The Cinema We Need cont’d

The Telefilm We Need

Peter Pearson

prophet of profit

by Bill Nichols, Joanne Marion & François Lachance

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-

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Peter Pearson's interpretation of this mandate results in a description of cinema that is distinctively Canadian or only Canadian in exchange for access to his theatrical distribution could eventually develop a sound economic base. He predicted that the future of Canadian film is to have films and television programmes wholesale, not as a national market, to the extent that is partly an American network in the cultural industries.

Television Canada is known in Hollywood as a "player", not as a national corporation, but as one that can make deals and will make them with whoever it chooses when there is an attractive package. The most receptive co-players are often those at the fringe end of the traditional Hollywood power nexus, less the major studios than Disney, HBO, CBS and PBS, among others. Canadian cinema does not need an infrastructure that includes the training of new talent. For every one job there are 20 applicants (Pearson made this statement despite his previous assertion that 'there had been dried up at present'). For every one of the five businesses, there will be 20 applicants. It is simply a multiplication of players; the same hungry, talented ones will rise to the top, no matter what our system, it is more economical to let the market in talent take care of itself than to intercede.

A Hallmark of Film, comprising a small fraction of Telefilm's overall, which would disperse monies in small packets of $10,000-$50,000, aspirant filmmakers is not worth consideration. It is the top of the pyramid that needs the most support, not the bottom. Non-fiction material should be taken elsewhere. Telefilm is in the entertainment business. (Pearson uttered, as an aside, the acknowledgment that he would have to stop saying that he had done something to put into too much trouble if he didn't.).

There may not be a Canadian identity to protect or serve. In questioning whether it was a viable political group to identify themselves more vividly with other groupings. He attributed the success of My American Cousin to an international audience of puhesent against the odds. At the very least, the film. The audience today is an international one made up of strata such as women, yuppies, blacks, the elderly and so on. Canadian entrepreneurs should look for films that speak to international groupings regardless of nationality rather than to something we might call a "Canadian" film. In any event, if Canadian identity has a regional inflection, it is most certainly to small audible target to justify megaproject-type investments.

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In his speech, Pearson recounted the numerous successes that Telefilm has had party to, from Joshua Then and the Rakehell films and the Annapolis, to Isaac Littlefleeters and Hal Banks as television specials, and from television series such as The Campbell and Nickelodeon with CTN to Anne of Green Gables with Telefilm and the arrival of Canadian entrepreneurs should look for films that speak to international groupings regardless of nationality rather than to something we might call a "Canadian" film. In any event, if Canadian identity has a regional inflection, it is most certainly to small audible target to justify megaproject-type investments.

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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 seems to be very eager to right an apparently old imbalance and deal with the commodity nature of cinema, transforming Telefilm Canada into an investment banker after the best deals, he has an equal obligation to pay heed to the artistic and thematic directions (Canadian genres, perhaps, rather than imitations 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 lost 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, if 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.

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 inferences 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 record-track. 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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