

Francis Fox's silent film policy

by Jacques Godbout

At Mexico City in 1982 France's minister of Culture Jack Lang described the reality of cultural relations in the light of two givens: "Artistic creation today is the victim of international financial domination," he stated, "and yet it is artistic (and scientific) innovation alone that will allow nations to overcome the crisis." Reading the most recent enunciation by the Canadian minister of Communications, one sees how, when it comes to cultural policy, Western ministers influence one another.

Nonetheless, between Jack Lang's approach which wishes to privilege the *quality of the work* and Francis Fox's preoccupation with "the information revolution", there exists a profound divergence. In Canada we still maintain that the "new techniques of transmission as well as the resulting means of distribution and diffusion" are at the centre of the problem. Mr. Fox even speaks of "a *cultural crisis* and an *economic challenge* whose breadth we cannot measure." This is presbyopic: for we are rather in an *economic crisis* and before a *cultural challenge*.

How is it that the technocrats of culture are seduced by technology? Why does fibre optics move them so? Is this new? Was not Canada brought into the world by railway engineers? Instead of preoccupying himself with profound cultural realities, Francis Fox speaks of "Canadianization"; that is, of the railroad of the future: electronics, television, cable, satellites.

A continuity

Those with good memories will recall that before being appointed the Queen's representative, Jeanne Sauvé, for one, had devoted herself to promoting pay-television. After her, Francis Fox too tugged on the umbilical cord of this "new industry" that would, so they said, bring in millions of new dollars to Canadian filmmakers.

Today we know that euphoria has given way to more modest proposals and that pay-television will not fulfill its promises: our small market will oblige the companies to fuse before becoming extensions of American cable. Francis Fox's National Film and Video Policy (made public May 29) is presented to us in the same euphoric discourse of the era of pay-TV, in the same spirit of "hi-tech" and "the technological U-turn" — those mammaries of Canadian speechifying — and risks, five years from now, producing the same results.

Everything occurs, in fact, as if culture these days were a convenient mask that governments use to disguise their commercial projects. Perhaps the cultural industries' lobbies have become more effective than those of creators. It is certainly the case that signed cultural productions, the fruits of the imagination of an author, are giving way before the products of marketing.

One can already see this in the book; it is obvious in the domain of recording, and for several years now audiovisual too has fallen in step with the machine.

One must pay attention to words: one no longer speaks of literature or music, but of books and records; one no longer speaks of cinema and television, but of film and video, two industrial materials that have in themselves no cultural value. One no longer speaks of content, one speaks of plumbing.

Bargain-basement patrimony

In the face of such a profound transformation of the meaning of an *oeuvre* (and so of life), one could hope for governments that cultural policies would first be concerned with creators and the necessary relations that they entertain with the consciousness of a country.

This is what, for 45 years, the National Film Board, for example, attempted, a unique and exemplary endeavor that Mr. Fox recognizes in his film and video policy. Nevertheless, while encouraging the NFB to pursue its research of excellence, the ministerial policy affirms that this institution can no longer today play its role of master craftsman and that the cabinet will recommend a bill to divest the government film commissioner and head of the NFB of his role as first counsellor to the government. And the minister mentions *Porky's* (a vulgar film, in the opinion of all) among the recent successes that have inspired his "new policy."

One grasps first of all, in the chapters of this document, a will to separate public sector territories from the functionaries. One senses also a preference in favor of private enterprise which is surely astonishing in a country where everything that moves on a screen is subsidized to the tune of 90%. Unfortunately, one understands all too quickly that the film and video policy, by giving private-sector managers and government technocrats the final responsibilities for our artistic future, guarantees us a manager's patrimony: it is not, in fact, because Denis Héroux and Harold Greenberg are getting rich that the cultures of Canada are in turn enriching themselves.

Nor it is on the basis of managerial solutions that one should judge a "national film and video policy." Changing the CFDC's label to Telefilm Canada, asking the Ministry of Supply and Services to substitute itself for the NFB's expertise in the production of government films, adding money to the development fund to promote screenwriting projects, or announcing further coproduction agreements with numerous countries, partakes more of the domain of patronage than the lofty perspective one would expect of a minister responsible for the cultural policies of Canada.

And yet that is what, in this extension of the Applebaum-Hébert report, Francis Fox's red booklet offers. First a *silent film policy*, and then an economic model borrowed from the auto pact that has more to do with industry than with culture.

A silent film policy

It is well-known that since 1929, the "talkies" have been produced and distributed along linguistic networks. Before this period, German, French, American or Canadian films were interchangeable. Since then, despite any amount of subtitling and more or less competent dubbing, films have a maternal language that confirms them within a certain number of circuits.

That is to say that the problems of (and solutions to) English-Canadian cinematographic production have *absolutely nothing to do* with those of French-Canadian/Québécois production. And yet, in a fundamental political text, the minister of Communications realises an extraordinary amalgam that simply does not exist when he speaks of "Canadian film."

A national industrial policy on aerospace or electronics need not distinguish between Quebec or Ontario factories. But when one speaks of "Canadian" cinema, as if the origin and career of *Les Plouffe* could compare itself to *The Grey Fox* or *Meatballs*, either one is practising what the Jesuits called "mental restriction" or one ignores reality altogether.

The reality is that an English-language film, shot in Canada with an American star so as to be attractive beyond the border, can very well "pass itself for an American film." In fact, Canadian content is defined by the minister according to the nationality of the collaborators on a film and not on the basis of the *authenticity* of its content as is the case in Australia. According to the letter of the law, *Quest For Fire* is a Canadian film.

On the other hand, it follows that *Les Plouffe*, shown in a drive-in theatre in Arizona, will always look like a product imported from Quebec. And as the Americans are not terribly interested in foreign films, it is in any case 99.9% certain that *Les Plouffe* would never be shown in Arizona.

If that's all there is to it, say the optimists, a French-language Canadian film can always find its market in France as naturally as the English-language Canadian product will in the U.S.A. Let us state immediately that there is nothing "natural" about cinema markets; in fact, the countries of which we speak want first priority on their own screens as well as on our own for good measure. Moreover, if one wishes to be honest, one has to admit that French Québécois films are seen in France as foreign language films. There's no need to be offended by this: we speak a familial language that is not familiar to them.

By refusing to invoke these linguistic dimensions, the minister of Communications says nothing less than that a successful "Canadian" film is much like *Atlantic City*: French director, American star, Canadian money. In developing a silent film policy, the minister reminds us that money has neither language, nor culture, nor pride. Cinema (or video) thus becomes an

assembly of deals, of "coups", in which Quebec filmmakers are the great losers. And English-Canadian filmmakers even more so.

It's the same discourse that permits the affirmation that France and Canada will sign \$100 million worth of deals this year! With what cultural consequences? Dubious ones, as they already admit around Jack Lang in Paris.

The auto-pact

So what is lurking beneath these thoughts? The desire to eliminate the original expression of our two cultures in the two official languages? Certainly not. Even if he does not speak of it, Francis Fox knows perfectly well that there are two types of cinema in Canada. In fact he knows it so well that he accepts that our internal markets (200,000 viewers in Quebec; less than a million in English Canada) are insufficient to structurally support both an original cinema and private television. Moreover, at a time when the other ministers are all taking cutbacks, how did the minister of Communications manage to get an increase for film and video?

Because he knew how to talk jobs, quoting hallucinatory statistics (over 10,000 A-V freelancers in Canada with a productive capacity of 100 feature films per year) and proposing for cinema a policy similar to the *auto pact*: since our markets are too small (just as they are too small for the production of a Canadian car), we have to go and negotiate with the American Majors (the GMs, Fords or Chryslers of film distribution), and persuade them to allow us to have an assembly industry in exchange for our patronage of their cinemas.

No doubt General Motors workers in Ste-Thérèse are happy to earn a living assembling Oldsmobiles. Film technicians also will, in the main, be happy assembling "international" films for the "international" market in exchange for good wages. Because if unemployment is rife in the audiovisual domain, the pay, on the other hand, is good. However, the "film pact" won't give us a metre more in *authentic* cultural product.

Why worry? Is it so bad to want to create jobs? Wasn't it necessary to put a stop to the growth of the CBC and the NFB? Absolutely if one prefers film over cinema; that is to say, if one believes in the cultural industries more than one does in culture. And yet, it is culture that legitimizes the State. When one wants to "Canadianize" the airwaves with hybrid (international) products for export, all that remains is to propose a "Cité du cinéma" so as to create a Hollywood-on-St.-Lawrence. And those whom this saddens can always console themselves by recalling that, after all, Walt Disney too was Canadian.

One of Quebec's leading novelists and essayists, Jacques Godbout is a filmmaker at the National Film Board of Canada. The original French version of this text first appeared in the newspaper Le Devoir.