The Cinema We Need cont’d

The Telefilm We Need
Peter Pearson
prophet of profit

by Bill Nichols,
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The “Cinema We Need” debate taking place in these pages must be grounded in the “cinema we’re getting” statements of government agency representatives. Because they are not sitting back waiting for the debaters to make all their points before deciding how they should respond supportively. Especially noteworthy are the initiatives of Peter Pearson, executive director of Telefilm Canada, and one of our best-known, most ardent cultural nationalists. While issues such as realism and experimentation, the avant-garde and the narrative mainstream, are getting sorted out, Telefilm Canada, among others, is quietly at work establishing the norms and conditions that will decide what the dominant, mainstream, commercial, brand-name Canadian cinema and television future will be. (We use “cinema” for convenience since it is the term invoked by the debate and extend it to refer to image culture that may appear in film, television or video formats.)

This future is determined in large measure by interpretations of Telefilm Canada’s mandate, which then become matters of policy. Focal points of that mandate are:

to promote national growth, high employment and economic stability within all sectors of the television and film industries. Within this context, the primary goals of Telefilm Canada are to increase Canadian content in terms of the cul-
Peter Pearson’s interpretation of this mandate results in a description of cinema Canada, an institution that was envisioned by any of the “cinema we need” debaters. On Nov. 7, 1985, Pearson came to Queen’s University to deliver a speech at a conference entitled “Canada’s Cinema: Managing the Challenge,” sponsored by the students of the Queen’s School of Business. Pearson was invited to speak in an address that would include some of the major business leaders in Canada, including Donald Carty, CEO of Canadian Pacific Airlines; J. Stuart MacKay, president and general manager of Selkirk Bank; Stephen Gow, CEO of Gandalf System Group; Gerald Hefferman, president of Co-Steel International Ltd.; F.R. Curd, vice-president of General Motors of Canada Ltd., and about a hundred others, as well as guests and other participants. Because he had been told that he would be speaking to all the assembled business leaders, Pearson prepared extensively, and, although a last-minute change in plans meant that his presentation was one of four slotted for the same time, delivered to sub-groups of the audience, it was well prepared. In it and in an informal discussion he had with students from the Film Studies Department, Pearson made his current vision of what kind of cinema Canada needs vividly clear.

In his speech, Pearson recounts the numerous successes that Telefilm has been party to, from Joshua Then and Now’s half hour of national poetry to The Pillars of Hercules and Isaac Littlefeathers and Hal Banks as television specials, and from television series such as The Campbells and Night Heat with CTN to Anne of Green Gables and the Son of the Morning with Ted Simpson and Telefilm’s CBC and PBS. Pearson pointed to dictate terms to the major distributors and exporters—“we don’t ask about culture but about profit.”

Pearson concluded: “When the Bible asks, ‘What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?’ we must ask of the cultural choices now facing Canada, can a nation expect to lose its soul, if it does so without profit?”

At this point, we profit from examining Pearson’s profit motive a bit more closely, although, to be fair, this was not a point he professed to make, but rather, to champion the right to market, rather than a film industry. It is partly an appeal to hard-headed businessmen, who probably have less exposure to or interest in Canadian film than many, to whom Pearson’s message is a worthy investment vehicle. Starting speech is incomparable with other statements that Pearson made, statements that in sum offer a distinctly entrepreneurial vision of cinema we need. Though not verbatim, the following points are what we understand Pearson to be saying:

- The industry is booming. The pool of providing talent has never been wider. The down-to-earth yet highly ambitious and entrepreneurial entrepreneurs can recoup their investment and theatrical distribution could eventually develop a sound economic base. He hopes that more of the profits from television and other income-generating sources will be reinvested in the domestic market, and that more of the profits from television and other income-generating sources will be reinvested in the domestic market, and that more of the profits from television and other income-generating sources will be reinvested in the domestic market, and that more of the profits from television and other income-generating sources will be reinvested in the domestic market, and that more of the profits from television and other income-generating sources will be reinvested in the domestic market.

- Beginners should start at the top. Don’t pace yourself. Don’t do one thing at a time. Start with another thing. Keep the ball rolling. We are in a position of national leverage, and we have the advantage of being in a country with a small population and a small market. We can do things that are impossible in larger countries.

- Telefilm Canada is known in Hollywood as a player, not as a national production house. The industry exists: it does not need to be primed or created. It is part of an economic reality. We have the advantage of being in a country with a small population and a small market. We can do things that are impossible in larger countries.

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class, sex, race and age, but not by nationality. This cultural “one-worldism” would be lovely — if it did not contradict economic realities which still seem to have considerable room for national imperatives. Film and television business profit from the Northland (Canada) still tends to land in the pocket of the other half of this faithful, “domestic” couple (the United States).

Hoping against hope that Pearson, as head of a national cultural agency with an extremely large amount of Canadian taxpayer’s money, does indeed have some sense of a vital Canadian cultural identity, one might then propose that Pearson attempt a carefully poised balancing act. What he must balance is the dual nature of film/television as commodity and as art. While Pearson, as head of a national cultural agency with the best deals, he has a number of sense and for the cinema, the question of American ones, to encouraging new talent and to cultivating an audience for a diversified range of cultural production that distinguishes itself as Canadian. It’s not enough to invest in “middle-of-the-road/safe” productions, like One Magic Christmas, which are tailored, or denatured, to be saleable in world markets.

The commercial exigencies are there. Telefilm Canada must make its money back by helping Canadian productions that make back the costs of their production and then some. And certain tactics, such as proposed increases in licencing fees paid by Canadian networks are clearly sensible. Other tactics, for instance the use of American production models, are less sensible and more lacking in imagination. Moreover, the complete capitulation to these commercial exigencies proposed by Pearson’s call for profit is highly unbalanced and suggests that he has not the sense of proportion that can make the government’s role not only of a matter of industrial “pump-priming”, but also of cultural “risk-taking” as well, including the very risk of sustaining a distinctively national culture in the face of potential foreign domination.

The notion of “cinema” embraces many disparate institutional practices — from the independent artisan of the avant-garde to the bureaucrat—craftspeople of NFB, from the academic scholars and the students curious enough to want to know about the cultural heritage that now issues in Night Heat and The Edison Twins, to the reviewers and critics who valiantly provide us with the consumer reports we need, and from the political cineastes to the Hollywood-North dealmakers. Peter Pearson speaks to and for only one segment of these practices (or perhaps a fraction of one segment), but it is a crucial one. The fate of our entertainment industry, even the determination that there ought to be government intervention in the structuring of that industry as well as in the fostering of Canadian culture per se (in the manner of the Canada Council), has serious repercussions for the kind of work that can be done throughout the country. It will not be only the big-name talents who are affected, even if they are the ones to whom Telefilm Canada decides to address itself; it will also be all those other talents, together with their multiple audiences, whose horizons and opportunities will swell and subside with every change of government policy and national will.

Peter Pearson sent a rejoinder too late for us to incorporate.

We want to acknowledge his response and make some clarifications. First, our report of what Pearson said at times draws onferences from his actual statements which Pearson does not consider to be what he intended or meant. But they are what we understood. The inference that a training program is not needed, for example, derives from his repeated refusal to entertain the idea of Telefilm’s setting aside funding for beginning efforts by established filmmakers at the level of $10-50,000. Pearson reminded us that he has strongly advocated a National Film School and that other agencies do provide support for beginning efforts (though usually in different categories from Telefilm). On this occasion, though, Pearson did not stress these points but emphasized that he saw Telefilm’s future directed toward the top of the production pyramid.

Second, we did not attempt to judge what Pearson said in light of what Telefilm has done. Pearson reminded us that its achievements are considerable and some — support for regional filmmaking; documentaries; for efforts by relatively inexperienced people — provide an important corrective if his remarks are used to understand Telefilm’s history or track-record. We chose instead to treat his remarks as suggestions of future policies and of the type of cinema we may get in the light of the “Cinema We Need” debate. Space prevents further clarification here, but we hope that the future role of Telefilm Canada can remain a subject of further discussion and debate.

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