

# Free-trade and the cultural industries: a Canadian strategy

"Ever since Confederation, Canada has rested and relied upon on two systems, one international, the other national."

Donald Creighton, *Dominion of the North*

The fact that both the film and broadcasting task forces appointed earlier this year by former Communications minister Marcel Masse have begun to drag their feet as recommendation-time draws near is a sure sign that the issues, far from getting clarified, are again bogging down in classical Canadian indecision. The Film Task Force, originally meant to report Nov. 1, now won't until late in November. The Caplan-Sauvageau Task Force, scheduled to report in mid-January, is now talking late winter-early spring. And beyond the task forces, Canada's erstwhile film and television industries wallow in their usual division and fragmentation, while another unique opportunity for concerted thinking and action slips by. Perhaps both Task Forces might have simplified matters by getting together to jointly come up with what Canada's cultural industries need most: a common cultural/ industrial strategy for at home and abroad.

But, as always, the problems start at the top. With cabinet itself divided between those who want to lead Canada confidently deeper into the U.S. and those who want to protect the little that's distinctively Canadian in our culture, there is no central political direction. What direction exists is divided between the heads of the large cultural agencies (the CBC, Telefilm, the NFB), though between them there seems to be some agreement on the need for large-scale Canadian content *dramatic* productions. However, by whom or how all this would be produced raises the uncomfortable fact that Canada's film and television industry and its 'independent' producers is itself deeply divided between a few large American-style feature producers, and a great many smaller independents whose commitments to Canadian content span the broader range of production genres.

The increased north-south pull signalled by Canada's readiness to open free-trade talks with the Americans has not only led to the usual vague rhetorical pieties about Canada's "unique culture" matched by the equally alarmist nationalist suspicions of massive cultural give-aways, but, more importantly perhaps, has only given further confirmation to the already acute distortions in Canadian film and television production towards the 'international' aspect of present arrangements.

For those who still need to be reminded of such distortions, recent StatsCan data for 1982 show that though Canadian-controlled film and video distribution companies account for 83% of total Canadian ownership, it's the 17% foreign-controlled distributors that took in 73% of total gross revenues (nearly \$300 million), and paid nothing in royalties, rentals or commissions to Canadian copyright owners.

It's such distortions that drive the largest Canadian producers (from the Héroux-Kemeny-Lantos-Roth Alliance to the smaller Bobby Coopers, Hirschs, Shapiros or Simcoms) to operate part- or full-time from L.A., and conversely result in Lorimar, MGM and Disney waiting just outside the Investment Canada gate for permission to open production offices in Toronto.

On the national side of things, and also as in distribution, the StatsCan data remind us that Canadian film and video production is restricted to a large number of small firms, with a marginal share of the Canadian market. If the actively producing independents have had their 'independence' tied hand-and-foot by Telefilm's Broadcast Fund's own dependence upon the unclear priorities of Canadian broadcasters (precisely what Caplan-Sauvageau have been mandated to examine), far too many of the remaining independents find themselves not only financially limited but even frozen out of funding by their own stubborn desire to produce low-budget Canadian programming and documentaries. If small independents like Atlantis in Toronto or Prisma in Montreal have managed successful track-records under the circumstances, Atlantis' very success is driving it increasingly towards 'international' production.

Yet, as always, squarely at the centre of the national scheme of things prominently figure the CBC and the NFB, Canada's only two genuinely national production/distribution networks. But if the heads of both these agencies are committed to increased Canadian content production, neither organization seems too sure how to go about it. The CBC, oblivious of the de-centralized technological capability of in-house production like *The Journal* or *Midday*, casts about for big budgets that don't exist. The NFB, in its on-going crisis of relevance, toys with the temptation of sacrificing its documentary heritage, low-budget French production, and successful national regionalization program, all for the chimera of big-budget coproduction. Not by accident is the more organized independent producing sector (Quebec's APFVQ, Ontario's ACFTP) once again hungrily eyeing both the CBC and the NFB as a free source of technical development.

Driven by the lack of a domestic market into chronic government-dependence on the one hand, and by the lack of same into sacrificing Canadian content to foreign aesthetics on the other, Canadian independents have always believed that they could resolve their own under-development if only more of the CBC and the NFB were handed over to them. But one need only glance at the Americanization of Canadian film and broadcasting that has gone hand-in-hand with the rise of the Canadian independents since the creation of the CFDC to see how erroneous and costly (the tax-shelter) an assumption this has been.

And, at this point in time, further moves on the CBC and the NFB would be irreversible mistakes. Canada's most successful production traditions (think of the NFB's 13 Oscars, or Atlantis' one) have succeeded because they were rooted in the public sector (and in the documentary or dramatic short). The Canadian private sector's outstanding achievements in feature filmmaking (*Meatballs*, *Porky's*, *Ghostbusters*) have always been more towards the American end of the Canadian system, to the detriment of Canada proper. To pretend otherwise is to mistake an American vision of filmmaking for a Canadian one.

Canada's cultural industries are living proof that a Canadian vision does exist, even if it is a divided one. But it's from such Canadian cultural and economic realities that the cultural industries, such as they exist, have developed so far, and it's only on that basis that further development will come. Canadian film and broadcasting history is filled with too many broken promises of brave new starts (from the creation of CBC-TV in the early '50s to 'Canadian' pay-TV in the early '80s) to be able to afford new delusions.

So two considerations that the task forces might find useful as they search about for recommendations could be: how can all the various components of Canada's cultural industries be brought to collaborate together, and how can such a collaborative structure expand Canada's domestic market which finds itself in its present state of fragmentation above all as a result of decades of favoring the international side of the Canadian system at the expense of the national side?

If the time has come to talk free-trade, then why not (as Eric Green suggests in this issue) more free-trade *within* Canada? Surely rather than being bartered away for the mirage of the U.S. market (which, as Norman Horowitz explains in this issue, even Americans don't understand), the future of Canada's cultural industries lies in serving Canada first.

## LETTERS

### CBC's golden '60s

In the April issue of *Cinema Canada*, Gail Henley says of John Hirsch re CBC TV drama series *For The Record*: In 1974 "it was his vision that dramas could be relevant to mainstream Canadian experience in the way that only current affairs were at the time - and his producers were immediately excited by the potential of drama to explore the news stories."

The result she says was "the emergence of a unique form of distinctly drama" which "garnered an audience rating in its sixth season (1981) of 1.6 million viewers."

For the record, perhaps Gail Henley should check out CBC-TV drama a decade earlier. In 1965, CBC TV drama erupted with the multi-award winning *Wojeck* series, which in its first season got 2.8 million viewers. Sold in Britain, it rose to the top of the top ten.

Before *Wojeck*, CBC TV drama was shot mostly on tape, mostly in the studio. *Wojeck* got together a documentary-type film crew, makeshift equipment and very little money. We got first-class actors working from real-life scripts, shooting where it was happening - in the streets, in the hospitals, the car lots, hotel bedrooms and the city morgue. It opened up a new world for TV drama, and a new awareness in ourselves and in our viewers.

It was also successful as a showcase

for Canadian talent, and Hollywood agents promptly signed actors John Vernon, Sharon Acker, Michael Sarrazin (*They Shoot Horses*), Peter Donat, Michael Learned (*The Waltons*), directors Paul Almond and George McCowan, writer Phil Hersch and others.

We developed other series, new writers, directors, actors and producers. In George Robertson's *Quentin Durgen M.P.* series, Gordon Pinsent won stardom as the young maverick member who brought touchy questions like native rights and pollution to the floor of the House of Commons.

Sandy Stern's medical series *Corwin*, inevitably launched writer Stern, directors Darryl Duke and Peter Carter, and actress Margo Kidder into Hollywood orbit.

We did the ombudsman reporter series. *McQueen*, the series *Sunday at Nine*, and *Canadian Short Stories* (50 of them). For *Sunday at Nine*, Grahame Woods - the gifted *Wojeck* cameraman - wrote the brilliant searing scripts on child abuse, that with Rene Bonniere's direction gave us Jackie Burrough's award-winning performance in *12 1/2 Cents* and *Vicky*. We did *Strike*, and a drama on anti-Jewish hate literature. We did the award winning *The Golden Handshake* - the plight of the senior executive whose job is declared redundant.

Ron Weyman  
Toronto