

SEPTEMBER 6, 2024

COLVILLE AND THE CINEMATIC THE ARTIST AND THE MOVIES

How film impacted the iconic Canadian painter and vice versa.



Alex Colville, *Pacific*, 1967, private collection.



Still from the film *Heat*, directed by Michael Mann, 1995, courtesy of Monarchy Enterprises, BV & Regency Entertainment (USA), Inc.



Since the first moving picture in 1878, the mediums of film and painting have had close ties—something on our minds at the Art Canada Institute as thousands fill cinemas this week during the Toronto International Film Festival. No Canadian painter has had closer connections to movies than Alex Colville (1920–2013). As ACI author Ray Cronin writes in [Alex Colville: Life & Work](#), “Film, arguably the most influential art form of the twentieth century, had a distinct impact on how Colville composed his images.” He goes on to explain that the painter was a cinematic artist whose signature style included “layering multiple viewpoints and time frames in his images.” Here’s a look at how film has been impacted by the iconic Canadian creator and how Colville himself has been influenced by film.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE HORSE IN MOTION AND HORSE AND TRAIN



Eadweard Muybridge, *The Horse in Motion*, 1878, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

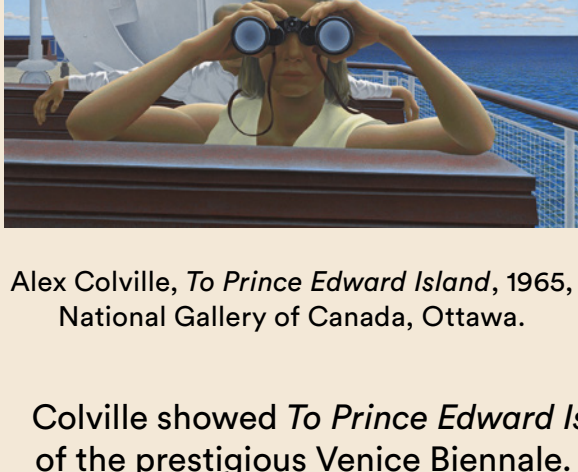


Alex Colville, *Horse and Train*, 1954, Art Gallery of Hamilton.

Noted as the world’s first foray into cinema, *The Horse in Motion*, 1878 (above left), by the English artist Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904) is the first example of a technique used to record the passage of time. The work bears a sharp resemblance to Colville’s *Horse and Train*, 1954 (above right)—among the most recognizable images in Canadian art. The painting presents a locomotive turning a curve just seconds before its light illuminates a dark stallion. Tensions between nature and machine, order and chaos, and the waking world and the realm of nightmares are all at play in this simple, indelible picture. As Ray Cronin writes in [Alex Colville: Life & Work](#), film’s immediacy, and its ability to tell stories, had an impact on how the artist constructed his images. Of film, and in the context of discussing *Horse and Train*, Colville said that he aspired to “the kind of immediacy of films.”

Read more in [Alex Colville: Life & Work](#) by Ray Cronin

TO PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND AND MOONRISE KINGDOM



Alex Colville, *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Still from *Moonrise Kingdom*, directed by Wes Anderson, 2012, courtesy of Focus Features.

Colville showed *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965 (above left), at the 33rd edition of the prestigious Venice Biennale. The painting’s scene is situated on the top deck of a P.E.I. ferry, where a woman looks directly at the viewer through a pair of binoculars while a man sits behind her, his face blocked from view by her body. Colville described this work as a contrast between what he calls “the searching vision of the female” and the “stupid and passive” approach of the male gaze: “The woman sees, I suppose, and the man does not.” The remarkable composition inspired American director Wes Anderson to restage the scene in his film *Moonrise Kingdom*, 2012 (above right).

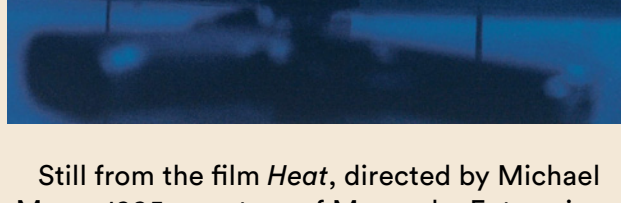
Read more about [To Prince Edward Island](#)

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PACIFIC AND HEAT



Alex Colville, *Pacific*, 1967, private collection.



Still from the film *Heat*, directed by Michael Mann, 1995, courtesy of Monarchy Enterprises, BV & Regency Entertainment (USA), Inc.

One of Colville’s greatest paintings, *Pacific*, 1967 (above left), depicts a male figure looking out over an ocean, while a handgun lies on a wooden table that has a ruler along one side. The man seems relaxed, yet the weapon creates a foreboding tension. Colville developed the dramatic composition from 1967 to 1968 while he was a visiting artist at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This mesmerizing image was paralleled in *Heat*, 1995 (above right), directed by Michael Mann. In a nod to Colville’s painting, Mann focused the camera’s attention on the gun placed on the table—a cinematic quotation that directs the film’s audience to themes of psychological alienation and moral apprehension.

Read more about [Pacific](#)

INFANTRY, NEAR NIJMEGEN, HOLLAND AND DUNKIRK



Alex Colville, *Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland*, 1946, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.



Still from *Dunkirk*, directed by Christopher Nolan, 2017, courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures.

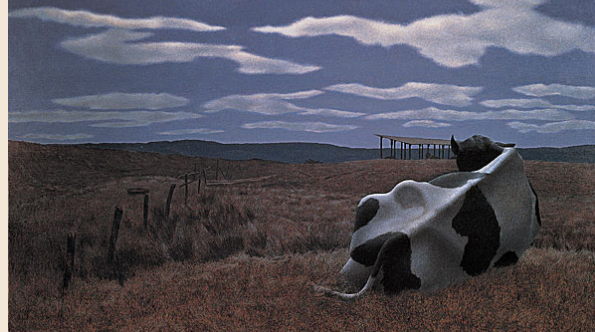
In *Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland*, 1946 (above left), Canadian soldiers walk through the mire of the Scheldt estuary in the Netherlands. They are a series of plodding figures, weighed down by the horrors of battle. One of Colville’s earliest paintings, created during his time as an official war artist, the work foreshadows the artist’s obsession with geometry—a dominant aspect of his later works. The slanted, infinite line and foreboding clouds of *Infantry, Near Nijmegen*, *Holland* appear in a scene from *Dunkirk* (above right), the 2017 film directed by Christopher Nolan, in which trapped Allied troops are evacuated using every serviceable naval and civilian vessel that could be found.

Read more about [Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland](#)

THE SHINING AND MOON AND COW



Still from *The Shining*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, 1980, courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures.



Alex Colville, *Moon and Cow*, 1963, private collection.

The Shining, 1980 (above left), is a masterpiece of fright by Stanley Kubrick. The film is noted for its cinematic beauty that includes no less than four Colville paintings: *Woman and Terrier*, 1963; *Horse and Train*, 1954; *Dog, Boy, and St. John River*, 1958; and *Moon and Cow*, 1963 (above right). The movie tells the story of Jack Torrance (played by Jack Nicholson), a winter caretaker at the isolated Overlook Hotel in Colorado. As he settles in with his wife, played by Shelley Duvall (pictured above left), and their young son, forces overtake the family. Duvall’s fear is palpable in the scene where she mounts the stairs wide-eyed and unsure of the sheer horror ahead of her. The irony and tension of the moment are heightened by the knife-carrying character’s proximity to Colville’s serene image hanging on the wall, which calls to mind the nursery rhyme of the cow jumping over the moon, a reference to untrammelled delight.

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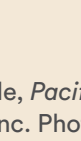
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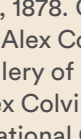
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