

BOYS IN THE BOX

Pop Culture and Critics in Canada

Geoff Pevere

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, something peculiar and unprecedented has happened to the popular status of that former paragon of tweedy academicism, the critic of the arts: they've become sexy. (*Saturday Night Live* recently ran a mock-preview of a new high-tension action series, replete with car chases and emotional bulldozing, called *Critic*.) Once confined to the distant towers of serious study or banished to the back pages of newspapers and magazines, cultural pundits of late have acquired a celebrity and level of professional credibility frequently equal to or sometimes greater than the subject of their scrutiny (when, for example, *New York Times* music critic Robert Palmer writes on an obscure rock and roll garage band like the Replacements you can safely bet it's the critic, and not what's criticized, that's snagging readers). Furthermore, in the manner of rock videos or the pod creatures from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, cultural wags are everywhere. Whether it's magazines, radio, TV, or the windiest corner of a cocktail soirée, the critics are there, quipping the light fantastic and generally (to quote *Miami Vice*) in your face.

It is not difficult to imagine the day when critics will be every bit as marketable as what they comment upon. Already Roger Ebert, the hamburger-shaped, bespectacled movie critic of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and the co-host (with the *Tribune's* hot dog-shaped Gene Siskel) of TV's popular *At the Movies*, is a publisher of books and a syndicated radio commentator. When Warren Beatty was introduced to Ebert and Siskel at the Toronto Festival of Festival's tribute to the actor, Beatty quipped, "You guys are just as famous as I am. Maybe I should be interviewing you." The mind needn't make any acrobatic leaps of imagination to conceive of the possibility of foam-filled Roger Ebert stuffed toys, Roger Ebert lobby candy, or even a line of Jay Scott designer leatherwear.

The why and how of this peculiar elevation of the cultural commentator in the past decade is arguable. Whether it's attributed to a rising postmodernist sense of mass culture consciousness, or merely interpreted as the latest inevitable step in the electronic age's certain march towards the culture of media-venation hearkened in different epochs by Orwell, McLuhan, and Warhol, is finally less important than coming to terms with what this cult of the critic-as-celebrity means, what its effects are on the way popular culture is consumed and interpreted, and what it says about the state of pop culture discourse and analysis in general today — and what, if anything, all this has to do with cultural activity and study in Canada.

But that's another essay in itself. For the present purposes the mere fact of critic celebrity is itself significant, particularly for what it suggests about the state of popular culture in the postmodernist age: this celebritization of the cultural pundit is the mass acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the practice (if not the theory) of discussing popular culture, an acknowledgement that bourgeois culture, with its conceptions of quality, uniqueness, and acquired taste is not capable of. Certainly this myopic insistence on culture as something serious preserves at least an impression of a healthy social order stratified according to taste, education, and manners: a social order that has actually been steadily crumbling since the advent of industrialization — and has been nearly reduced to rubble in the electronic age, when all culture is accessible to anyone thanks to the socially equalizing fact of affordable media. Yet this socialized (and institutionalized) snobbism has served to retard the practice of popular culture analysis to the point where technology and its effects have so far outstripped our understanding of them, we're like the chattering man-apes scampering around the mysterious and omnipotent black monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The difference is that popular culture and the media of its transmission were not sent to us from some superior, god-like intelligence in a distant galaxy — these myriad message systems strafing our sensibilities are monoliths of our own making.

Furthermore, these distinctions between levels of culture, and the qualitative modes of evaluation which reify them, cannot exist in the same way the media of their transmission are capable of transmitting *all* cultural products (or at least a figurative representation of them: you've still got to be there to experience the tactile nature of sculpture) in identical modes of discourse — TV can show a *representation* of anything. It's that deathless question of form and content again: if TV, for example, is viewed chiefly as a content medium, one can confidently — if naively — assert that distinctions between greater and poorer forms of culture do exist in such choices as *Masterpiece Theatre* or *Punky Brewster*. But to assert that would be to ignore one of the few genuinely profound and penetrating theoretical insights of the entire study of electronic-age culture:

that the medium of articulation does determine what is (and can be) articulated, that context does determine content, that the medium *is* the message.

The implications of this conception for the traditional and now-institutionalized distinctions between high and low culture, or art and commerce, or universal value and disposable trash, are profoundly disruptive (which possibly explains the virtual banishment of such thinking for so long from those fine arts sanctuaries called universities): it means that such distinctions are, in fact, purely academic after all, for, if they cannot apply to fixed and objective properties of cultural artifacts — which become unfixed when transmitted by other media — the distinctions exist only in the language used to make them. Art in the post-electronic age is not an unassailable set of attributes attached to a concrete set of objects, it exists only in forms of discourse applied to certain (increasingly arbitrary) objects. Art is in the mouth of the beholder.

This is not to suggest that words have no effect or existence outside their articulation; on the contrary, what we have here is the good old-fashioned, healthy, give-and-take and tug-of-war of a dialectic: the terms we use to identify and distinguish art *do* affect our perceptions and attitudes towards those objects we deem artful. Therefore, it is quite likely and entirely reasonable that we *will* distinguish between *Masterpiece Theatre* and *Punky Brewster* according to their respective “artistic” merits or intentions, and disregard the identity of their medium, and the standards of evaluation are likely to apply to elements of the programmes that have little or nothing to do with the medium itself. They will be “content” standards such as literariness, plausibility, acting proficiency, thematic depth, and social import.

THUS, THERE ARE definite, if malleable, standards for distinguishing both popular from more specialized forms of culture, and more from less popular forms of popular culture. Popular culture, which has developed out of oral and folk traditions, generally is comprised of those forms of cultural discourse that appeal to the widest possible audiences and which require the least amount of skill or orientation to be appreciated and apprehended — anybody with hearing can understand, if not appreciate, the appeal of Michael Jackson’s “Beat It,” but it takes a particular level of aural literacy to get down with John Cage. Reaching and appealing to the broadest possible audience is not only a characteristic of popular culture, it is, in an advanced capitalist society, an end in itself. Pop culture is part of the economic (and — we’ll get to this later — ideological) apparatus of capitalism and, as such, exists to make a profit. As western industrial capitalism developed in such a way that leisure time and disposable income created a vast and untapped source of undirected and unspent income,

popular culture filled the economic vacuum both as a way for workers to occupy leisure hours and as a consumable object paid for with surplus income. As various forms of pop culture achieved a level of economic viability and profitability, it became necessary to create a demand for these forms in order to reproduce themselves. As the demand grew, so did the volume. This mutually-replenishing scenario is identical today, only technology and audience size has changed. Popular culture exists to reproduce itself, and it does this by maintaining a constant demand for its products.

This brings us to one of the most elementary and essential distinctions between popular and more specialized forms of culture: for the latter, profitability and reproductability may be factors (although exclusivity is more highly valued in many fine arts), but not *raison d'être* (which is why *Masterpiece Theatre* is less likely to be interrupted by commercials than by appeals for donations). Popular culture forms exist principally as profit-making mechanisms, businesses as capitalist apparatuses designed to keep those dollars on the move.

This economic function has profound implications for the social, political, and ideological nature of popular culture (which, after all, are systems of discourse as well as snares for dollars): it determines the nature and range of possible messages to be transmitted by monitoring what it is possible to express in pop culture terms (and still be popular) and how it is to be expressed. Politically, this means that, by virtue of its function as a capital-gathering apparatus within capitalism, which depends upon the greatest possible demand created by reaching and sustaining the broadest possible number of consumers, pop is reactionary. The vast majority of pop culture systems must reify rather than challenge things-as-they-are in order to ensure their own reproduction. Producing idealized images of how-sweet-it-is is the ideological function of pop-culture. It keeps us happy here and now, and it keeps us coming back for more. Pop cannot agitate and profit, it must reassure, reconcile, and reaffirm. It must comfort. This is why most pop culture systems are genres, comprised of finitely variable, easily identifiable and (this is important) eminently reproducible patterns and elements arranged in predictable and thus satisfying (and saleable) ways. We continue to consume pop culture not because of the possibility of challenge or change it may present but, on the contrary, because of the certainty of satisfaction. To a great extent, therefore, status quo support is virtually embedded in the very form and function of pop culture systems.*

* The predictability factor was recently illustrated with unusual candidness by the poster for Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky IV*, which shows the boxer aloft the shoulders of his coach and trainer, wrapped in the stars and stripes and roaring in victory. The ending is given away by the poster because it's the certainty of the outcome, and the satisfaction of patterns established in the other *Rockys*, that will sell the film, and not the possibility of something new.

Other, marginal forms of culture may exist to oppose and confront things as they are, to thwart our expectations, challenge our assumptions, scramble our sensibilities, and create new ways of seeing, hearing, or understanding. But not pop, and that is another distinction between it and, if you insist, art.

It is also one of the most urgent justifications for the serious study of pop culture, its form and its effects. As pop culture is a profoundly effective mechanism through which dominant ideology is preserved, reproduced, and naturalized, any effective and comprehensive strategy of social criticism must confront it. But this confrontation need not be restricted to a bemoaning of the sorry and sentimental state of pop culture as it is, nor to the cooking up of alternative aesthetic strategies — both are just as likely to result in yet another retreat to the falsely progressive shelter of high culture as they are to result in any effective strategy for change or understanding. (Both also assume that pop culture systems are monolithic and unalterable, which they aren't.) No, to effectively address pop culture means to deal with it as-it-is, in all its glitzy, superficial, and sentiment-soaked glory. Once its modes of operation have been studied, it is also possible to see where interventions in the ostensibly monolithic apparatuses are possible. Popular culture's principal strategy of status quo reification is the reconciliation of tensions and contradictions. Things which threaten order are destroyed, things which do not conform to prevailing standards of normality and propriety are banished or rehabilitated (or nuked). What is thus played out endlessly in pop culture is a process of society justifying and protecting itself with the systematic and automatic striking out at that which does not conform, whether that's Indians, errant mothers, gays, or crooked politicians. The key to the intervention in this apparently spook-proofed apparatus is found in the strategic and structured paradox in popular culture posed by the ceaseless nature of the apparatus's work itself: pop culture's job is never done because the contradictions it deals with can never completely be reconciled. They can be dealt with symbolically, they can be ideologically reinforced as negative or evil, but they cannot be eradicated. These contradictions thus represent the points where the seams of an apparently seamless system of ideological hegemony are not only made visible, but, by the mere fact of their persistent presence, are *straining*.*

* The proliferation of movies dealing with the rehabilitation or punishment of women for abandoning their traditional roles is a typical if somewhat overdetermined example of the manner in which pop culture attempts to neutralize social contradictions by resolving them. Postfeminist Hollywood has recovered from the blow dealt to its primary patriarchal propaganda platform, the family, with a body of movies, from *Kramer vs. Kramer* to *One Magic Christmas*, that punish women — and particularly mothers — for getting independent.

Victoria Films Co. presents
MAD
© 1963

GREETINGS EARTHLINGS!
WE COME FROM PLANET....
..... OH, OOH

* BIP
BLAM BLAM! BIP
* BIP BIP *
* BIP POW! BIP *
ZAP ZAP! *
BEEP BIP
BOOM!



TO ANALYZE POP CULTURE in terms of this perennial battle between the status quo and those forces which threaten its hegemony is to come to terms not only with what our society feels it must remove, reform, or conquer to maintain itself, but to begin to intervene upon the reifying function of pop culture systems which depend upon the it's-only-a-movie appearance of innocuous transparency to function. Once you've seen *Rambo's* big gun for what it is, his touted patriotic "heroism" seems similarly inflated. Reading pop culture texts can be a way of addressing critically the social context which produces and employs them. All pop culture texts, from Prince videos to *The A-Team* to Stephen King books, are political, in that they transmit ideological messages (and attempt to reconcile potentially explosive contradictions) that can be identified, exposed, and challenged. In this regard, pop culture not only deserves to be taken seriously, it *must* be.

To speak of pop culture in a Canadian context is, to a certain extent, to speak in mutually exclusive terms, for there are few forms of Canadian culture that can unsmirkingly be called popular. Not that pop culture isn't popular in Canada, *Canadian* pop culture isn't. The largest consumer of American pop culture outside of the U.S. is Canada. The implications of this situation for producers, consumers, and critics of popular culture in Canada, to state the obvious, are profound and have — or should have — been addressed elsewhere, but a few observations can be stressed within the contours of this argument. The unchallenged flow, volume, and availability of American pop culture, be it in the form of radio, records, magazines, books, movies, television, cable, or videocassette, has probably produced a peculiar and peculiarly Canadian strain of cultural schizophrenia. By constantly subjecting ourselves to myriad, and virtually unavoidable forms of American pop culture, Canadians must exist in a kind of collective subconscious limbo created by the gap that exists between idealized representations and actual conditions. *With* but not *of* America, Canadians consume American pop forms, but derive even less satisfaction than even the leave-'em-hungry nature of most consumable culture customarily provides. American pop culture can only serve to tease Canadians with the simultaneous reminder of their similarity to and their difference from Canadians.* This sense of looking in on but not partaking of the big party that is America reproducing itself for Americans has, to a certain extent, defined the Canadian collective consciousness: we are a

* *English* Canadians in particular. The language difference and minority status of Quebecers has ensured the consistent production for and demand for French culture, popular and otherwise. But this doesn't mean that Quebec is immune to cultural schizophrenia: statistically, the rate of consumption of American pop culture appears to be growing there too. More slowly, perhaps, but just as certainly.

nation of outsiders, window shoppers at the American Pop Culture Shoppe, and this exiled status has permeated our own cultural forms, from the virtual institutionalization of our much-vaunted, objectively detached “documentary tradition” and the thematic preoccupation with surviving *outdoors* in our literature, to the miserable tradition of pogeey-collecting losers in Canadian fictional films and the ironic postmodern detachment of a Canadian TV comedy like *SCTV*. This sense of cultural vagrancy is further entrenched by the limbo created in the gap between what we want and cannot have and what we’ve got and don’t want. Eternal browsers at the American pop culture smorgasbord, most Canadians remain voluntary abstainers from their native cultural cuisine (if cultural anorexia is possible, it’s thriving here). Not only are we more comfortable with American culture, — and nowhere is this more evident than with mainstream reviewers for whom American pop culture is the standard against which to measure everything else — it is not unlikely that Canadian pop culture will seem to Canadians foreign, second rate, and downright *Amateur Hour* by comparison.† It will seem an acute reminder of our lack of ability, maturity, and confidence and it will embarrass us the way we were embarrassed by a kid brother’s tears in front of older friends in the schoolyard: Oh god, how can I be related to *that*?

THIS LACK OF a sustained process of cultural self-representation not only has resulted in a nation of pseudo-Americans and a national identity that is virtually defined by its lack of positive identifying characteristics, but also has played a significantly determining role in the nature and function of cultural analysis and criticism in Canada, which tends to be defensive in tone (we’re just as good as they are) and negative in methodology (but we’re different). Thus, identity-stalking has practically become a defining condition of cultural criticism in Canada. The case of Canadian film criticism over the past two decades is a particularly illuminating case in point, for not only does it illustrate this process of negative defence as critical practice, it’s a particularly pure example of the academic institutionalization of Canadian cultural self-denigration.

For the most part the practice of Canadian film criticism (that is, the criticism of Canadian film; which in turn implies a level of analytical rigour and seriousness to be distinguished from casual pay-or-stay-away mainstream reviewing) is a

† Last year, I taught an introductory film studies course at Carleton University. For the “national cinema” section of the course, I chose Canadian films. In a year that included Bergman and Godard, and a number of Hollywood thrillers, the home-grown movies struck the students as just as strange and “foreign” as anything else in the course.

recent phenomenon, and its relative degree of academic legitimization has corresponded to the gradual growth of film studies departments in Canadian universities since the late 1960's. The parallel determinants to the development of Canadian film criticism were: identity (specifically, its absence), which meant a search for cinematic trends and characteristics that might demonstrably be defined as "Canadian" (which frequently meant merely "not American"); and the auteurist mode of criticism inherited from the French *Cahiers du cinema* group of the late 1950's and popularized in North America during the 1960's. Itself a mode of criticism appropriated from the study of literature, auteurist critical practice placed the director as the source of creative responsibility in the cinematic process, and sought to distinguish greater from the lesser "authors" by providing evidence of a strong creative sensibility in the sustained manifestation of such literary qualities as theme, symbol, and consistent moral world-view. Worthy auteurs were those who demonstrated a distinctive style and sensibility over a body of works. The potential Canadian auteur was thus doubly handicapped: not only did he have to come up with the thematic and stylistic goods, the goods also had to be, somehow, *Canadian*.

In providing a legitimization strategy for Canadian cinema in the face of almost total indifference, this auteurist approach was invaluable at the time, even if it didn't turn up too many auteurs. (The biggest problem — and most illuminating, for what it reveals about cultural activity in general in Canada — wasn't finding the directors, it was following them up: few were able to keep working long enough to build up a canon sufficiently worthy of auteurist attention.) Consequently, those few filmmakers who did measure up to auteurist standards were leapt on like food scraps in a dog pound, and were frequently subjected to an orgy of praise and analysis that so outstripped their actual achievement (or even output), that reading the stuff made one feel that old playground humiliation setting in again: Oh god, is it necessary to *canonize* these guys?

At the conceptual core of auteurism lies a certain romantic notion of artistry, uniqueness, and individualism — all essential tools in the care and keeping of safe distances between high and low forms of culture. The application of the auteurist mode in the Canadian context also imported these parasitical qualitative assumptions lock, stock, and quill pen, with the result that judgements based on distinction, uniqueness, and artistic merit (blended with the sole local variant, Canadianness) were applied to a cinema that is, by nature, diverse, sporadic, regional, and low budget. Thus, a mode of critical analysis born of, and designed to address forms of cinematic activity — like those in the U.S. and France — so productive artists had to be tracked in order not to go unnoticed, was deployed in a country where a highly productive year rarely saw more than twenty feature films made. It was like using a chainsaw to trim hedges.

Not only was the method ill-suited to the reality of film production in Canada (which was thus condemned to failure *a priori* by a set of standards irrelevant to the local situation), but also it perpetuated a high culture bias that effectively prevented the serious cultural analysis of all but an absurdly small percentage of films produced in Canada. Those few areas of film production which have enjoyed a relative degree of sustained activity, such as animation, TV drama, and mock-Hollywood cheapies (movies with titles like *Death Ship* and *Terror Train* which, let's face it, have comprised the bulk of English-Canadian production for the last ten years), were left largely ignored and undiscussed, since they were not admissible as worthy of analysis according to the restrictive qualitative standards of auteurism. Back to the schoolyard, kids.

CANADA'S POP CULTURE, such as it is, has thus suffered from a crippling indifference on two fronts: a non-audience which prefers the schizoid satisfaction provided by American products, and the cultural analysts, who have abandoned it (as leprous and unworthy) in favour of the pursuit of a phantom called Great Canadian Art.

Unused and yet still abandoned: that is largely the fate of a national culture for whom popular is less an apt adjective than a terminological legacy. Lest this scenario seem so bleak as to summon those playground blues again, I have saved for these ruminations a silver lining, a ray of hope, a beacon of potential cultural and intellectual redemption in Canada that holds within its luminosity a possible key to a prosperous pop-culture future. Lo, I have seen this future and its name is — Corey Hart.

Yes, disbeliever, Corey Hart. Well not Corey specifically, but what Corey represents in pop culture status and impact in Canada. Corey is one of a number of Canadian pop music stars who are riding a crest of international notoriety virtually unprecedented in the hobbling history of Canadian pop culture. (Bryan Adams, the Springsteen of Scarborough, last summer sold out seven consecutive performances at New York's Madison Square Gardens.) Not coincidentally the rise of this group of Canadian pop musicians corresponds to the ascent to popular prominence of the latest alternative television medium, rock video. With its four-minute mini-movie format, in which pop performers either perform songs or appear in condensed dramatic scenarios illustrating the song (or both), rock video has introduced a vehicle for the production of pure celebrity that, particularly when seen in its 24-hour non-stop cable format (called *Much Music* in Canada), puts Canadian performers and their pop culture vehicles on equal footing and status with the world's best known rock and rollers. Rock video has democratized pop culture production and consumption to such an extent that it

is not outrageous to imagine that this might be the medium through which that pernicious old schoolyard sensibility might be beaten and blown away. Rock video programming makes no sheepish apologies for its Canadian content, nor does it make overdetermined efforts to justify Canadian performers, nor does it ghettoize Canadians or their videos in segregated or specialized programmes (it is probably the only specialty programming format that would happily meet Canadian content regulations without being legislated to do so). Bryan is stuck right in there between Mick and Tina, and made to hold his own. And, judging by record and concert ticket sales here and abroad, the kid's doing okay. On *Much Music*, Canadian pop culture is presented and consumed as equal in quality to everybody else's.

This is not to suggest that rock video is itself a medium of profundity and cultural responsibility, if such qualifications can be fairly applied to pop culture production. Depending on who you're reading or what video you're watching, it's either the most debased and regressive forum for sexist and reactionary fantasy-pandering since *Hustler* magazine or a veritable frontier of unmined artistic and technological potential — it's testimony to the medium's richness that it's both and more. What matters is that it's a form of Canadian pop culture that's honest-to-god *popular*. Not that popularity in itself is a virtue — after all, Sylvester Stallone movies are popular — but the ramifications of popularity for cultural self-image are profound: this could represent not only the first group of Canadian performers who are not handicapped from the starting gate by an assumption of innate cultural inferiority, but, more significantly, the mutually interdependent rise to popular prominence of Canadian performers and Canadian rock video suggests the existence of an audience that is similarly unhindered by the self-loathing that has defined Canadian cultural composition, production, and criticism since Norman Jewison and Paul Anka pulled stakes and hightailed it for L.A.

Not that Corey Hart can lead us out of the darkness of our conditioned inferiority to that proud pinnacle of cultural confidence all by his pouty, diminutive self. Rock video may be the necessary proof that, given the proper circumstances and attitude, Canadian culture can thrive, compete, and succeed without any apologies for its Canadian pedigree, but it is not likely to lift the veil of indoctrinated indifference and inferiority from all levels of cultural activity across this vast and chilly land. More likely, it will be denigrated and sneered upon (as it already has been) by those keepers of the flickering cultural flame for whom popular is an epithet and marginality is proof of integrity.

Essentially, the critical matter for Canadian popular culture is a matter of criticism. Even though rock video and its immaculately coiffed stars are likely to continue to thrive and gain popular ground despite the near-total absence of any serious analytical and critical response, this popularity will remain useless to

Canadian cultural, intellectual, and political development unless it is addressed, studied, and interpreted. As long as Canadian cultural criticism and its practitioners continue to wait, like some breed of polar ostrich with its head hunkered into a snowbank, for Canadian culture to rise to a set of standards that bear practically no relevance to the brass tacks and under-siege reality of cultural production and consumption in Canada, nothing will be gained but a frozen noggin. Besides, Roger Ebert didn't become a star with a six figure salary by holding out for art.

CONGRATULATIONS

Martin Kevan

I

In the provincial centre
 Laughing with American power
 Office workers teem through glass doors
 To walk the icy boulevards
 Where skin freezes mask-tight
 And hoary cars thump past
 On chains.

Rolled like a sausage
 Under a manager's arm
 A newspaper hotly advertises
 Air-frames, baby clothes, cognac, dogs and eggs.
 Anniversary photographs of ice stalagmites
 Covering 'Liberty Ships'
 Headed for Murmansk,
 Are squeezed beneath
 A beauty from Jamaica
 On page three.

"The President's got the Ruskies
 By their geriatric balls,"
 Murmurs the manager,
 Mist steaming from his mouth.