

# Playing cultural politics at Telefilm Canada

It is popular to suggest that politics entered the Telefilm Canada arena with the appointment of Jean Sirois as chairman of the agency last summer, but this is just not so. Politics entered the agency with the appointment of Peter Pearson who, in 1985, worked hard to sew-up his nomination as executive director.

Pearson is nothing if not a political animal. He comes from a political family and is fascinated by the process. Two of his best films, **The Man from Ingersoll** and **The Tar Sands**, dealt with political high rollers and the corrupting influence of power.

As president of the Directors Guild of Canada and the Council of Canadian Filmmakers, he lobbied relentlessly in the '70s for new policies from government agencies. In what ultimately will probably be considered as something of a tragedy, Pearson has not known what to do with the power he so coveted.

Lately — some say six months, some say a year — things have not gone well at Telefilm. But, in fact, TFC under Pearson has never had any clear vision or orientation. Only the smooth presence of André Picard camouflaged the difficulties in the beginning.

That Picard felt moved to initiate the Ad Hoc Committee report last fall, enumerating the difficulties at the agency, is some indication that the current disfunction within the agency predated the arrival of Jean Sirois as chairman of the board. It is fair to wonder, for instance, why Ed Prévost, the former chairman, stepped down before the end of his mandate.

The critical question is not whether Pearson is a good administrator. He is not and he knows it. But he has no model for how an agency like TFC should be run and will not (or cannot) let other administrators take responsibility.

He has approached his job, as a former senior executive commented, as if it were a film shoot, gathering together a good crew, working them like crazy under stressful conditions, and spitting them out, victims of burnout and disillusionment with the project at hand. Although some staffers continued to work, convinced that they were doing their jobs in the best interest of the industry, the recent departure of the manager of communications, the head of international marketing, and the operations man in Toronto indicates a truly untenable situation.

In Pearson's first year, he turned his political savvy into an impressive pile of money, first for the broadcast fund and then for the feature film fund. He

relished his relationship with the former minister of Communications Marcel Masse and their constant exchanges. But the new minister, Flora MacDonald didn't consult Pearson on policy issues and Pearson felt removed from the political heart of things.

At some point, politics in the service of an industry became self-serving. Pearson was unable to articulate policy which could be clearly understood by either staff or clients, and his management style was more suited to his own needs than those of an industry. Signs of poor administration were compounded by rude treatment of some employees and some clients, not to mention of the press. Pearson's propensity for the political game caused internal dissension which, in turn, was reflected in staff attitudes: sometimes arrogant, sometimes confused and ill informed, oftentimes well-intentioned, no one seemed in control of the agency.

The upshot is the current situation: rumours of fiscal mismanagement, gross dissatisfaction among the staff resulting in the departure of key people, and producer clients left to wonder whether it is safe to count on a Telefilm commitment if the contract's not yet signed.

According to all sources, the power play is now between the board of Telefilm which is considering Pearson's removal and an executive director who is not ready to go. Ironically, the situation of the industry has now become so fragile with the reduction of the capital cost allowance, coupled with the difficulty — once again — of finding private investment, that the last thing the industry can afford is a public battle at Telefilm over leadership.

If it is true that Telefilm has fully committed its funds until March 31, 1988, then some may think it doesn't matter if Pearson remains or if he goes. Certainly, the will to avoid a scandal is uppermost in the minds of people at the department of Communications and among the producers in Canada, not to mention the board of Telefilm. Then too, all the TFC money has been spent on the industry and producers are hardly unhappy to have been the beneficiaries of Pearson's administration.

The question which must be asked is what sort of an industry we want, for the leadership at TFC has always coloured the image the industry had of itself and our posture abroad. When politics is used for the maintainance of personal power and not in the service of an idea, a vision — when politics is no longer the management of public affairs — then it has become corrupted.

## B O O K S H E L F

A pioneer cartoonist who profoundly influenced the development of animation is portrayed by John Canemaker in **Windsor McKay: His Art and Life**. It traces the evolution of McKay's gifted draftsmanship, unique visual imagination and daring storytelling concepts seen in the *Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend* series and the celebrated *Gertie the Dinosaur* cartoon. Canemaker's lavishly illustrated book is an eloquent tribute to McKay's seminal contribution (Abbeville, NYC, \$49.95).

In **Law and Business of the Entertainment Industry**, the legal complexities of the field are knowledgeably addressed by Donald E. Biederman et al. Their study presents a clear and concise compendium of significant U.S. material dealing with film, television, advanced technologies, sound recording, theatre,

literary and music publishing, personal rights and professional representation. The book's expertise and scope make it an invaluable resource tool for handling legal problems (Auburn, Dover, MA, \$50).

A technological innovation that swept the world in record time is discussed by Albert Abramson in **The History of Television**. This well-documented study covers the 1880-1941 period, from the fruition of early schemes and inventions to the government decree legalizing commercial television in the U.S.A. Abramson's treatment of the many conflicting claims for credit is both objective and detailed, and his chronicle of the medium's growth is a telling example of international scientific exploration (McFarland, Jefferson, NC, \$29.95).

A well-researched study of film and television documentaries pertaining to South Africa's apartheid, **Myth, Race and Power** probes both indigenous and foreign productions. Prof. Keyan Tomaselli and his colleagues show how existing ethnographic documentaries serve racist propaganda. They advocate sharing information and resources between filmmakers and their native subjects to give such films a sense of reality (Smyrna Press, Box 1803-GPO, Brooklyn, NY 11202; \$10).

In **The Films of Carol Reed**, Robert F. Moss offers a perceptive assessment of the director's versatile cinematic gifts. *Odd Man Out*, *Oliver!*, *Trapeze* and *The Third Man* demonstrate Reed's ability to handle a wide variety of genres with characteristic visual inventiveness and narrative style. Moss attributes

Reed's achievements to his intellectual upbringing in the British empirical tradition that stresses realism over sentimentality, and which enabled Reed to give understated form to volcanic human passion (Columbia U. Press, NYC, \$27.50).

An engrossing biography by Vivienne Knight, **Trevor Howard: A Gentleman and a Player** traces a career that includes *Brief Encounter*, *The Third Man* and other classics. Whomever he impersonated, Howard won praise for his mastery and thorough professionalism, making him a favorite of such directors as Carol Reed and David Lean (Beaufort, NYC, \$18.95).

George L. George •