
Canadian Culture For the Mexican Public¹

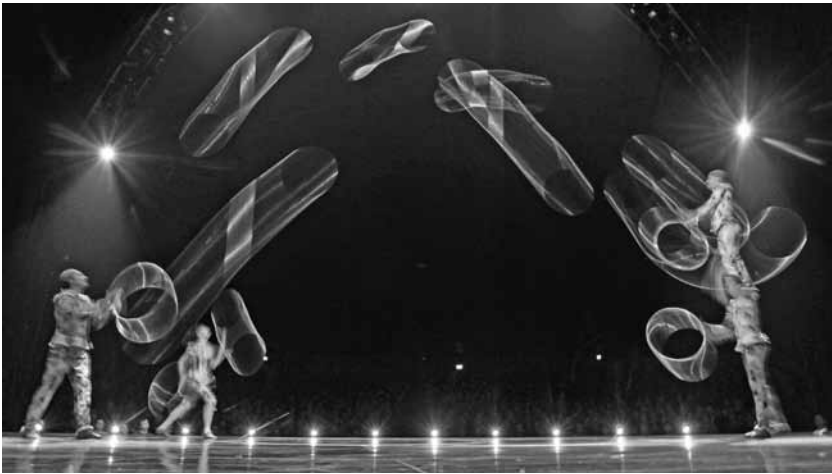
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IN THE MANNER OF A ROUGH INTRODUCTION

As a researcher in Canadian studies who teaches in the School of Spanish Letters, I am always aware of the translations of works by Anglo-Canadian and Quebecois authors (both men

and women) that I can offer my students. So, in December, while looking for an entertaining read, I bought the Aleph publishing house, Spanish-language edition of Douglas Coupland's latest novel, *Generation A*. Imagine my surprise when, on getting home and taking off the book's cellophane wrap-

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Lisi Niesner/Reuters

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per, I discovered that for the illustrious Spanish publishers, this resident of British Columbia is “one of today’s most prominent U.S. American authors.” Like any reader concerned with this kind of mistake, naturally, I immediately wrote to the publishing house, making an irate clarification—something writer’s agent should already have done—to which, of course, I received no answer.

My surprise was linked to how seriously we fetishists take books, since in autumn 2011, the morning TV news broadcast—with similar confusion, though more explicable because of the source—announced that “North American” musician and poet Leonard Cohen had received the Prince of Asturias Prize. In media-speak, “North American,” as all we North Americans know, generally functions as synonymous with U.S. American.

I have told these two short anecdotes to underline the importance of serious dissemination of Canadian culture in Mexico and how the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) has been a very significant part of it.

LITERARY PRIZES AND OTHER NOT-VERY-EFFECTIVE KINDS OF DISSEMINATION

In July 2008, Canadian poet and essayist Margaret Atwood was also given the Prince of Asturias Prize. What we Mexican readers, not too familiar with her work or the context in which she has produced it, would expect is that the country’s cultural supplements would publish a few articles on Canadian literature (which is actually made up of two literatures, one written in English and the other in French) or that Atwood’s books would have been placed on bookstores’ “re-

cent arrivals” displays. Except for one good article by Mónica Lavín in the “El ángel” (The Angel) section of the *Reforma* daily paper, nothing else happened.

CANADIAN CULTURAL ENTERTAINMENT AND ITS PRESENCE IN THE MEDIA

Sixteen years ago, when NAFTA’s signing was still recent, I sent a questionnaire to the Cirque du Soleil to find out if the signing of the agreement had facilitated the export of a show that, despite having been born as a provincial cultural product, had already turned into a company with a clear global focus.²

My questions revolved around Mexico’s inclusion in the North American cultural industries market.

The questionnaire was the following: 1) Have you scheduled a tour to Mexico in the future? If not, why not? 2) Do you have an official distributor for your products in Mexico? 3) Has NAFTA facilitated the export of your products to Mexico? 4) Is Mexico an important market for you? If not, are you thinking of exploring it in the future? 5) When you promote the circus, do you present it as a Canadian or a Quebecois product? 6) Is there an explicit intention to identify the circus as a national or regional company? 7) Is there an explicit intention to identify yourselves with Canadian multiculturalism, given the many ethnic nuances in the design of each show?

The brief response I received was the following: “Dear Graciela, We wish to thank you so much for your interest in Cirque du Soleil and extend our apologies for not responding sooner. [The] South American market is currently being

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evaluated by Cirque du Soleil. However, the project is still at a very early stage. More information will become available in the upcoming years as the project progresses. Once again we wish to express our gratitude for your interest.” Actually, for my research purposes, the note only told me that NAFTA was so foreign to this itinerant company that the person who responded had not even noticed that Mexico is part of North America.

But in the last decade, things have changed. Cirque du Soleil is one of the most famous, profitable shows in the world, and, of course, it performed its *Allegria* spectacle here, but not until October 2002. It put up a yellow and blue tent with 2 500 seats in the Santa Fe neighbourhood, and, since then, each time with similar success, it has played its *Dralion*, *Saltimbanco*, and *Quidam* seasons to full houses. The Mexican reviews did identify the company as Canadian. So, at least once a year, a Canadian cultural product is present in the mass media, and therefore, in the daily lives of Mexican audience members.

It could be argued that the case of the circus is exceptional worldwide and that, in fact, its national origin is what is least important. However, another strange phenomenon took place from January to April 2008 in Mexico City's Zócalo Square. The exhibition “Ashes and Snow” by Gregory Colbert, born in Toronto in 1960, also curiously displayed in a tent, called the Nomadic Museum, managed to beat all records for similar events. By March 5, 2008, with more than a month still to go, 1 589 776 people had already visited it after waiting in line for hours.³ Regardless of aesthetic considerations or why there were such crowds—we could explain the latter both because of the museum's fantastic location and because admission was free, to venture just a pair of hypotheses—, what is certain is that without the exhibit's content including any other Canadian reference except the photographer's origin, his nationality was mentioned both in reviews and in his presentation. Does this simple fact count, then, as sufficient for it to be considered “Canadian content”?

In this essay, I will review what has happened in the last decade with less massive phenomena, closer to what is called “high culture,” to see if the dissemination of Canadian content has increased in Mexico as the twenty-first century has advanced.

THE CASE OF QUEBECOIS AND ANGLOPHONE CANADIAN FILM

For the more than 30 years that the International Film Exhibition has been carried out in Mexico, fewer than 20 Francophone and Anglophone Canadian films have been part of it. Despite their excellent production, recognized worldwide, this is characteristic of Canadian films: they do not get the screen time they deserve either at home or abroad.

In recent years, the Canadian presence at the exhibition has almost disappeared, which is a shame because the advantage of the exhibition is that it sends the films to different cities around the country where they are shown not only in cultural institutes, but in commercial movie houses.

Apparently, this situation seems to have levelled off with the annual film festival organized by Mexico's National Cinematèque and the Canadian Embassy in Mexico City. Despite showing a large number of significant productions, this has the disadvantage of showing only in one theatre at the Cinematèque and another art cinema in Mexico City. In general, the films selected have been relevant ones, since they include work by important movie makers, but whose work has not yet been very well known abroad: film makers as diverse as Léa Pool, Guy Maddin, or Deepa Mehta, and productions that have been very successful domestically, like *C.R.A.Z.Y.*, or even documentaries, which are never as widely distributed as full-length fiction films. However, since very often no sub-titled copies are available, the mainly Spanish-speaking audience gets discouraged. So, the festival turns into an event for the cognoscenti, more than a real activity of mass dissemination.

In June 2003, the festival honoured David Cronenberg with a retrospective that was very important for Mexican audiences because, despite being the best known of Canada's film makers, his work has not been the most widely exhibited in the International Film Exhibition in Mexico.⁴ The selection was complemented with a series of round table discussions at the National Cinematèque. Cronenberg's films are distributed internationally, and some of them have been shown in

our country beyond the restricted space of the so-called art cinemas. It is very interesting that he was picked as the most representative Canadian film maker, and that the audience identified the Anglophone and Francophone film production of that country through a body of work that was rather difficult to digest due not only to its thorny subject matter, but also the visual impact it has on the screen.

To conclude this brief panorama, it is fundamental to keep in mind the importance of animated film, which has always made its presence felt at the annual children's film festival also organized by the National Cinematèque, focused on a different audience, in training. A large part of the list of films shown by the Cinematèque is of this genre, which, while not commercial, is successful, and which has earned Canada worldwide recognition.

MARGARET ATWOOD AND GABRIËLLE ROY CHAIR FOR CANADIAN STUDIES

In Canada and other countries of the world, most of what is called Canadian studies goes on in the field of cultural studies. Curiously, in Mexico (above all at the congresses organized annually by the Mexican Association of Canadian Studies), we can note that Mexican academics seem more interested in the economy in general, and NAFTA in particular, as well as the areas of Canada's domestic and foreign policy.

The idea of creating a chair came out of a series of meetings called Canadian Autumn that had brought together renowned writers, academics, translators, and journalists both from Mexico and from Canada. The meetings were held under the auspices of the UNAM, the Canadian Embassy, and the Mexican Association for Canadian Studies (AMEC), three institutions that have worked together for years to foster Canadian studies in Mexico.

The National Autonomous University of Mexico, through the School of Philosophy and Letters and the Center for Research on North America, in collaboration with the Canadian Embassy in Mexico, set up the Margaret Atwood and Gabriëlle Roy Chair for Canadian Studies on November 22, 2002. Present at the inauguration were Atwood herself and Marie-Claire Blais, among other prestigious Anglo-Canadian and Québécois writers.

The aim of the chair is to foster and stimulate academic exchange among professors, researchers, and eminent artists dedicated to the study of the different humanities disciplines

The Margaret Atwood and Gabriëlle Roy
Chair for Canadian Studies has been the most
productive chair in the UNAM in recent years, and, to
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herself gave a reading of her poems.

of Canadian culture through joint research projects, courses, seminars, cycles of lectures, colloquia, and publications, among other activities.

It was decided to name it after Margaret Atwood and Gabriëlle Roy because their prestige makes them two pillars of Canadian letters. The first, English-speaking, is an inescapable reference point in her country's contemporary literature. The work of Roy, who died in 1983, has been a landmark in the evolution of Canada's French-language letters. Both have outstandingly reflected and conciliated the diversity and cultural wealth of their people.

In recent years, the chair has favored interdisciplinary exchange both in teaching and in research and dissemination. It has brought together Mexican and Canadian writers, academics specializing in different aspects of Canadian culture, and has made it possible for students to deepen their knowledge about it through such diverse but complementary disciplines as the theory of translation and history, poetry, and documentary cinema. In addition, it has fostered knowledge and an appreciation of direct sources, the reading of novels and essays, and discussion with their authors.

Translations for the Mexican public have continually brought writers to the chair, which, in turn, has fostered translation and the publication of texts, showing the existence of a true dialogue not only between the texts and their readership, but also between the Canadian and Mexican intelligentsia. Symptomatically, this has been the most productive chair in the UNAM in recent years, and, to celebrate its tenth anniversary, Margaret Atwood herself gave a reading of her poems translated in Mexico at the School of Philosophy and Letters.

The website of the Association for the Export of Canadian Books curiously points out the importance of the flowering of university Canadian studies programs for disseminating Canadian literature. Although in this extremely brief article, I have not had the opportunity to talk about reading, translations of Anglo-Canadian and French-language Cana-

dian literature can be found for Mexican readers. Both the UNAM's libraries and certain bookstores have shelves lined with titles not only by Atwood herself, Leonard Cohen, and Douglas Coupland, but also Alice Munro, Nicole Brossard, Michael Ondaatje, Mordecai Richler, and Miriam Toews in translations done in Spain or in Mexico.

In the absence of a bachelor's program or specialization in Canadian studies, spaces such as the UNAM chair, the film festivals, or the book launches, and authors' presentations serve as effective means of disseminating a culture that seems increasing-

ly near because they allow us to view it from closer up, through its best exponents, and without the need for tents. ■■■

NOTES

- ¹ The author wishes to thank Claudia Lucotti and Dr. Laura López Morales for their generous contribution of information that made this text possible.
- ² See Graciela Martínez-Zalce, "Cirque du Soleil, a Canadian Product?" *Voices of Mexico* 41, October-December 1997, pp. 85-91.
- ³ Sergio R. Blanco, "La cultura como diversión, las musas mediáticas," in "El ángel," cultural supplement of *Reforma* (Mexico City), March 9, 2008, p. 6.
- ⁴ This is not the case for film makers of other nationalities, whether European, U.S. American, or Mexican.