



Alberta Film & TV

What this country really needs is more foreign television

by Jerry Ezekiel

The ingratitude of it all!

Here I sit with a veritable smorgasbord of electronic goodies at my fingertips – an array of programs and options to appease, if not overwhelm, the most gluttonous video junkie.

ABC, CBC, CTV, CBS, ITV, NBC, PBS, and a significant chunk of the rest of the alphabet. And pay-TV on top of that, and a VCR to put the icing on the cake – so I can rent movies or “time shift” television programs. (Such a device becomes a necessity of life when, for example, you find it mildly inconvenient to watch *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* on one of the 35 occasions it was offered during a single month.)

Surely the Golden Age of Home Entertainment is upon us, and only the incorrigibly cranky would dare complain. True, there is the vexing problem of Canadian program production, but that too will be resolved in the fullness of time or in the next world, whichever comes first. What more could a person want?

Well, for starters, how about more foreign programming?

More foreign programming on Canadian television? It isn't enough that we get the best (and the worst) of Hollywood piped into our living rooms twenty-four hours a day? It isn't enough that we get *Fantasy Island*, *The Love Boat*, *Dallas*, *Hill Street Blues*, and enough *M*A*S*H* to make *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* look like a rare occurrence by comparison?

No, it isn't enough. Not nearly enough. And I offer as a case in point the story of Miki Sawada.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, during the American occupation of Japan, Mrs. Sawada founded an orphanage to shelter and care for the illegitimate, unwanted, and abandoned offspring of Japanese women who had “fraternized” with American soldiers.

Over 30 years later, camera crews

from the Nippon Television Network travelled 250,000 miles to track down many of those children who had been adopted and had grown up abroad. The program which resulted, titled *The Children Have Crossed the Seven Seas*, had, as one of its irresistible emotional highlights, a satellite “reunion” between Mrs. Sawada, in a Tokyo studio, and her erstwhile children now living overseas.

Controversial though it was, *The Children Have Crossed the Seven Seas* was Japan's best documentary in 1978, and was one of the most talked about entries in the 1979 Banff Television Festival. It was a sensational story, in the best sense of that word, and it was more than just a television program: it was a program made possible by television and its related technologies.

That was four years ago, my first year selecting programs for the Banff Television Festival. Four years and many hundreds of program hours later, *The Children Have Crossed the Seven Seas* stands out as only one of too many vivid reminders of the elation and depression that make August such a strange month.

Elation, because I invariably get enthusiastic about the number of quality television programs out there; and depression when I get back to the real world of television and see what's on my own set – or, more precisely, what's not on my set.

The fact is, there is precious little foreign programming on Canadian television. Forget about *Poltergeist*, *Urban Cowboy*, *Three's Company* and *Dynasty*, all of which are as foreign as baseball and apple pie. Forget, too, about the occasional hit foreign film that makes it to pay-TV (*Das Boot* and *Montenegro*). And above all, forget about the wretchedly dubbed versions of Truffaut's *The Last Metro* and Costa-Gavras' *Z* so recently inflicted upon us.

I'm talking about television programs. Programs like *Lunatics*, *Lovers and Poets*, Andrea Andermann's meditation on the life and death of Pier Paolo Pasolini, which won the grand prize

and lots of critical acclaim at Banff in 1981.

Programs like Hungarian Television's dramatization of the life of Franz Listz, of T.F. 1's superb documentary series, *The Plant Adventure*.

Programs like Axel Engstand's *About Judges... And Other Sympathizers*, which documents the Nazi criminal justice system and its disturbing consequences in contemporary West German courts. Or Peter Morley's *Kitty: Return to Auschwitz*, which remains in my memory the single most vivid portrait of the horrors of that era, and you don't even see a corpse.

Morley, of course, is British, and we like to think we get at least a reasonable diet of British programs on our home screens. Yes, I know about *Upstairs, Downstairs*, *Brideshead Revisited*, and the rest. But how many of us have seen Dennis Potter's brilliant teleplay *Cream In My Coffee*, which won two prizes at Banff in 1981 and the coveted Prix Italia for drama in 1982?

And has anyone out there had a look at *Jean Michel Jarré – The China Concerts*, from Central Independent Television? It is not only a surprisingly imaginative record of the concerts themselves, but a portrait of China that is more convincing, original, and evocative than most conventional documentaries on the subject.

The list could go on, but the point has been made: there are a lot of terrific foreign programs – including American programs – that we just don't get to see on our home sets. What we are getting, with very few exceptions, is an exceedingly narrow selection of what is possible and what is available. That's what I call narrowcasting. For all the choices we think we have, or are told we have, our television sets make our movie theatres look cosmopolitan by comparison. (There's a dubious achievement for you.)

Undoubtedly, there are good, sensible and obvious reasons for this, all having to do with the economics of program

purchasing and questions – or assumptions – about public tastes and preferences.

While I'm not at all sure those assumptions have been tested often or adequately, I will readily admit that no one is going to make his fortune in this world programming, say, an off-beat documentary on Islamic women (*Daughters of the Nile*, from Dutch television).

Nor do I harbor any illusions of television audiences switching in droves from *The Winds of War* to a two-hour Yorkshire Television documentary on asbestos-related cancers (*Alice: A Fight for Life*).

But it does seem sad and aggravating that with so many hours of program time across so many channels, there are so few surprises and so little that deviates at all from conventional North American television fare – in substance or style.

Programs like *Quilts In Women's Lives*, by American filmmaker Pat Ferraro, or a 20-minute Soviet documentary on giant octopuses may not be a programmer's ticket to the mother lode. But they would be gems in anyone's schedule, and it's my guess that if you ever stumbled upon them by accident, you'd find them vastly more satisfying and entertaining than so many of the “fillers” currently on view.

Do Canadians want more foreign programming on their sets?

Would they tolerate it?

I don't know. But Francis Fox claimed recently that we “do not wish to exist in some sort of electronic cocoon, even if such a thing were possible.” He also said this: “Canadians, in broadcasting, as in other areas, want to benefit from the best the world has to offer.”

I wish that were true. Perhaps it is true.

But for now, it sure feels like a cocoon to me. The threads may be expensive and pretty, but the whole apparatus fits a bit too tightly four our creative and cultural well-being.

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