

In defence of criticism

Mary Alemany-Galway's insightful review of *Le Matou* (the film and not the novel) stands on its own (C.C. No.127) and needs no defenders. However the outraged chorus vilifying the critic in a subsequent issue requires some rejoinder, for the wounded *Matou*-lovers call into question some of the essential premises of the critical vocation which Alemany-Galway skilfully exercises.

Each of the three complainants seems to misunderstand, not only several linguistic nuances of the original review, but the basic function of cultural criticism.

Laurent Imbault thinks movies are "benign" and thus immune to historical and philosophical contextualization on the part of the critic. They also used to think that *Amos 'N' Andy* and Marilyn Monroe "dumb blonde" comedies were benign. No doubt consumer movie listings will satisfy this reader, not criticism.

Yves Beauchemin thinks critics should recapitulate all previous public statements of intent of the original author of a movie property, regardless of the actual effect of the cinematic translation of that property. Of course Beauchemin is no conscious anti-Semite (Griffith didn't think he was a racist either), but all the disavowals in the world cannot change the pattern of archetypes and stereotypes that the critic deciphered in the film.

François Côté thinks along similar lines: critics should understand a film solely in terms of the intentions of its creators and then provide PR puff-pieces on each individual technician's contribution. After nitpicking Alemany-Galway's perceptive exploration of cultural antecedents to Beauchemin/Beaudin's characters, Séraphin and Aurore, Côté engages in the same method by pointing out quite correctly how the hero of *Le Matou* is a winner, rather than one of the losers of the '50s (though he skips over Alemany-Galway's fine observation about the moral ambivalence of his "winning"). Côté finally is insulted by the reference to the peasant roots in Quebec's cultural past, a rather odd ostrich-in-the-sand contradiction of every Québécois historian in existence.

Any critic who does not attempt to locate a work within its cultural and historical context, who does not attempt to analyse a given film's effect as well as its intent, is not worth her press pass. Perhaps the reason Alemany-Galway touched so many sensitive nerves is that she was close to the truth. After all, the imprint of ideology is usually invisible to those within it, and it is the critic's job to unveil that imprint.

No one would argue that the huge audience who liked this pale adaptation of their favourite book were consciously implicated in the minority scapegoating

of the film. Yet this scapegoating was obvious to many of us who love Québécois film but who benefit from the outside vantagepoint of a cultural minority (and especially those of us who live in St. Louis/Plateau Mont-Royal, the neighbourhood depicted in *Le Matou* — whether all their lives, like the critic, or as little as 10 years like myself). It's by no means the first time that such scapegoating has appeared in Quebec movies of the same populist

vein as *Le Matou* (it appears in another stripe as the French villain of *Le Crime d'Ovide Plouffe*, the gay villains of *L'Homme à tout faire* and *Visage pâle*, and the "ethnic" villains of *The Peanut Butter Solution* and *Le Grand remue-ménage*). Judging from the myopia of *Le Matou*'s defenders, it will not be the last.

Thomas Waugh
Montreal

Pearson's attack: a reply

We would like to make the following reply to Peter Pearson's attack on our report, "The Telefilm We Need" (*Cinema Canada* No. 127). Unfortunately, Peter Pearson avoids pursuing any of the substantive issues of policy raised by the speech and comments he made and that we reported. Instead, he claims that what we report is not what he said and that we were somehow remiss for taking him at his word when we could have chosen to report Telefilm's past record. His complaints simply do not make sense.

Squarely at the centre of the report stands an extended, unabridged, *verbatim* quotation from the text of his prepared speech. Pearson simply cannot deny that these are his words. When he wrote in his prepared speech, "(W)e must ask of the cultural choices now facing Canada, can a nation expect to gain its soul, if it does so without profit?" this set the tone for all the remarks we reported and makes clear, in his

own words, the differences in perspective from the previous debate on "The Cinema We Need," (C.C. Nos. 120-121). Everything that he said and all that we report is consistent with the direct quotations we cite.

The content of Mr. Pearson's remarks is highly provocative. Their appearance in print may now disturb Mr. Pearson, but it is for him to explain why he made remarks he now chooses neither to recognize nor defend.

The report was drafted within 48 hours of the event and its accuracy has been confirmed by other participants. Notes were made that evening once the provocative nature of the day's events were clear. Mr. Pearson is simply wrong in his assumptions about careless reporting.

Surely a report of Peter Pearson's comments is not so unusual a task that special rules must be introduced, specifically an elaborate contextualization and cross-referencing to previous Telefilm policy and statements. We can't help but believe that even Peter Pearson will agree, in a calmer moment, that his complaint regarding scholarly method is groundless, based on spurious assumptions and specious argument. Senior officials do not usually make prepared speeches that are not consistent with existing policy. Additionally, Telefilm's history is well-known. We ourselves were quite familiar with it when Mr. Pearson came to visit. His remarks represented a significant *change* of emphasis worthy of report and, we would have hoped, defence and debate.

The *content* of Peter Pearson's remarks and their significance for *future* policy were our direct concern. If what he said that day no longer represents official Telefilm policy (something Mr. Pearson does not explicitly say in his reply), we would welcome a statement to that effect. We would also welcome clarification regarding what, in fact, Telefilm's current policies on big-budget production, co-productions, free trade and cultural sovereignty, training for new talent, documentary filmmaking, regional production and the "increase of Canadian content" are. This would be more productive than the reply which Mr. Pearson has made.

François Lachance
Joanne Marion
Bill Nichols
Kingston

No pot shots here

I very much appreciated the letter by Philip Rosenberg, Executive Story Editor, of *Night Heat* ('Nelson's Bias against Night Heat' *Cinema Canada* No. 128). He helped straighten me out on *Night Heat*.

Unfortunately, I too jumped to criticize *Night Heat* in general, based on viewing one episode, the same program reviewed by Joyce Nelson. I sent Joyce a personal note supporting her column, and you published it, much to my dismay.

Since sending that note I have seen subsequent episodes of *Night Heat*, I have seen *Joshua* and other strong films produced by Mr. Lantos, and I have read the comprehensive letter from Mr. Rosenberg.

In short, I know more; so I am embarrassed to see my hasty personal comments appear in print.

Night Heat is an outstanding Canadian success story and Mr. Lantos is one of our industry's greatest contributors.

It is very rude to take ill-informed pot shots at industry leaders, whether in private or otherwise. I took one. I deeply regret it.

Michael Douglas
Douglas Communications,
Edmonton

Newsmakers,
please note

You've read their names and maybe your own many times in the pages of *Cinema Canada*, but you've often wondered what the others look like... Well, so have we. That's why, *Cinema Canada* puts emphasis on the faces that make up Canada's program production/distribution industry. But don't wait for the news to happen first. Help us get a step ahead by sending along your photo to *Cinema Canada* now. That way, when you're in the news, we'll be ready to go with the story and your picture... while it is still news.

ERRATA — Two errors slipped into Thomas Waugh's *Les Auteurs: English Quebec cinema during the Parti Québécois régime 1976-1985* in last month's issue. *Les Johnson* was the French title of John Kramer's 1980 film *The Inheritance* and not the name of a co-director. In item 12 of Waugh's canon of significant films, *Not A Love Story* should have been described as "classical" in its Griersonian moralism, not "critical" as was erroneously printed. Finally, it should be mentioned that Waugh's *Cinema Canada* piece was an English-language and amended version of an article written in French for a forthcoming anthology on Quebec cinema, edited by Quebec scholar Louise Carrière for publication in Paris by *Cinémaction*.