

**Making Meatballs:
Canadian Film and Television Comedy**

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by

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Abstract

Making Meatballs: Canadian Film and Television Comedy begins an academic inquiry into English-Canadian film comedy and argues that *Meatballs* (1979), *Porky's* (1982), *The Adventures of Bob and Doug McKenzie: Strange Brew* (1983) and *Kids in the Hall: Brain Candy* (1996) exhibit unique comedic sensibilities founded, in part, on their position as products of a film-industrial context unique to Canada. This project comprises a variety of sub-topics, ranging from film's interface with television to practices of cross-dressing in popular entertainment. This study begins with an examination *Meatballs* and *Porky's* in relation to the Canadian debate surrounding the tax-shelter, as well as their position within the sub-genre of "Animal Comedy". The second chapter concerns *Strange Brew* and its satirical approach to the problem of mandated nationalism. The third chapter explores the uniquely subversive cross-dressing comedy of the Kids in the Hall, as evident in their television series and feature film *Brain Candy*.

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Introduction: A Certain Tendency of English-Canadian Film Scholarship

...the “foreignness” of Canadian cinema connotes its association with an international art cinema. This use of “foreignness” does not designate a geographical distance from the national territory, but a distance from popular cinemagoing taste. It makes sense to talk about how “at home” U.S. movies are in Canada, and how “come-from-away” Canadian films are. While plenty of non-Hollywood texts, from James Bond to Mad Max, have made it into the mainstream of international popular culture, the expectation that the minor cinemas of the world will regularly contribute in this fashion is slim. And these exceptions carry substantial significance. For example, over the last few years there has been an insistent whine asking “When will we get our Full Monty?” a plea that willfully forgets that Canada has had a number of prominent entrants to international popular culture, as with Porky’s and Meatballs (Ivan Reitman, 1979). Thus, the cry is not just for a popular blockbuster but for the “right kind” of hit (e.g., a humanist crowd-pleaser rather than a gross-out teen flick). The selective memory confirms a ruling sense of embarrassment about popular cinema culture, reflecting how bound by taste these appeals for a “proper” national cinema are.

~Charles Acland, Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture.¹

While we were making On est au cotton we were having a drink with the main character, and he asked us: ‘Do you think that you people would be able to make a real movie?’. We said: ‘What do you mean, what are we doing here?’. ‘No’, he said: ‘I mean a real movie that I could go to on a Saturday night with my wife’.

~Denys Arcand²

There have been four books published in as many years on the subject of English-Canadian cinema, none of which have allotted more than two pages to address film comedy. Most striking is William Beard and Jerry White's anthology *North of Everything: English Canadian Cinema Since 1980* (2002), which fails to indicate in its 488 pages that *any* comedies have been produced in English Canada over the past twenty years. This is surprising considering that since the launch of the Genie Awards by the Academy of Canadian Cinema & Television in 1980, fifty percent of the Golden Reel Awards have been presented to film comedies. The Golden Reel is a special award “presented to the Canadian film that earns the highest domestic box office revenue of the

year,”³ and has as its alumni such English-Canadian comedies as Ivan Reitman’s *Meatballs* (1979), Bob Clark’s *Porky’s* (1982), Dave Thomas’ *The Adventures of Bob and Doug McKenzie: Strange Brew* (1983), and such French-Canadian comedies as Louis Saïa’s *Les Boys* (1997), *Les Boys II* (1998), and *Les Boys III* (2001).

As regrettable as the critical neglect of such films may be for both the academic community and Canadian film fans alike, it is typical of Canadian film scholarship. In their desire for a neatly defined and distinctly “Canadian” national cinema, English-Canadian film scholars have worked to prescribe a national cinema that satisfies the Griersonian elitism upon which Canadian cinema was founded. In order to “put first things first,”⁴ critics concerned with defining English-Canadian national cinema have narrowed their focus to a tiny canon of approved masterpieces, casting aside all that does not belong in their ‘imagined community’ of acceptable national films. The main casualty of the exclusionist tendency in English-Canadian film scholarship has been comedy. The exclusion is curious in light of the fact that the two highest grossing Canadian films of all time—*Meatballs* and *Porky’s*—have been comedies. By ignoring film comedy, Canadian film scholarship is failing to acknowledge the sort of films produced in Canada that are popular with Canadian audiences. In effect, English-Canadian film scholarship has created an image of the national cinema which, as Charles Acland suggests in the opening quotation, feels foreign to the national public.

With this in mind, the purpose of this thesis is to begin the process of situating popular English-Canadian film comedies within the current Canadian film canon. This study begins with an examination of *Meatballs* and *Porky’s* in relation (1) to the

Canadian debate surrounding tax-shelter legislation intended to increase film production, and (2) to the position of these films within the sub-genre of “Animal Comedy”. The second chapter concerns *The Adventures of Bob and Doug McKenzie: Strange Brew* in the context of its satirical approach to the problem of popular film and television’s role in the project of nation-building. Finally, the thesis concludes with a chapter exploring the uniquely subversive cross-dressing comedy of the Kids in the Hall, as evident both in the Kids’ self-titled television series and in their feature film *Kids in the Hall: Brain Candy* (1996).

The tendency in English-Canadian film scholarship to turn a blind-eye to comedy is analogous to the critical neglect that film comedy itself has long faced. In *Film Comedy*, Geoff King draws attention to the problems of cultural status which plague the study of comedy. As King notes, audiences are “not usually encouraged to take comedy very seriously...[t]o analyse comedy, as the cliché goes, is to destroy it.”⁵ For film scholars, however, King argues that the problem is less about the destruction of comedy through over-analysis than it is comedy’s “apparent lack of weighty respectability and perhaps, its sheer ubiquity in the routine commercial mainstream.”⁶ Despite the fact that film comedy is “one of the most popular [entertainment] formats,” King continues, it remains “rarely one of the more prestigious or award-winning forms.”⁷

The lack of regard given to comedy is often explained relative to “matters such as social status and class,”⁸ in light of comedy’s traditional status as low-brow and unrefined entertainment. In *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (1992), Henry Jenkins outlines how attitudes toward comedy reflected beliefs

regarding class difference at the turn of the twentieth century. Debates concerning whether or not comedy-generated laughter was appropriate for Victorian gentlemen or ladies were sometimes couched in terms of Darwinian evolution, as Jenkins writes:

Burgess Johnson suggested to *Harper's Monthly* readers in 1915 that working-class humor was literally of a lower evolutionary order than that of the more genteel folks. Laughter depends, he suggested, on a stimulation of the nervous system either through shock or surprise...

...As humans evolved and developed higher degrees of civilization...they also developed a more refined sense of humor. The evolutionary superior human rejected the crude shocks of physical comedy in favor of the subtler, more restrained stimulation of a perceived incongruity or a contradictory character trait. Those who had not developed such a refined taste simply had not progressed as far toward an ideal state of civilization...⁹

In this regard, humour works as a gauge of class distinction and social refinement, with the higher classes associated with cerebral as opposed to slapstick humour. Demarcations of class and respectability linger in present-day film scholarship, with film comedy—the entertainment of the masses—lower on the propriety scale than more respectable, dramatic forms, such as those familiar to the art cinema. At best, film comedy is ranked, perhaps, only slightly above television comedy, a circumstance that prompts Barry Puterman to ask: “How insignificant a subject can one find and still remain in the world of the arts?”¹⁰

Film comedy’s popularity, and hence lack of respectability within academia, and other highbrow institutions, would seem to account for English-Canadian film scholarship’s reluctance even to acknowledge the existence of Canada’s own comedic productions. It also helps explain the paradox of the seeming incompatibility between English-Canadian film comedy and the image of Canadian film constructed through English-Canadian film criticism and scholarship. As the following sections will clarify,

there is a nationalist tradition in English-Canadian film scholarship which has made little room for comedy.

A Certain Tendency of Canadian Film Scholarship

...[there is] another, unacknowledged, assumption—one so self-evident, so centrally canonical, that it was unnecessary to mention it. This is the assumption of nationalism. Since the late sixties it has been a given premise that Canadian film criticism should be primarily engaged with elucidating the distinctiveness of Canadian cinema as, precisely, Canadian.

~Peter Morris, "In Our Own Eyes: Canonizing Canadian Film."¹¹

A central division in Canadian film scholarship and film-related policy-making concerns those who see Canadian film as industry and those who see it as art. The film-as-industry advocates believe that the goal of Canadian film is to be “first and foremost a business,”¹² i.e., a self-sustaining industry, aimed at both the domestic and export markets, which generates profits through films aimed at a mass audience. This industry-centered vision was paramount to the creation of the Canadian Film Development Corporation (later renamed Telefilm) by the Canadian government in 1967, and later the legislation of the Capital Cost Allowance, both of which used tax dollars—in one form or another—to promote investment in Canadian film, on the grounds that the “investments” in question would eventually turn a profit.¹³ It also goes without saying that the same outlook defines the primary position of those such as Michael MacMillan of Alliance Atlantis, whose business acumen presupposes a conception of Canadian film as an industry first and foremost. In contrast, advocates of film-as-art typically adopt what can be called a cultural-nationalist position, viewing Canadian film as an art form designed to

nurture a distinctly “Canadian” image and promote Canadian culture, however such features might be understood. In this regard, it is not the goal of Canadian filmmaking to make money, but to develop and promote a cinematic culture which, if not unique in itself, promotes an ideology intended to showcase distinguishing features of Canadian culture. This nationalist position can be traced back to the ideology set forth by National Film Board founder John Grierson, who championed the production of documentary films in Canada as a means of promoting “civic interests: what Canadians need to know and think about if they are going to do their best by Canada and by themselves,” as well as “the cultural aspects of Canadian life...Canadian achievements in painting and craftsmanship...Canadian folk songs, [and] the contributions of the various race groups to Canadian culture.”¹⁴ Often overlooked is the fact that Grierson also championed the production of documentary films as a means of avoiding commercial competition with Hollywood, securing a modicum of commercial success in the non-theatrical market.

To date, much of English-Canadian film scholarship continues to be influenced by the cultural-nationalist position. Due to the relative youth of English-Canadian feature filmmaking, and the finite number of productions, early studies of English-Canadian film focused largely on identifying and defining those elements which could be seen as unique to Canadian filmmaking. One problem inherent in the cultural-nationalist position of early English-Canadian film scholarship was its propensity to define Canadian film in opposition to Hollywood.

The construction of national cinemas through the assertion of difference from Hollywood is not exclusive to Canada. Many national cinemas consume mainly

Hollywood films, and since the 1920s and continuing into the present, they have defined themselves in terms comparable to those evident in English Canada. As Andrew Higson writes in “The Concept of National Cinema,” the purpose of most national cinema discussion is “to try to establish the identity of one national cinema by its relationship to and differentiation from other national cinemas.”¹⁵ In Canada, however, the need to differentiate Canada from Hollywood rests upon a unique sense of urgency. Geographic proximity and a shared language, combined with the fact that 80 percent of television and 95 percent of films viewed in Canada are estimated to have been produced in the United States,¹⁶ results in a long-standing fear that Canada is being culturally colonized by the U.S. Most recently, George Melnyk reaffirms this imperialist fear in *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (2004) in which he equates Canadian film history to the ancient Greek mortals who suffer at the hands of “the god of Hollywood, almighty Zeus,”¹⁷ sent to overpower and ‘Americanize’ them. As we shall see, this fear of American culture has led to an oversight regarding national identity more consequential than the neglect of popular film genres such as comedy.

The problem with defining a ‘national’ cinema through difference from Hollywood is threefold. First, it is prescriptive, “citing what *ought* to be the national cinema”¹⁸ rather than objectively exploring what the cinematic experience of a nation *is*. As Michael Dorland has argued, Canadian film scholars were effectively “nation builders” who developed an “ideal-typical theory of a Canadian national cinema.”¹⁹ Second, by ignoring what *is*, nationalist scholarship must exclude elements of their national cinema which do not fit their prescribed ideal. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s

'imagined community,' Andrew Higson makes this point relative to common definitions of British national cinema:

Thus, definitions of British cinema, for instance, almost always involve, on the one hand, the construction of an imaginary homogeneity of identity and culture, an already achieved national identity, apparently shared by all British subjects; and on the other hand, the valorization of a very particular conception of "British cinema," which involves ignoring whole areas of British cinema history. In each case, a process of inclusion and exclusion is enacted, a process whereby one thing is centralised, at the same time necessarily marginalizing another, a process wherein the interests of one particular social group are represented as in the collective or national interest...²⁰

In the case of Canadian film scholarship, the imagined identity in question leads to a definition of Canadian film characterized in early film scholarship by the following: (1) an emphasis on the animated, documentary or experimental film traditions (or any combination of the three); (2) a preference for auteur and/or art-cinema films featuring protagonists often characterized as victims and failures; (3) a story situated in Canada that invokes allegedly "Canadian" issues, including those relating to themes of landscape, technology, or other familiar national political tropes, such as French and English Canadian cultural differences. Current scholarship has expanded this paradigm to include issues of cultural and gender hybridity, but in ways that preserve a conception of English-Canadian cinema in terms of a collection of marginalized themes and subject matters.²¹ While all these Canadian film characteristics are interesting and useful, they are not fixed nor whole, but only account for a fraction of English-Canadian film culture. Dorland indicates what has been excluded in English-Canadian film scholarship:

The predominant account in Canada, in attempting to substitute an idealized conceptual unity for the intractability of excessive fragmentation caused by transnational influences, shifting practices, and institutions in the Canadian context, has 'chauvinistically' attempted to construct a counter-narrative of Canadian cinema that prides itself on its distinctiveness. The problem with the attempt...is the counter-narrative could only be possible by excluding *certain* others, namely the 'bad' others, like the American film industry or vulgar Canadian producers.²²

Inverting André Bazin's famous claim that the cinema's existence precedes its essence, nationalist scholars focus on an ideal, as opposed to the reality of Canadian film. The "certain" others Dorland is alluding to are not only Hollywood films, but Canadian films designed for the mass audience. There is a lack of engagement with popular film, rooted in the assumption that, with 95 percent of films screened in Canada being from Hollywood, "anything popular is suspect of being too American."²³

It should be made clear that what is truly tragic is not that English-Canadian film scholarship was elitist and exclusionary during its formation in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, but that this defensive stance persists in present-day scholarship. Contemporary English-Canadian film scholarship remains burdened by the prescriptions of a concept of national identity defined decades ago. As is demonstrated in William Beard and Jerry White's 500 page anthology *North of Everything*, which includes almost no reference to Canadian film comedy, contemporary English-Canadian film scholarship largely ignores the popular.

The exclusion in national film scholarship of complete cinematic histories leads to the third and most problematic effect of English-Canada's national cinematic canon: the alienation of the domestic audience. Ironically, the imagined homogenous national cinema championed by scholars is foreign and unfamiliar to its own audience. When it comes to fictional features, Canadians approach domestic films "with a mixture of prejudice and suspicion"²⁴ and though "opinion polls showed that a majority of Canadians would support measures to increase the exhibition of Canadian films [in 1973]...a majority also said they would be disinclined to go and see them."²⁵ Scholars

have suggested that Canadians view Canadian film as “an educational or duty bound activity,”²⁶ and “little more than a bad, scholastic flashback”²⁷ of the NFB documentaries seen in elementary school. Denys Arcand’s actor articulates this sentiment in the second quote which began this introduction: Canadian films, as he sees it, are not made for his enjoyment.

English-Canadian film scholarship promotes the division between English-Canadian film and English-Canadian audiences by continuing to overlook popular film genres, especially comedy. George Melnyk describes the academic discourse generated in Canadian film history as being “hermetically sealed...but also isolate[ed] from the general public,”²⁸ and that film scholars “sought to address their peers”²⁹ and not the mass audience. Charles Acland, in his book *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (2003) argues that Canadian scholars see “the popular merely as a site of lost national potential...of ideological colonization,”³⁰ and popular taste “as something to be combated for the way it suppresses some imagined ideal Canadian popular culture.”³¹ In fact, as Ted Magder has argued, the scholarship has been “principally concerned with counteracting the influences of foreign ‘mass’ or ‘popular’ culture.”³² The result of which are, as with the scholarly prescriptions regarding British national cinema discussed by Higson, accounts of English-Canadian film culture that ignore “the actual cinematic experience of popular audiences.”³³

English-Canadian film scholarship’s propensity for ignoring the majority of films popular with Canadian audiences is due in part to the aforementioned elitism, which is evident in the desire for respectability within the project of nation-building and academic

studies. The failure to acknowledge popular tastes serves only to reinforce the assumption that audiences themselves are guilty of a low-brow sensibility. The assumption is that the sensibility of the ‘mass’ audience is not as highly evolved as that of the scholars who take on the role of judging quality and taste. Hence, the scholars’ denigration of the popular serves to enhance his/her own qualification as critic. That these elitist assumptions continue today is evident in the Fall 2004 issue of *Montage*, a journal published by the Director’s Guild of Canada, where director Jack Blum addresses recent developments in Canadian film art and industry. At issue in “Who Do We Think We Are? A Canadian Perspective on Perspective Canada,” is the Toronto International Film Festival’s decision to eliminate the “Perspective Canada” category from their festival. Twenty years after it was first introduced, Perspective Canada is no longer considered helpful to Canadian filmmakers because of the disadvantage faced by films with a “Canadian” label. What was originally intended to serve a nationalist agenda by emphasizing and valorizing domestically produced films has become a red-flag cueing audiences as to which films to avoid. In discussion with Canadian director Patricia Rozema, Blum writes:

“To have commercial success,” [Patricia Rozema] says, “the regular audience member has to believe that [the Canadian film is] going to be better than any other film in the market. [But] there’s a prejudice against Canadian cinema at the moment.”

“A prejudice,” I ask, “as in something based in ignorance?”

“Based both in ignorance and reality,” she replies. “There haven’t been enough films that create a satisfying experience for people who don’t consider themselves film buffs.”

“Okay, so the film buffs know that Canadian films are okay, but the general audience doesn’t?”

She responds carefully. “The mass audience has not had enough positive experiences and they accurately believe there is not enough commercial fare provided by Canadian filmmakers.”³⁴

This exchange is not only indicative of an awareness of the Canadian audience's prejudice against Canadian films, but also highlights the discriminatory sentiment held against Canadian audiences. Here, Blum implies that the audience's prejudice is based in ignorance not experience, and that the problem is not with Canadian film, but with the quality of the general audience.

The unflattering judgment of the Canadian audience is common in English-Canadian film scholarship, and is based as well on the false assumption that the audience is passive in its reception of popular culture. Like Melnyk's Grecian mortals, Canadian audiences are positioned at the mercy of American cultural imperialism. Or, as Manjunath Pendakur claims in *Canadian Dreams & American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry*, the Canadian audience is not only a victim of "the powerful U.S. threats to bring Canada to its knees,"³⁵ and their Canadian corporate and institutional allies, but of a capitalist economy that works to "denationalize"³⁶ Canadian film and deny Canadian audiences their preferred cinema. Ted Magder points out, however, that this is no longer the case, as "ethnographic studies into the process of media reception have demonstrated that audiences are far more active, creative, and critical in their 'readings' of media messages."³⁷ Magder elaborates further:

..recent media scholarship has come to general agreement around the following point: audiences do not passively receive media messages; rather, they 'negotiate' and interpret them in various ways. Audiences are active, and the meaning of any media text ultimately resides in the interaction between text and reader...It is, quite frankly, not that easy to know for certain what goes on in the minds of audiences as they consume cultural products.³⁸

Scholars of Canadian film ought to consider seriously Magder's claim that the cultural imperialist thesis that underlies much of English-Canadian film scholarship does a

disservice to the study of Canadian film culture, ignoring the experience of the mass of Canadian viewers in order to focus on an idealized cinema whose appeal remains decidedly limited. Here Madger's position dovetails with much recent research on the topic of film and national identity, which has raised new questions concerning the role of film audience in shaping national cinemas.³⁹

It is only natural then that Canadian film scholarship should continue to ignore the mainstream audience, for in doing so, it is also rejecting the popular, which in academic discourse, refers explicitly or otherwise to American culture. Again, the rejection of American culture is a Canadian nationalist tradition, which sees cultural relation between the countries in terms of an “‘us’ and ‘them’...[a] relation of absolute difference, absolute opposition” in which American culture becomes stereotyped as an “evil, oppressive monster”⁴⁰ and Canada as its victim. That this position naturally entails a refusal to equate the Canadian with the popular is hardly surprising. As Jennifer Vanderburgh writes in “Ghostbusted! Popular Perceptions of English-Canadian Cinema.”

In popular discourse, it is widely presumed that English-Canadian cultural specificity and the classical narrative form are diametrically opposed. The logic of such a discursive paradigm results in a self-fulfilling prophecy that renders English-Canadian cinema, if divergent from classical Hollywood narration, marginal. As a result, the general characterization of culturally specific English-Canadian cinema considers it to be inherently uncommercial. Conversely, commercially successful Canadian films made with large budgets in the classical Hollywood narrative style are not perceived to be Canadian.⁴¹

If Hollywood films exist in the realm of the ‘blockbuster,’ then Canadian films, in order to be distinct from Hollywood, must assume the position of the anti-blockbuster, the commercially marginal. Following this logic to the full, scholars assume that the films Canadian audiences are familiar with and enjoy cannot be distinctly Canadian. In effect,

Canadian nationalist film scholarship is satisfied to work within fixed assumptions about its audience, rather than to confront the intricacies of actual audience tastes.

By ignoring the popular and prescribing a national cinema which venerates films that few Canadians have seen, English-Canadian film scholarship has become stagnant, continuing to recycle the same arguments and managing to alienate itself from the activities and concerns of Canadian film audiences. In the study of any national cinema, the audience is a valuable resource for understanding popular cultural values. As Alan Williams argues in *Film and Nationalism*, national cinemas “cannot by themselves mobilize nations...[but] reflect and keep in circulation values and behaviors associated with a particular nation.”⁴² In order to have a full understanding of what those values are, Williams seconds Andrew Higson’s advice “to consider what audiences actually *see* at least as much as what their film industry *makes*.⁴³ In this instance, by ignoring the popular and ignoring what is felt to be too American, Canadian film scholarship has overlooked an essential aspect of the Canadian experience, the very aspect that allows Canadian films to function in the manner Williams describes. Canadian scholarship has focused for so long on small cultural differences between Canada and the U.S. that they can no longer see the considerable similarities. In light of this, Madger, Higson and Acland all argue that it is not only important to study the films a country produces, but also to examine the films a country watches, whether Canadian or not. It is important to “[take] seriously the commitments and skills of popular audiences”⁴⁴ instead of dismissing their tastes as unimportant or ‘unCanadian.’ It is important for film scholars to explore what is popular with national audience and to appreciate it as a relevant part of a

country's cultural experience. This sentiment is strongly felt and most consistently argued on the edges of academia. As Geoff Pevere writes in "The Rites (and wrongs) of the Elder or The Cinema We Got: The Critics We Need":

Pop culture, all of it, high or low, crass or class, is an equally valid indicator of the cultural context which produces it, of the ideological temper of the times. The refusal or inability of Canadian film critics to adapt a non-evaluative, descriptive and analytical mode of criticism has merely perpetuated the colonization of the Canadian collective consciousness (if such a beast exists). Like the average weekend moviegoer, the critic in Canada has undergone a process of cultural dislocation, resulting from the adoption of imported critical standards that can only be self-defeating in a country where these standards cannot deal adequately with the cultural products that country produces...⁴⁵

In order to achieve a more complete understanding of English-Canadian cinema, film scholars must first lose the mantle of 'nation-builder' and arbiter of a 'distinct' Canadian culture, and open their minds to the discussion of *all* things Canadian, marginal or popular. The defensive nature of 'us' versus 'them' has led to a Canadian cinematic discourse which is focused on the minutia, the marginal differences, that presumably distinguish Canadian identity. Though it is important to explore the marginal, it is a tragedy to focus *only* on the marginal at the expense of the habits and tastes that define the mainstream Canadian cinematic experience. Turning a blind-eye to the everyday lived experiences of the 'mass' audience, Canadian film scholarship misses the opportunity to engage with the Canadian consumers who make Canada's film culture what it is.

Engaging with the popular in Canada threatens to spawn a discourse for which Canadian film scholars may not be ready. In addressing the popular, film scholars in Canada must challenge their own assumptions about the presence and effect of American culture on Canadian audiences. It is necessary to acknowledge the deep interrelationship between Canadian and American cultures shaped by the "migration of talent and film

shoots”⁴⁶ and the “presence of Canadian talent in the United States.”⁴⁷ Moreover, it offers a chance for scholars to explore the role of Canadians themselves, as Ted Magder makes clear:

With all due respect to the problems inherent in the notion of consumer sovereignty, it has to be said that the current mix of cultural practices in Canada does not exist because of some collusion on the part of American capital and the Canadian state, but because current cultural practices have been largely accepted and internalized by Canadians themselves.⁴⁸

With a new methodological outlook centered on issues of reception, Canadian film scholars can explore the popular under the assumption that it has not been produced helplessly or passively, but through the Canadian audience’s active, improvised and sometimes unruly engagement with American culture. We can explore popular Canadian films as a reflection of *Canadians*.

The goal of this thesis is to begin the process of analyzing popular English-Canadian film through a focus on one of its most popular forms, film comedy. As stated at the beginning of this introduction, half of the Golden Reel Award winners in Canada have been film comedies. This thesis argues that *Porky's*, *Meatballs*, *Strange Brew* and *Brain Candy*, exhibit unique comedic sensibilities founded, in part, on their position as products of a film-industrial context unique to Canada. My objective for this project is to open the discourse on Canadian national cinema beyond the limits of the current critical canon to include the popular. To this end, I will examine how Canadian familiarity with Hollywood culture has informed its filmmaking. In doing so, I will limit my focus to film comedy, one of cinema’s more popular genres, and one on which Canadians have had a particular impact in the international market.

First, in chapter one, I will examine two of the highest grossing films produced in Canada: *Meatballs* and *Porky's*. Significantly, these films receive surprisingly little attention in Canadian film scholarship except to be scoffed at as a national embarrassment, and yet they have lived on in the cultural life of Canada where they are still available for rent or purchase at several chains of video stores. Classified by scholar William Paul as “Animal Comedies,” these two films are examined both in relation to Canadian discussion and debate surrounding filmmaking during the boom period in film production under the Capital Cost Allowance (ca. 1978-1980), as well as their similarities and differences from their American Animal Comedy counterparts. As well, I will explore the kinder, gentler and more egalitarian nature of these low-brow comedies, and posit reasons why they lack the aggression that informs the gross-out aesthetic of Hollywood Animal Comedies.

The second chapter centers on a study of *The Adventures of Bob & Doug McKenzie: Strange Brew* and its satirical approach to the problem of nation-building. Through the phenomenon known as the McKenzie brothers, I will explore the influence of television, the importance of *SCTV*, and the confusion generated by ‘Canadian content’ regulation over what it means to be ‘Canadian.’

Finally, in chapter three, this study concludes with an examination of the cross-dressing comedy of the Kids in the Hall, both in their self-titled series and in their feature film *Kids in the Hall: Brain Candy* (1996). It is the goal of this chapter to understand the unique nature of the drag performances of the Kids in the Hall as a mimetic form that liberates female characters from what film scholars identify as the limitations of gender

propriety imposed on women in comedy. In contrast to the norm for North American comedy since the 1910s, the drag of the Kids in the Hall allows female characters to be aggressive and promiscuous in ways that highlight film comedy's potential for radical cultural subversion.

As such, this thesis is not a reception study. The fact that many of these comedies have had large domestic box-office grosses and are widely available in the Canadian market and in the Canadian ethos is proof enough of their popularity with Canadian audiences. As well, this study is not designed to question the validity of the notion of 'national' cinema and the trouble with defining such films as "Canadian" in our global marketplace. For the purposes of my argument, a "Canadian" film is one that has been recognized by the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television as such (all these films have been nominated for or awarded a Genie). As well, I do not intend to force these films into the established discourse on Canadian national cinema in order to make them more acceptable to the Canadian academic community. The goal is to explore Canadian comedies without imperialist fears or cultural-nationalist pressures and to move Canadian film scholarship out of its tired traditions and into an outlook sensitive to the popular Canadian film experience. This study is not designed to add to the division between Canada and the United States by privileging only differences without acknowledging similarities. Moreover, I do not explore popular French-Canadian comedy, given that traditionally French-Canadian film scholarship has been more open to the study of the popular.⁴⁹

The choice of films for study is based on those which remain in the popular culture. They are films which have achieved a measure of success not only in international markets, but, more importantly, in the Canadian market and therefore merit consideration from scholars of Canadian film. Finally, when faced with the question of "why" Canadian film scholarship should pay attention to Canadian film comedy, each film presents a different answer, which I articulate in each of the chapters. In analyzing the films, I examine a variety of topics, ranging from film's interface with television to practices of cross-dressing in popular entertainment. As much as possible, I allowed my ideas to evolve in the course of the research, so as to remain responsive to the films' particularities. The goal was never to mold these comedies to an already formulated argument, but to let these films reveal their arguments and perspectives in light of a new emphasis on Canadian popular film.

¹ Acland, Charles. *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture*. Duke University Press: London, 2003. p. 189

² Collins, Richard. *Culture, Communications & National Identity: The case of Canadian television*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990. p.223

³ <http://www.genieawards.ca/genie25/specials.cfm>, July 21, 2005.

⁴ Grierson, John. "A Film Policy for Canada." *Documents in Canadian Film*. Ed. Douglas Fetherling. Peterborough: Broadview Press 1988. p.55

⁵ King, Geoff. *Film Comedy*. New York: Wallflower Press, 2002. p. 4

⁶ Ibid., p. 18

⁷ Ibid., p. 1

⁸ Ibid., p. 72

⁹ Jenkins, Henry. *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. p.29

¹⁰ Puttermann, Barry. *On Television Comedy: Essays on Style, Theme, Performer and Writer*. London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1995. p. 1

¹¹ Morris, Peter. "In Our Own Eyes: The Canonizing of Canadian Film." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques*. Vol. 3, no. 1, 1994, p. 32

¹² Magder, Ted. *Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993, p. 161

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- ¹³ See Michael Spenser and Susan Ayscough's *Hollywood North: Creating the Canadian Motion Picture Industry* for further discussion on the CFDC.
- ¹⁴ Grierson, John. "A Film Policy for Canada." *Documents in Canadian Film*. Ed. Douglas Fetherling. Peterborough: Broadview Press 1988. p. 64.
- ¹⁵ Higson, Andrew. "The Concept of National Cinema." *Film and Nationalism*. Ed. Alan Williams. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002. p. 55
- ¹⁶ Grant, Peter, S. & Chris Wood. *Blockbusters and Trade Wars: Popular culture in a globalized world*. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004. p. 119
- ¹⁷ Melnyk, George. *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. p. 9
- ¹⁸ Higson, p. 53
- ¹⁹ Dorland, Michael. *So Close to the State/s: The emergence of Canadian Feature Film Policy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. p.6
- ²⁰ Higson., p. 63
- ²¹ See Margaret Atwood's *Survival: a thematic guide to Canadian Literature.*, Seth Feldman's *Take Two: Tribute to Film in Canada*, Robert Fothergill's "Coward, Bully, or Clown: The Dream-Life of a Younger Brother." *Canadian Film Reader* and Harold Innis' *The Bias of Communication*. For contemporary scholarship see William Beard and Jerry White's *North of Everything: English Canadian Cinema Since 1980* and Christopher E. Gittings' *Canadian National Cinema: Ideology, difference and representation*.
- ²² Dorland, p. 10
- ²³ Magder, p. 249
- ²⁴ Ibid, p. 192
- ²⁵ Ibid. p. 153
- ²⁶ Acland, p. 193
- ²⁷ Monk, Katherine. *Weird Sex and Snow Shoes: and other Canadian film phenomena*. Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2001, p. 111
- ²⁸ Melnyk, p. 231
- ²⁹ Ibid. p. 232
- ³⁰ Acland, p.13
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 183
- ³² Madger, p. 249
- ³³ Higson., p. 53
- ³⁴ Blum, Jack. "Who Do We Think We Are? A Canadian Perspective on Perspective Canada." *Montage*. Fall 2004, p. 34
- ³⁵ Pendakur, Manjunath. *Canadian Dreams & American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry*. Toronto: Garamond Press, 1990. p. 276
- ³⁶ Ibid. p. 213
- ³⁷ Madger., p. 9
- ³⁸ Ibid. p. 249
- ³⁹ See Andrew Higson's *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, Alan Williams' *Film and Nationalism* and Charles Acland's *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* for further discussion of national and global film audiences.
- ⁴⁰ Elder, R. Bruce. *Images and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989. p. 14
- ⁴¹ Vanderburgh, Jennifer, "Ghostbusted! Popular Perceptions of English-Canadian Cinema." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue D'Études Cinématographiques*. Vol. 12, nr. 2, Fall 2003. p. 82
- ⁴² Williams, Alan. *Film and Nationalism* Ed. Alan Williams. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002) p. 8
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 10
- ⁴⁴ Acland, p. 17

⁴⁵ Pevere, Geoff. "The Rites (and wrongs) of the Elder, or The Cinema We Got: The Critics We Need." *Documents in Canadian Film*. Ed. Douglas Fetherling. Peterborough: Broadview Press 1988. p. 334

⁴⁶ Acland, p. 7

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 190

⁴⁸ Magder, p. 17

⁴⁹ See Bill Marshall's *Quebec national cinema* for his insightful analysis of *Les Boys* (1997).

Chapter One: A Kinder, Gentler, Animal Comedy: Finding the Value in *Meatballs* and *Porky's*, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Tax-Shelter

"Hey, where did that guy who wrote Porky's drink? Uh? Uh? Oh, man! When that...when that fat broad grabbed that kid's crank through the hole...where do they get their ideas? Where do they get them? You're the writer, you tell me."

~Peter Griffin, *Family Guy*¹

Judging from the current state of Canadian film historiography, one might conclude that Canadian film scholars have never heard of *Porky's*. Both a symbol of Canadian films' commercial success (the highest grossing Canadian film, earning \$11 million domestically and \$152 million worldwide the year of its release²) and of its culturally distinct failure (as a low-brow comedy about a group of American teenagers, in which you would be hard pressed to find any obvious signs of Canada), *Porky's* is an elephant-sized challenge to the image of Canadian film that scholars have worked so hard to promote. *Porky's* with its total indifference to the task of promoting Canadian identity is exactly the sort of film that cultural nationalists despise and exactly the sort of film Canadian audiences support, no doubt for the same reason. Still, scholars and armchair nation-builders alike might have easily branded the success of *Porky's* as an anomaly of Canadian film production, a glitch in their desire for a culturally distinctive art cinema, had its financially successful predecessor not been *Meatballs*. Thus, a paradox imposes itself: the two most financially successful Canadian films are not auteur-based Maritime dramas in the social-realist tradition, but two very silly, low-brow, sex-driven animal comedies.

As the two largest grossing films in Canadian film history, it is disappointing, though not surprising, that *Meatballs* and *Porky's* have gone largely unexplored in Canadian film scholarship: *Porky's* and *Meatballs* are the type of low-brow comedies that critics—whether Canadian or not—love to hate. As William Paul makes clear in *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Comedy & Horror*, *Porky's* and *Meatballs* register as central examples of the genre he terms “Animal Comedy,” a group of films “that never won prestigious awards, movies that embraced the lowest common denominator as an aesthetic principle, movies that critics constantly griped about having to sit through.”³ In Canada, this disdain is amplified by the association of these films with the dreaded tax-shelter boom circa 1978-1980, a time that critics and scholars continue to scorn as a shameful period when Canadian filmmakers, by and large, did nothing but produce cheap imitations of Hollywood films. With stories not clearly situated in Canada, *Porky's* and *Meatballs* were condemned as “American-style junk”⁴ for failing to promote a distinctly Canadian identity. What they did promote was a string of sequels and a series of similar, though less successful Canadian productions, including *Screwballs* (1983), *Oddballs* (1984), *Goofballs* (1987) and *Fireballs* (1987). Despite the lack of critical and scholarly support, *Meatballs* and *Porky's* remain a part of the Canadian cultural consciousness. They were successful upon their release, and are still widely available for purchase or rent.

Film scholars and critics may pretend these films do not exist, but audiences do not, and the failure on the part of Canadian film scholarship to account for and explore the success of these films with Canadian viewers highlights academia’s disregard for the

cultural experience of Canadian audiences.⁵ Because these films do not contain any obvious Canadiana does not mean they should be overlooked within our national cinematic discourse. It is important to study *Meatballs* and *Porky's*, not simply because of their popularity—though that is a salient justification—but for what they can tell us about the peculiarities of the culture of filmmaking in Canada. *Meatballs* and *Porky's* stand as prime examples of Canadian film's similarity to and difference from Hollywood filmmaking. By situating *Porky's* and *Meatballs* within William Paul's definition of Animal Comedy, this chapter examines how Canadian familiarity with Hollywood cinema has allowed Canada to produce films which were not only domestic and international successes, but also influential in the establishment of Animal Comedy. To be more precise, the domestic film industry's ability to produce "American-style junk" points to a significant Canadian experience: their intimacy with American culture.

The study of these two Animal Comedies intends to open up a new understanding of Canadian popular film comedy, one that does not shun awareness of Canadian-American similarities, but instead factors them into an investigation of how the Canadian experience of American culture governs our own cinematic experience. It is not my intention to privilege the differences between the Canadian produced Animal Comedies and their Hollywood counterparts so as to valorize these films, in the familiar "us" versus "them" mentality which plagues much of Canadian film scholarship. Nonetheless there are differences between Canadian and Hollywood comedies which merit attention for what they reveal of the peculiarities of Canada's film and media culture. In the realm of Animal Comedy, *Porky's* and *Meatballs* stand as kinder, less aggressive and more

egalitarian comedies when compared to other such films as *Animal House* (1978), *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), *Police Academy* (1984) or even the genre's progenitor, *M*A*S*H* (1970). An egalitarian and principled outlook that is best explained with reference not to Canadian cultural life in general (assuming such a thing exists), but to Canada's unique film-industrial circumstances.

A Recipe for Meatballs

It is difficult to say which is the more depressing: the technical expertise with which this mind-numbing tripe has been put together, or its great success at the U.S. box-office.
~Jo Imeson on *Porky's*⁶

In order to appreciate the success of *Meatballs* and *Porky's* it is essential to consider the recent history of feature film policy legislation in Canada, which provided a context for the films' productions. The Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) was established after an act of the same name was passed in 1967, with \$10 million and a mandate to "foster and promote the development of a feature film industry in Canada."⁷ The CFDC was designed to fulfill the needs of both the industrial and arts advocates discussed in my Introduction. As Ted Madger states in Canada's Hollywood, the CFDC was to "advance funds to produce Canadian 'popular' culture that was expected to earn its keep in the marketplace" as well as "play a role in facilitating that elusive phenomenon known as national identity."⁸ The CFDC would invest in Canadian productions to promote the growth of Canadian cinema and preferably lessen the need for U.S. products. Not surprisingly, the CFDC found itself in a difficult position, trying to

satisfy the needs of industry by producing an economically viable product, while also satisfying the prescriptions of critics and scholars in search of cinematic and artistic distinction. These tensions were articulated most notably in the controversy surrounding the CFDC's investment in David Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975), which inspired Robert Fulford to write the infamous 1975 article for *Saturday Night* magazine, "You should know how bad this film is. After All, you paid for it."⁹ Fulford condemned the CFDC for using taxpayer money to "subsidize junk." What Michael Spencer, then the executive director of the CFDC, saw as a "profitable artistic investment,"¹⁰ Fulford saw as "a disgrace to everyone connected with it—including the taxpayer."¹¹ Fittingly, while Fulford's article put the CFDC on the defense, it did not dissuade audiences from flocking to see the film.

In 1975, in order to encourage private investment in Canadian feature film production, and alleviate some of the pressures on government and CFDC participation, Canada's federal government put the Capital Cost Allowance (CCA) into effect. The CCA—also known as the *tax-shelter*—would allow investors to deduct 100 percent of their investment in qualified Canadian film.¹² This eventually lead to what has been labeled a 'boom' period in Canadian cinema, when feature filmmaking went from three films in 1974, to a height of 66 in 1979, and 53 in 1980.¹³ During this time, middle-income Canadians turned to filmmaking as a way to shelter their income from the government. Moreover, many American production companies moved productions to Canada to take advantage of the shelter. This did nothing to disarm the tensions between industry advocates and cultural-nationalists which had already flared up over the CFDC's

participation in feature filmmaking. The effect of these tax-shelter laws seemed to confirm criticisms of Canadian filmmaking as simply a branch plant of Hollywood¹⁴, then playfully renamed ‘Hollywood North.’

Controversies concerning the tax-shelter period have served various rhetorical and ideological purposes, especially for scholars who feared the goals of industry advocates. As Manjunath Pendakur writes in *Canadian Dreams & American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian film Industry*, the Capital Cost Allowance was oriented more toward commercial success than nation building. He writes:

The fact was that the CCA was not intended to develop a national cinema. The Canadian government chose this policy after voluntary screen quota and investment policies had failed to produce any significant benefits to Canadian films. The CCA was a means to achieve what the government had not been able to do. If American distributors could not be persuaded to distribute Canadian films...why not encourage Canadian and other investors to finance high-budget films acceptable to the American distributors?¹⁵

Pendakur adopts a nationalist stance and is critical of the Capital Cost Allowance for promoting the “tactics to profit from international distribution” which ultimately meant “the mass-market...of the American majors.”¹⁶ Pendakur’s sentiments exemplify academia’s main criticism of the tax-shelter years, which is that the tax-shelter laws demanded that Canadian filmmaking function as a profit-based industry. In order to make a profit, Canadian films must be able to compete in the international market, for Canada alone is not large enough to sustain a national cinema. This ‘international appeal’—which ultimately meant “sales to the United States”¹⁷—required bigger budgets (budgets that the Canadian Film Development Corporation was not rich enough to provide), and universally themed storylines. For critics like Pendakur, this meant that “films that gave Canadian cinema a distinct identity became rare,”¹⁸ and instead Canadian companies

focused on producing “American-inspired”¹⁹ genre films. This supposed Americanization of Canadian film led film critic Jay Scott to remark in “The Great White Burnout” that “the most common criticism of the New Canadian Cinema—[is] that there *is* no New Canadian Cinema, that there is instead a New American Cinema on Canadian soil.”²⁰ Thus, the move toward a profit-based industry was a catastrophe, according to cultural nationalists, for it had resulted in films that were “hardly Canadian.”²¹

The disdain for the films of the tax-shelter period is not entirely uncalled for, nor is the Anti-American sentiment entirely new to Canadian scholarship. Indeed, many of the films produced during the period were commercial failures, if they were released at all.²² After two years of financial loss, investors and would-be producers began to realize that feature film financing was a risky business. Articles written by attorneys and chartered accountants began appearing in the trade press, outlining what investors could *really* expect from the film industry. Richard M. Wise, a chartered accountant, wrote that “investment forecasting in the feature film industry [was] no easy task,”²³ and that tax exemptions were complicated and not always worth what investors had hoped. Wise writes of the beginning of the ‘boom’: “because of the tax incentive, Canadians have not been too reluctant to invest their hard-earned funds in motion pictures. However, to their dismay, they are only beginning to realize that ‘you don’t spend a dollar to save sixty cents!’”²⁴ Canadians who jumped into film production with the idea of striking it rich were disappointed by the reality of the experience. Their films rarely found distribution, their tax exemptions did not amount to money saved, and there was little likelihood of seeing a return on their money.

For Canadian scholarship, however, the films produced during the tax-shelter stood only as examples of the necessity for a ‘distinctly Canadian’ style, and simply reinforced their dislike for anything Hollywood. More generally, the films came under attack for their industrial/international intentions with respect to distribution. John Harkness has argued that Canadian producers did “not see a great deal of difference between themselves and the Americans”²⁵ and that “[by] imitating American trash, we turn away from what we do well and attempt to follow trends in what other people do well.”²⁶ He also added that it was “*intrinsically evil* to spend money on quasi-American projects [my emphasis].”²⁷ Critics assumed that Canadian auteurs were suffering under the tax-shelter, “wrenched from subjects they knew, in order to direct ersatz American product”²⁸ and, like Norman Jewison working in the U.S., they were forced to “package someone else’s dreams.”²⁹ With the tax-shelter years routinely summed up as “a national farce of truly riveting dimensions,”³⁰ the films themselves are rarely subject to academic scrutiny.

The tax-shelter films’ failure to fit within the scholarly-defined national discourse has resulted in their continued obscurity within Canadian film scholarship. As well, they have come to symbolize the disregard Canadian film scholars and critics hold for many Canadian-produced, popular, Hollywood-style, genre films. Scholars who have addressed the ‘unCanadian’ have often done so only to rework them into an acceptable Canadian discourse. An early example of this is Piers Handling’s 1984 essay “A Canadian Cronenberg,” as he revisits the work of then reviled filmmaker David Cronenberg, in an “attempt to situate Cronenberg as a Canadian filmmaker”³¹ by highlighting the

acceptably Canadian traits found within his films (including his realist style and themes of technology). Handling's methodology has proven successful, as Cronenberg's films are now often found on a number of "Top Ten" lists of Canadian films.³²

Recently, the *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* published an essay by Peter Urquhart, in which he argued that "all the films of the tax-shelter boom need to be taken into account" by Canadian film historians as important documents of "Canadian history and culture."³³ Urquhart highlights some of the problems still inherent in Canadian critical writing on popular film:

It can be argued that these films do not rate attention because they fail to "fit" the critical definition of what constitutes a Canadian film. Insufficiently arty, angsty, or auteurist, these films do not satisfy the criteria established by cultural nationalists. ...Films in the popular idiom, genre films with American stars, for example, are seen not to qualify as "Canadian."³⁴

Urquhart offers some refreshing observations about the Canadian cinematic discourse, including its limited, often elitist attitude toward popular cinema, and its propensity to ignore Canadian films that do not fit its nationalistic art-cinema ideal. And though Urquhart should be commended for beginning to process of tax-shelter study, his decision to examine films with explicit Canadian content (*Suzanne* [1980], *Yesterday* [1981] and *Hot Dogs* [1980]) fails to develop a new critical understanding on the subject of popular Canadian film. Though Urquhart argues that "culturally nationalist biases...have resulted in a limited, skewed, and inaccurate perception of what actually constitutes the Canadian national cinema,"³⁵ his solution to study films he claims are "not bad knock-offs of Hollywood genre pictures, but are concerned specifically with national themes"³⁶ serves only to reinforce a cultural nationalist agenda. In this regard, instead of addressing those "bad knock-offs" directly in order to produce the "fuller, more accurate

understanding”³⁷ of Canadian cinema he hopes for, Urquhart focuses on films that “[bear] none of the ugly marks conventionally associated with tax-shelter-boom films.”³⁸ Much like Handlings situating of Cronenberg as a Canadian filmmaker, Urquhart is attempting to justify the study of the tax-shelter by highlighting films with acceptable Canadian content.

The omission of the tax-shelter films in Canadian discourse reiterates the failure on the part of scholars to address the complexities of the Canadian audience. The nationalist discourse on the tax-shelter period positions the Canadian audience like Canada itself, as a “helpless victim”³⁹ of American culture, a stance implying that, scholars and critics think very little of their fellow film-goers. As one critic wrote of the audience during the tax-shelter:

their target audience is more fickle than Marguerite Gautier and has the attention span of a hyperactive three year old. We’re talking about people who can’t remember what they had for breakfast, let alone what movie they saw last week. They like what everyone they know likes—hence the success of *Porky’s*...⁴⁰

This disregard for the Canadian audience is both shocking and insulting, but not entirely surprising. Fortunately, elitist assumptions such as these do not saturate all of Canadian film scholarship. As was stated in the Introduction, movements within current film studies give a higher regard to the audience’s capacity to interpret movies in terms of their own concerns and activities.

It is within the tax-shelter period’s atmosphere of economic growth and industry prosperity, coupled with fears of cultural imperialism and loathing of films too similar to Hollywood, that *Meatballs* and *Porky’s* were made. *Meatballs* was the most

commercially successful film of the tax-shelter “boom.” It was made with partial investment from the CFDC and earned \$40 million the year of its release. Interestingly, *Porky’s* was made without the aid of the CFDC and after the bottom had fallen out of the tax-shelter. Indeed, the film’s producer, Harold Greenberg, had “enormous difficulty finding investors.”⁴¹ As such, the film’s association with the tax-shelter is due largely to its low-brow generic quality, rather than its actual participation in the boom.

Despite all the critical strikes against them, or maybe precisely *because* of those strikes, *Meatballs* and *Porky’s* have something to teach us about Canadian filmmaking and our national experience. As outlined earlier, one of the primary criticisms leveled at *Meatballs* and *Porky’s* is that they are not reflective of a Canadian sensibility because they are “imitating America trash.”⁴² But what these films really reveal is a familiarity with Hollywood films intimate enough to allow a successful film comedy to be produced outside of the United States. It is perhaps a distinctly Canadian trait to be unable to take credit for the successful re-working of a foreign cultural product. *Meatballs* and *Porky’s* are not proof of Canada’s colonization, but examples of Canadian filmmaking’s engagement with and appropriation of Hollywood comedy. In turn, *Meatballs* and *Porky’s* have had their own influence on Hollywood productions, as this discussion of Animal Comedy will reveal. That Canadians are able to produce films which might be labeled as “too American” is in fact indicative of a quality that can be seen as wholly Canadian: a very intimate relationship, fostered through ongoing participation and immersion with a culture which is not entirely their own.

A Foundation for Comedy

Remember just because you are small doesn't mean you can't be original. To be original doesn't mean you have to be obscure or pretentious or dull. It does mean finding and developing something the world hasn't seen before.

~Ivan Reitman, Hollywood North⁴³

One of the aspects of Canadian life which distinguishes it from other countries is its absolute inundation by foreign media product. Canadians have been consuming American culture for nearly a century—not only film, but other media as well. What began with the CBC radio broadcasts of American radio programs soon translated into television; making the decision to adopt the “same technical specifications for television that the U.S. had established”⁴⁴ the Canadian government was not quick to offer domestic product for airplay. In fact,

the CBC launched the first Canadian television stations in 1952, four years after U.S. networks began regular broadcasting into Canada. This delay meant that an estimated 100,000 Canadian households first received television from U.S. border stations.⁴⁵

The advent of television extended the already widespread presence of American popular culture in Canada. A result of the continued domination of the airwaves is that Canada has the distinction of having “the longest-known exposure to the direct and indirect output of the U.S. media,”⁴⁶ and there has been little rally on the part of Canadian consumers for change.

The reason Canadian audiences might accept American programming can be argued two ways. As Liss Jeffrey writes of the American cultural dilemma:

Others have argued that there is no problem, reasoning that English Canada's acceptance of American productions is due to a deep similarity between English Canadian and American values and cultural preferences ... Arguably, this anomaly could just as easily be explained as the result of sixty years of cross-border and domestic broadcasting of

popular U.S. shows, particularly to children, a process that began with radio but accelerated with the advent of television in the 1950s.⁴⁷

Jeffrey tries to discredit the possibility that Canadians and Americans share many of the same values and places the blame on American radio and television for conditioning the Canadian audience. Once again, this is a theory that does a disservice to Canadian audiences, positioning them as a victim of Americana. Unfortunately, what is never outlined is that beyond film and television, Canadians do share many features with the United States. Canada shares a language, a landscape, educational systems, freedoms of race and religion, department stores, automobiles, and an array of other cultural commodities. Canadians drink Coca-Cola, eat McDonald's hamburgers, and drive Ford automobiles, just as Americans play hockey and listen to Celine Dion albums. Does this undermine the stability of Canadian and American nationalist identities? Hardly. As Richard Collins points out, it is possible that "consumption of exogenous culture, of foreign television, [can] be comfortably reconciled with refusal of the political goals and national identity belonging to the exogenous culture."⁴⁸ For as many similarities Canadians see when watching American cultural products, these same products also work to highlight national differences. Canadians have a Prime Minister, not a President. Canadians speak in Celsius and kilometers, not in Fahrenheit or miles. Indeed, this constant play of familiarity and difference experienced by the Canadian viewer of American media is itself a principal object for comic treatment in many Canadian-made film comedies.

Canada's familiarity with American media culture leads to successful comedy, Beverly Rasporich argues, explaining that the "careful study of America and American

behaviours” is “beneficial to humour,”⁴⁹ because it gives Canadians the distance from American ideology necessary for seeing its ironies, exaggerations, and faults. Rasporich continues:

As cultural outsiders, the Canadians have the advantage. As Martin Short is reputed to have suggested to Mike Myers, “When Americans watch TV, they’re watching TV, but when Canadians watch TV, they’re watching American TV. That distinction,” Myers says, “makes you notice things.”⁵⁰

This distinction between reception of American culture and how Canadian audiences interact with it, is important for a full understanding of the Canadian cinematic experience. As Rasporich and Geoff Pevere have argued, comedy is one of the principle means of interaction. What makes Canadian comedy successful is how it “incorporates [American culture] and meshes them with its own cultural experience” and then “sends the cultural signal back”⁵¹ with its own specificity. Geoff Pevere puts it plainly in “Ghostbusting! 100 Years of Canadian Cinema”:

This is not just a coincidence of nationally grown comedic talent we’re talking here, but a shift in comedic tone and approach in a direction one is pretty well compelled to call dC [distinctly Canadian.] It’s rooted in sketch comedy, and usually in the parodic imitation of forms of American pop culture...It is steeped in ironic detachment and over-mediated experience, the product of spending way too many thousands of hours at the unidirectional receiving end of American popular culture.⁵²

What we find when we examine *Meatballs* and *Porky's* are Canadian films articulating their familiarity with and comfort within a Hollywood film culture; so much so that Canadians are able to produce not only successful comedies, but ones that have influenced subsequent Hollywood productions. This unique situation has been described as giving Canadians “dual citizenship, passing easily as a North American, but remaining a Canadian.”⁵³ In this regard it is possible for a film such as *Porky's* to be set in the United States, while still remaining whole-heartedly Canadian. It is characteristic of a

Canadian film to be able to successfully navigate popular Hollywood film. What *Meatballs* and *Porky's* emphasize is not that Canadian filmmakers and producers *want* to make films critics label as American, but that they *can* produce films which are successful with audiences both domestically and abroad. It is a Canadian trait to be able to blend into American surroundings, as proposed in an article which appeared in Britain's *The Sunday Telegraph*:

It is a general rule...that actors and filmmakers arriving in Hollywood keep their nationality—unless, that is, they are Canadian. Thus Mary Pickford, Walter Huston, Donald Sutherland, Michael J. Fox, William Shatner, Norman Jewison, David Cronenberg and Dan Ackroyd have in the popular perception become American, and Christopher Plummer, British.⁵⁴

Familiarity with and the ability to camouflage themselves in the quasi-foreign culture of the U.S., can be seen as a Canadian quality. As *Variety* wrote of *Meatballs*: “‘*Meatballs*’...should also demonstrate that a Canadian-financed and produced pic featuring a largely Canadian cast, can match its American counterparts, and probably outperform them as well.”⁵⁵

Approaching these films from the perspective of film-comedy history, William Paul credits *Porky's* as one of the “primary progenitors”⁵⁶ of Animal Comedy. Paul’s assessment of *Porky's*, and also of *Meatballs*, suggest that Canadian familiarity and comfort with Hollywood style filmmaking, along with their distanced comedic sensibility, has resulted in a Canadian production that has influenced other Hollywood films and, as a result, helped propel the development of an important new genre of comedy.⁵⁷ Having accepted that Canada shares cultural similarities to the United States while remaining secure in the notion that this fact does not rob Canada of its own cultural

identity, we can be proud of films such as *Meatballs* and *Porky's* as Canadian successes, and as valuable resources for what they can teach us about Canadian filmmaking.

In what remains of this chapter, I will explore the relevance of *Meatballs* and *Porky's* in relation to Canadian film scholarship. Though these films stand as a testament to Canadian familiarity with Hollywood filmmaking, they also exhibit a key difference from comparable Hollywood productions. Within the context of the Animal Comedy conventions outlined by Paul, *Porky's* and *Meatballs* appear to lack the depth of comic aggression familiar to their Hollywood counterparts. *Porky's* and *Meatballs*, one might say, are kinder, gentler Animal Comedies. By suggesting that the Canadian Animal Comedies are less aggressive than their Hollywood counterparts is not to say that *Meatballs* and *Porky's* are better films, just that they differ in their content, in ways that point to the conditions of their making. Above all, it should be remembered that *Meatballs* and *Porky's* not only share a great deal with other Animal Comedies, but have been influential in Hollywood. To deny the low-brow sensibility of these films would be to do them a disservice.

As Animal as Possible Under the Circumstances

*For the glory of the country.
For the glory of the human race
For the glory of this glorious summer day.
For the U-S-A!
...Or perhaps even for your own bad self.*

~Tripper Harrison sings in *Meatballs*.

Rooted in the Old Comedy tradition of Aristophanes, due to “their abundance of obscene sexual and scatological jokes,”⁵⁸ Animal Comedies are characterized by Paul as

uninhibited, aggressive, episodic, comedies focused on sex—as opposed to romance—slapstick and most any other type of humour derived from the lower body. These films are informed by a “gross-out” aesthetic found also in contemporary horror films, which is designed to push the limits of vulgarity and taste through “graphic explicitness.”⁵⁹ First evident in films such as *M*A*S*H* and *American Graffiti* (1973), Animal Comedies came to be something of a full-blown film genre in 1978, with the success of John Landis’ *Animal House*. The use of the word “animal” in Animal comedy is based, according to Paul, on the fact that “[a]nimals are never very far from these films”⁶⁰ either metaphorically, through the bestial behaviour of the characters, or literally through the presence of actual animals.

Not surprisingly, these modern post-studio-era comedies have been stigmatized in film criticism and scholarship. As Paul notes, films like *Animal House* (1978), *Porky's*, *Meatballs*, *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) and the *Police Academy* (1984) series are taken by critics to represent “the most disreputable” of an already “disreputable art.”⁶¹ They are films that “critics constantly griped about having to sit through,” and were considered “as prime evidence of the vulgarity of mass taste.”⁶² Despite their popularity and the vast amount of money these films have made, critics did not consider them as art, only as “mere entertainment”⁶³ for the low-brow audience. As one might expect, the criticisms leveled at animal comedies echo the sentiments of Canadian critics toward the films of the tax-shelter period.

In fact, Paul positions *Porky's* as one of the “primary progenitors”⁶⁴ of Animal Comedy. This is understandable given how closely *Porky's*, as well as *Meatballs* fit into

the semantic and syntactic outline of Animal Comedy as Paul sees it. They are episodic in structure; they focus on the exploits of a group of people aligned with an institution; they present a desire for liberation coupled with a resentment of authority; and they imply an “us-versus-them mentality,” which culminates in the group of protagonists winning their respective competitions. The film analysis that follows is not designed to dispute the position of these Canadian comedies within the sub-genre of Animal Comedy. What is of interest, however, is the low level of aggressiveness which informs how *Meatballs* and *Porky's*, compared to the Hollywood-produced Animal Comedies, employ the genre's gross-out aesthetic rather differently. Unlike other Animal Comedies, *Meatballs* and *Porky's* are socially and sexually egalitarian, and imply a moral message atypical of the genre.

The term “aggressivity” is used here to refer to the degree to which Animal Comedies, via their gross-out aesthetic, embrace what many film viewers are inclined to regard as bad taste. In both contemporary comedy and horror, aggression is the term that often serves to indicate how the “films [assault] us with images of outrageously violent or sexual behavior, or violently sexual, or sexually violent.”⁶⁵ The desire for explicitness and uninhibitedness in Animal Comedy is sufficiently strong and fierce to threaten many viewers' sensibilities. As Paul notes, gross-out “transforms revulsion into a sought-after goal,”⁶⁶ and often pushes the limits of acceptability with graphic explicitness. In this regard, the gross-out aesthetics of Animal Comedy challenge notions of beauty and acceptability, and forces the viewer to acknowledge that they must “find something attractive in the repellent,”⁶⁷ otherwise they would certainly not participate or enjoy the

comedy. In Animal Comedy, aggression connotes not only the relation between film and viewer but also the relationship between groups of characters, which typically becomes manifest through forbidden imagery or vulgar behaviour.

It is at the level of these two forms of aggression—i.e. between film and viewer and between groups of characters—that the Canadian Animal Comedies appear distinctive. *Meatballs* and *Porky's* are not aggressive films, in the manner, say, of *Animal House* and the first place that we notice this lack of aggression is in the typology of the characters. According to Paul, a defining trait of Animal Comedy is that the group of protagonists are often “defined in the mode of the World War II combat film by a variety of types,” which results in “an underlying, and occasionally explicit, concern with defining a pluralistic society as a desired goal.”⁶⁸ Often, the character “types” motivate the aggression in the form of prejudices, with threats related to social, ethnic and gender difference driving violent behaviour. This attribute is most overtly explored in *Revenge of the Nerds*, in which the central story revolves around the beautiful athletes—both the “jocks” and the cheerleaders—pushing around and discriminating against the “Nerds” (an all-encompassing term for those who are not only intelligent, but also black, gay, foreign, overweight, physically weak, or simply not beautiful enough). Unprovoked, this homogenized group of athletes aggresses against the Nerds by taking over their residence, spoiling their party and vandalizing their home, while the Nerds desire only acceptance and peace.

In *Nerds*, the aggression is rooted in the division between the character types, as the beautiful people are not willing or able to get along with anyone who does not look

like them. This is also the case in *Animal House*, as the Delta fraternity becomes a catch all for people who are unacceptable by other fraternity standards. What is unacceptable is made very clear in the scene where Larry Kroger (Thomas Hulce) and Kent Dorfman (Stephen Furst) struggle to gain entrance to the Omega House pledge party. As the pledge leader, Doug Neidermeyer (Mark Metcalf), reluctantly lets “a wimp and a blimp” into the fraternity house, he is quick to lead them to a corner of the room filled with other unacceptable pledges, including a man wearing a turban, a scrawny intellectual and a blind man in a wheelchair. Any physical imperfection—which includes images of ethnicity—are grounds for expulsion from the homogenous group of men at Omega House.

In *Meatballs* and *Porky's* however, aggression amongst the types of characters is close to nil. Paul suggests that a consequence of the sort of character types featured in Animal Comedy “is an underlying, and occasionally explicit, concern with defining a pluralist society as a desired goal, although the pluralism does not encompass figures of authority.”⁶⁹ This is exemplified in both *Animal House* and *Revenge of the Nerds*, as the heterogeneous characters of the Delta and Lambda Lambda Lambda fraternities battle against the homogeneity of other fraternities. In this regard, the films center on the formation, solidification and eventual supremacy of the pluralist society. In *Meatballs* and *Porky's*, however, pluralist societies are already in place, and there is little discrimination between character types. In *Meatballs*, there is no tension among the group of counselors-in-training, as the handsome and athletic Crockett (Russ Banham) and Hardware (Matt Craven) work in unison with the geeky Spaz (Jack Blum) and over-

weight Larry Finkelstein (Keith Knight). In *Porky's*, the muscular and intelligent Meat (Tony Ganios) is a friend of the smaller, less athletic Pee-Wee (Dan Monahan). Physical and intellectual differences are not a cause for antagonism and hostility, except, as Paul has stated, with regard to figures of authority who, like Miss Balbricker (Nancy Parsons), are characterized by their overweight and unsightly appearance. And while it might be argued that there is a similar equality among the Nerds in *Revenge of the Nerds*, the Nerds are still positioned in opposition to their more physically attractive peers. In *Meatballs* and *Porky's* differences in physicality and intellectuality are not a cause for intolerance. While in *Porky's* there is a sub-plot concerning anti-Semitic prejudices, as Timmy Cavanaugh (Cyril O'Reilly) is resistant to having Brian (Scott Colomby) on his basketball team, the issue is minor and is resolved early enough so that Timmy and Brian can work together for the benefit of the group.

Another, more obvious social difference, which is often a source of aggression in Animal Comedies, is between the sexes. As Paul notes, a principle characteristic of Animal Comedy is that the characters are "so single-mindedly concerned with sex."⁷⁰ But sexual desires are not equal among the sexes. As Paul argues,

...sexual experience should be read in these films as *male* sexual experience. Although women are certainly the object of masculine pursuit and are often sufficiently liberated to be available to male desire, female desire is at best a nebulous business....Because woman must necessarily be subordinate to men when it comes to sex, their own sexual desire is at best secondary in Animal Comedy.⁷¹

In their desire to liberate their libidos, the male protagonists of Animal Comedy pursue sex with a vigor that often subjects their female participants to both physical threats and humiliation. In many respects, the women are positioned as the victims of male sexual

aggression. In *M*A*S*H*, 'Hot Lips' O'Houlihan (Sally Kellerman) loses the walls to her shower in a camp prank to see her nude. In *Animal House*, the women of the sorority are unaware that Bluto (John Belushi) is spying on them as they undress. Moreover, Delta fraternity leader Otter (Tim Matheson) takes advantage of the death of an Emily Dickinson College student to trick other female students into going on dates. Once out, Otter and gang abandon the women in an all-black club when they suspect that the other patrons may turn violent. As there is no romance in Animal Comedy, there is no need there for chivalry either. In *Revenge of the Nerds*, not only do the Tri-Lambs set up a spy camera to watch the women of Pi-Delta-Pi shower, but they sell pictures of the naked sorority girls around campus. Even more disturbing is the scene where Louis (Robert Carradine), passing himself off as Stan Gable (Ted McGinley), engages in sex with Stan's girlfriend Betty (Julia Montgomery). In these instances, women participate in sex without knowledge or consent. Sex is something that is *taken* from women, not something they actively participate in or enjoy.

Meatballs and *Porky's*, however, offer greater gender equality when it comes to sex and desire. While the male protagonists are still in pursuit of sex, so too are the females. *Meatballs* features decidedly little overt sexuality, and when it comes to the formation of the couple it is often the female characters who pursue the men. Candace (Sarah Torgov) kidnaps Crockett in a speedboat to tell him he is "cute." Jackie (Margot Pinvidic) makes her feelings known to Spaz through her gentle encouragement during their inter-camp Olympics. The most aggressive sexual violation in *Meatballs* is directed

toward a man, as Finkelstein has his pants hoisted up a flag pole after he is caught eavesdropping on the girls.

Porky's offers an even more interesting example of gender equality. Paul asserts that voyeurism is a common element in Animal Comedy, whose intention, evident in the scenes mentioned from *Animal House* and *Nerds*, is to achieve the “visual possession of women.”⁷² But while, voyeurism in film often serves as an instrument of male dominance over women, in the famous voyeuristic shower scene from *Porky's*, no such dominance is achieved. First, the boys secretly watch the girls as they shower after gym class. Once the girls realize they have visitors, they do not run away in humiliation, but once covered up begin to provoke their peeping Toms. In response, Tommy Turner (Wyatt Knight) puts his penis through the hole in the wall, giving the girls something to look at as well. As Paul notes, *Porky's* “is one of the few gross-out films that strives for something like sexual equality between men and women”⁷³ by allowing both genders participate equally in sex. In this instance,

The shower scene...dramatizes a sweetly childlike “you show me yours and I'll show you mine” exchange, in which the girls take as much delight in inspecting the boys as vice versa.⁷⁴

This voyeurism does not possess the aggressivity of the Hollywood Animal Comedies, as the boys are not out to harm or humiliate the girls. If the boys attempt to possess the image of the girls, then at least they are willing to be possessed in return.

The gender equality in *Porky's* allows women to actively seek out and take pleasure in sex. Miss Honeywell (Kim Cattrall) enjoys her sexuality so much that it causes her to howl like a dog. At the end of the film, schoolgirl Wendy (Kaki Hunter)

does not need to be tricked into having sex with Pee Wee. She does so of her own choosing.⁷⁵ As well, when sexuality does turn violent, the boys are often the victims. The most aggressive instance being when Miss Balbricker takes a hold of Tommy Turner's penis and attempts to pull him through the shower hole. The women in *Porky's* are not simply the victims of men but actively participate in their pranks. Prostitute Cherry Forever (Susan Clark) takes just as much pleasure in ogling and then scaring the naked boys—by pretending that her husband is a murderous black man who unexpectedly returns home—as do Tommy and Billy (Mark Herrier) who engineered the prank.

The egalitarian nature of these Canadian Animal Comedies may be a result of the ages of the protagonists: *Meatballs* and *Porky's* are centered around the lives of adolescents and pre-teens, while the sexually and socially aggressive behaviour in films such as *Animal House*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Police Academy* and *Bachelor Party* (1984) is performed by grown, college-age, men and women. In this regard, aggression is positioned as an adult—often, an adult male—attribute.

The age of the protagonists in Hollywood Animal Comedy also offers an explanation for the absence of parental figures so common in these films. According to Paul, Animal Comedy conventions require that parents "must be either scarce or ridiculous"⁷⁶ and when present, be arranged in opposition to their children or other youth. But while parents are absent in *Meatballs* and *Porky's*, parental figures are not. A case in point is the character Tripper Harrison (Bill Murray), one of the few parental figures in Animal Comedy, who takes young Rudy Gurner (Chris Makepeace) under his wing and helps him gain social acceptance and self-esteem. Unlike the ridiculous parental figures

discussed by William Paul, Tripper offers useful guidance to Rudy and is genuinely helpful and caring toward this young man. In part, Tripper is successful as a mentor because he is *not* a parent, but an independent adult figure free of parental responsibilities. This is also the case with Ted Jarvis (Art Hindle) in *Porky's* who is the only adult to help out the students in their desire for revenge. As the brother of Mickey (Roger Wilson), Ted stands as a big brother figure rather than an authoritative parent, despite the fact that he is a police officer. In both films, the guidance offered by these adult figures to the young is depicted not as ridiculous but as meaningful and sincere. This sincerity is indicative of a final distinction between the Canadian Animal Comedies and their Hollywood counterparts: the Canadian comedies, in their use of quasi-parents such as Tripper and Art Jarvis, offer a message of morality to the audience.

Despite the routine characterization of these films as insubstantial, it is difficult to watch *Meatballs* and *Porky's* without being struck by the seriousness of their social messages. Despite the silliness of the “It just doesn't matter!” cheer that Tripper Harrison offers to the campers during their pep-rally, when it comes to the sensitive Rudy, Tripper teaches the young child to believe in himself. As well, the inter-camp Olympics between their own Camp North Star and the wealthier members of Camp Mohawk gives the film the opportunity to endorse two moral lessons: that team work is important and cheaters never win. The social messages in *Porky's* are even more serious. First, the lessons of the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. are invoked when Billy tells Mickey that he should use the term “Negro”; a second, more prominent lesson in *Porky's* is the issue of anti-Semitism expressed in the tension between Timmy and Brian. While Brian wants to be

accepted by the group, Timmy is resistant to his Jewish peer, asking: "Why do we got to invite a Jew? All we need is a communist and a spick and we'd have the whole bit." Timmy's racism, we eventually learn, is the influence of his abusive father (Wayne Mauder). Like the adult protagonists in *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Animal House*, this image of Timmy's father positions the rejection of diversity as an adult trait and not the natural predisposition of youth. Once Timmy sees how foolish his behaviour has been—after he witnesses his father assailing Brian—he understands the errors of his ways and rejects his father.

In comparing Animal Comedies to their predecessors, *M*A*S*H* and *American Graffiti*, Paul distinguishes the new breed of gross-out comedies according to the seriousness of their message:

The films that came after [*M*A*S*H* and *Graffiti*] were not at all concerned with drawing on war as a way of enriching their status. Rather, they could act as if the class war had already been won, so that films of stature no longer had to be defined by their seriousness. By the time of *Animal House* and *Porky's*, the new comedies were quite content to celebrate their own apparent but joyous triviality.⁷⁷

It is exactly this acceptance of triviality which further distinguishes *Meatballs* and *Porky's* from other Animal Comedies. The youthfulness of the protagonists and the sincerity of the moral messages are indicative of the fact that *Meatballs* and *Porky's* do not consider their message trivial. While the vulgar behaviour in *Animal House* or *Police Academy* can be seen as frivolous and petty because it is performed by adults, this same behaviour in *Meatballs* and *Porky's* seems more genuine, as it marks the transition from child to adult. In these Canadian comedies, the protagonists are evolving and learning through trial and error. The counselors-in-training at Camp North Star learn about

romance and leadership, while the boys of Angel Beach High School learn to stand up against prejudice, greed and injustice.

The trivial spirit of Hollywood Animal Comedies is revealed in the self-reflexive moments which pepper the films. In *Animal House*, as Pluto peeps through a window at a sorority woman about to take her bra off, he turns and raises his eyebrows to the audience. Through this act, Pluto not only assumes that the audience is just as excited as he is, but it also highlights the film's awareness of its own crude behaviour. We find a similar audience address in *Revenge of the Nerds*, as young Wormser (Andrew Cassese), caught between two very large women with very big breasts, takes a break from conversation to smile at the audience. These moments of audience address collapse any serious moral aspirations and acknowledge the explicitness and "aggressive uninhibitedness"⁷⁸ of their intentions. Interestingly, *Meatballs* and *Porky's* do not contain such reflexive moments. While they may offer nudity and pranks, neither of these films give up on the possibility of imparting a moral lesson. In other words, they do not view themselves as trivial.

The equality among genders and character types, the focus on children and adolescents and the emphasis on presenting a moral message in both *Meatballs* and *Porky's* result in a variety of Animal Comedy that appears kinder, gentler and ultimately lacking in the aggression characteristic of the gross-out aesthetic that they otherwise exemplify. Critical responses to *Meatballs* and *Porky's* have picked up on the tameness of these two films. *Meatballs* was considered a "funny, friendly movie; a soft touch,"⁷⁹ and "a sheep in wolf's clothing."⁸⁰ Even *Porky's*, despite its overt sexuality has been

described as “simple-minded” and “unthreatening,”⁸¹ presenting the 1950s as a decade “more enlightened and benign than the actuality.”⁸² *Meatballs* and *Porky’s* strive for an aura of innocence and harmlessness despite some of their graphic imagery and thoughtless behaviour. These two Canadian productions may titillate, but they do not terrorize or offend.

It would be problematic, though, to attribute the kinder and gentler quality of *Meatballs* and *Porky’s* to their status as Canadian films. Although Canada gave the world their peace keepers, and Canadian film scholarship has made the claim that Canada’s documentary tradition reveals “suspended judgment” as being “something very Canadian,”⁸³ it would be wishful thinking to assume that the relative serenity of Canadian Animal Comedies reflects an inherently “Canadian” ethos of morality and equality. After all, Ivan Reitman, the director of *Meatballs*, was also the self-proclaimed “principle [sic] motivator, and creative force”⁸⁴ behind *Animal House*, which complicates any clear division between Hollywood and Canadian examples of the genre. Comments made by Rietman suggest, although far from conclusive, that the genteel nature of *Meatballs* is due to the criticism both Reitman and the CFDC received after the release of his second feature film as producer, the notorious *Shivers*. Reitman recalls of Robert Fulford’s article,

It was not just that he hated the movie, he attacked David and I and the [CFDC]...for making a film that he felt wasn’t Canadian. And he wasn’t referring to the nationality of the creative team, the crew, the cast. He argued that the film’s very subject matter, tone, genre was “Un-Canadian.” I remember trying to figure that one out.⁸⁵

Shivers director David Cronenberg has claimed that the backlash from Fulford’s article “took two years off [his] working life,”⁸⁶ and Michael Spencer, executive director of the

CFDC at the time, asserts that it forced the CFDC to be more cautious in their choice of projects to support. Spencer claimed that the CFDC did not invest in *Porky's* because it "no longer invested in films that raised the public's eyebrows."⁸⁷ No doubt, the pressure not to offend the public was influential in civilizing *Meatballs*.

The egalitarian nature of *Porky's* is more difficult to posit. Director and screenwriter Bob Clark has called his film a "farce" which he defines as an "expanded reality" and claims:

You can have farce which is two to one, very close to reality, which is what 'Porky's' is, or you can have farce like 'Animal House,' which is five or six levels removed from reality. [B]ut, nonetheless, if you traced 'Animal House' way back you'd find a root of truth somewhere.⁸⁸

The reality of *Porky's* is rooted in Clark's own teenage experience, along with a few anecdotes collected from other men about their own awkward teenage sexuality. In this regard, it is possible to suggest that the goal of *Porky's* was to present a teenage comedy with a closer link to real life experience. It is for that reason Clark decided to film *Porky's* on location in Florida, in order to preserve the "integrity"⁸⁹ of the story. The idea of integrity is significant when discussing *Porky's* as it reaffirms the suggestion that *Porky's* resists the triviality that William Paul associates with Animal Comedy. *Porky's* is a low-brow "farce," as Clark would suggest, but not so far removed from important and relevant issues of adolescents.

Porky's and *Meatballs* are films that serve as clear examples of how Canadian productions can successfully appropriate Hollywood film culture through their own interpretation of generic conventions. While demonized by critics for their roots in the tax-shelter, *Porky's* and *Meatballs* have had a lasting influence in Canadian culture. In

turn, as Paul makes clear, these Canadian interpretations of generic comedies have returned to Hollywood, informing not only future Hollywood productions, but international popular culture as well. The international and domestic success of *Meatballs* and *Porky's* merits further study by English-Canadian film scholars, as well as pride of place in the Canadian film canon. Precisely because of their generic quality and low-brow aesthetic, *Porky's* and *Meatballs* have something to teach about Canadian film in general. The following chapter extends the investigation by exploring what English-Canadian film comedy is capable of when it assumes added aggression. I now turn to an examination of *The Adventures of Bob and Doug McKenzie: Strange Brew* as a satirical response to the project of nation-building and the cultural nationalist agenda that denies the richness and complexity of the Canadian media experience.

¹ “Brian Does Hollywood.” *Family Guy*. Episode # 2ACX20. Air Date 7/18/01. Dir. Gavin Dell. With Seth MacFarlane. 20th Century Fox Television. 2001

² Madger, Ted. *Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993. p. 197

³ Paul, William. *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror & Comedy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. p. 4

⁴ Sears, Val. “He's the starmaker directing Canada's bonanza in films.” *The Toronto Star*. September 30, 1979

⁵ Film scholars are also missing out on the opportunity to explore the body of work of filmmakers Ivan Reitman and Bob Clark. Hardly isolated incidents, both Reitman (a writer on *Animal House* (1978) and director of *Stripes* (1981) and *Ghostbusters* (1984)) and Clark (director of *Black Christmas* (1974) and *A Christmas Story* (1983)) have experienced multiple successes and continue to direct and produce feature films. Canadian film scholarship is in desperate need of further exploration of these two filmmakers.

⁶ Imeson, Jo. “Porky's.” *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Vol. XLIX nr. 581. June 1982. p. 111

⁷ Magder, p. 86

⁸ Ibid., p. 5

⁹ Fulford, Robert (as Marshall Delaney). “You should know how bad this film is. After all, you paid for it.” *Saturday Night*. September, 1975. p. 83

¹⁰ Spencer, Michael. *Hollywood North: Creating the Canadian Motion Picture Industry*. With Suzan Ayscough. Montreal: Cantos International Publishing, Inc. 2003 p. 134

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- ¹¹ Fulford, P. 83
- ¹² Magder, p. 160
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 168
- ¹⁴ see-Harkness, John. "Notes on a tax-sheltered cinema." *Cinema Canada*. Nr. 87. August, 1982.
- ¹⁵ Pendakur, Manjunath. *Canadian Dreams & American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry*. Toronto: Garamond Press, 1990. p. 179
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 211
- ¹⁷ Madger, p. 169
- ¹⁸ Pendakur, p. 185
- ¹⁹ Magder, p. 192
- ²⁰ Scott, Jay. "The Great White Burnout." *Take Two: Tribute to Film in Canada*. Ed. Seth Feldman. Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1984. p. 30
- ²¹ Urquhart, Peter. "You should know something—anything—about this movie. You paid for it." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue D'Études Cinématographiques*. Vol. 12, nr. 2. Fall 2003. p. 68
- ²² See Pendakur, p. 180
- ²³ Wise, Richard M., C.A. "Shelter in a Changing Climate" *Cinema Canada*. Nr. 68. September, 1980. p.31
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 32
- ²⁵ Harkness, p. 24
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 25
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 26
- ²⁸ Scott, p. 31
- ²⁹ Pendakur, p. 193
- ³⁰ Pevere, Geoff & Greig Dymond. *Mondo Canuck: A Canadian Pop Culture Odyssey*. Scarborough: Prentice Hall Canada Inc., 1996. p. 214
- ³¹ Handling, Piers. "A Canadian Cronenberg." *Take Two: Tribute to Film in Canada*. Ed. Seth Feldman. Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1984. p. 81
- ³² *Take One's* 1998 list of Canada's Top 20 Canadian Films includes three Cronenberg films including *Videodrome* (1983), *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *Crash* (1996).
- ³³ Urquhart, p. 66
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 67
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 66
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 71
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 66
- ³⁸ Ibid., p 72
- ³⁹ Magder, p. 9
- ⁴⁰ Harkness, p. 26
- ⁴¹ Spencer, p. 160
- ⁴² Harkness, p. 25
- ⁴³ Reitman, Ivan. "From the desk of ...Ivan." *Hollywood North*. Vol. 1, nr. 3. Fall 2003. p. 5
- ⁴⁴ Raboy, Marc. *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada's Broadcasting Policy*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990. p. 104
- ⁴⁵ Jeffrey, Liss. "Private Television and Cable." *The Cultural Industries in Canada: Problems, policies and prospects*. Ed. Michael Dorland. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1996. p. 207
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 212
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Collins, p. 203
- ⁴⁹ Rasporich, Beverly. "Canadian Humour in the Media: Exporting John Candy and Importing Homer Simpson." *Seeing Ourselves: Media Power and Policy in Canada*. Ed. Helen Holmes & David Taras. 2nd Edition. Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996. p.86
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 89

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- ⁵¹ Clark, Andrew. *Stand and Deliver: Inside Canadian Comedy*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited, 1997. p. 213
- ⁵² Pevere, Geoff. "Ghostbusting: 100 Years of Canadian Cinema or Why My Canada Includes *The Terminator*." *Take One*. Vol. V nr. 12, Summer 1996. p. 10
- ⁵³ Rasporich, p. 87
- ⁵⁴ Grant, Peter, S. & Chris Wood. *Blockbusters and Trade Wars: Popular culture in a globalized world*. Douglas & McIntyre: Toronto, 2004, p.142
- ⁵⁵ Variety. "Meatballs" June 27, 1979
- ⁵⁶ Paul, p. 86
- ⁵⁷ Although not considered a Canadian film by production standards, it should also be noted that William Paul's other influential Animal Comedy, *Animal House*, was written by Canadian Ivan Reitman and influenced by his student days at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario.
- ⁵⁸ Paul, p. 51
- ⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 92
- ⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 86
- ⁶¹ Ibid, p. 5
- ⁶² Ibid, p. 3
- ⁶³ Ibid., p. 4
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 86
- ⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 5
- ⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 10
- ⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 420
- ⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 111
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 111
- ⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 110
- ⁷¹ Ibid p. 101
- ⁷² Ibid, p. 103
- ⁷³ Ibid. P. 114
- ⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 116
- ⁷⁵ The character of Wendy becomes an even more important narrative participant in *Porky's II: The Next Day* (1983).
- ⁷⁶ Paul, p. 179
- ⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 93.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid, p.28
- ⁷⁹ Kirkland, Bruce. "Meatballs a tender delight." *The Toronto Star*. June 29, 1979
- ⁸⁰ Canby, Vincent. "'Our Gang' Formula" *The New York Times*. July 3, 1979
- ⁸¹ Canby, Vincent. "Pondering Real Concerns of the 1950s" *The New York Times*. April 25, 1982
- ⁸² Paul, p. 127
- ⁸³ Harcourt, Peter. "The Innocent Eye: An Aspect of the Work of the National Film Board of Canada." *Canadian Film Reader*. Eds. Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson. Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977. p.72
- ⁸⁴ Reitman, p.4
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.
- ⁸⁶ Spencer, p. 135
- ⁸⁷ Spencer, p. 160
- ⁸⁸ "That's a Movie Farce You're Laughing at, Not a Comedy, Says Director Bob Clark." *Porky's Press Kit*. April 6, 1981. p. 2
- ⁸⁹ *Porky's Press Kit*. p. 3

Chapter Two: Presented in Hoserama: Satire and Nationalism in The Adventures of Bob and Doug McKenzie: Strange Brew

Great White North is 100 percent Canadian Content.

The Federal Government is pleased to announce that it is no longer subsidized due to the tremendous commercial success enjoyed by Bob & Doug McKenzie in their National Film Board Special: "The Inuit and Back Bacon: A Canadian Profile."

Bob & Doug now have agents in L.A. and don't take calls. Recently Doug hired a bodyguard to protect him from Bob, whose alcohol abuse is now reaching classic proportions.

(Oops. Sorry eh!)

So, like, don't call them. They'll call you.

Good day. Eh?

Transcripts of the Great White North are available through the Canadian Transcript Development Corporation, funded entirely by the National Identity Crisis Centre.

Take off, eh?

~ End Credits to "Great White North" *SCTV*

One way to describe the impediments to satisfactory self-realization by the protagonist of English Canadian films is in terms of the psychological history of a younger brother. Consider the relationship between two brothers. One of them has always been dominant. He grew up faster, was a self-determining adult, making it on his own, while the other was still a juvenile.

~Robert Fothergill "Coward, Bully, or Clown..."¹

When Robert Fothergill wrote about Canadian and American identity in terms of a relationship between brothers, you can rest assured that he was not thinking about Bob and Doug McKenzie. Created out of the need to fill an extra two minutes of air time for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's airing of *SCTV*—a Canadian sketch-comedy television program—Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas created “Great White North,” a fictional Canadian discussion show hosted by two Canadian brothers: Bob and Doug. Sitting in front of an oversized map of Canada, Bob (Moranis) and Doug (Thomas), wearing parkas, toques, plaid shirts and boots, grill back bacon, drink beer and discuss the issues of great importance to Canadians, such as tire chains and how to get free beer.

They also spend a lot of time bickering. As far as Fothergill's observation about brothers go, it would seem that neither Bob nor Doug have managed to become 'a self-determining adult' and that is just what makes the duo so appealing.

The McKenzie brothers phenomenon was popular in both Canada and the United States. Beyond their regular two minute segments on *SCTV*, the comedic characters produced a top selling album titled, *Great White North* (1981), which received both a Grammy and several Juno nominations. Moreover, the two starred in their own feature film, which was written and directed by the duo's creators Thomas and Moranis, entitled: *The Adventures of Bob and Doug McKenzie: Strange Brew* (1983). This film won the Golden Reel Award for most financially successful film in Canada that year, and though it has been nearly two decades since *Strange Brew*, the McKenzie brothers have yet to fall off the popular-culture radar in Canada and the U.S. The characters have made appearances in Molson Canadian ads in Canada and have had collectible action figures sculpted of them by Canadian comic-book mogul Todd MacFarlane (creator of *Spawn*). Recently they have paid homage to themselves as a pair of moose brothers name Rutt and Tuke in Disney's *Brother Bear* (2003). Instead of "take off" and "hoser," Rutt and Tuke tell each other to "trample off you hoofer." In Canada, both the McKenzie brothers' album and the film *Strange Brew* can still be found for purchase at major retailers.

With the evident popularity of the McKenzie brothers, it is perhaps not surprising to note that within the Canadian film discourse, *Strange Brew*, despite the film's explicit Canadian content, has gone largely unexplored. Unlike *Meatballs* (1979) and *Porky's* (1982) which receive mention in Canadian film histories, *Strange Brew* receives no

mention at all. As Dave Thomas notes, “In Canada, *Strange Brew* won the Golden Reel Award as the highest-grossing movie of the year. But no one talks about that, not even Canadians.”² When Mr. Thomas laments the neglect of *Strange Brew* by “Canadians” he is referring to the Canadian media and scholarly discourses, not to the Canadian mass audience who, as mentioned previously, have not allowed the McKenzie brothers merchandise to fall out of circulation. *Strange Brew* is a fascinating film from a Canadian film studies perspective, if only for the prominence of Canadian imagery which inundates the film. Shot in Toronto and Hamilton, *Strange Brew* makes no effort to disguise the Canadian skyline, it uses Canadian money and keeps Canadian license plates on the cars. Images of the Canadian flag, Canadian beer, the “Beer Store” and Canadian businesses dominate its landscape. Yet the failure of Canadian film scholarship to study *Strange Brew* is yet another symptom of a general tendency in this scholarship to ignore the popular. Moreover, it underlines the same lack of importance placed on comedy evident in the critical reception of *Meatballs* and *Porky's*.

It is often said that while film comedy is resistant to analysis, the risks of analysis are necessary in order to further our understanding of this highly prevalent film genre. Moreover, as Geoff King adds, an analytical stance “can add to the pleasure”³ of viewing film comedy. As I intend to demonstrate here, King’s point is especially relevant to *Strange Brew* and to the McKenzie brothers’ material in general.

In the case of films such as *Porky's* and *Meatballs*, the explicit American content and generic roots were unappealing to Canadian scholars and critics, who tended to deem these films “un-Canadian.” As I have argued in the previous chapter, the abundance of

American culture within Canada—through film, radio and especially television—has made the comfort with Americana constitutive of Canadian culture. Canadian familiarity with American cultural products has created a unique cultural context in Canada for film comedy. Occupying the position of outsiders looking in, Canadians are able to see the ironies and paradoxes of American culture with unusual acuity. In so far as we accept that to be a Canadian is to have intimate knowledge of American culture, films such as *Strange Brew* offer an exemplary focus for the study of Canadian film comedy. Indeed *Strange Brew* not only offers insight into Canadian comedy's relationship with Hollywood film culture, but also Canadian comedy's relationship with Canadian filmmaking and film criticism.

In the comedic tradition, parody can be distinguished from satire for its lack of social target. In *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, Steven Neale and Frank Krutnik outline the distinction:

Satire is often confused with parody, but the two are quite different. Where parody...draws on—and highlights—aesthetic conventions, satire draws on—and highlights—social ones. Like parody, but perhaps more insistently, satire works to mock and attack.⁴

Parody emulates aesthetic conventions, while satire attacks social matters. It is with this definition of parody and satire that I shall examine *Strange Brew*. This film not only parodies Hollywood films and filmmaking, but satirizes Canadian filmmaking as well. In other words, while *Meatballs* and *Porky's* mask much of their Canadian content, *Strange Brew* makes its Canadian identity explicit. From its position as a Canadian production, *Strange Brew* attacks the Canadian institutions which seek to define its Canadian content and criticize its comedy. It uses parody and satire to ridicule the cultural nationalist

agendas which have influenced Canadian feature filmmaking and scholarship, while ignoring Canadian popular comedy.

Second City Television

SCTV targeted American television. It was not a topical show. The cast didn't chase headlines the way SNL did. It was apolitical. This was a savvy strategy. More people watched American TV than voted or read the newspaper. It was the great leveler. More importantly, television irritated and disappointed many—who watched it nonetheless.⁵

~Andrew Clark, *Stand and Deliver: Inside Canadian Comedy*

It is not surprising that one of the most significant contemporary Canadian film comedies has its roots in television, especially a Canadian show whose purpose was to parody American television. *SCTV* was a thirty minute program about a fictional low-budget television station in the small town of Melonville. The workings of television, not only the programs but the advertisements and service announcements as well, were familiar territory for the *SCTV* staff. As Dave Thomas, one of the original members, writes:

As writers we were children of television. We had been absorbing TV culture like sponges until, having reached saturation point, we were ready to squirt out ideas. Although we each had our individual interests, we had more than enough in common to be on the same wavelength. Television shows were our primary source of comic inspiration, but we set out to lampoon news programs, movies, and commercials as well. Stiff news anchors, relentless pitchmen, lame comedians, derivative sitcoms, and low-budget local programming were our targets. Up to that point, nobody in television had really lampooned talk shows, sacred cows like Sammy Davis, Jr., Bob Hope specials, or Walter Cronkite.⁶

Television, especially American television, was the commonality among the various *SCTV* writers. Having spent a lifetime in the presence of American culture, this Canadian team had the familiarity needed for successful parody. The targets included American

soap operas with their own “Days of the Week” or “The Young and the Wrestling,” and also low budget commercials like “Tex & Edna Boil’s Organ Emporium” where customers receive a free bird with every organ purchase. There was Canadian parody as well, with the limited-time-only television offer of “Gordon Lightfoot sings every song ever written.” The cast often impersonated pop culture icons from American television, as with the fictional live theatrical broadcast of “Death of a Salesman,” in which Ricardo Montalban of *Fantasy Island* and DeForest Kelly of *Star Trek* are positioned together in Arthur Miller’s play, each falling out of theatrical character and into their television personas. The formula proved successful across North America. Although initially only shown domestically and in a few syndicated markets in the U.S., *SCTV* was eventually picked up by NBC and broadcast to rave reviews on American television, even earning an Emmy Award.⁷

The advent of the two most famous characters from *SCTV*, Bob and Doug McKenzie, came about less as a desire to parody television, than as a response to the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commissions (CRTC) impositions of Canadian content regulations on Canadian broadcasters. Canadian content, loosely defined, represents “programs of ‘general interest to Canadians.’”⁸ When the CBC asked *SCTV* for two additional minutes of programming to accommodate their longer airtime, those extra minutes came with a mandate:

Says [Dave] Thomas:... “The CBC asked if the two minutes could be Canadian. We were insulted. The cast was more than half Canadian, it was shot in Canada, the crew was Canadian, and these whiners at the CBC wanted more Canadian content....We said, ‘What do you want us to do? Put up a big map of Canada? Is that Canadian enough for you? And sit there in toques and parkas and fry back bacon?’ The CBC said, ‘Yeah, that would be great.’ Our producer said, ‘If you could put a Mountie in there, that would be good.’”⁹

This request on the part of the CBC, and the general disdain the writers had for the enforcers of Canadian content regulations who did not accept *SCTV* itself as ‘Canadian’ programming, led to the formation of Bob and Doug. As Thomas states, the characters were meant to be “an insult to the CBC”¹⁰ by adding satirical Canadian content to the show. The radical, if not entirely fictional *Canadianess* that Bob and Doug exemplified on the television program evolved as a critique of an institution trying to mandate nationalism. The satirical nature of Bob and Doug is made explicit, as the credits which rolled at the end of one show state: “the Great White North is almost 100 percent Canadian Content.” As the quote which began this essay makes clear, the *Great White North* mocks Canadian institutions by creating their own “Canadian Transcript Development Corporation” (a stab at the CFDC) and the “National Identity Crisis Centre.” Even their fictional National Film Board documentary speaks volumes: “The Inuit and Back Bacon: A Canadian Profile.” In effect *Great White North*’s satire was directed at Canadian film and television institutions, both for their attempt to control Canadian production, and for their focus on the marginal as opposed to the popular. As Thomas reiterated recently to *USA Today*: “Canada has a national inferiority complex. It isn’t enough that the whole cast and crew are Canadian. You have to make specific Canadian references. No wonder they flock to American TV.”¹¹

With the prime target of the satire in *Strange Brew* being Canadian culture itself, the peculiar satirical predisposition of the McKenzie brothers makes them of great interest to the study of Canadian comedy. Yet despite the excess of *Canadiana*, *Strange Brew* often refers to the presence of American culture within Canada. Herein lies the

innovative duality of the McKenzie brothers, who simultaneously parody American culture and satirize Canadiana. The McKenzies stand both as surrogates for Canadian audiences raised on American culture, but also as critics of the Canadian cultural institutions devoted to controlling that culture. In the following pages, a close analysis of *Strange Brew* will reveal how, once again, Canadian familiarity with American culture manifests itself in Canadian comedy. But more to the point, it will reveal that beyond a simple parody of American culture, *Strange Brew* mocks Canadian cultural institutions for their cultural-nationalist tendency to embrace only official versions of what can be considered 'distinctly' Canadian. In its own low-brow way, *Strange Brew* goes beyond the familiar project of reflecting Canadian audiences' experience of and assumptions about America. More precisely, *Strange Brew* uses self-reflexive strategies, familiar to its television roots, to lend authority to its satire. If Canadian film criticism has long ignored American and popular culture in Canada, then *Strange Brew* brings that omission to light in an extraordinarily insightful manner.

Strange Brew and the Canadian Sensibility

A Canadian newcomer to Los Angeles must overcome the belief that his or her visit to California is going to end in a flurry of machine gun bullets. That is the first hurdle. For years we have been brain-washed by television reports of chronic, senseless violence. The L.A. riots did nothing to dispel the notion the Los Angeles is one step removed from hell.¹²

~Andrew Clark, *Stand and Deliver*

The plot of *Strange Brew* is similar to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. John Elsinore (Eric House), the president of Elsinore Brewery has been murdered by his brother Claude (Paul

Dooley) and the evil Brewmeister Smith (Max Von Sydow). Claude has married John's wife, and is trying to regain control of the brewery from his niece, Pam (Lynne Griffin). John communicates with his daughter from beyond the grave through an abandoned video game. The film even begins with a reflexive film-within-the-film sequence reminiscent of *Hamlet*'s play-within-a-play. *Strange Brew* begins with the failed screening of the McKenzie brothers' first feature, *Mutants of 2051 A.D.*. *Mutants* begins like an episode of *Great White North*, with the McKenzies lounging on a television stage set, discussing movies. For reasons we shall address later, the audience revolts and the boys flee the theatre, giving away their father's beer money on their way out. In order to satisfy their father, the McKenzies must find a way to acquire more beer. This is where the real plot of *Strange Brew* begins, as the boys make their way to the Elsinore brewery with a mouse in a beer bottle—a gag already made famous on their television program and album. In the interim, they inadvertently stumble upon evil Brewmeister Smith's murderous plot to take over the brewery and the world.

Despite the simplicity of the plot, *Strange Brew*, through use of parody and satire, reflects a complicated and multi-layered experience of Canadian culture and nationalism. The Canadian experience overwhelms *Strange Brew*. If the *Great White North* was designed to satirize the CBC's desire for Canadian content, then *Strange Brew* aims its satire at a broader range of Canadian institutions, especially those involved in Canadian cinema. *Strange Brew* mocks Canadian feature filmmaking and film critics, as well as the other institutions whose cultural nationalist agendas ignore the influence of American

culture and thereby alienate Canadian audiences. When it comes to Canadian cultural institutions, *Strange Brew* knows exactly where the ignorance and hypocrisies reside.

American cultural references run rampant in this film. Consider the film-within-the-film of the already mentioned opening sequence. The opening shot of the cheap eight-millimeter *The Mutants of 2051 A.D.* is the McKenzie version of a title card, an old piece of cardboard held up by Bob with the words “2051 A.D. Ten years after World War 4” written on it. As the film continues, we see a solitary Bob McKenzie, in long underwear and a hockey helmet standing on a pile of large rocks near a body of water. Bob narrates:

Bob: I was the only one left on the planet after the holocaust, eh? The earth had been, like, desestated (sic) by nuclear war. Like, Russia blew up the U.S. and the U.S. blew up Russia, eh. Lucky for me, I'd been off planet on vacation at the time of the war, eh.

Bob continues the narration, telling the audience of his search for a safe place to live with his family and of his battle against radiated mutants. Bob describes his mission as “kinda like a one-man force. Like Charlton Heston in *Omega Man*. Did you see it? It was beauty.” He then begins to do battle with the mutant—played by Doug in an equally silly costume—before the film burns in the projector and the boys must find another way to explain their movie to their audience. The McKenzies’ *The Mutants of 2051 A.D.* is reflective not of Canadian art cinema à la *Goin’ Down the Road* (1970) but of the American dystopic cinema prevalent in the 1970s. Bob, in his voice over commentary, mentions the film’s similarity to *The Omega Man* (1971)—where Charlton Heston is the last man on earth after a bio-terror attack. Like the Heston film, the plot of their movie is rooted in Cold War fears in which Russia and the U.S. end up initiating World War 4. Canada is not mentioned in the narration. Bob explores the desolate landscape, picking

up a miniature, broken Statue of Liberty in an allusion to a similar moment in another dystopian fantasy film, *Planet of the Apes* (1968). The McKenzie brothers model their film after the popular Hollywood products they are familiar with—a parody of dystopian aesthetics—implying a cultural experience that has little to do with the familiar tropes of Canadian nationalist discourse, but much to do with the popular films consumed by Canadian movie-goers.

References to American culture abound in *Strange Brew*. The voice of the boy's father is dubbed by Mel Blanc of *Looney Tunes* fame. When we first see the parents, they are positioned in front of the television—a key tool for the consumption of a foreign culture—watching a *Tom & Jerry* cartoon. Moreover, when Brewmeister Smith pits Bob and Doug against his army of hockey players from the Royal Canadian Institute for the Mentally Insane their uniforms are reminiscent of the storm troopers from *Star Wars* (1977). Doug cannot help but draw attention to the similarity. With a black mask over his face, Doug breathily says: "I am your father Luke. Give in to the dark side of the force, you knob." To which Bob adds: "he saw *Jedi* 17 times, eh?" These *Return of the Jedi* (1983) references continue throughout the scene, as Doug comments that it is the "power of the force" which he used to stop the opposing team. The power and prevalence of Hollywood film culture, specifically the phenomenon of the *Star Wars* Trilogy, is emphasized, but appropriated into a Canadian context: a hockey game.

References to Hollywood films in *Strange Brew* come in a variety of forms. As the camera follows divers sent to recover the McKenzie brothers in their van at the bottom of Lake Ontario, the musical score quotes the theme from *Jaws* (1975). Later,

when the boys appear in court, their lawyer fights off the press using martial arts. They walk past the beaten-down bodies of the paparazzi and Doug jokes: "Chuck Norris for the defense, eh?" At the end of the film, their dog Hosehead flies across Ontario to Oktoberfest, as a Superman-like cape appears around his neck. The positioning of the Elsinore brewery atop a gloomy and remote hill, conveniently next to an insane asylum is reminiscent of a B-horror film. We might even argue that having the McKenzie brothers drive around in a van, solving mysteries in haunted breweries is comparable to an episode of *Scooby-Doo*. Even the McKenzie brothers' album, *Great White North*, is influenced by American culture, with a track titled "The Beerhunter," a parody of *The Deer Hunter* (1978), where the boys play a game similar to Russian roulette, as they hunt for a shaken beer. As these examples suggest, both the McKenzie brothers—and their creators Thomas and Moranis—are quite self-conscious concerning the extent to which they have been informed by Hollywood culture. This does not mean, however, that *Strange Brew* lacks *Canadiana*.

Besides the fact that a familiarity with American culture is a Canadian trait, *Strange Brew* contains a myriad of Canadian references, many of which satirize and criticize Canadian institutions. Indeed such references are plentiful enough to meet any Canadian content regulations. The mise-en-scène alone is full of *Canadiana*, as Bob dons a Maple Leaf on his toque, and Canadian flags adorn the interior of the McKenzie's van. There are images of the Toronto skyline, Toronto police officers, police cars and Toronto streetcars. There are Canadian products like Country Style Doughnuts and Molson Canadian beer. When the McKenzie's head out to buy their father beer, the images of the

street is telling of a Canadian experience, with Canadian companies like Petro Canada and The Beer Store positioned next to American chain stores of Kentucky Fried Chicken and 7-Eleven.

The Canadian culture present in *Strange Brew* is often used to mock the institutionalization of nationalism by Canadian film culture. Once again, the presence of the film-within-the-film sequence that begins *Strange Brew* offers the most insight. That the McKenzie's would choose to make a Hollywood science-fiction feature is reminiscent of the type of Canadian productions made during the tax shelter boom. Not only is *The Mutants of 2051 A.D.* a generic, Hollywood film which Canadian discourse would consider 'un-Canadian,' but it is a cheaply made version as well. Here, *Strange Brew* is taking a position on the state of Canadian filmmaking through satire. In attempting to make a film, the McKenzies make the kind of film *they* enjoy, not the kind of film promoted by the Canadian filmmaking institutions, as we imagine the fictional "The Inuit and Back Bacon: A Canadian Profile" might have been. It is obvious that the McKenzie brothers do not have the budget required for the type of film they want to produce. Instead of having proper titles, the boys must write on an old piece of cardboard. Their props consist of a measuring tape as a communication device and a plastic Nerf gun. Bob is costumed in long underwear with a jock strap worn outside and a pair of rubber boots, while Doug's 'mutant' wears panty hose stuffed with tennis balls on his head to signify his mutant status. Without a doubt, these are items found in their own house. To disguise the McKenzies' van as a space ship, the boys have glued egg cartons and rubber garbage cans to the exterior. The cheapness of the production is meant to be

explicit. In a shot of the van flying through the air, the strings are visible and the sound of a crank can be heard tugging the model space ship along.

The significance of *The Mutants of 2051 A.D.* is twofold. The international audience can find humour in the idiocy of Bob and Doug McKenzie, and in the excessively low-budget B-film they produce. As Dave Thomas has noted, “Americans love dumb characters.”¹³ For the Canadian audience, this sequence is even more significant, as it reflects the kind of Canadian filmmaking they have become familiar with. If one problem of Canadian filmmaking is the “lack of audience appeal,”¹⁴ then *The Mutants of 2051 A.D.* fits that role by being so cheaply made as to repulse the audience. Beyond its poor production value, the 8 millimeter film breaks just as it begins and the McKenzies are forced to finish their film by narrating to the audience the rest of the story. Doug tries to entertain the audience by teaching them how to get free beer using a mouse at which time they become angry at the repetitiveness of the film-within-the-film, shouting that it is a “rip-off” because Bob and Doug are simply repeating material from their album and television show. Inevitably, the audience of *The Mutants of 2051 A.D.* revolts and demands their money back so they can go and see “a real film.” As the audience leaves the theatre, Bob and Doug are scolded by two members, one older woman stating: “I hope you’re proud of yourselves.” This Canadian film, *The Mutants of 2051 A.D.* is not appreciated by the audience as a “real” film. The criticism lies not in the genre of film, but in the expectation that an audience should sit through and enjoy such a poorly made, repetitive and low-budget production. What is important to understand is

that the satire points not to a disdain for Hollywood culture, but a disdain for Canadian productions which do not equal and do not satisfy audience demands.

Strange Brew even goes as far as to deride the venerable Canadian institution of hockey. Hockey is satirized as a catalyst for violent behaviour when evil Brewmeister Smith feeds a mind-control drug to the asylum inmates that prompt the players to fight when they play hockey. When Bob and Doug witness these fights they break into a parodic announcing of the game:

Bob: Delvecchio's hurt Gretzky. They're in the dressing room now to find out what's been done.

Doug: Pulford and Holman have been fighting terribly, of course, Frank Mahavolich is one of the strongest guys in the league, he made out okay, but what a fight.

Bob: Oh now someone's thrown an octopus on the ice.

As the boys cheer on the players, it becomes obvious that what they enjoy most about the hockey is the violence. Fighting is the most enjoyable element of hockey, and the satire can be found in the redundancy of having to drug players in order to incite the aggressive and violent behaviour native to the sport.

Strange Brew also satirizes Canadians and the assumptions they make about the United States. As Bob and Doug reach Elsinore Brewery's cafeteria, Doug immediately rushes to an old video game unit entitled: "Galactic Border Patrol". On the side of the arcade game is an image of two spaceships emblazoned with an American and Canadian flag respectively, and two armoured Astronauts doing battle on the U.S./Canadian border—in space. This game ridicules the focus of cultural imperialists on the presence and threat of U.S. culture in Canada, while highlighting the heightened awareness Canada has of its neighbour to the south.

Canadian inferences about the United States are further satirized in “*The Animated Adventures of Bob and Doug McKenzie*,” a short-lived animated television show based on the two brothers. In his instance, Bob and Doug live in fictional “Borderton” (like most Canadians who live in a border town) which has a bridge connected to the U.S. On the American side of the bridge we see pollution, liquor stores, gun shops and triple-X clubs. As the American flag waves, we hear police sirens and gun shots. As Bob and Doug shift their attention to the Canadian side, we see a lush green landscape, birds flying overhead and hear only the sounds of nature. The McKenzie brothers play on the assumptions made about both Canada and the United States, that Canada serves as a Garden of Eden in comparison to the violence and vulgarity of the United States.

Satirizing Canadian nationalism in *Strange Brew* simply extends the criticism of institutional nationalism for which Bob and Doug were created. These characters parody Canadiana, but instead of targeting American television, as much of *SCTV* did, Bob and Doug McKenzie aimed toward their own producers. They aimed at the policy makers and critics and *Strange Brew* uses reflexive tools to add authority to their argument.

Strange Brew has a self-reflexive nature, drawing attention to its own construction, and at points, addressing the audience directly. This reflexivity in part is a result of the influence of television on the film’s production methods. Certain film comedies, such as those of the Marx Brothers, have been considered anarchic for disrupting classical narrative—as in those moments when Groucho breaks out of character to address the audience directly.¹⁵ *Strange Brew* however addresses the

audience in a manner that reflects its television roots rather than the anarchic aesthetic sometimes attributed to the Marx Brothers. In television, it is not uncommon for an audience to be directly addressed. As Steven Neale and Frank Krutnik write:

Both within and between the programmes themselves, the viewer will be regularly addressed by link people, announcers, newsreaders, chat-show hosts, compères, and presenters...each permitted, in various ways, to look into camera and speak to us.¹⁶

Suitably enough, the McKenzie brothers began as hosts of their own low-budget local television show: *Great White North*. The format of this show entailed addressing the audience directly during the hosts' discussions. *Strange Brew* alludes to this format by book-ending the film with sequences similar to the television program. But the aesthetics of television are not the only grounds for this self-reflexive manifestation. In drawing attention to conventions of filmic construction, *Strange Brew* implies an unusual self-awareness concerning its parody. Just as *Animal House* and *Revenge of the Nerds* used self-reflexivity to acknowledge sexually explicit goals, *Strange Brew* uses the same self-reflexivity to acknowledge their parodic goals. While on the surface the McKenzie boys appear stupid and unaware, these moments signal that they know exactly what they are doing and exactly what their targets are.

The reflexivity in *Strange Brew* extends beyond the television format of direct address, to encompass explicit references to film conventions. The McKenzies begin their film by stressing the difference between their film and their television show. For the film, the McKenzies have a bigger map in the background, as the brothers take the opportunity to welcome England and Hawaii to their program. While Doug is usually responsible for singing the show's theme song, this time around they have a "movie theme" played by an

orchestra. Moreover, they highlight the difference in image by comparing the television screen to the film screen. At the film's end, Bob and Doug return to their *Great White North* set as they address the topic of movie credits. They speak directly to the audience again, discussing the people "that left early, eh, when the movie was ending." Bob reassures the audience that "they got their cars out now, and you, you got to see this eh? Beauty." Bob and Doug McKenzie have always been aware of the constraints of the medium in which they are working and this awareness often becomes manifest in highly self-reflexive moments. Their record album *Great White North* opens with the track "This is our album, eh?" and ends with the track "Okay, This is the End, eh?" The album even has a "Welcome to Side Two" track, an appropriate salutation in the days before compact discs. As the album plays, the brothers address the topic of stereo sound as Bob is heard in the left speaker, "I'm in one ear" to which Doug adds from the right speaker "and I'm in the other."

Beyond the awareness of filmic conventions, *The Mutants of 2051 A.D.* sequence offers another level of reflexivity to *Strange Brew*. After the film breaks, Doug tries to entertain the theatre audience with a tip for getting free beer by stuffing a mouse in a beer bottle. As he begins, an audience member yells: "Hey, they did this on their album!" Not only did they perform that sketch on their album, but they did it on *SCTV* as well, and will use it again during the course of the film. This repetition of a comedic bit serves a dual function. First, it establishes an awareness of Bob and Doug as performers outside the confines of *Strange Brew*, and thus blurs the boundary between performer and role. Much like the general disposition in Comedian comedy to show an awareness of the "pre-

filmic cultural reputation of the comedian”¹⁷ *Strange Brew* offers an alternative ‘character’ comedy, where the characters’ awareness of their own reputations is integral to the film’s narrative. It has been suggested by Andrew Clark that the use of ‘characters’ in Canadian comedy is quite common, and as he notes regarding *Spring Thaw* (1947), the first theatrical revue to draw on Canadian politic and culture for its humour, the convention of character allowed for the expression of sentiments that otherwise could not be articulated.

Its secret, comedically, was that you, the writer or performer, did not criticize the country. You did not stand before your audience and openly attack—you created characters to do it for you. You created a comic mask that shielded you from responsibility for any inappropriate barbs or ideas...¹⁸

Clark suggests that the use of ‘characters’ in comedy, though not a Canadian invention, is prominent in Canada and rests on a cultural ethos which is not comfortable being directly critical. Clark argues that in Canada “criticism, which implies a need for change, equals conflict,” but that if “criticism is placed in the mouth of an imaginary character, it becomes more acceptable.”¹⁹ This observation certainly seems relevant for Bob and Doug McKenzie, which Dave Thomas and Rick Moranis created precisely to criticize Canadian policy, while also rendering the satire less threatening by locating its source in such seemingly unintelligent characters.

The second function of the self-referentiality of the comedy is that in presenting a film-within-the-film which is derivative of their television show, *Strange Brew* disarms critics. In presenting the audience as unsatisfied and critical, the film works to silence those who may criticize *Strange Brew* for the same reasons as the fictional audience criticizes *Mutants*, as unoriginal, low-budget and simple-minded. Though *Strange Brew*

begins like an episode of *Great White North* with a slightly bigger budget, it certainly will not unfold as such. The film's reflexive nature, rooted in part in television and film-comedy aesthetics, serves also to forestall possible criticisms of the film.

With the end of *The Mutants of 2051 A.D.* sequence, the reflexive nature of the film diminishes. Bob and Doug leave the screening of their film and no longer address the audience directly. Still, they take the opportunity to point out filmic conventions over the course of film, such the sequence where Doug is driving their van and passenger Bob turns to his brother and says:

Bob: Hey did you ever notice, uh, like in movies that they, when they're driving, they don't look at the road, like for a long time?
 Doug: (looking away from the road) No, I'd never noticed that.
 Bob: Yeah, that's cuz, uh, they're being towed eh, by like, a rig.

Bob and Doug take this moment to deconstruct the filmmaking conventions. The realism of the scene is saved however, when the van veers into oncoming traffic and ends up in the water. Moreover, after the police Inspector assumes that the McKenzies have drowned in the accident, the camera tracks back and cuts to a black screen with the intertitle: "INTERMISSION"—another filmic convention. And unlike their *Mutants* film which began the narrative, *Strange Brew* offers more impressive special effects, which the film is quick to point out with "nice effect, eh?" written on screen. The reflexivity appears at the end of the film, as the McKenzies return for the end credits to critique their own film. They take a moment to "freeze frame" for the audience, then wave good-bye.

The self-reflexive nature of *Strange Brew* connotes a keen awareness of the filmic and televisual. Both the characters of Bob and Doug, and the film itself, are conscious of their own satiric discourse, and thereby communicate to the audience the pleasure they

take in their own joyous triviality. With the earlier Canadian comedies of *Meatballs* and *Porky's*, we had comedic texts that participated in the gross-out aesthetic of Animal Comedy, but without relinquishing their sincerity of message. Unlike their Hollywood counterparts, these films appear relatively tame and unthreatening. *Strange Brew*, however situates Bob and Doug within an explicitly Canadian context, and thus opens the way for social commentary that aggressively targets Canadian cultural institutions and their attempts to construct national identity. As if mindful of the dubious Canadian content regulations that led to the creation of the McKenzie brothers, *Strange Brew* uses explicit and perhaps unflattering images of Canadians to insult critics incapable of acknowledging the tastes of the Canadian audience. *Strange Brew* answers the question: if Canadian writers, producers and comedians are not Canadian enough for content quotas, then who is? *Strange Brew* challenges the very idea of a mandated Canadian identity and its effects in the form of approved images of Canada, which are unrepresentative of actual audience experience, and low-budget productions. The reflexive stance of *Strange Brew* reveals the absurdity of the nationalist discourses that would prefer that films like *Strange Brew* not be made in the first place. Though produced by MGM, its success in Canada only highlights the degree to which audiences have enjoyed, and continue to enjoy the film's satire. As it stands, *Strange Brew* uses hyper-Canadiana to mock the Canadian 'identity-crisis' frequently invoked by cultural-nationalists. The Canadian pop-culture audience enjoys *Strange Brew*. They understand and relate to the parody and satire inherent in the portrayal of two beer-drinking, doughnut-eating, toque-wearing hosers. Canadian film scholarship might ignore this film,

but again, Canadian audiences do not. *Strange Brew* and the McKenzie brothers know exactly what it is like to be Canadian, and it is nothing to be ashamed of. Eh?

¹ Fothergill, Robert. "Coward, Bully, or Clown: The Dream-Life of a Younger Brother." *Canadian Film Reader*. Eds. Seth Feldman & Joyce Nelson. Toronto: Peter Martin Associates. 1977. p. 243

² Thomas, Dave with Robert Crane and Susan Carney. *SCTV: Behind the Scenes*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1996. p. 212

³ Ibid.

⁴ Neale, Steven and Frank Krutnik. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 1990. p. 19

⁵ Clark, Andrew. *Stand and Deliver: Inside Canadian Comedy*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited, 1997. p. 219

⁶ Thomas, p. 33

⁷ See Thomas.

⁸ Collins, Richard. *Culture, Communications & National Identity: The case of Canadian television*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990. p. 75

⁹ Clark, p. 221

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Wloszczyna, Susan. "Moose tracks lead to Bob and Doug, eh?" *USA Today*. April 27, 2004.

http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2003-10-28-moose-tracks_x.htm. p. 2

¹² Clark, p. 149

¹³ Thomas, p. 115

¹⁴ Collins, p. 214

¹⁵ See Henry Jenkins' *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville aesthetic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992

¹⁶ Neale, Steven and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 1990 p.

¹⁷ 178

¹⁷ Seidman, Steve. "Performance, Enunciation and Self-reference in Hollywood Comedian Comedy." *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader*. Ed. Frank Krutnik. New York: Routledge, 2003. p. 21

¹⁸ Clark, p. 27

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 28

**Chapter Three: Taking It in the Face: Liberating the Unruly Woman in
*Kids in the Hall: Brain Candy***

Mark McKinney: [Directly addressing the camera.] Wow! What a bad sketch. And in such poor taste too. You know, we're gonna get a lot of telephone calls and letters about this one. And why not? Every Canadian has a right to complain about that sketch because every Canadian owns a piece of that sketch! You see, your tax dollars feed into the government, which in turn mandates the CBC, which in turn provides funding both whole or in part to shows such as ours. So like a cup full of water poured into the ocean the atomic parts of your tax dollars mix with the whole and wind up providing for the budget of this show, for the budget of that sketch and for this piece I'm doing now, which we like to call—

Shot of the audience: There is a big key over the screen which reads:

Audience: SCREW YOU TAXPAYER!

~ “Two years late for a date/Screw you taxpayer!”
*The Kids in the Hall*¹

As the previous chapters have argued, the cultural-nationalist agenda of English-Canadian film scholarship has done a disservice to the study of English-Canadian film comedy. Fears of American imperialism and the low-brow aesthetic have blinded English-Canadian film scholars to what films such as *Meatballs*, *Porky's* and *Strange Brew* reveal about the complexity of Canadian national identity. Of course, English-Canadian film comedy need not be limited to the period surrounding the tax-shelter nor openly address issues of nationalism to merit study. As the following examination of the *Kids in the Hall* will suggest, English-Canadian film comedy has also contributed significantly and inventively to broader film comedy traditions.

The purpose of this chapter to explore the way in which the *Kids in the Hall* incorporate drag performance into their comedy. Drawing on how drag has been

understood in recent work by gender theorists, queer theorists and comedy scholars alike, it is my position that the Kids in the Hall use what might be called mimetic drag in order to include women into areas of comedy from which they have otherwise been excluded. By focusing on *Kids in the Hall: Brain Candy* (1996) and *The Kids in the Hall* series, we will see how this use of drag is not designed primarily to trouble homosocial or sexual stereotypes—although it may indeed do this—nor is it used aggressively against femininity, but rather to alter the boundaries of film comedy so as to open up possibilities for female performance. In this context, drag is seen as transgressing not just the bounds of gender or sexuality but also those of film and television comedy.

Named for the group of aspiring writers who would wait outside Jack Benny's office hoping to sell him a joke or two, the Kids in the Hall formed in 1985 as an improv and sketch comedy troupe. The five members, Dave Foley, Bruce McCulloch, Mark McKinney, Kevin McDonald and Scott Thompson performed every Monday night at Toronto's Rivoli Theatre to a less than packed house. It was there that they were discovered by Pam Thomas, former wife of *Strange Brew* writer and director Dave Thomas, who then alerted Canadian born producer Lorne Michaels to the Kids as a prospect for his own production company, Broadway Video. Through Michaels, the Kids in the Hall produced a comedy special for Home Box Office (HBO) and eventually signed with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) to produce a self-titled series. The original episodes of *The Kids in the Hall*² aired on the CBC in Canada, as well as HBO and eventually the Central Broadcast System (CBS) in the United States. Premiering in 1989 *The Kids in the Hall* aired for five seasons, earning several Gemini

Awards including “Best Performance” (1989, 1993), “Best Writing” (1989-90), and “Best Comedy Series” (1993-94), before ending in 1995. Before they were to disband however, the troupe decided to produce their first and only feature film *Brain Candy*.

As with *Strange Brew* and to a lesser extent *Meatballs*, *Brain Candy* is rooted in television. The television series’ that inspired these films—*SCTV*, *Saturday Night Live* and *The Kids in the Hall*—were all sketch comedies in which the success of a performer (Bill Murray), character (Bob and Doug McKenzie) or troupe itself (the Kids in the Hall) was the genesis for the feature length production. In addition, the personal and professional connections among the actors, writers and producers of these films suggests something like a spider’s web of relations—or what Geoff Pevere designates in *Mondo Camuck* as “the Canadian Sketch-Comedy Family Tree.”³ But the importance for Canadian film scholarship of the Kids in the Hall and *Brain Candy* does not lie in its similarities to the comedies which preceded it, Canadian or not. What is of important instead is a specific element of performance by the Kids in the Hall that sets them apart from comparable comedy troupes: their use of drag. Unlike *Saturday Night Live*’s “Not-Ready-for-Primetime-Players” and the Second City alumni of *SCTV*, the Kids in the Hall do not have any female members; as a consequence, the men perform the roles of women. While it is not unusual to witness cross-dressing in comedy, the Kids in the Hall’s use of drag performance transcends the usual goals of female impersonation. The Kids in the Hall use drag not only as a means of subverting gender or sexual norms, but as a means of including women within the realm of comedy without the prescriptive gender barriers that traditionally have dictated feminine behaviour throughout film

comedy history. It is my contention that the gender-bending performances of the Kids in the Hall are not designed as a joke unto themselves; nor are they primarily meant, as many gender scholars might argue, as a means of troubling gender or subverting heterosexual norms. While the troupe's drag performances might well fulfill all these aims, I will argue that when it comes to the significance of the Kids in the Hall's use of drag in the history of film comedy, the most interesting effect is how drag allows for a greater integration of women into the realm of comic action. As women, the Kids in the Hall present female characters who are given a remarkable degree of comedic freedom, in that they are allowed to be more verbally and sexually aggressive, as well as to participate fully in the physicality of comedy without having to sacrifice their feminine image. In *The Kids in the Hall* and *Brain Candy* the female characters—in a manner almost unprecedented in film-comedy history—actively participate in the aggressiveness of a joke instead of simply being the butt of it.

In the following sections I will examine specific types of drag, as well as various socio-cultural implications that gender theorists have assigned to drag performance. I will explore how these theoretical perceptions of drag are only partly sufficient for understanding the Kids' drag aesthetic. In order to specify the subversive nature of the drag performance practiced by the Kids in the Hall, it is necessary to see this performance relative to a long history of gender limitations within the field of film and television comedy. It is within the context of this history that the subversive effects of the Kids in the Hall's use of drag performance become apparent. Moreover, it is my hope via the following analysis of the comedic function of drag, to offer insight into the importance of

the Kids in the Hall not only within popular film and television, but also within Canadian comedy: the Kids present a comedic sensibility made possible by an entertainment culture definitive of the Great White North.

The Logic of the Female Man

"I know it, it's a good sketch, but, but as a, as a woman it looks like we're doing the Mess Hall Revue of the Fourteenth Highlanders. You know [adopting a parodic tone of a news reel narrator] "*After victory in Cicely they cut up a little bit and pretended they were women. Forgot to put on the breasts.*"...How did people ever figure out we were trying to play women?

~Mark McKinney of the Kids in the Hall
commenting on one of their first cross-dressing performances for television.⁴

Drag performance has a long history in popular entertainment. For centuries, due either to cultural, monarchic or papal restrictions, women in the Western World were prevented from performing in the theatre which necessitated the pervasive use in theatre of cross-dressing male performers.⁵ As restrictions began to fade during the 16th and 17th Century, and women were allowed to perform their own roles on the stage, the practice of men dressing as women began to take on new meanings, and would continue to do so through the present.⁶ As film scholars and gender theorists have shown, practices of female impersonation can reveal a great deal about contemporary sexual, social and gender performances and anxieties.

Having originated in 18th Century theatrical culture, the word "drag" initially served as a slang term for female impersonation, referring to "the drag of a gown with a train."⁷ Associated during much of the 20th Century with the homosexual underground, the image of the drag performance also entered the mainstream as a fixture of film, and

then television, comedy. From the Charlie Chaplin short *A Woman* (1915) to Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot* (1959), Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie* (1982) and Robin Williams as *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), the image of the cross-dressing male has been fodder for popular film comedy. Drag performance also made a home for itself in television comedy as well, with Flip Wilson's Geraldine Jones from *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970-1974) to Maxwell Klinger on *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983) and more recently of course, the Kids in the Hall themselves. Questions remain however, as to the motivation and effects of specific cases of contemporary drag performance, leading scholars to define drag as a highly complex means of transgressing the boundaries of heterosexuality as well as gender identity. It is my intention to draw upon recent theoretical claims concerning the socio-cultural significance of drag performance so as to clarify the singularity of the drag practiced by the Kids in the Hall. While theorists have praised drag for both articulating sexual taboos and for troubling gender identities, and have also criticized it for its alleged misogyny (particularly in the field of comedy), I argue that the Kids in the Hall's performance of drag, in important respects, escapes the frame of current theories regarding drag's cultural effects. Before we address the broader and more complex issue of gender performance in drag, it is necessary to recognize the variety of types of drag performances, whose specific methods and goals are sometimes at odds with one another.

In her groundbreaking anthropological study of drag performances in 1960s America, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, Esther Newton identifies and defines the types of drag performances visible in the both homo- and heterosexual

theatrical club communities. According to Newton, two types of drag have dominated in late 20th Century North America: glamour drag and comic drag. Glamour drag is a hyper-feminized gender performance, one that “presents women at their ‘best,’ ...at their most desirable and exciting to men”⁸ and is “intended to allure.”⁹ This is similar to what David Boxwell designates as a mimetic form of drag, which was a “strenuous, but illusionistic, effort to align the body of the female impersonator as closely as possible to the body of an erotically alluring woman.”¹⁰ This is the type of drag performance most often found in drag revues, whose performers are characterized most often by their outrageous use of makeup, beautifully coiffed yet oversized feminine wigs and a sexy evening gown. Contemporary glamour drag performances are exemplified by singer RuPaul or Mitzi Del Bra (Hugo Weaving) and Felecia Jollygoodfellow (Guy Pearce) from *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994).

Comic drag, on the other hand, is designed for laughs, as Newton writes:

There are two principle types of comic acts: slapstick comedy and stand-up. Slapstick comedy utilizes gross comic effects, usually visual. The slapstick comedian attempts to make himself *look* as ridiculous as possible. The standard props are the old “ratty” dress, the false nose, and the “fright wig.” The fright wig is the ugly wig as opposed to the beautiful wig.¹¹

In comic drag—also referred to as “tacky drag” by Newton—the ridiculousness of the feminine image is central to the comedy. In other words, laughter rooted simply in the image of a cross-dressing man motivates the drag performance. In “The Follies of War: Cross-Dressing and Popular Theatre on the British Front Lines, 1914-18,” Boxwell defines this sort of performance as mimicry drag that is designed to mock both femininity and the female impersonator. As Boxwell notes:

Mimicry was most visibly embodied in the pantomime “dame” tradition, a comedic effort to render the female form in its most hypercarnivalized manner: the grotesque, oversized, and voracious body of the raddled, “ugly” woman presented on stage out of misogynistic animus. There was no attempt to eroticize the impersonated female body in this tradition.¹²

The presence of comic drag highlights one of the salient motivations for drag performance: to provoke laughter. The image of a man dressed as a woman—and often poorly dressed at that—can itself be a motivation for drag performance if the goal of the performer is to elicit laughter. In the comic tradition, the motivation for the drag performance is to laugh at the ridiculousness of the female image along with the ineptitude of the male performer. This is the case with many of the film and television uses of comic drag performance. *Some Like it Hot*, *Tootsie*, and *Mrs. Doubtfire* are films that “derive their humor from the humiliation of the man dressed as a woman.”¹³ The audience enjoys watching male performers negotiating the boundaries of femininity as they struggle to walk in heels, assuage the advances of men, subdue their male voices, and, in the case of Euphegenia Doubtfire (Robin Williams), put out her flaming breasts with two pot lids. While these drag performances do not represent the extreme of Esther Newton’s fright wig and ratty dress aesthetic, the female impersonations do present a de-eroticized, often homely image of women, and thus can be seen as continuous with the earlier “dame” performance discussed by Boxwell.

Rebecca Bell-Metereau argues that this comedic cross-dressing “functions as an expression of hostility and anxiety”¹⁴ both against women and against the broader issue of gender transgressions. In order to “maintain the status quo” she argues, the male performer must always be “the butt of the joke, and the audience laughs at him, not with him.”¹⁵ She argues:

All films that employ role-reversal and transvestism may be interpreted by some viewers as presenting a negative image of women, for in order to accomplish imitation, the actor must focus on precisely those elements of female anatomy, dress, and makeup that seem the most superficial, the most governed by restrictions and dictates of society.¹⁶

From this standpoint, comedic drag is a double edge sword, which mocks the basic traits of femininity, while also deriding the male who performs it.¹⁷

But this use of comic drag as a means of mocking men and the performance of femininity outlined by Newton, Boxwell and Bell-Metereau is not useful when trying to understand the Kids in the Hall's use of drag. In short, the Kids in the Hall do not exploit the techniques of comic drag. For the troupe, the joke does not lie in the obviousness of a cross-dressed man. We know this to be true because in their early days as a comedy troupe, before landing their own series, the Kids in the Hall did not perform in drag. In fact they had "never done drag until [they] did the special" for HBO.¹⁸ During their Rivoli shows, if a character was female this would be signified by the use of a sweater over the shoulders or perhaps a single wig. The goal of their comedy, therefore, was not to laugh at the drag costume because they did not wear one. When the Kids in the Hall finally did begin to wear women's clothing it was not the fright wig and ratty dress associated with comedic drag. Alternatively, the Kids in the Hall present drag as a mimetic reflection of reality. In other words the Kids in the Hall performed women as women, without the hyperfemininity of glamour drag or the grotesque comedic image. As Mark McKinney's criticism of their initial drag performances would suggest, the Kids in the Hall did not intend for their female impersonations themselves to be comedic. The disheveled look of their female characters was simply due to inexperience as drag performers. As Dave Foley says proudly, "First season is when we started doing drag, but

it wasn't very good. Second season we did good drag."¹⁹ Evidently, Foley's use of the term "drag" implies the mimetic impersonation of their experience of women. Mark McKinney contextualizes their use of drag as the result of "a five man troupe who wanted to write about the social and personal relationships [they] had with women."²⁰

Another interesting distinction between the drag of the Kids and that of comedies previously described is that the comedy of the Kids in the Hall does not derive from the foibles of men struggling to be women. Simply put, while in *Some Like It Hot* the audience is fully aware that Josephine is actually Joe (Tony Curtis) and Daphne is actually Jerry (Jack Lemmon), and can "take part in the impersonator's conspiracy ...[with] satisfied laughter at the superiority of [their] position,"²¹ there is no such privilege of position in *The Kids in the Hall* or *Brain Candy*. None of the female characters are revealed as men. There are no moments of de-wigging, no highlighting of a flat chest, and none of their male voices sneak through. A notable skit from *The Kids in the Hall*, "Gavin: The Police Department" (Episode #505) involves the recurring child character Gavin (McCullough) waiting at the police department for his father to be let out on bail. Known for his pestering questions, Gavin begins to annoy the male and female police officers working at the front desk. What is interesting about this skit is that while Scott Thompson is dressed as a female police officer, the issue of gender has no impact on the skit's narrative. There are no jokes or plot devices which necessitate a drag performance. Arguably, he is dressed as a woman to add gender diversity and mimetic realism to the scene.

The drag performances of the Kids in the Hall are not in line with traditional comedic drag, nor are they suited to glamour drag. In fact, these female impersonations challenge the constructs of professional drag. Esther Newton outlines a third type of drag performance which is frowned upon by the professional community. This is what she calls “transy drag.” She writes:

Transy drag is wrong because it violates the glamour standard, which is synonymous with professionalism, that is, the right context and motivation for impersonation (performance, making legitimate money) as opposed to the wrong context and motivation (private life, private compulsion to *be* rather than to *imitate* women). In addition, transy drag violates the implicit aesthetic in the glamour standard, for transy drag makes one look like an ordinary woman, and ordinary women are not beautiful.²²

This is the type of drag performed by the Kids in the Hall. A prime example is the character of Doreen Terzinsky from *Brain Candy*. While Doreen is played by Kevin McDonald, the image presented is of a well dressed, though not hyperfeminized woman. Doreen has elegant makeup, simple red hair in curls, and wears a casually elegant blue skirt and matching blazer. This is not the disheveled drag image of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-1974) with the comedian's wig on the verge of falling off and the hair on the legs and face clearly visible. Nor is Doreen a feminine extreme, with oversized breasts, a tight fitting dress and layers of sparkling makeup. Doreen looks like an ordinary woman. This can be said of all the drag performances in *Brain Candy*, including the scientist Alice (McCullough), patient Mrs. Hurdicure (Thompson) and talk show hostess Nina Bedford (McKinney).

The Kids' approach to drag performance, which they refer to as “femming out” is to remain sensitive to their female characters. As the troupe told the *New York Times* in 1994, “[we] try hard not to take cheap shots [at their female characters], any more than

[we] would take cheap shots at male characters.”²³ This “transy” performance has proven quite successful for the Kids who, according to the same *New York Times* article, have been given “an award from a Canadian women’s group for presenting women in a positive light.”²⁴ A most glowing review comes from a fan in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*. Articulating the differences between *Saturday Night Live* and *The Kids in the Hall*, Carolyn Lengel writes:

The genuinely female actresses on “Saturday Night Live” are lucky to get the air time to play two-dimensional women characters; the show’s writers seem to think that putting male actors in drag is an idea for a comic sketch all by itself. But when the Kids are in drag, their characters act and speak (and often look) like real women—women their female fans will recognize or, perhaps, resemble. The Canadians can even spoof sexploitation flicks (as in the brilliant “Sex Girl Patrol” sketch) without laughing at women for just being women.²⁵

By refusing to laugh at the image of woman, both as hypercarnivaled and hyperfeminized, the Kids in the Hall offer drag performances which differ from the norms of professional drag. The drag performances of the Kids in the Hall are not motivated by misogynistic intent but by their perceived realism.

While both comic and glamour drag trouble notions of gender performance and identity, comic drag is defined by its purposeful lack of eroticism. It is the erotic element of glamour drag which gives way to the second claim of drag performance as a means of articulating within the mainstream the subversive and culturally taboo existence of homosexuality. This claim became particularly relevant during the World War I in the context of entertainment for the military, which in certain respects proved foundational for much subsequent Canadian comedy history.

It is not surprising to learn that there is a cross-dressing tradition in Canadian comedy. In *Stand and Deliver*, Andrew Clark begins his historical account of Canadian

comedy with a discussion of the Dumbells. Formed by Canadian Army 3rd Division Captain Merton Wesley Plunkett after the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917, the Dumbells were one of the first Canadian sketch comedy troupes. With the hopes of boosting troop morale during the war, the Dumbells organized and performed comedic revues. Most notably, and much like the Kids in the Hall almost a century later, the Dumbells performed the roles of women themselves. Far from the “Mess Hall Revue of the Fourteenth Highlanders” as joked by Mark McKinney in reference to the Kids in the Hall’s shamefully unconvincing portrayal of women in their first HBO special, the Dumbells had Ross Hamilton “who when properly costumed became a stunningly beautiful brunette with the falsetto voice to match”²⁶ and was “so fetching [as the character “Marjorie”] that soldiers frequently fell in love with him.”²⁷ For Clark, Hamilton’s cross-dressing performance for the Dumbells was a “minor psychic rebellion” against the image of manhood promoted by war and the nationalist propaganda which had “duped”²⁸ the soldiers into signing up for battle. While the issue of gender identity is paramount to theories of drag performance and will be addressed later in this chapter, what is of further interest is Clark’s positioning, or lack thereof, of the implicit sexual transgressions present in the Dumbells’ drag performances. Clark writes:

Canadian newspaper journalists would later say that the Dumbells’ drag element played on the soldiers’ sexual frustrations, but prostitution and organized brothels were common along the western front during World War I. There was plenty of sex to be had for a soldier with money to spend. The Dumbells’ drag routines were irreverent send-ups, pure and simple.²⁹

Clark’s dismissal of sexuality as relevant to the drag performance is problematic, if only to acknowledge that there is little that is “pure and simple” about gender performance and identity. Moreover, the assumption that soldiers might easily satisfy their sexual

frustration at a local brothel is reasonable only if we further assume that every Canadian soldier fighting in World War I was heterosexual and was attracted to the feminine image of “Marjorie” and not Hamilton himself.

While drag performance in World War I is often reduced to necessity, as there were few women available on the front lines, it was also an opportunity to articulate the gender and sexual tensions which underscored the homo-social construct of war. In “The Follies of War” David Boxwell argues that cross-dressing performance during World War I were a means of addressing social and sexual confusions. Drag performances by British soldiers “ritualistically desublimated and resublimated the array of inhibitive repressions structuring male bonding during the war.”³⁰ Under the guise of comedy and Mikhail Bahktin’s carnivalesque aesthetic, drag performance both encouraged and discouraged homosexual practices. Boxwell argues:

Because drag was situated in both a long-standing tradition of carnivalesque entertainments and in a more recent one of subcultural homosexual formations, male transvestic theatre performances during the Great War operated in—and incited—a complex circuit of encoding and decoding. In turn they expanded the range of desiring gazes and proliferated scopophilic pleasures. Drag could be transferred to the front lines because its subversive potential (enabling gay subcultural forms to flourish within and exploit homosocial arrangements) went hand in hand with its conservative and misogynistic ability to shore up normative arrangements of sex, gender, and sexuality in an acutely homophobic context. Because so much material originally performed by women was recontextualized from contemporary music halls, revues, and operettas on the home front, and staged in all-male theatrical locations on the front lines, the process of resisting and reciting this material affirmed the slippage and connotation upon which drag capitalized.³¹

For Boxwell, beneath the explicit justifications for drag performances as necessity or as comedy pure and simple, cross-dressing exists as a means of articulating unspoken desires and social concerns about heterosexual and homosexual practices and norms. The presence of glamour drag, such as Ross Hamilton’s “Marjorie,” explicitly troubles the

norms of sexuality. Not simply that the female performance is especially believable, but that its limited femininity, in which all the “non-essential details have been pared away,”³² leaves only the “hyperfemininity...[which exceeds] the erotic allure contained in—and expressed by—the body of a ‘mere’ woman.”³³ For Boxwell, the performance of glamour drag on the front lines allowed for the flourishing of a homosexual aesthetic within the highly conservative context of military life. The guise of “necessity” coupled with the need for entertainment as a means to boost morale, permitted social transgressions which might otherwise have been unacceptable.

For Boxwell, World War I drag performances can be linked to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, which proposes that medieval Europeans were permitted “liberation of laughter and body”³⁴ only during times of festival and celebration. During these carnival moments, “strictly limited by the dates of the feasts...the world was permitted to emerge from the official routine but exclusively under the camouflage of laughter. Barriers were raised, provided there was nothing but laughter.”³⁵ Front line revues were exactly such carnival moments. So, while at the turn of the twentieth century homosexuality remained taboo, the cross-dressing revues offered a means for articulating homosexual desires. It was a process through which homosexuality could transgress and subvert the boundaries of mainstream heterosexuality under the guise of entertainment.

The positioning of glamour drag as a homosexual practice is not unusual, for drag performances have long been associated with homosexuality. Laurence Senelick states that the “association of cross-dressing and sexual relations between men had become proverbial by the mid-eighteenth century”³⁶ and this association continued to dominate

studies of drag performance into the twentieth century. In *Mother Camp*, Esther Newton refers to professional drag queens as “professional homosexuals; [who] represent the stigma of the gay world.”³⁷ Yet it is exactly the idea of entertainment and performance which makes homosexually-associated cross-dressing acceptable in the mainstream. While both comic and glamour drag trouble notions of gender performance and identity, the lack of eroticism in comic drag excludes it from Boxwell’s claims of drag performance as a means of transgressing heterosexual boundaries.

While *The Kids in the Hall* and *Brain Candy* certainly offer moments of eroticized drag performance which intrinsically subverts heterosexual norms and adds a homosexual subtext to prime time television, this is not the principal aim of their drag. Put another way, *Brain Candy* and *The Kids in the Hall* present enough overt homosexual subject matter to render any subversive attempts trivial in comparison. In *Brain Candy* homosexuality is explicit. The presence of Kevin McDonald as Doreen Terzinsky does little to transgress heterosexual boundaries when compared to Scott Thompson as her husband Wally Terzinsky, whose struggle to deal with his closeted homosexuality is one of the central sub-plots of the film. As the film begins, we see Wally masturbating to gay pornographic videos in his bedroom. Later in the film, Wally is arrested by the police for cruising in the park and is brought home naked to his wife. The joke lies in the fact that the only person who does not know that Wally is gay, is Wally himself. *Brain Candy* provides us with subjective flashbacks to Wally’s happiest memories of his time in the army. In these flashbacks we see Wally being sexually aroused by his Captain’s

reprimands. We are even given insight into the homosexual games allegedly played in the army involving combat maneuvers and naked men in the shower.

The explicit homosexual themes are not limited to the film. In fact, much of *The Kids in the Hall* deals with homosexual topics. Scott Thompson's recurring character Buddy Cole is the most obvious gay character. Characterized as a "macho queen"³⁸ Buddy Cole typically addresses the audience in monologue to discuss a range of issues including gay marriage, virtual sex, his first love and even his own lisp: "Really. Such a lot of fuss over a few extra esses." While Thompson notes that the character received a lot of criticism for being "incredibly effeminate" and embodying "a lot of the stereotypes that gay people don't want to see anymore,"³⁹ Buddy Cole was popular enough to compel a special episode of *The Kids in the Hall* titled "Chalet 2000" (Episode #409), a stage show and even the fictional autobiography *Buddy Babylon: The Autobiography of Buddy Cole* (1998).

Homosexual content is not limited to Buddy Cole, but manifests itself throughout the television series. Thompson, who is openly gay, is responsible for writing much of this material. He has played a gay folk hero in "Running Faggot" (Episode #109), who saves the life of a puppy and teaches the gunfighters to settle their problems with words; a closeted film star named Tony Baldwin in "Surf Cops" (Episode #208), who comes back from the dead to convince people that he died of Cancer and not AIDS; and as himself in "Homo Alone" (Episode #315), where he explains what gay boys like to wear when they are home alone. Gay imagery is not limited to Thompson who also performs heterosexual roles. Just as the Kids in the Hall are able to transform gender, so are they

able to transform sexuality. One popular series of skits, "Steps" presents Scott Thompson, Dave Foley and Kevin McDonald as Butch, Riley and Smitty, three gay men sitting at the steps of a coffee house enjoying—or not enjoying—among other things, Toronto's gay pride parade. It is unnecessary for the Kids in the Hall to use their drag performances as a means of subversively addressing homosexuality within mainstream television because homosexuality is already being explicitly addressed.

That is not to say that drag does *not* subvert heterosexuality for there are moments in *The Kids in the Hall* and *Brain Candy* when the norms of heterosexuality are transgressed through drag, particularly in instances of personal contact between performers. *Brain Candy* ends with the romantic formation of a couple, Alice and Chris (McDonald), symbolized by the two finally embracing each other with a kiss. While the awkward and peculiarly unromantic nature of this kiss will be addressed later in this chapter, what is currently of interest is how underlying knowledge that these are two men kissing can function as a means of transgressing the boundaries of heterosexuality but it is a minor function when compared to the explicitness of other homosexual imagery. As well, while this homosexual kiss is structured as *Brain Candy*'s climax, it is quite a common occurrence in *The Kids in the Hall* series, along with much more sexually explicit behaviour. It is in these moments of sexual explicitness that the most important function of the Kids in the Hall's drag performance is accentuated. In moments of unrestrained sexuality, the Kids in the Hall's cross-dressing performances seem intended less to transgress heterosexual boundaries by flaunting implicit images of homosexuality than to transgress the restrictive gender limitations imposed by comedy. In other words,

the Kids in the Hall are aiming less to give voice to homosexuality than to liberate female characters by allowing them to participate more fully in the transgressive nature of comedy. Through gender performance, the Kids in the Hall are breaking the binds of gender performance, binds which, as explained in the following pages, have defined North American film comedy since the 1910s.

Taking it in the Face

Furthermore, though critics have pointed out that in *City Lights* (1931), beautiful, adult Virginia Cherrill gets in on the comedy when she empties a pot of flower water in the Tramp's face, she doesn't *take* it in the face, which makes all the difference.

~ Alan Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble*.⁴⁰

In *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*, Alan Dale recalls Theodore Dreiser's 1928 interview with the Quebec-born pioneer of American film comedy, Mack Sennett. Dreiser questions Sennett on the limits of slapstick comedy, to which Sennett replies:

No joke about a mother ever gets a laugh... We've tried that, and we know. You can't joke about a mother in even the lightest, mildest way. If you do, the audience sits there cold, and you get no hand. It may not be angry—we wouldn't put in stuff about a mother that an audience could take offense at—but on the other hand, it is not moved to laugh—doesn't want to...⁴¹

This maternal exclusion from slapstick is indicative of gender politics which persist in film and television comedy. As Sennett articulates, there are social codes which exclude women from fully participating in comedy. In his study of slapstick, Dale draws attention to the dichotomy facing women comedians in early film where women were either the "promiscuous broad or the helpless dear."⁴² Rules of social propriety governed the degree

to which an actress could participate in the physicality of slapstick. As Dale writes on the limits of physicality:

What's strange is that for female characters, physical comedy itself is seen as a form of impurity, as if pratfalls, even though at the level of character and story they are clearly unintentional, imply that the heroine is altogether too physically available. Falling on her ass appears to make people wonder what else she might do with it.⁴³

The physical nature of slapstick is associated with lower body humour. A proper woman was not allowed to willfully “fall on her ass,” and as such, women were effectively prohibited from taking an active role in slapstick comedy.

While Dale's study focuses on film comedy from Sennett up through Jerry Lewis, the gender boundaries he identifies persist in present-day comedy, as Dale himself suggests. In *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, Kathleen Rowe analyses female performers who actively participate in film comedy, and reaches conclusions regarding gender norms congruent with Dale's. Again rooted in Bakhtin's carnival aesthetic, Rowe explores what she terms the “unruly” woman of comedy. The unruly woman actively participates in comedy, but in doing so she must give up many of her feminine qualities. Much like drag performance, the unruly woman is often characterized by her excessive behaviour and physicality. Rowe, who cites Roseanne Barr and Miss Piggy as examples, defines the unruly woman as:

1. The unruly woman creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, men. She is unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place.
2. Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites.
3. Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone.
4. She makes jokes, or laughs herself.
5. She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender.
6. She may be old or a masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque.

7. Her behavior is associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness, but her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than is that of the femme fatale. She may be pregnant.

8. She is associate with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins), and taboo, rendering her above all a figure of ambivalence.⁴⁴

Through her excess the unruly woman challenges gender propriety. Much like the grotesque performances of comedic drag or Boxwell's "dame" tradition, the unruly woman is characterized by the degree to which she is positioned outside of heterosexual feminine norms. Characterized most often in comedy as the "spinsters...mothers-in-law, librarians, suffragettes, battle-axes, career woman...and lesbians"⁴⁵ the unruly woman is unaware that "woman are expected to keep not only their bodies but their utterances unobtrusive,"⁴⁶ and often she liberates both.

As a result, her femininity is marginalized, something to be laughed at instead of admired as the unruly woman herself becomes a target for aggression. As Rowe writes:

Through her body, her speech, and her laughter, especially in the public sphere, she creates a disruptive spectacle of herself. The tropes of unruliness are often coded with misogyny. However, they are also a source of potential power, especially when they are recoded or reframed to expose what that composure conceals. Ultimately, the unruly woman can be seen as prototype of woman as subject—transgressive above all when she lays claim to her own desire.⁴⁷

Much like Boxwell's claim about glamour drag performance during World War I disrupting and reaffirming heterosexual norms, the presence and eventual punishment of the unruly woman in comedy both disrupt and reaffirms gender norms. In order for a woman to actively participate within comedy, she must shed the qualities which are characteristically feminine. Only when she is no longer recognizable as a woman is she allowed, as Dale puts it, "to take it in the face." Yet at the same time, that she does become the butt of the joke serves as punishment for her lack of proper femininity. If she were more characteristically feminine, she would be safe from such aggression. In this

sense, the physicality of the unruly woman serves the same function as comedic drag performances, to lessen the threat of transgressive behaviour by laughing at it.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bahktin discusses a particular carnival performance associated with the lower body:

A group of masquerading men appears. Some of them are disguised as peasants, others as women; one of them displays the signs of pregnancy. A quarrel breaks out among the men, and daggers made of silver foil are drawn. The women separate the fighters; the pregnant masker is terrified and her labor starts in the street. She moans and writhes while the other women surround her. She gives birth to a formless creature under the eyes of the spectators. Thus ends the performance.⁴⁸

While the carnival freedoms are often associated with lower body activity, including pregnancy and childbirth, what is interesting is that the women who participate in this carnival performance are actually cross-dressed men. Beyond the comedy of this grotesque performance lies another motivation for drag: as a means of distancing the performer from the material being performed.

In “Women’s Part Played by Men in the Roman Theater,” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe shares his impression of an Italian performance of Carlo Golondoni’s theatrical comedy *La Locandiera* in which the principal female role is played by a male performer. Having produced the play himself with a female performer in the lead, Goethe is surprised to find he prefers the former. Goethe credits his pleasure to two features of drag performance. The first is an appreciation of imitation, that “these actors are not women but portray women” which requires a special kind of skill to “not portray himself but a third nature actually foreign to him.”⁴⁹ The second source of Goethe’s pleasure derives from the distance the drag performances places between the content of the comedic material and the actor who performs it. Goethe writes:

I am convinced and have myself been a witness to it, that a clever and understanding actress can earn much praise in this role; but the last scene, if they are played by a woman, will always be offensive. The expression of that invincible coldness, of that sweet feeling of revenge, of malicious joy in the discomfiture of the others, shock us in their unmitigated truthfulness. And when she finally gives her hand in marriage to her servant only so that she may have a manservant about the house, the trivial ending of the play hardly satisfies us. But on the Roman stage we found no cold absence of love, no female wantonness—the performance merely reminded us of them. We were comforted by the fact that this time at least it was not true. We applauded the young man lightheartedly and were delighted that he was so well acquainted with the ensnaring wiles of the fair sex that through his successful imitation of feminine behavior he had avenged us for every such offense women had made us suffer.⁵⁰

The drag performance distances the unruly behaviour of the feminine character from actuality. When faced with female transgressions, the audience finds solace and safety in the fact that these acts are not being performed by an actual woman. In this regard, the female character is allowed a greater range of performance and greater participation in her comedic role because of the distance the cross-dressing provides. With drag performance “the *female* impersonator could flaunt a courtesan’s wardrobe and coquettish behavior without falling foul of the censure aimed at a woman behaving in such a way.”⁵¹ This relief is due in part to what Leslie Ferris highlights as the “enduring conflation of self and actress,” the belief that “women cannot in principle act a character, but can only perform aspects of themselves.”⁵² It becomes important then to ensure that female performers maintain propriety, for their performances on stage will no doubt be equated to their own lived experience. This idea echoes the position outlined by Alan Dale, that comediettes must limit their slapstick performance if they are to maintain their feminine character. Invariably, the use of drag performance reduces the restrictions of feminine performance imposed by comedy. For Goethe, with *La Locandiera* the selfishness and manipulative behaviour of the female character only becomes permissible

if not enjoyable, because she is played by a man. It is out of this desire to extend the boundaries of comedy and allow for the active participation of women within its realm that informs the drag performances of the Kids in the Hall. Their drag is designed to allow women to partake in physical, sexual and other transgressive behaviors without punishment and without having to shed their femininity in favour of the grotesque and excessive image of Rowe's unruly woman.

In *The Kids in the Hall* the drag performances allow the female characters to actively participate in comedy which might otherwise seem threatening or improper. In the skit "The Nasty Break-Up" (Episode #206), a man played by Mark McKinney and a woman played by Bruce McCulloch are in the midst of ending their relationship. As the man heads to the apartment door with his last box of clothes the mood turns sour. The woman becomes aggressive toward her ex-boyfriend: "I bet I get laid before you do." This begins an escalating argument of sexual superiority. The argument continues:

Man: ...I'd be surprised if I didn't get laid three times this week. Now that I come to think of it, at least three times.

Woman: I bet I get laid twice in the next six hours.

Man: Well, sounds like the race is on.

Woman: Yeah, I guess it is. Get on your mark, get set, go. Bye, stud. [Giggles]

Man: Wait, wait, I almost forgot. I want to send you an artist's rendering of me satisfying women of all types. Where should I send that? Should I send it here? Or to the office?

Woman: Um, why don't you send it to your best friend's house where I'll be on top of him.

In this skit, not only is the woman an active participant in this sexually explicit repartee—one that implies her own sexual promiscuity—but she is also the aggressor who begins the argument, and ultimately is given the last laugh on the issue. She is even allowed to laugh at her boyfriend's efforts to challenge her. In this "transy" drag performance, the woman participates in the comedy, but without the required excess of the unruly woman.

She is not overweight and she is quite soft spoken. The drag performance allows the female character to maintain a feminine image.

In “The Friendly Couples” (Episode #201), sexual promiscuity is not implicit, but visualized on screen. In the skit, middle-aged heterosexual couple Bram (Scott Thompson) and Nina (Mark McKinney) have just finished having dinner with their old friends Tom (Dave Foley) and his nameless wife (Kevin McDonald). As the couples settle in the living room Bram gives thanks for old friends because “they don’t care what you do.” After saying this, Bram leans over and kisses Tom’s wife on the lips. As Bram continues to fondle Tom’s wife and Nina begins to feel agitated, Tom’s wife assures her, “Relax Nina. I’m fine. I’m a grown woman.” The joke escalates as Bram unzips Tom’s wife’s dress, leads her to the dining room table and begins to have sex with her; as everyone in the room smiles politely. As with “The Nasty Break-Up,” Tom’s wife enjoys her sexuality and takes great pleasure in this sexual encounter. She tells the room that her husband cannot make love to her because he is impotent. In this moment, it is Goethe’s impression of drag performance which liberates the comedienne. The audience is free to laugh with and enjoy the image of a married woman, lying on a dining room table with her legs in the air, enjoying having sex with another man, because there is safety in the knowledge that this is not a real woman. As a result, the female character is allowed greater participation in the comedy without having to relinquish her femininity and without punishment for her sexual behaviour. At long last, she is no longer bound by the gender limits described by Mack Sennett some eighty years ago.

Is This Canadian Comedy?

For the fact was, while there were certain aspects of the group which seemed unmistakably Canadian—like the Kids' hoser-deluxe, WASPier-than-thou names, for instance—there were others that were pretty well unprecedented in popular home-grown comedy. While the backbone of our “tradition” has always been sketch comedy directed at some readily identifiable target outside itself, like politics (*Royal Canadian Air Farce*) or pop culture (*SCTV*). The Kids’ approach to sketch, on the other hand, was so purely conceptual as to verge on solipsistic...

~Geoff Pevere, *Mondo Canuck*⁵³

As previous chapters have noted, the degree of cross-pollination between American and Canadian popular cultures makes it difficult to argue definitively what sort of cultural product can or should be labeled as distinctively Canadian. Even if we accept that a familiarity with both Canadian and American culture is a mark of a Canadian comedy tradition, this is not necessarily helpful in discussing the Kids in the Hall because their comedy is less derivative of popular cultural parody and satire. Still, there is some evidence which indicates that a Canadian cultural sensibility, conditioned by the particularities of Canada’s media culture, was necessary for the Kids in the Hall to develop and pursue their unique form of comedy. It seems that Canada, or at least the CBC, was much more tolerant of the precarious nature of *The Kids in the Hall* than were the American companies who ultimately distributed the show in the U.S.. One indication of this difference concerns scheduling. While the series originally aired on the public airwaves in Canada on Thursday nights at 9:30pm, it premiered on the U.S. cable network HBO at 11:30pm, after the prime time hours. When *The Kids in the Hall* finally made it to public network television in the U.S., after being picked up by CBS in 1992, the show’s air time was pushed back even further to 12:30 am.

It is also interesting to note that while the Kids have made clear their desire for a mimetic drag image, this sensibility was not shared by their American producer. While Kevin McDonald told *The New York Times* that the Kids did not want their drag done “badly and insultingly, all high voices and big breasts,”⁵⁴ their Texas born producer Joe Forristal had made the claim years earlier that “The Kids are at their best when they look as if they’d made their own wigs.”⁵⁵ What Forristal did not appreciate was that for the Kids, the drag itself was not the root of their comedy.

Once CBS became involved and *The Kids in the Hall* was to be aired on network television in the U.S., censorship became an issue. While Dave Foley has argued that having Lorne Michaels as Executive Producer offered the Kids “tremendous freedom”⁵⁶ in Canada, it was not enough to satisfy American television executives. As was written in the *New York Times*,

“CBS has a more conservative standards policy,” said John Blanchard, the show’s director, in a recent interview in a Toronto restaurant where the cast was filming a sketch. Mr. Blanchard said that sometimes the writers (six of them, along with the five cast members) must come up with two versions of the same skit—the unexpurgated one for Canadian television and the relatively sanitized one for the American audience.⁵⁷

In order to reach a mainstream American audience the Kids in the Hall had to accept certain restrictions. One of the troupe’s final skits, “On Censorship” (Episode # 521) has the Kids in the Hall presenting to the audience fictional skits which they claimed had been censored by the network⁵⁸. In one titled “Home Run” Bruce McCulloch plays “Cancer Boy,” a child dying of cancer who asks Big Joe (Foley) the baseball player to hit a home run for him. The irony of this censored skit is that for the American airing “Cancer Boy” was changed to “That Dyin’ Kid.” Where in the CBC version, Big Joe says

"Anything for you, Cancer Boy," for CBS it was changed to "Anything for you, on account of your dying."

One of the most heated censorship battles began with the previously mentioned "Surf Cops" skit. When CBS refused to air the skit they made it known to the Kids that along with Cancer, jokes about AIDS would not be tolerated. Scott Thompson was openly critical of this censorship, and he told the *Vancouver Sun* that "this makes me really angry." Thompson condemned CBS's fear of words, arguing that "What's silly is that they think you're only talking about AIDS when you say the word AIDS...And that's not the case. I've done pieces before that are about AIDS and they never knew."⁵⁹ Still, it cannot be argued that censorship is only a reality in the United States. In *The Kids in the Hall's* first season, the "Dr. Seuss Bible"(Episode #120) skit, which depicts the crucifixion of Jesus as written by Dr. Seuss "was a big hit on the American HBO cable network" while the CBC "refused to run it."⁶⁰ It is not that the US is more apt to censor than Canada, just that the sensibilities differ.

Still, Lorne Michaels and the Kids in the Hall themselves have argued that there are Canadian qualities which inform their comedy. As *Newsweek* reported in 1989:

...Michaels sees in the Kids a style of comedy that's purely Canadian, darker and edgier than American comedy, and the Kids themselves agree, "In Canada there's no mass audience," [Dave] Foley says, "so you don't have that mass mentality. Performers here are a bit more free to please themselves."

"We're observers," [Scott] Thompson adds. "We're not taken seriously in the world so it's very easy for us to watch and to judge. America's the culture everybody seems to flock to and listen to, but not Canada. So we bus the tables and make jokes."⁶¹

The lack of a large audience in Canada eliminates the pressure to appeal to the largest audience. In this sense, the Kids are free to attract the marginal audience because that is

the most you can hope for in Canada. By ignoring the "mass mentality" the Kids in the Hall are free to challenge propriety.

This "mass mentality" argument becomes obvious when comparing *The Kids in the Hall* television series to their film *Brain Candy*. While still offering drag performances and homosexual content, the comedy in *Brain Candy*—which was produced by Paramount Pictures for release in Canada and the United States—is limited in its transgressions. While "Cancer Boy" makes a brief appearance in the film, there are no references to AIDS. The troupe members perform in drag, but they are limited to one or two characters, and other female roles are filled by actual women. Moreover, unlike "The Nasty Break-Up" or "The Friendly Couples" there is no sexual contact among the troupe members. The women that the troupe members play are saved from sexual contact because they are either single like Alice, widowed like Mrs. Hurdicure, or as in the case of Doreen Terzinsky, her husband is gay. The kiss between troupe members which is a common occurrence in *The Kids in the Hall* is given greater significance in *Brain Candy* as it is climactically placed at the end of the film. In the final shot the formation of the couple is completed as Alice and Dr. Chris Cooper finally kiss. This kiss is notable, however, for its complete lack of romance and sexuality. Alice and Chris come together like two awkward teenagers, eyes open, lips smacking together like guppies. This sexual encounter between what are actually two men is stripped of all its eroticism and played strictly for laughs. It should be noted that when Dr. Cooper is shown in bed with two women, they are both played by actual women. Even the production notes that Paramount released to the media have been tamed, making no reference to the homosexual

undertones of the film and referring to the character Wally Terzinsky as “prodigiously repressed”⁶² and to Scott Thompson’s recurring character on *The Larry Sanders Show* as “socially-conscious” as opposed to gay. *Brain Candy* was written for a larger, mass audience and is noticeably less provocative than its television counterpart.

Despite the fact that the smaller size of the Canadian audience is credited for allowing the Kids in the Hall to disrupt rules of propriety, *The Kids in the Hall*’s marginal comedy did not go unnoticed in Canada where audiences are as familiar with sanitized American comedy as Americans are. John Haslett Cuff of the *Globe and Mail* noted that *The Kids in the Hall* “extended the boundaries of (bad) taste and redefined notions of what is funny on prime-time network television. [The Kids in the Hall] were certainly raunchier than anything that had previously been seen on either side of the 49th parallel.”⁶³ Strangely, while he champions the Kids in the Hall for daring to bring drag performances and homosexual content into mainstream comedy, he also criticizes their comedy as being “homogenized” for its lack of both political content and the distinctive Canadiana exemplified by other Canadian comedies such as *Codco* (1988-1993). He argues that “their preoccupations were fundamentally suburban, the product of shopping mall and family rec-room culture in which notions of life and comedy are formed through relentless daily exposure to U.S. TV signals.”⁶⁴ Here it seems that my larger project has come full circle. While praising the Kids in the Hall for their pioneering work, Haslett Cuff is also critical of them for not adhering to the confines of Canadian-produced entertainment. As Andrew Clark compares *The Kids in the Hall* to sketch comedy troupe of *The Royal Canadian Air Farce* (1993-present), he notes that the Kids “did not draw

laughs from Canadianisms. There were no impressions of the prime minister, no references to Newfoundland, no soiled-politician-of-the-day material.”⁶⁵ In order for *The Kids in the Hall* to be acceptable by Canadian critical standards, it must promulgate an acceptable image of Canada that is properly marginal and deals with overt Canadian issues. Like the criticism of *SCTV* before it, it is somehow not enough for critics that *The Kids in the Hall* is written, produced and stars Canadians.

Haslett Cuff’s remarks are indicative of the larger problem that faces Canadian film and television comedy criticism. Apparently, the codes of Canadian scholarship that govern our canon are not flexible enough to allow *The Kids in the Hall* into its discourse. The rigidity with which Canadian scholarship approaches the issue of a distinctively Canadian cultural identity has left us without the tools for understanding comedy that does not possess the overt icons or marginal narrative subjects that are valorized by traditional scholarship. As Haslett Cuff’s remarks all too clearly point out, *The Kids in the Hall* is squeezed into the same arbitrary category with *Meatballs*, *Porky's*, and *SCTV* for being “too American.” By dismissing *The Kids in the Hall* for what it does not do, Haslett Cuff has missed out on the opportunity to appreciate what *The Kids in the Hall* does do. By scanning only for images of Newfoundland and Jean Chrétien, Haslett Cuff has overlooked the importance of gender performance and homosexual inclusion that the *Kids in the Hall* offer. Moreover, he is failing to appreciate the extent to which *The Kids in the Hall* is *Canadiana*, a result of the comic sensibilities of five men from all coasts who represent and draw on their various disparate social experiences. Finally, he fails to recognize the importance of his own remarks, that the “suburban” nature of the series and

the “rec-room culture” it highlights are fundamentally Canadian experiences. In many respects, it is the lived reality of many Canadians from coast to coast. Like Bob and Doug Mckenzie, the Kids in the Hall represent the repressed notion of a Canadian identity, one that uses various comedic devices and traditions to undermine preconceived notions of a uniform Canadian identity.

Through a study of *The Kids in the Hall* and *Brain Candy* we have seen how this troupe’s innovative use of mimetic drag performance troubles the standards of professional drag and highlights the limits placed on women in comedy. We have also seen how the Kids in the Hall do not use their drag as a subversive means of addressing homosexuality, gay culture, and AIDS principally because they are able to address these issues in an otherwise explicit nature. These issues not only broaden theories of gender performance and comedy, but are essential to a more complete understanding of Canadian comedy. In this case, the Kids in the Hall problematize not only notions of gender performance in comedy, but also how comedies are interpreted and studied in Canada.

¹ “Two years late for a date/Screw you tax payer!” *The Kids in the Hall*. With Mark McKinney. CBC Television. Episode #218. 1991.

² It should hereby be noted that the italicized *The Kids in the Hall* shall refer to the television series, while the non-italicized Kids in the Hall shall refer to the troupe itself.

³ Pevere, Geoff & Greig Dymond. *Mondo Canuck: A Canadian Pop Culture Odyssey*. Scarborough: Prentice Hall Canada, Inc. 1996. p. 198.

⁴ “Romeo.” Audio Commentary. *The Kids in the Hall: Complete Season 1*. With Mark McKinney. A & E Home Video. DVD. 2004.

⁵ See *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on cross-dressing*. Ed. Leslie Ferris. New York: Routledge, 1993. & Roger Baker’s *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation on the Stage*. London: Triton, 1968.

⁶ For a more complete understanding of the complex historical nature of gender based theatrical traditions see Lesley Ferris’, *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre*. London: Macmillan, 1990 & Vern L.

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- Bullough and Bonnie Bullough's *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- ⁷ Senelick, Laurence. "Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural origins of glamour drag and male impersonation on the nineteenth-century stage." *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on cross-dressing*. Ed. Lesley Ferris. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 85.
- ⁸ Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1972. p. 57.
- ⁹ Senelick, p. 80.
- ¹⁰ Boxwell, David A. "The Follies of War: Cross-Dressing and Popular Theatre on the British Front Lines, 1914-18." *MODERNISM/modernity*. Vol. IX, nr. 1, 2002. p. 13.
- ¹¹ Newton, p. 52.
- ¹² Boxwell, p. 13.
- ¹³ Bell-Metereau, Rebecca. *Hollywood Androgyny*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985 p. 21.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, p. 23.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 201.
- ¹⁷ In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" Judith Butler extends this notion to argue that drag performance is a parody of all gender and gender performances. Drag, she states "constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation" for as she famously declares "*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.*" (Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991. p. 21.)
- ¹⁸ "Romeo." Audio Commentary. *The Kids in the Hall: Complete Season 1*. With Mark McKinney. A & E Home Video. DVD. 2004.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Lyall, Sarah. "The Real Not-Ready-for-Prime-Time-Players." *The New York Times*. January 16, 1994. H29.
- ²¹ Bell-Metereau, p. 22.
- ²² Newton, p. 51.
- ²³ Lyall, 1994. H29.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Lengel, Carolyn. "Taking Accurate Aim." *The New York Times*. February 13, 1994. H4.
- ²⁶ Clark, Andrew. *Stand and Deliver: Inside Canadian Comedy*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited, 1997 p. 8.
- ²⁷ Clark, p. 9.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid, p. 10.
- ³⁰ Boxwell, p. 4.
- ³¹ Ibid, p. 11.
- ³² Newton, p. 57.
- ³³ Boxwell, p. 16.
- ³⁴ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and his World*. Trans. Helene Iswoldsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. p. 89.
- ³⁵ Ibid, p. 90.
- ³⁶ Senelick. P. 80.
- ³⁷ Newton, p. 3.
- ³⁸ "An Oral History." Special Feature. *The Kids in the Hall: Complete Season 1*. With Mark McKinney. A & E Home Video. DVD. 2004 .
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- ⁴⁰ Dale, Alan. *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 95.

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- ⁴¹ Ibid, p. 92.
- ⁴² Ibid, p. 99.
- ⁴³ Ibid, p. 100.
- ⁴⁴ Rowe, Kathleen. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. Austin: Texas University Press, 1995. p. 31.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 105.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 63.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 31.
- ⁴⁸ Bakhtin, p. 247.
- ⁴⁹ Goethe, p. 49.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 50.
- ⁵¹ Senelick, p. 93.
- ⁵² Ferris, Leslie., *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre*. London: Macmillan, 1990. p. 44
- ⁵³ Pevere, p. 121.
- ⁵⁴ Lyall, p. H29.
- ⁵⁵ Knelman, Martin. "Canadian Comics Take Aim at Cable Funny Bone." *The New York Times*. July 16, 1989. p. H27.
- ⁵⁶ "An Oral History." Special Feature. *The Kids in the Hall: Complete Season 1*. With Mark McKinney. A & E Home Video. DVD. 2004.
- ⁵⁷ Lyall, p. H29.
- ⁵⁸ These skits were actually new material.
- ⁵⁹ Barrett, Tom. "5 Angry Kids: Scott Thompson decries hypocrisy of CBS ban on troupe's AIDS humor." *Vancouver Sun*, February 1, 1993. p. C1.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Barol, Bill. "Those Darn Kids: Black humor from the Great White North." *Newsweek*. October 2, 1989 p. 67.
- ⁶² *Brain Candy*. Press Kit at the Toronto Film Reference Library.
- ⁶³ Haslett Cuff, John. "Farewell to those versatile and fearless Kids." *The Globe and Mail*. January 16, 1995.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ Clark, p. 210.

Conclusion: A Spaz, a Hoser and a Queen walk into a bar...

When one delves into the very notion of the thing called "Canadian cinema," one is sinking one's rubbers in something much more sensitive, complex, and problematic than just another national cinema. One may even be stepping into the very heart of the country's conflicted soul, the mine-strewn border where culture meets commerce, and where the impractical, poetic ideal of the country collides with the cold business of running it.

~Geoff Pevere, "Fishy"¹

This thesis has demonstrated that the study of English-Canadian film comedy is essential for a more complete understanding of Canadian cinema. When film scholars first began their project of mining English-Canadian cinema for the qualities which set it apart from other national cinemas, their concepts were never meant, nor should they have been meant, as an all-encompassing measure for understanding Canadian film. The problem with the scholarship is not that early historians set limits on English-Canadian film, but that contemporary scholars continue to rely on these initial concepts as prescriptive models for defining Canadian cinema. As a result, English-Canadian film scholarship continues to overlook the role of the Canadian audience in the construction of a Canadian film culture. A thorough understanding of Canadian film requires the study of films which are popular with domestic audiences, and as the history of the Golden Reel Award indicates, popular films are often comedies.

The examination of *Meatballs* and *Porky's*, and their position within the tax-shelter, has brought to light how these two low-brow comedies reflect Canada's unique immersion in a foreign culture, reflecting Canada's ability to appropriate, diverge and even influence Hollywood culture. *Meatballs* and *Porky's* are symbols of the secreted

multicultural Canadian identity. The study of *The Adventures of Bob and Doug McKenzie: Strange Brew* signaled a comedic resistance, through the use of satire, to the problem of nation-building and the troublesome project of defining a Canadian identity. In response to a call for more “Canadian content” Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas responded with two Canadian characters unsuited to the nationalist paradigm. Finally, this thesis concluded with an exploration of cross-dressing comedy of the Kids in the Hall, both in their self-titled television series and in their feature film *Kids in the Hall: Brain Candy* and showed that nearly a century after Canadian Mack Sennett gave the world the Keystone Kops, Canadian comedies can still revolutionize comedic traditions.

The importance of comedy cannot be understated in Canadian film scholarship. The comedies studied in this thesis continue to influence English-Canadian film production. The low-brow Animal Comedy genre was rekindled recently with the release of Mark Griffith’s teenage travelogue *Going the Distance* (2004) and Dave Thomas’ *Intern Academy* (2004). Somewhat more aggressive in their sexuality, drug abuse and general appropriation of the gross-out aesthetic, these films not only continue a comedy tradition, but as the postings on the *Internet Movie Database*’s website suggest, they also carry on the nationalist, imperialist and industry debates that surrounded the tax-shelter.² What is more, the dim-witted “hosers” characterized by Bob and Doug have found new life as Terry (David Lawrence) and Dean (Paul Spence) in Michael Dowie’s mockumentary *Fubar* (2002) and, some might argue, as the characters of Wayne (Mike Myers) and Garth (Dana Carvey) from the *Wayne’s World* (1992) series. No doubt, the Canadian ethos will be even further debased when Ricky (Robb Wells), Julian (John Paul

Tremblay) and Bubbles (Mike Smith) make their feature film debut next year in the Ivan Reitman-produced, *Trailer Park Boys: The Movie* (2006). Issues of gender and sexuality have surfaced in both *Mambo Italiano* (2003) and *Touch of Pink* (2004), though not with the explicitness of *Brain Candy*, as Canada has yet to produce another film that engages with the topic of cross-dressing and the place of female performers in physical comedy as satisfactorily.

This thesis has only skimmed the surface of the historical, theoretical and cultural implications of Canadian film comedy, as there are many other areas that would benefit from further investigation. A natural extension of this work would be a reception study of film comedy and the Canadian and international audiences who consume it. Are there still prejudices against Canadian film? To what degree is the marketing of the films responsible for their financial and cultural success? Are Canadian audiences responsive to these films as representations of their own experience? A thorough reception analysis would no doubt inform the ongoing cultural imperialist and nationalist debates.

As well, for those who are brave enough to challenge the banner of nationalism, there remains a wealth of material that has yet to be explored concerning cross-border filmmaking. The increase in co-productions raise issues of cultural hybridity as it relates to the production of Hollywood comedies heavily influenced by Canadians. How can the work of comedians such as Dan Ackroyd, Lorne Michaels, Ivan Reitman and Mike Myers reflect the cross-cultural influence of Canadian comedy? Do Wayne and Garth really live in Scarborough? Can Canada claim *Ghostbusters* (1984) as its own? Is it

possible that the majority of popular English-Canadian film comedies are being produced by Hollywood?

Finally, it will be important to begin a study of the role of television in the production of English-Canadian film comedy. As *SCTV* and *The Kids in the Hall* have illustrated, television success is often a precursor to a cinematic spin-off. To what degree will television continue to influence English-Canadian film comedy? What is the role of the television audience and the fans of a program? When Steve Smith decided to make *Red Green's Duct Tape Forever* (2002), a film version of his popular television series *The Red Green Show* (1991-present), he raised funds by auctioning off extra roles as part of the Public Broadcasting Station's pledge drive, and also asked viewers to send him duct tape sculptures to be used as props.³ To what degree does an established fan-base inspire production and influence success?

In order to have a properly nuanced understanding of what influences and informs Canadian comedy, a more inclusive film scholarship is needed. Canada requires a critical framework that accepts all that Canada produces—including its film comedies—as relevant to a Canadian identity. The sheer lack of acknowledgement of such Canadian comedies as *Meatballs*, *Porky's*, *Strange Brew* and *Brain Candy* only emphasize the degree to which Canadian film scholarship has overlooked a large part of Canada's popular culture. Instead of dismissing films which fail to meet nationalist canonical standards, scholarship would do better to embrace them, for such films allude to forms of Canadian cultural experience that, however common, could only have been made in Canada.

¹ Pevere, Geoff, "Fishy." *North of Everything: English Canadian Cinema Since 1980*. Eds. William Beard and Jerry White. University of Alberta Press: Alberta, 2002. p.103

² See threads "Look Everybody! Canada Can Make Generic Crap, Too!" (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0388285/board/nest/10060476>. Accessed: September 9, 2004) and "In American theatres?" (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0388285/board/nest/10565178>. Accessed: September 9, 2004)

³ Amsden, Cynthia. "Canadian Comedy, eh? Paul Gross' *Men with Brooms* and Steve Smiths *Red Green's Duct Tape Forever.*" *Take One*. Vol. X, nr. 36. Mar-April 2002, p. 13

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