

## Winners & losers in Canadian TV's kulchur sweepstakes

*"We have moved from an era when business was our culture to one in which culture is our business."*

-Marshall McLuhan

It is all too easy to forget the extent to which a seemingly mundane gesture like flicking on a television set in this country is a significant political action. But both Francis Fox's recent policy blueprint for "a new and distinctive CBC" as well as the CRTC's approval of the Greenberg-Bronfman bailout of First Choice once again remind us how intensely political the question of television actually is in Canada.

Not for nothing does the television day begin and end with the playing of the national anthem and the images of political and economic power, a daily reminder that television programming is the reflection of a particular national sovereignty. One does not watch television in the abstract: one watches either Canadian television or American television.

But in Canada - America's testing zone for cultural cruise missiles - one watches both. That is to say that any form of Canadian television watching is predicated upon an infringement of national sovereignty, a fact that is a cause of intermittent concern to the Canadian political authorities. To grasp that Canadian cultural life, such as it is, takes place in the footprints of an infringement which has both a long history and well-established structures, one need only look again at the continuing dispossession of the distribution mechanisms of Canadian filmmaking, at the daily newspapers' saturation coverage of Hollywood films, at Canadian viewers' far more intimate familiarity with the cultural products of the U.S. than with those of their own country; and finally at pay-television which owes what little popularity it can claim to round-the-clock showing of (mainly) American films.

Canadian cultural life takes place in a strangely unbalanced environment that is on the whole accepted as "the way it is" by the public, an imbalance that, furthermore, is the business environment of Canada's privately-owned cultural enterprises whose money-making ability is a function of north-south markets while its viewing constituency lives east-west. The constitutional separation of powers that relegates the domain of culture to the provinces while leaving cultural job-creation and regulation of Canada's airwaves to the federal government only further tilts the imbalance against such federal cultural initiatives as do occur.

As former CRTC chairman John Meisel recently put it, in a warning that like Eisenhower's belated alarms about the "military-industrial complex" says too little too late, there is no such thing as a free market in Canadian broadcasting, only markets where the most powerful players arrange matters in their favor. And foreign programming is the most powerful voice in Canadian television. In such a situation, according to Meisel, the CRTC is "the moral conscience" of Canadian broadcasting.

Unfortunately, the CRTC's approval of the Astral-Hees takeover of First Choice illustrates both the truth of Meisel's warning and the fact that, as Hamlet put it, moral "conscience doth make cowards of us all." Or losers (if the word "cowards" seems too strong). So let's review how the winners and losers stack up after Canadian TV's latest round in the kulchur sweepstakes:

**The CRTC.** It all goes back to the fateful March '82 pay-television decision which established structures that nobody but the CRTC itself thought could work. For the Commission not to approve the Astral takeover would likely have provoked the collapse of the industry and numerous independent producers. For the Commission to approve the Astral takeover is also an admission by other means of the weakness of the original decision.

On the other hand, all that the Commission may have achieved last week is to put Astral in such an impossible predicament that, as Allan King has said, the next thing to go can only be Canadian content. There's some evidence in the history of private Canadian broadcasting endeavors that Canadian content is a very low priority indeed, whatever the well-intentioned promises. If First Choice really did lose much of its money in supporting Canadian productions, it's not a far leap in logic to conclude that Canadian content is demonstrably not worth the price. The Commission's record on

holding the line on Canadian content in the face of screams of poverty from private broadcasters is not exactly overpowering. As King says elsewhere in this issue, "They have built an immense highway for American product into Canada."

**Astral.** Astral's take-over of First Choice is potentially a great victory for the Quebec production community which has always claimed (Greenberg among them) that it knows about filmmaking. If First Choice can become a genuine source of Canadian production and at the same time satisfy the CRTC, the Astral takeover will have proved fortunate indeed. But if the market for pay-TV subscribers turns out to be too small to accommodate more than one 'natural' monopoly (either First Choice or the other aspiring 'national', Superchannel), the Astral bailout will have been but another federally inspired rescue operation, leaving the CRTC looking as uncertain as to what a market is as the rest of Canada's pay-TV entrepreneurs.

**The CBC.** While the pay-television industry flounders, the CBC gets a free head-start (and according to the Fox blueprint management models based on ABC, CBS and other giants of culture), to join the competitive TV sweepstakes. If the CBC is the Petro-Canada of the airwaves - after all, as the commercial says "It's ours!" - it has the added advantage that, in Canadian broadcasting, there are as yet no equivalents to Imperial Oil, Shell or Texaco. So a "lean, efficient" CBC may yet be able to demonstrate it can out-Dallas Dallas as anyone who's seen *Vanderberg* can confirm.

**The independent producers.** The independent producers, whose interests all this carrying-on is supposed to serve, now truly face their golden hour: to produce cheap, high-quality, Canadian programming that can sell in the U.S. market. If they can meet this challenge, now that most of the pieces are in place - the Broadcast Fund; a lean, efficient CBC; and a revitalized pay-TV industry - they will have proved themselves to be the wizards they always said they were.

The industrialization of Canadian culture, which Harry Boyle discusses in this issue, comes at a price, however, that only cheapens the notion of Canadian culture, making of it the creation of low-cost cultural export goods. The *Globe & Mail's* Bill MacVicar, appropriately in a column called "Kulchur", recently blamed it all on government "interference" in the free-market of his literary imagination. He takes comfort in the thought that "economic man... will inevitably look for best quality at cheapest price." While the best is not usually the cheapest, it is the attitude that cheapest is best that explains what happens when the culture of business gets into the business of kulchur.

And still the lynch-pin of it all, the Film Policy, promised for Spring '83, then the fall, then the end of the year, has once again been postponed - this time reportedly till March '84. The final irony would be to dignify by the term 'strategy' the bits and pieces of policy now in place - those that Paul Almond elsewhere in this issue says amount to "the blind leading the blind."

The editors

*"Showtime and HBO know it. Robert Halmi Productions knows it. Kirk Douglas knows it. Hugh Hefner knows it (and may inadvertently be the cause of its ending). In fact, every successful producer of programming for American television, whether for pay TV or free TV, knows it.*

*"What they know is that our northern neighbor is a motherlode of talent and deals, which has led, by some estimates, to \$100 million or more in production going out of the U.S. and into Canada during the past year alone. And unless Canadian Communications Minister Francis Fox and the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) succeed in cutting the throat of their own golden goose, as they now seem to be trying to do, we can expect to see more money heading north in the near future."*

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