OS ANGELES - Nobody gets tired of ordering you to have a nice day. Waiters and waitresses announce their first names before they hand out the menus and then threaten to come back later to see how you’re doing. Almost everybody seems to be in therapy — and it’s not something they’re embarrassed to talk about. Try and stop ‘em.

The stereotypes are all there, alive and well and living in Technicolor. They shout and flex and gaze inwardly in a consciousness zone that has little or nothing to do with the Great White North. And yet, the average Canadian filmgoer is probably a lot more familiar with these three-dimensional cartoons than he is with what happened in Les Bons Appétits, Come, Draw the Road, Peanut Butter Solution, Baby or any of the 78 feature films lensed last year in our own home and native land.

It’s an irony worth pondering. And it’s a particularly nettlesome one for me to face during this leave from almost nine years as a film reviewer in the mass media that so many Canadian filmmakers see as largely responsible for the national indifference to their work. Nonetheless, I’m not about to cry war into the situation without an explanation — a sort of affidavit which, I hope, will go some way toward soothing those egos which have been bruised or, worse yet, ignored by a seemingly heartless, self-satisfied and flippantry Establishment with a red-white-and-blue flag for a brain.

Before we get into the nuts and bolts of the daily critic's machinery that stands between your work and the public — let’s put it into its journalistic context. After all, the treatment accorded Canadian filmmakers by reporters on the mass media is more or less a function of the broader context. If you have any real complexity at hand, all your physical and emotional energy getting your film together, but that doesn’t count for all that much when the journalist is under the gun. Deadline pressures are such that it wouldn’t be uncommon for a daily critic to log in a whole review within an hour (including travelling time) after the screening. "Background" pieces don’t fare much better. Nobody around my office gasped if they tripped over the scripted lines after the fact.

Some blame — Gazette film critic Bruce Bailey takes his employer to task

Canadian filmmakers do not have the benefit of the mass media publicity circles that systematically derange the attention of journalists toward Hollywood, generally end up at best, as side-shows in the daily coverage. Put simply: if the public doesn’t already have a handle on the subject, the mass media are not about to give them the passkey.

From an artistic point of view, the situation is deplorable — even obscene. But from the perspective of newspaper management, turning out a product calculated to appeal to the L.C.D. of readership taste and knowledge is the only reasonable way to run a large-scale business — as in "nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the public." Both sides are probably right in their own ways, but because their ethical vocabularies are so radically different, there’s virtually no hope of a dialogue that will yield any significant practical results.

Case in point: two or three years ago, the Montreal Gazette management set up and chaired a meeting between its critics in the Entertainment Department and representatives of local artistic communities. The idea — at least officially — was to provide the artists with a fair chance to air their complaints about the paper’s treatment of the arts in Quebec. The sources of discontent were made abundantly clear: the paper was taken to task for insufficient and/or shallow and/or incompetent coverage. The critics launched a defense based on the limitations of a 35-hour week and the priority system built into writing for a largely middle-class anglophone readership. And both management and the critics took some pains to point out the nature of the beast — or monster: daily newspapers are primarily a "reactive" medium — that is, they’re oriented toward responding on an immediate, superficial level to events (such as the opening of a Runaway movie) of predetermined general interest. If you want a serious discussion of subjects with minority appeal (e.g., a Canadian filmmaker) or of heretofore unheralded talents, you’re pretty much confined to the "reflective" media (which would include such publications as Cinema Canada).

At the meeting in question, the sides seemed to see each other’s point of view well enough. But it would be naive to suppose that there was any real understanding going on here.

The mass media’s ineluctable insistence on immediate reporting is a pressure endured by everybody in the biz. But on top of that, the critic has assumed an obligation to be entertaining. We operate on the axiom that readers who opt for "soft" news — a feature, for instance — have surely right to get a kick out of the prose, whether or not they have seen the film or have any intention of going. The net effect is that time which would have been spent in mulling over your film in the best of all possible worlds is in fact given over to constructing zippy copy.

At the risk of sounding condescending, I should also point out that at most newspapers and that includes The Gazette — the critic doesn’t simply write until he or she has said what has to
be said and then stop. More often than not, the critic is operating under the constraints of available space. Sometimes those pre-defined limits can leave the critic with a bum rap—and a certain public embarrassment. When I had to do the review of *Heaven's Gate*, for example, I was given six inches to make my points about a movie that took several very painful hours of my time to watch. A few days later, I got a letter attached to a copy of Jay Scott's lengthy piece on the same subject in the Globe & Mail. Why, the reader wanted to know, was I so glib and superficial about a film that Mr. Scott felt was worthy of so much attention?

As it so happens, the treatment we gave to *Heaven's Gate* was not at all typical of what happens to most Hollywood films by name directors. Its fate was more along the lines of what befalls most Canadian movies. Partly because the editor (assuming the role of the "average reader") is usually unfamiliar with the Canadian movie or personality at hand, it usually gets substantially less play than a Hollywood product that happens to be a sequel or has been pumped up by months of PR flak. Hence, the critic may be given reams of space and prominent placement for *Crocodile Dundee II*—a film about which nothing of any density could possibly be said—while *Le Délivrance de l'Empire Américain*, a far more complex and socially relevant film, stands a good chance of getting relegated to a back page and dismissed in short shrift.

No matter which film we're dealing with, however, the daily newspaper reviewer generally falls far short of concerning himself with what T.S. Eliot would call legitimate work in the field—"the elucidation of a work of art and the elevation of taste." Normally, we're confined to the less-than-glorious task of identifying the cast, summarizing the set-up and expressing a consistent opinion in a familiar voice and posture.

Once that humble task is complete, the piece is still subject to editing—and often to cutting, regardless of what space requirements we were originally told to meet. It's then topped by a headline written by somebody else, usually a copy editor. The head should reflect the sense of the feature or review, but at most papers, it must also "fit" within narrow limits left to right, top to bottom. In practice, that means that an accurate head that does not fit will always be rejected for a less accurate one that does match the space. Makes you wonder why the blurb writers for movie ads take those headlines seriously enough to quote them. And indeed, the whole process is enough to leave you wondering why so many Canadian filmmakers take the treatment they get in the press to heart—as if they're being affronted on a personal level. What they do have every right to get upset about has less to do with the validity of the opinions themselves than with the way that decisions made under duress can have such devastating effects on so many careers.

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