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.
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 films 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 Macenas 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 new artists and self-proclaimed filmmakers? Is there much more, beyond 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-

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. If a particular country 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-

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 mill, 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 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 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 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 refund itself starting 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 considera-
bly the budget of the CFDC. The fact that the
cost of a more or less successful film is
about a million must be accepted in 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
to films produced elsewhere by great interna-
tional 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 free-
edom to operate on a world scale because,
whether we like it or not, there is no pos-
sibility of a viable industry in this field
if it is not oriented towards the interna-
tional 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 (film-makers, pro-
bducers) 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 indus-
try. Our linguistic duality will leave us
for a long time handicapped by French
and American cinema, because to be suc-
scessful 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 solv-
ing the problem in showing our films in
the world, whereas the CRTC obtains foreign films or other simplistic and un-
realistic activities.

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 indus-
trial side of cinema and the Council the
official side of film. As long as a govern-
ment institution remains the judge concern-
ing the good of the nation, 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
cultures, the role of impresarios, which 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 Na-
tional Archives.

It is not always easy to try to tell,
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 should be examined separately
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 making things up. For poli-
tical or other reasons (definitely outmoded)
this agency thinks of itself as the absolute
master of any Canadian participation in
other countries and this undermines the
efforts of organizations which have ex-
changes 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 activi-
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realistic activities.
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 stopgap. 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.

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.
Norman McLaren

Three Birds

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