

## **Red & White on the Silver Screen: An Iconography of the Canadian film.**

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The image of a red & white, maple-leaf-adorned flag waiving proudly in the front yard of a peaceful suburban bungalow is relatively rare in English-Canadian cinema.<sup>1</sup> Unlike American directors, who generally signal their patriotic penchant through prominent shots of the stars & stripes, Canadian filmmakers have traditionally chosen to express their sense of national belonging in other ways. Cineastes in this country seem to agree with Keith Spicer when he says that “We Canadians are reluctant enough to wrap ourselves in our own flag.” (Spicer, 1995, p.14). As I have discussed elsewhere, “irony,” “mosaic narratives” (Loiselle, 2002, pp.257-262) and “quirkiness” (Loiselle, 2011, p.372) have been the preferred cultural markers of our “distinct” identity on film. Much has been written on the unassumingly flagless distinctiveness of our cinema over the last 50 years; and there is no doubt that this persistent discourse has been at once reflexive and constitutive of something that can definitely be called “Canadian film”. Yet, there has been a peculiar use of red & white in Canadian films that has haunted our screens but has rarely been theorized: the poignant image of blood on snow. From the shot of an old man crawling in the snow with his face mysteriously torn off by a possessed doll in *Cathy’s Curse* (1977) to the close up of a wounded pigeon on the frozen ground getting crushed with a brick by an evil little girl in *Ophan* (2009), images of gooey red liquid colliding with the whiteness of the frosty surface with which we are all too familiar appear in a number of cinematic tales of terror shot in this country. These images stunningly evoke the clash between the peaceful, calm, wintery temperament that putatively distinguishes Canadians and the deep-seated, repressed violence that feeds our collective nightmares and at times explodes in the form of a downtown shootout on boxing-day or a savage riot after a hockey game.



Crushed pigeon in *Orphan*.

Staunch cultural nationalists would probably take issue with the two examples above: Eddy Matalon's *Cathy's Curse* and Jaume Collet-Serra's *Orphan*. "These are not Canadian films!!!" one might say. As co-productions, they are not "pure" Canadian films; they were directed by *non*-Canadians – the former is French, the latter Spanish; and, perhaps most damningly, they are formulaic horror films that seek to appeal to the spectator's baser instincts, rather than trying to edify them through the earnest discourse of compassionate, tolerant, open-minded Canadianness. Yet both films were shot in Canada and foreground the frigid environment that defines much of Canadian identity. The same is true of many other "un-pure" films shot in Canada, which display a vivid red & white iconography, from *Ilsa, the Tigress of Siberia* (1977, Jean Lafleur) and *Ghostkeeper* (1981, Jim Makichuk) to *Yeti: Curse of the Snow Demon* (2008, Paul Ziller) and *Red Riding Hood* (2011, Catherine Hardwicke). These might all defy the conventional definitions of our national cinema as advocated by culturally conservative Canadian film critics, but these and other similar tales of bloody terror on ice nevertheless generate stunningly effective visual metaphors for the red & white banner.

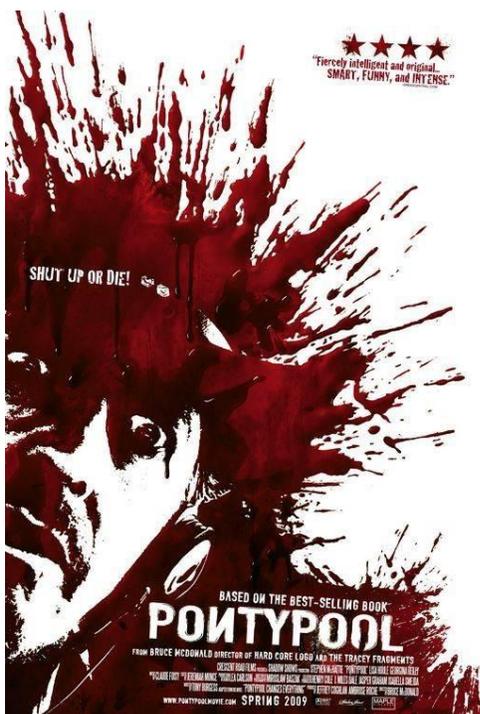
## **Conventional Wisdom about Canadian Film.**

Since the 1960s, the critical discourse around English Canadian cinema has sought to demonstrate not only that there is such a thing as a true “Canadian film”, but that motion pictures worthy of the term “Canadian” are undeniably *distinct* from their Hollywood counterparts. As I have discussed at length elsewhere, Cultural nationalists who contributed to landmark anthologies such as *Canadian Film Reader* (1977) and *Self Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Québec Cinemas* (1980), which defined English-Canadian film studies for years, took it “upon themselves to promote a kind of cinema that was *not* Hollywood [... they] set forth the admittedly uncertain project of defining our national cinema through an exploration of the ‘unique characteristics of Canadian cinema’” (Loiselle, 2011, p.367). The “unique characteristics of Canadian cinema” that were highlighted by cultural nationalists in an attempt to promote the distinctiveness of our national cinema helped to create over time a canon of films that are “small-scale, narratively and stylistically innovative” and that shun “the slick look and contrived, action-packed stories of Hollywood movies” (Loiselle, 2011, p.366).

Over the past 50 years, the critical discourse around Canadian cinema has changed somewhat. But to this day, Canadian critics continue to praise those films that are distinctively *not* clones of mindless American entertainment. Films that are quirky and ironic yet understated and unassuming; narratively daring yet realist in style; cutting-edge yet inoffensive – those are the true Canadian films (Loiselle, 2011, p.372). But this definition of Canadian cinema cannot hold. There are many American films that are as quirky and understated as any Canadian film ever was (think of films by directors ranging from Jim Jarmush to Alexander Payne); and conversely, there are Canadian films that are as stupidly patriotic as anything Hollywood ever

produced (think of Paul Gross’s insipidly romantic and moronically pro-militaristic *Passchendaele* (2008)).

Trying to establish a clear cut distinction between American and Canadian cinema is a futile exercise in futility. The American film industry has had, and continues to have, too profound an influence on Canadian film culture for any “distinct” mainstream cinema to exist in this country. However, there can undeniably be a recognizable Canadian “spin” in cinema. This spin, to me, is most obvious in films that dare to tackle the peculiar aberrations that emerge from a context where cultural and environmental repressions overlap to engender characters who are compelled by their well-meaning hypocrisy, aggressive tolerance and callous civility to obstinately stifle the natural urges that people living in less “courteous” nations can express unreservedly. When this exercise in fanatical self-restraint fails – as it necessarily will – red splashes on white in a pattern most evocatively depicted on the poster of Bruce McDonald’s darkly droll tale of linguistic zombies: *Pontypool* (2009).



The evocative red & white design of *Pontypool*'s Canadian poster.

## **Blood on Snow: Moments of Brutal Recognition in Canadian Cinema**

The arresting iconography of the *Pontypool* poster finds many moving equivalents in Canadian films that deal with this quintessential moment when our repressed brutality returns with a bloody vengeance to paint the vivid red on white of our flag. In *The Dark Hours* (Paul Fox 2005), for instance, a fatally wounded dog, wrapped in a blood stained white sheet, crawls on snow toward the disturbed female psychiatrist who just shot it. This hallucination, one of many, reminds the doctor of her tragic professional failures, her own terminal illness and the fact that she axed to death her cheating husband and sister minutes earlier. At this moment of horror, the visual analogy with the Canadian flag signals the correlation between the cruel vindictiveness beneath the psychiatrist's pretense of sensible rationalism and the vicious hostility that underlies the agreeable façade of our collective ethos.



Fatally shot dog as Canadian flag in *The Dark Hours*.

Of course, I am not the first film critic to have pointed out the analogy between bloody gore and the Canadian flag. In her analysis of the *Ginger Snaps* trilogy, Sunnie Rothenburger describes a moment early in *Ginger Snaps: Unleashed* (Brett Sullivan, 2004) when, on a cold wintery night a young man falls victim to a werewolf. As he is torn to pieces in his car, a huge

splash of blood covers the windshield upon which a small Canadian flag proudly stands.

Rothenburger notes:

The gore on an official symbol of nation insinuates that, against the common stereotype of peacekeeper, not only is violence possible in Canada, but it may even help constitute the nation. As [Justin] Edwards argues, “the history of colonization in Canada enables us to consider the nation as a threatening, powerful force that has mangled, mutilated, and marginalized those who have stood in its path”( Rothenburger, 2010, p.102; Edwards, 2005, p.111).

This moment in *Unleashed* undoubtedly bespeaks of a Canadian cinematic strategy whereby our holier-than-thou attitude gets a well-deserved slap in the face. But I personally prefer another moment in the *Ginger Snaps* trilogy, which occurs in *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning* (Grant Harvey, 2004), the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century prequel to the other two.

Unlike in *Unleashed* there is no direct visual reference to the flag in *The Beginning* – not surprisingly, since the flag did not exist in 1815. But there is still one moment of bloody snow which provides a vivid reflection on Canada’s unspeakable potential for brutality. As the colonial ancestors of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Ginger and Brigitte find refuge from the cold in a fort inhabited by unpleasant soldiers, we are thrown in the middle of Northrop Frye’s worst nightmare: a small garrison “confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting” (Frye, 1971, p. 226) and surrounded by werewolves! The film quickly constructs the soldiers as reprehensible colonialists and the two sisters as defiant victims of patriarchy who use their connections to the ungodly beasts as weapons against men. From a feminist perspective, as Rothenburger notes, the Ginger-led werewolf attacks against the fort can be read positively: “the audience’s potential empathy with these characters [Ginger and Brigitte] suggests that these are celebratory moments, where the sisters turn violence back against their oppressors and reshape Canada as subversively brutal” (Rothenburger, 2010, p.105). The bond between the two women is so strong that when the Hunter, an indigenous man who had been an allied, urges Brigitte to kill

Ginger, she proceeds to stab him ruthlessly. Any man who threatens the sister's "feminist solitary"<sup>2</sup> must be disposed of.

But the film becomes more broadly critical, beyond a feminist reading, when it paints all white characters with the same brush in a striking scene where a teenage indigenous boy offers to guide the sisters through the dark, looming forest. He is not a menacing character; threatening neither to the sisterhood nor to the masculinist fort. And yet he is lacerated by the werewolves. For the boy, the werewolves are the wendigo: "a disease that the White men brought with them from Europe" (Rothenburger, 2010, p.102). His bloody body lying in the snow signals that the werewolves are not so much a tool of female power against patriarchy than an embodiment of the (self-)destructive Canadian settler mentality – male and female. Canadians, in their ravenous thirst for civility, their irrational obsession with being reasonable, their rabid fixation on appearances of equality and fairness, will destroy anything and everything that stand in their path – allies and enemies alike – to satisfy their need for hostile graciousness.



Indigenous teenager shredded by colonial werewolves in *Ginger Snaps Back*

In many ways, therefore, Canadians are like the murderous little creatures of David Cronenberg's best horror film, *The Brood* (1979): bland, innocuous little things that look rather

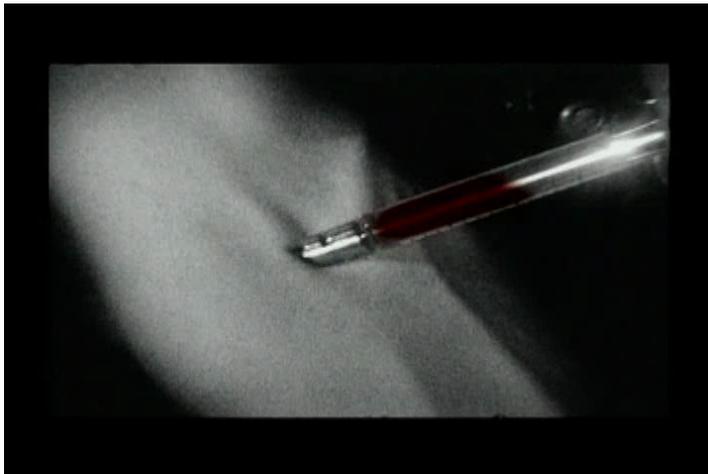
ridiculous in their awkward snowsuits. But do not stand in the way of their self-righteous mission to manifest their mother's repressed rage or they will beat you to a pulp with a meat tenderizer. While there is a lot of snow and blood in *The Brood*, I do not believe there is a single shot of blood *on* snow. But the red & white iconography is still central to the film's main moment of horror. The infamous scene in which the monstrous mother, Nora, reveals the external womb from which she gives birth to the killer brood, projects an image of gruesome patriotism. Dressed in white and covered in blood, Nora stands for Canada's matriarch. A repressed Brit (the accent is unmistakable) she gives birth to preposterous little Canadians who generally behave inoffensively, until fury overtakes them.



The Matriarch of the Canadian Brood.

Like many other Canadian films, *The Brood* uses the red & white iconography as a metaphor for the consequence of oppressive good manners and repressive politeness. Another, even more striking example is the selective use of red in Guy Maddin's *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* (2002). Shot in black and white, the 1920s-looking film adaptation of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's performance of Mark Godden's *Dracula*, includes only a few moments of colour, and in particular the conspicuous use of red for blood, which clashes with the overexposed pale grays that dominate the screen.

The film revolves around the age-old Canadian conflict between reason and passion. The “immigrant” Dracula embodies all that is sensual, exotic, irrational and forbidden. For their part, the “normal” men who surround Lucy, the main female character and first victim of the vampire’s bite, are rationalists who fear the woman’s threatening sexuality as much as they despise Dracula’s lascivious potency. While they hide behind the cloak of reason, science and civilization, the men are depicted by Maddin as vile hypocrites and brutal perverts. In a scene where the men, led by Dr Van Helsing, give a collective blood transfusion to Lucy, to “save her” from Dracula’s venom, Maddin uses extreme camera angles and distorted perspectives to link the transfusion to a gang rape, with Lucy contorting and the men grimacing with painful pleasure as they pump their vital fluid into her. Not surprisingly, red blood appears during the scene in stark contrast with the white flesh of the learned scientists. This is Canada, Maddin seems to suggest: highly cultured and enlightened men who, under the guise of reason and knowledge, rape, pillage and abuse.



Canada: Red & White; Science and Rape.

Significantly, when Lucy – now a vampire – and Dracula suck each other’s blood, there is no shot of red against white. The bi-chromatic iconography would not be fitting here, for the two characters are now on the same plane of impolite lust, bad-mannered desire, undemocratic

horniness – nothing could be less Canadian. It is only when the repressive urges of perversely quirky civility encounter inappropriate concupiscence and offensive courtship that the red & white icon materializes as a suitable emblem of appalling Canadian contradictions. And one of the most evocative uses of red blood against a white backdrop occurs when the nauseatingly sensible men decide to eliminate Dracula and the threat he represents against caution, propriety and triteness.

Armed with their crosses and stakes, Van Helsing and his disciples track down Dracula in his castle and swiftly proceed to poke at the rogue aristocratic figure. Each rational, level-headed stab from the decent men produces a streak of red blood upon white surroundings that visually associates the victory of neurotic sanity and perilous prudence with the colours of our fanatically prosaic nation. At this moment, when the mundane hunts down the extraordinary in a pathetic effort to maintain respectability, health and social equity, the red & white iconography is too salient to ignore. As such, the obliteration of Dracula reverberates cinematically as a typically Canadian gesture.



The spear of reason pierces through the heart of passion.

## Conclusion

Whether it is a “pure” Canadian ballet film directed for the mighty CBC by Winnipeg’s home-grown cinematic genius, or a bastard child co-production that tries to deny its origins, like *Orphan*, the movies that explore the more unpleasant facets of our all-too-pleasant collective identity often foreground red & white as a conspicuous visual reminder of the gory national wounds we desperately try to veil. Of course, not all Canadian films include shots of blood on snow – or some bi-chromatic equivalent; nor does red & white iconography appear exclusively in Canadian films. But there is an intriguing tendency in cinematic tales of terror shot in this country to flag our contradictions through images of a bloody stain smudged on a pristine frozen surface. Most Canadian spectators are probably oblivious to these moments of patriotic repulsion. But for those of us who have noticed them, their recurrence serves as haunting evidence that Canadian cinema is most gripping when it dares to tap into our disturbingly pleasant nightmares.<sup>3</sup>

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will conveniently ignore French-language *Québécois* cinema, which is a different creature altogether.

<sup>2</sup> See Bianca Nielsen's (2004) well-known reading of “feminist solidarity” in the original *Ginger Snaps*.

<sup>3</sup> I wish to thank my students Gina Freitag and Frederick Blichert for drawing my attention to some of the elements discussed in this paper.