

# The Body Snatchers: GENRE and CANADIAN CINEMA

by Jim Leach

*But they'd killed the heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference. Like the Late Show sci-fi movies, creatures from outer space, body snatchers injecting themselves into you, dispossessing your brain... If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them.... you speak their language, a language is everything you do.<sup>1</sup>*

Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*

Margaret Atwood's ironic allusion to the feat of being 'taken over' that dominates much of American popular culture (*us versus them*) offers a basic insight into the relationship between Canadian fears of assimilation and the subtle colonizing effects of the American mass media. The influence of Hollywood has affected many film industries throughout the world, but the problem is made particularly acute in Canada by geographical proximity. Canada is largely controlled by U.S. corporations. As Atwood makes clear, however, the problem is also psychological: the "Americans" in *Surfacing* whose

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mindless cruelty is exhibited in the killing of the heron are in fact Canadians. "Americans" are modern "human beings," the products of the affluent society and the concrete city, totally alienated from their land, their gods, and (in Canada's case) their languages. In terms of film, this alienation can be expressed as a struggle between an attempt to evolve a film language capable of responding to the Canadian experience and the temptation to take over (or be taken over by) one ready-made language of the American genres.

The issue is not confined to cinema or to Canada. As Ronald Sutherland has pointed out, there is a continuity between the Quebecois' fear of being taken over by "the Anglo-Saxon mentality or way of life," the English Canadian fear of "Americanization," and the American experience of "the furious dehumanization of the age."<sup>2</sup> As far as the Canadian cinema is concerned, the problem has always been aggravated by the economic and aesthetic pressure exerted by the mass-production techniques of the American cinema. The development of the American genres has been traced back to the emergence during the First World War of "mass production" methods that brought with them "the concomitant of all economies of scale: standardization." The use of formulas thus had an economic base, but the social function of the genres

was also highly conservative: "The very existence of a set of conventionalized genre parameters constrains movies towards a norm. A genre is a relatively fixed culture pattern. It defines a moral and social world, as well as a physical and historical environment. By its nature, its very familiarity, it inclines towards reassurance."<sup>3</sup> The reliance on established genres provides a general security blanket: the producer knows what he or she is investing in, the distributor has an "angle" to exploit, the director knows that the film will find an audience, and the audience knows what to expect and how to respond. This sense of security is precisely what is lacking, almost by definition, in the more traditional (or progressive?) Canadian cinema that explores (often painfully) the uncertainties of the Canadian experience.

One alternative for Canadian cinema has been found in the documentary tradition established by John Grierson, who developed the National Film Board to set the social concern of the documentary movement against the glamorous escapism of Hollywood. More recently, Pierre Perrault, whose documentaries explore the basis for identity in Quebec, has set that exploration against the simplifications of the genre film: "There is an essential difference between a good western in which the good and bad are easily identifi-

able... and reality. Moreover the films that we make do not seek to divide the world between the good and the bad but to look reality in the face and if possible to reflect it... If sometimes there is spectacle it is in the auditorium... This cinema puts the filmmakers themselves in question."<sup>4</sup> Although it has become increasingly difficult to tell the good from the bad (or the ugly) in recent westerns, Perrault does point to a basic opposition between a cinema of provocation and a cinema of consumption. Perrault sees the advance of a consumer society as the greatest threat to the survival of Quebec: "The dream that comes in a box, in a can, on a disc, on film, threatens to assimilate us, to send us to sleep forever."<sup>5</sup> His strategy involves not only the rejection of genre and spectacle but also of fiction. Such an extreme solution is obviously limited as a means of combating the influence exercised by the formulas of the American fiction film through cinema and television, but the experience of the documentary cannot be overlooked in an attempt to distinguish a Canadian perspective.

The documentary experience was certainly a major factor in 1963 when the Canadian fiction film finally established itself, simultaneously in English and French, with the appearance of Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Goodbye* and Gilles Groulx's *Le Chat dans le sac*.<sup>6</sup> Both films originated as documentary projects within the NFB, and they were followed by a number of small-budget fiction films influenced by the techniques of direct cinema and rooted in the specifics of experience in Canada's different regions.<sup>7</sup> These regional films were often better received by U.S. than by Canadian critics, but they generally failed to reach large audiences, not only because of the audience's familiarity with the American formulas that define

'popular' cinema but also because of the lack of commitment to these films of the largely U.S.-controlled distribution system in Canada. The search for popular audiences has confirmed the truth of Atwood's vision, as the indigenous regional films have given way to genre films, sometimes filmed in the United States, more often in unidentified Canadian locations or in Canadian settings labeled with U.S. names.<sup>8</sup> Thus Peter Medak's *The Changeling* (1979) was shot in Ontario and Vancouver, but its settings were identified as northern New York State and Seattle, and David Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone* (1983) made Ontario stand in for New Hampshire. Before the body snatchers finally took over, however, there was a transition period (the early seventies) during which a number of Canadian filmmakers tried to adapt the American genres to deal with the specifically Canadian experiences that had provided the basis for the regional films. With the benefit of hindsight, it could be said that these films paved the way for the body snatchers, but the strategies that they developed help to illuminate some of the problems of Canadian popular culture as it tries to define itself within or against the popular formulas established in another country.

These films appeared at a time when the American genres were themselves under pressure. The American dream had turned into something of a nightmare, and the sense of communal values that animated the genres had largely disappeared. In the films of Peckinpah, Altman, and others, the familiarity of the genre material no longer offers reassurance, and the established norms are disturbingly questioned. An increased self-consciousness in the use of genres and the absence of widely accepted norms suggest a possible drawing together of the American and Canadian experiences on this common ground of uncertainty. Two of the most popular American genres of this period were the heist film and the disaster film: in the valueless world of the former, the criminals are caught (if at all) not through the efficiency of the forces of law and order but by pure chance; in the latter a society, normal to the point of banality, is shaken by forces over which it has no control. The tension between a world without norms and a world of aggressive normality becomes the basis for the Canadian genre film.

The absence of normality is thoroughly developed in Harvey Hart's crime thriller *The Pyx* (1973). In the convent where she is undergoing a drug cure, a friend tells Elizabeth (Karen Black) that she doesn't know what the world 'normal,' the detective (Christopher Plummer) replies that after twenty-four years on the police force he doesn't know what that word means. The double structure, in which the investigation of Elizabeth's death is intercut with the events leading up to it, reveals strong parallels between the lives of the prostitute and the detective.



• Christopher Walken in a *Dead Zone*



• Vivien Reis, Louis del Grande and Lindsay Wagner get a *Second Wind*

Montreal is presented as a city of extremes, with its illuminated cross presiding over prostitution and homosexuality, gangsters and drug addiction, convents and devil worship. The process by which the detective discovers the truth represents not a restoration of social order but a loss of control in the face of an all-pervasive corruption and exploitation. Like Elizabeth, he is a 'bad' Catholic, but, whereas her death can be seen as a redemption in that it is caused by her refusal to commit sacrilege against the host, his discovery of the world in which she lived leads him to commit an act of violence that violates the law that he is supposed to uphold.

This grotesque underworld can be seen as the perversion of the instinctual life that has been repressed to make the 'normal' life of bourgeois society possible. The 'normal' world is glimpsed only briefly in *The Pyx* in the unsatisfying, and almost irrelevant, relationship of the detective and his girlfriend, but a number of Canadian films have been concerned with building up a strong sense of normality and security that is then undermined. David Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1974) opens with a smooth soft-sell voice extolling the self-contained luxury of the apartment building that is to be victimized; in William Fruet's *Death Weekend* (1976) the invasion of the dentist's elegant country mansion by violent thugs exposes the

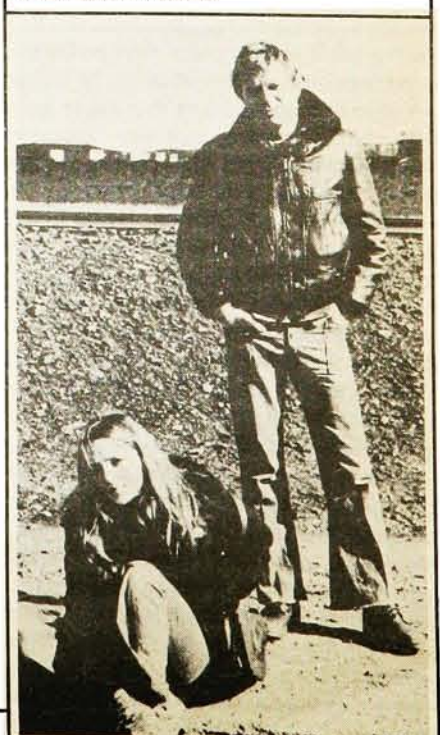
fragility of bourgeois illusions of affluence and security; while Don Shebib's *Second Wind* (1976) draws on the genre to set Roger's obsession with running against the deadening banality of suburban life. Whereas in the American context the sterility of a life based on consumption and possession signifies the collapse of the American dream, these Canadian films relate the concern with material security to the 'Americanization' of Canadian life. What is missing from the plastic and packaged world of each of these films is what gave the American dream its vitality: a sense of challenge. In *Second Wind*, for example, Roger turns to competitive running because, surprisingly, his job at the stock exchange offers no challenges.

The aggressiveness of the normal and the urge toward standardization only serve to emphasize the absence of a felt Canadian identity. The measuring of Canadian culture and society against American standards becomes (implicitly or explicitly) a major concern of Canadian genre films. Dillon in Peter Pearson's *Paperback Hero* (1972) tries to invest his life with a glamor drawn from American westerns that is hopelessly at variance with the drab reality of his small-town existence in Saskatchewan; Don Shebib's *Between Friends* (1973) begins with a smoothly efficient heist in California and ends

with a disastrous attempted holdup at a mine in the wastelands of Ontario's nickel belt; Jacques Godbout's *La Gammick* (1974) shows the Montreal underworld to be controlled by American bosses; and Don Owen's *Partners* (1976) deals with the reactions of characters whose backgrounds are American or English to an attempt by an American corporation to take over a Canadian company. Since all these films make explicit their concern with the squeezing of Canadian life into an American mold, their use of the genres is highly ironic: they stress the gulf between Canadian reality and the dreams that once sustained the American genres.

This feeling of disillusionment could also be found in American genre films of the time, but in Canada it was coupled with a tendency to define reality as what happens south of the border. Genre films, of course, are not the only ones to express this tendency: the visits to the Chicago riots in Robin Spry's *Prologue* (1969) and to the poor people's camp in Washington in Claude Jutra's *Wow* (1969) confront Canadian youths searching for identity and commitment with 'real' political events. The point is not that Canadian problems are unreal but that they are intangible, that the political battle in the United States seems (or seemed in the late sixties) to be clear-cut while the Canadian identity crisis grows out of the absence of norms against which to rebel. Peter Harcourt has aptly described the reminiscence of John Ford's westerns when Will sings 'We Shall Gather at the River' during Coker's funeral in *Between Friends* as "an allusion to an absence," and the whole film is suffused with images of impotence, failure, and absence.<sup>9</sup> This mood also dominates *Paperback Hero*, which is concerned not only with Dillon's failure to become a western hero but also with the way in which his ideal destroys any other possibility for his life. Robert Fulford has referred to "a

• *Between Friends*



sense of uselessness to come that places him firmly within the tradition of recent American westerns," but Pearson presents us less with the decline of a heroic past than with the sterility of a present shaped by imported dreams.<sup>10</sup>

The bleakness of outlook presented by most Canadian genre films offers little comfort to audiences, and critics constantly bemoan the absence of the traditional virtues. "If one is looking for a tight, suspenseful, and a fast-paced tingler," writes Nat Shuster, "*The Pyx* is a nix."<sup>11</sup> The demand for a smooth-flowing narrative and an aggressive pace is an attempt to confine Canadian genre films within the Hollywood norms, to make them more comfortable and less disturbing. This attempt to impose a preconceived form can be related to the use of a preexisting iconography that is basic to the genre film; and the adoption of the conventions of a genre can result in a failure to take into account the viewing habits developed by that genre. Quebec critics, for example, have complained that the political point of Jean-Claude Lord's *Bingo* (1973) is undermined by its concern to generate the suspense expected of a political thriller; since the spectators are treated as consumers not implicated in the action, the film's structure becomes a reflection of the oppressive political structures that it tries to denounce.<sup>12</sup> An even more extreme case is Denis Héroux's *Born for Hell* (1975), which opens with a powerful vision of a society in which violence has become all-pervasive but which then proceeds to treat its spectators as voyeurs by its graphic depiction of a series of sex murders.

Of course, the best of American genre films do not demand a simple and passive response from their spectators, but the inherent conservatism of the genre system does create a strong pull in that direction. The subversive intentions of filmmakers can easily be negated by the expectations aroused by the genre in which they are working. George McCowan's *Face-Off* (1971), for example, seems to relate the plight of the hockey player (tied to one team, owned by the establishment, and forced to be competitive and aggressive) to a more general social malaise, but the climactic freeze-frame of Duke stepping onto the ice to save the Leafs conforms to genre expectations and seems to endorse the way things are. Coupled with this pull toward reassurance, however, is the problem faced by all genre films of balancing vision and narrative, of ensuring that the film's themes are not submerged by the details required to embody them in 'realistic' narrative form. In *Shivers* Cronenberg builds up a vision of a 'normal' world that conceals the perversion and frustration of its inhabitants, but the detailed depiction of the parasites' destruction of this world and the refusal to leave anything to the imagination finally communicate little more than a strong sexual disgust. The graphic depiction of violent death in



• Carole Laure and Mathieu Carrière in *Born for Hell*



• Christopher Plummer and Karen Black in *The Pyx*

*Death Weekend* (throat-cutting, burning alive, being sucked into a swamp, being run down by a car) arouses our interest in the mechanics of the illusion but undermines the disturbing vision of a consumer society with which the film opens (or is death the ultimate consumer?).

As if to counter this smothering of tensions by the violent detail associated with the genre, *Death Weekend* ends on a note of ambiguity: Diane has survived the assault of the thugs by answering violence with violence but is haunted by her memory of her encounter with the leader of the gang with whom she seems to have some "mystic" connection. Similar 'open' endings occur in *Shivers*, in which the infected apartment-dwellers drive out into the city, and in *Second Wind*, in which it is left unclear whether Roger has thrown away his running shoes for

good. Whereas genre films normally move from tension to resolution, each of these films begins in a world in which all ambiguity has been denied and ends with an image that can be taken as resolution or question. But such ambiguity seems imposed on films that have previously depended on conventions and stereotypes, an evasion of the issues that the film might have raised rather than a challenge to the spectator. What these films do demonstrate, however, is the need for stronger and more consistent measures to counteract the demands of the genre and the difficulty of finding new perspectives from which to view the old assumptions.

The problem of creating a critical detachment from these assumptions is stressed by Quebec filmmaker Denis Arcand. He argues that even when directors set out to separate themselves from "the social positions of the domin-

ant bourgeoisie..., the use of a cinematic form of expression whose rules normally carry the established philosophy leads in the end to the denial, on the screen, of the original intentions so praiseworthy in themselves." Arcand's solution is a radical "deconstruction" of the genre, the denial of genre expectations so as to "produce an uneasiness in the spectator which will be difficult to identify to begin with because it is caused by a modification of the cinematic language itself."<sup>13</sup> As in Arcand's own films, this strategy demands a rejection of the heavy editing and brisk rhythms of the American genre film, as well as a lessening of emphasis on 'action' and on violence as a solution to all problems. This approach has been adopted, to widely varying effect, in Arcand's own *La Maudite Galette* (1972), Shebib's *Between Friends*, Godbout's *La Gammick*, and Jean-Pierre Lefebvre's *Pigs Are Seldom Clean* (1973).<sup>14</sup>

Arcand has described *La Maudite Galette* as "a false crime thriller" and as "a deconstructed thriller." Like all of these films, it stresses waiting and frustration rather than the action expected of its genre. Its use of single-shot sequences, within which small variations of tone and gesture build up a sense of disturbance and unease, relates it closely to nongenre films like Jacques Leduc's *On est loin du soleil* (1971), which expresses the Quebec experience in terms of "the natural duration of beings to whom nothing happens."<sup>15</sup> The violence of the robbery breaks through the sense of inertia so far built up and creates a sense of direction, but the movement thus initiated leads ultimately to the abandonment of Quebec (by the old couple who end up with the money and drive their new American car to Florida). Arcand's "strategy of slowness" prevents any identification with the characters or emotional gratification from the violence: "Instead of asking yourself what is happening to the heroes, you ask yourself why it is happening. You are led to interrogate yourself on the society which produces this kind of individual."<sup>16</sup> In documentaries like *On est au coton* (1970) and *Quebec: Duplessis and After* (1972), Arcand had already explored the social, economic, and political factors that gave birth to terrorism in Quebec; in his genre films, his interest shifts from terrorism to gangsterism (and its alliance with capitalism), but his vision remains consistent in its concern with the social roots of violence.<sup>17</sup>

Arcand's method in his genre films – *La Maudite Galette*, *Réjeanne Padovani* (1973), and *Gina* (1975) – is to create frustration in the spectator by developing a tension between "a cinema of the look and a cinema of action."<sup>18</sup> Whereas in the American genre film violent action usually resolves tensions, in these films action only manages to intensify the contradictions that it tries to resolve. Moreover, in a world in which traditional values have crumbled, the opposition between the crimi-

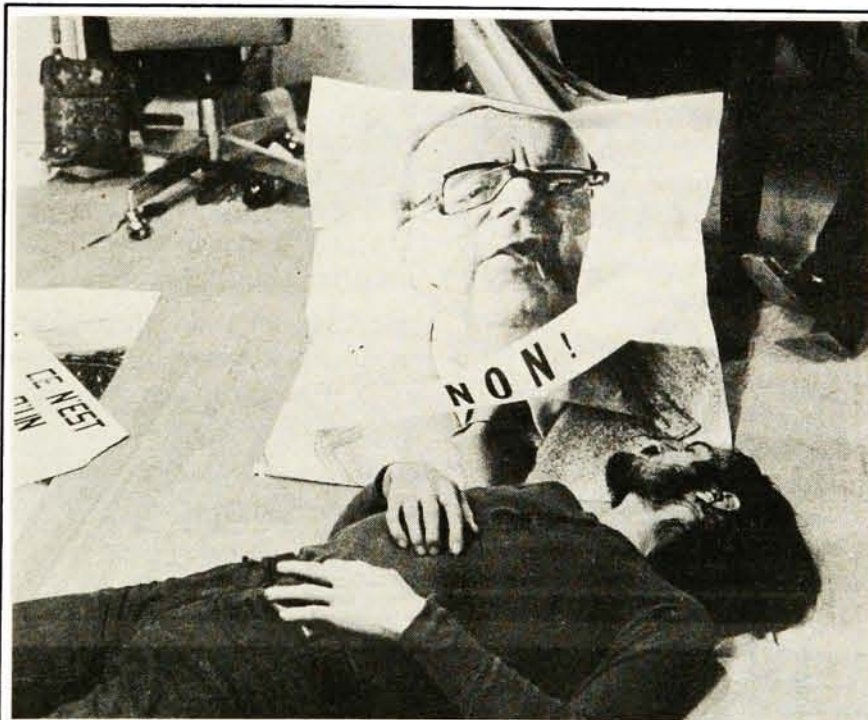
nal and 'straight' society no longer has any real meaning. After their son has been gunned down in their kitchen in *La Maudite Galette*, his old parents calmly hide the stolen money before the police arrive; similarly, in Lefebvre's *Pigs Are Seldom Clean*, Bob Tremblay both pushes drugs and informs on the users to an RCMP officer who smokes pot himself, and Chico in Godbout's *La Gammick* tries to expose American crime bosses on an open-line radio show but is betrayed by the host and gunned down by police. In *La Maudite Galette* and Réjeanne Padovani, as in *Between Friends*, the family no longer functions as a social force but is instead the source of the violence. In *Pigs Are Seldom Clean* Bob Tremblay acts as a double agent to fulfill his dream of a suburban family life. There is no clear dividing line between domesticity and criminality, and if crime rarely pays, it is because the characters in these films are mostly smalltime operators who are as alienated from the world of big crime as they are from the closely related world of big business. Vincent Padovani survives unscathed, while his wife Réjeanne ends up buried in the concrete highway that his company has built as a result of his political connections.

The conventional boundaries that were so important to the genre film no longer exist, and one of the themes of all these films is the search for meaningful boundaries. *Pigs Are Seldom Clean* is set in the divided city of Ottawa-Hull: Bob Tremblay (whose Anglo-French name expresses division) works for the police in Ottawa and pushes drugs among the young people of Hull.<sup>19</sup> Despite the boundary between the two cities (and provinces), much of the film takes place in a no-man's land, the two societies having in common their nondescript buildings and, of course, the Canadian winter. More commonly the boundary is that between Canada and the United States: for the American corporate underworld of *La Gammick* the border exists only as a minor nuisance; in *Between Friends* the border is not shown but the California surf remains in Toby's mind as a memory of a past to which he cannot return and as a dream of a future that he does not have. America is both dream and reality; Canada is uncomfortably posed between the two.

Given this absence of well-defined boundaries, the sharply defined conflicts of the genre film cease to be appropriate. Lefebvre leaves us to contemplate a moral vacuum, eliminating all suspense by the opening teletype message that succinctly describes the final killings; Godbout fills the second half of his film almost entirely with Chico's monologue on a hotline radio show, a monologue that becomes an expression of his impotence and a challenge to the viewer to examine its implications; while Shebib begins with the successful Californian heist and ends with the botched Canadian job, these action sequences come to seem almost



• Luce Guilbault counts her blessing in *La Maudite Galette*



• A potential demonstration is thwarted in *Réjeanne Padovani*

irrelevant to a film concerned with empty spaces (between friends) and unfulfilled dreams.

In these films, the whole generic context becomes an allusion to an absence. They are now part of Canadian film history and can be seen as transitional works between Canadian regional cinema and the anonymous films of Hollywood North. But they should not be condemned automatically because of what followed them; rather, it would be better to determine how successfully each film has coped with the aesthetic and ideological issues raised by the chosen genre. These Canadian genre films may offer insights into the social and cinematic forces that still threaten to 'take over' the Canadian cinema. For geographical and linguistic reasons, Canada is especially vulnerable to these forces. In Quebec, the French language does provide some protection, but the

essential issue is one of film language. As Atwood suggests in *Surfacing*, "a language is everything you do," and the tensions explored in this article can also be found in many national cinemas that must define themselves in relation to the dominant codes of the American genres.

Notes

1. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 148.  
 2. Ronald Sutherland, *Second Image: Comparative Studies in Quebec / Canadian Literature* (Don Mills, Ontario: New Press, 1971), p. 22.

3. Andrew Tudor, *Image and Influence* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), pp. 180-181.  
 4. Michel Brûlé, Fernand Dumont, and Pierre Perrault, "De la notion de pays à la représentation de la nation," *Cinema Canada* 1, no. 1 (May 1971): 26-27.  
 5. Michel Delahaye and Louis Marcorelles, "L'Action parlée: Entretien avec Pierre Perrault," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 165 (April 1965): 36.  
 6. I have tried to translate French titles where possible, but Quebec filmmakers often contribute to the politics of language in Canada by using colloquial titles that resist translation into English. The title of *Le Chat dans le sac* - literally, "The Cat in the Bag" - refers to the hero's feelings of suffocation, of being in a cul-de-sac. For earlier attempts to create a Canadian fiction cinema, see Pierre Véronneau and Piers Handling, eds., *Self Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Quebec Cinemas* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1980). For the relationship between Hollywood and the Canadian film industry, see Pierre Berton, *Hollywood's Canada: The Americanization of Our National Image* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975).  
 7. Quebec is, of course, more than simply a 'region' of Canada; but Quebec nationalism did inspire a concern to develop cinematic images that would reflect the immediate environment, and these images are often close to those found in English Canadian regional films. See my "Second Images: Reflections on the Canadian Cinema(s) in the Seventies," *Dalhousie Review* 62, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 181-195; reprinted in *Take Two: A Tribute to Film in Canada*, edited by Seth Feldman (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1984), pp. 100-110.  
 8. Another controversial aspect of these films is the frequent use of American stars to ensure international distribution. There have also been several 'coproductions' with Britain and France.  
 9. Peter Harcourt, "Men of Vision: Don Shebib," *Cinema Canada*, no. 32 (November 1976): 40; reprinted in *Canadian Film Reader*, edited by Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977), p. 216.  
 10. Robert Fulford, *Marshall Delaney at the Movies* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1974), p. 72.  
 11. Nat Shuster, "Canadian Film View," *Motion* (November-December 1973): 30.  
 12. See Pierre Vallières, "Bingo sur une foire de confusion," *Cinéma Québec* 3, nos. 6/7 (April-May 1974): 33.  
 13. Denys Arcand, "La Maudite Galette," *Cinéma Québec* 2, no. 1 (Septembre 1972): 11.  
 14. *La Maudite Galette* means "Damned Money," using a colloquial term for money; *La Gammick* (from the English *gimmick*) refers to the activities of the gangsters that Chico unmasks; *Pigs Are Seldom Clean* is the title of the English-dubbed print of Lefebvre's *On n'engraisse pas les cochons à l'eau claire*, roughly "Pigs don't grow fat on clear water."  
 15. André Leroux, "L'Evidence mise à nue," *Cinéma Québec* 1, no. 5 (November 1971): 7. *On est loin du soleil* could be translated as "We are far from the sun."  
 16. "La Maudite Galette, interview with Denys Arcand," *Cinéma Québec* 1, no. 9 (May-June 1972): 29.  
 17. *On est au coton*, Arcand's controversial documentary on the cotton industry in Quebec, was banned by the NFB, but the issues it raises were incorporated into the fiction film *Gina* (1974). The title includes an untranslatable pun, since "coton" means "cotton" but is also part of a colloquial expression meaning "we're fed up."  
 18. Richard Gay, "Notre condition de violés," *Cinéma Québec* 4, no. 2 (April 1975): 14.  
 19. Lefebvre does not show the tourist sites in Canada's federal capital, but he does contrast the affluence of the predominantly English-speaking city on the Ontario side of the border with the less prosperous French-speaking city of Hull across the river in Quebec.

# Canadian Feature Film Index

# 1913-1985

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