

Canadian Feature Film : A Ward of the State

(カナダ映画：その現状)

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SUMMARY IN JAPANESE: 英語圏カナダの映画は、直接、間接的に州政府の影響下にあると言える。何故に政府が映画の製作に介入するのであるかと言えば、それは主義主張や政治的理由によるものではなく、むしろ社会的、文化的理由による。

1987年の時点でカナダで上映された映画のうち、カナダで製作されたものは3パーセント以下であった。国内市場の小ささ、関係者の意欲の欠落、アメリカ映画の強大な存在、さらには長年にわたる政府の無策が現状をもたらし、それ故に政府による介入が必要となった。例えば民間企業による映画製作は経済性がなく、カナダ映画が存在するためには政府の助成が必要であった。

社会の期待は二重のものであり、一つはありとあらゆる種類の映画をカナダで製作するべしという要求であり、もう一つは政府助成にふさわしい映画を製作せよということである。ラジオ放送が始まった時には、教育と文化に重点をおいた公共放送とするということが決定されたが、テレビジョン放送と映画においても同様の方針が守られているといえる。

Introduction

This study is an exploration into the development of English-language feature films in Canada and the role of the state in the process. Because of a variety of interdependent factors, Canada has

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become unique in its treatment of the cultural arts. In the area of feature motion pictures, the state has played a vital role in the course of events that have shaped the industry. The state has either directly (through the National Film Board) or indirectly (through tax incentive programs) influenced motion picture activities in both the public and private sectors.

There are two questions relating to the state's involvement in the Canadian feature film industry. The first is why the state is so involved in the industry, but perhaps the more important issue is how the actions of the state have influenced film activities. There is something in the Canadian experience with government film production that reflects a more general Canadian attitude towards state-owned enterprises. Rarely argued philosophically, and certainly never on socialist principles by governments in power, it seems more of a pragmatic response to the peculiar needs of Canadian society than an articulated doctrine. It is not somehow proper for Canadians to produce films, and certainly not fiction films. It is a paradoxical situation of governments willing to pay civil servants to make films while at the same time refusing to recognize or support the existence of anything outside their own bureaucratic circles.¹

To fully understand the reasons behind the active role of the state, one must first realize the major stumbling block which has plagued Canadian films since their inception; namely, film distribution and exhibition.

In 1987, less than 3 percent of the total films shown in Canada were Canadian. The small domestic market, the absence of a concerted entrepreneurial spirit, the almost total American domination of the marketplace and the hands-off attitude adopted by a succession of governments over the decades have been cited as reasons for state intervention. The active penetration of Canada's economy by the United States has had specific ramifications leading to government involvement in a range of activities. This has resulted in public-sector activity dwarfing other indigenous, private-sector efforts.² The limited domestic market made privately funded films economically infeasible. In short, the only possibility for Canadian feature film production to survive is with government support.

The second question concerns the development of the Canadian film industry as a result of state influence. State-legislated support has been most influential in the area of subsidies for film production. Other measures dealing with distribution and exhibition are few and basically ineffective.

Hollywood's influence on Canada demands that the state make any kind of cinema possible. In turn, the public expects the state to comply with certain guidelines in regard to the content of the media. In the early years of radio, it was decided that there would be a public broadcasting network with an emphasis on education and higher culture. This has carried over into television and film. In general, the public Canadian media take a responsible, analytical and dispassionate point of view.

Canadian Film History Until 1939

The motion picture industry began to develop just before the turn of the 20th century. Canada was no exception and felt the impact of this new medium from its inception. In 1900, Bioscope Company of Canada, a British film production company founded by the Canadian Pacific Railway, began to produce films with the intention of attracting immigrants to western Canada. Bioscope also produced the series *Living Canada* and the first Canadian feature film, 15-minute-long *Hiawatha, The Messiah of the Ojibway*. But the first legitimate Canadian feature-length film was *Evangeline*, based on the Longfellow poem and produced by Bioscope. The film ran about 75 minutes, cost \$30,000 to make and enjoyed considerable commercial success in Canada and the United States.

With World War I and the growth of Canadian nationalism, the use of motion pictures expanded to newsreels. But the increasing number of feature films provided the industry with its real impetus. The Canadian-owned Allen Theatres chain sprung up and the first motion picture bureaus were established by the Ontario government (1917) and the federal government (1923).³ Thus, from the outset the important pattern of publically supported film production and private

distribution/ exhibition was to haunt Canadian cinema.

During the period 1914–1923, numerous short and feature-length films were produced in Canada. Perhaps the most successful commercial filmmaker was Ernest Shipman, who produced seven movies on location during this period. His highly successful *Back to God's Country* was made in Calgary in 1919, with much deserved credit going to his wife, Nell. Shipman is often considered to be one of the true pioneers of Canadian cinema. However, his success was to be short-lived, as Hollywood began to penetrate the Canadian market with greater frequency.

So, from the beginning, the state had established itself as a prime user of motion pictures to encourage immigration and assist in the war effort. It had also become a producer of films. By 1917, there was a need to develop a state agency to centralize all government film production activities. The Exhibits and Publicity Bureau was formed to accomplish that task in addition to producing films for the promotion of Canadian trade and industry. Reflecting its increased importance, the bureau was expanded in 1923 and became known as the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau. This newly formed organization continued to serve Canada's film needs and promote western movement. The director responsible for the success of the bureau from 1920 to 1927 was Ray Peck. Although a strong supporter of the bureau, Peck was outspoken against the development of Canadian feature films and advocated the importation of American films. The bureau was known for its reluctance to support sound movies until the late 1920s.

It was during the 1920s when the shortcomings of the ever-present distribution problem for Canadian films first became apparent. Canadian productions declined as American-owned theaters showed foreign imports. The one consolation was that some of the American films had Canadian storylines. In 1923, Famous Players of the U.S. took control of the Allen Theatres, virtually giving them control over the Canadian exhibition market.

While European countries took measures to prevent Hollywood domination in the 1920s, Canada took no comparable action. Production in Canada was restricted to inserts for American newsreels,

short films, and documentaries produced by government motion picture bureaus and a handful of private companies.⁴

The 1920s did bring about the production *Carry On Sergeant!*, which is often cited as the first Canadian film epic. Unfortunately, *Carry On Sergeant!* is also considered Canada's most expensive flop. The production cost over \$500,000 and had difficulty competing with American war story counterparts.

Ironically, the first wave of active feature filmmaking in Canada came as a result of a measure to control the number of foreign movies into Great Britain. During the years 1923 through 1937, the British government passed a measure (the Cinematograph Films Act) ensuring that a certain number of motion pictures shown in British theaters would be of British or Commonwealth origin. As a result, a series of low-budget films, commonly called Quota Quickies, were produced in Canada by companies such as Commonwealth Productions and Central Films. Many of these productions, like *The Viking*, were financed by Americans. Partly because of the dominant American presence in this process, the British amended the law in 1938 to include only British productions.

It was obvious by the early 1930s that little of the cinema which was related to Canada could actually be considered indigenous. With relatively few exceptions, most early Canadian cinema was produced and exhibited by Americans. In 1930, the state launched an investigation to determine the extent to which Americans were involved in the film industry. The Combines Investigation Act proved Famous Players to be guilty of maintaining virtual control over Canadian distribution and exhibition but no remedial action was taken. By the end of the decade, most Canadian production and distribution companies were unsuccessful and had become extensions of the American system.

Meanwhile, the Government Motion Picture Bureau continued to produce the popular short documentary *Seeing Canada* series from 1919 until 1939. Other popular exceptions outside of the bureau's normal activities were films such as *Lest We Forget* in 1935 and *The Royal Visit* in 1939.

National Film Board

In 1938, Canada was concerned with the direction of its film industry and John Grierson was brought in to report on the state of filmmaking in Canada. The next year, Parliament created the National Film Board Act with the National Film Board's mandate to produce and distribute films designed to help Canadians understand the ways of living and the problems of Canadians all over the nation.

Grierson was primarily a propagandist and the war in Europe dictated a strong need for information and propaganda films. But Grierson took the National Film Board beyond just a tool for supporting the war effort. What he saw in the movies was a marvelous vehicle for reaching people and making them see the world the way he saw it. There wasn't a word for Grierson's doctrine so he coined one: documentary. He defined it as "the creative interpretation of reality."⁵

Grierson was a great believer in the power of actuality and the documentary film. He turned his back on the escapist entertainment of Hollywood in favor of documenting and reflecting the realities of society and its many peoples. Above all, Grierson believed in the power of a realist cinema.⁶

The National Film Board has produced thousands of films (including hundreds that have won international awards) on a variety of themes and topics and in genres from documentary to fiction. It has played a key role in a number of major areas of film: animation, the development of direct cinema, some of the first postwar fiction films, and documentary dramas.⁷

Grierson left the film board in 1945 but his tradition of quality documentary filmmaking continued. For years, the National Film Board was the primary film producer in Canada and the training ground for many talented filmmakers. Even today, the NFB documentary tradition continues to influence Canada's film industry.

1940-1960

Feature film production in Canada during the 1940s was almost non-existent, with all film efforts revolving around the Film Board and the war. In 1941, the board absorbed the Motion Picture Bureau and primarily involved itself with the documentary form. The only significant feature film production during this period was the forgettable *Bush Pilot* filmed in 1945.

The postwar trend to neorealism, centered in Europe, focused attention on ways to integrate documentary and fiction. In Canada, it came to dominate documentary efforts. Dramatized sequences were also widely used in training films.⁸

By the end of the 1940s, the state once again made a decision which was to affect the film industry in an enormous way. For a decade, the Canadian Cooperation Project was to all but eliminate Canadian feature film production. In 1948, the Motion Picture Association of America made a deal with Canada to stimulate northern tourism by including obvious Canadian references in their scripts and to assist in the distribution of National Film Board shorts in theaters throughout the United States. In return, the Canadian government agreed not to block film rentals to the United States or to stimulate feature film production in Canada. The result of the agreement on the Canadian film industry was devastating. Only a few productions were shot in Canada and the occasional American movie reference to Canada did not produce the increase in film production or tourism that had been anticipated. The project was terminated in 1958. The true importance of this 10-year agreement was that it virtually stopped all film production in Canada for that period of time. Canada's film industry was relegated to the role of supporting for American productions.

Another development occurred in 1956 that was to have a profound influence on shaping the future of Canadian film. Partially because of the political climate in the mid-1950s, the Film Act of 1956 called for moving the National Film Board from the political center of the country, Ottawa, to Montreal. This move exposed the NFB, a predominantly English-influenced institution, to the culture and

language of French Canada.

With the lack of film production activities in the 1950s, filmmakers turned to the only viable alternative: the state-supported Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The CBC began television broadcasting in 1952 with the majority of production originating live or through films. In fact, the CBC has always relied heavily on film for broadcast purposes. By the late 1950s and 60s, film documentaries were a regular part of the CBC's production activities, led by a new generation of filmmakers, in particular Beryl Fox, Cameron Graham, Don Haig, Philip Keatley, Ron Kelly, Allan King, Douglas Leiterman, Arla Saare, Grahame Wood and Patrick Watson. The documentary was especially important but would give way in the 1970s and 80s to the dramatic film, where the CBC would invest the largest portion of its budget.⁹

Filmmakers in English Canada welcomed the outlet in the emerging medium of television and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. However, film for television was not the same as film for theatrical release. Television demanded a different kind of filmmaking. CBC and NFB productions for television had to be completed in shorter time spans and required a new approach to the art. It was obvious that television had an enormous effect on an entire generation of filmmakers. Canada's best talent, people like Norman Jewison, Ted Kotcheff, Sidney Furie, Silvio Narizzano and Arthur Hiller, all moved into television before leaving the country to make their feature films elsewhere. An entire generation of young filmmakers left due to an inhospitable production climate.¹⁰

Despite the impact television had on the Canadian film industry, it at least provided a vehicle to produce and an outlet for the finished products. Strangely enough, an outgrowth of the intense television production was renewed activity in feature-length films. But these attempts to establish a viable commercial film industry met with little success.

Throughout the 1950s there were ongoing debates concerning the future cultural direction. Out of that period came a series of government reports such as the Massey Commission's Royal Inquiry into the arts which created the Canada Council and the Fowler Report

on broadcasting. Essentially, these studies were to determine the role of government in the next decade.

Documentary into Fiction

In the early 1960s, several things seemed to be going on simultaneously, all creating a bridge between documentaries and features. Whether they were working on the French side or the English side of the board, or whether inside or outside the government, Canadian filmmakers had a lot in common. They didn't have the budgets to do dramatic, scripted features, and they didn't have a background in theater or fiction, so they had to work out their aspirations through the documentary form. Because of this imposed limitation, Canadian filmmakers tended to develop a strong sociological sense.¹¹

Allan King was a film producer who felt that time had come for a less traditional type of documentaries to be produced and favored the romantic style of Robert Flaherty to the more analytically oriented Grierson. King wasn't alone in sensing that the time for making feature-length documentaries in Canada had passed. The new frontiers had been created by filmmakers who were discontent with the limitations imposed by the documentary form. They had gone as far as they could go with actuality. Now they were ready to move on to fiction, to what Grierson had dismissed as "temptation for trivial people".¹²

An example of this new form of film is the *Candid Eye* series of documentaries produced for television by the Unit B group under executive producer Tom Daly. This style is similar to the direct cinema styles of the French Unit using hand-held cameras with sound and wide-angle lenses.

Although the NFB has, with only occasional exceptions, confined its production activity to documentary and educational films for the non-theatrical markets, its relatively few feature films include some of the best Canadian features that have been produced. Two of these films include the *Drylanders* (1963) and the improvisational feature

Nobody Waved Good-Bye (1964) directed by Don Owen. Filmmakers like Jutra and Owen were out of the cinema verite mainstream because of the political undertones to their work. Both independent and NFB films during the mid-1960s were typically low-budget films and shot on 16mm film stock. Most dealt with the growing pains of adolescence and the passage into adulthood, as if this theme corresponded with the psychic mood of a country moving into full nationhood.¹³

Another important trend in Canadian filmmaking was the advent of low - budget features produced in the universities. David Cronenberg produced futuristic student films and was to become one of the most successful commercial filmmakers in Canada.

Film : The Director's Medium

In 1967, Canada made it's first serious commitment to feature film production and to stimulate private-sector production. The Canadian Film Development Corporation was funded with \$10 million to develop a feature film industry concerned with production but virtually ignoring the distribution and exhibition aspects of the industry. Early films financed were attempts to imitate American movies which had become so popular in Canada. Most of the early CFDC-financed films were commercial failures. However, some received international recognition. Eventually, financial incentives through tax benefits resulted in a large increase in private dollars invested into Canadian production.

Filmmakers began to leave the CBC and the National Film Board to venture out and make their own features. Most of the films from 1968 through 1974 were basically filmmaker-generated movies. Writers and directors who had ideas that they wanted made into films would get together with producers who put together the package. Producers in name only, they generally did not have expertise in film or distribution. Occasionally there would be support from a studio, as was the case with Paramount and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*.

Despite the upswing in Canadian film production, there was still

a serious distribution problem in Canada. Even the lower grade Hollywood films got better distribution in Canada than Canadian films. The result was that only a small percentage of the films produced in Canada ever reached a Canadian audience. Without access to the exhibition network, films produced by the Canadian industry yielded very little cultural or economic return.¹⁴

There were breakthrough pictures, like *Goin' Down the Road* (1970), *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974) and *Why Shoot the Teacher* (1977). But the marketplace, dominated by American-controlled theater chains in collaboration with Hollywood studios, made it difficult for small independent films to reach the public. Some of the best people found it impossible to do the work they wanted to do, and they began to feel the industry was collapsing around them. It wasn't enough, it became obvious, to have a few talented people along with technicians and a government sugar daddy. The missing element, the theory went, was the high-powered producer.¹⁵

The CFDC has made the mistake of assuming that the only workable model was the Hollywood model. Since there is not enough money in Canada to compete with expensive Hollywood movies, all that is left is to compete with the cheap Hollywood product that occasionally becomes a surprise money-maker.¹⁶

By 1972, investment money in Canadian films began to dwindle. The CFDC began to finance low-budget features not dependent on private investments. Once again, feature films in Canada became rare.

Film : The Producer's Medium

Between 1968 and 1977, the CFDC succeeded in increasing the number of Canadian films produced and the annual level of investment. But it was not successful in building a strong domestic production and distribution industry.¹⁷ By 1978, the CFDC had managed to shift its emphasis to the "film industry" from film as an "art form". Thus, Canadian film moved from cultural films to big-budget commercial projects. Film as a director's medium had become a producer-

driven industry. By 1979, the creative contributors to film had become less important than the investors. The result was low-grade productions of a generic nature. The new breed of producer who put the whole package together became the only way of getting films produced in Canada.

The important stimulus to this movement was the Capital Cost Allowance. The CCA, part of the Income Tax Act, was introduced for Canadian filmmakers in 1974 as a 100 percent allowance for feature films. This tax-shelter for investors enabled them to deduct taxable income for certified Canadian productions. The immediate result was an increase in production of films with American investors aimed at the North American market for generic-type themes. The period known as "Hollywood North" had begun. Although the main characters were usually American stars, many Canadian actors and craftsmen gained valuable experience. In 1976, incentives were extended to include videotape productions. And in 1978, the CDFC's focus shifted to partial investing for private investors. Between 1978 and 1980, this program provided an average indirect federal subsidy of some \$125 million annually to private-sector film production. It is widely believed that it stimulated an unprecedented boom in the Canadian feature-film business, although the effect tapered off in 1981 when investment declined.¹⁸

The use of foreign talent and generic themes was prevalent during the second half of the 1970s. Many co-productions with foreign filmmakers gave little sense of the Canadian identity. Most of these films did not do well commercially. However, a few exceptional films emerged from this commercial period. *Why Shoot the Teacher* (1976) and *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1977), both adapted from Canadian novels, retained their integrity and did well at the box office.¹⁹ These films, along with others such as *Paperback Hero*, *The Rowdyman*, and *Between Friends*, had a Canadian element which differentiated them from the less memorable American imitations. They were not only produced in Canada, they at least attempted to catch the Canadian spirit.

It was perhaps a measure of the cultural climate in Canada in the late 1970s that when a full-fledged feature-film industry blossomed, the

one genuine star it created was a veteran of the Ottawa political machine, Michael McCabe. It was he, as director of the CFDC, who made producers king. McCabe's detractors said he didn't care about Canadian cultural expression, that he had no commitment to native talent, that he neglected Quebec and that he wouldn't recognize a good movie if it were sent up to his room on a platter by room service. His boosters claimed he was exactly the brash, fast-talking wheeler-dealer needed to put Canada on the map of the movie world, where what counted most were nerve and gambling instincts. One thing McCabe's fans and critics agreed on: he singlehandedly revolutionized the Canadian film industry and put his stamp on it. McCabe believed his mandate was to turn moviemaking in Canada into a profitable operation. Since it was impossible to do without major foreign sales, that meant making movies people all over the world would shell out money to watch. If the only way to do that was to make "Canadian" movies on home turf with Hollywood stars and frequently even with Canadian cities disguised as American cities, well, so be it.²⁰

Ironically, out of this producer-driven period emerged perhaps the most internationally known Canadian film producer, Ivan Reitman. While Reitman was earning a reputation for entrepreneurial genius, his interest in raising the level of movie art seemed at times minimal. By the mid-1970s Reitman was regarded by some observers as a symbol of what had gone wrong with the Canadian movie industry.²¹

Production was increasing but there was still the problem of distribution. In 1975, Secretary of State Hugh Falkner was under pressure to deal with the distribution problem and announced a voluntary quota on Canadian films to be shown in theaters. This quota was never closely followed and the state once again relaxed its stance in dealing with the distributors.

By 1980, the estimated wholesale revenue from the sale of films on the Canadian market for both theater and television was \$219 million; of that amount, 98.2 percent and 92.7 percent, respectively, went to foreign producers.²²

The federal budget of Nov. 12, 1981 reduced the Capital Cost Allowance for certified Canadian films from 100 percent to 50 percent.²³

At that point, it seemed that Canada had begun to give up on ever having an indigenous film industry which could be both artistically acclaimed and commercially viable. In another attempt to privatize the industry, a Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee recommended expanding the CFDC and reducing the NFB to a center for advanced research and training.

Telefilm : Television and Film

From 1981 through 1983, there were hardly any feature films made in Canada. The decrease in CCA incentives and the perennial problem with distribution demanded a change in direction for the film industry. The state turned the mission of the CFDC into one which would help solve these problems. In the summer of 1983, the Broadcast Program Development Fund was created and administered by Telefilm to finance films through the CFDC. The intent on the fund was to provide financial resources to Canadian producers for high-quality Canadian programming that would be attractive to the Canadian viewer. For producers to qualify for the fund, they had to have a Canadian broadcaster agree to exhibit the product on television.²⁴ This requirement neatly sidestepped one of the most embarrassing problems of Hollywood North the fact that many of the films produced with the help of public subsidy couldn't get distribution and never reached an audience.²⁵ Then, in the summer of 1986, the Feature Film Fund was created as another pool for direct investment money. Films that were done in the Broadcast Fund were essentially financed for television.

With the creation of the Broadcast Fund, it was obvious that the government had given up on the possibility of a truly Canadian cinema. Telefilm, unlike the CFDC, was also interested in "international" films. Telefilm's mandate was to foster and promote independent films and television production across the country. Telefilm has also ventured internationally into co-productions with other countries' production companies.

In 1984, the National Film and Video Policy was issued by the

federal minister of communications. This statement of intent had two primary goals. The first was the development of the private-sector Canadian film and video industry and the second to reduce the production role of the National Film Board.

The next year, the Broadcast Fund extended its mandate to support script and project development and to participate in documentaries as well as the established categories of drama, variety and children's programming. The fund also emphasized Canadian-owned and controlled distribution companies.

The effect of the Broadcast Fund was to increase the production of films for television but it did not benefit feature films produced for theatrical release. Thus, the state created the Feature Film Fund, following the recommendations of a Canadian cinema industry task force which identified the distribution and exhibition problem. Despite public production policies for film, exhibition and distribution remains a major concern. Only about 2 percent of screen time in Canada goes to Canadian films. In 1987, there were only two major movie theater chains in Canada; Famous Players (owned by Paramount Pictures) and Cineplex Odeon (owned partly by Universal-MGM). Both chains have contractual arrangements with the seven Hollywood majors who produce and distribute their films.²⁶

In 1986, two Canadian productions were invited to the Director's Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival: Denys Arcand's corrosive *Le Declin de L'Empire Americain* and Leon Marr's claustrophobic *Dancing in the Dark*. In contrast to a cinema perpetually obsessed with the dilemmas of adolescence, a fascination that suggests an imaginative inability to grow up, these two films confronted the issues of middle age with unflinching insight. Perhaps they indicate, finally, that both our culture and film industry have matured into adulthood.²⁷

Summary

This study has presented the relationship between state-legislated measures and the quantity and quality of Canadian film. Clearly, film activity has always been a function of what the state has dictated.

The problem tends to revert back to the issue of distribution and exhibition. The Canadian Conference of the Arts said that it is not the size of Canada's domestic market but rather the size of the filmmakers' share in the market that matters. Canada's theatrical market is one of the richest in the world. Canada is Hollywood's No. 1 foreign customer. The nation's television industry has a combined public/private revenue in excess of \$1.5 billion annually. The Canadian film market would be fully capable of supporting a thriving domestic production industry if only Canadian producers had more access to it. This is today, as it always has been, the central issue of the Canadian film industry.²⁸

It is easy to understand why the federal government is willing to make a massive investment to try to help Canadians acquire a decent share of the market. It makes sense if only because we cannot afford to lose all these Canadian dollars (\$219 million in 1980) to foreign producers.²⁹ But a more idealistic explanation would be the desire to allow Canadian artists an opportunity to express themselves in the interest of national unity and in support of the Canadian identity.

Notes

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- 3 Peter Morris, "Film" in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 1st Edition (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1985), p.629.
- 4 Morris, "Film" p.630.
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- 13 Handling, "Canada", p.93.
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- 16 Knelman, *This Is Where We Came In*, p.98.
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- 21 Knelman, *Home Movies*, pp.13-14.
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