The Rise of a Maple Syrup Auteur: From Found Footage to the Founder of Blackberry

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Abstract

Forging a national identity for Canadian cinema is challenged by the enduring stereotype that it lacks one altogether. America's overbearing cultural influences make it a struggle for a distinct Canadian cinematic voice to emerge. Early Canadian cinema responded to this hegemony with a realism and documentary motif – an approach championed by John Grierson during his tenure with the National Film Board. He aimed to steer away from Hollywood's narrative-driven commercial style. Canadian cinema is consequently defined in relation to its American counterpart – either mimicking it, often awkwardly, or rejecting it outright. Toronto-born actor and filmmaker Matt Johnson deftly straddles the divide, blending Canada's documentary tradition with American popular culture while injecting his signature style and irreverent humour. His mockumentary approach to lampooning American media tropes produces a product with an unmistakably Canadian flavour. This paper proposes Johnson's filmography as a synecdoche of Canadian cinema, bridging its historical foundations and emerging identity. His three feature films – The Dirties (2013), Operation Avalanche (2016) and Blackberry (2023) – along with his sitcom Nirvanna the Band the Show (2017-2018), will be viewed through the dual lens of Canada's cinematic past and charting a future distinct identity.

Keywords

Canadian, Documentary, Mockumentary, Realism, Parody, Cinema

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Introduction

Matt Johnson: A Canadian Filmmaker

Toronto-born actor, writer, and filmmaker Matt Johnson has directed four feature films and two television shows. Academic scholarship on Johnson's filmography is lacking, perhaps because his films are seen as too 'silly' to be taken seriously or too recent to have generated any scholarship. I aim to make the case that Johnson's films are deeply rooted in conversation with Canadian cinematic tradition while also forging a new path for its future. Johnson is arguably the most original Canadian filmmaker since David Cronenberg, changing the comedy landscape as much as Cronenberg altered the language of horror.

The cinematic identities of Canada and America are too vast and complex for one essay to tackle. The notion of confining the United States' "extensive commercial enterprise" (Bordwell, 1985, p. 1) and the entirety of Canada's early cinematic history into a single paragraph is both absurd and impossible. This paper will instead provide a brief outline of Hollywood and Canada's National Film Board's (NFB) studio systems, as well as identify their key differences.

One cannot speak of Classical Hollywood without acknowledging its vast studio system. The 'big five' studios dominating Hollywood's golden era were Warner Bros, 20th Century Studios, Universal, Columbia, and Paramount Pictures. Those studios played the equivalent role of Canada's NFB, establishing an American cultural identity through cinema. The American cinematic national identity was communicated through a specific Classical Hollywood style, which "conceals its artifice through techniques of continuity and invisible storytelling" (Bordwell, 1985, p. 1). Hollywood filmmaking has long strived toward the ideal of "pure entertainment" (Dyer, 1981, p. 19). While maintaining the illusion that what is on screen is not a constructed reality. Hollywood filmmaking was about creating a utopia focused more on what it "would feel like rather than how it would be organized" (Dyer, 1981, p. 20).

Canadian cinema, by contrast, was decidedly less glamorous, rooted as it was in documentary filmmaking. Canada could not compete with America's scale of film production; therefore, it had to offer something different. John Grierson, the former head of the Canadian National Film Board, which he founded in 1939 (Druick, 2007, p. 15), had a major influence on Canada's cinematic identity. The NFB was the defining voice of Canadian cinema, in contrast to the 'big five' studios of Hollywood. NFB documentary films embraced realism by using real places and people. The utopia presented in these early Canadian films was more grounded in community and realistic goals compared to the individualism typifying Classical Hollywood's cinema. The goal of early Canadian cinema was not to create Hollywood fantasies, but "to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations" (Leach, 2010, p. 17). If Hollywood was the *dream* factory, then Canada was the *reality* factory.

Johnson is primarily a mockumentary filmmaker, a genre that "plays with documentary conventions" (Wallace, 2018, p. 5), often lampooning them. The mockumentary shares the aesthetic qualities of a documentary, but its subjects are fictional. It pairs the seriousness of a documentary with lighthearted situations. The juxtaposition between the serious and formal style of a documentary with Johnson's often frivolous content makes the mockumentary the perfect genre for his comedy. Johonson speaks to Canada's realist past but with a comedic twist – using the seriousness of the documentary format for his own humorous purposes. Johnson transformed the NFB's mission from showing the world a realistic image of Canada to presenting it through a comedic lens. He embraced both 'pure entertainment' and crowd-pleasing tendencies of Classical Hollywood filmmaking, with the realism and documentary style of early Canadian cinema.

Despite the efforts of Canadian film institutions to establish a unique national identity for their cinema, the proximity to the United States has made this nearly impossible. Canadian cinema is usually stereotyped as a cheap American knockoff. Johnson leans into this perception, with American popular culture permeating every frame of his filmography. There is hardly a

single frame of his films that does not feature a Hollywood movie poster somewhere in the background. The uniqueness of Johnson's style comes from fusing Canadian documentary with Hollywood aesthetics – creating a new type of Canadian cinema. Johnson is not simply just a Canadian filmmaker: he is a maple syrup auteur, forging a new path for himself and Canadian cinema.

Matt Johnson and Telefilm

Canadian cinema is primarily sustained through public funding, notably from agencies such as Telefilm Canada. Matt Johnson expresses ambivalence toward this system. On one hand, he acknowledges the cultural value of a nation that financially supports its artists. His films have benefited from such funding. Johnson also praises Telefilm for "making feature films and every single television show" (Johnson, 2018, TIFF, 5.03), acknowledging that his work would not exist without them. On the other hand, he critiques what he sees as institutional "risk aversion" (Johnson, 2018, 4:00) that typifies Canada's film-funding bodies.

This conservative approach of public funding inhibits the creation of daring, innovative cinema – exactly the kind of work that could foster a robust Canadian cinematic identity. The problem of underfunding bold and original art is an issue shared with the American film industry. The United States suffers from "blockbuster mentality, which in turn sets financial expectations so unreasonably high that jittery studios refused to fund more experimental and iconoclastic moviemakers" (Friedman, 2007, p. 5). Canadian and American cinema are thus both held back by risk aversion. Patrons of Canadian media funds often lack incentives to support bold or original work, noting, "people are getting paid whether their show is good or not" and "you don't need to push the boundaries to get work because the work is already funded" (Johnson, 2018,5:21). American cinema faces similar constraints for opposite reasons: there is greater emphasis on earning a return on investments, rather than on creating culturally defining art. Johnson proposed a solution that would work for both Canada and the United States: take more

risks on imperfect and unproven filmmakers. Canada must "promote failure" as a necessary step in "training our young filmmakers" (Johnson, 2016, 25:15). Only if we embolden our young and innovative filmmakers to tell unique and personal stories is the only way to create a new and bold cinematic identity for Canada. Without this willingness to support creative risk-taking, the industry will likely remain stagnant, thereby curtailing the potential evolution of a national identity.

Johnson's filmography is marked by boundary-pushing storytelling and a refusal to compromise artistic vision. It demonstrates to emerging Canadian filmmakers that it is possible to tell their stories authentically – even within the constraints of a risk-averse funding landscape.

The Dirties (2013)

Part One: A Canuck Cinderella Story

If a Canadian film premieres at a film festival and an American does not see it, does it still exist? Luckily for Matt Johnson, American filmmaker Kevin Smith discovered Johnson's debut film, *The Dirties*, which premiered at Slamdance, a Los Angeles film festival for emerging and independent filmmakers. The film received high praise and was awarded the Grand Jury prize, which Smith later joked that the film festival was taken over by "true hostile Canadians" (Smith, 2013, 0:31). Smith was introduced to *The Dirties* by his friend and producer, Elyse Seiden, and was "moved immensely" (Smith, 2013, 0:54). He would later say it was "the most important film of the year" (Smith, 2013, para. 3). Smith then used his international fame to promote a low-budget Canadian film.

The Dirties benefited from "the international film apparatus" and how it "[bestows] cultural capital in generating a niche market for art cinema" (Longfellow, 2009, p. 171). Canadian cinema relies on the American film festival to gain global publicity. As much as Canadian cinema wants to distance itself from Hollywood's oppressive domination over culture,

it's impossible. The Canadian film industry remains too small to stand out on the world stage without an American audience to bolster it – ears for our falling maple trees.

Part Two: Realism, Mocumentary, and Governmentality

The Dirties reflects Canada's "fundamentally realist" (Leach, 2010, p. 17) style of filmmaking. The found-footage style mockumentary follows two bullied high schoolers, Matt Johnson and Owen Williams, as their plan for a fictional depiction of a school shooting for a student film turns into planning a real one. The timing of this film's release at Slamdance reflects the prevalence of school violence in America, as the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary happened just two weeks before its premiere. Real-life violence was a key inspiration for Johnson as "a lot of inspiration for this film came from our memories of what we saw as a kid when Columbine happened and understanding what was going on" (Johnson, 2013, para. 6).

The mockumentary style utilized was not just to reflect real-life violence; it is also done for practical reasons. *The Dirties*, like many Canadian debuts, was made on a shoestring budget. The film only cost $10,000 to make, with $9,000 used for music rights (Johnson, 2016, 14:48). Johnson utilized the film's structure to make its low budget work for the story. Presenting the film as a found footage documentary made by teenage amateurs provided cover for mistakes caused by limited funds and experience. The mistakes established narrative realism for the film, as it was ostensibly created by two confused and angry teenage boys.

Dirties takes "realism [in a] more radical direction" (Druick, 2007, p. 16) by not using the style to promote governmentality. Foucault defines governmentality as "the range of practices organized around conducting the conduct of self in society" (Druick, 2007, p. 23). It is further defined as "how to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed" (Foucault, 1978, p. 87) Film scholar Zoe Druick's book *Projecting Canada* (2007) tracks Canada's early film history and connects it with Foucault's concept of governmentality. Druick's chapter on "NFB and Government," explores how

Canada's tradition of documentary filmmaking defined its cinematic national identity—early Canadian cinema documentaries aimed to educate Canadian citizens on pro-social values and therefore promote societal norms. Films were used to promote "narratives of ideal citizenship" (Druick, 2007, p. 23) and pro-Canadian values. Examples can be found in Norman McLaren's work for the NFB, which encourages Canadians to to conform to the accectable social values of the time such as buying War Bonds during the Second World War – e.g., *Hen Hop* (1942) and not starting unnecessary conflict with one's neighbour (*Neighbours*, 1952) These films promoted positive interactions between both Canadian government institutions and citizens.

Johnson uses the aesthetics of early NFB films, but his films show zero interest in preaching governmentality like McLaren. The legacy of John Grierson and the NFB cannot be escaped, only subverted, as even the tools of governmentality can be used to criticize it. *The Dirties* protagonists are outsiders; they do not fit into generally accepted societal norms and are punished for it. Matt Johnson (the character) solves this issue by bringing a gun to school to shoot "only the bad guys" (Johnson, 2013), a solution that is neither legal nor pro-social. *The Dirties* criticize "our government agents [and] services" (Druick, 2007, p. 23) as being ineffective. This character convinces the Toronto building management to provide him with the building plans for his high school. The footage is fuzzy and shot at a tilted angle to blur reality with a fictional narrative. The lie that he needs the plans for a school project is not questioned by the staff. Even the immature Johnson showed concern over this lack of oversight and how a valid student ID was not required to obtain a detailed map of a high school.

***Operation Avalanche* (2016): How two Canadians infiltrated NASA.**

Operation Avalanche is Johnson's follow-up to *The Dirties.* It utilizes the same mockumentary style of filmmaking for different reasons. The film follows two young filmmakers working for the CIA in the 1960s who are tasked with faking the moon landing to win the space race against Russia. It is "a fake documentary about the CIA faking the moon

landing" (Johnson, 2016, 0:51), offering a speculative take on real-life events. *Operation Avalanche* balances "the tensions between documentary evidence, fictional re-enactment," which "acknowledge[s] the difficulties involved in creating convincing images of reality" (Leach, 2010, p. 31). Matt Johnson and Owen Williams, just like in *The Dirties,* play characters who share their real names – a key component in how they got the film made. Johnson and Williams (actors) used the cover of being graduate students at the University of Toronto to gain access to NASA. They lied, saying they were making a student film to earn their Master's degrees. The astronauts interviewed for the movie are not actors; they are "real people who really did these things talking about it with passion, how do you get an actor to do that" (Johnson, 2016, 11:27).

Operation Avalanche was made to look like it was shot on 16mm film, giving the impression that it was archival footage. However, it was shot digitally due to the film's limited $1 million budget, which, like *The Dirties*, was largely spent on licensing music (Johnson, 2016, 15:04). Cinematographer Jared Raab explained that "if you want to make something look like it's on film, you can shoot digital and then do a one-to-one transfer" and he "did the film transfers shot by shot" (Film Supply, para. 7). To achieve a more authentic look, Raab also stated: "We'd often match whole sequences to the stock footage" (Film Supply, para. 9). The attention to detail is immaculate; when the characters get new cameras, the visual quality improves, witnessing their world through their camera lens.

Johnson is a fearless filmmaker, never letting any setback compromise his creative vision. There is a scene featuring Stanley Kubrick on the set of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), as you cannot have a moon landing conspiracy theory without Kubrick. Johnson reached out to Kubrick's estate to recreate his image, and they declined, so he "reacreat[ed] Kubrick illegally from photographs that Time magazine took" (Johnson, 2016, 7:46). The voice was re-created using sound from a documentary made by Kubrick's daughter. The experience paints Johnson as a scrappy filmmaker who can make movie magic with a minuscule budget and powerful people set against him.

Nirvanna the Band the Show (2017-2018)

Part One: The Merging of Canadian Identity with American Hegemony

Nirvanna the Band the Show follows the antics of Matt Johnson and Jay McCarroll as they attempt to get their band a gig at the Rivoli, an iconic music venue in Toronto. Using Rivoli, a real Toronto-based music venue, successfully situates the show within Toronto, making it distinctly and unmistakably Canadian. Instead of recording music or calling to book a show, they do ever-increasing hair-brained schemes to get the Rivoli's attention. In the episode "The Boy" (Season One, Episode 6, 2017), they kidnap a sick child from the hospital with the hopes of leveraging their 'Make a Wish' to get them their coveted spot at the Rivoli. Toronto is the show's third protagonist, featuring several references to local businesses such as Honest Ed's. The show's main plot point revolves around getting a gig at a venue that's Toronto-based. It stands out from other Canadian media, where the "locations [are] disguised and dressed to look like somewhere else or nowhere at all" (Acland, 2013, p. 277). The decision received some pushback as, according to Johnson, fellow Canadian filmmaker Kenny Hotz stated that he "made a big mistake setting this in Toronto" (Johnson, 2024, 0:7). Because a distinctly Canadian setting might alienate viewers, the safest strategy is often to depict Toronto as a generic American city. Johnson rejects the disavowal of Canada in Canadian media because he "love[s] Toronto and Canada so much, that [he does not] try to hide it" (Johnson, 2024, 0:27).

Nirvanna the Band the Show wears its American influences on its sleeve. Retaining its distant Canadian and Toronto identity while revelling in its love for American popular culture. This stylistic choice reflects the psyche of the two protagonists, who are "perpetually stuck in the nineties" (Johnson, 2018, 0:50). *The Boast* (Johnson, 2017) revolves around the video game GoldenEye 007 (1997), showing America's influence on Canadian childhood nostalgia. American culture is hegemonic and Canadian media is negatively stereotyped as unable to sever itself from America's influence. That is why early Canadian cinema leaned into realism and

documentary style, wanting to distance itself from Hollywood's influence. *Nirvanna the Band the Show* utilizes a hybrid of both Canadian realist tradition and American popular culture.

The Big Time (Johnson, 2017) effectively mixes "guerrilla-style of mockumentary filmmaking" (Johnson, 2017, 0:31) with parody. This episode lampoons the American HBO series *Entourage* (2004-2011). The opening credits are a shot-for-shot recreation, using the same theme music and imagery. The episode follows yet another scheme to play the Rivoli, thinking that sneaking a film into the Sundance Film Festival will get them discovered – serving as a parody of how Canadian filmmakers are often 'discovered' at American film festivals. The scenes shot at Sundance were real, coinciding with the premiere of Johnson's sophomore film *Operation Avalanche.* The name of the movie that the fictional characters sneak into the festival shares the name of Johnson's real movie, blurring the line between reality and fiction. Johnson cheekily addresses the camera, saying, "That's the title, I'm not sure how much you guys know," (Johnson, 2017, *Nirvanna The Band the Show*, 2:53), breaking both character and the fourth wall. The fictional movie within a television show is a meta-commentary on Johnson's debut feature, *The Dirties.*

All the scenes shot at Sundance were real, including the interviews. Johnson took advantage of doing press for his real movie to make content for his television show. He even introduced the film in character and used it as the climax of the episode, finding joy that "the super old and Mormon crowd bought it" (Johnson, 2017, 5:13). The audience reacts with genuine bafflement as Jay McCarrol introduces a Matt Johnson film as something he made, not knowing they are part of a fictional narrative. Kevin Smith is the only person at the festival who was in on the joke – a nod to the publicity he gave to Johnson's debut film.

Part Two: Canadian Outlaws, or, How to Not Get Sued

Every episode of the show is a parody of American popular culture, lampooning everything from the obscure Wahlberger's reality television show to popular franchise films such

as *Indiana Jones*. The episode *The Band List* (Johnson, 2018) uses "wall-to-wall John Williams music without informing the copyright holder and without paying anything" (Johnson, 2018,2:19). Fair use laws are vaguely written, as filmmakers are allowed to use licensed material if they prove they have a "strong narrative reason" (Johnson, 2018, 1:21) for it. *Nirvanna the Band the Show* accomplishes "normaliz[ing] fair use practices in media" (Johnson, 2017, 8:46), which Johnson hopes will encourage more filmmakers to use licensed material for original storytelling purposes.

Johnson is a rebellious filmmaker who lives by the credence of Canadian filmmaker Bruce McDonald, "realize[ing] and revel[ing] in the fact that there are no rules" (McDonald, 1988, p. 3). Johnson did not have permission for most of what was filmed for *Nirvanna the Band the Show*; during the course of the show, he jumped on Toronto's underground train tracks, got kicked out of Canada's Wonderland, and purchased speed. Johnson is willing to take these risks because "once you have the footage, its your" (Johnson, 2016, 13:20) These are all things that are illegal but that lends to Johnson's unique voice in doing what others haven't taking his work "to the edge of chaos because that's where the crazy stuff is going to happen" (Johnson,2018, 9:31) Johnson is truly the outlaw filmmaker that McDonald valorized in the 80s – except Johnson actually breaks the law.

Blackberry (2023): Interpreting Canada to Canadians and The World

Johnson's filmography culminates in *Blackberry*, a dramatization of the creation of the world's first smartphone. The drama comes from the clashing personalities of the engineers, Doug Fregin (played by Matt Johnson), and Mike Lazaridis (played by Jay Baruchel), with their eccentric investor, Jim Balsillie (played by Glenn Howerton). Johnson retains his signature mockumentary style, even when crafting a tightly scripted drama. This is the first work of Johnson's where he does not incorporate real footage, nor is he playing himself. This does not mean that the style he had been developing throughout his career is not present. Johnson may not

be playing himself, but he is still playing "a very funny nerd character who's constantly quoting movies" (Johnson, 2023, 12:12).

The BlackBerry phone is one of the most important Canadian inventions – changing the lives of nearly every person in the world. It is an educational film about Canada's contribution to the tech world because "ninety-nine percent of international people who talk to me about this film say the same thing: I didn't know Blackberry was Canadian" (Johnson, 2023, para. 2). The film also reflects our relation to America as an all-encompassing force. The line stating, "You have the best engineers in Canada" (Johnson, 2023, 56:46*)* is a snide comment on Canada's perceived limited talent pool. The constant threat of a hostile takeover by American corporate interests hangs over the movie, presenting America as the schoolyard bully.

An American investor character expresses a dislike for hockey, and for the sake of a business deal, a Canadian must pretend to hate it as well. This demonstrates how Canadians must often truncate their core identity to appease American audiences. Johnson made no compromises for this film, never hiding its Canadianness to make it palatable for an international audience. Johnson takes umbrage with the fact that Canada does not get any international recognition for its achievements: "It's almost like it didn't happen on the world stage. Our country doesn't get the credit for the fact that we invented the smartphone" (Johnson, 2023, para. 3). In making a film that manages to be "both entertaining and unabashedly Canadian" (Johnson, 2023, 12:34), Johnson continues adhering to the NFB mandate "to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations" (Leach, 2010, p. 17).

Conclusion: The Future of Canadian Cinema

Analyzing Johnson's filmography paints a portrait not only of the artist but also of the nation that shaped him. Canadian history and aesthetics are seamlessly blended with a unique personal style. Johnson's distinct filmmaking style combats the notion that "English Canadian cinema has *zero* international identity*"* (Johnson, 2023, para. 10).

In finding humour in realism and uniqueness in parody, Johnson, in my opinion, takes what is stale and trite about Canadian cinema and makes it shine with originality. He shows Canadian cinema as having radical power because, with “the limitation of having no money and no power, you can actually do more interesting stuff” (Johnson, 2016, 6:24). Johnson represents a new destiny for Canadian national cinema and its filmmakers. A future where filmmakers can be inspired by Canada’s history and American culture without being shackled by either.

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