

# Gordon, could you answer this question ?

Below are the results of a survey of producers and directors concerning the screenplays they read and with which they work.

by Gordon Roback

### Methodology

A survey of English Canadian producers and directors was done early this year while I was a graduate student in Communication Studies. The seminar leader was Professor John O'Brien of the Loyola campus of Concordia University.

A review of the literature indicated that only one article had been written specifically on the script-writer in Canada. ("Write Me a Film? A Symposium by Canadian Filmmakers", *Canadian Literature*, 46:73-90 Autumn 1970.) Although the other articles were not directly related to the problem of the script-writer in Canada, they did provide good background information about the industry as well as the names of many of the key Canadian producers and directors. The Canadian Film Development Corporation was contacted and provided a booklet with the names of one hundred and forty-three directors and producers.

Since the survey was directed specifically at the English Canadian film industry (because of differences of culture, aesthetic values and the literary tradition of the two founding nations of Canada), the thirty-three francophones listed in the booklet were eliminated under the context of the research.

The booklet was read a first time, and about twenty-five names were familiar to the researcher from his review of the literature. Since most of the producers and directors were based in Montreal and Toronto, the booklet was reviewed a second time and an additional ten filmmakers were selected from the Prairies and the West Coast in order to give the survey a national balance. The list was then reviewed a third time and every third anglophone name was selected. In addition, questionnaires were sent to the drama department of the CBC and to the National Film Board. A total of fifty-two questionnaires were sent out.

A covering letter, explaining the purpose of the survey and the background of the research, was enclosed with every questionnaire. In addition, the researcher promised that all responses would be treated anonymously. It is for this reason that the quotes in this article are not identified.

Of the twenty-eight replies received, 47% were from Ontario; 26% were from Montreal; 16% were from the Prairies and 11% were from British Columbia.

G.R.

Is the lack of good script-writers the main problem facing the English Canadian film industry? How important is the screenplay to the ultimate success of a film? What are the essential elements of a good script? What percentage of the scripts received by the filmmaker are considered worthy of being produced and how many actually are? Where are the scripts obtained? Are the professionals satisfied with the quality of the Canadian scripts they receive? How do scripts by Canadians compare with those written by British and American writers? If Canadian writers were paid on an American scale would the quality of the scripts improve? Do Canadian scripts reflect Canadian values and culture? What can be done to train Canadian script-writers?

These, and other questions, were asked in a survey of English Canadian producers and directors done early this year. A full 53% of questionnaires were returned, a high rate for this kind of survey. (see box)

When asked how important the script is to the success of a film, 88% of the directors and producers said that it was very important to vital and 12% said that the script was not very important. One prominent Toronto director said that "a director is only as good as his script", and a Toronto producer said, "It is difficult to make a bad film from a good script and it is impossible to make a good film from a bad script."

The comment of the same Toronto producer is representative of the feelings of Canadian filmmakers when it comes to their definition of a good script. He looks for "a good narrative story with strong characters and compelling visual images." Another Toronto producer wrote that he looks for "a strong, interesting story idea in the form of characters we can care about, and a cinematic point of view that is honest and has style."

Gordon Roback is a graduate student at the University of British Columbia. He received his B.A. from McGill and a Diploma in Communication Studies from Concordia (Loyola campus) and is presently working on the film *Two Solitudes*.

When asked if the reaction of a target audience influences their decision to produce a script, 74% replied yes, 13% said mildly and 13% said no.

Only 6% of the respondents received scripts from the Canadian Film Development Corporation. The breakdown of the source of scripts is as follows:

31% receive scripts from book publishers;

25% receive scripts from agents;

50% receive scripts which were unsolicited;

50% receive scripts from social contacts;

68% receive scripts by commissioning a writer to adapt a property; and

68% receive scripts by commissioning a writer to do an original screenplay.

What is surprising, considering the quality of the Canadian films we see in the theatre, is that only a miniscule fraction of the scripts received and read are made into films. As the above figures indicate, the chances of a script being produced are much better if the script-writer is commissioned to write or adapt a book into a script. The following quotes are presented to give an idea of the situation.

A prominent Montreal producer said that, "Of two hundred scripts received over a five year period, one was worth producing and I am doing it. An additional five were B-type sex or violence pictures. If I commission a script, there is a one in three chance that it will turn out well and be produced."

An Academy Award winning Canadian producer said that, "Ten percent of the scripts received are worth producing and two percent are produced."

A Toronto producer said that, "One in thirty scripts is worth producing, and one quarter of one percent of the scripts are considered worthy of producing and are actually produced."

An award winning director from Toronto said that, ".001% of the scripts received are considered and nil are produced."

Another Toronto producer said that, "Of the 120 scripts received last year, eight were worth producing. Five of the eight were considered for production, and one of the five was produced."

A West Coast producer replied that, "Of unsolicited manuscripts received, very few have been used; of those commissioned, all have been produced."

The lack of money for financing films and the lack of promising scripts are the main reasons given for the small number of films made. When asked if promising scripts remained in their files, the following reasons were given for those who said yes.

33% because the right star was unavailable;

25% because the subject was no longer fashionable;

33% because distribution could not be arranged;

66% because financing could not be arranged;

33% said flatly that there were no promising scripts.

Yet, when asked if the availability of good Canadian scripts is a problem compared to other aspects of the Canadian film industry, 100% of the producers and directors said that the lack of good script-writers was a problem. 73% said the lack of good writers was the main problem, and only 7% said financing was a problem. Another 7% said that the lack of good actors was a problem. In addition, 20% replied that the lack of good directors was a problem and 13% said that the lack of good producers was a problem. 13% of the respondents went so far as to say that the lack of good writers, directors, producers and actors were equally a problem.

As a Toronto producer put it, "Our technicians are excellent. We are short of writers as much as producers, directors and engaging actors. To exaggerate slightly, these four are only as good as each other."

A Vancouver producer said, "When compared to other aspects of the Canadian film industry, the problem of the lack of good script-writers is indeed a small one... A healthy industry will have immediate positive effects on related problems; there are some good script-writers, and Canada is fortunate if they remain in this country."

When asked if they were satisfied with the quality of the scripts they receive, 75% said no; 18% said they were satisfied with some of them and 7% said that they were satisfied with the quality of the scripts, although this applied only to commissioned scripts.

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*"On a trip to London, England, one major distributor said to me, 'Canadian films are like rare French wines - they don't travel'."*

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Yet, when asked if Canadian script-writers were able to think and write in cinematic terms, 31% said no, 25% said some and 44% said yes. While the answer to this question appears to contradict the answers given in the previous two questions, it may mean that the technical aspect of script-writing is not as much of a problem as other aspects of script-writing.

Many reasons were given for the lack of appeal of Canadian scripts. A Montreal producer said that they were "typically pretentious and quite unimaginative." Another Montreal producer said, "Canadian scripts are totally uncommercial to the rest of the world."

A Toronto producer said they are "under-written where things visual are concerned and over-written where dialogue is concerned." A prominent Toronto director said that the scripts are "too literary or too TV oriented." Another Toronto producer said that "the scripts are self-indulgent and the choice of characters is of limited dimension."

Several directors and producers remarked that the scripts they receive are too regional or too parochial as a rule, although, regrettably, they did not elaborate on this point.

When asked how Canadian script-writers compare to British and American script-writers, 88% responded that they thought Canadian script-writers were inferior. Here are a number of significant quotes on the subject.

"British scripts are generally excellent, but the topics are not appropriate. United States scripts reflect U.S. values. Often, Canadian scripts reflect the same values, not a unique Canadian fantasy or a special Canadian dynamic."

"Canadian scripts are sometimes criticized for being derivative. They are not derivative enough. In trying to be original we do not study the craft before breaking the rules. English and American scripts tend to be more professional in their craft and content."

"Canadian scripts on the whole are dull, pedestrian and unimaginative."

"Apart from cultural differences, U.S. and British scripts show experience, the competitive nature of the market and more commercial appeal."

When asked if they would name some Canadian script-writers they would like to work with, only Ted Allen and Mordecai Richler were named twice and both times by Montreal producers. It also appears that script-writing is a regional affair since, with one exception, the producers and directors use writers local to their immediate region. Most of the respondents refused to give specific examples

of the writers they would like to work with. These respondents' comments ranged from, "a few" to "none of the English" to the comment, "too many to name." A Toronto director with a sense of humor said merely, "I'd prefer to keep his name unknown."

Asked how much script-writers are paid, the answers ranged from 2% to 10% of budget, although one producer remarked that, "percentages are not everything, talk money." The figure most frequently mentioned was 5% of budget although 41% of respondents start at less than 5%. When asked if this was enough to attract writers of calibre, 76% said yes and 24% said no.

When asked if the quality of the scripts would improve if Canadian writers were paid on an American scale, 50% said no, 25% said it was unlikely and 25% said yes. One West Coast producer was not happy with this question and replied that "To ask this question is to reveal a deep miscomprehension of the Canadian film industry."

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*"We, as producers, must make movies or money. The two seldom go together. We are developing an industry which cannot be supported even 25% by Canadian distribution alone."*

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Almost everyone agreed that money alone would not solve the problem of a lack of good script-writers. A Toronto producer said, "No, unless money is spent on more productions, producing more work and training through practice." Another Toronto producer replied that, "Money would solve a lot of problems."

As for the steps necessary to train Canadian writers, 43% think that the emphasis should be on more production so that there will be more jobs for script-writers; 43% think that some kind of on-the-job training program should be established to enable script-writers to obtain firsthand experience and 14% think that special school programs or seminars by leading script-writers should be set up. The following are some key suggestions.

"The CFDC is trying, but I'm not convinced we can actually train writers. If we had development money we could learn a lot about training and writing."

"Increase production in films and TV. Script-writers don't appear from nowhere."

"Have seminars conducted by successful Canadian, U.S. and European script-writers. It could best be done through contact with major U.S. studios and networks."

"Set up a small Canadian film school, perhaps like that of AFI which is based on the Prague and Lodz models, or an improved system of study or Canada Council 'professional development' grants."

In answer to the question, 'Do Canadian scripts reflect Canadian culture, values and aspirations?', 79% of the respondents replied that Canadian culture was of no importance to them; 14% replied that it was of some importance and only 7% said it was important. The following quotes are good examples of the majority viewpoint.

"Unless scripts are international in scope they are not commercial. This is a business. We want to make money. The CFDC, the NFB and the CBC should look after the culture."

"If they did as you suggest, the scripts would be contrived and of no interest to me."

"This is of no importance. Rather, the script-writers should think in terms of a world-wide audience and world-wide appeal."

"Scripts that try are too self-conscious for comfort. All we need is to tell good cinematic stories and the rest will follow. We try too hard to be Canadian."

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*"I think you should be asking questions about the state of the art of the film industry in Canada and generate your script questions within that context... the industry needs encouragement and improvement."*

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"What are Canadian culture, values and aspirations? Best ask a script to be the result of a Canadian writing in Canada. Script-writing is as much a problem as the culture at large."

"Gordon, could you answer this question?"



## A Personal Conclusion

The survey of the script-writer in Canada has yielded a great deal of information, but before elaborating on what I perceive to be the key points, it is necessary to mention that this questionnaire was sent only to producers and directors. As a result, this study at best relates only half the story. In order to get the whole story, it is necessary to survey the script-writers too. Hopefully, that will be done in the near future.

The survey has shown that script-writing is the area of expertise most lacking in the English Canadian film industry; many respondents felt that other areas of expertise were also weak. Almost all the respondents agreed that a good script is essential to make a good film. It is not difficult, therefore, to come to the conclusion that a major effort should be made to improve the quality of Canadian scripts. The question is, how can this best be done?

The Canada Council provides money for the re-writing of scripts and makes grants to promising script-writers. In addition, the Canadian Film Development Corporation started a program last year in Toronto in which an American consultant was hired to read over scripts and to work with writers in developing them. In the past, the CFDC has helped script-writers contact producers and directors.

The problem here is that these services to script-writers go beyond the mandate of the CFDC. Either the mandate of the CFDC should be changed to permit it to go even further in providing assistance to script-writers (by hiring editors to help writers prepare and perfect scripts, by helping writers market their scripts and by helping writers contact producers and directors) or the CFDC should withdraw

entirely from the script-writing/marketing end and a new agency could be established that would be concerned primarily with aiding script-writers.

This agency might work closely with universities and junior colleges which offer script-writing workshops. One of the main complaints about writing instruction in Canada is that it is done in a vacuum. It would be more effective if the universities could send their students to work with professionals, thus allowing them to obtain firsthand experience as part of the school program. This could be done in many ways. Some students could become apprentices at the National Film Board (the NFB presently offers several programs for students during the summer), or the Canada Council could provide funds to enable students or novice script-writers to work with a director while a film is being made (similar to the arrangement the government of Saskatchewan made with Allan King for the shooting of **Who Has Seen The Wind**). Companies in the private sector might want to participate. Programs of this nature are very important. If sufficient effort is made to train young Canadian script-writers, they could provide the cornerstone for a new wave of Canadian cinema.

In my opinion, the majority of directors and producers distinguish between a good and a bad script. Most stated that they look for a good story, arresting characters and a script that is visually exciting. Assuming the above to be true, the question arises as to why the majority of Canadian films are not more successful, especially since they are chosen from thousands of scripts considered for production every year. One possibility is that the best of a mediocre thousand is at best mediocre. Another possibility is that good scripts are so changed by the time they are produced that they are almost unrecognizable to the script-writer. Whether this is an inherent danger of the collaborative act of filmmaking is open to debate, though it is certainly not inevitable. I think further research is required since there appears to be a contradiction between what the producers and directors say and what they do.

According to the respondents, money is not a problem as far as the quality of Canadian scripts is concerned and paying script-writers more money will not solve the problem. While this reflects the attitudes of the producers and directors, it must be again noted that this is not necessarily the feeling of the script-writers.

Producers and directors maintain that they are paying close attention to audience appeal. Though producers are attempting to aim their films at a market, it is not necessarily true that they are scoring. I think this is an essential problem which merits further examination, including a marketing study.

The information I found most surprising and upsetting was that many of the producers and directors said they paid little attention to their role of conveying Canadian culture, values and aspirations. Since this is of so little importance to them, I question the wisdom of the Canadian public - through the CFDC as well as through tax deferments - investing so much money to bolster a Canadian film industry. If it is the aim of Canadian filmmakers to make facsimiles of Hollywood productions (and slick, superficial ones at that), perhaps it would be better to leave it to the Americans; they do it better and have more money to work with. Certainly the Canadian taxpayer should not be expected to fund films like **The Shadow of the Hawk**, **Rabid**, **Find the Lady** and **The Uncanny**.

The key point, as many of the respondents mentioned, is that the more films that are produced, the more scripts that will be required and the more work that will be available to script-writers. The more work available, the better the chance that the best script-writers will remain in Canada. □

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