

# OPINIONS

## A FEW GUT RESPONSES TO THE CMPDA

I was most interested by the Canadian Motion Picture Distributors' Association's "factual and unemotional overview of the motion picture industry in Canada" in their article "A Major Offensive Against Nationalism" **Cinema Canada** No. 34/35. While their analysis is brief and succinct it indeed contains an enormous amount of information plus much food for thought. While many of the points are well taken, certainly in terms of a more professional and rational approach to elements of production, publicity and marketing, I would like to offer a few gut responses to what I feel is a somewhat dangerous attitude that I perceive in their brief.

All of us interested in film in this country have a bias (or two) of some sort or another. The CMPDA has every right to demand more commercial 'properties' with an eye not only on our own box office, but also on the international marketplace. However, to my mind their analysis and their recommendations would only continue the colonized branch-plant mentality and reality of this country. To read proposals urging some kind of formula as the key to success raises great doubts in my mind. If the "ingredients necessary to assure every reasonable opportunity for box office success" are "a star with an international reputation, a proven property, a successful producer, adequate financial resources and a suitable distribution contract" one can only ask about those two-thirds of American pictures that didn't yield a profit. What is more disturbing though is this search for the magic formula based on competing with the American model. If the average American production budget ranges between \$2½ and \$3 million we are told that we must have more competitive budgets, a minimum of \$1 million "to ensure some degree of production quality". If it is war out there, gentlemen, (and by their description it undoubtedly is) then the CMPDA is fighting the wrong one using conventional methods. Surely if Vietnam taught us anything it was simply that the monolithic American giant – supreme in economic and military power – can be bested not by playing their game but by fighting a guerrilla war. Nobody will out-Hollywood Hollywood and I would suggest that you're barking up the wrong tree if you try, but there is an opportunity to try different methods, to in reality change the rules of the game, rules that are basically American. If the free-enterprise system is not working in our favor then we should look seriously at some alternatives. It is also a myth that money will make films that the public will want to see – our record is certainly a dismal one, **Alien Thunder** (a formula picture, \$1 million budget and big star), **Kamouraska** (the same), **Goldenrod**, **Child Under a Leaf** etc. – whereas **Shivers** costing \$165,000 grosses over \$700,000 (surely a conservative estimate), or **Goin' Down the Road** grosses about \$600,000 after coming in for \$87,000. And even if there was a magic formula I'm sure Hollywood would have discovered it first. You see, a formula system can never create an Ingmar Bergman (he made too many "parochial" films

before he was discovered as a marketable commodity) or a Federico Fellini (his films were "too great a reflection of the producers'/directors' personal concepts"). While we may have a number of directors who do wallow in personal fantasy, it's nice when one comes along like a Fellini to put you on the map.

No, I'm afraid the formula picture will only result in a faceless, anonymous product that might not even keep the distributors happy. While Morey Hamat assures us that good pictures will be seen, qualifying good as "a picture which has public appeal", I wonder why we haven't seen **Deep Throat** or **Behind the Green Door**. If we want films that will sell, perhaps the CMPDA should be lobbying the provincial censor boards so we can *really* get into exploitation in a big way – why hold back if money is the only object?

There comes a time when the chicken comes before the egg, when films made because someone has something that he wants to say happen to go on to make money, when people listen to so-called 'art' directors like Bergman, Bertolucci or Fellini in a big way. I wonder what we would have made of a movement like the French new wave, with its Godards, Truffauts, Chabrols and Rohmers who started out making very different films for peanuts before becoming commercially successful. Would the Renoirs and the Picassos of the world be around if they had been told that they shouldn't paint pictures larger or smaller than 12"x24" because the public liked them that way? Or imagine a music promoter telling Beethoven while writing his Ninth Symphony that a symphonic movement shouldn't last longer than ten minutes because after that the audience would fall asleep.

I would further suggest that the CMPDA look a little closer at government involvement in film in this country as well. While espousing the free market system, Canada is marked by extensive public-sector involvement in almost every aspect of film in this country. (Would it even be going too far to propose that there almost wouldn't be a film industry in this country if it wasn't for the CFDC or the NFB, or there would and it would be a lot healthier?) No, for me, one of our greatest problems has been the government's schizophrenia over whether they should be creating art and culture, or entertainment and commodity. So, as with much else in this country, we emerge with a compromise which suits none of us because it's not decisive enough. It's not so much a question of commercialism vs. art as getting behind whatever we're doing 100% to support it, be it quotas, levies, free enterprise or a nationalized industry.

Piers Handling

**N.B.** – In 1973 we produced 53 features, and in 1974 there were 71, all listed in *Film Canadiana*, the Canadian Film Institute's yearbook – not 33 and 32 as the CMPDA claims!



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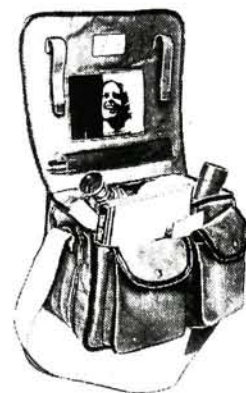


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