Closed Circuits: The Sellout of Canadian Television by Herschel Hardin

T
ing of the publication of Herschel Hardin’s Closed Circuits: The Sellout of Canadian Television couldn’t be better. Not only is the country in the grip of yet another of what CBC president Pierre Juneau recently called “quintessential Canadian cultural self-examinations about Canadian broadcasting”, but it’s nearly Christmas, a time during which Canadians, avid readers as a nation, indulge in lavish, luxuriant book-buying. With any luck, Closed Circuits should obtain the very wide readership it deserves.

For here is a book that attempts to grapple with what is perhaps the most widespread and significant of all Canadian cultural contradictions, one that is far from abstract, but sits prominently in the living-rooms of the vast majority of Canadian homes—namely, why is the Canadian broadcasting system, in which the statutory legislation defines as “predominantly Canadian in character and ownership”, in fact, predominantly American?

Closed Circuits’ straight-shooting answer is simple: the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), the federal agency charged with applying the Broadcasting Act, has built the system not as a simple regulator of a marketplace as it is supposed to be as Canadian as possible in an otherwise U.S.-imported, privately-owned broadcasting system. It means that the broadcasting establishment in Canada rests upon a different concept of public life than the American one.

Secondly, there is no such thing as on the one hand, taxpayer (or public) television which everybody is stuck paying for, and on the other hand, commercial television which pays its own way. It is all public television in that the public pays one way or another: directly through taxation or indirectly through the much more costly commercial television overheads. “No other business” is not so much the simple regrettation of a marketplace as it is the public broadcasting law, not quite the Supreme Court of Canadian broadcasting (since cabinet can order it to review its decisions and, beside that, campaign finance), but rather the CRTC’s which the government in its ownership of the entire Canadian broadcasting system. This does not mean that only the CRTC has the power to stop the spiralling networks that are supposed to be as Canadian as possible in an otherwise U.S.-imported, privately-owned broadcasting system. It means that the broadcasting establishment in Canada rests upon a different concept of public life than the American one.

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At least, that’s the theory according to Hardin, a theory that’s been much supported by the mountain of nationalist rhetoric that has accumulated since before the 1929 Airé Royal Commission that established the CRTC, the centerpiece of the Canadian broadcasting system.

The practices—and it is in documenting their laxity that Closed Circuits is at its best—are, however, something else again. Modern studies of the CRTC’s not only acause but also a consequence of its regulatory role, do not quite the Supreme Court of Canadian broadcasting (since cabinet can order it to review its decisions and, beside that, campaign finance), but rather the CRTC’s which the government in its ownership of the entire Canadian broadcasting system. This does not mean that only the CRTC has the power to stop the spiralling networks that are supposed to be as Canadian as possible in an otherwise U.S.-imported, privately-owned broadcasting system. It means that the broadcasting establishment in Canada rests upon a different concept of public life than the American one.

And this is a landscape that, from the hardware point-of-view, is one of the technological marvels of the world, but from the software side (both as a case study in public administration and even more so as an education in the failure of Canadian cultural nationalism), conceals a cultural disaster of singularly epic proportions.

If former CRTC chairman Pierre Juneau and John Meisel have tended, no doubt at moments of depression, to blame the disaster on the treacherous Canadian public (the first for being too small, the second for being half-American), Hardin aims the bulk of his ire at the supposed public cultural policy of central Canada. Which is all the more curious in that Hardin seems to have completely forgotten the main point of his own 1974 book, A Nation Unaware: what characterizes Canadian culture, political, economic or other, is precisely its immense ignorance of itself. That Hardin gets so exercised in Closed Circuits because the CRTC did not order the networks to change things after they have yet again to a lamentable degree ours is a nation unaware, is to put it mildly, contradictory.

Among other limitations to Closed Circuits is the lack of footnotes, as well as the absence of any developed conceptual framework by which to grasp an entity as complex as the CRTC. Hardin’s Four Laws of Regulatory Agencies, if amusing, are, alas, hopelessly inapplicable here.

Finally, and this is less a specific failing of Hardin’s book than it is one, if not the central problem facing any discussion of the future of Canadian broadcasting, the cultural effects have 50 years of exposure to U.S. media had on the Canadian public (when a far less pervasive but nearly equally longevity dosage of Canadianism has hardly so far made a dent. As Hardin points out, even while one of the CRTC’s top ideologues, has argued that post-national Canada, has in reaction to the United States, developed a unique North American cultural identity, this is not the case in the Canadian media landscape, where in some international no-man’s-land of its own, a sort of cultural free-trade zone. If this is so, then the CRTC’s role has been neither a cultural tragedy nor a political disaster, but rather, that of an enlightened, orderly, transnational agent in a civilizational shift to a post-national, post-cultural, purely technological system of image communications.

Hardin’s book offers one extremely impasioned view of a potentially much larger process, debate over which is, happily, far from complete. In the meantime, Closed Circuits is a welcome smack that’s sure to keep the Canadian media world where it should be: bouncing hard.

Michael Dorland

Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter-Cinema edited by Peter Steven. Between The Lines Press, Toronto, 400 pp., $29.95. There is no single article in this section devoted to a feminist reading of a woman-directed feature. In other words, there is little in this section to suggest that women filmmakers can reasonably expect support from the mainstream or can be read interestingly through feminist analysis.

Part Four, “Gay and Lesbian Cinema” is barely half the length of the other sections, but includes four quite good pieces that are thoroughly informative and illuminating. Richard Dyser’s “Re-Defining Straight Ideals: Gays in Film” is especially good on stereotyping and
Michelle Citron’s clear analysis of the work of Jan Oxenberg is particularly useful for understanding the radical practice in lesbian filmmaking.

The last section in the anthology, "Radical Third World Cinema", has five very strong pieces which go a long way toward fully informing the reader on filmmaking work in Africa, Latin America, and Cuba. Tom Waugh’s "In Solidarity: Joris Ivens and the Birth of Cuban Cinema" seems wonderfully well-written and usefully fills a gap in our understanding of both Ivens’ career and the roots of Cuban filmmaking. Also particularly noteworthy is Julia Lasgés’s careful delineation of problems of cross-cultural understanding when viewing Third World film through Western eyes.

The only significant overall problem I find in Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter-Cinema is that it includes just one piece dealing with Canadian politically-committed documentary, though that movement has a long and complex history which has contributed much to radical counter-cinema. Moreover, the magazine Jump Cut has not ignored the work of Canadian filmmakers over the years, as its Canadian associate editor must surely be aware. With only one entry in this collection, dealing with a single film, the book (and ironically, it has a Canadian publisher) wrongly conveys a sense of invisibility as far as Canadian political filmmaking is concerned. And that’s really too bad.

Joyce Nelson

ASPECTS OF CINEMA

Several new volumes in the “Studies of Cinema” series, reviewed below, provide a significant source of scholarly exploration of the broader aspects of film (UMI Research Press, 300 N Zeeb Rd, Ann Arbor, MI 48106).

The writer’s contribution to film is examined in Ben Hecht, Hollywood Screenwriter by Jeffrey Brown Martin, and Hollywood and the Profession of Authorship 1928-40 by Richard Fine. Both books prove searchingly the question of creativity in a commercially controlled milieu and a profit-oriented studio system (UMI $39.95 ea).

Dana Polan examined in The Political Language of Film and the Avant-Garde, the esthetics of experimental film in works by Eisenstein, Brecht, Oshima and Michael Snow. In Abstraction in Avant-Garde Films, Maureen Cherry Turim analyzes the challenge of innovative cinema to current film theories (UMI $39.95 ea).

In Soviet Cinema of the Silent Era, Dennis J. Younghood brings to light the cultural politics and institutional developments that marked its evolution between 1918 and 1935. In Struggles of the Italian Film Industry during Fascism, Elaine Mancini describes the losing battle waged by Italian film producers for independence from government control (UMI $44.94 ea).

Four outstanding directors are discussed in new volumes of the informative “Guide to References and Research” series published by G.K. Hall, Boston. In Cecil B. DeMille, Sumiko Hiigashi remedies the scarcity of serious critical material with a thorough archival search ($35). In Elia Kazan, Lloyd Michaels praises Kazan’s belief in cinema as a medium for artistic expression and his talent for mise-en-scene ($35). René Clair by Naomi Greene traces the French director’s career from early experimental films to his mastery of the medium ($48). John Allyn’s Kon Ichikawa assesses the accomplishments of the versatile Japanese filmmaker ($45). Each volume includes thorough documentation, biographies, full filmographies, bibliographies and archival sources.

Barbara Leaming’s sweeping biography, Orson Welles, draws a fascinating portrait that does justice to an uncommonly gifted artist. Exceptionally well-researched and with full access to Welles himself and his private collection of documents, it reveals the astounding range of his achievements and offers a first-hand interpretation of a complex man whose troubled childhood affected his entire life (Viking, NYC, $79.95).

Christopher Finch’s definitive work, The Art of Walt Disney is re-issued in its sumptuous original large format edition at a notably reduced price. It combines a lavishly artistic presentation — 763 superb illustrations, including 351 full color plates and 12 fold-outs — with an extensive study of Disney’s career and animation techniques (Abrams, NYC, $29.95).

Many of Hollywood film industry’s recent corporate changes and top personnel shifts can be traced to the financial and artistic disaster that befell Michael Cimino’s Heaven’s Gate and its producers. United Artists. The whole sorry story is told in Final Cut, a riveting account by Steven Bach, former UA head of production. Boundless self-indulgence, extravagant carelessness and creativity running amok constituted the mainspring of this $56 million pecadillo that should (but will it?) teach a salutary lesson to the Hollywood establishment (Morrow, NYC, $19.95).


George L. George

Correction: In a recent Bookshelf column, the title of Richard E Van Deusen’s expert book on cost controls was incorrectly stated. Its title is Practical AV/Video Budgeting, published by Knowledge Industry Publishers, White Plains, NY, at $34.95.