
Monkey See, Monkey Do, Monkey Pay

by Fil Fraser

“Monkey see, monkey do” sums up the present preoccupation with Hollywood film formulas — a dubious exercise that threatens Canada’s *true* filmmaking potential.

If what we’re doing in the Canadian feature film industry is trying to beat Hollywood at its own game, I don’t like our chances. All of the highly publicized talk about “Hollywood North” is nonsensical and naive, a disservice to what can happen here in film. We can, I believe, create a viable indigenous film industry, which can succeed, without trying to beat them, or, for that matter, join them.

The Americans are the greatest filmmakers in the world. They know, explicitly, and sometimes cynically, how to pull all of the strings that make us laugh or cry or cringe in response to lights and shadows. They know how to push all of the buttons that bring us into darkened rooms to watch a strip of plastic being projected on a screen so large it overwhelms our disbelief and creates a magic that keeps us coming back for more.

American films succeed so well — often overwhelming indigenous films in their own countries — for two reasons. First, because they are by and large very good at what they set out to do — to entertain at a mass level. Second, because the Hollywood “major” studios have enormous power in the marketplace. The power is only partially in their ability to make superbly crafted entertainment films. What really counts is their control of a world-wide distribution system that commands the best screens and the best play dates in the world. In Canada, in Australia, and in a score of other countries, locally made films have little chance of competing successfully for screen time against the current Hollywood blockbuster.

That’s the problem and the challenge for Canadian filmmakers. If, on the one hand, we are going to try to make Hollywood style movies, with the budgets and stars that go with them, then the only way to the international markets we must have to recoup our costs is through the “majors”. That means that we must persuade a major Hollywood studio to “pick up” our film for distribution. They alone can commit the massive budgets, often ex-

ceeding the total cost of the production, required to promote and launch the film on a world scale. The cost of prints, advertising and promotion, transportation, executive travel and entertainment, overhead and other expenses are, of course, the first charge against revenues from the film. Add to this a distribution fee or commission in the thirty to fifty percent range, and you can see how the producer, who waits at the end of the line, can end up losing money on a picture that succeeds at the box office and makes money for the distributor. That’s all right if the distributor is also the producer, as is the case with the Hollywood Majors. It’s simply a matter of cost accounting. But the independent producer often finds himself caught up in the chronic round of Hollywood lawsuits in which producers, actors, and others who hoped to share in the profits, try to find out where the money went.

If, on the other hand, Canadian producers want to be truly independent and make and distribute their films outside the orbit of the Majors, we face a very different set of challenges. It bears pointing out that we do not really make Hollywood movies in Canada, even though some would like to believe so. That is not to say that Hollywood movies don’t get made in this country — only that Canadians don’t make them. The true Hollywood movies that are made here are controlled by Hollywood producers. Sometimes they just come to use the scenery and the relatively cheap labour. More recently, they come to work with Canadian “producers”, and in addition to the scenery

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and cheap labour, get tax subsidized dollars to cover the cost of film. To make this work in terms of the taxation point system they relegate themselves to the role of "executive producers", and let the Canadians take the glory and the fees as "producers" until the film leaves the country.

The movies Canadian producers are really in charge of are too often "imitation Hollywood", peopled with stars of the second water remembered fondly by middle-aged investors who don't go to the movies anymore. They are frequently joined by expatriate Canadian actors who count for "points" in qualifying for the tax break, and who manage to get paid more for working in their native land than they can command in Hollywood. There are notable exceptions, but, by and large, the mainstream of Canadian feature film production in recent years has been the imitation Hollywood movie, in which Canadian locations are disguised to look American, and in which Hollywood "names" loom large on the marquee.

These "Canadian" films, rarely picked up for distribution by the Majors, try to compete with Hollywood alongside the so-called "independent" producers and distributors from the United States and every other filmmaking country in the world. The largest gathering of the "independents" took place this past October at Milan, Italy at the MIFED film market. No pretense of a festival, no celebration of the art and excellence of film takes place at MIFED. This is where films are bought and sold. Some four thousand buyers and sellers of film from virtually every country in the world that makes or shows movies were present. For a week they prowled through close to 200 screening facilities ranging from 35mm projection theatres seating 25 to 50, to office-sized rooms dominated by videotape players and television monitors. They were incessantly on the move through the building complex at the site of the Milan World Fair, rarely pausing to look at any film for more than a few minutes, meeting in offices, corridors, stairways, bars and restaurants — dealing, dealing, dealing. The Majors, of course, weren't there. They really are independent of the need to huckster their films this way. But the Canadians were there in force.

Fully eighty percent of the films being bought and sold at MIFED were exploitation films of one genre or another, and some of them were Canadian. There were horror exploitation films (occult blood and guts), science-fiction exploitation films (extra-terrestrial blood and guts), and, of course, plain old sexploitation films (lots of "T & A", tits and ass). The level of creativity, craft and cynicism reached new lows. Buyers and sellers expressed disgust at delights which included seeing live people seemingly fed into meat grinders; but they bought, and they sold.

The minority twenty percent of the films offered, the so-called "soft" films, included movies created by producers who believe (along with the Majors, by the way) that it's possible to tell good stories with taste, and still find an audience. And, just often enough to make it worth the considerable effort, some of them succeed. It should be a source of great concern however, that the audience for these films is being pushed out of the theatres by the narrowing segment who are being conditioned to exploita-

tion cinema, and by the system that feeds them.

All film producers, including the Majors, feel and often yield to the call for more blood and guts and T&A, even in films meant to tell good stories entertainingly. Many producers deliberately avoid getting a "Family" rating for their films. They no longer believe in the commercial viability of that audience, having yielded the field to television. But I believe that there is a vast audience waiting and wanting to come back to the cinema, because no form of television can duplicate the magic of the big screen and an audience in a dark room. If all this suggests that the present alternatives for Canadian film producers are narrow indeed, that is absolutely the case. We cannot join or compete with the Majors. Joining the mainstream of independent producers, making films for the exploitation market, requires a toughness and a cynicism few can muster. Our best alternative is to go for quality, to become part of that small, but persistent stream of films that every year break through the system and find audiences around the world. It's the stream that has been occupied by many European films, and increasingly in recent years, by films from countries such as Australia. It's the stream where small is beautiful.

We can make small, enjoyable and successful films in Canada. Not the serious, *meaningful*, artistic films of the self-indulgent — there is no room for them in an enterprise where you risk such large quantities of other people's money — but storytelling films that are moving and fun to watch. I believe that Canadians have the tenacity and the talent to succeed. We have the landscape, we have the stories, we have the creative and technical gifts.

But we need to keep the budgets down. Forget the star wars. There's no certain magic in the big names. Recent films starring Richard Burton, Richard Widmark, Burt Lancaster, Orson Welles and others, are examples. We need to take the limousines and Lear Jets to Lethbridge out of the budgets and put the money on the screen.

We need to revise the point system that triggers the 100% write-off for investors in Certified Canadian Feature Films. Let the percentage be reduced for every foreign star, director, writer or producer (no matter what he's called) that comes into the film. Give the 100% write-off only to films that are 100% Canadian. We need to convince the unions and guilds that this is not Hollywood North, and if we try to build Hollywood salaries and perquisites into our film budgets, our chances of getting our money back, and consequently of making more films, are reduced.

Only then can we concentrate on telling stories born of our own experience, that ring with the authenticity and universality that will carry them around the world.

Finally, we need to develop our own market and turn Canadian audiences on to Canadian film. It's almost impossible, on today's budgets, for a film made in this country to recoup its costs from distribution here. But we can come much closer than we have by bringing people who love movies, but who revolt at the emotional exploitation of most current films, back into the theatres. We have the stories and we know how to tell them.

And I believe in the magic. ■