

A political choice

If there's a catch 22 in this industry, it's that 'you can do it right, and get it wrong.'

Look at the production of *Humungus*. The producers took note of the dreary production scene, and structured the picture accordingly. They had the script idea tested and it proved popular. They planned a low-budget, privately financed shoot and went ahead with a distribution deal. They got Avco Embassy on board for world sales.

Ostensibly, Mickey Stevenson and Tony Kramreither did it right. Without begging the question of whether Canada needs yet another horror flick, a low-budget film with an American sale is a welcome deal in today's climate.

And then things went wrong. The private deal fell through, a public issue became necessary, the budget went from \$1.2 million to \$2 million, and now everybody's up in arms about this "high-budget" film and the agreements which had been made with the crew on a "low-budget" basis. These are the disputes which cause producers to want to move to the States; making a film according to Canadian rules is onerous indeed.

Then again, look at the pay-TV applications. Only one national application states clearly that it does not intend to use American films to fuel its programming, nor will profit-making be its aim. Moreover, Canadian cable subscribers would have universal access to the channel, thus pumping more money into the Canadian program production industry than any other projected pay channel.

Ostensibly, the TeleCanada application promises to stem the Americanizations of Canadian culture by offering an alternative. It also responds to the CRTC's objective of providing substantial funds to Canadians for production. Moreover, the CFDC backs a universal system, and the NFB insists that the pay system adopted be in the public interest.

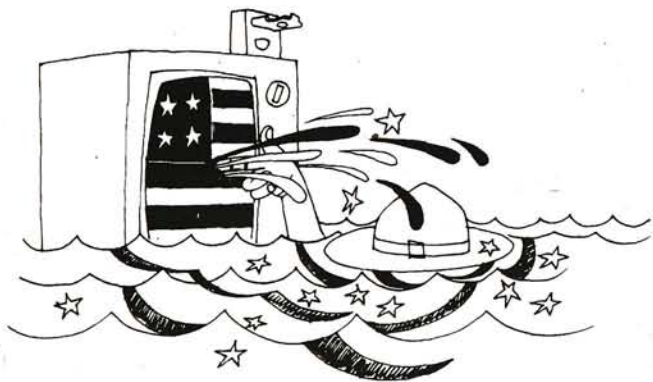
But no one seriously thinks that a universal application can receive the license. Not to be profit-motivated is, in itself, suspect. Besides, chairman John Meisel told the Canadian Television Association on May 13 that the CRTC had "rejected monopoly and non-discretionary models of pay TV." Never mind that a week later he told the Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, "We have ruled out nothing." He managed to create a climate in which it is difficult to take a universal application seriously.

Then there are the pay-TV hearings themselves. Whether or not the CRTC has gone about its business correctly is open to discussion, since it did not respect the statutory period between rendering the applications public and holding the hearings. It was, however, a positive gesture on the part of the cable operators to broadcast the hearings across Canada, and certainly the public nature of the proceedings have allowed everyone access to the information.

This time, however, we can't afford to bungle the results. Among the filmmakers in the country there is a growing skepticism that the pay-TV proposals can, in fact, produce the results they claim. There is also grave doubt that the CRTC will be able to regulate the pay-TV system once the license is awarded. Once the studies and debates are over, the decision must be the right one if production in Canada is to be given one last chance.

It is part of the Canadian context that the government creates the climate within which the film industry flourishes or fails. The point system, the capital cost allowance, the CFDC and NFB are all inventions of the government. So, too, is the CRTC. In many ways, the failure of the film industry to develop more rationally is a political failure. It follows that the attribution of the pay-TV license is a political choice of primary importance.

The editors



Time well spent?

With a certain disbelief, I have recently found myself - along with many others - with time to read the papers ("Slump" says *Cinema Canada*, "Film Industry Reels with Woe as Boom goes Bust" headlines *The Gazette*) and time to ponder my situation and that of the industry in general. Consequently, I have come to certain realizations.

It all starts with the words "Canadian Film Industry." They present an interesting conundrum. Each word has a specific meaning. Any combination of two of them also has a specific meaning. Canadian Film: *Mon Oncle Antoine, Going Down the Road*. Canadian Industry: Stelco, Noranda Mines. Film Industry: 300 million dollars invested in Canadian films. But put the three words together and you reach for Aspirin. Within them lies a mind-boggling ambiguity.

Granted there is such a thing as Canadian Film - *Duddy Kravitz, Wedding in White*. More or less successful at the box-office. Usually less. Subsidized generally as NFB productions or with major CFDC participation. A little impact in world cinema. Zero on the world market. But successful in at least one pairing of words - as Canadian Films.

And granted there is such a thing as a Film Industry in Canada. In three years over 100 films have been made and 300 million dollars invested. Sales: *Scanners, Prom Night*. Theatres: *My Bloody Valentine* opens on one-thousand screens. Deals: Tiberius' and ICC's multi-picture deals with 20th Century-Fox. And profits. The continued existence of these companies is proof of their success in another pairing of words - as a Film Industry.

Unfortunately, our two entities seem to exist in different worlds. Even more unfortunate, these worlds have proven themselves mutually exclusive. Just ask anybody on any street corner across the country which Canadian films he or she remembers having liked and they will probably mention two or three films made in the early '70s. Of the 100 or so made since '77 almost none are perceived as even being Canadian. But then again, not a single one of those early low-budget films appears to have earned any of their makers enough money to do a second one, while at least some percentage of the recent films have returned their multi-million dollar investments.

I conclude that the "Canadian Film Industry" has been a mirage. An illusion. Two phenomena appear to have converged on the same plane when they are, in reality, very far apart. The "Canadian Film Industry" doesn't exist. Never did.

Not in real life, anyway. It seems to have existed only in the mind of the government, who saw in it a factory of Identity. (A private factory.) And only in the mind of the producer, who saw in it a way to make money (and movies) in this country without paying the price. While one dreamed of world-wide recognition of Canada's Integrity, Concern and Sensitivity, and the other of a box-office hit that would knock the socks off the majors, they became partners in a kind of 'danse macabre.' With much whoopeeing and cackling celebration the country witnessed the birth of a cinematic Frankenstein. Canada could... and did. Pity. In the world of film we finally achieved the status of a banana

republic.

Today the creature seems to have vanished. Where are the promising new works? And where is the industry? (The scorched-earth policy carried out in the stock market has resulted in a deficit of investors.) Some say the Industry killed Canadian Film; others maintain that, given the points system, ACTRA, the lack of good actors, writers, directors and what-have-you, it was Canadian Film that strangled the Industry. Or drove it into exile.

These days, as though waking from a dream, I feel like a survivor coming out of the basement to find the city in ruins. What happened? The Boom is over. What has it left behind? Meatballs?

Well... we knew it couldn't last. I hope the next time around - if there is one - we get it right. (Though from some of the signs I'm not sure.) I don't know if there is a "solution" to what are the fundamental problems in this country, but this I do know. As far as I can see the only Canadian industry around here is the talent. The actors, writers and directors are the ones who are going to make the movies, who have something to say, an identity to express. *Not* the government and *not* the producers. (One can't help but wonder about the meaning of the alliance between the CFDC and the producers; about whether or not the government is putting its money in the right place. Don't they realize that it takes talent to use talent? That all the money in the world can't help you?) True, one must admit the embarrassing sight of so-called creative Canadians tripping over each other to "make it." (Into oblivion.) There hasn't been much evidence of artistic backbone. And yet, if we're gambling on a future for the industry, that's where we have to lay our bets.

There is also another reality we must deal with if we're serious about a movie industry in this country. Distribution. The facts are that even a successful Canadian movie simply *cannot* recoup its costs here and that distribution is in foreign hands. If we opt for a "cultural" approach, we either cut costs or subsidize. (Tax allowance dollars don't work for a movie like *Les bons débarras*.) There is no getting around it. If we opt for the "industry" approach, there is *no way* we won't tailor our films to somebody else's market. Our so-called producers are really more useful as distribution links, than as producers per se. The movies they have made are not producer's movies, working with talent, but distributor's movies, exploiting the market. Having to compete with the majors' own product for their market (including Canada), our producers have become mere suppliers to the distributors - or worse, northern branch-plants subsidized by the local government.

At this point I believe we have to have both Spencer and McCabe. If we now have links to the majors, why not use them a little more to our advantage? Let's put our accomplishments in the areas of distribution and production values at the service of some real talent. Can't the pressures to reach large audiences also lead to superior work?

I believe we have to follow both paths and let them *freely* meet (no shotgun marriage here) where they will. Perhaps then will the words Canadian Film Industry have meaning.

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