

Open skies

MIP and the global television revolution

BY TOM PERLMUTTER

For three years John Walker and I had been developing a documentary series (with the active support of the NFB) on what seemed to be a fundamental transformation of the communications landscape by the pull of technological innovation and the push of political deregulation. Characterized by the globalization and concentration of media ownership, driven by the demands of information-based industries which saw their future in the commercial exploitation of communications, this transformation raised serious questions about national sovereignty and cultural diversity. Questions that had not gone unnoticed.

Ten years ago the Clyne report on The Implications of Telecommunications for Canadian Sovereignty made an impassioned plea: "With all the force at our command, we urge the Government of Canada to take immediate action to alert the people of Canada to the perilous position of their collective sovereignty that has resulted from the new technologies of telecommunications and informatics."

In 1980 the MacBride Commission, established by UNESCO to develop policies for a more just and more efficient world information and communication order, pinpointed the central role communications plays within and among nations. It noted that "a nation whose mass media are under foreign domination cannot claim to be a nation." The report stated that "to hold at bay possible influences which may lead to cultural dominance is today an urgent task."

More recently scholars like Herbert Schiller in the States, Armand Mattelart in France, Anthony Smith in Britain and Hans Enzensberger in Germany and Arthur Kroker in Canada have been exploring the implications of this communications revolution.

For our documentary we decided to look at the rapid change in the communications world through one constituent element: television. Television is immediate, it has the greatest visibility and greatest impact.

The first question we had to confront was: Did the musings and sometimes shrill jeremiads of the academics and government commissions have a palpable reality in the hurly-burly arena of broadcasting? We set off for MIP—the Marche International des Programmes de Television, the world's largest television market—to find some answers.

We arrive in Cannes the day before opening. It's my first time here. My first impression is of noise, an endless assault by high-pitched, unmuffled mopeds. Then there is the disorientation. Where exactly am I? I wonder. In what had once reputedly been a heavenly fishing village the sea hardly exists, reduced to a kind of excrecence by a massive architectural assault on the shoreline. Is this the Riviera or is this Miami? Frye's question echoes in my mind. Where is here?

On the waterfront, giant billboards proclaim the virtues of Barbie and *That French Show*, "the hottest new show at MIP, 26 episodes of late-night sizzle". What that sizzle is I can never ascertain. I do find out that the show is being

sold by an American outfit headquartered in Dallas. Other attractions they promote include *Texas Championship Rodeo* and *Ladies Professional Wrestling*.

At the Palais de Festival it seems inconceivable that anything will be ready for the following day. We drift down to the basement where most of the action is to take place. Someone tells us the basement was originally designed as a parking space. We believe it. The place is something of an ecological disaster. Within 10 minutes we all have blistering headaches from whatever toxic substances are used to glue the carpets to the concrete. We escape to check out the deal-making sites, the grand hotels where the air is perfumed with money and ersatz power.

Opening day and everything is ready; the air in the basement at least seems breathable. Like a machine MIP comes to life, inhaling and exhaling people.

GIVE THE AUDIENCE WHAT THEY WANT

A Soviet production company is here to discover the secrets of the world market. Their booth is plastered with posters of what seems to be a Russian Ms. Rambo, a faceless, metallic-skinned torso with protruding nipples clad in an ochre body tight. Maya Toidze, an executive with the Soviet Videofilm Corporation, tells us that Soviet filmmaking has to change, the editing is too slow, the pace is too slow. We need to give audiences what they want.

I didn't realize it but I had stumbled across a theme. Cyril du Peloux, general secretary of France's premiere private station, TF1, tells a packed symposium on the future of European television that the real problem is to find product to please our audience.

The view is echoed by Mel Harris, president of Paramount Television group. What is it the viewers want, he asks when questioning the legitimacy of European content quotas. An executive of Britain's Superchannel admonishes the symposium audience, "If Europe wants to play the game of commercial TV it must use the right equipment—programming that audiences want to watch." As a kicker he adds, "You cannot take the public broadcast viewpoint to commercial television. You must support advertisers' needs."

Now I begin to understand. The translation of "give the audiences what they want" is "give the advertisers what they need." That the two are not coincidental is not questioned. On day five of MIP, the MIP Daily News proclaims "East Meets West As Soviets Deal". The Soviet delegation had agreed to "an unprecedented series of major East-West co-production deals" including an all-star rock spectacular, a heavy metal concert, and Frank Sinatra's Moscow debut. The Soviets have become players. Welcome to the club.

We keep bumping into a British independent hoping to find those co-production funds at MIP. He's here with a couple of sci-fi, ecological projects. Environmental programming is big. Everyone is looking for the environmental holocaust program. Even as the planet collapses around them, television types seek to exploit it for commercial gain.



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Television Programming

BARTER – ITS TIME HAS COME

The new word at MIP is barter. Bartering is advertiser-furnished programming tailored to the advertiser's demographic needs. Bill Cameron, European media controller of giant international ad agency WCRS and its new programming division, Carat Entertainment, is unhappy about "a stigma or negativity about 'barter'". Nevertheless, he prophesies that "it will happen."

At MIP, the BBC announces the setting up of a special unit dedicated to sponsorship and barter. Not allowed to carry commercials at home, the BBC will look for overseas sponsorship of its programmes. Among advertisers listed are Johnnie Walker and Rothmans.

At our hotel we meet the former commissioning editor, children's programming for Britain's Channel Four. She is bleak about the future of children's programming in commercialized Europe. With no commercial incentives to make good children's programming, barter products will take over. *Vive Barbie.*

With the explosion of channel choice in Europe – much of it deregulated, commercial television – the problem becomes feeding the behemoth. Carlo Freccero, head of programmes for La Cinq, a French private network, emphasizes that "television is quantity, quantity, and quantity." He adds that the only programs that can be international are those one that adopt the American programming form. Massimo Fichera, chairman of the European Coproduction Association, notes that American programming dominated the international market because "Americans have a strong infrastructure and their national values are not

denied but filtered through a universal television language."

Patrick Cox, former boss of Rupert Murdoch's Sky Channel, asks, "If *Mork and Mindy* can work in Germany, why can't we make it here? The programming the Americans make successfully is pan-European programming. It works right across every country in Europe, language notwithstanding."

TV À LA MACDONALDS

There seems to be a general agreement that, as commercialization grows there is more and more need for Europeans to learn the craft of American commercial television. Mel Harris is ready to welcome European creators to Los Angeles where they can learn the universal language.

But for one impatient American television executive it's all too slow. He complains that "there is a tradition of pretentiousness and state meddling" in European television. He challenges the Europeans "to have the courage to be commercial" and "to be doing TV à la MacDonalds."

On the last day, MIP organizers announce that attendance was up almost 12 per cent over the previous year. Over 7,000 participants from over 85 countries have gathered to remake the face of television. Xavier Roy, managing director of MIDEM, the organization that runs MIP (itself controlled by Telso which owns among others the TV South commercial licence in England), is quoted as saying that "the growth in U.S. attendance reflects as much the opening of the American market to European product as the desire of Europeans to buy even more United States programming." A few days earlier the

MIP Daily News reported that "American television executives were forced to defend themselves against accusations of operating a one-way street against programme traffic from Europe."

At first I had thought of MIP as an update of Dante's *Inferno*, a descent into an airless realm of endless noise and harsh neon lights; the frenetic, almost panic-driven flight of souls damned to sell TV programs. So this is what THAT PLACE is like, I tell myself. Then as the days pass, as I become both observer and participant, MIP twists shape, becomes a kind of limbo, a vast, anxious prelude to the thing itself while assuming one is creating the thing itself. But despite the claims of "reality-based" programmes, the real activity of MIP, its subtext, is not creation but erasure. MIP erases boundaries: national boundaries, cultural boundaries, the boundaries between self and other, the boundaries that exclude and the boundaries that define. MIP is a giant soup ladle, stirring all the ingredients dropped higgledypiggledy into this market to a uniform taste and consistency. The 7,000-plus who attend disperse, taking with them the recipe for that international soup – in Europe that kind of international coproduction is being called "Europadding." This is how programming will be made. And what kind of programming is that?

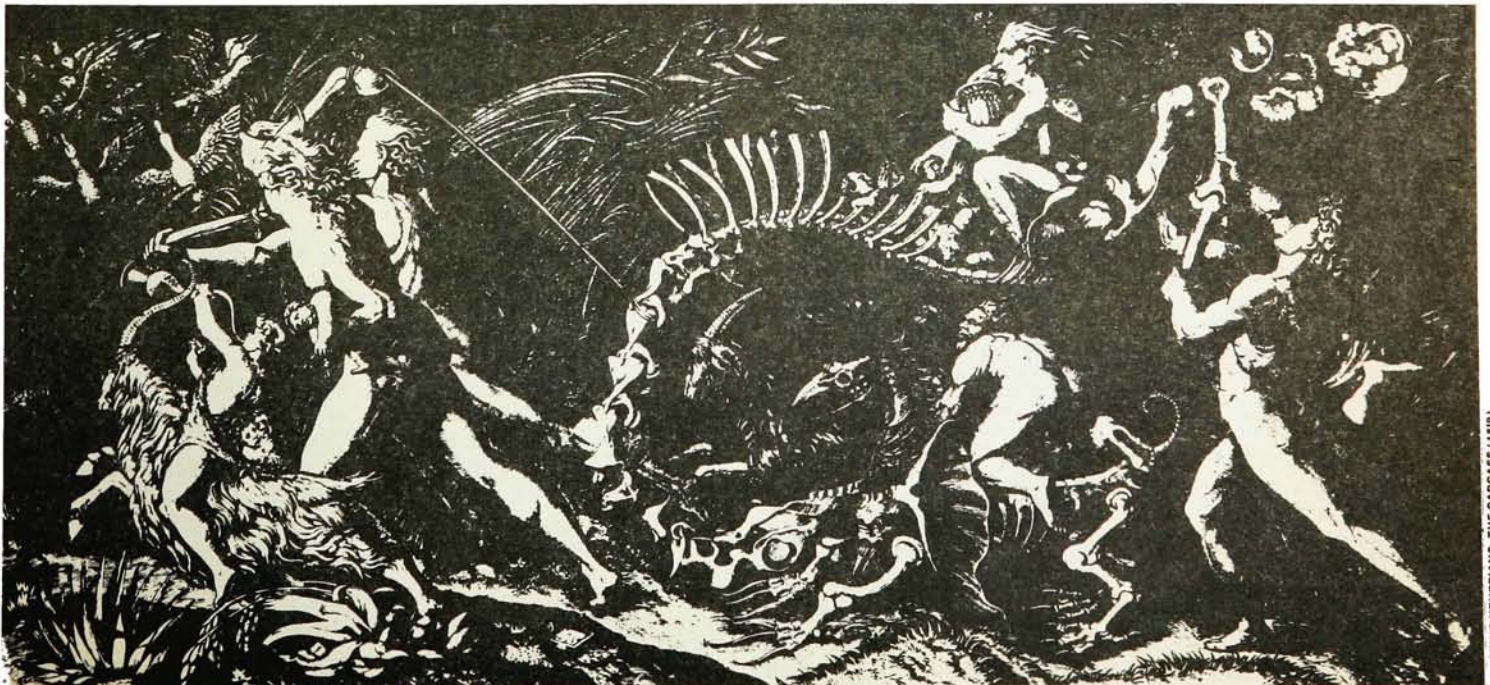
PROGRAMMING FROM VACUUMLAND

Mel Harris asks rhetorically, "What country is *Star Trek: The Next Generation* from?" He answers himself, "It's not from any country." Similarly, *Mission Impossible* is from nowhere. "It

has no base," says Harris, "it doesn't reflect any point of view." *Ex nihilo.* Or in other words born in a vacuum, without context and without signification. And, of course, being from nowhere these programs are exportable everywhere.

It's late afternoon on the last day. The people have left. I wander around the deserted stands which seem an emblem of a lost civilization. In a corner lies a knee-deep pile of unspooled video tapes, the ghost in the machine. Out of the corner of my eye I catch a greenish shade beckoning me from a man-sized poster into Haunted Hollywood. I shudder and hurry on.

On the plane home I have a dream. A television executive dies and finds himself in MIP. He wanders up and down the booth-laden aisles. Large multi-screened monitors flash images at him which he barely takes in; he's too busy rushing to make appointments. But everyone slides by him with a vaguely anxious look, searching for something. It finally dawns on him that he's dead. Now he begins to grab at the other shades frantically asking them, "Where am I?" They all give the same answer, "You are here, at MIP" and slip away. "But is this heaven or is this hell?" he wants to know. "This is MIP" is the invariable response. Soon he is like them wandering through the endless halls of images trying to locate himself in this land haunted by Hollywood. I wake rattled, not quite certain of where I am. Oh yes, a plane. When we land and I wander around an air terminal which is everywhere and nowhere, I understand my dream. The "here" the television executive searched for at MIP is nowhere; he had penetrated the central territory of television. ●



AGOSTINO VENEZIANO, THE CARCASS (1518)