

1983: The year of the American compromise

If nature abhors a vacuum, so does an entrepreneur. The inability of the federal government to articulate any coherent, serious cultural policy concerned with program production has led to the inevitable. As the year 1983 draws to a close, Canada steps into the production of American films and programming with great willingness and naive enthusiasm.

The signs of the new mood are all around us. At the highest level, the film policy is still being promised, but sceptics suspect that any muscle, especially meant to deal with the domination of the Canadian market by the American majors, has been carved away. The deputy minister of Communications, Robert Rabinovitch, is known to favor exports to the U.S. as a way to bolster cultural industries, and a new director of Cultural Industries, John Watt, has replaced the avowed nationalist Ian McLaren who grew up in that haven of Canadian fervor, the National Film Board. Watt comes from the music business and knows that records must succeed in the States if they are to count.

The Academy of Canadian Cinema is responding to the demands of its 600 members to honor American films in which Canadian talent has a meaningful input. Having reworked its point system, it now announces that *Strange Brew* and *A Christmas Story* qualify as Canadian films, though they were both produced by MGM. The Canada Council gives this move its blessing, as it continues to support the ACC. However, the list of Canadian features is the shortest one since the ACC was formed, because most Canadian films produced last year – the likes of *Night Eyes*, *Screwballs*, and *Cross Country* – are not the kind of film one dares celebrate in an annual tribute to Canadian creativity.

At the federal certification office, once a hot-bed of letters, applications, preliminary and final approval of The Canadian Film, only two features were certified this year: *Blood Relations*, made in Calgary, and *Undercurrents*, made in Ottawa/Hull. Nobody else bothered to apply because nobody could convince investors that a Canadian film, as defined by the government for tax purposes, had any chance of making money back.

Meanwhile, the CRTC is drowning in applications for Canadian content numbers – and because there is no definition of Canadian content at the CRTC other than that there be significant control of the production by Canadians and that Canadian performers be used, numbers are plentifully given. Countless American films (among the \$100 million worth reportedly shot in Canada in 1983) hold Canadian content numbers and so will qualify – on network TV and on pay-TV – as Canadian.

The CRTC, finally embarrassed by its own loopholes, promised to plug them with a definition which would conform to the now unused definition of the certification office, but the out-cry from the industry was such that it backed off, begging for time to create a consensus, and postponing the new definition until the Spring.

Meanwhile, those who want to work have got fed up with the meandering shenanigans of the federal government.

The CRTC wanted a competitive, regional and national pay-TV system? Fie on the CRTC. First Choice is buying out Star Channel in the Atlantic provinces, and has just "consolidated" Premier Choix with TVEC in Quebec, taking \$3 million in provincial investment monies to boot. All observers agree that, financially, the creation of this new company is the only way to have a viable French-language pay-service in Canada.

The government wanted private investment in feature films? Then why wasn't the DOC able at the time to convince the department of Revenue that investors' money would still be at risk, despite pre-sales? Had Revenue come to this determination while the 100% capital cost allowance over one year was still in place, something might have worked. As it is, no infrastructure was created, and the film industry is no more independent today than it was before the tax shelter. It has grown, however, in suits and bankruptcies.

The government wanted to produce films of some enduring cultural value? Of late, almost every film of any cultural pretention – *The Wars*, Don Owen's *Unfinished Business*, *Le crime d'Ovide Plouffe*, *The Tin Flute*, Jean Beaudin's *Mario s'en va t'en guerre* and Jutra's *Le silence* – has been done with the National Film Board of Canada. Yet it is only a matter of time (unless François Macerola can work miracles) before the Liberals dismantle the NFB – and this in the name of some higher cultural purpose which surely only they understand.

Meanwhile, even Quebec – long the most articulate and inspired of political bodies when it comes to cultural policy – is coming up with its version of the American compromise. The minister of Cultural Affairs, Clément Richard had the American majors on the run this summer ("We're not worried about Ottawa," confided one executive from Los Angeles. "What we really want to know is what is going to happen in Quebec.") Now, his staff says that the structures needed to implement the cinema law will be a year in the making, and the momentum has run down. In distribution, it's business as usual.

As for production, the province should heat up quickly, what with a viable pay-network and the promise of an 150% capital cost allowance. And this time the rules have been specifically written to attract business – to bring in the Americans, the French and the others who might want to make films here. And while there are a point system and other riders to maintain some control on feature films to be made in Quebec under its tax shelter, there are absolutely no terms which a film under 75 minutes must meet other than to spend 75% of the production costs in the province and to be produced by a Québécois. The definition of the latter is so broad that Glen Ford, by virtue of his birth certificate, can qualify, as would any potential Harry Allan Towers who would deign to visit the province for 200 days prior to principal photography to earn residency.

So the vacuum created by the government is now being filled by those who want to get on with business. If, for a while, Canadian producers had hoped that federal policy would lead to new openings for them in Canada, they are now sorely disabused. In one of the sadder footnotes, television producers are suing for membership in the Association of Canadian Movie Production Companies, abandoning the Canadian Film and Television Association which has elaborated for their interests for 36 years. With the new association, they are joining the ranks of the makers of *Joy*, *Candy the Stripper*, *Crunch*, *Gas*, and *Spacehunter*, to mention some memorable titles.

If the year 1983 was the year of negligible feature production (other than the activity at the NFB), it was also the year in which an entire industry turned to the most culturally colonized of Canadian communicative media for its salvation. And here again, as with feature production, *Canadian television*, with the notable exception of CBC productions like *Empire Inc.* or *Vanderberg*, is a myth. There is no such thing as "international" television programming. One can't opt to watch Spanish programs or Japanese programs or Mexican programs. Around the world, one watches either locally produced programs or American programs.

If, as Harold Greenberg says, with the enthusiastic approval of Québec's Clément Richard, "We are producing for a world market," then, with the possible exception of the CBC, we will soon be producing nothing but *Dallas*-clones, as American-style programming is the only programming likely to steal across the border and beyond, to those millions of screens across the world that hunger for a look at America.

Saddest of all is the fact that, through government ineptitude, there is no alternative. So welcome to 1984.

The editors ●

