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# Invisible Culture

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## A Case Study in the Construction of Place: Boundary Management as Theme and Strategy in Canadian Art and Life

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The search for a theoretical peg on which to hang this paper led me, inevitably, to Homi Bhabha. Yet when I pulled out *Nation and Narration* in quest of an apt quote to use as an epigraph, the best I could come up with was actually a passage from Benedict Anderson, whom Bhabha himself quotes in his introduction. Anderson, through Bhabha, states: “What I am proposing is that Nationalism has to be understood, by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being.” <sup>1</sup> Bhabha jumps from this quotation directly, and without explanation, to writing. I was surprised. I didn’t recall this book as being so narrowly focused. True, it’s supposed to be about narration. But surely the conflation of “cultural representation” (as he calls it on the next page) into one particular mode of representation requires some explanation. Especially if one is purporting to talk about a phenomenon that “precedes” self-consciously held ideas. Why not painting? Why not – if we are going to focus on ideology – television? For that matter, why not everyday life in all its abundance and variety? If there really is a “large cultural system” that underlies, and expresses, and perhaps even creates Nation, then surely its key characteristic has to be its pervasiveness. There’s no sense of this in *Nation and Narration*. Though the book includes a token piece on “the Englishness of English art,” and though Bhabha himself, in his conclusion, diverges briefly into consideration of a film, the collection as a whole suggests, albeit silently, that literature can somehow be taken to “stand for” culture at large.

There’s nothing unusual about this, of course. One of the most

entrenched peculiarities of Western education is the notion that one can extrapolate the world from compartmentalized subject matters. Nor is it surprising that it is literature that should be given pride of place. It's an axiom of recent theory that language is a privileged category, our key means not just of communicating, but of knowing, of being human, of constructing and manipulating social reality. "Language plays a central part in the thought of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan, as it does in the anthropology of Levi-Strauss," said an early text on structuralism. "All of them, it could be said, are obsessed by it. They are obsessed by the institutional nature of language, and by its infinite productivity. It is not something we each bring with us into the world at birth, but an institution into which we are gradually initiated as the most fundamental element of all our socialization." [2](#) On the surface, there's nothing the least bit remarkable in this passage. Nowadays it would go without saying. But is the sensibleness of this stance really as self-evident as it has come to seem? Without challenging either the practical or the psychological importance of language in maintaining social systems, what I'm going to suggest, at least provisionally, is that when it comes to sense of place it is possible that seeing precedes saying. If this is the case, then it is also possible that when we are talking about the underpinnings to collective identity, it is visual representation, not writing, that provides our privileged entry. I'll come back to this later. For now, I'll just say that this essay operates on the assumption that visual culture doesn't just provide an interesting "other" perspective on the issue of how nation-ness is constructed or expressed – *it is at least as important* an indicator as narrative.

So – assuming Anderson is right, and leaving aside the problem of competing media, what is the cultural formation that underlies and drives our ideas of Canada? I'm going to tackle this question indirectly by looking at some of the diverse phenomena that led me to my own vision of the country. I'll begin the excursion with something that isn't obviously "cultural" at all. Erving Goffman is well known as a key figure in the development of an important American school of qualitative sociology known as symbolic interactionism. What isn't so well known is that Goffman was born and raised a Canadian. The reason this is important rather than merely interesting is that it makes Goffman's peculiarities as a scholar look considerably less peculiar. His view of the world as threatening and irrational, of interpersonal relations as fraught with danger, and of individuals as the passive victims of their social and institutional environments [3](#) – these features are strikingly reminiscent of the gloomy-through-catastrophic strain in

Canadian literature that has led critics like Margaret Atwood to see the Canadian as incurably paranoid: “Given a choice of the negative or positive aspects of any symbol – sea as life-giving Mother, sea as what your ship goes down in; tree as symbol of growth, tree as what falls on your head – Canadians show a marked preference for the negative.” [4](#) What Atwood might not find so readily recognizable, on the other hand, is that the means recommended by Goffman for dealing with these perils is also arguably an artifact of his Canadian mindset. Obsessed with boundary management, fascinated with artifice, and fixated on the ceremonials of everyday life, Goffman’s dramaturgical model for social interaction [5](#) vividly anticipates the fixation of Canadians – and I’m not just talking writers and artists here – on the motif of mediation in all its guises and dimensions. Demonstrating the continuity between life and art, in fact, one might say that the “world” implicit in Goffman’s sociology, [6](#) and the stance he assumes in the face of it, is the same world and the same stance one might infer from an examination of Canadian self-representations.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by this. Cynthia Scott’s prizewinning 1990 film, *The Company of Strangers*, a markedly unAmerican story about a busload of elderly women who get stranded for two days in a remote region of the Laurentians, has been widely recognized as having a quality of civility that speaks of its national origin. “One could imagine a Hollywood version of [this film,]” says Jill McGreal in a review in *Sight and Sound*, “in which the cast would include several well-known stars, most of whom would not be old themselves, and in which there would undoubtedly be a male character [who functioned] as a catalyst for the action. The women would have to overcome life-threatening situations and one of them would certainly die. Cynthia Scott’s film, however, takes a different, more contemplative approach to the trials and tribulations of old age.” [7](#) I agree with McGreal’s comments about the film’s difference. What I don’t agree with is her suggestion that it is “about” one particular demographic group. Trapped as they are in the middle of a beautiful but alien wilderness, full of strange noises and impervious to penetration, these women are literal emblems for that oh-so-Canadian syndrome that Northrop Frye called the garrison mentality. [8](#)

The implication emerges right from the beginning. It is telling, for instance, that our initial glimpse of the group has them struggling to fight their way free not only from the forest but also from the fog. The first thing they do when the breakdown occurs is to head for shelter –

the old farmhouse which is Scott's version of the fort in the wilderness. Once ensconced, moreover, they stick very close. While it is true that there are a few cautious forays into the borderlands – a typical example of this is a scene where two of the characters are shown carrying seats into a field where they proceed to survey the world through the safe mediation of binoculars – what centers the diegesis are the recurrent images of women almost literally clinging to their temporary home: peering through windows, sitting on steps, standing in doorways, leaning against walls or railings, singly or in groups. The film is also peppered with references to the less tangible means by which the pioneer creates a bastion against chaos – songs, dances, stories, games, communal food preparation. It is notable that as the establishing shots of the ramshackle building turn from lonely to cozy, it is the voices that make the difference. It is also notable that the noble savage figure in the film, a Mohawk woman, gives lessons to her compeers not in wildness but in language and in primitive technology. But this resistance to American conventions is consistent throughout. These women survive their ordeal, not as the fictional American would, by finding and revealing a reservoir of inner strength and wisdom, but by banding together, by becoming a “company” – literally, as do Goffman's subjects, by using the rituals of everyday life as a mediating device, to create community. [9](#) What we have here, in fact, is a singularly Canadian recapitulation of how “we” won the West. If the film went no further than this it would already be a notable exemplar. *Showing* the work of interaction is not the only, or indeed, the most important way that this film models mediation, however. What is more significant is not what it depicts, but what it is.

What do I mean by this? Let me step back a little before getting down to the point. I said that *Company* shouldn't be viewed simply as a representation of old women. The fact that the protagonists are both old and women is, however, a key element in our response. I have written elsewhere about the Canadian symbolic ego being feminine, a side-effect of our interiority and disidentification with power. [10](#) What I'd claim here is that the sense of lurking mortality usually associated with old age is also typical of the Canadian's general sense of being-in-the-world ([see Appendix 1](#)). The vulnerability of Scott's characters, the thing we identify with as Canadians, comes from the fact that they are not just on the edge of nature, but also on the edge of that greater unknown, death. On one level, indeed, the forest in this film may be seen as actually “standing for” death. And not just in a metaphorical sense, either. The truth is that nature and death have always been intimately intertwined in the Canadian imagination. At first this was

because the most immediate threat to our survival was “out there,” *in* nature. Later, paradoxically, it was because it *wasn't* – because, on the contrary, the most palpable aspect of nature for the postcolonial Canadian is the aspect we carry around in our own bodies. This is probably why there are so many cautionary tales in Canadian literature about people going out into nature and getting killed by it – it's an attempt to keep otherness safely on the outside. Bear stories notwithstanding, however, what seems clear from the constellation of symbols that has grown up around these two concepts is that the real reason nature retains a negative or at least ambiguous emotional charge for us is not – or not only – because it is the home of wild animals and killer storms but because of the extent to which it evokes the idea of corporeality, the intransigence of the flesh, and the inevitability of decay. [11](#) You will see why I said that the age of the women in *Strangers* made them more rather than less suitable to “represent” Canadians. Scott's cross-referencing of wilderness with death is the key to the whole film, not only adding an extra coloration to the emotional overtones of the setting, but also providing a point of entry into another whole dimension of meaning.

The project, on this level, begins in exposing its own – and *our* own – lack. Covert but unmistakable, the fact that there is a shadow wilderness lurking behind the real wilderness which *cannot* be “managed” by the simple rituals of human interaction is conveyed not only by the talk of death, the evidence of fragility, and the emotions, ranging from innocent hope to barely submerged panic, with which the women respond to their anticipations, but even more through the filmmaker's strategy of interlarding her text with black and white photographs of the actors as they appeared at earlier stages of their life. Standing as they do for the sheer palpability of absence, the hidden and unsharable life that lurks beneath the surface of chat and chore-doing, these images, more than anything else in the film, bespeak the double tragedy of human existence: the fact that the past, even the past self, is literally estranged; the fact, even more, that we are alone – frozen in our separate and ineluctable identities – in the face of the future. It is their knowledge, and ours, of this unspeakable truth that Scott's characters are dancing around when they regress from their daytime companionability to their nighttime complaints about the dark, and the animal noises, and the uncertainty of their fate. Against *this* confrontation, companionship, even community, provides little protection. What does? At the risk of invoking a discredited modernist bogey, the lesson of Scott's film, as, at least implicitly, of many other Canadian texts, is that the only

recourse we have against the horror of mortality is art. Like the mediator of myth, the art text, in modeling wholeness, effects a reconciliation between the self and its most-feared other. [12](#) Unlike the modernist version of this story, on the other hand, the particular paradigm presented by Canadian texts has nothing to do with a recuperation or discovery of will. This is where Goffman's example becomes pertinent. Echoing the validation of community we find in the storyline, the mimesis in *Strangers* is not about inwardness (as it would be in the American version) but about between-ness.

The key here is the text's resistance to categorization. *Strangers* is a made-up, carefully planned and scripted story about real people who play themselves. It arises not from an auteur's singular impulse, but from the collaboration between the filmmaker's vision and her actors' life experiences. [13](#) Lest the audience be tempted at any point to forget this, moreover, the film is constructed in such a way as to highlight rather than disguise its ambiguous status. The camerawork and the self-consciousness of the editing draw attention to its "made-ness" and artistry. The photographs and the self-consciousness of the women draw attention to the "given-ness" of the raw material from which it is constructed. The effect of this ambivalence is not merely to resist the limitations of one perspective, one particular kind of truth value, but to force the audience to identify with a position which is neither subjective nor objective but somewhere between the two. One might, in fact, say that what Scott has created here is a tangible facsimile of the classical Greek speech category known as the middle voice.

For reasons extending far beyond the film, the comparison is a provocative one. In classical Greece, says Pierre Vernant, "we see two cases, one in which the action is ascribed to the agent like an attribute to a subject, and another in which the action envelopes the agent and the agent remains immersed in the action – that is the case of the middle voice." [14](#) Why is this significant? Vernant doesn't stop here. "In thought as expressed in Greek or ancient Indo-European," he continues, "there is no idea of the agent being the *source* of his action. Or, if I may translate that, as a historian of Greek civilization, there is no category of *will* in Greece. But what we see in the Western world, through language, the evolution of law, the creation of a vocabulary of the will is precisely the idea of the human subject as agent, the source of actions, creating them, assuming them, carrying responsibility for them." In "the Western world," maybe, but not in

Canada. In Canada – as Goffman suggests, and as our art and literature insist on reminding us – we share with the Greeks a vision of the individual as, at least potentially, a pawn and sometimes casualty of a possibly inimical, at least impervious Fate.

The connections Vernant draws here may explain at least in part why Scott's film is so satisfying despite its sounding of the themes of death and decay. The middle voice spoke not only *for* but also *to* the Greek sense of self. The same could be said about *Strangers*. By expressing and thus in a sense legitimizing will-lessness, its mode of address legitimizes the Canadian sense of impotence. And not just in a negative sense, either. The text provides its own legitimization as well, not least because of the poignancy with which it addresses an anxiety so deeply buried in the national psyche as to be inaccessible to our normal modes of discourse. Again, a comparison is instructive. Vernant speaks elsewhere in the same essay of Greek tragedy as expressing and mediating an un-admitted and inadmissible tension between a heroic past and a circumscribed sense of the present. Canadians, too – bombarded with, but alienated from, the American myth of self-reliance – are caught between fear of/fascination with the heroic other and shame for/comfort in the banality of self. Perhaps it is only natural, then, that we would seek our relief in the same way that the Greeks did: by exorcising both shame *and* fascination through a ritual validation of middle-ness.

One might take note here of the fact that the great Greek tragedies exhibit very much the same homology between diegesis and mimesis as Scott's film. If, as stories, they affirm the value of the social over the personal, as events – and the meaning on this level is summarized in the capacity of the mask to function simultaneously to transform and to protect its wearer [15](#) – they literally reproduce the reconciliation of human and inhuman. This same reconciliation, I would claim, is the primary project – *and* the primary strategy – not just of *The Company of Strangers*, but of the mega-text of which it forms a part. Does that sound improbable? While space clearly doesn't permit a detailed examination of the whole corpus, a few selected examples will, I hope, provide a sense both of the coherence of the Canadian cultural continuum and of the diverse ways that different works and media manage to add up to the same thing. Although, given the venue, I have focused on visual materials, I could just as easily have chosen verbal ones. (This is perhaps the real answer to the words versus images debate.) Three features in particular recur across the board: the invocation of the dangers of

being on the edge; the validation of community as a defense against these dangers; and the modeling of means for effecting and/or buffering the risky but critical task of “going between.” The first is implicit in almost everything Canadians make; the second is so common as to be one of the few consensually recognized features of Canadian high and popular culture; the third, somewhat less frequent, represents the moment when the mythic and the aesthetic dimensions of the oeuvre come together to produce catharsis.

## Painting

I said earlier that the thing that struck many critics about *The Company of Strangers* was its un-Americanness. The same might be said of Canadian painting as a whole. Take what we did with modernism, for instance. Or more critically, take what we *didn't* do. When someone says “modern art,” the one idiom that springs most readily to mind is abstract expressionism, with its heroic pretensions and air of transgressiveness. The New York oeuvre in particular exemplified both of these tendencies – arrogant, iconoclastic, aggressive, many of the pieces so full of energy that they seem ready at any moment to break right out of the frame. There's no trace of this in Canadian painting of the same period. If one had to pick a single word to describe this body of work, in fact, it would probably be “introverted.” In part, this is a matter of emotional register. Alternatively, though, it relates to hard, demonstrable technical preferences. One noteworthy datum is the fact that Canadian paintings are almost always “centered,” both visually and psychologically. In many pieces, this orientation is further accentuated by an inside/outside organization of pictorial space. The whole corpus, in fact, is overflowing with enclosure images. It is also overflowing with signs of anxiety about the integrity and the meaning of these enclosures. Are they cages or caves? How firm are those walls? And what's on the inside? Cutting as it does across both stylistic and regional lines, the “boxed” experience – the boxing of experience – is obviously in some way paradigmatic or revelatory for the Canadian. As a result of this propensity, where American art both invites and suggests a kind of mental and emotional “breaking out,” Canadian painting bespeaks a strong sense of the self's limits; of its isolation and impotence in the face of otherness. Where does it come from, this reticence and trepidation? Measured against an American standard, the Canadian response seems odd, inappropriate. Measured against the country's own history, however, it seems almost predictable.

Let's turn the clock back a bit, to the nineteenth century. The most popular genre on both sides of the border during this period was landscape painting. But there's a difference. The nature we find in the American version is idealized certainly, but just as certainly accessible. The nature we infer from our own version, in contrast, even when not explicitly inimical, is alien, impenetrable, overwhelming to the point of claustrophobia. This is a world in which the observer is always looking uphill. Where rivers carry us out of rather than into the distance. Where the eye rebounds constantly to its starting place. It's a world, in other words, which categorically denies us entry. Contrasting starkly with the American penchant for panorama, the kinds of natural features we are most likely to find in Canadian paintings are notable mainly for their obtrusiveness. Woods are like walls. Waterfalls are like bowls. Mountains stretch like palisades across the picture plane or squat inimically in the middle of the canvas. Nowhere is there the sense of opening up, of laying claim to the horizon – that is the hallmark of contemporaneous American work. Far from asserting their ascendancy, the creators of *these* landscapes would clearly prefer to dissociate themselves from the at-large altogether.

Enclosure, then, is just as much a keynote of premodern as it is of recent Canadian art. More important, the *attitudes* evinced by the artists towards their existential condition are also similar in both periods. And I'm not simply talking about negativity here. Claustrophobia notwithstanding, the characterizing feature of the Canadian world-view is in fact neither affirmation *nor* abhorrence, but a radical, deep-seated ambivalence. There is, in other words, an "up-" as well as a "down-" side to introversion. I said above that Canadian painting bespeaks a strong sense of isolation and impotence. What I might perhaps have added was that – like Scott's film – it also offers a number of therapeutic models for dealing with or responding to these uncomfortable feelings. Many of the aforementioned iconic boxes exude a feeling not of entrapment but of safety. And so it is with at least a few among those claustrophobic nineteenth-century landscape paintings. Thickets are transformed into nests. Tombs become wombs. The sheer visual dominance of the other is recoded as protective. In short, enclosure, no longer constricting, becomes validated as beneficent.

The centripetal vision is not necessarily a negative vision, then. Nor does the process of naturalization stop at such simple ploys as role reversal. Indeed, if we consider both periods in juxtaposition, it

becomes apparent that in the nineteenth century, as in the twentieth, the Canadian's perspectival biases serve not merely as an *expression* of his or her felt relations with otherness, but as a means of neutralizing the dangers implicit in those relations. How does this work? Consider the aforementioned feature of obtrusiveness, for instance. When David Thompson, in 1810, painted a solid screen of mountains across his canvas, it tells us that he is repelled by this topography. When *Tom* Thomson does the same thing a hundred years later, however, he is able to translate that knee-jerk recoil into a highly successful aesthetic strategy. In rationalizing the superficiality, which earlier worked to undermine the illusion, Thomson gives us the means not merely of delineating but also of *managing* the dangerous interface between self and other.

Once we make this leap, it is possible to also see something a little different in the recent penchant for enclosure images. Many of these figures are simply extensions of or variants on the aforementioned womb symbol. Some still carry the emotional stigmata of the even earlier claustrophobia. Most interesting of the ilk, however, are cases – like William Ronald's *Ontario Place* or Gordon Rayner's *Magnetawan* or Michael Snow's *Lac Clair* – where the enclosure is no longer a box for the self, benign *or* malignant, but an imposition on an unruly reality. Why interesting? In the same way that the foreshortened focus of the colonial landscape painter can be read as signifying both an anxiety and a mode of managing it, once the iconic box begins to change from *container* to *frame* it no longer passively mirrors the plight of the isolated ego but provides the auditor with a means of controlling the very element from which he or she has hitherto been most concerned to dissociate. At this point the line around begins actually to mediate the space between. [16](#)

## Film

It is interesting but not surprising that one of Canada's best known filmmakers, David Cronenberg, devoted his first eight feature films to exploring what happens when the integrity of self is not maintained. [17](#) Too easily dismissed as schlock horror, Cronenberg's studies in psychic and corporeal breakdown demonstrate, in a sense, what would happen if Scott's women – or any of us – were to venture, without some kind of ritual protection, beyond their boundaries, into the forest. This kind of explicitness is rare. More characteristically, in Canadian film, the dangers are presented obliquely, and in the context of compensating solutions. The underlying idea, however – that edges are scary, that transgression is even scarier – is a

consistent motif in both Anglophone and Francophone variants. As in *Company*, moreover, it lays the ground for – triggers or focuses or mobilizes – a number of other distinctive tendencies. For present purposes, three in particular stand out.

The first has to do with the treatment of gender. While the problem does not arise in *Company*, with its female-only complement of actors, the national ambivalence about power and power-wielders ([see Appendix 1](#)) has made it difficult for filmmakers to fit their male characters into conventional moulds. As with the paintings discussed in the last section, there is an up- as well as a down-side to this predicament. At worst, it accounts for an overabundance of the kind of “loser” types that Robert Fothergill talks about in his classic 1973 essay, “Coward, Bully or Clown: The Dream Life of a Younger Brother.” [18](#) At best it has provided the occasion for some memorable explorations of the links between compromised masculinity and a history of colonization. In earlier versions of this genre – like Don Shebib’s *Goin’ Down the Road* (1970) – the connections tend to be left implicit. In later cases, arguably because of the debate over Fothergill’s thesis, the political subtext is often brought right to the center of the stage. In Mort Ransen’s *Margaret’s Museum*, a 1995 film set in a 1940s mining community in Cape Breton, for example, the titular exhibit of dismembered male bodies is clearly intended as a paradigm for the collective unmanning already accomplished by the insatiable greed of foreign and central Canadian capital. Such blatancy is relatively rare, however. Between the extremes of both denigration and defensiveness is a large slate of films which avoid the issue by focusing on what one might call the “properly” unmasculine – women, children, homosexuals, transvestites, and the physically or mentally handicapped. Confirming the original dissociative impulse, the child-characters in particular are often paired with dysfunctional or abusive father figures. Some notable examples of this would be Claude Jutra’s *Mon Oncle Antoine* (1971), Anne Wheeler’s *Loyalties* (1985), and – of particular interest insofar as it also includes nods to the themes of physical debility and homosexuality – Thom Fitzgerald’s *The Hanging Garden* (1997).

The second feature could be seen, in a sense, as a corollary to the first. If “heroic” characters present problems, judging by the results, Canadian filmmakers are even more ambivalent about heroic solutions. On the other hand, because American-style commercial film is what the public – or at least the distributors – appear to want, it is difficult for them to break openly with the Hollywood tradition. One

result of this is simply bad films – cynical films, or out-of-control films, or films where the creators are quoting conventions they can't fully get their hearts around. In a surprising number of cases, though, the filmmakers have devised ways to eat their cake without showing their teeth. One popular approach involves symbolically defusing the heroic myth by invoking and deconstructing American genre conventions. Sometimes this is accomplished simply by naturalizing the hero. In Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin* (1986), for instance, the young rebel, with his James Dean good looks and his aura of recklessness, is revealed as simply an ordinary, rather silly, and notably immature teenage runaway. [19](#) Sometimes it involves exposing the dark or seamy undersides to the convention. Typical of this latter ilk is David Wellington's *I Love a Man in Uniform* (1993), where a play-acting wannabe cop is caught up in an escalating but non-cathartic cycle of violence. [20](#)

Yet most often this reluctance towards a heroic solution entails some kind of containment strategy. As one might expect, the commonest version of this involves an appeal to community. The variations on this theme are almost as numerous as the films that have used it. For a positive example, there is Don McKellar's anti-apocalyptic disaster tale, *Last Night* (1998), where the inhabitants of a Canadian city contemplate the approaching cataclysm with reason and resignation and a surprising amount of good humor. For a negative, one might choose Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), where a community is torn apart in the wake of disastrous school bus accident when an out-of-town lawyer goads them into a divisive lawsuit. For ambiguity, on the other hand, one couldn't do better than the group-made sci-fi movie, *Cube* (1997), where, in the words of the back-cover blurb from the Alliance video release, "six ordinary strangers awaken to find themselves in a seemingly endless maze of interlocking cubical chambers armed with deadly booby traps." Given that these traps are triggered by traversing from one chamber into the next, one could hardly imagine a more graphic representation of edge-anxiety. The blurb continues: "As they work together to extricate themselves from their claustrophobic cell, one thing becomes painfully clear – unless they learn to cooperate to solve the secrets of this deadly trap, none of them has very long to live." I won't reveal the ending of this film, except to say that it is both surprising and predictable. But what could be more Canadian than the premise!

The third element I want to talk about takes us out of the realm of

story to more technical usages. Just as Scott is not the only filmmaker who promotes a collective viewpoint in her plot, she is also not the only filmmaker who makes the text itself into a paradigm of mediation. It is significant in this respect that the kind of feature film that I have been talking about in the last few paragraphs is a relatively late development in Canada. For most of its history, the Canadian film industry has been driven largely by government-sponsored non-commercial production. [21](#) What ultimately raised the oeuvre above the blandness of public service and schoolroom movies – and laid the ground for a powerful new idiom – was the post-war search for a middle ground between the subjectivity of conventional Anglo-American documentary, with its imperial voice-over, and the object-orientation of “direct cinema” with its obeisance to the thing seen.

Tellingly, the thing that distinguishes Canadian direct cinema from other versions of cinema vérité is the way it plays on or against that ground. [22](#) Claude Jutra, back in the sixties, annoyed critics for blurring the line between fact and fiction. Pierre Perrault, similarly, destabilized expectations by creating fictions claiming the authority of documentary. Nor was the impulse to obfuscate limited to the French side of the language line. Allan King, to give only one particularly well-known example, achieved similar destabilization by offsetting a notably passive style of camerawork with an interventionist style of editing. From here it was only a short step to Scott. As the not-quite-documentary of the late fifties through mid-seventies turned into the alternative drama of the eighties, the middle voice became progressively more confident and more distinctive. It also discovered new strategies not anticipated in the cinema vérité tradition. Films like Patricia Rozema’s *I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987) and Denys Arcand’s *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), for instance, not only continued the trend to genre blurring but exacerbated the uncertainty by using ambiguous inner fictions [23](#) – ambiguous in the sense that they bear undecidable relationships to truth on the one hand and reality on the other – to draw attention to the whole problem of how art “means.” The commercial corpus is not, of course, generally as “arty” as these last two examples. It is striking, however, that even in productions as mainstream as *The Sweet Hereafter* – which won the 1997 Cannes Grand Prix and was nominated for two academy awards – there is a tendency for the Canadian film text to parade its surface, foiling our attempts at penetration and throwing us back on ourselves as surely as those nineteenth-century landscape paintings.

## Television ([see Appendix 2](#))

The most popular form of media included my survey, surprisingly enough, makes just as much use of formal features for therapeutic purposes as high art and film. Whether it is because of the way it invokes Americanness or because we are threatened by its aura of commercialism, Canadian television production is almost an extended inquest on the subject, and the dangers, of between-ness. Many of the strategies we have already noted with respect to other media turn up again here. There's the community emphasis of family fare like *Road to Avonlea* or *Neon Rider*. There's the anti-conventionality of Canadian versions of American-style "action" shows like *Seeing Things*, *Adderly*, *Counterstrike*, *Due South*, or *Forever Knight*, with their qualms about power and their domestication/disavowal/punishment of their heroes. There's the obsession with liminality – check out how many of the emotional moments in Canadian television dramas take place at thresholds. There's even the use of frames, in genre shows like *ENG* and *Night Heat*, to provide the viewer with a symbolic buffer against the irrationality not only of the American-style aggressor, but also of the public world in general.

Where television goes further than most of the other categories, however, is in the way its most basic technical features echo the message of its stories. The cinematography itself is un-American. Visually, Canadian television is almost always characterized by a greater depth of field and a more evenly distributed focus. We see more of the background, and it is more fully realized. Correspondingly, we see less of the personalities. Characters are shot at longer range, and with a less intimate, less confrontational lens. We get far fewer of the extreme close-ups that are almost a trademark of American commercial television – and when we do, they are more often than not designed to increase our discomfort than cement our identification with the protagonist.

Adding to the distancing effect of the less intense camerawork, Canadian productions tend to provide a running reference to context through the use of "nested" spaces; the emphasis on non-diegetic activity on the peripheries of the action; and the use of off-screen noise to suggest "outside." Enclosure motifs are omnipresent. Violence is buffered, distanced, or denaturalized by implicit and explicit strategies of containment. Similar strategies are used to diffuse and qualify emotion. The screen is a strongly felt presence in Canadian television. Dampening the impulse to identify, viewpoint is stabilized by the camera, not by the characters. The community is

also omnipresent, whether or not it is an explicit player in the action. Direct cinema techniques of extended takes and minimalist editing are employed to underline the extent to which individuals and events are connected by an ongoing network of relations. Appropriately for present purposes, the most striking example of this usage is the handling of court scenes, where, in marked contrast to the American preference for close-ups and rapid fire shot/reverse shot sequences to underscore the combative relationship between participants (for Americans, the courtroom confrontation is the modern version of the gun fight on Main Street), Canadian directors use a deeper, more inclusive focus, along with more panning and tracking shots, to situate the action in a clearly social context, with the judge as paternalistic referee. [24](#)

One thing that should perhaps be added here is that, counter to the common belief that any distinctiveness Canadian pop culture ever possessed has disappeared as a side-effect of globalization, [25](#) there is no sign that these practices have been falling out of use in recent years. If anything, the covert markers of Canadian-ness tend to appear *more* prominently in those areas of collective endeavor – like television – that *have* been brought into closer symbolic or economic proximity to the American megalith. If I were going to pick an exemplary television text, in the same sense that *Company* is exemplary for film, in fact, it would be *DaVinci's Inquest*, a three-year-old CBC drama series about a crime-fighting Vancouver coroner named Nicholas DaVinci. Sound familiar? The capsule description is misleading. Notwithstanding the overlap in subject matter, this is no *Crossing Jordan* or *CSI*. (Even leaving aside the heroics, in the Canadian version of this genre, the emphasis is on procedure and teamwork, not science and ingenuity.) Nor does it owe much to the original American crusading coroner, *Quincy*, with his irascibility and constant run-ins with authority. DaVinci is a distinctly Canadian brand of "hero" -- flawed, ordinary, unaggressive; committed to truth and justice, but rather plodding in his pursuit of it -- just as the vehicle in which he appears has a distinctly Canadian look and logic.

We find a particularly striking example of this in an episode on police violence that aired in the fall of 2000. Despite the hackneyed nature of the plot premise, this episode could almost stand as a recipe for Canadian difference. Three features in particular stand out. First, because the victim/aggressor is a mentally disturbed man who has cut himself off from his normal sources of support, there is a strong indication that the cause of the problem was social isolation leading to

a failure of boundary maintenance. The correlation made between danger and thresholds, and the use of images of shattering glass to mark the moment of maximum violence, add to this effect by underlining the literally transgressive nature of his behavior. Second, because the story is told from the perspective, and within the context, of an inquest, what it gives us is a practical demonstration of the community in action. It is the community – not the hero, not the authorities, not even the viewer, who never sees the events directly – that winks out the “true” story from among the conflicting accounts; it is the community that assigns or distributes responsibility (in this case, typically, it is the “system,” not the individual, which is found to blame); and it is the community that decides what should be done about it. Last, and perhaps most striking, the episode demonstrates some of the commonest strategies used by Canadian creators to distance us from the action. The story is safely in the past, and is seen only through other peoples’ eyes. The process of retelling is mediated through the regulated formality of the hearing procedure. The fact that there is no single authoritative version of the story (as the visual text reminds us with its insistence on a shifting viewpoint) forces us to maintain a skeptical and detached attitude throughout. Finally, the visual and aural distortions used during the flashbacks de-naturalize the action even further. All of these aspects function to rebuild the boundaries that the aggressor threatens to break down. Like the photographs in Scott’s film, it also reminds us of the elusiveness of truth, the over-againstness of transpersonal reality, and the ultimate inaccessibility of the “other.”

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One thing that becomes clear when we see these examples arranged in sequence like this, from earlier to later, simple to more complex – that we can’t get from examining even the most well-chosen single text – is the sheer consistency of the ways in which Canadian artists have most commonly imagined being-in-the-world. Another – and this goes back to what I said in my introduction – is the apparent privileging of the pictorial in these imaginings. Even in the cinematic media, it is the visual rather than the narrative features that carry the main burden of meaning. This is not to say that one could not find similar patterns in written materials. My first book, *The Wacousta Syndrome* ([see note 8](#)) was an extended peroration on exactly the same themes in Canadian literature. Nor is it only literary writers who are fixated on between-ness. I already mentioned Goffman. However anomalous he may be in the annals of American sociology, he is far

from an anomaly among Canadian intellectuals. If they aren't writing about difference (borders, boundaries, edges, and margins are endemic among recent Canadian book titles [26](#) ), they are contemplating ways to connect. The classic topic for Canadian historians has been the role played by communication and transportation networks in the development of civilization in general and Canadian society in particular. [27](#)

Even our public life shows something of an obsession with middle-ness. I was struck a few years ago when I came across a book by political scientist Carolyn Tuohy entitled, provocatively, *Policy and Politics in Canada: Institutionalized Ambivalence*. What Tuohy meant by this last term was a propensity among Canadians – which she traces back to seminal tensions between (there's that word again!) French and English, Canada and the U.S., Ottawa and the regions – for political solutions that will accommodate both or all possibilities raised by a situation rather than forcing a choice between them. The aversion to either/or choices, she says, finds expression in everything from the division of powers to the development of economic policy. “First, the system legitimizes competing principles...” she argues, “[s]econd, it allows these principles to coexist in a context of constitutional and institutionalized ambiguity.” [28](#) Supporting Tuohy's analysis – only one among numerous examples that could be adduced – is the Canadian Supreme Court's 1998 decision in the Reference on Quebec Separation, which not only declines to find for or against either party, but also makes a legal duty out of negotiation. [29](#) Real-world consequences notwithstanding, this sounds remarkably like yet another version of Vernant's middle voice.

So, yes – the mediation theme is endemic throughout the whole of Canadian life, not just in its visual culture. What this multiplication of examples may obscure, on the other hand, is the extent to which it is the visual culture that establishes the base terms of reference on which the whole edifice is erected. From colonial times to the present, as if we suffered from some giant repetition compulsion, the key project of Canadian culture has been to reiterate over and over, in ever more elaborate versions, the image of the fort in the wilderness. Why? Actually, two questions pose themselves here. First, why an image rather than, say, a story? (Usually when we think of origins, we think of myths or legends.) Second, why this *particular* image? The first question is easy. There is ample evidence on record that entry into the continent was experienced by new Canadians in preeminently

spatial terms. Northrop Frye, tracing that garrison trope I mentioned earlier in the paper, talks about the newcomers' sense of being "swallowed up" by the Gulf of Saint Lawrence – and certainly this is what emerges from the letters and diaries that survive from the period. [30](#) He also talks about the way this "type" of experience was repeated and reinforced by the encounter with an alien and apparently limitless wilderness:

In the United States one could choose to move out to the frontier or to retreat from it back to the seaboard... In the Canadas, [however] ... the frontier was all around one, a part and a condition of one's whole imaginative being. The frontier was what separated the Canadian, physically or mentally, from Great Britain, from the United States, and even more important, from other Canadian communities. Such a frontier was the immediate datum of [the colonist's] imagination, the thing that had to be dealt with first. [31](#)

Note the prominence given to geography in this formulation. Here, of course, is where the tendency to pictorialize comes in. When one's most significant other is the landscape, the most natural way to represent it is with a map. (Spatial concepts translate far more readily into graphic forms than verbal ones.) And here as well is the answer to our second question. When the other is as scary as this particular landscape – Frye talks about one of the most noticeable features of early Canadian poetry being "a tone of deep terror in regard to nature" [32](#) – there is an obvious compulsion to construct real and symbolic buffers against it.

This brings me back to my claim about visual representations possibly providing a better window on the collective consciousness than language. Certainly a case can be made that the Canadian imagination starts with – and can most easily be traced through – figurations of place. A case can also be made that Canada is not alone in this propensity. I talked earlier about Canadian landscape paintings being claustrophobic. I also talked about the American difference. Where nineteenth-century Canadian artists worked to minimize recession and the sense of penetration, Americans of the same period gave us no more nor less than a visual version of the physical process by which their forebears conquered the real landscape. Think of those operatic Hudson River School paintings

with their backlit skies, their heroic personae, their long, sinuous river valleys opening up the green distance like a compliant woman. If the Canadian viewpoint is feminine, the American one, with its emulation of the claiming gaze, is clearly masculine. Why the divergence in what are commonly taken to be very similar societies? Without getting into details, I will just say that it has a little to do with the relative harsher Canadian climate and geography, a little more with the psychological discrepancies between mission-driven seventeenth-century puritans and prosperity-driven nineteenth-century immigrants, and a *lot* to do with the conceptual difference between a northern and a western frontier, with one representing the limits of knowledge and the other the limits of endurance. [33](#) In both cases, however, what is important to note is that the contrasting modes of self-imaging we find in the two countries correspond precisely to the mental mapping of that first encounter with the wilderness.

It's not just Canadians, then, who exhibit a penchant for visualization. It's not even just North Americans. Although I don't want to confuse matters by dragging in a whole other example, I will just say that a similar analysis of Australia produces comparable – though strikingly different – findings. [34](#) This doesn't, to be sure, rule out the possibility that the effect is specific to particular types of societies. It may be significant that all three of my own examples have involved cases where a semi-civilized people has been transplanted into an untamed wilderness. I talked earlier about the shock – or exhilaration, in the American case – of confronting an absolutely alien landscape. In older cultures, however, where the environment is, if not domesticated, at least familiar, one might assume that geography would be a less immediate datum (to use Frye's phrase). If this is true, then the claims I have made about the primacy of visual expression would apply only under certain special circumstances.

*Is it true?* I confess I don't know the answer to this. Yet I can think of some very good reasons why it might *not* be. One of the theorists who initially drove my own thinking in this direction was Claude Lévi-Strauss. I was particularly struck by his notion that culture was imprinted with the cognitive structures of the making mind – a notion that seems to me no more than common sense. The problem is what Lévi-Strauss did with the idea. This obviously isn't the place to get into an explication of either structuralism or its critics, so I will settle for just a couple of comments. The charge most often levelled against Lévi-Strauss concerns his insistence on reducing everything to universal structures. For myself, I am more troubled by his earlier mentioned

privileging of language.

Despite the ostensible generality of Lévi-Strauss's theory, it is notable that most of the actual instantiations he has dealt with have been either verbal or logical constructs – myths, kinship, totemic systems. In the few cases where he looks at more material aspects of culture, they are treated as objectifications of concepts that have already been given logico-verbal form. In his analysis of the Bororo village in *Structural Anthropology*, for instance, the layout is interpreted as a means of symbolically reconciling logical discrepancies in the kinship system.<sup>35</sup> Why is this a problem? Given what is known about the way human cognition actually develops, it seems equally or even more likely that the kinship system is an elaboration of a more fundamental sense of being-in-the-world. While it is probably true, as Lévi-Strauss insists, that our most natural mode of organizing experience is in terms of binaries, common sense suggests that the fundamental binary is not nature:culture but self:other. I mean, think about it. The one thing that radically divergent accounts of childhood development have in common is the idea that awareness begins at the moment when the infant realizes that there is a difference between *self* and *not-self*, a difference which is inevitably going to be experienced in spatial terms – *here* versus *there*. Nature:culture doesn't come into it until one starts making further distinctions within *there*. This means that the privileging of maps over stories may not be a specific function of post-frontier cultures (the obsession with landscape in these cases may be attributed to a historical accident, the fact that the exigencies of colonization made nature the most critical aspect of otherness for a hitherto acculturated people), but a function of all human experience. In this scenario, the privileging of language in older, particularly Western societies would relate, not to some sort of existential primacy, but to the long-time accretion of secondary elaborations. Scrape away these elaborations, and what you are left with are the pictures – simple, graphic, unmediated (think of kindergarten self-portraits) representations of self-in-place which express what is surely the most basic human “thought”: “here I am.”

None of this proves anything, of course. I am doing exactly what Lévi-Strauss's critics accused him of doing – playing mind games. I offer the foregoing speculations merely as speculations. It seems at least provocative to note, on the other hand, that the privileging of spatial sense would provide a better explanation for the pervasiveness of cultural/cognitive structuring than pinning it all on later-learned language. Mind structures environment which structures mind. It also

seems provocative to note that, at least in the postcolonial cases, there is actually some hard evidence for such a connection. Most striking in this respect is the fact, as I have detailed elsewhere, that Canadian and American settlement patterns are not only as distinct as, but significantly capable of being inferred from, general cultural tendencies of the two countries. In a book called *The Myth of the North American City*, for instance, Michael Goldberg and John Mercer established beyond cavil that Canadian and American cities, long assumed to be rough copies, in fact differ radically in their management, funding, spatial dispositions, architecture, psychosymbology, relations to State and Capital, mappings of class, and quality of life. In marked contrast to the typically decentered American pattern, they say, a picture emerges of Canadian urban areas “as being more compact in form with a greater reliance upon public modes of travel; ... as having a less racially diverse and less racially segregated population ...; and as having lower status differences between the inner and the outer cities with the former” – this is a key point here – “with the former retaining their traditional family-oriented households.” [36](#) In other words, while the American city-center has become a wasteland where no-one lives who could afford to do otherwise, Canadians apparently *like* living downtown. What does this have to do with my disquisition on the modeling of mediation? What we have here is not only a structural homologue to the paintings I talked about earlier, but a psychological parallel to Canadian culture in general. Like the fort in the wilderness, or the house in the film, or the mediated heroes of our homegrown television fables, the centripetal bias of the Canadian city bespeaks trepidation about what lies outside.

Does this seem farfetched? Probably. Especially when there are such exhaustive analyses available explaining this or that feature in terms of this or that pragmatic factor. The problem, of course, is that the entity “city” seems (on common sense criteria) far too complex to be a simple outing – in Marshall McLuhan’s usage [37](#) – of a patterned response. One can accept such a supposition of art. One can even accept it of architecture. The fact, for instance, that Toronto City Hall -- with its demi-circular wings, its protective/symbolic bracketing of explicitly acculturated space -- seems remarkably similar in both structure and mood to the paintings and sculptures produced by so many Toronto artists can be attributed to the circumstance that it shares with these artworks an iconic as well as a pragmatic function. Once we get beyond simple, singular structures, though, the parallel no longer seems so persuasive. That Canadians are politer and less

violent than Americans, that our cities are physically more compact and administratively more integrated, that our perhaps sole significant contribution to architectural history is the enclosed mega-mall – such phenomena seem too existentially disparate, not to mention too pragmatically motivated, to be comprehended under a single class of causes. The mere fact that it runs counter to popular wisdom – which is, after all, an artifact of common prejudices – cannot, on the other hand, be taken to “prove” that there isn’t a hidden coherence beneath the secondary elaboration.

It’s interesting in this regard to consider settlement patterns in parts of the continent where the elaboration is minimal. Take the north, for instance. More specifically, take the two *different* norths we find in Alaska and the Northwest Territories. Because they are different. Even on a map scale it’s evident that the American north is *lived in* to a degree that the Canadian one isn’t. Check any atlas. Look at the blank spaces on the Canadian side of the border. Look at the difference in the density of dots. And even this is misleading. Nearly all the outlying communities in the Territories are settled by native peoples. Apart from well-equipped and carefully regulated seasonal expeditions by tourists and scientists and prospectors, the whites tend to congregate in a very few, relatively sizable centres. In Alaska just the opposite is the case. Between and beyond the “official” dots on the map, the landscape of Alaska is dotted with people – squatters and trappers and hermits and gold-panners and naturalists and cottage entrepreneurs, many from the lower forty-eight, lured to the north by romantic notions about living rough.

Clearly there are different ideologies at work here – different levels of self-confidence, different attitudes about the appropriability of the land. Equally clearly these ideologies have affected the settlement process in each region, right down to the shape of the “places” we make. Despite the geopolitical contiguity, despite economic similarities, despite the shared myth of frontier, even casual inspection reveals that these are markedly different on different sides of the border. And not just cosmetically. The typical Canadian northern town – and this holds for large places like Yellowknife as for small ones like Pond Inlet – is a well-serviced, highly rationalized, pre-fab imitation of a southern community, with houses tightly huddled and outer boundaries clearly marked. [38](#) Its American counterpart, in contrast, will in all probability be something like Fairbanks: a sprawling, unbounded, fortuitous agglomeration of mismatched and often makeshift building types, where people precede services, where

space and privacy are more important factors in residential site-selection than security, and where the outer edges seem to be trying to migrate into the trees. [39](#)

But let me not get too far off topic here. The key point to be made about this contrast is the fact that it recapitulates in direct and simple terms the same patterned responses so graphically expressed in the image of the fort. Centripetal versus centrifugal. Closed versus open. [40](#) At least in the early stages, then, settlement patterns in North America would appear to have been controlled neither by circumstances nor by socio-economic factors but by some mediate kind of structuring related to psychological-cum-aesthetic predispositions. This brings us full circle to Anderson's cultural "system." From paintings to public spaces, the whole spectrum of Canadian culture tells us that where Americans see boundaries and frontiers as limitations that can only be transcended or denied, Canadians see them as dangerous interfaces to be marked and negotiated. And the pattern holds *regardless* of arena. Paintings exhibit the same spatial habits as cities. Or maybe cities exhibit the same spatial habits as paintings. It doesn't matter – the point is that the image at the heart of the Canadian cultural formation is a map. *Here we are in the wilderness. Here we are in the world. Here is our place.* Margaret Atwood, possibly Canada's best known writer, begins the first poem in her borrowed memoir of frontier living, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, with the line "I take this picture of myself." [41](#) This pretty much says it all. Whatever it is elsewhere, for Canadians, at least, it is the snapshot of home, not the stories we tell around the campfire, that most saliently represents Nation.

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[sic] (University of Toronto Press), the first volume in a three-volume series of semio-ethnographic studies of post-frontier societies, which played a key role in shaping contemporary understandings of Canadian identity-formation. See [www3.sympatico.ca/terracon/gaile\\_mcgregor/index.htm](http://www3.sympatico.ca/terracon/gaile_mcgregor/index.htm) for more information.

1. Benedict Andersen quoted in Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1. ↑
2. John Sturrock, *Structuralism and Since* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 12. ↑
3. Goffman's sociology, says Peter Manning, "center[s] upon delineating in detail the extent to which ... what is portended by 'normal appearances' ... holds a very real potential for terror ... As interaction among strangers relies heavily on trust, a person who intends to harm may not outwardly appear to differ from others and be read as emitting 'normal' communications. To the degree one trusts strangers or casual acquaintances, one is vulnerable to physical harm, personal surveillance, or the loss of property ... [Indeed,] any association in public, even with a passing stranger requesting a match, can be the prelude to an assault." From "The Decline of Civility: A Comment on Erving Goffman's Sociology," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 13, 1 (1976). ↑
4. Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), 35. ↑
5. The name given to this theory derives from the emphasis Goffman places on acting in his analysis of human behaviour. "Dr Goffman has employed as a framework the metaphor of the theatrical performance," says the back-cover blurb on the paperback edition of his first book. "Each man in everyday social intercourse presents himself and his activities to others, attempts to guide and control the impressions they form of him, and employs certain techniques in order to sustain his performance." From *The Presentation of Self Everyday Life* (N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1959). ↑
6. It is interesting that it is this aspect of Goffman's work that has been most harshly criticized. His American colleagues, in particular, are uncomfortable with the extent to which his emphasis on the perdurability and "over againstness" of the social world delimits the scope for individual agency. For

a fuller discussion of this see Gaile McGregor, "A View from the Fort: Erving Goffman as Canadian," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 23, 4. ↑

7. Jill McGreal, "The Company of Strangers," *Sight and Sound*, 1, 1 (1991): 44. ↑

8. This term was initially popularized by Northrop Frye in his conclusion to a Literary History of Canada, which was reprinted in *The Bush Garden: Essays on The Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971). I will have more to say about Frye's analysis of this phenomenon later in the paper. For my own take on the notion, see *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape* [sic] (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985). Although, like Bhabha's collection, this book focuses primarily on formal culture, its broader project is to unpack the historical development of -- and the psychological reasons for -- the characterizing sense of being-in-the-world which, I would claim, underlies all the particular social and cultural manifestations I talk about in this paper. For a nutshell version of the story, see the chart attached to this article as [Appendix 1](#). ↑

9. It is important to realize that in Canada community is not just an idea or a description or a civic category, but also an essential concomitant of survival -- both physical and psychological. As such, it plays a very different role in the Canadian imagination than in the American one. "Perhaps the extreme difficulty of forming a national identity has been one of the factors that have made Canadian thinkers so deeply aware of the fact that the community does not (as so many American thinkers seem to believe) necessarily oppress individuals but rather, that individuals come into being in and through the community," says Bruce Elder. He continues: "Canadian thinkers have stressed persistently the importance of the community in the moral formation of the individuals -- indeed have stressed persistently that there can be no individual being apart from social being. Perhaps, too, the immensity and diversity of the country, and the very difficulty of creating a community in a country of empty spaces help make Canadian thinkers so acutely aware of the importance of community." From *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press with The Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television, 1989), 9. ↑

10. I want to underline that the descriptor feminine as I am using it here has nothing to do with biological femaleness. Rather, it represents a psychological orientation, a complex of attitudes, or a set of symbolic affinities. The distinction will be clear if one reviews the range of personae who turn up in Canadian fictions coded as Self. While it is true that the corpus has more than the usual number of female protagonists, taken in

isolation this fact is misleading. The preference is for a certain coding (for details see [Appendix 1](#)), not a particular incarnation. Child-figures are almost equally frequent, as are other socially vulnerable types from handicapped people to aboriginals. ↑

11. Of all Canadian cultural creators, it is perhaps David Cronenberg who makes these connections most explicit. Nearly all of this filmmaker's most characterizing concerns and strategies can be seen as relating to or deriving from the rather peculiar sense of being I have been circling around in this paragraph. Numerous critics have talked, for instance, about his "Cartesian" dualism, his obsession with the relationship between mind and body. Significantly, they have also noted that, despite his cautionary tales about the dangers of "science," Cronenberg's greatest ambivalence is reserved for the latter. "[C]ongealing goo seeping from ears and noses, squirming ... parasites inhabiting people's abdomens, strange growths, new organs, ... explosions of blood and flesh ... These spectacular expressions of the body's will," says William Beard, "constitute an insistence on the physical, unknowable, untamable half of the human animal ... that ... lies in wait beneath the bland ... cerebrations of the conscious mind" (From "The Visceral Mind: The Major Films of David Cronenberg" in Piers Handling, ed., *The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg* [Toronto: The Academy of Canadian Cinema, 1983], 43). "[I]n Cronenberg's universe," adds David Hogan, "the flesh may be the strongest – and the most dangerous – thing of all" (*Dark Romance: Sexuality in the Horror Film* [New York: McFarland, 1986], 279). It is this aspect – the obsessive distaste for creature-likeness – that makes Cronenberg, despite his association with the pulpiest of American pulp genres, an archetypal Canadian artist. If the ubiquitous house symbol of Canadian literature carries a certain ambivalence simply by virtue of its intimations of isolation and confinement, Cronenberg's images of bodies turned literally deadly only make more explicit what it is that always subtends the ritual reiteration of enclosure. The "real" horror, he once told an interviewer, is "looking into a mirror and realizing that one's own treacherous flesh [is] rotting on the bones, that death [is] already at work" (in David Chute, "He Came from Within," *Film Comment* 16, 2 [1980]: 37). ↑
12. At the risk of getting ahead of the argument a little, it is worth noting that the process described here is therapeutic on a social as well as a personal level. "Central ... to the phenomenon of national identity is an impulse to mastery in the face of uncertainty, contradiction, heterogeneity and difference," says Christine Ramsay. "The nation holds out the promise of stability in the face of what Regis Debray, in 'Marxism and the National Question,' calls 'the twin threats of disorder and death' which confront all societies and all individuals. But, since the metaphysical paradox is that you can never simply make disorder, death, heterogeneity, and the threatening margins go away, you

work to manage them and to sustain the illusion of absolute control from the centre through the process of fantasy. It is in response to what Timothy Brennan, in an article of the same name, calls 'the longing for national form,' or collective order and containment, that the Western nation is invented and composed. Imagination and narrative become central processes in the formation of national identities." From "Canadian Narrative Cinema from the Margins: 'The Nation' and Masculinity in Goin' Down the Road," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 2, 2-3 (1993), 28. ↑

13. For insight into Scott's unusual methods, I recommend a book written about the experience by Montreal writer/painter Mary Meigs, one of the eight women who portray themselves in the film. As the back cover blurb describes it, "Meigs spent two years writing this extraordinary narrative, which begins as her story of being in the film and unfolds into a gentle, intricate meditation on the experience of time, old age, magic and binding. Time becomes still and circular as the women's self-images and film images, their past and present, are bound inextricably with the filmmaker's vision."

From *In The Company of Strangers* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991). ↑

14. Discussion following Roland Barthes' "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. Eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 152. ↑

15. With respect to this somewhat difficult notion, it is perhaps useful to consider Albert Cook's comments on the ambivalent function of the mask in Greece. Classical drama, Cook explains, reverses the Lacanian analytic model. Instead of the analyst-as-other using silences to direct the quest(ion)er back upon him/herself, the "dialogue of the dramatic transaction ... takes place by suppressing the speech of the self, by displacing it ... into two kinds of interacting [discourses, that is, the words exchanged by actors and the lines spoken by the collective chorus] ... Of this abnormal dialogue the mask is not only the symbol but also the semantic vehicle. The audience, as it subjects itself to the sequence of the structured statements in the play, reacts cathartically both by identification, in so far as it is addressed, empathizing in pity; and by disidentification, in so far as its own speech is suppressed, by aroused fright." From *Enactment: Greek Tragedy* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971), 36-7. ↑

16. For another perspective on this, it is worth noting that the landscape artist Philip Fry takes my thesis about framing images in Canadian art and tries it on a much broader range of works and styles. For the results, see "Concerning *The Wacousta Syndrome* (More About What's Canadian in Canadian Art)" in *Sightlines: Reading Contemporary Canadian Art*. Eds. Jessica Bradley and Lesley Johnstone (Montreal: Artextes Editions, 1994). ↑

17. *Shivers*, A.K.A. *They Came from Within: The Parasite Murders* (1975); *Rabid* (1976); *The Brood* (1979); *Scanners* (1980); *Videodrome* (1982); *The Dead Zone* (1983); *The Fly* (1986); and *Dead Ringers* (1988). This list omits a number of short films and films which did not see any significant commercial distribution. For comments on Cronenberg's obsession with corporeal integrity, see note 11. ↑
18. In *Take One* 4, 3 (Sept. 1973), rpt. in eds. Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson, *Canadian Film Reader* (Toronto: Peter Martin & Take One Books, 1977), 234-51. For a range of perspectives on the "problem" of masculinity in Canadian film, see the special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 8, 1 (1999). For a discussion of the impact of Fothergill's thesis, and on the general links between colonialism and compromised masculinity, see particularly Lee Parpart, "Pit(iful) Male Bodies: Colonial Masculinity, Class and Folk Innocence in *Margaret's Museum*," (63-86). Also of note is the lead article by Thomas Waugh, "Cinemas – Nations – Masculinities" (8-44), on implicit and explicit homoerotic elements in the oeuvre, which gave its name to the issue. ↑
19. Notably, Seth Feldman identifies this film as "a useful metaphor for the Canadian ambiguity towards the American presence as a whole and the manner in which this ambiguity expresses it in cinema." See "Our House, Their House: Canadian Cinema's Coming of Age" in *The Beaver Bites Back: American Popular Culture in Canada*. Eds. David Flaherty and Frank Manning (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 209. ↑
20. It is interesting that Brian Johnson, in reviewing this film, takes the same tack of underlining the un-Americanness of its approach – a similar approach to that which we noted in reviews of *Company*. Johnson states: "Tom McManus delivers a quietly riveting performance as Henry, a bank clerk who has aspirations to be an actor. He gets a night job playing a cop on a cheesy TV crime series, then starts to wear his uniform, and his weapon, on the street. His method-acting exercise gradually gets out of hand. He takes his revolver to bed. Armed with the same premise, Hollywood might have turned the movie into a vigilante shoot-'em-up. But *Uniform* sublimates violence into existential suspense. And beneath it all is an unnerving current of homoeroticism." (From "Sexual Extremes," *Macleans* [September 13, 1993]: 44). ↑
21. For a compact, accessible discussion of the history of Canadian film, including its documentary bias, see various articles in ed. Seth Feldman, *Take Two* (Toronto: Irwin, 1984). ↑
22. See, for instance, Michel Euvrard and Pierre Verroneau, "Direct Cinema" and Robert Daudelin, "The Encounter between Fiction and the Direct

Cinema” in *Self-Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Quebec Cinemas*. Eds. Pierre Veronneau and Piers Handling (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1980).↑

23. An inner fiction is any text depicted in a primary text – a story-within-a-story, a play-within-a-play, a painting-within-a-painting, etc. – regardless of how it gets there or the function it serves. The strategy is most effective, however, when what is depicted is not merely the “fiction” itself but the activity of its making. It is notable, in this respect, that so many Canadian novels are what Sheldon Fischer (borrowing from Alistair Fowler) call poioumenon: “novels in which the main plot is itself about the writing of a novel” (“Poioumenon and Performative Storytelling in Canadian Fiction,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 22, 2 [1997]: 90). Fischer himself instances Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*, Morley Callaghan’s *A Fine and Private Place*, Robertson Davies’ *Deptford Trilogy*, M.G. Vassanji’s *The Book of Secrets*, Sinclair Ross’s *As For Me and My House*, Robert Kroetsch’s *The Studhorse Man*, George Bowering’s *Burning Water*, John Steffler’s *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, Clarke Blaise’s *I Had a Father*, Jack Hodgins’ *Invention of the World*, Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*, and “several of Ondaatje’s works,” but a full list would be much longer. Why the popularity of this particular form? Fischer, citing Kroetsch on the role played by writing in the task of “naming,” which is so crucial in a new country, suggests that it has something to do with finding/creating identity. He states: “These writers thereby extend themselves out, as it were, into the world through their characters, but at the same time they use those other characters as a means of distilling or clarifying their own experience ... It may be that we only know who we are when we write, and in that very process establish our being” (103).↑
24. I first observed this phenomenon in comparing the contemporaneous late-eighties lawyer shows *L.A. Law* and *Street Legal*. The usage is not an artifact of any particular vehicle, but may be confirmed by looking at courtroom scenes in more recent programs. The episode of *Da Vinci’s Inquest* discussed on pages 18-19 is exemplary. That the solution to the puzzle is a collective effort – rather than the property or the achievement of a single American-style investigator -- is underlined visually during the inquest scenes. Instead of jumping back and forth between primary participants, the camera “performs” inclusiveness by continually circling the room, establishing connections and relations, and reminding us of the communal presence.↑
25. We find a typical example of this rather wrong-headed view in Paul Rutherford, “Made in America: The Problem of Mass Culture” in Flaherty and Manning’s *The Beaver Bites Back*. Without offering any hard evidence whatsoever, Rutherford simply proclaims that “the forty-ninth parallel has only slight cultural significance these days” (276). Rutherford is unfortunately

not alone in his thinking. What facilitates this error is the fact that (as noted in the preamble to [Appendix 2](#)) Canadian television studies has devoted very little attention to the texts themselves. A notable exception is Mary Jane Miller's *Turn Up the Contrast: CBC Television Drama since 1952* (Vancouver: CBC and UBC Press, 1987), which provides insightful and useful readings of a number of early Canadian series. Substantive work of this sort is rare, however. (This is one reason why there are so few references in this section of my essay compared with the section on film.) Rather than attempting any significant analysis of the materials on which they are pronouncing, most scholars working in this field tend simply to assume that what they would find if they did do the work is the cultural homogenization predicted by globalization theory. For a critique of this propensity, see my review of the Flaherty-Manning book in the *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, available at <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/cjscopy/articles/mcgregor.html> ↑

26. For a sampling, see W.H. New, *Borderlands: How We Talk About Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998); Ian Angus, *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality, and Wilderness* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997); and Russell Brown, *Borderlines and Borderlands in English Canada: The Written Line*, Borderlands Monograph Series no. 4 (Orono, Maine: Canadian-American Center, University of Maine, 1990). ↑
27. See, for instance, Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976); also, for a different "take" on the phenomenon, Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1984). ↑
28. Carolyn Tuohy, *Policy and Politics in Canada: Institutionalized Ambivalence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 5. ↑
29. *Reference re Secession of Quebec*, [1998] 2 S.C.R. 217. ↑
30. The best known examples of this are collections of essays by two sisters who came to Canada with their husbands in the 1830s: Catharine Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836), and Susanna Moodie, *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852). Traill's book is particularly notable for the contrast between her conventionally Wordsworthian description of the trip up the St. Lawrence and the horrific account she gives of her first close-up encounter with the Canadian bush on arriving at their homestead in the Peterborough district. ↑
31. Frye, *A Literary History of Canada*, 220-21. ↑
32. Frye, *A Literary History of Canada*, 225. ↑
33. For a more detailed explanation, see my discussion of "The Frontier

- Antithesis” in *The Wacousta Syndrome*, 47-70. ↑
34. Gaile McGregor, *EcCentric Visions: Re Constructing Australia* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1993). ↑
  35. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1963), ch. VIII, pp. 132 ff. ↑
  36. Michael Goldberg and John Mercer, *The Myth of the North American City: Continentalism Challenged* (Vancouver: U.B.C. Press, 1986), 174. ↑
  37. In using this term, McLuhan suggests that electronic media acts as a literal, not merely a metaphorical extension to human senses. “After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western World is imploding,” he says in his *Introduction to Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965). He continues: “During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies into space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time” (3). ↑
  38. One of my own favorite datum on this phenomenon is the fact that the dining rooms in the two fanciest hotels in Yellowknife, rather than taking advantage of the rude grandeur of the lakeside setting of the town, are situated on the main floor with no view whatsoever. This feature is not anomalous. There are very few places in the whole town, in fact, where one can actually get a visual sense of being close to the wilderness. And where there is a view, there are often countermeasures taken to “deny” it. For a period back in the late eighties, I lived in an older residential area out near one of Yellowknife’s major mines. Unlike most of the city, the street we were on ran right along the lake. What struck me was that although every house had big picture windows and many of them also had decks or balconies on the lake side, none of them actually opened directly onto the lake. If one wanted to go down to the shore, one had to go out the front door and around. I’ve never had the occasion to verify it for myself, but one of my students once told me that this sort of arrangement was typical in Newfoundland as well. Whatever the pragmatic reasons for choices like these, it always struck me as faintly redolent of paranoia. Perhaps when one really is “out there,” one doesn’t want to be reminded of it – or to make it too easy to slip over the line. ↑
  39. Urban geographers have identified this penchant as a primary obstacle to achieving rational planning in such areas as sewage disposal. “Even by 1920, the geographic growth of the Fairbanks settlement had taken on a highly dispersed and fragmented form,” notes one article. The main reason for this, apart from special environmental conditions, was that “many individuals opted to locate outside the corporate limits of Fairbanks. Before

the city boundaries were expanded in 1970, there were 14,711 people living in the city and 7,833 in the immediate vicinity. Reasons for remaining outside the city were (a) economic ones, namely avoiding city taxes, and (b) the personal one of escaping 'crowded' city living" (Roger Pearson and Daniel Smith, "Fairbanks: A Study of Environmental Quality," *Musk-Ox* 19 [1976]: 22). To this I would add (from personal observation), first, that the 1970 expansion by no means ended the exodus, and second, as a result of the increase in service and transportation costs (now that the environs have been pushed further out) it is in most cases the personal rather than the economic reasons that prompt the choice. ↑

40. It is intriguing how often these notions turn up as touchstone referents in discussions of the Canadian experience; not exactly for good versus bad, but for safe versus risky, or us versus not-us. "In our efforts to imagine, narrate, and master a 'centre' for ourselves," says Christine Ramsay, "Canadians have grappled with the issue of regionalism as a centrifugal force that pulls us apart from within; but at the same time we have also grappled with the issue of American economic domination and cultural imperialism as a centrifugal force from without that likewise threatens to dissolve us as a centered, independent, and autonomous imagined community" ("Canadian Narrative Cinema," 32). ↑
41. Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), np. I chose this particular example because of the connection with settlers' tales (see note 30). However, it is an image that obviously resonates for the poet. It is notable, for instance, that the first poem in her first major collection, *The Circle Game* (1966; rpt. Toronto: Anansi, 1978), is entitled "This is a photograph of me." It is also notable, given what I have been saying about the Canadian sense of beleaguerment, that the subject of this photograph has apparently drowned. "I am in the lake, in the center/of the picture, just under the surface" (17). ↑

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