

## The place of Canadian content in a universe unfolding as it should

*"First of all, this country must be assured of complete control of broadcasting from Canadian sources, free from foreign interference or influence."* – Prime Minister R.E. Bennett (1932)

There is a dark underside to the federal government's recent strategic initiatives in the area of broadcasting policy. For all the high-sounding phrases about Canadian content and the preservation of a Canadian identity only conceal a political debate from which, according to *The Globe & Mail* (Mar. 16, 1984), the Canadian public has been excluded. That issue, the subject of on going high-level talks between Ottawa and Washington, is free-trade with the United States – namely, the total integration of Canadian industry into what a recent Cabinet document called "the North-American regional market."

The history of Canada's cultural industries, particularly the Canadian film industry, provides a stunning example of what free-trade with the Americans entails for Canadian culture. In our film industry, the theatrical exhibition and distribution sectors have since the 1920s been integrated into what the American Majors call "the U.S.-Canada market," and the sad but true story of Canadian filmmaking is that of repeated failures to extricate itself from the stranglehold of integration. The Canadian Film Development Corporation's recent name-change to Telefilm Canada is the confirmation that failure is now a *fait accompli*.

In this shrinking from albeit ungainly, bureaucratic and oft misguided attempts to generate a Canadian film industry/culture to the trimmer and more specific function of developing a television program industry lies an enormous admission of defeat. A defeat that will shortly be crowned by the long-awaited but emasculated Film Policy, a fitting emblem of the Trudeau years' liberal nationalism. Ironically, just when Trudeau, the great anti-nationalist leaves the political scene, Canadian cultural nationalism too finds itself reduced to a position similar to Quebec's after the loss of the 1980 referendum on independence. Because, both then and now, what is left in ruins is the dream of cultural independence.

For Canadian filmmaking, this dream was already badly mangled by the boom-and-bust of the tax-shelter years, and by an unmistakable producer orientation towards internationalism's golden high-roads. The name-change to Telefilm Canada marks the demise of what was left of the dream of Canadian film development and consecrates a new realism directed towards television as the locus of Canadian culture.

The reversion to a more traditional preoccupation with issues of broadcasting content and delivery means the definitive abandonment of the motion-picture exhibition/distribution sectors to its 'natural' masters. Quebec's valiant attempt last year to repossess some control over theatrical film structures might have succeeded, if backed by a similar determination on the part of the federal government. But that determination is non-existent and, as these lines are written, Québec cultural affairs minister Clément Richard is eating humble pie with the Majors in Los Angeles.

And so today Canadian cultural industries rein in their wagons around the old campfires of the Canadian broadcasting system at a time when that system is under considerable technological attack and, as CRTC chairman André Bureau puts it in this issue, when increasing numbers of Canadians "are effectively disconnecting themselves from the Canadian broadcasting system." If the broadcasting system has belatedly become the last line of defense of a Canadian identity, it is perhaps worth recalling how much ground has already been abandoned.

In 1932, as Tanya Tree's feature on Canadian content in this issue notes, Prime Minister R.B. Bennett stated unequivocally: "The use of the air... that lies over the soil and land of Canada is a natural resource over which we have complete jurisdiction (and) I cannot think that any government would be warranted in leaving the air to private exploitation and not reserving it for development for the use of the people." And yet successive Liberal governments from Mackenzie King onward would do exactly what the Conservative Bennett considered unthinkable. Only now, after 50 years of ever-increasing private exploitation of the air has the CRTC come to define the nature of that jurisdiction in terms of a Canadian television program.

Again, it is to the undying credit of the Canadian public-sector in film and broadcasting that such a long, hard battle has been fought to defend Canadian air, our last natural resource, from the predations of private enterprise, both foreign and home-grown. But the battle has been a losing one – with severe casualties, not the least being the progressive destruction of the National Film Board, a sacrifice of Canadian identity that, as Jacques Bobet movingly relates in this issue, will prove irreplaceable.

In this lengthy context of erosion and defeat, there are nevertheless signs that with the new conservatism comes a realization that what little remains must be defended. With, finally, some agreement between the CRTC, the CFCVO, and Telefilm Canada on what the CRTC calls "minimal requirements" as to the definition of a Canadian television programming, there is now a common base for defensive action to safeguard the skeleton

of Canadian identity. There is a related agreement that this line of defense can only be maintained by a broad partnership between the independent private-sector, the CBC, the Broadcast Fund and related regulatory agencies. For its part, Telefilm Canada is reported to be showing an openness and cooperativeness that was all too rare when it was the CFDC. Even a kind of low-grade nationalism is said to be blowing through the usually airless bureaucracies.

In theory, it should now be possible, given sufficient mechanisms and a sense of purpose, for the various institutional components to effect that fundamental reorientation of the broadcasting system away from disguised American programming that the CRTC's Canadian program criteria would like to bring about. In this perspective, Telefilm Canada's world-wide search for television coproduction treaties looks potentially very positive.

But the Liberal stewardship of the federal government leaves behind it a highly ambiguous legacy. It may have achieved in the narrower area of television exactly what it refused to accomplish in film: namely, use of the levers of public ownership and public money to reinforce both the private production and distribution of Canadian programming for, in Bennett's words, the development of the people. Paradoxically, however, providing the Canadian content has now devolved upon the private sector. The great unknown is and remains the extent to which the Canadian private sector can take the idea of Canadian content seriously – something it has always fought tooth and claw in the past.

If that private sector or even a part of it can rise to its cultural responsibility, something can perhaps still be salvaged from the wreckage of the Canadian filmmaking dream that began first at the NFB, then in 1968 with the creation of the CFDC. If not, then having taken the option to open the airwaves to private exploitation will turn out to have been a political and cultural catastrophe from which this country will never recover. And the very fact of the free-trade talks only underscores that such an outcome is far from remote.

## LETTERS

### Porn policy protest

*(An open letter to all ACTRA members)*

We don't know about you, but we were both angered and dismayed by the recent ACTRA Policy Statement on pornography and censorship. We were not involved in generating it and we do not approve of it.

We would like the following points to be known:

1) We resent the fact that this policy statement was released to the press and presented to the Fraser Committee *before* it was sent to ACTRA members for a reaction by those members who could not be present at the annual meeting of January 28-29, 1984. We feel that this was reprehensible behaviour on the part of ACTRA's Board of Directors, and we do not accept that the policy statement represents the majority opinion of ACTRA because it was never submitted to the vote of the entire membership.

2) We disagree vehemently with the interpretation of the premise and function of a trade union as expressed in the policy statement; that is, we do not feel that it is ACTRA's place to tell the artists who form their membership about their art, and what shall and shall not be "tolerated" and "condoned" by ACTRA concerning their membership's choice of subject matter or form or tone of expression. We feel that this is a matter of personal taste and moral sense, and that Canada does not need yet another regulating, restricting, overseeing, committee-ridden body to interpret matters of morality and art for its artistic community.

3) We disagree with many of the assumptions and statements within the policy, and single out for special con-

demnation the resolution that "the most effective and just approach to restricting obscenity is to outlaw proscribed conduct."

4) We are appalled that ACTRA would want to set up what could be called the ACTRA CENSOR BOARD OF PRE-PRIOR RESTRAINT, which would empower it to censor films *even before they were made*. Not even the Ontario Censor Board at its most restrictive has ever dared to do this. We resist with all our heart any changes within ACTRA such as these proposed which would lead it to become another reactionary and repressive force in the life of this country.

With the foregoing in mind, we respectfully ask

a) that ACTRA refrain from lobbying for changes in legislation respecting obscenity,

b) that ACTRA refrain from adopting and implementing its resolution as per its Policy Statement which would secure changes in conditions of work and terms of employment within the production industry insofar as these deal with questions of obscenity, pornography, censorship, sexual mores and the artistic life of its membership, and

c) that ACTRA publicly withdraw its Policy Statement on Pornography and Censorship.

**David Cronenberg**, Writer  
**Lynne Gordon**, Performer  
**Jackie Burroughs**, Performer  
**June Callwood**, Writer

*ACTRA's lengthy reply will be printed next month on Cinema Canada's Opinions page.*

## Vanderberg valedictory

(Letter addressed to Cinema Canada's associate editor)

I was in my office yesterday afternoon (Feb. 3) when I got a phone call from my Art Director who had just seen your "Vanderberg" article ("Requiem for a Canadian hero," Cinema Canada No. 104). I picked up a copy last night and read it. Really, I'm quite stunned; especially after all the disappointments and letdown.

Today I'm sending copies to various members of the cast and production team, all of whom had believed so deeply in what we were doing and shared in the pain and shock of seeing it all dumped on, and seeing the series dropped when we all thought it would be back.

What angered me the most, not that it really surprised me (nothing a Canadian newspaper TV critic could say could truly surprise me), was to be accused of ripping off Dallas and Dynasty and the like when our concept and inspiration were so totally and utterly Canadian. (If there was a single "inspiration" it was *The Acquisitors*, by Peter Newman.) I appreciate your noting the Canadian-ness of what we were doing, and the Calgary viewpoint. It was fundamental to the whole idea. Rob Forsyth is from Saskatoon and he thinks like a western Canadian, not an American. None of us connected with the series have the remotest interest in those American soaps. Of course while some complained of us trying to imitate Dallas & Co., others were annoyed that we weren't enough like them - too much confusing business detail, not enough violence and sleaze.

There's a great deal I could say about your article. At the moment I'm in a bit of a rush because I'm on my way out of town for a week. Perhaps I should confine myself to sincere thanks. I know it wasn't written to feed our egos. But all of us involved - and a lot of us have been feeling a bit fragile lately - are touched and appreciative.

Meanwhile I see that to others of my colleagues in the same issue you are something of a villain. Well I haven't seen the film in question so I can stay nicely out of that one.

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## The Canadian screenplay debate : two views

I whole-heartedly support Frank Barillaro's call for an assessment of the state of Canadian scriptwriting instruction ("The Canadian Screenplay: A modest proposal", Cinema Canada No 103). Why, indeed, shouldn't we expect our film-school graduates to write saleable scripts of high quality? However, I believe that analysing and defining standards for screenplays, as advocated by Barillaro, is a backward step for creativity.

The case is put that, generally speaking, present courses of instruction fail on two counts. First, they fail to define a standard of excellence in screenplays, and second, they do not provide ways of analysing that standard. It is felt that the student can detect and examine consistent mistakes if they have some way of analysing their script by comparison with an ideal structure.

I have four questions.

First, whose standards would we use? Those determined by writers, producers, the public or (God forbid) a royal commission, would quite probably differ radically.

Could we transcend these standards, and the means of analysis that identify them? I would contend that we have already achieved the ability to create what Barillaro calls the "ideal, conventional film story," but are artistically incapable of consistently moving beyond it. I would need to be convinced that introducing models and standards into scripting courses would not be the equivalent of chiselling prettier gravestones.

Would students be discouraged from working outside the course methods? When new structures or perceptions emerge, the accepted methods tend to censor them as inferior, inappropriate, or incomprehensible. If the entire media are incapable of altering their standards, then developing talent may be forced to pursue work in more receptive centres.

Finally, is analysis itself compatible with creativity? Analysis (from the Greek 'to loosen') is principally concerned with isolating any part of a finished whole quickly and efficiently, and examining it in detail. At most it can only tell us that the pieces can be sensibly related as parts of a whole.

Artistic learning, I believe, arises from discovery by doing. The biographical material on Western artists in any medium, in any documented period of our history, shows us that they learned their craft by copying the masters and studying nature, often feeling their way by trial and error. By introducing analysis as a major component of course instruction, we might well find ourselves turning potential scriptwriters into practising critics.

Far from diminishing the chances to make mistakes, we should be increasing them. Canada lacks a National Film school of the sort found in many European countries, nor can it claim a university with the calibre of instruction of an NYU or UCLA.

In this regard, Barillaro rightly blames the industry for not contributing its share; at present they are merely trading acres of forests for cords of presto-logs. It would greatly help our writers, and their pocket-books in the long run, if a pee-wee league of writing, production

and exposition could be established.

Despite its defects, I do not believe the "read aloud and wait for comments" workshop course should be discarded. I have also had my share of glib, disappointing comments like "It doesn't sound right..." or worse, scattered nods of polite toleration. However, there is one great advantage, especially if the class is very small, the course long, and the students honest and able to develop trust amongst themselves. The participants tend to adopt each other's scripts, and support them with well-reasoned criticism, writing tips, or pooling ideas and resource material from other sources.

The one improvement I might recommend for workshops is to have student scenes acted out, or at least read aloud, by other members of the class. I am constantly amazed how few people actually hear their own scripts. The other writers would also gain by the experience of being in the actor's robes, of having to stumble over stilted, dry, or tangled dialogue.

Of far greater damage to scriptwriters is the absence of published screenplays of Canadian films, English or French. Certainly one may read the writers of international repute and learn much about scripts. But if we are to achieve excellence (and generate revenue in the Canadian film industry) we must have examples drawn from our own works which can be referred to for inspiration as well as instruction.

While I remain skeptical of screenplay analysis, the value of written exercises, mentioned almost as an aside by Barillaro, cannot be doubted. And characterization is the key here. Study people, not methods; analyze emotion, not scene structures. If we are to blow life into the Canadian screen, then surely our first task as writers is to populate our works with people capable of more than just inhaling and exhaling. We must study the sigh, the snort, and the sneeze.

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I agree with Frank Barillaro in his January, 1984, "Opinion" in Cinema Canada. We do need quality screenplays written in Canada. And I agree that Film schools have a role to play in teaching screenwriting. I do feel, however, that his concentration on the shortcomings of the way screenwriting is taught, is too ambitious an answer, for the shortcomings of the dramatic film problem in Canada.

At York we offer screenwriting at three levels for undergraduates and we currently have half a dozen screenwriting students with writing experience working on their MFA degrees. My first observation about screenwriting instruction is that it is not as difficult as Barillaro suggests. Perhaps because our goals are different. The underlying assumption in all of Barillaro's comments is that teaching screenwriting can spark the type of creativity that will produce exceptional screenplays. I disagree. Courses in screenwriting can

teach students the craft of screenwriting and these courses can accomplish the craft goals quite well.

What screenwriting courses cannot do is to teach would-be writers the *art* of storytelling. Screenwriting courses can teach discrimination between what is a good idea for a screenplay. But screenwriting courses cannot teach a writer that dramatic vitality is a strange blend of the expected and the unexpected, a compression of the extremities of behaviour and feeling, and that the involvement with the story depends on empathy with the characters of the story rather than on admiration for its writer.

The impression that there is something magical about a good screenplay is quite apt. Barillaro feels that magic can be kindled in the classroom. If the film industry rarely ventures into the realm of storytellers - the wonderful novels and short stories of this country - why would the film industry be any more likely to find that magic in the classroom? Or look for those stories in the seminar rooms that house screenwriting courses?

Another implicit barrier to Barillaro's scheme is the dearth of experience of our producers, and the absence of a class of experienced story editors in the dramatic film infrastructure of this country. We have producers who produce and we have story editors who edit, but if these people don't have the developed acumen to recognize the magic screenplay when they read it, it won't matter what we do at the film education level. A producer has to have an eye and ear for the commercial viability as well as the tasteful or tasteless uniqueness of a potential project. A good story editor has to know how to work and how to solve dramatic problems in the promising work of writers who may become good screenwriters.

Finally it is very difficult to write and produce good screenplays in a country where perhaps 100 hours of film drama are produced each year in film and television. The competition is so great that faced with too many choices producers will favour writers they know. We live in a big country with a small market.

What then can the film schools do to encourage as Barillaro puts it, "quality screenplays"? I don't think an anthology of Canadian screenplay criticism is the answer. We can encourage students to learn the craft of screenwriting. We can encourage students to acquaint themselves with film - see everything, past and present, and think about why those great films have worked. We can encourage film students to read. This is not a facetious comment. Film technology demands so much attention and energy that it leaves the student insufficient time to attend to ideas, and to the difficulty of articulating in a stimulating way, those ideas for film. And we can encourage the film student to study Canadian culture and the Canadian film industry with a critical eye. The film student has as much to learn from the mistakes of his elders as from his own.

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