural revisionism to which it aspired (Cockrell, 2008; Honeycutt, 2008), while in the UK, *Sight and Sound* noted its impressive visuals, but found the stilted dialogue and conventional direction less appealing (Macnab, 2009). Despite these criticisms, the film won 6 Genie awards in 2009, including best film, best art direction, best costume, best sound, best editing, and also won the Golden Reel Award as the top Canadian film at the box office in 2008 (Vlessing, 2009). The film was ultimately a financial failure, however, as it grossed only \$4.4 million on a \$20 million budget (Kelly, 2009).

A distinct lure of *Passchendaele* was the involvement of Paul Gross, one of English Canada's most recognizable celebrities. Gross' name adds recognition value to the film, which likely attracted audiences familiar with his work on the television series *Due South* or his previous Canadian curling comedy, *Men with Brooms*. One wonders, however, if Gross' involvement in so many creative roles hampered the film's reception. The screenplay is sometimes heavy handed (Dunne's mother "died of a broken heart" when her sons were killed in battle), filled with awkward exposition for the sake of historical inclusiveness, and melodramatic in its treatment of the love story between Dunne and Sarah ("In a heartbeat, I could fall so hard," she swoons). It is difficult to relate to any of the central characters, whose dialogue often seems drawn from a made-for-TV movie, and for all the discussions of Dunne's battlefield trauma, Gross' character appears more jaded than shell-shocked. The climactic 'hero's run' where Dunne charges,

without a gun, across no man's land to rescue David is difficult to believe, as is the heavy-handed, Christ-like symbolism when Dunne carries the injured boy on a mangled cross. Perhaps if Gross cast another actor in the lead (a wartime love story with a 49-year old is rather unusual, particularly given the infamously young recruits of the war), or enlisted the help of another writer, the film would have enjoyed more critical and financial success. One also wonders if the film might have found more success as a television production, for Gross is arguably more well-known on small Canadian screens and television is generally a less critically demanding medium.

As a Canadian historical film, *Passchendaele* is proudly concerned with Canada's past, and unlike the previous films discussed, it attempts to valorize Canadian history. The film's First World War setting immediately distinguishes it from American war films, which rarely address their country's brief involvement in the Great War. Unlike Borsos' and Beresford's films, which are set in respective historical pasts, Gross' production features and is titled after a specific historical event in a war that is characterized as leading to Canada's "birth" as a nation. Pierre Berton cites the Canadians' success at Vimy Ridge, a battle that preceded *Passchendaele*, as one of the major turning points in the First World War, and a pivotal moment for Canada, when Canadian generals and troops secured a victory where the European allies had failed (Berton, 2001). In *Passchendaele*, Canada's independence at Vimy is proudly referenced, "the British couldn't do it, the French couldn't do it, it was just us. The Canadian Corps," and Canadian history also explicitly appears in the inter-titles that provide context at the film's opening and conclusion. Other nods to Canadian history and culture are variously present in the film, seen in the efforts to reference specific Calgary locations, the

pseudonym of McCrae that Dunne adopts on his return to battle (a reference to the Great War poet), and more humorously, Sarah's neighbor Mr. Harper, a stern looking gentleman with an ill-tempered dog.

Yet for all the nationalist sentiment present in the film, the historical event from which the title is drawn is sidelined in favor of the love story between Dunne and Sarah. The importance of the battle at Passchendaele, if any exists at all, is never truly emphasized until the text at the end of the film, which, in the antithetical vein of *Black Robe*, informs us that after four months of fighting and 600,000 lives lost, "an enemy offensive the following spring recaptured the hard won ground in less than a week." Since the battle is merely a backdrop for the love story, the audience invests little emotion in Canada's victory or loss. Despite the earlier nationalist accolades about the Canadians' success at Vimy Ridge, the announcement of Canada's victory at Passchendaele is delivered by a tired field doctor, and met with equally tepid enthusiasm. Gross struggles to find a balance between typically American flag-waving nationalism as seen in *The Patriot* (Gibson, 2000) and *Lincoln* (Spielberg, 2012), and the Canadian desire to atone for a troubled past (one officer remarks that "this country does not yet support internment"). This reveals a crucial paradox in the film, for its desire to valorize Canada's military achievements is at odds with its demythologization of Canada's past. Unlike *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998), which portrays the horrors of war as a necessary endeavor for the preservation of freedom, *Passchendaele* tends to portray war as pointless and destructive. The film also premiered in the midst of debates about Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan, which embodied a shift in Canada's

identity from peacekeepers to combatants, and seems to appropriately embody this conflict in Canadian identity in its reluctance to choose a side.

Perhaps the most poignant moment in the film is during its ending credits, which play alongside archival footage of Canadian soldiers in the First World War. Although the film itself carries clear indicators of meticulous historical research, the use of authentic war footage ultimately reveals the film's artificiality. The footage shows us the faces of men who fought and died in the conflict, and who appear very differently from the actors in their mannerisms and behavior. It reminds us that the film is an imagined re-enactment of a true event, sidelined for a fictional romance. *Passchendaele*'s use of documentary footage combats any suspension of disbelief with direct historical reality.

Regardless of its criticisms, *Passchendaele* is arguably the most mainstream historical film in this study, designed to attract and entertain, rather than challenge its viewers. The film opens *in medias res* in the heat of a battle to hook its audience, attempts to create a sympathetic hero and love story, and even features a major antagonist in the character of a demeaning British officer (Jim Mezon) who is unceremoniously killed by a piece of shrapnel to the neck. The central characters all must overcome obstacles (Dunne's shell-shock, Sarah's morphine addiction and her family's association with 'the hun'), there are violent battle scenes, and the film concludes with a tragic, sentimental ending as Dunne dies in his lover's arms. *Passchendaele*'s overt attempts to generate an audience through its casting, publicity, and traditional story structure make it unique among the Canadian historical films in this study, and its uncharacteristically overt national sentiment is a bold new direction for the English Canadian historical film.

As a popular film, however, *Passchendaele* is ultimately a failure, as it did not resonate strongly with popular or critical audiences, and as mentioned earlier, recouped only 1/5 of its budget at the box office. Canadian films are typically either auteur driven art-house productions, or low-brow mainstream comedies (*Porky's* and *Meatballs*), and *Passchendaele* attempted to break new ground as a popular mainstream Canadian film that was straight-faced and culturally significant. The film is not inherently appealing to a young audience, and the 18-34 year old demographic so often targeted by Hollywood films likely had relatively little interest in the film.

Passchendaele's failure echoes the previous failure of *Carry on Sergeant* (Bairnsfather, 1928), a silent 1928 Canadian war film that Peter Morris describes as “Canadian cinema’s most expensive flop,” that was “on several levels, an unmitigated disaster” (Morris, 1992, pp. 71–2). Much like *Passchendaele*, Morris argues that *Carry on, Sergeant* was not necessarily a bad film, but was ultimately not better than most Hollywood fare. The film raised much of its budget through private investors, buoyed by the high-profile name of Bruce Bairnsfather, a famous author and cartoonist who was to direct the film (Morris, 1992, p. 74). Bairnsfather’s inexperience led to several costly overruns during production, and the finished product scandalized audiences over the morality of John McKay, the film’s hero. In the film, McKay, a married officer, is wooed by a French damsel and is seen climbing the stairs to her room, arm in arm with the girl. Canadian audiences decried the film as a slight against the morals of Canada’s servicemen, which added to the poor reception of an already narratively disjointed production (Morris, 1992, p.79).

Carry on, Sergeant and *Passchendaele* endured eerily similar failures. Both are characterized as mediocre films with flawed central characters, both raised extraordinarily high budgets and expectations on the popular reputation of their directors, and both failed to captivate audiences and profit at the box office. Perhaps these films also reveal the conflicted nature of Canada's war-time identity, for the country's participation in World War I is often cast in a heroic light, but more recent conflicts, such as the 2001 entry into Afghanistan, often face criticism. *Passchendaele*'s failure is also heightened by its attempt to compete as an "epic" film at the cinema, with a Canadian star, a large budget, and an ambitious narrative. A \$20 million budget is not enough to compete with the \$100 million budgets of Hollywood epics, but as mentioned earlier, a historical television miniseries is not saddled with the expectations of an epic war film. *Passchendaele* might have better succeeded as a large-scale CBC television production, in a medium where Canadian identity appears far less conflicted.

Passchendaele also exemplifies the issues inherent with Anderson's theory of the nationalistic imagined community. Unlike *Duddy* and *Rasmussen*, *Passchendaele* attempts to create a broad Canadian identity by placing its focus on a wide range of culturally diverse characters. The inclusion of English, French, German, and Aboriginal Canadians results in a film that does not delve deeply into any cultural identity, and arguably does not resonate with any specific cultural group. *Passchendaele* also therefore reflects Hall's theory of revived nationalism, but among a broad, rather than marginalized population. Coupled with its aforementioned uncertainty about the valorization of war, however, the film fails to locate a clear Canadian identity. Conversely, the film succeeds in its attempt to construct a dramatic narrative that is supported, rather than dictated, by

historical facts, as Rosenstone advocates. Few criticisms emerged about the historical accuracy of the film, likely due to the fact that none of the characters are based on major historical figures, no marginalized peoples are included in major roles, and the script attempts to appeal to a popular audience. *Passchendaele* therefore successfully adopts many tropes of a mainstream historical film, but its broad cultural focus may have hindered its success as a *Canadian* historical film.

Conclusion

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz, *The Grey Fox*, *Black Robe*, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, and *Passchendaele* are films separated by decades, but nevertheless yield insights about the subgenre of Canadian historical films. These films each received a great amount of media attention, not only for their attempts at historical accuracy but also for their budgets, which in each case was the highest ever awarded to a Canadian film. Each film also seems to emulate a larger cinematic genre, with *Duddy* as a coming-of-age tale, *The Grey Fox* as a Canadian Western, *Black Robe* as a “road movie,” *Rasmussen* as an Aboriginal viewpoint on colonialism and *Passchendaele* as a war epic. All five films are also styled as biopics, with *Duddy* as a fictional rendering of Richler’s childhood, *Miner* based upon his real-life counterpart, *Laforgue* as a composite character from the Jesuit *Relations*, *Avva*, a true historical shaman described in Rasmussen’s journal, and *Dunne*, drawn from Gross’ grandfather’s own experiences in the Great War. Yet these films do not always conform to the American genres from which they derive. After the Vietnam War, American films that glorified war became scarce, and in

Passchendaele, Gross clearly struggles with valorization of Canada's wartime past. *Rasmussen's* presentation oscillates between a historical film, a docudrama, and an art film. The relative independence of characters in American road movies like *Easy Rider* is subverted in *Black Robe*, where Laforgue must rely on the Algonquin for assistance in unknown lands. Similarly, Miner, as the genteel relic of the Old West, stands in stark contrast to the violent outlaws of Sam Peckinpah and Clint Eastwood (*The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid* (1973) and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1972)). Finally, *Duddy* is less nostalgic than contemporaries like *American Graffiti* and demonstrates a mature acknowledgement and examination of Jewish stereotypes. Perhaps the appropriation of generic elements indicates that these Canadian filmmakers want their movies to appeal to a larger audience, not only because they believe the story is important, but because they believe the histories their films embody are important to preserve. Despite these aspirations, the frequent lack of box office success is either symptomatic of Canadians' disinterest in their own history or, more likely, a failure of English Canadian filmmakers to capture an audience. English Canadian historical films seem to spring from careful research and utilize fairly balanced narratives in which no true antagonists exist. This portrayal of history is commendable, but it fails to mythologize the Canadian past in the same way as American films. This failure to be "American" in its approach allows the English Canadian historical film to express different values concerning national identity. Taken as a whole, these values make Canadian identity distinct and rooted in its own culture and public discourse. The acceptance of this distinctness in our films may mean that the films remain unpopular in theatres, although the same may not be said for television productions.

Chapter 5: Interviews and Analysis

Introduction

This study of English Canadian historical films involves an original research component that informs my conclusions and reveals potential avenues for future investigation. The research was conducted in the form of a short questionnaire sent to a small number of academics, journalists, and filmmakers with previous involvement in Canadian films. The research questions were designed to get both industry and academic perspectives on the Canadian historical film. The most interesting and applicable responses concern issues of Canadian identity, the state of English Canadian filmmaking, and the challenges inherent in creating historical productions in Canada. My question-by-question analysis of the responses follows below, and the complete responses appear in Appendix 1.

Process and Participants

I selected my participants because of their experience as Canadian filmmakers, as critics of Canadian film, or as scholars of Canadian cinema. I attempted to contact a writer, director, or producer from each historical film in my study, as this would ensure a sample that spans 40 years of Canadian filmmaking and directly relates to the films I examine. I received responses from Ted Kotcheff, director of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Norman Cohn, co-director of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, and Paul Gross, the writer, director, and producer of *Passchendaele*. I also contacted Peter Howell, a journalist and movie critic who writes frequently on Canadian cinema for the *Toronto Star* and is a member of the Broadcast Film Critics Association. Finally, I contacted two

Canadian film scholars: Dr. Jim Leach of Brock University, who's *Film in Canada* (Leach, 2011) charts the political and cultural contexts of Canadian cinema, and Dr. William Beard of the University of Alberta, who has published frequently on the work of David Cronenberg, Atom Egoyan, and English Canadian cinema in general.

Each participant received a short survey of the following six questions:

1. What do historical films contribute to Canadian identity?
2. Why do we have so few Canadian historical films?
3. How does the low number of Canadian historical films affect Canadian cinema?
4. Considering the limited English Canadian cinema audience, does it make sense to have our historical productions on television?
5. What is the result of so few historical films on Canadian identity?
6. Any other comments?

The participants responded to my questions electronically and signed consent forms that allowed for the publication of participant names and responses in my thesis. Although I was fortunate to contact several filmmakers for this study, two potential participants ultimately could not respond to my survey, and consequently no responses are available from the filmmakers of *The Grey Fox* or *Black Robe*. To help fill this information gap, I examined previously published interviews with Robert Lantos, producer of *Black Robe*, for his opinions on English Canadian cinema that could benefit this study. The following analysis therefore includes a small but significant cross-sample of specialists in various aspects of Canadian cinema, who offer insight and opinion into Canadian historical films and their relation to Canadian identity.

1. What do historical films contribute to Canadian Identity?

A common consensus in the responses to this first question is that historical films are powerful media, with intrinsic ties to national identity. Several respondents connected a nation's art to its identity, as typically seen in literature, but Paul Gross emphasizes the unique, visceral power of film to immerse viewers "in a period foreign to them and yet immediately [comprehensible]." Similarly, Peter Howell contends that historical films contain the power to become generally accepted documents of the past, and therefore contribute greatly to the formation of Canadian identity. Howell also remarks on the filmmaker's ability to shape history, as evidenced by the Oscar-winning historical film *Argo* (Affleck, 2012), which shifted the story's focus from Canadian protagonists, as Howell knew it, to American heroes.

Howell's recognition of the delicate connection between history and identity is reflected in many other participants' responses. The majority of responses reference the power of perspective in history, encapsulated by Jim Leach's argument that a one-sided version of history risks the promotion of "a politics of identity that marginalizes newcomers." Leach's assertion is reflected by Ted Kotcheff, who recalls a review of *Duddy Kravitz* that celebrated its focus on the marginalized Jewish Canadian identity, and by Norman Cohn's belief that historical films should be used as tools to illuminate peoples and identities that are often overlooked in Canadian history¹⁴. The power of historical films to dictate and subvert history is undeniable, but their ability to highlight marginalized identities is perhaps underutilized in Canadian cinema.

¹⁴ Cohn's films with co-director Zacharias Kunuk focus exclusively on Inuit history and mythology.

A clear response on the contribution of historical films to Canadian identity appears somewhat elusive, however. Most respondents supply a theoretical answer, without specific examples of films that enforce or subvert notions of Canadian identity. This lack of specificity suggests that either the small number of English Canadian historical films does not greatly impact identity, or, more likely, that the identities featured in historical films are as divergent and complex as Canadian identity itself. The study of and emphasis on Canadian history as identity-forming is much weaker on Canada than in the United States, and until the Harper government's attempted shift toward a military identity, the emphasis was placed on contemporary values of inclusiveness, rather than historical identity. Rather than paint a clear picture of an idealized national identity, historical films may instead complicate Canadian identity through the use of perspectives not typically considered by the average Canadian viewer. For example, in *Black Robe*, the aboriginal characters are given an arguably more authentic voice than in many earlier American films. Instead of ridiculing the spiritual beliefs of the Algonquin, the film compares their devotion as equal to the Jesuit priest's faith in Catholicism. The film does not make moral judgments about one faith over another, but takes the more complicated approach of presenting two opposed and unrelenting ideologies to explore the nature of spiritual belief in different cultures. The film's postcolonial perspective is certainly a re-writing of history, for its source material in the 17th century *Jesuit Relations* is not as spiritually balanced. Historical films are therefore powerful tools that appear to complicate, rather than define, Canadian identity.

2. Why do we have so few Canadian historical films?

This question yielded the common response that the cost of historical films is the largest impediment to their production. Not only are large budgets needed to create historically researched sets, costumes, and props, but many participants also believe that the Canadian film industry lacks the resources to adequately support large historical film productions. As evidence for this argument, Gross provides a brief example from the production of *Passchendaele*, in which the construction of First World War uniforms was outsourced to India, as no Canadian entity could accommodate the order. While not all historical films are so epic in scale, it is conceivable that their production costs would almost always be higher than similarly sized films in a contemporary setting. Additionally, the relatively small amount of money available from Telefilm Canada for each production, especially when compared to the larger budgets of Hollywood films, further limits historical film production in Canada.

Another theme to emerge from the responses is a perceived public disinterest in Canadian history. Many respondents believe that Canadian history is often unfairly categorized as dull and boring, a stereotype that directly hinders the production of historical films. Howell cites a general “low national self-esteem” among Canadians, but Leach probes deeper to suggest that the Canadian “refusal to create images that might stand in for historical memory” may arise from Canada’s strong tradition in documentary filmmaking. Leach also notes that when English Canadian art-house filmmakers Guy Maddin and Atom Egoyan approach history, they frame the past through overtly artificial methods, a deliberate attempt to encourage the audience to question any claims of

historical authenticity.¹⁵ Leach also notes Quebec director Denys Arcand's refusal to make narrative historical films because "all historical reconstruction is a fraud." Although Robert Rosenstone would challenge Arcand with the argument that written histories are in many ways as artificial as historical films, the trepidation of renowned Canadian directors to approach history head-on is interesting to note. Certainly, many Canadian filmmakers appear more interested in the fictional present, rather than their nation's historical past, but it is impossible to say if this disinterest is part of a national trend, or merely individual artistic interests.

More broadly, Gross wonders if a disinterest in history has spread to American studios, as evidenced by Steven Spielberg's difficulty in producing *Lincoln* as a theatrical feature and Gross' own failed attempt to adapt an acclaimed historical fiction novel about the Civil War for the American screen (Bond, 2013). If American studios begin to shy away from historical films with concerns over limited appeal and high budgets, Canadian historical films are also unlikely to flourish. Similarly, Cohn is skeptical that any Canadian historical film would receive funding without its basis on a piece of popular literature; two films in this study (*Duddy Kravitz* and *Black Robe*) were indeed adapted from popular novels, which likely buoyed investment in their production. Cohn's assertion raises an interesting question: if Canadians are not familiar with the subject of a historical film, are they more likely to see it or avoid it? Part of the appeal of historical films is arguably their connection to the present, which enables the audience to draw parallels between the film and the world they inhabit. For example, *Passchendale's* production during Canada's first military offensive since the Korean War may have

¹⁵ Maddin's *My Winnipeg* (2007) is a surreal documentary about the filmmaker's adolescence in the city of Winnipeg. Egoyan's *Ararat* (2002) frames the 1915 Armenian genocide through the production of a fictional historical film about the event.

influenced Gross' ambivalent approach to Canada's wartime identity, and may have encouraged audiences to attend the film. Conversely, a lack of knowledge about Canada's Inuit peoples may have deterred audiences from viewing *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. If Canadians are truly disinterested in their present place in history, they are unlikely to be interested in the past.

3. How does the low number of Canadian historical films affect Canadian cinema?

The common response to this question is that Canadian cinema is not greatly affected by a lack of historical films. Howell speculates that the infrequent production of historical films makes it difficult to raise funds for future historical productions, as no great need for these films has been demonstrated in the past. From a similar but broader perspective, Beard argues that the general audience for Canadian films is so low that an absence of historical films is negligible; in a cinema that few people watch, genres are of little importance. Beard's opinion is certainly valid, but perhaps it is the general art-house focus of Canadian films that alienates the national audience, rather than the genre. Many of Canada's award-winning films are dramatic art-house productions, rarely aimed at a mainstream audience. In contrast, the more popular films of the Capital Cost Allowance era of the late 1970's and early 1980's embraced popular genres like horror and comedy, and while their artistic merit is debatable, the wide distribution and box office profits of films like *The Brood* (Cronenberg, 1979), *Scanners* (Cronenberg, 1981), *Porky's* (Clark, 1982) and *Meatballs* (Reitman, 1979) are unmatched by most, if not all, dramatic Canadian films since that time.

As argued earlier in this study, historical feature films are often aimed at a popular audience, with the hope that a high number of ticket sales will offset expensive production costs. Beard indicates that the Canadian cinema audience is too small to meet such a demand, and therefore big budget Canadian productions need to appeal to American audiences if they hope to turn a profit. Leach and Gross also acknowledge the struggle for Canadian cinema to find a place in international markets, and given their national focus, Canadian historical films may be especially difficult to market in other countries. Cohn provides a contentious voice to this argument, however, for as an art-house filmmaker set on creating a distinct national cinema, he objects to the popularization or "Americanization" of Canadian films, and argues that the lack of funding for unique historical productions is extremely detrimental to Canadian cinema. The historical films that Cohn imagines, though, are likely much less mainstream than those of Gross or Kotcheff, and are unlikely to achieve the ticket sales and profits to which Telefilm Canada aspires.

Despite their recognition of the difficulties in making and marketing profitable historical films, Gross, Leach, and Beard agree that the low number of Canadian historical films is simply part of the landscape of Canadian cinema, without a strong affect in any direction. It is unfortunate to think that these ambitious and expensive films might have little effect on Canada's cinema, but their rare production is likely directly related to their impact. *Passchendaele* seems to prove this theory, for although it broke from the Canadian art-house tradition and utilized large production and marketing budgets, it did not appear to inspire the production of any new historical films, either on war or other topics. The responses to this study indicate that Canadian historical films are

viewed as having a strong *potential* impact on Canadian identity. Only an increase in the production of these films could lead to an increased influence on Canadian cinema as a whole.

4. Considering the limited English Canadian cinema audience, does it make sense to continue to have our historical productions on television?

Participants generally agree that historical productions should continue to appear on Canadian television, but not necessarily at the expense of future theatrical films. Beard frames television as a pseudo 'last resort' for historical productions, a medium that does not guarantee profitability but has the ability to preserve and perpetuate Canadian history and culture. Beard argues that government-sponsored broadcasters like the CBC are the only organizations able to fund such content, and that their tie to federal funding does not necessarily encourage the production of costly programs that may not interest viewers. Leach also recognizes the tenuous nature of government funded programming, and therefore characterizes public broadcasters as an unstable means of transmitting history. Similarly, Cohn questions the agenda of government-sponsored content, and cautions against an "Anglo-centric misrepresentation of Canadian history" controlled by federal powers. These observations recognize the potential pitfalls of government funded historical productions, but also acknowledge that without such funding opportunities, historical television content may cease to exist. The necessity of historical productions is therefore caught within a paradoxical web of objectivity and government control, which again calls to attention the narrative perspective of Canadian historical productions.

Other filmmakers regard historical television productions with a more welcoming attitude, although they do not necessarily view the medium as a replacement for theatrical films. Kotcheff frames television as “ideally suited for [historical productions] in many ways,” and while he does not elaborate on this point, he is likely aware of the growing trend of American historical miniseries like HBO’s *Band of Brothers* (2001) and *The Pacific* (2010), and History Channel’s first scripted drama, *Hatfields & McCoys* (2012). These programs are far longer than any traditional film, and would be unimaginable in a theatrical setting. Kotcheff’s career has also involved numerous productions for both cinema and television, which may also contribute his acceptance of historical productions on the small screen.

Gross’ experience with *Passchendaele* involves an interesting combination of both theatrical and televised releases. In his response, Gross charts *Passchendaele*’s success as it moved from cinemas, to video-on-demand, to free television and finally to classrooms across the country as part of an educational package. He remarks that the film’s dissemination throughout Canada would not have happened if it had only existed as a television production, and that it was buoyed by the prestige associated with “the power of cinema.” For the \$20 million *Passchendaele*, cost recoupment was a paramount concern with investors, and the film’s distribution through various media is an interesting model that future historical filmmakers might pursue.

Producer Robert Lantos recognizes the important role television can play in the production and distribution of not only historical films, but also Canadian films in general. Lantos, with the assistance of Gross and many other prominent Canadian filmmakers, has tried since 2012 to launch Starlight, “an English-language specialty

television service devoted to Canadian movies, particularly feature films and documentaries intended for theatrical release” (Toronto Star, 2013). In 2013, Lantos failed in his bid to make Starlight a mandatory Canadian channel included with basic television packages, but still hopes to launch the channel as an option for interested consumers. Lantos argues that “Canadian movies have never had a home” in cinemas, and his attempt to establish an English Canadian movie channel is both a concession and a subversion of the English Canadian film industry. In one respect, Starlight is an acknowledgment of the low box office figures generated by Canadian films and the ever-increasing dominance of Hollywood productions in Canadian cinemas. On the other hand, the channel offers a previously unavailable, direct-to-consumer distribution for Canadian films, which typically only receive 5.2 percent of airtime on existing channels (Wong, 2014). Should the channel receive approval from the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, it seeks to fund a number of original Canadian films every year. With the clearly Canadian content of historical films, it will be interesting to see if audiences respond to hard-to-find films like *Duddy Kravitz* and *The Grey Fox*, and if the channel will finance any new historical productions if interest is demonstrated.

In general, this study’s respondents appear supportive of Canadian historical television productions. Although these productions may lack the cinematic weight of feature films, their presence is appreciated on a cultural level. Concerns about the amount of government control over television productions are justly founded, which relates to the earlier arguments over narrative perspective in historical features. In this sense, television may be more suited to factual, rather than social or fictional history; a *Passchendale*

miniseries might allow for a deeper exploration of its titular battle, somewhat like the aforementioned HBO historical series. The shifting nature of television may yield an interesting future for Canadian historical productions, especially in the areas of mini-series and specialty channels, but it may unfortunately occur with the loss of Canadian history on the big screen.

5. What is the result of so few historical films on Canadian identity?

On this question, respondents agree that a lack of historical films impacts Canadian identity, although the impacts themselves are somewhat unclear. Howell argues that the low number of historical films risks the perpetuation of ignorance about Canada's past, which in turn clouds any attempt to create a clear definition of Canadian identity. Cohn echoes this response, with the assertion that national identity springs from the work of a nation's artists, who foster and preserve notions of identity. Cohn asserts that the lack of English Canadian historical films is therefore detrimental to the formation of a clear national identity, and he frames English Canadians as a "people without a narrative," out-of-touch and unfamiliar with their own history.

Gross also recognizes the complicated nature of Canadian identity, but suggests that it is not necessarily a problem that needs to be solved. Gross portrays Canadian identity as a puzzle that continues to grow in complexity, into which historical films add new twists and complications. He argues that historical films should not establish a clear and undisputed Canadian identity, and obliquely suggests that without the continued production of these films, Canadian identity will lose an element of its ongoing development. Gross clearly supports the evolutionary nature of Canadian identity, in

contrast to the revolutionary and mythological American identity described earlier in this study. His assertion is especially interesting given his efforts to produce *Passchendaele*, an ambitiously epic film that overtly attempts to uncover a foundational point in Canadian history, moreso than any other film in this study.

In contrast, Leach suggests that a lack of English Canadian films supports the argument that English Canada has no identity to begin with. Beard takes a similar approach, with the assertion that English Canadians are often unable to identify the social and cultural differences between themselves and Americans, beyond a few broad distinctions like healthcare and hockey. Beard also points to the absence of a mythical national foundation from which a Canadian identity can be created, but Leach and Cohn are quick to contrast the absent identity of English Canada with the culturally and politically developed identity of Quebec. Leach and Cohn portray the great number of Quebecois historical films as an indication of the province's clear identity, and thereby connect the lack of English historical films to a lack of national identity. Like Cohn, Beard argues that more English Canadian historical films would benefit Canadian identity, but does not specify what these benefits might be. As an example, Beard references the 21-part CBC television docudrama *Canada: A People's History* (Lortie & Métiivier, 2000) as a much too overt attempt to create a Canadian identity, and finds fault in the program's "self-conscious pious politically correct mythmaking," that is too distanced from lived experiences to be truly effective. *A People's History* foregrounds its artifice as an educational tool, with omniscient narration and actors who stare directly into the camera as they recite historical documents. Canada's efforts to create histories that represent contemporary sensibilities also stand in contrast with the one-sided

American myths perpetuated by Hollywood historical epics like *Gone With the Wind* and *The Patriot*, which academics similarly dismiss for their narrow historical viewpoint.

Leach, Cohn, and Beard agree that a lack of historical films is detrimental to Canadian identity, but appear unsure if more productions would help to solve or exacerbate the problem.

6. Any other comments?

This final question yielded some diverse and interesting responses. Many participants restated the desire to see the production of more Canadian historical films, but again emphasized the difficulties faced by such productions. Leach recommends a close study of Quebec historical films to understand how history is used effectively for nostalgic, critical, and nationalistic aims. Beard worries that the current barriers to the financing and exhibition of Canadian film, combined with the perceived lack of public interest in Canadian history, make the production of future historical films very unlikely. In contrast, Gross believes that many Canadians are interested in Canadian history, as evidenced by the enthusiastic responses he receives when visiting classrooms across the country, as part of the Reel Canada cinema program.¹⁶ Gross acknowledges the difficulties in convincing potential investors of this interest, however, a challenge made greater by an ever-decreasing funding of independent films since 2008. Gross also points to the rise of superhero films and franchise attempts as evidence of a “post-historical phase” in moviemaking; this may certainly be true of blockbuster fare, but period films continue to make strong impressions on critics every year.

¹⁶ Reel Canada is a Toronto-based non-profit agency that arranges screenings of Canadian films in high schools across the country.

The “epic” portrayal of Canadian history is certainly not a feature of Canadian historical films, although it is interesting to note that Howell, Gross, and Kotcheff each mention the 1759 battle of the Plains of Abraham as a pivotal moment in Canadian history that is yet to receive a filmic treatment. Gross predicts that a film on the subject, while important in the formation of Canada, would likely receive no attention from investors or international markets. This is an apt assertion, as Kotcheff tried unsuccessfully to secure funding for a film about the battle: “not only could I not get financing for the film, I did not receive the slightest interest in it whatsoever.” Perhaps Canadians have an inherent aversion to big-budget, patriotic, mythological renderings of their history, but more realistically, the major barriers that English Canadian filmmakers face, namely small audiences, a reliance on federal funding, and Hollywood competition, simply prevent such films from ever being made at all.

Conclusions

The participants in this survey yielded many similar responses and provided useful insights and opinions on the subject of Canadian historical films. In general, the participants believe that historical films play an integral part in the development of Canadian identity, and they emphasize that history is a powerful tool that can simplify cultures and marginalize minority perspectives. The high costs of historical films limits their production in Canada, as does a possible misconception that Canadians are simply not interested in their nation’s history. Canadian cinema is not greatly affected by the lack of historical films, however, and their absence is characterized as an accepted feature of an industry that mainly supports art-house films. Participants generally believe that

Canadian television should continue to support historical productions, but not necessarily at the expense of historical films, as federally funded programs might embody a government agenda. Participants seemed to overlook the federal government's current interest in perpetuating a militaristic history, however, as most recently evidenced by the national campaign to remember the Battle of 1812. In this sense, the government's agenda is potentially as influential in Canadian myth making than any lack of historical films¹⁷. Finally, most participants believe the low number of historical films contributes to Canadians' unfamiliarity with their own history, and hinders the development of Canadian identity.

The analysis of the survey responses reveals a contention between two conflicting portrayals of Canadian history. The first is a mythological history, a grand, sweeping narrative that contributes to the creation of a strong Canadian identity, somewhat akin to the stereotypical American cinematic presentation of history. The other is a perspective-driven history that gives voice to marginalized groups in Canadian society. While neither approach is completely possible in any historical production, several respondents seem torn between a desire to create a mythical Canadian past and their realization of the falseness of such history within the Canadian cultural mosaic. This tension illustrates a central paradox of English Canada's complicated identity; the maintenance of our many divergent histories prevents the construction of a common, uniting historical narrative.

Perhaps Canadian directors are also more aware, or at least more suspicious, of the artifice behind historical films than their American counterparts. The large-scale historical films examined in this study generally shy away from definitive renderings of

¹⁷ Another way to characterize the federal 1812 remembrance campaign is through its lack of influence, as it was roundly criticized by the media and seemed to make no impact on public patriotism.

Canadian history, which potentially signals Canada's historical films as post-modern histories themselves. Paul Gross, who's *Passchendaele* arguably attempts the most authoritative portrayal of Canadian history, readily admits that not all Canadians will share his view of the First World War as a defining moment for Canada. Regardless of how history is portrayed on screen, however, many participants in this study believe that an appetite exists for Canadian history, so long as the story is interesting and well told. If this interest does exist, Canadian filmmakers require an innovative way to make historical productions cheaply and for a wide audience, if historical films are ever to gain a recurrent presence on Canadian screens.

Chapter 6: Contrasting Models: The United States, Quebec, and English Canadian Television

Introduction

This study identifies English Canadian historical films as ambitious productions that seldom turn a profit at the box office, despite publicity and marketing efforts. In contrast, historical films produced by major American studios, such as *JFK*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Black Hawk Down* account for some of the most expensive, highest grossing, and critically lauded films ever made. On a similar but smaller scale, Quebecois filmmakers produce many historical films that reflect their national identity and appeal to both audiences and critics alike, such as *Mon Once Antoine*, *Le Confessionnal*, and *C.R.A.Z.Y.* This section compares the contrasting models of Hollywood historical films and Quebecois cinema with their English Canadian counterparts, and comments on the benefits and drawbacks of historical content delivered via television, rather than the cinema.

American Historical Films: A Successful Tradition

The cinematic celebration of American history is almost as old as the movies themselves. The Western film genre, arguably founded with *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903), represents a mythologized version of American frontier history. Another early historical production, D.W. Griffith's silent Civil War epic *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), is frequently celebrated for its groundbreaking box office success and

revolutionary approach to cinematic storytelling (Stokes, 2007).¹⁸ Since these early days, American historical films continue to engage both critics and audiences, to the extent that, since 1990, three-quarters of the Best Picture winners at the Academy Awards were set in a historical past.¹⁹ While not all Hollywood historical films focus solely on American history (*Gladiator* (Scott, 2000) and *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995) are two obvious exceptions), the narratives of these films are arguably shaped by quintessential American ideals that spring from the country's revolutionary past, in which a small force (usually one man) confronts a corrupt and powerful antagonist. In American historical films, history is generally used to perpetuate American mythology and ideology that is taught to Americans at an early age, and is rarely used as a platform through which filmmakers critically explore the past. This patriotic approach to history is perhaps what contributes to these films' financial and cultural success, as it is presented to a national audience that is oriented to such a mythological history.

Unlike their English Canadian counterparts, American historical films receive a considerable amount of scholarly attention. American film scholar Robert Burgoyne argues "the history film has played an exceptionally powerful role in shaping our culture's understanding of the past," and describes the subgenre's ability to project "an image of America that informs, or in some cases challenges, our sense of national self-identity" (Burgoyne, 2008, pp. 1–2). Burgoyne notes that traditional studies of Hollywood historical films often consist of comparisons between historical fact and

¹⁸ Despite its aesthetic achievements, Griffith's film is rightly criticized for its disturbing sympathies towards the Ku Klux Klan.

¹⁹ These films include *Dances with Wolves* (1991), *Unforgiven* (1993), *Schindler's List* (1994), *Forrest Gump* (1995), *Braveheart* (1996), *The English Patient* (1997), *Titanic* (1998), *Shakespeare in Love* (1999), *Gladiator* (2001), *A Beautiful Mind* (2002), *Chicago* (2003), *No Country for Old Men* (2008), *The Hurt Locker* (2010), *The King's Speech* (2011), *The Artist* (2012) and *Argo* (2013).

fiction, and he argues for a deeper investigation into the filmic genres through which history is retold, somewhat in the vein of Robert Rosenstone (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 3; Rosenstone, 2006). As stated earlier in this study, Rosenstone encourages the examination of historical films as historical documents themselves and maintains that in many respects, these films are as culturally valid as traditional written histories (Rosenstone, 2006, pp. 1–3). Other scholarly approaches to American historical films include J.E. Smyth’s categorization of history by genre (Smyth, 2012) and David Eldridge’s chronological exploration of historical films produced in a single decade (Eldridge, 2006).²⁰ These scholars, while divergent in their approach to the American historical film, ultimately engage in debates about American film and history that are largely absent from Canadian scholarly discourse, and in turn reveal the need for a deeper examination of the ideological differences between Hollywood and English Canadian historical films.

When compared to the United States, the lack of scholarly attention towards English Canadian historical films is partly due to the reticence of filmmakers to adopt a strong ideological historical position. The Canadian films in this study do not portray their characters as strong archetypal heroes and lack any portrayals of revolutionary history; even the war-set *Passchendaele* explores Canada’s involvement in the conflict through a supportive, rather than initiatory role. Although both Canada and the United States have colonial origins, the American War of Independence required the establishment of a distinct national identity, whereas Canada continues its existence as part of the British Commonwealth. The small quantity of Canadian historical films in

²⁰ Eldridge examines historical films from the 1950’s, which accounted for an impressive 40% of Hollywood’s cinematic output.

comparison to art-house dramas also likely contributes to the lack of scholarly attention toward this subgenre. Because scholars tend to be interested in key features of a national cinema, the frequent production of American historical films lends itself to academic investigation, whereas the rare Canadian production of this subgenre perpetuates its marginalization.

Historical Television: American Failure and Canadian Success

Although American historical films receive much scholarly and popular attention, American historical television programs gain less popularity in both respects. The major American television networks (ABC, NBC, CBS and FOX) rarely broadcast historical productions, and instead generally feature contemporary detective series (*CSI*, *NCIS*, *Bones*), legal and hospital dramas (*Law & Order*, *Grey's Anatomy*), and reality-based competition and talent shows (*Survivor*, *American Idol*). Narrative historical productions are found more frequently on either subscription-based or public access channels, namely AMC (*Mad Men*, *Hell on Wheels*), HBO (*Deadwood*, *Band of Brothers*, *John Adams*), and PBS.

As a publicly funded broadcaster, PBS plays a parallel role to Canada's CBC, although much of its funding is received via private donation, rather than from government. PBS's most recognizable historical programs are likely the numerous documentary series produced by Ken Burns, which examine a wide array of American subjects, such as the American West, the Civil War, jazz, and baseball. Burns, who considers his work as that of an "amateur" historian, argues that before 1990, television's programs that depicted the American past "have gone a long way towards killing our

historical curiosity,” and describes the academic approaches to history as similarly detrimental (Thelen, 1994, p. 1032). Burns cites short audience attention spans as a possible reason for the low number of American historical television productions (he designs his programs to hold the focus of “an interested but ignorant member of the audience, an eighth grader perhaps” (Thelen, 1994, p. 1043)), but the higher production costs of a narrative historical series likely act as a greater deterrent for traditional broadcasters. Historical documentaries therefore offer a much more affordable approach to the presentation and preservation of the American past, especially for public broadcasters like PBS. Furthermore, the major American channels are privately funded and without a national mandate, unlike the CBC. These channels are therefore not indebted to the perpetuation of any American culture or history, and accordingly focus their programming on a number of similar and potentially profitable productions.

In contrast to the United States, historical productions appear often on English Canadian Television. The CBC frequently features historical miniseries and movies-of-the-week, such as *The Arrow* (McBrearty, 1997), *Prairie Giant: The Tommy Douglas Story* (Smith, 2006), and, most notably, the 21-part docudrama series, *Canada: A People's History* (Lortie & Métivier, 2000). Although the CBC's Canadian content mandate and taxpayer funding facilitates the production of these programs, other major Canadian networks also produce historically-themed programs, including Global Television's Second World War drama *Bomb Girls*, and CityTV's *Murdoch Mysteries*, set in 19th century Toronto. In English Canada, the large number of historical television shows indicates a public interest in Canadian history, and suggests that the lack of historical films is much more a failing of the English Canadian film industry to facilitate

such productions, rather than a purely cultural problem. In contrast, the American avoidance of historical television shows may also be due in part to the successful production and cultural penetration of American historical films in the cinema. American audiences frequently see their history on the big screen, whereas Canadian audiences rarely see their history, or any Canadian narrative films, at all.

Quebec Cinema: Independence and Ideology

Unlike English Canada, Quebec maintains a distinct and profitable filmmaking tradition. The linguistic and cultural differences between Quebec and English Canada have fostered a distinct French Canadian cultural industry, replete with authors, musicians, filmmakers, and celebrities that often go unrecognized in the English speaking provinces. Naturally, Quebec's cultural producers seek to explore French Canadian identity and history, which in the cinema often results in the production of historical films.

Studies of Quebecois cinema frequently frame their subject through a socio-political lens, particularly in the period after 1950. Scott Mackenzie describes the scholarly categorization of Quebec films as localized productions, "concerned only with the fragile state of French-Canadian identity in North America," and Bill Marshall explores the manifestation of Quebec history and identity through the province's "national cinema" (Mackenzie, 2004, p. 1; Marshall, 2001). The socio-political approach to Quebecois cinema is understandable, given the province's cultural and historical divergence from English Canada.

As the English Canadian film industry became firmly established in the 1960's and early 1970's, Quebec experienced the "Quiet Revolution," a social shift in which an increasing secularization of the population led the provincial government to assume control of health and education from the Catholic church (Pallister, 1995, p. 16). The Quiet Revolution also involved an increase in provincial economic control and laid the groundwork for Quebec's independence movement, which included the formation of the separatist *Partis Quebecois* (Dickinson & Young, 2000). The sovereignty sentiment that developed during this era is reflected in work of Quebec's cultural producers, who promoted a distinct and nationalistic culture often at odds with English Canada. In this respect, Quebec's struggle for independence more closely reflects the ideology of the United States than English Canada, for it involves the recognition and protection of a distinct national identity. English Canada lacks such a clear identity, and similarly lacks cultural producers driven by a nationalistic ideology to tell their nation's story.

The production of Quebecois historical films began early, after the cessation of imported French films during the Second World War led Quebec filmmakers to establish a cinema of their own (Melnyk, 2004, pp. 78–9). An early entry was *Tit Coq* (Delacroix & Gélinas, 1953), a drama set around the Second World War that is cited as a catalyst for subsequent cinematic critiques of the Catholic church (Pallister, 1995, p. 29). The societal critique and exploration of identity continued in many subsequent historical films, including *Kamouraska* (Jutra, 1973), an 1830's love story, *Les Ordres* (Brault, 1974) about the incarceration of civilians during the October Crisis, and *Le Confessionnal* (Lepage, 1996), a family mystery set in both 1994 and 1952. Perhaps the most renowned Quebecois historical film, however, is *Mon Oncle Antoine* (Jutra, 1971), the coming-of-

age story of a small boy in 1940's rural Quebec. Quebec film scholar Janis L. Pallister observes both the narrative and ideological functions of *Mon Oncle Antoine*, which is “on one level the story of one boy, and on another... the coming of age or the raising of consciousness of Quebec and its sense of authority and history,” essentially an ideal combination of history and identity (Pallister, 1995, pp. 241–2). Like *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Mon Oncle Antoine* is a fictional narrative set in a historical past, but *Antoine* is distinguished by its frequent identification as the greatest Canadian film ever made, an acclamation that has eluded English Canadian films, historical or otherwise.

Like much of American cinema, the cinema of Quebec often projects and interrogates aspects of a distinct cultural identity. Quebecois films generally appear more ideological and self-critical than American films, and their sense of identity and history is far more prevalent than anything found in most English Canadian productions. While debates about Quebec's “national” status are beyond the scope of this study, the province's strong cinematic tradition and cultural identity is another clear indication that Canadian audiences are interested in their stories and their past, and that a small, domestic film industry can succeed in an American-dominated market.

Conclusion

When compared with the nature and output of historical films from the United States and Quebec, the low number of English Canadian historical films appears to stem from a lack of clear cultural identity in English Canada. The numerous examples of popular and financially successful Hollywood historical films indicate that the historical subgenre is a rich cinematic field, but one that cannot thrive without a strong sense of

national identity. The cultural focus of Quebecois cinema also reflects this claim, as seen in the struggle to preserve and perpetuate French history and identity in Quebecois films. In contrast, the success of English Canadian historical television productions indicates that an audience exists for English Canadian history, but the predominance of these productions on CBC television suggests an indebtedness to Canadian content regulations that are non-existent in Canadian cinemas. Government mandated CBC television productions are able to deal with problematic history, but often approach such subjects in a general fashion designed to engage audiences with seemingly uncomplicated history. Television's traditional avoidance of strong violence, language, and sexuality also tends to homogenize productions away from controversy, whereas films tend to seek out controversy and spur debate. English Canadian historical films avoid such controversial opportunities, however, due in part to a combination of reluctant filmmakers and their indebtedness to government funding.

Chapter 7: Findings and Conclusions

Because English Canadian identity is not monolithic, understanding it is not simple or easy. Unlike Americans, who have a strong sense of a unified national myth, English Canadian identity survives through constant evolution and transformation. Canadian historical films reflect this tradition of deconstructing older narratives and creating new ones developed by minorities in the country, which is best exemplified by *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. The power of Canadian historical films to tell non-heroic stories has meant that Canadian historical films remain open to new and diverse storytelling methods. Broadly speaking, Canadians are open to new historical directions, while Americans embrace the repetition of the same national myths. By being always open to transformation, Canadian historical films are constantly changing, and their diversity should not be viewed as a weakness.

This study is the first significant attempt to examine the importance of the subgenre of English Canadian historical films in their contextual, generic, and ideological functions. As a marginalized subgenre within an already marginalized national cinema, this thesis presents reasons for the low number of English Canadian historical films when compared to American and Quebec cinemas. English Canadian cinema is typically dominated by art-house films from directors like Atom Egoyan and Guy Maddin, who strive to forge a distinctive cinematic voice, rather than compete with mainstream Hollywood productions. In contrast to these art-house productions, historical films are aimed at a popular audience, utilize large budgets, extensive marketing campaigns and expect high box office grosses. These films contain explicit relationships to Canadian history and identity, but despite their ambitions and overtly Canadian content, their

market hopes seldom materialize, much like most other English Canadian films. English Canadian cinema's "absent audience" does not encourage domestic film production, and filmmakers rely on state subsidies from Telefilm Canada to make low budget, independent features, usually aimed at critical, rather than commercial success. State funding is also provided for Canadian television productions of a historical nature, which typically draw a larger audience than Canadian films, and are much more mainstream. Marginality is not necessarily a negative aspect of Canadian historical films, because historical television thrives in comparison. Historical productions do not detract from Canadian cinema, as its absent audience is due to a predominance of art-house productions. Only if the Canadian audience were to wean itself off Hollywood cinematic expectations would it be more open to the historical subgenre. Furthermore, The basis of historical films in mythic nationalism is only one route to success. The Canadian route, which seems to be a road to failure, can also be viewed to be successful through its articulation of an original, non-mythic style with multiple perspectives. Instead of failing to build a strong national identity, English Canadian historical films may be successfully building an alternative national identity.

The examination of five historical productions between 1970 and 2010 illustrated the common traits between English Canadian historical films (specifically, their commercial ambitions, high budgets, and manipulation of American genres), and helped to chart the development of historical films alongside the development of Canadian cinema. This study utilized the analytical approach to historical films advocated by Robert Rosenstone and Hayden White, which favours an examination of how historical arguments are constructed rather than the hunt for factual deviations. Rosenstone and

White are forerunners in a tradition of American film historians that draw from the large body of both American historical films and their scholarship to tackle issues of historical authenticity in their nation's cinema. In comparison, this study pioneers the analysis of Canadian historical films, a subgenre with few films and little critical academic exploration. The analysis of each film's production and release, as recommended by Chapman and Topin, helped to locate these films within their respective eras of Canadian film history and revealed the inspiration behind these productions. The films' frequent rejection of overt nationalistic qualities was examined against Anderson's theory of imagined communities and Hall's notions of revived nationalisms.

This study demonstrates that:

- 1) English Canadian historical films adopt and subvert American film genres to add unique Canadian perspectives in place of American ideology;
- 2) These films both perpetuate and challenge Canadian cultural stereotypes;
- 3) These films simultaneously embody the Canadian past and reflect contemporary socio-political contexts.

The filmmakers, academics and journalists interviewed for this study also generally agreed that:

- 1) Canadian historical films play an integral role in the development of Canadian identity;
- 2) A lack of historical films contributes to Canadians' unfamiliarity with their own history and creates the misconception that Canadians are not interested in this history;
- 3) Canadian television should continue to make historical productions, but historical films should also continue in the cinema.

The general agreements on these points is unusual, as the research participants are involved in several different but tangentially related areas of Canadian cinema. These findings are an important step in the establishment of a scholarship on Canadian historical films, not only because they validate this thesis' hypothesis that historical films are intrinsically related to Canadian identity, but because they also ascribe a cultural value to these often overlooked productions in the wider discussion of Canadian cinema.

As narrative feature films inspired by Canadian history, English Canadian historical films reflect the complex nature of Canadian identity through the identification of numerous competing narratives. Rather than attempt to define a national identity through a mythic rendering of the past, or attempt to create an "imagined community," these films embody the multicultural Canadian mosaic, with a tendency to explore intercultural tensions through the perspectives of their protagonists. Villains are largely absent from these productions, which aids in the creation of a complicated and at times ambiguous presentation of Canadian history. While the typical Hollywood production embraces heroes and incorporates American myths, Canadian historical films take a different approach. In English Canadian historical films, history is rarely presented as a grand, nation-building narrative, but is instead told through personal stories that often involve the intersection and clash of cultures. These complicated renderings of a Canadian past share a paradoxical link with Canadian identity: a rich history cannot be formed without a strong national identity, but a clear national identity cannot be created without a strong sense of history.

The cinema of Quebec and its emphasis on cultural and national identity highlights the shortcomings of English Canadian cinema. In contrast with Quebecois

historical films, which often celebrate or examine French Canadian history, English Canadian historical films are less nationally focused and far more critical. In this sense, these historical films participate in the general reticent ethos of English Canadian cinema. English Canadian television is much more receptive to traditionally nationalistic productions, however, and often overtly attempts to construct a sense of national identity for its audience.

Canada's evolutionary history and identity supports the theory of post-modern Canada attempting to include the many people and traditions that continue to shape it. *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* exemplifies this evolution, for as the second Inuit feature film ever produced, it showcases a culture, history and language that most Canadians are largely unaware of. This ambition is also reflected in Canadian cinema as a whole, which is similarly fractured and driven by unique artistic perspectives, largely uninterested in the cultivation of a wide national audience. With the odd exception, Telefilm Canada has failed to fund popular English Canadian productions, which lowers English Canadian box office profits to a dismal 1% of national cinema revenues. In contrast, Quebec films generate 15% of the province's box office gross through productions across a number of popular genres, such as crime, drama, and comedy, which are routinely recognized as the highest grossing Canadian films in their years of release.

Despite their connection to Canadian identity, English Canadian historical films are rarely produced. Their limited production is due to a combination of their typically high costs, the small English Canadian cinema audience, and a perceived public disinterest in Canadian history. Canadian historical disinterest is somewhat debatable, however, as historical television productions often draw larger audiences than most

Canadian films. Historical television productions are very different from their cinematic counterparts, as most are CBC productions and are therefore influenced by government interests. Television programs are also typically less controversial than films, which lessen their potential for a large cultural impact. Although the recent rise of subscription content and streaming services indicates a shift in Canadian television, programming on the small screen traditionally does not carry the same cultural weight as the cinema.

The future of English Canadian historical films is tied to technological developments in digital media production, national broadcasting policy and the evolution of public discourse about national identity. Although new historical productions will likely be produced, their frequency and impact on the national consciousness is unlikely to increase. The increasing dominance from Hollywood franchises makes it ever harder for Canadian films to compete for space on domestic screens, and Canadian films will never match the budgets or production value of major American movies. Instead of adopting a large-scale approach to Canadian history, like *Passchendaele* or *Black Robe*, perhaps future historical filmmakers will utilize limited Canadian budgets to tell small, more intimate micro histories.²¹ The combination of digital filmmaking techniques, crowd funding campaigns and direct distribution platforms allows filmmakers to situate historical films within Canada's art-house tradition, and gain some level of cultural acclaim. This possibility is unlikely to stir the interest of English Canada's "veteran" directors, however, so it may fall to the next generation of filmmakers to continue the important tradition of Canadian historical films, and to explore the assertion that a people without a history are a people without an identity.

²¹ An example of a "small" Canadian history is *Wedding in White* (Fruet, 1972), a Second World War drama about a father's dilemma when his unmarried teenage daughter becomes pregnant.

This study has dealt with a historical period of Canadian film production lasting four decades. During that time period, the nature of Canada has changed dramatically in terms of its urbanization, its multicultural nature, the rise of Quebec separatism, and the continuing subordination of Canadian cinema in the minds of Canadian audiences. There is no reason not to expect that some of the factors discussed in this thesis will continue to influence Canadian historical film production, but there is also reason to believe that forty years from now, Canadian historical films will look much different. The deciding factor is whether Canadians will remain an absent audience for their own cinema. The lack of a mythic nationalism in Canadian historical films makes these films un-American, and therefore Canadian, and it is hoped that filmmakers will continue to build on this tradition to create a unique Canadian film industry.

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Appendix 1: Interview Responses

Dr. William Beard – Professor of Film Studies at the University of Alberta

1. What do historical films contribute to Canadian identity?

Not much, in view of the fact that there are not so many of them and that they do not form an important part of the general public's viewing. I imagine that films of this kind are used in schools and perhaps even post-secondary education in courses with Canadian history content, but I cannot speak to that. Potentially, however, that might be a place to look for factors in Canadian identity formation.

2. Why do we have so few Canadian historical films?

Why do we have so few of any kind of Canadian films? It is a subset of the general malaise of (English)-Canadian cinema. Really the only venue in which films of this kind have shown is on television, and there principally on the CBC, and, in earlier years, the National Film Board. While the NFB concentrated mostly on present-day documentaries, some of these now definitely have a historical value. The CBC seems to go in fits and starts, with small historical information blips to run between longer programs, or the occasional Big Deal, such as "Canada – A Nation's History." In short, outside of educational or public-broadcasting environments, there is no demand for Canadian historical films – or for any other kind of English-Canadian films – and thus no financial base for their production.

It must be added that in the multifaceted and constantly evolving environment of cable television, it is always possible that some programs of this kind, whether documentary or fictional, will arise, owing to the existence of the Canadian Broadcasting Fund and other public-monies initiatives.

3. How does the low number of Canadian historical films affect Canadian cinema?

Again, what Canadian cinema? Practically speaking, there hardly is a Canadian theatrical cinema. The annual exhibition numbers are so low that the presence or absence of historical films will always have only a marginal effect.

Once again, television offers more presence and more potential. Several English-Canadian television series have attained a viable financial status. My sense is that the most successful of these, however, exist in the context of "genre cinema" – e.g. crime or cop shows. These can in many cases be sold to the cable market in the US in a way that a Canadian historical show or series would probably not be able to be. Canadians are not so interested in Canadian history – why should anyone else be?

4. Considering the limited English Canadian cinema audience, does it make sense to continue to have our historical productions on television?

Well, it depends on what you mean by "does it make sense." Does it make sense financially? Probably not. Does it make sense from the standpoint of the transmission

and preservation of national culture? Definitely it does. It is the public or quasi-public broadcasting authorities that must take up this task, and the present political and economic climate does not bode well for any kind of production which will not earn its money back in the marketplace. A rather gloomy picture.

5. What is the result of so few historical films on Canadian identity?

Again I would place this within the context of the presentation of a specifically Canadian culture in general. Throughout much of the past century, English-Canadians have had a difficult time identifying what their national identity is, or indeed even if they have one. Health-care and hockey seem to spring to people's lips when they are asked to identify, for example, the cultural and social differences between themselves and Americans – not very robust definitions. Other, more complex, formulations of Canadian identity exist of course, but they are under constant debate and revision and in any case are so refined and nuanced that they can't function mythically, as a national identity must.

The presence of more historical films could only have a beneficial effect on Canadians' sense of identity, though of course exactly what effect would depend on what kind of films they were. "Canada – A Nation's History" (which I confess I did not watch all of) was swathed in self-conscious pious politically correct mythmaking that its efforts to provide just such an identity were all too clear, and its distance from any kind of lived historical experience pretty great. The fact that initiatives such as this always seem to have to do too much work, to provide generalizations and answers in a realm where there is not much existing context, does not help.

6. Any other comments?

Personally I feel that more Canadian historical films are greatly to be desired. But I am not optimistic about their prospects. My own children (in their 20s, one even a history major) show no interest whatever in Canadian history, and it is hard to imagine an environment so changed that existing barriers in financing, exhibition, and popular taste can be changed very much.

Dr. Jim Leach – Professor of Film at Brock University

1. What do historical films contribute to Canadian identity?

This is a difficult question to answer given that "Canadian identity" is such a complicated issue. It seems to me that the importance of historical films depends on how important history is in defining an identity. History is seen as much more important to identity in Quebec than it seems to be in English Canada and there are, accordingly, far more historical films, but these tend to promote a politics of identity that marginalizes newcomers. So, while I think a knowledge of Canadian history is important, the main question is how history is used.

2. Why do we have so few Canadian historical films?

One answer to this question would be that Canadian cinema has its roots in the documentary tradition that emerged in the 1950s and became known as "direct cinema," which by definition is concerned with the present. I'm not completely convinced by this, but I do think there is an underlying suspicion of historical reconstructions. In Quebec, Denys Arcand, who studied history at university, has said he would never make a historical fiction film because "all historical reconstruction is a fraud." A similar attitude underlies Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*, which frames a historical film about the massacre of Armenians in Turkey in 1917 within a narrative set in Toronto in the present, and perhaps also Guy Maddin's depictions of the past through old-fashioned film techniques that foreground the artifice. In both cases, there is a refusal to create images that might stand in for historical memory as Spielberg tried to do in *Schindler's List*. Another factor is certainly the cost of major historical productions, such as *Black Robe* and *Passchendaele*, which means that, to be commercially successful, they must sell in international markets, where it is assumed there would be little interest in Canadian subjects.

3. How does the low number of Canadian historical films affect Canadian cinema?

It depends on what exactly you mean by "historical films." If you mean films dealing with actual figures from the past, then there are few such Canadian films (at least in English Canada). If you include period films, fictional films set in the past, there are a fair number, going as far back as *The Drylanders*. And *Mon oncle Antoine*, repeatedly voted the best Canadian film ever, is, among other things, a historical film. I'd be more concerned about the "low number" of recent English-Canadian historical films if Canadians actually watched Canadian films set in the past, present or future. As things stand, the lack of historical films (in English Canada) doesn't really make much difference.

4. Considering the limited English Canadian cinema audience, does it make sense to continue to have our historical productions on television?

I'm not sure what the switch to English Canada only in this question implies. Obviously, the audience for English-language Canadian TV is larger than for theatrical films, but the

main problem here would seem to be how long English-Canadian TV will be able to continue to make historical productions given the current policies of the federal government. Another question, for the same reason, is whose version of history such programs would represent?

5. What is the result of so few historical films on Canadian identity?

As I said above, this is not really an issue in Quebec, where there are plenty of historical films that may impact on Canadian identity, not necessarily in a positive way as far as Canada is concerned. In English Canada, I suppose the lack of such films may support the myth that English Canada has no real identity of its own.

6. Any other comments?

I think your project raises a lot of interesting questions. One of the key ones is why history matters more in Quebec (not just in cinema but in the culture as whole) that it seems to in English Canada. As I suggested above, it is not only a question of how many historical films there are, but also of it how history is used (nostalgically, critically, nationalistically, etc.).

Norman Cohn – Co-Director of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*

1. What do historical films contribute to Canadian identity?

We're talking about movies that are designed to be superior films on historical themes. *War and Peace* is a historical novel with superior artistic aims and superior artistic achievements. It also clearly addresses historical events. If you look at as the core philosophical question behind the work that Zacharias and I have done over the last 30 years, I think what we're after is making films that illuminate the clichéd stereotypes and myths that normally comprise the historical record, and certainly comprise national identity. And re-examining these things through artistic narrative tools sheds a fresh light on events and realities that people understand through propaganda, rather than through any objective historical means.

We contest the assumed historical reality around the relationship between indigenous and European peoples. We contest the sources that are believed to have influenced historical events, because how those events have been represented to people really affect how people look at those events. Our practice is about reviewing the world we look at through Inuit perspective. Once you start dealing with narrative, I think the question of whose narrative you're looking through becomes a very impactful lens. Inuit have been misrepresented and misunderstood since European contact, whether in ways that denigrate them as savages or drunks or primitives, or ways that idealize them as the happy, smiling Eskimo who is the innocent savage. When we address history, we are deliberately humanizing it from the perspective of the most stereotyped element in the historical record. We're deliberately and violently undermining the accepted historical record and all of its implications, such as how people look at aboriginals today, or Inuit today, or the problems in the north, or issues about mining. The perspectives on these issues are all influenced by whether people think Inuit are complex human beings or happy savages or pathetic drunks.

2. Why do we have so few Canadian historical films?

What you're really saying is why do we have so few historical films in English Canada. I think the answer is that English Canada has an uncontested historical propaganda that is extremely difficult for anyone to successfully challenge in an industry where the government controls almost all the financing. A film like *Passchendaele* is sort of a pep rally for Canadian European white Anglo militaristic NATO-based propaganda. That Canada exists on a narrow strip along the US border and 99.9 percent of the films that those people watch are American films. So the English Canada that we're talking about in the film industry is itself a myth. It's some strange combination of America that doesn't really celebrate the key historical events that would have made Canadian history significant even from the Anglophone perspective. I've never seen anybody try to treat the decisions that people made in the late 1700's during the American Revolution to stick with the king, and that's a serious Anglo decision. That must have been very complex and intense, sort of like the Civil War, brothers and families broken up around decisions, and neighbors and friends taking different sides. I don't think Canadians want to look at

that. I was not educated in Canada, so I don't know that those things are taught in Canadian history. I don't actually know what's taught in Canadian history. If you're not teaching Canadian history in terms of the fundamental conflict with the French up until now, and if you're not teaching Canadian history of the relations and exploitations of Canada's indigenous people, you're teaching Canadian history that involves a very narrow number of people that happen to control the tools of history.

Less than 1% of the films that English Canadians watch are actually Canadian. If you look at the non-francophone films that English Canadians watch, there are Deepa Mehta's films, which are basically about India, a few Cronenberg films, a few of Atom Egoyan's, and a few of Guy Maddin's, but that's about it. Every year, Canadians only hear about one or two English Canadian films financed by Telefilm, out of maybe twelve or fifteen. I think there's a connection here. We're not looking at Canada in the present because people do not perceive a historical Canada that's authentic and meaningful. And neither of those authentic Canadian realities are authenticated by the film system. In literature you have the *Grey Fox*, *Duddy Kravitz*, and *Black Robe*, and if those books had not been published, those films would never have been made. In a sense you cannot say that those are historical films, for they are films that were made from historical books. I don't know if *Passchendaele* was made from a book, but I suspect it was. So the only historical film you've got is about the Inuit in Canada because they have a real, authentic history. When you illuminate that history to an audience, people are surprised, they're compelled, and they feel they're seeing something real that they never knew before.

3. How does the low number of Canadian historical films affect Canadian cinema?

English Canadian cinema is so pathetic – more so than Slovakia, Scandinavia, or any other English speaking country. It's the most embarrassingly inauthentic and uneventful native language cinema in the world. There's nothing wrong with what we're doing, but there's definitely something wrong with what's passing for Canadian films. I don't think it matters if the films are about modern events or past events or real events or fictionalized events. It doesn't matter whether all the facts in *War and Peace* are correct because the whole book is about how those facts don't really matter anyway. Nobody really knows. What really matters are the forces in history which are the same as the forces of narrative, the forces of imagination, and what moves human beings in any direction. Films don't get made just because somebody wants to make them. Films in Canada get made because the government financing system is going to support them. And the government financing system is not supporting films that look at Canadian history, because the government financing systems supports films that appear to be American. The government financing system is saying that the more American the films we make, the more likely it is that we'll sell tickets, and they're desperate to sell tickets.

4. Considering the limited English Canadian cinema audience, does it make sense to continue to have our historical productions on television?

No, I don't think it makes sense. I think the fact that there are not more films like ours does not make any sense. I think the fact that the film system finances the films that it finances is embarrassing and stupid. They're deliberately not encouraging the kind of

films you're talking about. Neither is television. You could say that *The Englishman's Boy* or whatever else, are all coming out of the CBC, which is basically a self-financing agency. It's like Telefilm making films by themselves in a controlled market. But even in television they're not really doing what you're talking about, unless you want to include *Corner Gas* or *North of 60* in your study. I think you're talking about a fundamental failure in the Canadian media financing system that is based on an Anglo-centric misrepresentation of Canadian history, Canadian reality and that basically misinforms and misleads people about the nature of Canada today and the world that they live in. Canadian people think they're basically Americans, only with worse films and funny accents.

Everybody with talent knows that if they want to have a successful career, they should go to Los Angeles. They don't all go because people have their own reasons, but everybody knows that to become successful as a filmmaker they have to get out of Canada. I think the real question is why do people assume Canadians would not be interested in more authentic, distinctively Canadian films? I think that this national insecurity assumes that you should make a film that's an imitation, low budget cop thriller, which looks like it could be made in LA and could be an American thriller. Only the *Bourne Identity* is made with \$100 million and this Canadian version is made with \$9 million. And that \$9 million makes it the biggest budget Canadian film of the year, sucking up resources from five other films that couldn't get made because of this imitation *Bourne Identity* that has 10% of the production values of the real *Bourne Identity*. And then they wonder why no one goes to see it. They do this year after year, but nobody goes to see those films, because they're so bad.

5. What is the result of so few historical films on Canadian identity?

I think the impact on Canadian identity is the continuing obsession with why we don't have a Canadian identity. Where does your national identity come from? It comes from your artists. There have been some excellent Canadian writers, but not that many. And for at least the last generation or so, our storytelling is primarily coming through non-literary media. In the north, we know that if we're not making films about an Inuit identity and using the Inuit language, those things will disappear. The Basques know that, the Welsh know that, the French know that in Canada. In the mid-1970's, when the Partis Quebecois took power, they set out to build and invest in a francophone cultural industry. They didn't ask people to make films or television that sounded American or French, but that were distinct to the people who lived in Quebec. In English Canada, people are without a narrative. I think we're a very lost population in English Canada, without any kind of national understanding, and that's partly because people don't know any thing about their own history.

6. Any other comments?

I don't think so.

Paul Gross – Writer, Director and Producer of *Passchendaele*

1. What do historical films contribute to Canadian identity?

An oddly framed question. It's one that could be asked of any art form in any nation at any period. In the broadest terms, art makes history. Take, oh let's say, Pharaonic Egypt. We can read the dates and the names and the various conflicts but our understanding of this period comes from the art they have left behind. Similarly with any modern nation, we more deeply understand its nature, or 'identity', through its art. Seminal texts in the nature of Canadianess are found, for instance, in the journals of Suzanna Moodie and equally importantly, in Atwood's reimagining of them. Historical film has a similar influence, in that for those who have seen it, their understanding of our shared history is shaped to some extent by the movie. The most important aspect of film is that its impact is visceral – the cobwebs that separate us from our past are blown away and the viewer is immersed in a period foreign to them and yet immediately apprehensible. They can experience their own history. In that sense, film is essential to any understanding of our past and as such essential to understanding who we are, or as your question asks, our 'identity'.

2. Why do we have so few Canadian historical films?

This question assumes Canada has few historical films and I'm not entirely sure that's true. I haven't done a study of per capita movies with historical subjects to see how Canadian cinema rates with other countries but I'd be surprised if we didn't rank in the middle somewhere. The prosaic reason is that historical film is wildly expensive. We operate on very tight budgets in Canadian cinema, so tight that historical pieces are largely beyond our financial capacity. As an example, for *Passchendaele* we had to have our uniforms built in India because there is no costume warehouse that could accommodate us. The expense of this is through the roof. In short, history is expensive. Beyond that, there is the problem of distribution and most distributors currently aren't interested in period pieces (unless it's Jane Austen and her gang). Period pieces lock them into a very specific ethos and culture and in today's business model of cinema that's a real problem for sales.

3. How does the low number of Canadian historical films affect Canadian cinema?

Again, I'm not sure the number is actually that low – you may be right but I'd like to see some stats. Assuming your question is accurate, I'm still not sure how to answer this question. How does it affect Canadian cinema? It doesn't really. Canadian cinema is what it is – an oddly evolving form that struggles with the international marketplace. More than any other popular form, film is tied to international tastes. At the moment, Canada is not interesting to foreign markets. Why? Maybe because our Prime Minister is dull, or we are relatively stable and cinema goers are more interested in disaster, perhaps it's because the films we make simply aren't grabbing the attention of the world. Who knows? And this dip in international interest coincides with the utter cratering of

interest in independent cinema world wide that started in 2008 and continues. Film is going through a massive, unstable transition – to what, no one can tell. It's like Dodge City out there at the moment and everyone I know who works in film is shaking their heads. Historical film is but one element in that very complicated, combustible matrix. Would a movie about the Plains of Abraham work internationally right now? Probably not, at least that would be the opinion of the distribution companies and the exhibitors. So the paucity of historical film in essence has no effect on Canadian cinema in general. In a sense, film has moved into a post-historical phase. A glance at the listings will tell you that it is largely dominated by superhero and comic book movies. Do historical films have a place inside this? Time will tell, I suppose. As an anecdote, I had a meeting with the development people for Brad Pitt's company, Plan B. They wanted to know what I'd been thinking about writing. I proposed they should do *The March*, by E.L. Doctorow – a brilliant tale of Sherman's march through the south in the civil war. I explained why I thought it was relevant today etc etc. At the end of our talk, he said it sounded great but they can't sell period pieces to the studios. As an addendum, Spielberg's *Lincoln* almost didn't get financed and for a time he thought the only way he could do it was if it was on television.

4. Considering the limited English Canadian cinema audience, does it make sense to continue to have our historical productions on television?

I don't think you understand the power of cinema when it clicks. A film like *Passchendaele* was a great success at the cinemas, then through V.O.D., then through free TV and eventually in most classrooms in the land. You can't achieve this through television alone – unless you're very lucky and it hits a zeitgeist. That said, some subjects are better suited to television and others to film. A great example would be *The Englishman's Boy*, a novel by Guy Vanderhaeghe (sp?). It should have been a movie, instead became a television mini. While the production was good and true the power it would have had as a film moving into TV would have been greater. On the other hand some stories are better suited to television. There is no artistic firewall, by the way – we all move between media. Beyond that, the financial problems facing period film no different in television. It's just prohibitively expensive regardless of the medium.

5. What is the result of so few historical films on Canadian identity?

Your final question is almost impossible to answer. Canadian identity is a topic that has befuddled everyone across all spectra. I happen to have an affinity for an epoch of our history that I felt shaped us – the First World War. But that's not something shared by everyone I inhabit this country with. Somewhere behind your questions, I feel, is the notion that there is a common ground of history that we might all agree upon. I think this is no longer true. Canadian identity is a question mark. Who are we? It's my opinion that the question is the answer. We are constantly evolving, constantly trying to answer this enigma that is Canada and the fact that we can't answer it is the most glowing affirmation of what we are. Historical movies will only contribute to this evolution. In a very real sense, whenever a film maker is lucky enough to dip into the well of history he or she simply adds another turn in the maze that is Canadian Identity. Do we need more

of them? Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. There are extraordinary stories to be told of our formation and forbears and they will come, perhaps not at the clip I would like, but they will come. And they will add, along with all our other art forms, to our collective understanding of what it means to be Canadian.

6. Any other comments?

There is a group called Reel Canada who take Canadian films into high schools that I have been a part of since its inception many years ago. Whenever they screen a movie for the kids they try to have a member of the movie show up – actor, director, writer etc. I've done a number for Passchendaele and every time I go I am stunned by how eager and hungry these kids are (from all ethnic backgrounds) to know about the history of this country. Do I want more historical movies? You bet, because our youth want them and those people in charge of money whether it's in film or television ought to serve them.

Peter Howell – Movie Critic for The Toronto Star

1. What do historical films contribute to Canadian identity?

I think historical films can contribute greatly to how Canadians see themselves and their history. There's the old saying that "history is written by the victors" and that also applies to historical films. Hollywood pursues only an American agenda. Witness last year's Oscar winner, *Argo*, which completely alters what was long known as "the Canadian Caper" to turn it into an American one. The American version will become the accepted one, which is a shame. I actually think the Canadian government should have spoken up about this.

2. Why do we have so few Canadian historical films?

It's has partly to do with money, but I think mainly low national self-esteem. We generally lack the resources to put on big movies about Canadian historical events, such as our nation-defining battle on the Plains of Abraham. But more significant than this, I think, is our defeatist national attitude that Canadian history is either boring or merely a footnote to the more important goings-on of our neighbor to the south.

3. How does the low number of Canadian historical films affect Canadian cinema?

This is kind of a chicken-and-egg question, isn't it? There aren't very many Canadian historical films, so it's hard to say how it affects Canadian cinema. But I do know that actor/director Paul Gross did do yeoman work in getting his World War I drama *Passchendaele* made and onto the screen in 2008. It often takes someone of his passion and multiple skills (I believe he was also a co-producer of that) to get a project of this nature done.

4. Considering the limited English Canadian cinema audience, does it make sense to continue to have our historical productions on television?

You're probably right. I'd rather see a Canadian historical production on TV than not at all.

5. What is the result of so few historical films on Canadian identity?

See answer No. 1 above. But to sum it up in one word: ignorance. People who don't know or understand the history of their country are unlikely to fully identify with their country.

6. Any other comments?

I think we've covered it.

Ted Kotcheff – Director of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*

Dear Eric: enclosed is my response to the questions you posed. Some of the wide sociological questions I'm afraid I don't feel equipped to answer.

It has always been my belief that a flourishing film industry, be the films historical or not, defines a nation. That together with its literature, films reflect its essential character. They are it's very heart and soul. Consider French films, Italian films, British films as evidence of what I have just observed.

Martin Knelman made a very perspicacious comment in his review of Duddy in 1973. He said to paraphrase him from memory, we've had films about English Canada, we've had films about French Canada, now someone for the first time has made a film about the third world in Canada.

I tried to get Duddy financed in Canada in the 60's, but struck out totally. So reluctantly, I tried going the US route.

Sam Arkoff, head of AIP, was a fan of my work and loved Mordecai's novel. He said he would finance the film of it. I was cock-a-hoop until I heard the catch: sharing Hollywood's reluctance to depict Jewish protagonists, he said he would only make the film if I made Duddy a Greek.

I said No. This film is about the Jewish experience of growing up in Montreal. He declined.

Another interested American film financier wanted the story to be moved to Pittsburgh because Montreal was too parochial! "Pittsburgh's not parochial", I retorted! I went on to say to him that the central dynamic of the film, what shapes Duddy and his aspirations is that he has grown up in a small Jewish ghetto surrounded by a huge, inimical Catholic city. I told him that when Mordecai was a kid, French Canadian boys danced around him chanting,

"You killed Jesus Christ!"

"You killed Jesus Christ!". He still said No and I said No!

I don't deal with this directly with Duddy but it's implicit: they won't sell their farms to a Jew and he has to use his French Canadian girlfriend as a front.

But the film also, of course, depicts the colorful Jewish life of the period. So the film deals with a special time in Canadian history. A small detail, Eric: I photographed the back alleys of Montreal, especially the ghetto, which had these distinctive 3 story wooden, enclosed back stairs. These are all gone now as the municipal authorities had them all torn down as being fire hazards.

Why we have so few Canadian historical films is a good question for which I'm not sure I have the total answer. A few years ago, after "Duddy", I wanted to make a film about Wolfe and Montcalm and the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. Aside from its being a pivotal event in our history, it's a great story with fascinating protagonists. The story of Montcalm is movingly tragic: his military tactics with dealing with the British flotilla were continually over-ruled by the stupid.

Royal Governor of Quebec. There is no doubt in my mind that Canada would still be French if Montcalm had had his way. And what happened after his defeat was a shaping force in the character of French Canada. Not only could I not get financing for the film, I did not receive the slightest interest in it whatsoever, as I said, one of the most important moments in our history.

My only theory as to why there are so few Canadian historical films is that, unlike the United States, which came into being as an independent country so explosively in 1776, Canada remained tied to the apron strings of Great Britain. We automatically fell in with their wars and we did not become an independent country until very recently and then in a very undramatic way, by parliamentary fiat. So before then, we were part of British history. Then there is, of course, that semi-mythical inferiority complex about ourselves and our country.

A lack of historical films as such, I don't think affects Canadian films detrimentally. After all, there is still comedy, romance, thrillers, satire, drama, etc. And I see no reason why we should not have historical productions on television. That medium is ideally suited for them in many ways.

I think the Canadian identity is still in a fluid state. You must know the old joke: What is the distinguishing characteristic of a Canadian?---That he has no distinguishing characteristics.

I don't agree with this self denigration. When I walk into a room full of Americans and then into a room full of Canadians, I feel a distinct, palpable difference.

I am a Canadian! I feel my Canadianess. I could live a 100 years in Great Britain or the United States, and I could never feel like a Brit or a Yank. I will always be a Canuck, unquestionably.