

A Course in Canadian Film for U.S. students

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Introducing Canadian film to students in the United States faces a major challenge: the notion of “Canadian Film” is inconceivable. You can blame typical U.S. Intro to Film Studies courses for this challenge. Domestic film content centers on Hollywood, with some forays into indie and experimental film. For the foreign film component, the venerable and universally recognized genres of German Expressionism, Italian Neorealism, and French New Wave are de rigeur. Add to that the Japanese, Bollywood, Chop Socky, and perhaps Australian, African, or East European cinemas, and you have what is usually considered the complete overview of all that is foreign in film. And where does Canada fit into this curriculum? How exotically foreign is Canada? How domestic?

It does not help that most Americans feel that Canadians are actually Americans who are suffering under the quaint delusion that they are somehow another country. Someday they will all get a good smack on the head, come to their senses, and realize that “gosh, we were Americans all along...”. It was all just a dream. It doesn’t help overthrow that notion when Americans cross over

into Canada and find themselves engulfed by US corporate real estate. *Tim Horton's* and *The Bay* do not go too far in restituting a Canadian landscape.

Compounding this is the long-standing conventional practice in commercial Canadian filmmaking of masquerading their feature films by setting them in “generic America”. Self-imposed identity theft as marketing strategy. How can you blame, then, the average U.S. film studies student for being oblivious about Canadian Film? How can you blame them for not enrolling in a course that is inconceivable? The major challenge in this course is getting this course to “make”.

What lies ahead for U.S. students in a Canadian Film course?

Experimental films from the NFB (National Film Board of Canada), the cinema of French-Canada, and certain early independent film works will exhibit that certain “exotic foreignness” students expect in a course that is not about American film. This will help introduce them to Canada’s cultural and socio-political nature and emblematic characters.

Primarily, this course will address cultural and social issues that resonate both similarly and differently in Canada and the United States: sites of cultural control, representation of ethnicity and conflict, economic practices (practises), technological determinism, citizenship, national identifiers, and art. There will also be numerous comparisons made between the evolution of film in Canada and in the United States, including some “local significance” that will bring Canada

closer to home to those in Kansas City. It will be these cross-national comparisons that I anticipate may make the greatest impression on students. Since so much of what is Canadian is distinguished by comparison and contrast to the American*, this process will also throw into relief for U.S. students both American film itself and their own cultural experiences as non-Canadians. To know Canada is to better know the United States.

The Course Plan

Course content includes the history and accomplishments of the National Film Board of Canada, US production in Canada since the late 1960s, the development of Hollywood North, French-Canadian film, IMAX and other cinematic innovations, and outstanding Canadian films and directors from both within and outside Canada. Topics flow chronologically as much as possible.

Canadian Film will begin with the distinctive history of the “national cinema” fostered by the NFB and relate this to the limited comparable work in the US. If anyone knows anything about Canadian Film they know about the NFB. There are all those Oscars, undeniable evidence that Canadian film exists and has external (particularly, American) validation. This is an obvious place to begin.

The exodus of Canadian film talent and the growing use of Canada as a location by the US film industry is the second phase of the course. Kansas City resonates with the latter development on several points: Robert Altman, KC’s only

bona fide major film director, made *That Cold Day in the Park* and *McCabe and*

* “I don’t know exactly what a Canadian is, but we’re definitely not American!”

-- anonymous definition by a Canadian of what a Canadian is.

Mrs. Miller in British Columbia, and Alberta has stood in for the Kansas City and its region in films such as *Prime Cut*, *Silver Streak*, and more than one modern Jesse James film biography.

The next phase covers the emerging French and English cinemas of the 1960s, and takes particular note of their “indie film” methods and themes that presage our contemporary independent film industry. A further unexpected Canada-U.S. connection is the 1980’s cable-only channels’ dearth of program content that resulted in such fledgling networks as A&E and Bravo screening obscure indie Canadian films like *Isabel* and *The Act of the Heart* by Paul Almond (which may not have been seen by all that many Canadians!).

A particularly Canadian filmmakers’ fascination with cinematic form has a class session covering Imax, “multi-dynamic image” (*A Place to Stand*), “pan-and-scan” (*City of Gold*), and other outside-the-box experimentations. The course concludes with the surprising (to our students) infiltration of US and world film and broadcast markets by the modern Canadian media industry; the rise (and fall?) of Hollywood North.

In planning this curriculum, I have reviewed existing courses in Canadian film available online and several texts: [One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema](#)

by Melnyk, Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film edited by Wise, Canadian National Cinema by Gittings, They Came From Within by Vatnsdal, Great Canadian Film Directors, also by Melnyk, Film in Canada by Leach, and Weird Sex and Snowshoes by Monk. They all resonate with me as a Canadian, but I feel there is a certain *a priori* expectation of having lived a Canadian experience, even one that is not all that well articulated and examined, that will make these Canadian-authored texts inscrutable to the American reader. As a result, I will be using Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film as the book to buy due to its encyclopedic value, but using only certain selections from the other texts. (What I need is a book on Canadian Film written for non-Canadians!)

Of course, this course plan is a work in progress and I am very interested in any feedback sent my way. The course syllabus and schedule for Spring 2011 is appended.



Canadian Film ComS 400C

MEETS: Tuesdays and Thursdays 12:30 to 1:45

REQUIRED TEXTS: *Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film*
Weird Sex and Snowshoes
Selected readings posted on Blackboard

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COURSE OBJECTIVES: This is a Canadian Film class for non-Canadians. Here at UMKC, this means particularly for Mid-Western Americans who, it can be reasonably assumed, have little if any in-depth awareness of Canada, let alone Canadian film. That will now change.

In this class you will discover a number of interesting things:

- Why one Canadian organization has won more Academy Awards than any other film-producing agency in the world.
- How many American films are actually made by Canadians and/or in Canada (more than you'd care to imagine) and how to detect these imposters.
- Why Canadians often understand Americans and American issues better than Americans do.
- Why so much US film and television series production "went south" to Hollywood North.
- How Canadian cinema illustrates the differences between the Canadian and the American experience, both culturally and politically.

COURSE GRADES: There are three tests worth 10% of the course grade and one term paper worth 70% of the course grade. Details will be announced and posted on Blackboard, including due dates.

COURSE OUTLINE:

1/28 COMING ATTRACTIONS: WHO IS CANADA? WHY IS CANADA?

The First Fifty Years (or so) of Cinema's First Century

Hollywood the Myth-maker versus Canada the Realist?

When Canadian kids play, who do they play?

National Film Board's origins.

The Greirson Vision and Mission

Quebec Film

Separate culture and separate cinema

NFB national/social missions

Canadian Ethnography: Mosaic or undercooked Melting Pot?

Public Education: Citizenship and National Identity

Media Awareness: Experimental film

2/4 National Anthem: The Canadian movie audiences' film experience.

NFB Documentary John Greirson era: *Churchill's Island* 1941

--Back in the USA: *Why We Fight* 1940s

NFB Public education Cultural *New Home in the West* 1942

Science *Universe* 1960

NFB Animation Norman McLaren *Begone Dull Care* 1949

--Back in the USA: Disney, Warner Brothers, etc.

2/11 NFB Experimental filmmakers: Norman McLaren *Neighbors* 1952

Pas De Deux 1968

--Meanwhile back in the USA: Maya Deren, *Meshes of the Afternoon* 1942

Inventing the New Documentary: Direct Film *Lonely Boy* 1962

2/18 BREAKING GROUND: ENGLISH-CANADIAN FEATURE INDUSTRY (1960S)

Canadians come to America (and England). No jobs at home.

Norman Jewison, *In the Heat of the Night* 1967

Recognizing the dynamics of class warfare

Sidney J. Furie, *The Ipcress File* 1965

visual style

“And the list of actors is...” the Canadian expatriates among US

2/25 Americans come to Canada I: Locations, locations, and it's cheap.
Canada is so Sci-Fi *The Starlost* 1973
Calgary is so Kansas City *Prime Cut* 1972 *Sliver Streak* 1976
Alberta is so America *Superman* 1978
Americans come to Canada II: Locations, locations, and it's cheap.
Kansas City comes to Canada: Robert Altman in BC
That Cold Day in the Park 1969
McCabe and Mrs. Miller 1971
But Hollywood takes their toys home with them.

3/4 Growing the English-Canadian Feature Film Industry (1970s)
Canada is so Sci-Fi II *The Groundstar Conspiracy* 1972
David Cronenberg *Scanners* 1980
Americans come to Canada III: Television series production.
Hollywood looks North *MacGyver* *The X-Files*
Production resources grow.
CBC Television production -- Canadian Content
The tax credit advantage

3/11 Revenge of the English-Canadian Feature Film Industry
Hollywood North *A History of Violence* 2006
The Hidden Canadian
Hungry Cable Destinations *Any film with a colon?*
Co-Production: More gore for the buck/looney *Silent Hill*, *LEXX*

3/18 Revenge of the French-Canadian Feature Film Industry
Always been there... Paul Almond *Isabel* 1968
--Meanwhile back in the USA: John Cassavette *Faces* 1968
A model for *Mon oncle Antoine* 1971
independent film *The Decline of the American Empire* 1986
Jesus of Montreal 1989

4/1 NFB recently *Walking*
2000+Oscar Nominees and Winners: *Ryan*
The Danish Poet
Strange Invaders
Hardwood

