

# where is canadian cinema heading ?

by Serge Losique

In recent years, Canadian cinema has been the subject of innumerable discussions, controversies and oral or written statements. Since I have been working in the field of cinema in Montreal for a long time, I will venture an opinion and offer some ideas, even if they are unlikely to be accepted. I will deal with only the broad outlines because what happens behind the scenes would make a whole book, not a simple article.

We have many so-called "saviors" who are constantly speaking of the "crisis" of cinema and blaming either the government or the industry, in particular certain American companies. Of course, all these "saviors" claim to be absolutely disinterested, an attitude which leads to conflict and auto-destruction: everyone is jealous of the others and wants recognition of the divine mission which gives him a right to the taxpayer's money. Among these people are, on the one hand, federal civil servants (whom some provinces unfortunately try to emulate) who think of themselves as absolute masters capable of bringing Canadian cinema to the greatest heights, and on the other hand, a contingent of self-styled filmmakers who act as if society owed them

everything because they have made one or two films. In this unhealthy climate, empires of "kommissars", lobbying, parachuting into key positions, dirty tricks and something that vaguely resembles Northern Ireland has developed.

Of course, these problems are present elsewhere too. But nowhere else in a democratic country is public money so much a part of the game. This "cultural mafia" is the most destructive force in our country. How can this be explained? Is it the result of a political will determined to give cinema a definite direction, or of ignorance on the part of the mandarins in the field? We may one day elucidate the answer to this question.

Between these two extremes stand some people who understand that cinema has been in a perpetual crisis since its birth in 1895 because it is at the same time an art and an industry – and both are costly. Therefore, cinema is a continuous struggle, and each film goes through its own crisis even after all the contracts are signed. Fellini was in a state of financial crisis throughout the shooting of his last film *Casanova*.

This group of moderates understand that Canadian or Quebec content cannot be a guarantee of success, and that people can never be forced to see a particular film, simply because it is Canadian. Our viewers live surrounded by images and have seen the best of world films on the small or the big screen. Some groups insist that the state has to "protect" our cinema but they forget that no government in the course of history has ever created any great culture. On the contrary, creation is always unpredictable – it must not be confused with the planning of highways. As

far as cinema is concerned, the more the state will legislate, the fewer good films will be made – because cinema means "movement" and the moment this movement is supervised by civil servants, very often incompetent ones, cinema is dead or meaningless – as is the case in countries where cinema is tightly controlled.

In some circles where it *should* matter, nobody worries about the quality of our products. It is very difficult to make cinema succeed artificially while steering it in the wrong direction. It is not by protecting mediocrity that a serious cinematographic base will be created in this country. Even Bergman has rejected any further "protection" from the officials of Sweden (which is so often proposed as an example of success) and left for Hollywood.

If cinema could be reduced to the dimensions of meat, it would no doubt be easier – because there is no reason why we should be inundated by American beef when our beef is as good, if not better, than its southern counterpart. But cinema is something else. It is in constant revolution and in the western world this revolution is led by our best bourgeois creators.

The fact that this revolution originates in Hollywood, in the United States, is not surprising because Hollywood has become for cinema what Paris was for the arts at the beginning of the 20th century. Cinema is essentially the art of the masses and for that reason it is a mistake to underestimate American cinema, which provided the masses of the world with great myths of escape: love, horizons, freedom, sex, the direct justice of the frontiers, adventure... and also with modern gods

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*Serge Losique founded the Conservatoire d'art cinématographique at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University), and has sponsored the Student Film Festival for eight years. This summer he was also instrumental in the organization of two festivals which coincided with the Olympics: one on cinema and sport, and the other on Canadian cinema.*



and goddesses: Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, Humphrey Bogart, Marlon Brando, Jack Nicholson...

Furthermore, we must no longer think of Hollywood as being representative only of America; indeed some of the greatest filmmakers of the world as well as the greatest stars were received and accepted in Hollywood: Mack Sennett (from Quebec), Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Eric Von Stroheim, Joseph Von Sternberg, Zoltan Korda, Frank Capra, Rouben Mamoulian, Alfred Hitchcock, Charles Chaplin, René Clair, Jean Renoir, Roman Polanski, Milos Forman... Also in Hollywood cinema was never limited to a particular outlook as was the case in Canada where cinema for almost 30 years was only allowed to follow the lead of the National Film Board. As if this was not enough, even now they are trying to keep us within their official lines – and then are bold enough to speak of an industry of cinema, of creation!

With just a little love and intelligence, it can be understood that this beautiful and universal language is in itself irrational and as such cannot agree with the systems of rigid institutions. It lives and develops in absolute freedom and the role of the state as the modern Maecenas is to help it directly and not through a stuffy bureaucracy which is a consequence here of the worst British traditions. One might ask, where is the British film industry today?

In the early '60s, it was under the influence of the great American films that the French produced a new concept of cinema with the films of the Nouvelle Vague. The first feature film of Jean-Luc Godard, *A bout de souffle (Breathless)*, was an homage to John Ford. This interdependence has shown that the language of cinema, particularly fiction, cannot go far if it is locked into some sort of provincialism.

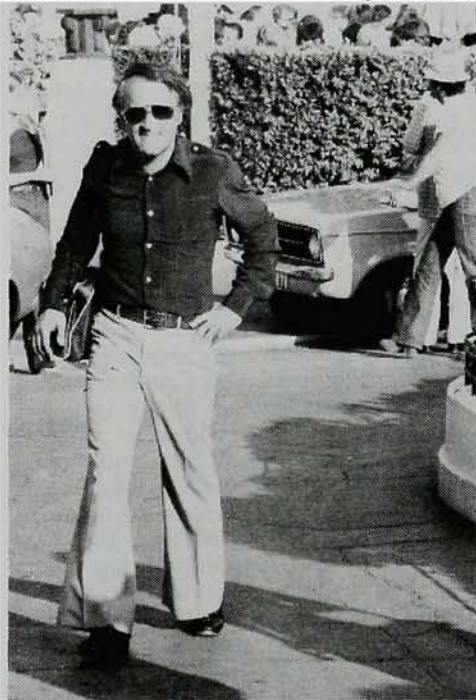
In a concrete way, what can be done in the present situation? Is it possible to construct a strong cinema with the help of narrow-minded pseudo-intellectuals, most of them disciples of the National Film Board? We naively think that by eliminating the American "majors" Canadian cinema can be created. But Montreal is only 40 miles from the American border, like most of our urban centers, and nothing can prevent our people from going to see films there, just as nothing can prevent them from rushing to Cape Cod or Miami for vacations. Even if the American-owned theatres were closed, the "majors" would still do very good business as they are doing now with 16 mm films in schools, private clubs, etc. In Spain, during the Franco regime, the least sex in cinema was considered sinful and banned. As a consequence, the French border towns made easy money by offering the Spaniards sexy films.

People want to see a film, nothing more. It is true that our federal state lacks a general policy in this field and the general impression is they haven't a clue. They should be the ones – maybe the Ministry of Industry and Commerce – to study whether foreign companies prevent our films and other films of quality from being seen by monopolizing showing and distribution.

There exist anti-trust laws in the United States too. Only healthy competition can give us access to the best films of the world. It is the role of the state to see to it that no monopoly exists in this field and that no particular country's cinema be penalized in the process. But if cinema is treated as an industry it should be treated also in the overall framework of economic relations between Canada and the US.

Consequently, I wish in this article to examine the role of the Department of the Secretary of State, the main power behind cinema activities in this country, as well as the roles of its various agencies. The problems of the Department of the Secretary of State, particularly its past problems, can be summarized by saying that it was for a long time a prisoner of the British traditions of its higher officials and that it acted mainly through the agency of the National Film Board. On the one hand, the Department wanted to create a national cinema with its own "identity", slightly overdone and artificially maintain-

photo Federico



Serge Losique at the Cannes festival

ed for political reasons inherent in the federal context; on the other hand, its officials acted, and still act, as if we were a socialist country, or Latin American one, or – worse still – a young African country where people have never seen films.

The desire for power and domination that characterized the predecessors of the present Secretary has brought about the malaise of the Department and of the industry as a whole. I wonder if the commercial side of cinema would not be better served within the Ministry of Industry and Commerce than the Department of the Secretary of State. It is not easy to break established empires; however, in a political sense as well as for the cultural good of Canadians, the Department of the Secretary of State must examine as soon as possible the role of its agencies. It is not by controlling whatever moves on the screen that the federal government will make us more Canadian. After all, a man who keeps insisting that he is married is not necessarily a faithful husband...

## The National Film Board

Its role was at one time positive but today, when secondary schoolchildren have studios and cameras, not to mention the innumerable universities where cinema is beginning to gain roots, it is urgent that the role of the Board be reassessed. We have seen enough of the power game and vested interests in Ottawa. Now the millions given the Board could go directly to our filmmakers and cinema would fare much better. The role of the Board during the war was understandable and justified. But today, is there one great *democratic* country which has a branch of cinematographic propaganda? If the Board must exist, then let it exist, but it should be treated on the same footing as other crown corporations and should rely on its own resources to survive. We are living at a time of image explosion and a democratic government does not have the right to use taxpayers' money to make us tributaries of an organization that has already considerably slowed the normal evolution of Canadian cinema. The image had already won the battle against the words in 1938...

It may now be time to apply the Massey minority report (Royal Commission: Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1950) which declared that the federal government should cease financing the National Film Board. With its monopoly, the Board has done enormous prejudice to the independent sector and to those filmmakers who were not privileged to enter the Board. Where can a non-NFB documentary film be shot? So, not only have we prevented an independent sector from developing and becoming stronger but we prevented our talents from expressing themselves, which is unacceptable in a country like ours. At any rate, the Board would be more productive if it became a kind of "cinema center" – a center of cinema information, a national laboratory which would make contracts with private industry, a production company like all other private companies. As things stand now, people are wondering about the usefulness of the National Film Board with its army of functionaries.

## The CFDC

Much has been said for and against this state corporation. I must admit that I, personally, am not a great fan of it. On the other hand, it must be said that the CFDC has helped Canadian cinema. The problem with the CFDC was, and still is at the present moment, that its policy is unclear and pseudo-cultural rather than industry-oriented. It is true that we lack expertise and the CFDC cannot make films in the place of filmmakers and producers. But should it not have tried in the beginning to develop such expertise instead of subsidizing mediocrity?

The idea I always supported was that the CFDC become a sort of national bank for the financing of the cinema industry (production, distribution, promotion) and that it refrain from setting itself up as a superstructure, thus repeating the mistake of the National Film Board. If a producer is willing to risk his own money along with that of the state, he should have the right to make any film he likes. The CFDC should transform itself into a mixed company of public and private capital. In the first



stage, the government should reduce the money it gives to other agencies involved in film production and increase considerably the budget of the CFDC. The fact that the cost of a more or less successful film is about a million must be taken into account. In our conditions, such a budget is realistic because crowds are running to see super-productions like *Jaws* and others whose budgets went far above \$10,000,000.

The CFDC should not close its doors to films produced here by great international filmmakers. Once in a while, such a film made by a world celebrity would stimulate our creativity and make our industry more viable.

The CFDC should also make changes in its board. I would surround the present director with men who "breathe" cinema – and such men do exist here. If we really decide to have a cinema industry and not just talk about it, then the new CFDC must be given the means to work and the freedom to operate on a world scale because, whether we like it or not, there is no possibility of a viable industry in this field if it is not oriented towards the international market.

I think that such a new CFDC, once established and cleansed of its narrow conceptions, could be extremely useful to our cinema industry – which will remain modest for a long time, not only because of the lack of expertise (filmmakers, producers) but because of our tastes for things American (from hotdogs to automobiles) and also because of the enormous costs that will always be involved in this industry. Our linguistic duality will leave us for a long time handicapped by French and American cinema, because to be successful on the foreign market means to receive the stamp of approval of New York and Paris. It is a harsh reality that we must be aware of. Finally, it is the CFDC that should be responsible for solving the problem of showing our films in theatres without resorting to quotas on foreign films or other simplistic and unrealistic methods.

## The Canada Council

All reasonable people will admit that the Canada Council is trying to be the fairest of all federal agencies. As far as cinema is concerned, the Council is just starting to contribute. It would be beneficial that this agency play a much more important role, with an increased budget, than it does at present. The CFDC could help the industrial side of cinema and the Council the cultural side. As long as a government institution remains the judge concerning the good of the population, nothing can be said against it but the moment it becomes judge and participant at the same time, it cannot work any more in a democratic system. The Canada Council should play, in the field of cinema, the same role as it plays in other cultural fields and to my knowledge, there is no national commissioner for theatre or music. In this case, we could do without the commissioners from the National Film Board, the Festivals Bureau and the National Archives.

I realize it is sometimes difficult to tell in advance whether a film is "commercial". I think Canada Council grants for a film should never go over \$50,000. As one

criterion for selection, we might say that the types of films made by students or the ones produced at present by the National Film Board should be subsidized by the Council. Moreover, applications to the Council would be made directly while, in the case of the CFDC, the producing company would take the necessary steps and make the commitments.

## The Festivals Bureau

I would not mention this Bureau if it were not constantly messing things up. For political or other reasons (definitely outmoded) this agency thinks of itself as the absolute master of any Canadian participation in other countries and thus undermines the efforts of organizations which have exchanges with the outside. On the other hand, this Bureau does not consider it one of its prerogatives to help a strictly Canadian film festival. It is easy to organize activities in other countries when all expenses are paid by the government, but we also need people who work here on Canadian soil.

For many organizations, exchanges with other countries depend on reciprocity. And what then is the role of the Office of Cinema of the Department of Foreign Affairs if it is not to take care of our activities in other countries? However, when a grant is requested from the Festivals Bureau, the answer is always the same: no money. But when it is the Bureau itself which is organizing, then official delegations can be seen from Cannes to Sorrente (without, incidentally, representation of the private sector which the Bureau of Festivals was created to help). Officials travel everywhere under the grand title of "Cinema Canada" instead of directly helping the distributors and producers to sell their films. In Cannes, our films are not sold by the Festivals Bureau but by Carle, Link, Demers and David themselves, and they are the ones who should be our delegates. Like the Australians and their koalas, we are trying to sell an image of the country. But the professionals who go to Cannes to buy films are not interested in the "delegations" of Ottawa, Melbourne or Quebec. On the contrary, this insistence on bureaucracy can be detrimental to our films because serious festival organizers are suspicious of officials. Our Bureau abuses its publicity here as well as outside. To impress its employers (for reasons of budget) the Festivals Bureau declares everywhere in newspapers that Canadian cinema was never better represented than in Cannes this year. However, in the official competition, only one film, *Metamorphosis*, was presented by Canada. This student film received the *Palme d'Or* – but it took part in the Festival only because of the efforts of my Conservatory and not those of the Festivals Bureau. In 1969, we had nine feature films in the "Quinzaine des Réalisateurs"; in 1976 we had only two. If the CFDC is reorganized, it would make sense that it become responsible for helping our producers and distributors to sell on the international scene. An office with three persons in Cannes would be sufficient to give out all information on Canadian productions. It would be illogical for the CFDC, whose role it is to help the cinema industry, not to be present in the professional film festivals of the world. For all

other festivals, no agency would be better chosen than the Canada Council to take care of everything in a fair way.

## The Film Archives

When its history is written, it will be said that the Film Archives of Ottawa were founded over the dead body of the Canadian Film Institute. This expression may be strong but unfortunately it reflects the truth. History will also say that our government stopped having faith in private cultural institutions. In this particular case, the government allowed some officials, worthy of the military regimes of Latin America, to take over a great institution which had proved its value since 1935. The directors of the Institute tried everything to get some aid from the state, but in vain. To mislead the public, there was a "merging" between the archives of the Institute and the almost nonexistent ones of the National Archives. It was a scandalous "coup d'état". What is also sad is that our parliamentary opposition has never been interested in cultural questions.

Of course, the federal government has the right and the duty to set up National Archives that will preserve its filmed documents but when the Archives try to take over and control other private institutions (by controlling their subsidies), we do not have a democracy anymore but neo-fascism. The Archives are getting involved everywhere and if the government does not examine their more dubious activities (for example, trying to organize some festivals in other countries) there will not be any future for private initiatives. What good is it to try to improve the quality of culture in our country when we know that a federal or provincial official will do all he can to crush you? Such people are interested in power only and are cut off from the cultural and educational needs of the masses. In socialist countries, governments have at least the decency to admit that they want to direct and decide everything (economy as well as the freedom and culture of citizens) but there the expression "private enterprise" has no meaning.

This said, I still believe that the Archives could play an important role in safekeeping our national heritage so long as their aim is not to build new empires. This tendency towards aggrandizement was clearly seen in the discussion organized by the Canada Council last June 14 and 15. It is to be hoped that after this discussion, another attitude will be taken in this field. If the National Film Board is reorganized, I think the National Archives should become part of it rather than of the Public Archives. The Board has the technical means and experience necessary; it also has its own collection. It would be illogical to create a new technical government agency because, if the agency is only for "preservation", it is a question of money and nothing else.

## The CBC

It is not my purpose to analyze here the greatnesses and the weaknesses of this government monster but because it is an important factor in cinema, I want to say a few words about it. This institution is at present too powerful and we should not let it become bigger by monopolizing other areas but should reduce its power as much



as possible to make it competitive with private networks. The CBC is already too costly for what it is doing.

Concerning cinema, CBC-TV is a stop-gap. It can be said that, in part, it is because of television that our cinema was never successful in theatres; this is at least my experience in Montreal. Let us imagine the following authentic scenario: the CBC advertises it is presenting a certain Canadian film on March 27; a small independent theatre advertises the same film for March 29; failure of the film in the theatre. At any rate, most Quebec films were shown on TV in the course of the year. The few persons who were interested in seeing the films reflected that it was not worth going out to see the films since they would see them on TV.

State-owned television was certainly not intended as a dumping ground for films nor as a film producer. Even the Sunday program *Les beaux dimanches* has started showing films. Such dumping can work for American films because, in the case of *The Godfather* for example, the film has already made a fortune in theatres and can now afford to get a few million more on the various TVs of the world. But such a method is fatal for a film produced here: right in the beginning, the film is handicapped commercially in theatres and the CBC pays only peanuts. (A filmmaker is not paid more than \$10,000 while the production cost may be around \$350,000.) If the CBC gave the film producer the same amount they pay for a Lise Payette show or an Olympic Lottery special, the Corporation would really be helping our cinema. If state television forgot about film production and left it to private industry, the latter would be seriously reinforced. The CBC's own production studios are not only detrimental to the independent sector but literally kill it. The great networks in the United States are always using the resources of private industry and I don't see why we cannot do the same, the more so as the production of a CBC film or show involves a real army of people which makes for a terrible waste of public money. The CBC, as a corporation representing the Canadian taxpayer, should have an obligation to contribute seriously to our film production and not only to overblown projects destined to justify high budgets in Ottawa.

## Conclusion

If I took the liberty in this article of discussing exclusively federal agencies, it is because I believe that the development of cinema depends right now for a large part on the federal government. It is true that the provinces, in particular Quebec, have the intention of doing something in the field of cinema but since provincial institutions are still embryonic and more narrow in their conception than the bureaucratic federal agencies, I have omitted them.

I know how difficult it is to break up certain pyramids. But if we believe in democracy, if we believe in the contribution of citizens to the economic-cultural life of our country, it is time the federal government took away the monopoly from its institutions and showed more confidence in private initiative. We have the means, we just have to use our resources in the light of the reality of 1976. □

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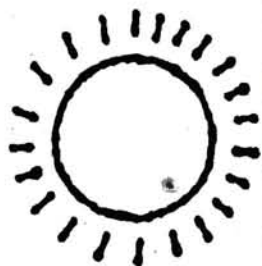
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