

# Trading on distinctions

"Culture... is the expression of an identifiable group of people under threat – economic threat. Those things that we consider culture to Americans are not culture at all. They are industrial."

– Stephen Roth

"The challenge of the future is to preserve and enhance the values that have distinguished public broadcasting since its inception – a belief in the importance of independent journalism, a sense of social responsibility and a commitment to the creative imagination."

– Pierre Juneau

Coming as it does in a climate of market-driven, conservative government policies, the Caplan-Sauvageau Report on Broadcasting reminds us of the virtues of well-reasoned, dispassionate initiatives, advanced in the public interest. It recognizes the crucial role of communications in Canada as the mainstay of our cultural fabric, and the central importance of broadcasting in assuring those communications.

As editors of *Cinema Canada*, we cannot read the report without reflecting, too, on the role of the magazine and its central position in assuring communication between the creators of our films and programs and the industry – both public and private – which provides the means for the creators to reach their public. The values to which Pierre Juneau refers and which distinguish public broadcasting – "independent journalism, a sense of social responsibility and a commitment to the creative imagination" – are the same values which have motivated our magazine over the years.

Like public broadcasting, *Cinema Canada* has long been published in a spirit of public service. Its original mandate was cultural, and it has grown in that typically Canadian way which mixes government funding (through the arts councils) with private funding through advertising. The magazine has adhered over the years to the notion that our culture does not exist in a vacuum but that industrial structures affect program content, and our ongoing concern has been the government policies which influence these structures, and the ability of the creators to find freedom within them.

The international trade press first became interested in Canada in the mid-'70s with the tax shelter boom, and each in its turn printed a special section on Canada, an initiative warmly received by the Canadian Film Development Corp. which routinely announced these special issues to the industry and encouraged participation. At *Cinema Canada*, we considered these initiatives a doubtful contribution to the healthy development of a Canadian cultural industry. In these publications the editorial copy flowed all too often from the advertiser's interest in the issue, and the foreign publisher was able to extract thousands of dollars of revenue while providing a sanitized and upbeat image of an industry which oftentimes had little to do with reality.

In those days, we did not stand outside of that process. As freelancers, we were the stringers for *Variety* for three years before it set up a Canadian office; we were in a position to judge the difference between the trade press as it was

run internationally and our efforts at *Cinema Canada* to maintain high standards of journalism removed from the commercial pressures of advertising.

By 1977, there was a serious effort on the part of the American Majors to set up a trade publication in Canada. Wanting to forestall that initiative, and realizing that more had to be done to follow business news, we founded *Trade News North*, the very name a send-up of the trade press we were to avoid becoming. *Trade News North* became the bi-monthly *CineMag* which, in turn, became an integral part of *Cinema Canada* when the bottom fell out of the tax shelter boom. Today, *Cinema Canada* is the only magazine we know of which combines cultural comment and criticism with business news and analysis.

Today, the second Canadian boom is, like the first, having a distorting effect on industry reporting and this is being felt at *Cinema Canada*. We are grouped together with "the trades" that suddenly seem to be popping up all over. People are assuming that editorial copy, too, is now for sale. Producers call asking how much they must pay to get on the cover. Others phone in bonafide news items and then ask for the advertising department as if to insure that we will take notice of the story. Other publishers brag about their "deals." One recently sold a series of back covers in color against a promise to deal editorially with each new camera the supplier would issue in the coming year.

The "trade press" as it is commonly perceived, is market-driven. It prints what the industry wants to hear and is willing to pay for. Eventually the copy becomes the reflection of what the industry thinks of itself, and readers begin to mistake this reflection for the reality.

*Cinema Canada* has always resisted these pressures. We have lost advertisers in so doing, and we have stood up against great pressure from government agencies to get on the band wagon and join the industry hype. By our independence we provoke a certain irritation at times, but we cannot see how the industry or its artists can be better served by any other attitude. Call it freedom of the press.

As Stephen Roth admits, what we call culture others call industry. If *Cinema Canada* is to contribute to the development of the culture in this country as reflected in our films and television programs, then we must refuse the label of "trade press," that archetypical American industrial form in which editorial is traded against advertising and everyone gets rich but no one gets better.

As the debate continues about the value of a public broadcasting system and the cost of it, members of the Canadian film and television community would do well to consider the quality of the press treatment they receive, both from the specialized press and in the daily papers. Juneau has commented that some members of parliament are wondering why they should fund a public broadcaster which acts as the government's critic.

As competition heats up, industry members may find themselves asking the same question. Why advertise in a magazine which offers no strokes in return? The answer can only be that a high standard of objective journalism and criticism is still the best and only defence against the encroachment of cultural imperialism from the United States; that the adoption of an American publishing model can only work against a distinctive Canadian press; and that there can be no communication between the creative forces in the industry, business and government if they are corrupted by the promise of profits that subverts the independence and sense of responsibility which the editors of *Cinema Canada* have always assumed to be the bedrock of Canadian cultural life.

## LETTERS

### David versus Goliath

Joyce Nelson has failed in her attempts to identify the culprits responsible for the decline of CBC Television ("Losing it on TV," *Cinema Canada* No. 133). As usual John Diefenbaker, greedy visionless private broadcasters, profit, competition and commercialism are all blamed for the current CBC predicament.

If she could turn the historic clock back she's telling us that TV utopia would consist of a system whereby:

1. CBC was regulator and our only national voice.
2. CBC would never be involved with commercials.

3. Private TV would never become big enough to compete with CBC.

4. New technology would not be introduced until the CBC was ready! (We should have sent Joyce instead of the RCMP to tear down the once illegal satellite dishes).

Nelson neglects to mention how we should deal with the real Canadian competition ... NBC, ABC, CBS, PBS, HBO, USA Network, Arts & Entertainment Network, Nashville Network, CNN, etc., etc., etc. except to slow down technology introduction.

We need a "single system" defense to fight this onslaught, led by determined government policy that will encourage both CBC and the private sector. Whether advertisers, or taxes pay for increased output is immaterial.

What hurts the most is the Canadian tendency to snipe at our productive sectors, creating an artificial battle zone

between Parliament – CRTC – CBC and private interests.

In one of Nelson's analogies she refers to the human body as a single system, whose various functions do not compete against each other. Our single system of CBC, CTV, TSN, MuchMusic, Global, Independents, Superchannel and the local cable companies is the "single system" in competition with the U.S. giants. We'd be shooting ourselves in our own foot if we pay serious attention to Nelson's historical perspective.

Nelson, in her defense of Public Broadcasting, has not offered a solution by throwing her misguided missiles. I for one think it essential that Canada should properly fund the Public System and use every other ingenious Canadian financial support mechanism to create high quality Canadian production. One billion dollars a year is now spent by advertisers, which is about

equal to our total Parliamentary CBC allotment. Add Telefilm, NFB, and the massive private capital being invested in development of our "single system" programs, and we'll have a good chance to give the Canadian public what they want and maybe even what they need.

Every Canadian deems it to be his inalienable right to watch everything produced in the U.S.A. The CBC, by itself, would offer Canadians a very unbalanced single system competition to these giants. Collectively we Canadians combined are still in a David vs. Goliath battle. Remember, David won. With a little unity of purpose in our single system, maybe we can put some ammunition in our slingshot. It might help if we first identify the real enemy.

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