

by Veronika Soul

notes for an article that needs to be written

People who know who they are and where, express themselves through their culture. Do Canadians care to see their reflection in films? Peter Harcourt asks this most important question. Until we answer his question, we'll all be a bit in the air. We thank Veronika Soul for her footnotes.

nationalism and the canadian consciousness

by Peter Harcourt

It seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question "Who am I?" than by some such riddle as "Where is here?"

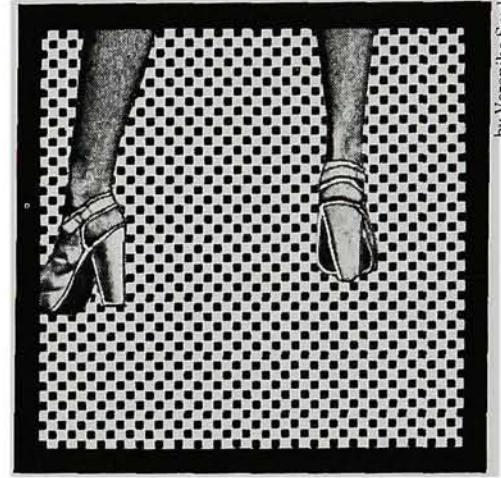
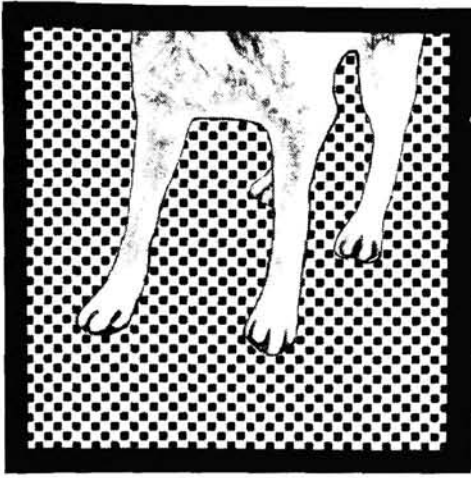
Northrop Frye, 1971 (1)

Throughout Dr. Frye's collected articles on the Canadian imagination, there are references to the particularities of history and geography. Canada, Frye reminds us, was

Peter Harcourt, author of Six European Directors (Penguin, 1974) and Movies & Mythologies (CBC, 1977), teaches film at York University.

founded by a respect for both tradition and law. In terms of history, we chose not to join the American Revolution and we organized our expansion so that we never had a Wild West. In terms of geography, the United States began as an Atlantic seaboard community which, bit by bit, throughout its length, pushed itself west. But the Canadian experience has been different, appropriate to the shape of our country.

The traveller from Europe edges into it like a tiny Jonah entering an inconceivably large whale, slipping past the Straits of Belle Isle into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where five Canadian provinces surround him, for the most part invisible. Then he goes up the St. Lawrence and the inhabited country comes into view, mainly a French-speaking country, with its own cultural traditions. To enter the United States is a matter of crossing an ocean; to enter Canada is



by Veronika Souil

a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent. (2)

Today, when most people inject themselves into both countries by means of jet, bypassing these geographical differences, unlike the United States, Canada still remains a kind of ribbon development – the only nation in the world to be constructed in this way. On top of this, there is (or can be) the pull of the north, the sense of space up there that is part of our nation and which the majority of Canadians have never seen.

What is the effect of this space on the Canadian imagination? Dealing largely with poetry, Northrop Frye can relate it to what he calls a pastoral tradition, a tradition that alternates between two poles:

At one pole of experience there is a fusion of human life and the life in nature; at the opposite pole is the identity of the sinister and terrible elements in nature with the death-wish in man. (3)

This second pole has been taken up by Margaret Atwood in *Survival*, her thematic guide to Canadian literature. She suggests that in much of our "frontier" writing, there is less a sense of excitement and adventure than "an almost intolerable anxiety."

Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience – the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship – that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; and he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life. (4)

In *Surfacing*, however, her novel about a retreat into the wilderness, nature is handled differently, more in terms of Frye's first pole. It is presented less as a threat than as an alternative to the regimented impersonality of city life. The wilderness becomes a source of wisdom, Indian in origin, that is the partner of those who live with reverence for the land.

Geography affects culture and culture forms consciousness. But there are further refinements that have to be made. Is culture necessarily national or does it tend more to be regional? Is culture dependent on politics? And how does a sense of identity relate to the feeling of national unity? For Northrop Frye, these terms must be kept separate. National unity is a matter of political and economic convenience, while identity is something else:

The question of identity is primarily a cultural and imaginative question, and there is always something

vegetable about the imagination, something sharply limited in range... Identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture; unity is national in reference, international in perspective, and rooted in political feeling. (5)

Dr. Frye feels strongly about these matters. For their terms allow him to diagnose the nation's ills:

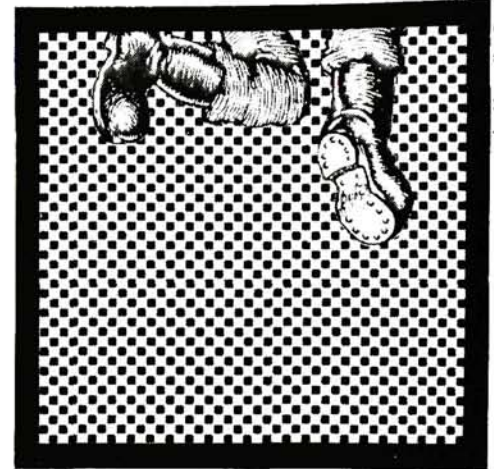
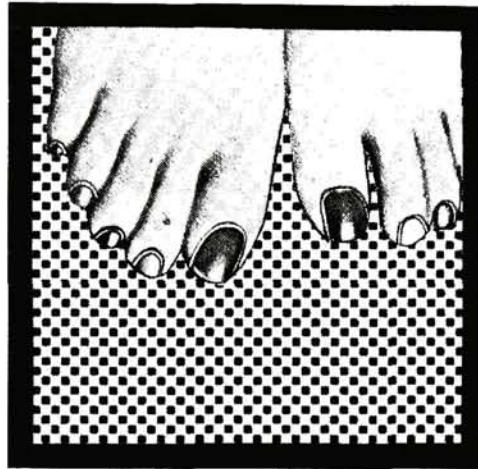
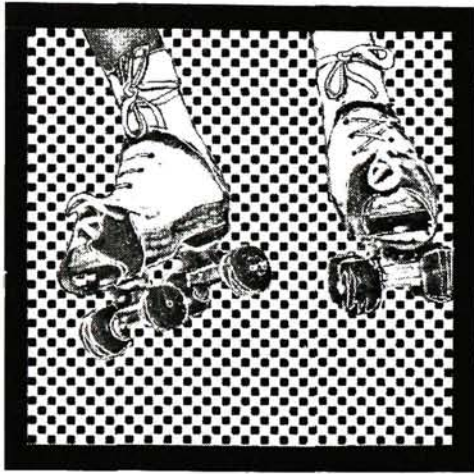
The essential element in the national sense of unity is the east-west feeling, developed historically along the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes axis, and expressed in the national motto, *a mari usque ad mare*. The tension between this political sense of unity and the imaginative sense of locality is the essence of whatever the word "Canadian" means. Once the tension is given up, and the two elements of unity and identity are confused or assimilated to each other, we get the two endemic diseases of Canadian life. Assimilating identity to unity produces the empty gestures of cultural nationalism; assimilating unity to identity produces the kind of provincial isolation which is now called separatism. (6)

The last few years have seen an intensification of these confusions between the cultural and the political – whether in British Columbia or Quebec. The fight for cultural identity seems increasingly to be fought against the notion of national unity, confusing independence of spirit with political sovereignty.

Yet there are reasons for this, reasons that relate to the degree to which, in Canada, the federal government is so deeply implicated in cultural matters. If one is a writer or a potter or a painter, one can ply one's craft within one's region by whatever means one can find. In this way, whether consciously or unconsciously, one can let one's culture speak through one, producing work which, with its regional references, is recognizably Canadian. But if one is a filmmaker or if one wants to work in radio or television, political considerations cut across one's desired cultural gestures.

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As things now stand – certainly in North America – theatrical filmmaking is an international industry controlled by American capital; and the largest producer of programs for radio and television is the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. To do anything at all in these media, one requires money; and one is then thinking less in regional than in national, if not international, terms.



by Veronika Smit

This is why the CBC is important – potentially important. Within our country, it is the major source of money for continuous film production and it does spread itself “from sea to shining sea.” It can thus overcome the absurdities of our national geography, absurdities well described by Don Shebib last year in *The Toronto Globe & Mail*:

The price we Canadians pay for living in a land that we can call our own is higher than that paid by any other country in the industrialized world. For we live in what is surely the worst-designed country on earth. Where else is there a nation that is 4,000 miles long and only 200 miles wide, with 24 million people scattered along what was initially a railway-and-river system? (7)

Shebib’s article is largely an argument *against* regionalism. As one of our most established filmmakers, he speaks against the regionalization policy of the National Film Board and against any impulse within the Canadian Film Development Corporation to decentralize feature film production. As a director of theatrical features, he recognizes the economic and technological reasons for maintaining English and French production in Toronto and Montreal, and I know that Peter Pearson agrees with him. At the same time, this argument, practical though it is in terms of the film industry, might be wrong for us as a nation in terms of our culture. In the world of feature films, there might seem to be a tension between the needs of an industry and the needs of our culture.

It is true (as Shebib points out) that there is no film production in Dallas or Detroit and no one in the States seems to mind. But American history and geography are very different from ours. Both their educational system and that great Myth of America have combined to give the ethnic mixture of that nation a far stronger sense of national identity than we have here in Canada.

For what is a Canadian? Canadians are a collection of individuals searching for a cause that might give them the feeling of cultural identity. Right now, for whatever reasons, the causes seem to be more regional than national, and in this sense more cultural than political. And I think this concern with our regional identity has to be acknowledged.

But let us return to the CBC – our most convenient scapegoat. Without a doubt, the CBC is our single most important cultural institution. It is our greatest producer of films and our strongest agency for creating a national consciousness. Yet its history, when it is written, will be a history of failure and compromise – failure because of compromise.

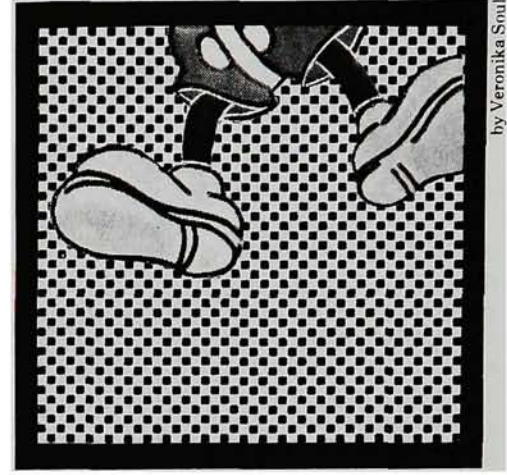
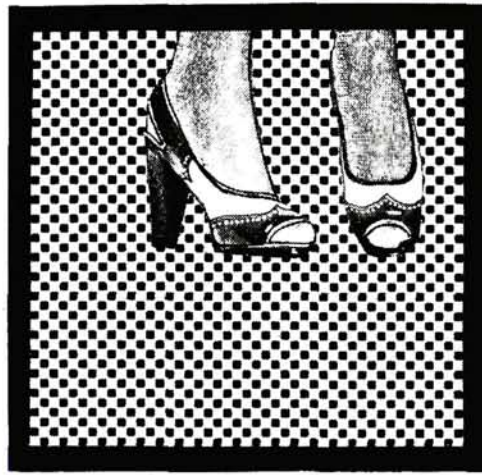
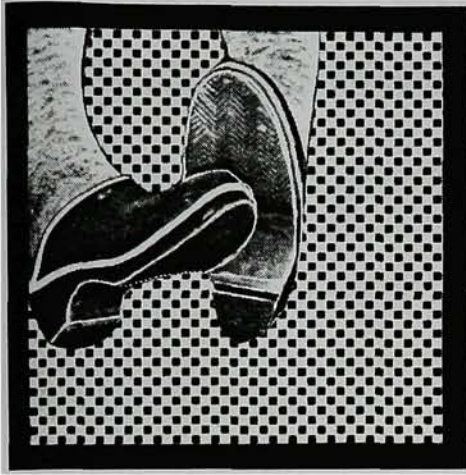
What the CBC offers with one hand, it taketh away with the other. While television drama is to be applauded for the *range* of experiences it has attempted to offer us – experiences which (I have briefly argued elsewhere) (8) also contain many shows of quality – CBC radio programming has almost totally centralized its FM broadcasting and has, for the most part, reduced cultural comment to items of news. This is why, in Canada, regional cultural concerns cannot be separated from national politics. The failure of the CBC is inseparable from the failure of the cultural policies of our various Liberal governments, in spite of other fine things which they may have done.

Everything has to do with money – money and power. Whenever the Liberals have been in power, they have sold us out on the long term for short-term benefits. They have accepted the image offered to us by the United States, a nation more or less like their own. This gives us, as George Grant has so tellingly put it, a kind of “errand boy” status in relation to the United States. To quote Grant more fully:

Since 1960, Canada has developed into a northern extension of the continental economy. This was involved in the decision made by C.D. Howe and his men. Our traditional role – as exporter of raw materials (particularly to Europe) with highly protected industry in central Canada – gradually lost its importance in relation to our role as a branch-plant of American capitalism. Our ruling class is composed of the same groups as that of the United States, with the single difference that the Canadian ruling class looks across the border for its final authority in both politics and culture. (9)

With these words, we return to the old problem of our colonial status in relation to the rest of the world, especially to the United States. But we must be clear about one important factor: the Americans have not invaded us and taken over our resources. Everything they have done they have done with the permission of our federal and provincial governments, sometimes at their invitation. For reasons perhaps more complicated than the economic facts that seem to explain them, we have allowed the Americans to out-distance our own national enterprise and to colonize our minds.

This traditional weakness, which is almost congenital to the national consciousness of underdeveloped countries, is not solely the result of the mutilation of the colonized people by the colonial regime. It is also the result of the intellectual laziness of the national middle class, of its spiritual penury, and of the profoundly cosmopolitan mold that its mind is set in. (10)



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These strong words are by Frantz Fanon. Of course, he is writing about Africa, about a continent where European colonization has totally destroyed cultural autonomy. In Canada, the situation, while certainly less extreme, is perhaps more insidious. We have been allowed our share of the world's riches. Our individual standard of living compares decently with that of the United States, and also we have far more social services. We are in this sense something like the "just society" that the Trudeau Liberals have tried to persuade us we are.

Yet in Canada, while we have been given these material advantages, we have been denied the full confidence of cultural adulthood – a confidence that comes about when we feel we are in charge of our own lives. We have grown up swamped by the words and images of another nation's culture; and we have been offered this culture as if it were our own.

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A person who is "here" but would rather be somewhere else is an exile or a prisoner; a person who is "here" but *thinks* he is somewhere else is insane. (11)

In Margaret Atwood's terms, our cultural situation is insane – especially in film and television. Not only are our screens controlled by foreign interests, our minds constantly jostled by foreign experiences; but when we do set up a film, both the standards of production and the scale of pay demanded by our technicians are derived from American models. In this way, we end up with a product that is striving for the same kind of style for a fraction of the cost – an "international" style, as people have been trained to say, when thinking about Hollywood.

The problems are well known. Co-productions with the United States generally surrender to the American companies a basic control. The films are made with their eye on New York – not on Regina or Chicoutimi. Yet what about co-productions with Switzerland or Belgium – small countries that live in the shadow of larger nations whose languages they share, small countries that also have to deal with a bi- or tri-lingual culture? What about co-productions with Sweden, Czechoslovakia, or West Germany – countries that have resisted American infiltration on the level of production and which work from an economic base comparable to our own?

"Who am I?" asked Northrop Frye, and then went on to refine that question within the Canadian cultural context and asked "Where is here?" As we contemplate the endless delays of the Secretary of State's office, requested about 10

years ago to devise a film policy for our nation; as we witness the decline in production from the promising '60s and the virtual cessation of production in Quebec; as we worry about our radio and the continuance of national television, we might well refine that question further and ask ourselves, "When is now?"

Yet we do have a culture that does manage to manifest itself – even in our movies; and along with our more prestigious, theatrical movies, there are also the more regional, small-budget films. There is the work of Jack Darcus on the West Coast and a film like **Montreal Main**, from Quebec; and there are themes and ideas in these films that are trying to speak to us in the same way as they do from our poetry and painting, as a critic like Robert Fothergill has shown (12).

In this vast country of ours, plugged in by cable to all that is most attractive in the United States; in this Canadian nation that has been nurtured on the passive virtues of respect for history and for law; in such a country, regional though our culture may be, it will never be allowed to express itself in the sphere of film and television without some kind of protective legislation, without some federal determination to utilize the popularity of the American product to help finance our own.

We have the talent and a growing cultural awareness to draw upon. But we still lack the means. Do enough Canadians care about this matter to make it appear to Ottawa an important national issue?

This is a question that only other Canadians can answer. □

1. *The Bush Garden*, by Northrop Frye (Toronto, Anansi, 1971), p. 220.
2. *Ibid*, p. 217.
3. *Ibid*, p. 246.
4. *Survival*, by Margaret Atwood (Toronto, Anansi, 1972), p. 33.
5. *The Bush Garden*, pp. i-ii.
6. *Ibid.*, p. iii.
7. "Art is like baseball. For the Great Canadian anything, don't build from the top down," by Don Shebib. In the *Globe & Mail* (Toronto), 9 Oct. '76.
8. In *Books in Canada* (Toronto), April 1977.
9. *Lament for a Nation*, by George Grant (Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1970), pp. 8-9.
10. *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon (New York, Grove Press, 1968), p. 149.
11. *Survival*, p. 18.
12. "Being Canadian Means Always Having To Say You're Sorry: the dream-life of a younger brother," by Robert Fothergill. In *Take One* (Montreal). Vol. 4, No. 3, 1974, pp. 24-30.