

# 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

## Robert Lantos' pride

For Robert Lantos to say in his interview in the October issue of *Cinema Canada* that "over the past ten years Canadian films had a world wide exposure and critical recognition in excess of French and Australian films" and "that no other country has ever accomplished this" is certainly the most preposterous statement ever to issue from the apologists for our pseudo-American English-track cinema. It obviously comes from a man in great pain, as well he might be.

With the very few exceptions among the titles he lists, the rest, and those unlisted, which did get picked up, like the rubbish they are, have been passed off as being American. Is he really proud of such a record? What did audiences learn about Canada from them, or doesn't that concern him?

Gerald Pratley  
Ontario Film Institute,  
Toronto

## Save NFB theatre

(The following was addressed to François Macerola, Government Film Commissioner, National Film Board of Canada)

As a filmmaker and educator, I would like to express concern over the closing of the National Film Board theatre in Regina. It is the only publicly accessible 16mm exhibition facility of quality in our city so I know that its loss would be a painful blow to Regina's growing media production community.

Following are four examples of how the facility has been used. All four bookings took place within the past five months:

- During the summer my company, Birdsong Films, used the facility as a seminar and projection venue for a series of six workshops involving Youth Unlimited, a Regina youth action group. The workshops were used to develop scripts for three two-minute vignettes. The vignettes were produced by Birdsong for exhibition on CBC Regina.
- Since September, I have been teaching a credit course entitled "History of Documentary Film" for the department of film and video, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Regina. Since most of the films used in the class are NFB films, and since the University is only able to assign me a regular classroom for the screenings, I have been holding the weekly class in the NFB theatre.
- As part of the abovementioned class, I have used two films from the NFB archives. These film are not in general cir-

ulation and cannot be shown outside an NFB facility. If the NFB theater did not exist, I would not have been able to show the films.

• As director of a half-hour workshop drama for Filmpool (Regina's film cooperative), I used the NFB facility for a meeting and casting call. Thus, about twenty actors or aspiring actors passed through the facility. The film, entitled *Jimmy's Game*, is due for production in December.

These are just four examples. I know that others in Regina can give you many more. As one specifically interested in media education, I must emphasize the importance of the NFB facility to the development of Regina's media production community. The NFB staff has been especially helpful to us and has taken pains to initiate projects and events to foster the community. In recent memory the NFB theatre has been a venue for seminars by such notables as Bernie Bordeleau, Jean Pierre Lefebvre and Richard Leacock. We have viewed and premiered several local NFB and Filmpool productions and we have used the facility as a high-quality low-cost meeting place when the alternative would have been a noisy church basement or someone's living room.

I am aware of the importance of maintaining a balanced budget, but I would beg of you and the Board to reconsider the decision to close this valuable exhibition and education venue.

Gerald S. Horne  
Birdsong Films,  
Regina

## Vengeance: not racist

(The following letters were received in response to the correspondence published in *Cinema Canada* No. 122)

Tuesday September 3, 1985

Mr. Ed Prevost  
Chairman  
Telefilm Canada  
600, rue de la Gauchetiere Ouest  
Montreal, Quebec

Dear Mr. Prevost,

On June 1, 1985 we received a copy of a letter addressed to you by the Arab Research and Studies Centre Inc. The letter deals with a number of projects that involve some of the undersigned, in particular the project *Vengeance*, which is a future production based on a book by George Jonas.

The letter raises some issues that we cannot leave unanswered. However, the project in question has not yet been produced, and we find it perplexing that it is being accused of 'blatant biases.'

We can only conclude that the author of the letter is referring to the source material for the future film, the book by George Jonas. Hence it seems in order

that Mr. Jonas himself respond to the issues raised. His letter is enclosed. Sincerely,

Robert Lantos,  
producer  
Alliance Entertainment Corp.  
Toronto

Mr. Robert Lantos  
Producer  
Alliance Entertainment Corp.  
Bloor Street East, Toronto, Ontario.

Dear Robert,

The following is my response to a letter typed on the letterhead of an organization calling itself *Arab Research and Studies Centre Inc.*, a copy of which you have shown me. I note that the letter, addressed to Ed Prevost of Telefilm Canada, is over an undecipherable signature and gives a Montreal postal box as its return address.

Please feel free to copy my response to anyone you wish.

First, the Arab Research and Studies Centre's letter, undated but received on June 1, 1985, makes a charge that is ludicrous on the face of it. The letter claims that "The film is racist." The fact is, the film has not yet been made. On June 1, 1985, I believe there wasn't even a script.

The only thing the letter-writer can possibly complain about, therefore, is my book, *Vengeance*, on which you wish to base a film.

In *Vengeance* I relate, to the best of my ability on the basis of information available to me, the story of the leader of an Israeli group who has claimed responsibility for the assassination of several people held to have been the organizers of the Munich massacre in 1972, in which eleven Israeli athletes had lost their lives.

The massacre and its aftermath are historical facts. In my book I largely confine myself to relating how I understand them to have occurred, rather than trying to analyze their causes. The only position I take is to unequivocally condemn terrorism, the killing of innocent civilians - which the letter-writer also claims not to condone.

Though in my book I make it clear at the outset that in the Middle East conflict I support Israel - which, to put it mildly, is my human right - I also point out that I'm not without sympathy to the Palestinian cause and that I regard the legitimate aspirations of any people for a homeland as honourable. Throughout the book, in references too numerous to cite, I make it plain that in no way do I regard terrorism as an Arab invention, and that other nationals, including Israelis, have regrettably also engaged in acts of terror at one time or another. I point all this out in my book not in order to appease anyone or to create an appearance of even-handedness but because, alas, it's true.

I suggest that no objective reader of my book can fail to note any of this. The protests - whichever side they come from - are made by people who are not interested in objectivity.

I abhor racism. I equally abhor, however, utterly false charges of racism levelled against my work by the very people who are only interested in their

own version of the truth, and who'd try to suppress anything that does not completely coincide with their own partisan view of events. I can only hope that today in Canada such pressures are still treated with the contempt they deserve.

Sincerely yours,

George Jonas,  
Toronto

## B.C.'s lost years

Rona Gilbertson's "The Sirens of Cinema" (*Cinema Canada* No. 123, October 1985) may be long on current analysis but it's short on historical accuracy. I can appreciate the difficulty of editing an article about British Columbia from Montreal, but somewhere between typewriter and typesetter numerous typographical and editing errors disrupted my enjoyment of her otherwise interesting account of film production in this province.

Lew Parry's (yes, that's how his name is spelled) role as the "progenitor of film work" in B.C. is both somewhat overstated and underplayed by Gilbertson. There were other dedicated filmmakers here going right back to the 1910s, but continuity was not always maintained between generations of filmmakers. That was probably Parry's most significant contribution to the industry, in that his company provided invaluable training and experience in the film business.

Gilbertson appears to have lost 20 years or almost an entire generation between 1944 and the mid-'60s. Those were important years which have often been ignored, because outside of the CBC's Vancouver Film Unit, there was no real dramatic film production being created by BC producers. Canada's identity as a nation of vast natural resources and a quaint vacation wonderland was reflected in the kinds of films being produced in the 1950s: primarily industrial mini-epics or travelogues. Film historians have consistently downplayed the work of individuals such as Parry and Crawley, yet their work is no less important than that of the current wave of U.S. filmmakers who are providing training for another generation of filmmakers but no real Canadian content.

Your readers may be interested in learning that the Provincial Archives of British Columbia is about to publish the culmination of a four-year research project to document films shot or produced in B.C. Researched by Dennis J. Duffy and the staff of the Sound and Moving Image Division, *Camera West: British Columbia On Film, 1941-1965*, includes an extensive background to film production during that period and describes more than 1200 titles.

David Mattison,  
Archivist  
Sound And Moving Image Division,  
Government of British Columbia,  
Victoria