

Boom! (2)

One response from a screenwriter

by Arthur Fuller

In the most recent issue of *Impulse* magazine, one of the editors takes a broadside swipe at the Canadian film industry, suggesting we throw out the baby with the bath-water and start once again. "There is no longer an indigenous cinema in English-speaking Canada. Canadian cinema is dead..." and on and on. Scriptwriter Arthur Fuller responds to the author in the article which follows.

I don't know who James Dunn is except that his name appears on the masthead of *Impulse* and that he authored an article entitled "Some Notes on an Essay About the Death of Canadian Cinema" (summer, 1982). But I do conclude after reading the piece that a) he is no logician; b) he has never invested a cent in a film; and c) romantic that he is, he would rather fill four large magazine pages with laments than solutions. To give Dunn his due, though, I am seldom provoked to respond to articles I read. Some comments:

First off, the bourgeois-nationalist schtick Dunn is doing offers up four points on a continuum: "authentic" Canadian cinema, Can-American cinema, American cinema, and a category unnamed and, for convenience of argument, unacknowledged - good American cinema (*A Woman Under the Influence*, *The Godfather*, *The Black Stallion*... add your favourites).

We started out making Canadian pictures, Dunn argues, then turned to Can-American cinema. Not only producers turned their backs on Don Owen and Shebib, Peter Pearson and Robin Spry. Face it; we all did, and for the same reason that many of us feel embarrassed that we once were hippies. As some wag put it, money is the long hair of the Eighties. Or hasn't Dunn strolled through the Ontario College of Art lately?

Next, Thomas Hobbes as author of the vision of man-as-beast: Dunn should leaf through a slightly earlier work called *The Bible*.

Third, we are all afraid of needles, Jim, but don't let it colour your view of dentists. One I know, having seen *Skip Tracer* on the tube one night, said *that's* the kind of movie he'd like to have money in, because its quality assured enough TV showings that it would eventually break even.

Ralph Thomas and I had seen *Ticket to Heaven* together (prior to its release) and discussed it at considerable length. At no time did he hint that his intent was to feed "our infantile fantasies of victimization at the hands of American cultural imperialism. It analogizes Canadians as poor lambs at the sacrificial altar of American films and television" (my emphasis). The aforementioned infantile fantasies are Dunn's alone, not mine. And it is Dunn rather than *Ticket* who does the analogizing here. But perhaps he believes, contrary to what the content of *Impulse* usually implies, that the artist's intention is irrelevant (a Barthesian?). I think Ralph made a film about Moonies and the fact that normal citizens are the most susceptible, having already bought one line of bunk.

Here and there the strain of Dunn's contemptuous posture toward non-artists (dentists especially) gets the better of him, as in "Canadians always disliked Canadian cinema for all the wrong reasons." The swirl of invective

obscures his point. Would he prefer that we dislike Canadian cinema for all the right reasons? That we like it for the wrong reasons? That we occasionally dislike it for the wrong reasons? Or, finally, that we cut our preferences loose from the leash of reasons? Your guess may be better than mine.

Dunn next tells us Canadians why we liked *Ticket* so much: it looked, felt and sounded like an American film. Curiously, American critics didn't think so and liked it anyway - but what do they know about American film? As Dunn defines it: slick, grossly Technicolor visuals, slick invisible editing, and slick, multi-track, modulated voices with unobtrusive background music.

Think about this for a moment, Mr. Dunn. Against *Taxi Driver*, *Ticket* is markedly unslick in its visuals. In fact, my eye, at least, detects a continuity with precisely the filmmakers Dunn champions (Owen and Shebib). As for soundtracks, would Dunn prefer noisy-location, single-track, unmodulated voices? Music so obtrusive that it threatens to become foreground music? And what is it with this invisible editing fetish? Would Dunn prefer sloppy, visible editing, jump-cuts and freeze-frames and other horses Godard flogged to death 20 years ago? One can only write "fuck" on a wall so many times without growing bored. Artistic issues affect all the arts, self-referentialism included, and though filmmakers came to it late they also moved beyond it sooner, while certain novelists, painters and critics linger on.

Next Dunn blithely asserts that if a film director's heart is in the right place, it matters not what *merde* he or she makes. The right place, as Dunn sees it, is a belief in the innate goodness of people. As I intimated earlier, that belief is singularly un-Christian, and there is rather a lot of Christian art in the world. Certain others have chosen to disbelieve it too, Franz Kafka among them. The point is, art has not a lot to do with belief systems. Dostoevski, they say, was anti-Semitic.

Predictably, Dunn then performs the obligatory respect-Quebec piece: "Québécois cinema has not been co-opted by corporate and American interests. Québécois cinema is not Can-American cinema." Forget Roger Vadim and Marie-France Pisier making *Hot Touch*, Pierre David making all Cronenberg's movies, RSL making *Paradise*. Forget *Atlantic City*, if you can, for the sake of argument. It's not cooption, it's internationalism.

In outlining the few Canadian films Dunn managed to like, he again takes a

swipe at dentists (some novice must have hurt him very young) before finding in *Goin' Down the Road* a clarification that "their tragedy is not born of their inability to survive, but of society's inability to provide them with access to the means for survival. 'First the eats, then the morals,' Bertolt Brecht always said. Some societies never learn." Some film critics too, I might add. It was Roger Corman who gave Martin Scorsese his first shot. I don't see Dunn coming forth with money for Owen or Shebib.

Closing his discussion of *A Married Couple*, Dunn writes: "In the final shot of the film King cuts from the one to the many, telling us the problem is one of environment, and not of human nature." What is the environment but millions of other humans, past and present? On another level, are the bacteria in Dunn's stomach part of the environment or of him? To some of us, such issues are not instantly clear, but blithe distinctions seem to be Dunn's forte.

Just before carving his inscription on our tombstone, Dunn takes yet another poke at dentists, this time poking producers and bureaucrats too. Regarding these last, let me point out that the Canadian Film Development Corporation tends to regard overtly commercial projects as unneeding of assistance. Thus they tend to get into projects with problems.

Just what Dunn means by "they want us to corporatize our reality... our dreams," I have no idea. He thinks its opposite is to personalize. The irony is that only rookie filmmakers waste time trying to anticipate the wants of an audience two years hence (which is about the fastest anybody can write, shoot and release a film, even when it's all going your way). Who goes with his own obsessions more than Coppola or Cronenberg?

Then comes Dunn's variation on the artist-in-a-garret theme: "We must go back to being a poor cinema... begging, borrowing or stealing cameras... We must abandon invisible editing... American movie stars and American genres. We must return to making the films we want to make."

Earth to Dunn: we have unions here. Is Dunn seriously suggesting - political sensitive that he apparently is - that we shoot non-union, thus guaranteeing that no union members will work on it, nor union projectionist screen it? If so, what's the point? We already have plenty of things to put on shelves.

Again he decries invisible editing. Again he drags up the spectre of America, only to kick it. (What, incidentally, is an *American genre*, save perhaps the Wes-

tern, consistently the most successful of American films worldwide?) And finally, *no* writer or director makes a film he or she doesn't want to - especially in Canada, where to make a film you must want very badly to do it. What Dunn really means here is that we should make the films *he* wants to make, but doesn't, perhaps because he has enough brains not to sink a cent into such a venture.

That's the bottom line. Film is the most expensive art in history, and the money has to come from somewhere. He doesn't like dentists, bureaucrats (though I notice *Impulse* takes money from two levels of them) or producers, or presumably their money. I wonder if he has any ideas on alternative sources of money, or on how to talk the unions into letting their members work for nothing, or on how to persuade the owner of a fifty-thousand-dollar camera to loan it to a rookie without insurance, or on how to get the film into the theatres once it's made, or on how to get the people into the theatres to see it.

I say all this not because I like all the bad movies Dunn hates, but because as a screenwriter my interest lies in proving Dunn wrong - Canadian cinema is not dead. Granted, the CFDC bent over backwards to take what certain producers were giving it from behind. Granted, Bay Street's inflation of film budgets nearly killed film. Granted too that American actors (no actual star has appeared in a Canadian film to date) neither prove their worth in audience draw nor lead to the grooming of Canadian stars. But to go back to no-budget shooting is senseless.

While I do not pretend to have all the answers, I do have an idea or two. First, put film back into the hands of directors and writers, by restructuring CFDC financing so that money goes directly to writers and directors rather than to producers who have hired the former. Projects would be submitted anonymously to a review board, whose sole options would be *yea* or *nay* - no editorialization - and could be killed after any of several stages (outline, first draft, etc.) Money would flow to writer and director to finance each subsequent stage - to a maximum, say, of \$30,000. The resultant scripts would comprise a script bank. Only then would producers be invited in to read - tax benefits being dependent on the making of a film from a script in the bank.

In this way, \$2 million could finance the writing of 70 scripts to completion, and since not all will go that far, the actual number might be over 100. Any script chosen for production would then be bought by the producer for 4 per cent of the film's budget, that amount being split between screenwriter and script bank. Out of 100 scripts there are bound to be a couple of great ones and a dozen, perhaps twenty, good ones. A good year.

Thus money flows to the two areas of our greatest need, writers and directors. There are problems in this arrangement, the most obvious being the review board, whose qualifications and hiring are subject to debate. But the important thing is to remove the grey area of bureaucratic discretion - the pre-product censorship that hampers directors with a personal vision and writers of power. Given that, we might make some great and successful films. And should some dentists in Markham invest and grow rich, at least some banker will hear about it. It can only help film to be regarded as good business.

Arthur Fuller, a free-lance writer in Toronto, wrote the screenplay to *Hit and Run* with Robin Spry.