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 dress 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 the script idea tested and it proved popular. They planned a low-budget, became necessary, the budget went from $1.2 million to $2 million, and 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 Americanization 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, chairmen John Meisle 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. "Humungus" at 26th Century Fox. And profit killed Canadian Film; others maintain that, given the points system, ACTRA, the lack of good actors, writers, directors, etc., led to the death of Canadian Film that strangled the industry. It drove into exile.

There, 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? What happens now? We have to 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 can be a way to make money (and movies) in this climate or any better one. Sooner or later the government is going to have to realize that, given the points system, the CRTC will have to refuse to license the most controversial projects. There's a list of projects that are not acceptable; why not add a way to make money (and movies) to it? True, one can define "acceptable" as "in the public interest." But it's a little hard to help the public with that one.

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: "Humungus" and "iPhone" market deals with 26th 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 films made since '77 almost none are perceived as even "Canadian." But then again, one single one of those early low-budget films put the director of one of them in a "minor" CFC's Top 10 list. Much more important, their multi-million dollar investments.

I conclude that the "Canadian Film Industry" has been a mirage, an illusion. The phenomena appears 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 having to pay the price. While one dreamed of world-wide recognition of Canada's Identity, Concentrating Sensibility, and the other of a box-office hit that made everyone in the box-office the majors, they became partners in a kind of "dance macabre." With the droning and the roving celebration the country witnessed the birth of a cinematic Frankenstein. Canada could... and did. Pitiful. In the world of film we finally find the status of a banana

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