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Sign Off — Chris Dornan

In the United States, as in Canada, it is customary for television stations to sign off the air at the close of the broadcasting day with a short film especially crafted to accompany the playing of the national anthem. As a programming genre, such films distinguish themselves in a number of ways, not the least of which being that they are expressly designed not to be watched: from the opening bars of their soundtracks, they signal the termination of programming - and hence extend an immediate invitation to either switch channels or turn off the set.

In that regard, the television genre which the sign-off film most resembles is the commercial. In others, it resembles the offspring of the commercial, the music video: disparate, evocative images are juxtaposed so as to give visual dimension to the national anthem - which is to say, the narrative weave of the images is at all times answerable to the soundtrack.

Unlike music video, whoever, the sign-off film is commissioned by, or indeed produced by, an agency of the state. Whereas the former operates as the television advertising arm of the recording industry, the latter serves as an elaborate (albeit ignored) commercial on behalf of the state itself.

The intent in the sign-off film, as in the national anthem, is to both celebrate and instill a national spirit. As a result, such films inevitably capitalise on patriotic symbols already at hand, thereby working to reaffirm their efficacy.

The sign-off is not intended for a foreign audience - it speaks to domestic viewers, reminding them to be proud - and perhaps it is presumptuous to comment on the construction of another nation's internal monologue. (And in any case, what cultural labour can possibly be performed by a film no one watches?) But the fact remains that it is a film crafted to the specifications of the state, and one therefore that tells the 'story' of its nation in as promotional a manner as it can muster.

Precisely because it is an exercise in the orchestration of patriotism, it presents a snapshot of a nation as it would see itself. It is, in short, an ideological travelogue for folks already resident. And in that regard, if in no other, it provides a revealing text for analysis.

As it happens, the proximity of Canadian urban centres to the American border, together with the unhindered availability of U.S. programming north of the 49th parallel, means that the Canadian viewing public has long been familiar with both the Canadian and American signature sign-offs. The greater Ottawa area, for example, receives via cable a U.S. Public Broadcasting channel from Watertown, N.Y. Its viewership in Canada outnumbers its American ratings to the extent that the station nightly plays the Canadian national anthem before its own. The accompanying sign-off films differ markedly in tone and content, and the fact of their juxtaposition vouchsafes a glimpse of how the two nations go about

organising the consent on which their respective hegemonies rest.

In each case, the anthem is heard without lyrics, and in that sense the accompanying images are the lyrics. What follows is an annotated songsheet for the sign-off films aired by WNPI, Watertown.

The Canadian sign-off film, to the strains of 'O Canada', opens with:

1. A travelling shot from a helicopter flying fast and low across a vast expanse of tundra, passing over a trapper and his dogsled.
2. The travelling shot continues, this time from a helicopter flying fast and low over a vast expanse of wheat, passing over a combine harvester.
3. Pan from a helicopter up majestic snow-covered Rockie peaks.
4. A tracking shot of a trawler ploughing through choppy seas, a small Canadian flag fluttering from its mast in the storm.
5. Close-up of waves dashing against a breakwater with an enormous spray.
6. Ocean spray in the foreground momentarily obscures the view of a Newfoundland outport in the background.
7. A travelling shot of a horse at canter, pulling a 19th century sulky. The two figures in the sulky are dressed in black hats and overcoats - possibly Mennonites or Dukhabours, members of religious faiths which reject industrial technology.
8. Medium close-up of a fisherman in a dory, shooting up at him as he rows underneath a wooden footbridge.
9. Deep focus shot of a teeming city street - probably St. Catherine in Montreal, taken before English-language signs became illegal.
10. Medium close-up of a traffic policeman, with white gloves and white peaked hat. He is looking to his right, his left hand palm forward in the 'Stop' gesture. He turns directly to the camera and gestures traffic to move forward.
11. A tracking shot of a cowboy on horseback, riding with his back to the camera, about to lasso a steer.
12. Medium close-up of a miner, underground in a lamp helmet, talking on a telephone.
13. Travelling shot from the back of a mine vehicle as it moves through a (potash?) tunnel.
14. Figures struggling down a snowswept street at night in the midst of a blizzard.
15. An Inuit woman in sealskin parka inside an igloo, mukluks hanging overhead and a kettle at the boil behind her.
16. Medium close-up of a miner gesturing a load to come forward. He is weather-beaten, fifty-ish, almost indistinguishable from the traffic cop in shot 10.
17. A wedding party outside Casa Loma (a garishly ostentatious ersatz castle in Toronto). The groom and bride are kissing.
18. A large group of children standing in a schoolyard in parkas and toques, their breath visible, all looking at the camera. In the centre of a sea of white faces, a young black child smiles at the camera.
19. Shot of an ice hockey game in progress in a large indoor arena, taken from

high behind one of the goals. Opposing forwards swoop in toward the net and the goalie makes a save. The arena is packed, but neither team is distinguishable.

20. A woman in a black leotard pirouettes in a dance studio.
21. A shot taken from on board a toboggan hurtling down the slide on the boardwalk outside the Château Frontenac in Quebec City, during the Winter Carnival.
22. The Snowbirds - the aerobatics team of the Canadian Air Force - execute a fantail manoeuvre, smoke streaming from their tails.
23. A male canoeist in wide-brimmed hat paddling through rapids.
24. An eagle flying in the sun against a rockface.
25. A shot from above of a woman diving backwards from a three meter tower into the blue of a swimming pool.
26. Greg Joy in maple leaf tunic clearing the bar at the Montreal Olympics in 1976 and turning to the crowd in exultation, knowing that he has just won the men's high jump silver medal.
27. A young blonde girl, possibly three years old, in the midst of an audience, bursting into laughter and turning to hug and kiss her baby brother. Freeze on the kiss. Fade to black.

It should be said that while sign-off films do vary from station to station and market to market, this one is the standard Canadian model, and has aired across the country for more than ten years.

The American film that follows contains almost as many shots, but far fewer images: many are repetitions, or shots of a single object from different vantage points. To the tune of 'The Star Spangled Banner', it opens with:

1. A static shot of the Iwo Jima monument in Washington - a statue of U.S. marines raising the Stars and Stripes. The statue is immobile but for the flag fluttering in the breeze.
2. Fade to close-up of the flag streaming in the wind.
3. Fade to a U.S. Marine in dress uniform touching his sword to the peak of his cap.
4. Slow pull-back shot of the Hudson River and the Statue of Liberty, with the sun sinking toward the horizon. As it crowns the statue in a halo of light...
5. Fade to close-up of the Stars and Stripes streaming in the wind. Pull back to reveal the stark white obelisk of the Washington Monument jutting skyward behind the flag.
6. Fade to a field of eight flags streaming in the wind.
7. Cut to a slightly more distant shot of the same flags.
8. Fade into colour Second World War footage of U.S. Marines in landing craft in the South Pacific.
9. Cut to a U.S. battlefield rocket launcher loosing a salvo into the sky.
10. Battlefield footage of explosions.
11. More men in landing craft, this time with the flag visible.
12. More battlefield explosions. Shots of Marines advancing from a beach head.

13. More battlefield explosions, this time at night. Tracer bullets.
14. Fade to a long shot of the flag flying atop a hill at Iwo Jima
15. Close-up of the same flag.
16. Fade to pull-back shot of the flag flying in front of the Washington Monument.
17. Slow zoom into the face of George Washington on Mount Rushmore.
18. Zoom into the face of Abraham Lincoln.
19. Fade to slow zoom toward all four of Rushmore's presidential likenesses.
20. Fade to footage of Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima.
21. Fade to a slow pan up the front of the Iwo Jima monument.
22. Fade to a profile of the monument.
23. Fade to a close-up of the flag streaming.
24. Fade to an aerial shot of the monument, circling around it from above. Fade to black.

Clearly, the most striking aspect of the American film - particularly in contrast with its Canadian equivalent - is its stark and unabashed militarism. Indeed, it might well have been made originally for the U.S. Marines themselves, which would explain its curious fixation with a single battle. (If the intent is to celebrate the American military, why concentrate on only one of its branches?)

From a Canadian perspective, however, what is noteworthy is not the film's sponsoring agency, but that American programmers (and presumably American audiences) would find the military a perfectly appropriate symbolic vehicle for the nightly promotion of nationhood. If the film is designed to remind the citizenry of what its society is 'about' - or what is good and valued about the United States - why select the nation's elite troops as the focus?

Which is not to say that the film is opaque or objectionable to Canadians. On the contrary, it is so simple and so typically American as to be transparent: it is the flag and the man-made edifices that are meant to remind viewers succinctly and emotionally of what America is 'about'. The concentration on the Marines underscores not only the necessity of strength (to defend the ideal against those who would do it harm) but that the defence of one's country is the highest of honours. We are returned to the symbols of nationhood invigorated by battlefield glory, yet sobered by the price of duty.

By comparison, the Canadian film is a good deal more explicit in its articulation of the values that are to be prized: as a younger country, and a country built on uninterrupted, continuing immigration, the need is to spell out what Canada is, and in so doing urge viewers to embrace the vision.

As a result, and of necessity, the film eschews any preoccupation with monuments. Canada has a number of structures or landmarks that speak the country's name, but they tend to be either distinctive architecture (the CN Tower is to Toronto what the Opera House is to Sydney) or geological features (Niagara Falls is the Canadian equivalent of Ayer's Rock). As 'Canadian' as such objects may be, they neither capture nor signify a recognisable and coherent set of cultural values - it is the construction of such values that is at stake - and hence

they would be useless as didactic ingredients.

Thus, while the star spangled banner is used throughout the American film, the maple leaf is seen only twice in the Canadian, and then only briefly.

In fact, the Canadian film studiously avoids the most shopworn representations of Canada: there are no moose, no beavers, and no Mounties in red tunics. (Hockey is featured, of course, but then the omission of hockey would have been incompetent.) Nonetheless, it handles the major motifs of 'Canadian culture' with some deliberation.

The land itself is a recurring feature, but without the picture-postcard sentimentality of Lake Louise or Peggy's Cove. The image, rather, is of an eminently uncomfortable climate - from the storm of the Atlantic to the chill of the tundra to the sting of a city blizzard. Even the school children are shot bundled up in the midst of winter. If the U.S. film looks as though it were made by the Marines, the Canadian version looks like the product of immigration authorities - not so much to discourage immigrants as to let them know what they're in for.

Certainly, the film both promotes and acknowledges the multi-cultural fact. From the Inuit woman to the modern dancer, the intent is to signal diversity and to cultivate tolerance.

Work is equally emphasised, not insignificantly in the form of trapping and mining and fishing - hard labours that live off the land, that speak self-sufficiency and exports, and into which few immigrants are drawn.

Almost more revealing than the contents of the film, however, are the omissions. Clearly, as a genre, the sign-off film operates under various constraints. Because it deals in ostensibly ahistorical values, and because it has to be aired night after night, year after year, it should avoid images that would obviously date it. (Alas, given the inclusion of Greg Joy, one knows that the Canadian film is more than ten years old. The fact that the hockey players are not wearing helmets suggests that other footage is even older.)

More importantly, however, is the absence of anything vaguely controversial or socially-divisive. Because the objective is a film that is not only universally acceptable but universally uplifting, any image that might (legitimately) alienate a bloc of viewers is steadfastly avoided. Hence there are no images of the Houses of Parliament (millions of Canadians, after all, did not vote for the government in power), or of the Queen or Governor General (many Canadians find the British link increasingly anachronistic, if not objectionable), and certainly nothing to indicate a tension between the two official language groups - which means, in effect, that the film makes no mention of Quebec, bilingualism and the federation's central problematic.

Crucially, the two films distinguish themselves by virtue of the consensus each supposes. The American version presumes a national consensus so entrenched that patriotism can be summoned simply by panning down the Statue of Liberty. In the Canadian case, the sign-off film is one small element in the larger effort to build a national identity - not insignificantly, one characterised by diffidence,

compromise, and the utter absence of the sort of single-minded will suggested by the U.S. visual anthem.

As a Canadian, one cannot know how Americans view the Canadian sign-off signature, but one is left in no doubt as to how one views the American. Given that the ideal sign-off film should offend no one and inspire everyone, the simple prominence of military heroism as an inspirational staple south of the border - the fact that armed force should be seen as a perfectly appropriate means to celebrate the American identity; the fact that this is what they would have their flag associated with - is as brute an indication as any of the difference between two otherwise remarkably similar nations.