

"I Am Canadian":

Americanization and Canadian Cultural Identity

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"Who are we?" is one of mankind's oldest questions. As the Americanization of the world continues, and American culture exerts a greater and greater influence on other cultures and countries, there exists a natural push-back. Anti-American sentiment is nothing new in the Middle East and in large parts of Asia. Despite critics in such places as India, China, and Japan calling for the preservation of their own unique culture, non-English-speaking countries are affected less than English-speaking ones such as England and Australia. Yet even considering this, none of those countries are in remotely the same situation as Canada. Due to the fact that Canada shares both language and proximity with the United States, Canada is subjected to significantly more American media and popular culture than any other nation. Not only American movies and music, but local culture and issues can seep across the border. American politics, magazines, newspapers, and radio, both the local and national varieties are available in great quantities. Despite Canada's bilingual and multicultural history, it is said

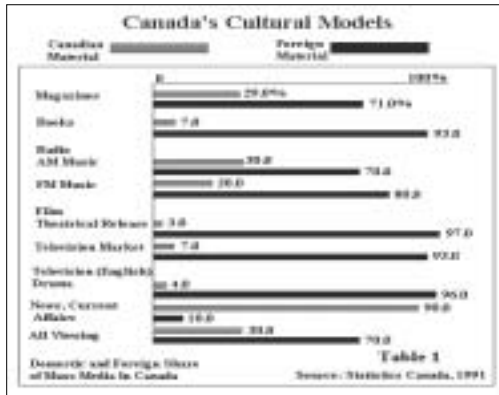


Figure 1: Canada's Cultural Models: About Canada: Foreign Media in Canada (About Canada)

that Canada is losing her heritage and culture to Americanization. Some Canadians have made it a point to proclaim that they are not Americans, avoiding that term when describing themselves. Companies declare their products "distinctly Canadian". When traveling abroad Canadians will pin or sew their national flags to their bags so as not to have their nationality mistaken.

Yet, consider the chart above, which tracks where much of Canada's media originates. As is obvious, the vast majority of media consumed by the average Canadian is foreign in origin. This is especially obvious when looking at the film and TV markets. This tremendous disparity has led to a loss of Canadian identity. This is despite the Canadian government's attempts to slow the progression of Americanization and maintain its own

culture. Programs such as Canadian Content Regulations, which regulate the percentage of television, radio, etc. that must be created in Canada. However, less than 5% of the movies seen by Canadians are made by Canadians (About Canada).

Living in a place that is overwhelmed and saturated with American culture, what does it mean to be Canadian? In 2000, a beer commercial created quite a stir. In the commercial, stereotypical images of Canada were prominently featured. This commercial boosted Canadian national pride and contributed to Canadian identity. However, some of those stereotypes in the commercial were clearly portrayed as false, while others were presented as if true. How were these Canadian stereotypes created, and how much did these stereotypes affect the average Canadian individual's sense of national identity?

The commercial appeared as a campaign of a Canadian beer company called Molson. Founded in 1786 by John Molson, the Molson Company is Canada's largest alcoholic beverage company, North America's oldest brewery, and Canada's second oldest company (after The Hudson Bay Company). It has 3800 employees and major brands such as Molson Canadian, Molson XXX, Molson stock Ale and so on. On July 22nd 2004, the company officially announced it would be merging with the American brewer Coors. The merger was completed in February 2005 and now it is the fifth-largest in the world ("Molson").

The Molson Company's advertising history is fairly unique. Historically, the brand had attempted to sell itself based on the "Canadian-ness" of their product. Their strategic planning

methodology categorizes brands according to how they bond with their audience, and they found that a "Canadian" beer was well suited for their target demographic.

The advertising campaign was called, "I Am Canadian". The first commercial, a 60-second spot titled "The Rant", features a man named Joe who stands in a movie theater, and preaches about how Canada is different and being Canadian is great. It mostly highlights the differences between Canada and the United States:

"Hey, I'm not a lumberjack, or a fur trader... I don't like in an igloo or eat blubber, or own a dogsled, and I don't know Jimmy, Sally or Suzy from Canada, although I'm certain they're really really nice. I have a Prime Minister, not a president. I speak English and French, not American. And I pronounce it 'about' not 'a boot'. I can proudly sew my country's flag on my backpack. I believe in peace keeping, not policing, diversity, not assimilation, and that the beaver is a truly proud and noble animal. A toque is a hat, a chesterfield is a couch, and it is pronounced 'zed' not 'zee' 'zed!!!! Canada is the second largest landmass! The first nation of hockey!! And the best part of North America! My name is Joe!! And I am Canadian!!!" ("Canada 4 Life. Ca")



Figure 2: Joe in the commercial

Joe stands in front of a movie screen as his voice gets continually louder. The shouts and applause of onlookers grows bigger

and bigger as he gets excited. As he approaches the end of the speech, he begins shouting with a great pride. The background music is 'Pomp and Circumstance', which is the song usually used in graduation ceremonies. This song instills in the viewer a sense of pride, accomplishment, and victory. The commercial is obviously supposed to infuse the viewer with feelings of Canadian pride and patriotism.

This commercial was a huge success for Molson. It was first shown in movie theaters starting on March 17th, 2000, and may have been a calculated move to create buzz and anticipation. In a stunt of aggressive viral marketing 'The Rant' was also performed live, without warning, in movie theaters across the country. This further drew standing ovations and news coverage. The commercial was aired on TV on March 26th for the first time during the Academy Awards broadcast. This commercial won a Bronze Lion at the 2000 Cannes International Advertising Awards, which had thirty-two competitors in the alcoholic beverage category (Macgregor 280).

People responded by making the campaign an overnight phenomenon. Many radio stations composed provincial parodies of "The Rant" such as 'I am a columnist', 'I am an Albertan', and 'I am not Canadian' (a parody on Quebecers, though the commercial was never aired there). There are national parodies too, such as 'I Am American', 'I Am Chinese' and even 'I Am Japanese' that have appeared on the internet. Moreover, during the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, a copycat ad was produced by Australian beer company Foster's

Group to advertise its product. It featured a similar speech that played upon various stereotypes about Australians. Besides the Foster's commercial, William Shatner, (famous for his starring role as James T. Kirk in 1960's American television series, *Star Trek*) performed his own variation as part of a stand-up routine.

While boosting Canadian patriotism, the Awards group said that the Molson Canadian campaign produced "incredible" results for the brand. Its annual sales grew by 2.5 percent in market share, though some have said that it was not such a big jump. Molson has not revealed exact figures (Macgregor 280).

These ads were not limited to Canada. The campaign was also run in the United States, and became the focus of debates on Canadian identity in both countries. Though seen as an expression of Canadian pride by some, critics claimed that "The Rant" was a declaration of anti-American sentiment. However, Glen Hunt, who wrote the ad, claims it is pro-Canadian and not anti-American. Brett Marchand, Molson vice president, believed in what the ad said, the "Beer ad is what more Canadians wish people would do--scream that they are proud to be Canadian" (Macgregor 281). A research study by the University of Chicago sheds some light on why Molson Inc may have chosen to use nationalism and Canadian stereotypes to appeal to their audience. In a cross-cultural survey of 23 nations, they found that Canada ranks among the three proudest countries on earth. The Molson Company felt that they could utilize this to appeal to their target audience: young male beer-drinkers (Bensimon-Byrne D'Arcy, 2001).

In truth, Molson Inc actually tried used a similar campaign before, between 1994 and 1998, but it was criticized as unsuccessful. Marketing executive Brett Marchand decided to revive the "I Am Canadian" slogan. He believed the name "Canadian" was a valuable part of the brand's equity, and could be used to make Canadians as passionate about the brand as they were about their country. Marchand felt that no other brand's marketing had attempted to do something like this. The resulting strategic marketing recommendation was reduced to a single sentence: "Molson Canadian is the only beer that lets me be as Canadian as I feel" (Bensimon-Byrne D'Arcy 3).

The reasons for the commercial's popularity may partially rest with the cultural environment in which it was unleashed. At the time, Trey Parker and Matt Stone's "Blame Canada", a song from the film *"South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut"* (1999), had been nominated for an Academy Award. This had led to a big debate about Canada and Canadians. The phrase "Blame Canada" had even become an expression used in Canada to describe Americans' tendency to blame Canada for problems to which they had no relation (See: The September 11th terrorist attacks). Moreover, Michael Moore had created a comedy film called "Canadian Bacon" in 1995, which was about America invading Canada because America needed to have someone to fight after the Cold War. Perhaps this environment contributed to Canadians being more receptive towards ads extolling their national identity, heritage and culture more than ever.

However, how much the commercial actually affected the

average person's national identity is debatable. It has been said that many Canadians were filled with nationalistic pride. It is possible, however, that they didn't really take the ad that seriously. Some images portrayed in the commercial were obviously supposed to be humorous exaggerations. For example, Joe says, "the beaver is a truly proud and noble animal", but there most likely are only a few people who really think that way. Rather, some people may have chuckled when they saw the picture of beavers in the background. Joe also proclaims, "a chesterfield is a couch!!", but it seems that Canadians don't use "chesterfield" to mean a couch in most situations. Rather, the word is more formal than just saying couch. Moreover, the picture of a couch shown in the background was black and white which may have made one think that the word chesterfield is old-fashioned.

More important things are the images which Joe finds to be offensive. They are stereotypical images of Canada: lumberjacks, fur traders, dog sleds, etc. The stereotypes, however, are rooted



Figure 3: Joe stands in the theater with images of a lumberjack and a fur trader behind him.



Figure 4: Joe standing in front of an image of a dog sled.



Figure 5: The movie poster for *The Heart of the North* (1921)



Figure 6: From *In the Back to God's Country* (1927)

in a situation of cultural and economic domination of Canada by the US - mainly in the film industry. Note the obvious similarities between these two pictures from 'The Rant' (See Figures 3 and 4) and images from the film "*In the Back to God's Country*" (1927), and "*The Heart of the North*" (1921) (See Figures 5 and 6)

Both are films that helped contribute to Hollywood's propagation of Canadian stereotypes. Between 1907 and 1975, Hollywood created 575 feature films about Canada (though interestingly enough, not usually filmed in Canada) (Berton 16). This number is about ten times the number of feature films that Canadians made themselves; of which not all were necessarily about Canada.

A fairly typical example of such period films is "*Northwest Trail*" (1942) produced by Action Pictures, Incorporated, U.S. The film features the "Dangerous Life of The Canadian

Northwest Mounted Police." Mountie Matt O'Brien is assigned to escort Miss Owens to a remote outpost, but when he finds an illegal mining operation there that is smuggling gold across the border, his superior Sgt. Means orders him to leave it be. In the movie there are many views of vast sprawling wilderness, lots of trees, log houses, a bunch of lumberjacks playing poker at a bar, and even a British flag hanging on a flagpole. All of these are typical Canadian images that are seen in other Hollywood movies. The film even contains an exchange between Mountie Matt and Ms. Owens indicating that Hollywood was aware of the influence that it had over Canada's image: "You are a mountie, aren't you?" "That's right, ma'am." "I thought I recognized the uniform, cuz I watched it in the movie".

All these images aren't necessarily correct. Mountie Matt draws his gun and opens fire. However, this is considered taboo in real life. Pierre Berton also states in his book, "Mounties' hats never looked quite right in the movies" (Berton 130). Not everyone in Canada owns a dog-sled. There isn't always snow on the ground. And the red tunic is not the Lumberjack's mandatory uniform.

To get an even better feel for how Hollywood saw Canada, consider the following table which charts specific key words and how often they would show up in the titles of US-made movies:

Of 575 or so movies about Canada, more than 170 movies bore that kind of key words in their titles; only eight dared to use Canada or Canadian. Most movies about Canada are usually set in the wilderness of Canada as can be easily ascertained from the

Key Words in Movie Title	Number of Occurrences
North, Northwest, Northern	79
Woods, Wild, Wilderness, or Trail	50
Mounties or Mounted	37
Klondike or Yukon	18
Snow	11

Figure 7: Key Words in Movie titles created by Hollywood from 1907 and 1975 (Berton 19)



Figure 8: The movie poster for *Outpost of the Mounties* (1938)



Figure 9: The movie poster for *The Flame of the Yukon*

above chart. This is exemplified by figures 8 and 9. Images such as these have simple, naive perceptions of Canada.

In fact, most of these movies had their principle photography shot in California, at places such as Yosemite National Park. The films didn't use authentic props, and given the climate in California, they had to use gypsum as snow. We can thus see that neither the wardrobes nor the landscapes of these films are accurate. These and numerous other factual errors lead to the

conclusion that American productions have spent years lackadaisically making movies about Canada without performing even the most perfunctory research. While these are all small easily dismissed errors, the fact is that they are all somewhat based on Canadian history and geography.

When we think of movies and the media in general, we tend to regard them only as entertainment, but movies and television can and do perform a much greater role than that. They influence us by imposing ideas and images about the world around us. How many people learned about D.N.A. from *Jurassic Park*? Was the plight of William Wallace as well known before Mel Gibson made him the protagonist in an the Oscar-winning film *Braveheart* (1995)? How many people really know where these works of fiction differentiated from their source material? Both of these films contain as many gross factual errors as the aforementioned movies about Canada, yet because of the way they portray themselves most of the information they present is taken at face-value.

Even if we know that what we are viewing is stereotypical, many of us have no way to determine to what extent it isn't factual. Therefore, we sometimes subconsciously integrate the information from such unreliable media sources as movies into our conceptions about other countries, people, and things. It is all part of our suspension of disbelief. And as anyone who has ever gotten into a religious or political argument can tell you, beliefs are one of the hardest things in the world to change. Perhaps it is frustration at these sorts of deep-seated stereotypes that

exhibited itself as support for a direct attack on such Hollywood stereotypes. It is obvious that Joe feels that other things are more important to being Canadian than cold weather, dog sleds and Mounties.

Having any sort of group identity can be a double-edged sword. By their very nature such identities are composed of stereotypes. For example, Asians are smart, American's are arrogant, or Japanese are polite. Most of these images can be pretty racist, so we have to remember that stereotypes are not always true, although there are other ones which are not racist such as stereotypes about nerds and jocks. Sometimes these pre-conceived images are not even accurate at the point of their conception. As "The Rant" demonstrates, these stereotypes do not simply disappear because they have become outdated or false.

Yet without stereotypes no one would know the things that Joe seems to think are important. Do all Canadians believe in "peace keeping, not policing, diversity, not assimilation"? Do all Canadian's speak perfect French and English? Is Canada really the best place for Hockey? These are all stereotypes presented by the commercial, they just happen to be positive ones. As long as one is part of a group, one will be seen as having that group's stereotypical traits, both good and bad. Those stereotypes can be changed, but not easily. Those who object to this categorizing can derive identity and worth from who they are. For example, there is a stereotype that girls are not good at sports. Women who object to this can simply show that they do not meet this sexist stereotype. If your sense of self is based on you, then no

one else's conceptions of the groups you belong to matters. You do not have to be your country, you can be yourself.

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