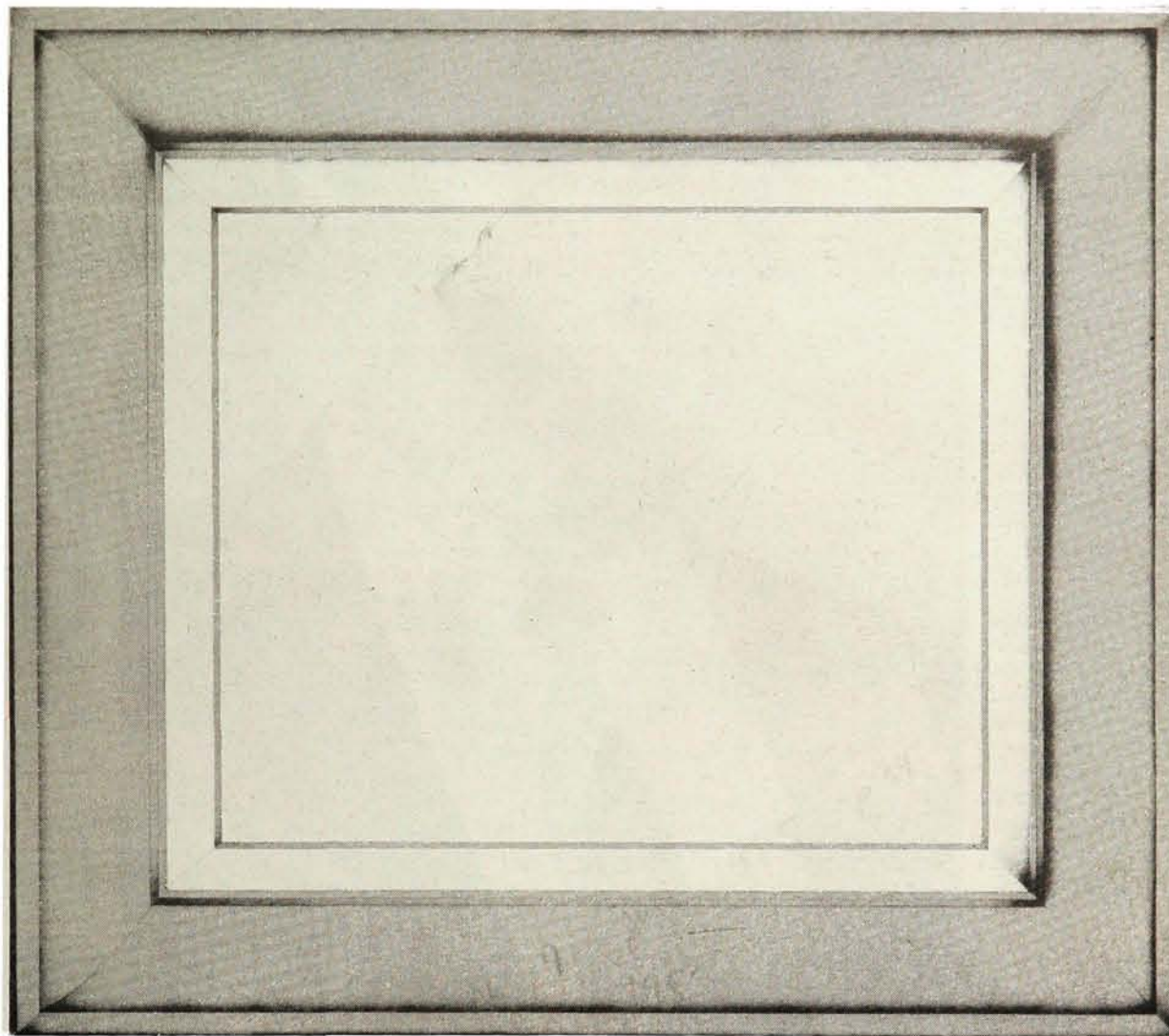


Framing Canadian content



"The only enemy which can vanquish a culture is its own weakness."
Georges-Henri Lévesque

Perhaps the perfect metaphor for the present state of Canadian cultural life is the poster recently designed for the Canadian Conference of the Arts' 40th anniversary (and proudly presented to Communications minister Marcel Masse at the CCA's annual general meeting in Montreal in mid-May). The poster shows a gilded frame and that's all. The space within the frame is, tellingly, an absolute blank, a void.

Nothing better states the dilemma of Canadian content at a time when the frame itself is getting all the attention. These days in cultural policy it's all frames: the dreaded technological invasion against which only fierce competition can defend us; the umpteenth review of the broadcasting framework; the economic valorisation of the "framework" of the cultural industries; the Broadcast Fund, yet another gilded frame that's doing just splendidly thank you. In Canada today, the health of the frame has never been better and much official optimism prevails as to the future.

But when one looks beyond the frame, it's really quite another story: a CBC that in the words of one executive-producer "is having a collective nervous breakdown"; a CRTC that's so out of control it has confused the public interest with the interests of the cable industry; a national film industry so bedazzled with spurious internationalism that it ranks Hollywood as Canada's fifth largest city; broadcasters storming the regulator *en masse* for dispensation from the burdens of Canadian content; and Telefilm Canada (until a replacement for André Lamy is chosen) just drifting merrily along.

Meanwhile the chorus of official wisdom clamors that the only hope for Canadian cultural production lies in international competition. From the minister of Communications to the chairman of the CRTC, officialdom warns of the spectre of a "foreign" technological revolution that is changing cultural production as we have known it away from content and into, you guessed it, the building of more frames. The content, it is alleged, will either take care of itself, or is the prerogative of "creators"; or better yet doesn't matter much when all that matters is the building of frames.

Canada claims the curious distinction to have vaulted onto the inter-

national scene (another frame) but, unlike any other nation, without first having gone through a national phase, without ever having built a national platform (the content) strong enough to uphold the internationalism *that only comes afterwards*. What sort of internationalism can be expected of a country that makes a political pastime of dismantling what precious few national institutions it possesses (the CBC being the most obvious example)? There is a reigning delusion in the skyscrapers of policy-making that Canada is somehow capable of having it both ways at the same time: of going international while simultaneously shoring up the communications frame of the national economy. More precisely, this only means strengthening the most internationally inclined sector of communications, namely, the private sector.

CRTC chairman André Bureau has argued that in the new mature phase of enlightened Canadian cultural industry, businessmen will naturally gravitate towards Canadian content as the means of distinguishing their "product" from all the other international stuff. Would that this were the case, but the case is, sadly, that this is nothing but a pious wish. It's been more or less 20 years now, in broadcasting and film, that the Canadian private sector has been given every conceivable encouragement (some might even say has been catered to, pampered and babied) in the hope that some Canadian national, cultural reconciliation of arts and business would come of it. What we got instead was Hollywood North and the cultural ideology of *Entertainment Tonight*. As Bernard Ostry remarked several years ago with typical Canadian understatement: "Even cultural decisions have a way of achieving the opposite effect of what was intended."

So – and since this turn of events is not likely to change in the near future – what is to be done?

One small suggestion. As Marcel Masse interviews potential candidates for the top Telefilm job, he might consider showing applicants the Canadian Conference of the Arts' poster and asking: what's wrong with this picture? The person who replies in shocked tones "But it has no content" is the one to hire.

It may not be much, but it would at least be a step towards the proper perspective.