Boyle’s law

The Canadian third wave according to Harry Boyle

by Aileen Weir

At 65, Harry Boyle is one of the true veterans of Canadian broadcasting. With years of experience in both public and private radio and television, added to a 10-year term in the upper echelons of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), he is an authority of formidable knowledge.

Boyle began his career in 1936 when he joined the local radio station (CRXX) in Winham, Ontario. His competence as an innovative news broadcaster led to a position with the CBC in 1942. He was to stay with the CBC until his appointment as vice-chairman of the CRTC in 1968. It was while he was at the CBC that the strong personality so apparent in his years with the CRTC began to assert itself.

Alex Frame, who later worked as a producer with Peter Gzowski, was one of the young talents whose career was initiated by Harry Boyle. Frame describes his old boss as a “very creative bureaucrat” and “the most inspirational kind of boss you could possibly have. He just loved people that raised hell!”

Boyle is passionately concerned about the type and quality of programming being presented to the Canadian public. As chairman of the CRTC in 1977, Boyle headed a Committee of Inquiry into the National Broadcasting Service. Asked to consider whether or not the government should hold a Royal Commission on the public broadcasting service in general, the committee recommended against the establishment of a Royal Commission at the time.

“When the present issues in Canada are clarified,” the Boyle committee concluded in July 1977, “when the CBC has had a chance to show what it can do on its own initiative, when some firmer trends become apparent in technology, when Parliament has re-considered its relation to the CBC and other cultural and communications agencies, a fuller inquiry will then be needed…” Five years later, the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee tabled the controversial Applebert report, recommending drastic changes in the CBC as Canadians know it.

Boyle’s awareness of the explosive impact of advancing technology has made him a continual – and thoughtful – agitator in the media. “The questions we’ve got to ask,” Boyle has written, “are ones like what are we going to do ‘with all this new technology?’ What the hell good is it and just what’s it all going to do for humanity?”

Since leaving the CRTC, Harry Boyle has been a consultant and public speaker and has written extensively on media-related questions. One of his current projects includes a book on his long association with media philosopher Marshall McLuhan. Boyle is a member of the jury for UNESCO’s $50,000 Marshall McLuhan award for outstanding contribution in the area of contemporary communications.

Aileen Weir is a recent graduate of Queen’s University Film Studies.
Cinema Canada: Do you consider the recommendations of Applebert to be sufficiently protective of the present situation in Canadian culture?

Harry Boyle: I have a certain sympathy for the committee. I think the Applebert report reflects pretty well what they thought was necessary for the protection of Canadian culture. 

Cinema Canada: What about the point system that has been suggested? Do you think that is a valid approach to the problem?

Harry Boyle: I think it’s very complicated. I have never known any rule that you can't find a way to get around. You've just got to encourage some kind of disposition within them to make sure that it's in their interest to do it. The blindness, it seems to me, of private commercial broadcasting is the fact that imitation of what is American is a very poor route to take because you can't do it. You just can't do it. The idea that American broadcasting is the epitome of broadcasting is stupid. It’s not. It’s just that they're further ahead than we are. The only valid approach to commercial broadcasting is a very American way of saying, you know, we want the original; we want daring; we don’t want the best, we want the best possible. And I think that just cop-out.

Cinema Canada: Do you consider the CBC a successful enterprise of the government in this country?

Harry Boyle: I started in private commercial broadcasting and I have no quarrels with it. One of the things that many well-wishers in broadcasting have overlooked is that it is not something that is perfectly legitimate - in fact it was set up that way in the first place - to be a public/private system. Whether you like the CBC or not, that's the type of system that is there and it's legitimate. I started in private broadcasting and I was in the CBC, but I'm still convinced that they don't have the same problems. 

Cinema Canada: Is there any potential for the formation of a syndicated CBC network in the public interest?

Harry Boyle: I think it’s a very simple argument. If you don’t want to do something, you don’t. It’s a question of whether or not you can do it. The idea that the CBC was a great solution to the problem of radio is a very American one. It’s a very American way of saying, you know, we want the original; we want daring; we don’t want the best, we want the best possible. And I think that just cop-out.

Cinema Canada: Do you consider the CRTC feeling a lot of pressure right now, with pay television, Canadian content and so on? Harry Boyle: It seems to me that there is a tendency in Ottawa at the moment, largely because of economic pressures - to industrialize. Everybody’s on the move, whether you like it or not. It’s the thing to do. And I think that as opposed to a kind of instinct that there is something in broadcasting. I don’t think broadcasting is the be-all and end-all. It's only a part of it. It's only a part of creativity. It's only a part of that.

Cinema Canada: Do you consider the CBC a widely successful enterprise of the government in this country?

Harry Boyle: Well, there used to be it was arm’s length certainly during the time that I was there. As a matter of fact, that was one of the reasons, one of the contributing factors why I left, was because there was some very experienced people feeling they wanted to direct - and they couldn’t. There was no legislation for it and I abhor the present legislation which doesn’t go far enough. I don’t support government giving direction to a public agency, if it does it in a public way. But I don’t like it when it goes by order-in-council. Our whole democratic system is threatened by this curve we have at the moment of government finding ways to avoid exposure in Parliament.

Cinema Canada: With the new Canadian content regulations that have just been released, do you think the CRTC is being stiff enough? Are they a feasible approach to the Canadian culture?

Harry Boyle: I became involved in the first place with regulatory bodies in 1967 when I was hired by the Board of Broadcast Governors, which became the CRTC, to investigate, as part of a committee, the proposition of whether we had any Canadian broadcasting companies. We looked at every aspect of it and came to the conclusion that it was almost impossible. You couldn’t do it. The only route by which you could do it, the only crude way that it could be done, was by a committee. That was after, all, whose judgment is it?

Cinema Canada: If the CBC were to relinquish its production facilities to the independents as suggested in Applebert...

Harry Boyle: The difficulty about it is this whole notion of the CBC being one of the large broadcasting organizations. It must have its own production facilities. It must have them. Now, there is a constant tug-of-war between the CBC and the private broadcasting organizations and the in-house production staff and the independents. And what develops over a period of time - unless there is a very strong leadership - is a kind of free-for-all amongst the insiders to keep the outsiders out. There's got to be an attitude laid down and clearly followed all the time that what matters is originality and creativity. Now, one of the great problems in terms of how you maintain the inside operation is by making it more flexible than it is. Tenure and salaries and such a thing. They must be able to go from one to the other, so that people can move in and out.

Cinema Canada: Do you think that’s true of the NFB as well as the CBC?

Harry Boyle: Yes, although I think the NFB has had more outside people working for them. I think that we have had some kind of continuity and tried and try and find the goodwill of the broadcasters. They object. I remember when we brought in community broadcasting the first thing they did was to scream about it. They were all screaming about it, it was dictatorial, and so forth. But they discovered in the long run, that it was good for them and then they went about it.

Cinema Canada: Do you consider the CBC an effective institution - a non-commercial institution - as a kind of an educational body? And the very funny thing about creative activity no matter what form it takes - books, films, etc. Some people are one-shot people. Brilliant. Some are going to be around for a time and then go back to normal. But they should be given the opportunity. The difficulty when you institutionalize creativity is that it becomes like everything else. It gets down to a dull thing. It becomes like everything else. It's not nearly as influential as people thought. I was just reading that only 9% of Americans watch CBS news five nights a week. This is against the whole mythological thing.

Harry Boyle: Let’s face it - North America is conditioned towards certain forms of popular entertainment, but that doesn’t mean that it’s not to be trusted. Take, for example, the CRTC, to investigate, as part of a committee, the proposition of whether we had any Canadian broadcasting companies. We looked at every aspect of it and came to the conclusion that it was almost impossible. You couldn’t do it. The only route by which you could do it, the only crude way that it could be done, was by a committee. That was after, all, whose judgment is it?

Harry Boyle: We have swallowed the mythology that all people want is mass entertainment. We swallow an awful lot of mythology. An example: There’s been a great deal of discussion on TV news being going to knock newspapers for a loop. So newspapers consolidated. Now we discover that when you analyse that the TV watching is for the average person it's not nearly as influential as people thought. I was just reading that only 9% of Americans watch CBS news five nights a week. This is against the whole mythological thing.

Harry Boyle: We have been able to get the proportions in our minds. We spend millions of dollars on a museum or an art gallery, but the average person just can't watch all the television programmes. It's not nearly as influential as people thought. I was just reading that only 9% of Americans watch CBS news five nights a week. This is against the whole mythological thing.
opinions. It's still pretty hard to identify any one film as being true blue Canadian. And it's so easy to make fun of the other kind of intrinsic quality... I mean, when you watch a Bergman film, or a Rossellini film or indeed when you watch some of the films that were made for television certainly when you watch a Yugoslav or a Polish filmmaker's film, somehow or other you look and see something that you know is unique because something being portrayed there is real. And even in Australian commercial films, you suddenly realize that that film couldn't have been done anywhere else. It's like Gallipoli or Breaker Morant - there's a kind of a great hurt in the Australian psyche about that first war and it comes through in the other kind of intrinsic quality. But there's a kind of something you know is unique when you watch a Yugoslav or a Polish filmmaker's film, you see something that you know is unique.

Bergman film, or a Rossellini film - the right point at the right time. He knew it until it happens. Reagan has nothing there. It goes away with a sense of it.

We're in a post-industrial era. It's an era with which we don't quite know what to do. It's an era where it's possible for people to have more power than they've ever had before, at home individually - because of information. Not just the media, either, but the whole process of information. The basis of how it goes is changing. The Third World is rapidly becoming - and will become within the next ten years - the purveyor of many of the things we now make ourselves. There's a kind of a slow over-recovery from Japan, for instance. There are electronic industries now in Taiwan, and Malaysia and Sri Lanka. Even the Japanese are now among us. And we've faced with a new situation. And that proposition about identification locally has always been with people. It's even been with cities. I think it or not. Nobody seems to understand that this is one of the most parochial cities you can imagine for the people living here. It happens when a city gets to be a certain size.

And when a country gets to a certain size, the pressures start to appear and the pressures that are there always are with you. They're always there. Friends always there. It's like a family. The family means that people are looking for something else. Or, say they're going into the moon when they tell you you're going to Detroit! There is just this parochial, local kind of bias. It is going to be there for a long time. And all this, too, has to do with the family that means that people are looking for something else. The old, familiar ties of husband and wife, and those who are now so important to you, and the children of immigrants, and the children of immigrants and, included in our collective consciousness, is the point that all of these people come from somewhere else. The family is inherited, and you become very aware of the fact when you travel. In three or four generations, look at what has been passed down. Every family has some kind of a root to go back. It was a particular, folk kind of thing. Everybody listened because that was where they found out. For the first real evidence of the necessity of having a voice of our own came in the 1939-1945 war. Nobody else did it. You know that if you depended upon newspapers or depended on press services, your coverage wouldn't count. So the CBC accomplished a tremendous service, because it was a man of its own overseas service. It was a particular, folk kind of thing. Everybody listened because that was where they found out. Everybody wanted to be there.