

Sin and sovereignty: the curious rise of Cinepax Inc.

By Paul Corupe

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Perce Rock is one of the biggest tourist attractions along the Gaspé Peninsula, even when there isn't anyone having sex on it. In 1971, visitors to the 70-metre-high rock formation surely would have done a double take when they noticed a demonstrative couple on the peak, helicoptered there by the upstart Montreal film company Cinepax Inc. to publicize its latest offering, a sex farce called *Loving and Laughing*. The RCMP, however, were not amused. Called in to remove and arrest the offenders, the Mounties were left floating in a boat just offshore, unable to make it up Perce Rock. "All the papers were grabbing it—that kind of stuff gave us a big hit!" recalls former Cinepax president John Dunning with a chuckle. Even in the first decade of their 40-year careers, no one—not even the Mounties—could deny Cinepax partners John Dunning's and Andre Link's flair for showmanship. In the wake of a political and cultural renewal that took shape throughout Quebec in the 1960s, Cinepax established itself at the heart of low-budget film production in Canada. Fostering the careers of budding filmmakers such as Ivan Reitman and David Cronenberg, Cinepax was home to many of Canada's most controversial films, including *Shivers*, *Ilsa the Tigress of Siberia* and a series of spicy Quebecois sex comedies. With a profound ability to capitalize on their evolving audience, Link and Dunning were able to take the lead in commercial film with distinctively relevant genre pictures that pushed the very boundaries of the Canadian film industry.

Cinepax's rise to prominence closely mirrored Quebec's own coming of age after the death of long-reigning conservative premier Marcel Duplessis. Elected into office in 1960, Jean Lesage's Liberal government attempted to assert Quebec's autonomy by freeing the province's social services from the influence of the Catholic Church. In a six-year period that has come to be known as the Quiet Revolution, broad and sweeping reforms were introduced in an effort to regain control of the province's economy from Ottawa, and to secularize welfare, education, health care and culture. Under Lesage, Quebec emerged from the strict morality of Catholicism in the sexually permissive 1960s and early 1970s with a newly discovered sense of self. For some, like Dunning, it was a "breath of fresh air," but for others, it was nothing short of a culture shock, tantamount to being stranded in the St. Lawrence alongside those frustrated RCMP officers at Perce Rock.

Nowhere were these insurgent notions of free love and political sovereignty better set to collide than in local movie houses, and Cinepax was just the film company to harness the spirit of the Quiet Revolution. Dunning, who literally grew up in the independent theatre chain his father owned, initially formed Cinepax in 1962 to handle theatrical distribution for a few classic French films originally bound for the CBC. Audiences happily welcomed the change from the usual Hollywood dubs, and within a few months, Andre Link, a businessman born in Hungary with experience in both film distribution and booking, joined the enterprise. Link's strength in business and financial matters meshed perfectly with Dunning's interest in the creative side of filmmaking, and together they began to furnish theatres with films that most Quebec viewers had never seen before.

In the past, the Catholic Church-controlled Le Bureau de Censure had dominated Quebec's film industry, rejecting more than 7,000 films since 1913, but under new Liberal director Andre Guerin, Link and Dunning saw that Le Bureau, too, was about to undergo a transformation. The

pair began to beef up their distribution roster with a selection of cheaper genre pictures to supplement the more expensive—and not always successful—French films. Although they often struggled for Le Bureau approval of titillating films like *Samoa*, *Queen of the Jungle* and *The Screentest Girls*, Link and Dunning both credit Guerin for gradually ending film censorship in the province, and in turn, the entire country. As Le Bureau became more lenient toward depictions of sex and violence, Cinepix [sic] continued to import increasingly risqué features—a steady stream of what Dunning terms “prostitution films.” As he explains, “We were buying all kinds of films from Italy, Germany—drug-ridden, horrible things. We would bring them in and promote them with all kinds of garish advertising, as much as we could get by with.”

In 1968, under mounting pressure from audiences and filmmakers, Quebec became one of the first provinces to replace its censorship board with a more tolerant film classification system. Not coincidentally, this was also the year that Cinepix decided to expand into production. Link says that he and Dunning looked at the films they were distributing and figured, “We can make one of these. We certainly couldn’t do any worse!” Taking advantage of the collapse of censorship, the pair amassed a slim budget of \$90,000 and started work on their first film, *Valerie*. Directed by university professor Denis Heroux, *Valerie* essentially recast the kind of “prostitution films” that Cinepix frequently distributed with local appeal and references for Quebec audiences. The film tells the story of Valerie (Danielle Ouimet), a young girl who escapes a dreary Catholic orphanage for the bright lights of Montreal. Along the way she gets involved in the rising youth subculture, which leads her to a less-than-illustrious career as a topless dancer and high-class prostitute. When she eventually meets and falls in love with an artist, she abandons her sinful past for a new life as a housewife.

Although ostensibly a morality tale, *Valerie*’s final redemption serves primarily as a justification for the film’s uninhibited sexuality, an astute dramatization of the newfound freedom that Quebecois audiences felt at the time. Aware of the significance of their soft-core film, Link and Dunning played off of the Quiet Revolution heavily in the advertising, and suggested that *Valerie* was symbolic of a Quebec that was prostituting her natural goods to the rest of Canada. “We were able to get the cultural people involved with that kind of a sell,” explains Dunning.

Mustering sufficient appeal for both academics and popular audiences alike, *Valerie* raked in over \$1 million at the Quebec box office in 1969, setting earnings records and prompting Link and Dunning to tap Heroux to direct a follow-up, *L’Initiation*. Released in 1970, it concerns the sexual and political awakening of Victoria (Chantal Renaud), a young French-Canadian girl who becomes enamoured with a famous French author played by Jacques Riberolles. Although the film contains an obvious nod to *Valerie* with the casting of Ouimet as Victoria’s promiscuous friend Nadine, the film dispensed with the moral pretension of its predecessor, and is far more literal in its association of female flesh with freedom.

When *L’Initiation* went on to an equally successful run, Quebec theatres were suddenly inundated with a rash of similarly conceived softcore sex comedies dubbed “maple syrup porn,” a term that Link rightfully calls “misleading for the uninitiated,” as the amount of nudity in these films seems almost modest by today’s standards. Cinepix continued to lead the way in the newly established genre with Heroux’s third film, *L’Amour humain* (1970), Roger Fournier’s *Pile ou face* (1971) and Claude Fournier’s *La Pomme, la queue... et les pepins!* (1974). Link and Dunning even tried to break the phenomenon outside Quebec with two English-language maple syrup porn entries, John Sone’s *Love in a 4 Letter World* (1970) and *Loving and Laughing* (1971), but despite headline-making promotional gimmicks, these films did not translate well outside the province. Instead, the maple syrup porn phenomenon peaked locally with a rival production, Claude Fournier’s *Deux femmes en or* (1970), which significantly stepped up Quebecois pride with cameos from French-Canadian celebrities and politicians.

Not surprisingly, Cinepix began to wind down its sexploitation films in favour of thrillers and horror as early as 1972. “Everybody jumped on the bandwagon. It got too competitive,” claims

Dunning, who first looked beyond the profitable skin flicks with Jean Beaudin's *Le Diable est parmi nous* (1972). Making his screen debut, Daniel Pilon stars in the film as a newspaper reporter who attempts to track down a satanic conspiracy, only to get caught up in a black mass. A self-conscious expansion into a new genre that often plays like a cross between a maple syrup porn and *Rosemary's Baby*, Link readily admits that "the end result was pretty scattered." Still, *Le Diable est parmi nous* remains outstanding for a variety of reasons, including its unique, funky score and some particularly garish examples of 1970s interior design. Although the influence of Catholicism had certainly diminished, the Church was still part of life in Quebec, and audiences were not responsive Dunning claims. "It was sort of a punch against the Catholic Church, but it wasn't successful—we learned not to fool around with anybody's religion."

Cinepix's distinctive brand of Canadian filmmaking soon began to attract young hopefuls from outside the province. Ivan Reitman first appeared on Link's and Dunning's doorstep in 1971, seeking U.S. distribution for *Columbus of Sex*, a soft-core feature he had made at McMaster University with Dan Goldberg and John Hofsess. Reitman's ability to handle both the creative and business side of production impressed the partners. "He's an amazing guy," Dunning says. "When Ivan took charge of something, he really took charge of it." Through Cinepix, Reitman was able to secure Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) funds for his second film, *Foxy Lady* (1971). After directing *Cannibal Girls* (1973), Reitman formed a partnership with Link and Dunning and supervised production on Cinepix's second attempt at commercial horror, *Shivers*.

Like Reitman, David Cronenberg was another prospective filmmaker from Ontario who came to Montreal looking for a break. Originally slated to direct *Loving and Laughing*, Cinepix's recent shift in focus to horror fit just fine with the novice writer/director, who had recently completed a script for *Orgy of the Blood Parasites*, a film about sexually transmitted organisms that insidiously spread throughout a Montreal apartment complex. It took more than three years for CFDC head Michael Spencer to approve funding for the daring film, but when it eventually hit theatres in 1975, *Shivers* (as it was eventually retitled) proved just the kind of embryonic national breakthrough that Link and Dunning had been looking for.

Unlike *Le Diable est parmi nous*, which simply married Cinepix's maple syrup porn formula with elements of horror, *Shivers* made a splash (or more accurately, a squish) on Canadian screens precisely because it threatened the guiltless sex and freedom that films like *L'Initiation* hedonistically celebrated. *Shivers* went on to similarly handsome profits in the U.S., but not before it was vilified by the cultural elite back home. Robert Fulford's scathing review of *Shivers* in *Saturday Night* magazine was less a criticism of the film than a denunciation of the publicly funded CFDC's cultural priorities. "Michael Spencer was under the gun, and undeservedly," Dunning explains. "He was trying to promote a business, making films that would put people in theatres." Link defended the film and Spencer in editorials in *Cinema Canada*, and published a pamphlet for distribution to Members of Parliament entitled, "Is There a Place for Horror Films in Canada's Film Industry?" Clearly Cinepix and Cronenberg believed there was, and both were able to weather the attack and finish a second collaboration, *Rabid* (1977), before Cronenberg was lured back to Toronto.

Cinepix's repertoire expanded throughout the mid-1970s, from the performance film *Across this Land with Stompin' Tom Connors* to *The Mystery of the Million Dollar Hockey Puck*, a surprisingly fun Disney-styled kid's movie that featured cameos from Guy Lafleur and the Montreal Canadiens. In the end, though, Link and Dunning could not resist the promotional power of controversy. Inspired by their success distributing *Love Camp 7*, an American sexploitation film that takes place in a Nazi stalag, the pair continued to turn their well-established "sex as freedom" metaphor inside out with the creation of *Ilsa She Wolf of the SS* and its sequels—arguably the most excessively shocking films of the 1970s.

Ilsa was born when Link and Dunning enlisted University of Toronto English professor John Saxton to pen a script about Nazi medical atrocities based on the French book *Les Mediciens*

maudits. “[Saxton] loved the idea of getting off his pedestal at the university to do Ilsa,” explains Dunning. “He was a kinky guy!” The resulting script, titled *Ilsa She Wolf of the SS*, was drenched in sex and sadism with a splash of tongue-in-cheek humour, as Nazi commandant Ilsa tortured and seduced a variety of young men and women in a Nazi medical base. “It was just a piece of fluff, but it was very strong fluff,” offers Dunning.

Rather than shoot the film in Canada, the script was farmed out to self-professed “exploitation monarch” David F. Friedman, who borrowed sets leftover from *Hogan’s Heroes* and charmed former Las Vegas showgirl Dyanne Thorne into a career-defining performance as the larger-than-life dominatrix, Ilsa. Advertised as a “Different kind of ‘X’,” *Ilsa She Wolf of the SS* was released in 1975 to resounding box office, breaking records during its astounding six-month run at a New York City 42nd Street grindhouse, *The Apollo*. Ilsa may have been extreme, but it was also groundbreaking. Link points to the character of Ilsa as “cinema’s first female villain,” a fact that was not lost on reviewers who were willing to look past the indelicate subject matter to pick up on Ilsa as a strong, feminist character.

The illegitimate and unacknowledged daughter of the Canadian film industry (*She Wolf of the SS* is not technically a Canadian film), Ilsa eventually had her homecoming in the fourth and final sequel, 1977’s *Ilsa the Tigress of Siberia*, in which Cinepix attempted to reclaim and update its notorious character. This time, Ilsa is plucked from her station at a post-war Siberian prison camp and transported to modern day Montreal to run a chain of brothels and kidnap Russian hockey players. Eschewing the popular physical torture of the first three films for the horrors of electroshock—an apparent reference to the medical brutality sanctioned under Duplessis in 1950s Quebec—the sequel remains relatively unappreciated, even among fans of the series.

Films like *Ilsa She Wolf of the SS* had secured Cinepix a reputation as an exploitation production house during the 1970s, but as the decade came to close, Link and Dunning found their biggest success wasn’t sex or horror genre pictures, but a PG-rated comedy. After producing 1978’s *Animal House* for Universal, Reitman returned to both directing and the company that helped launch his career to helm the Bill Murray summer camp romp *Meatballs* (1979), which grossed US \$43 million in North America after it was picked up for distribution by Paramount.

Unfortunately, *Meatballs* proved to be more than just Cinepix’s last film of the 1970s; it also marked the end of an era. Although Link and Dunning never wholly relied on the CFDC for their funding, new cultural criteria instituted in the wake of the tax-shelter collapse all but barred Cinepix from receiving further government assistance. Unfazed, Cinepix [*sic*] turned its attention stateside, and continued to seek and secure distribution from major American distributors throughout the 1980s, for films like the 3-D sci-fi epic *Spacehunter: Adventures in the Forbidden Zone*, directed by Lamont Johnson, and J. Lee Thomson’s slasher/horror *Happy Birthday to Me*. In 1989, Cinepix merged with Famous Players to distribute its films, only to buy out Famous’ interest in the distribution partnership five years later. In 1997, the reorganized C/FP [*sic*] was acquired by Lions Gate Entertainment (LGE) and Link currently resides as chairman of LGE, while Dunning, a former chairman of LGE, remains active in production and screenwriting.

Cinepix Inc.’s legacy as Canada’s first commercial film empire goes beyond the locales of its films or its talent for besmirching tourist attractions in the name of promotion. With the pioneering maple syrup porn films *Valerie* and *L’Initiation*, Link and Dunning were able to reflect the political and sexual liberation of Quebec amid the changing face of film censorship. Building on their initial success, Cinepix continuously pushed Canadian film into uncharacteristic genres and styles that attracted both audiences and some of our most prosperous filmmakers. Call them exploitation merchants, marketing wizards or merely fiercely proud Canadian producers, Andre Link’s and John Dunning’s unique Canuck twist on commercial cinema managed to accomplish what few have done before or since—to turn ostensibly local preoccupations into unqualified international successes.

