

# Boyle's law

## The Canadian third wave according to Harry Boyle

by Aileen Weir

At 68, Harry Boyle is one of the true veterans of Canadian broadcasting. With years of experience in both public and private radio and television, added to a 10-year term in the upper echelons of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), his is an authority of formidable knowledge.

Boyle began his career in 1936 when he joined the local radio station (CKNX) in Wingham, Ontario. His competence as an innovative news broadcaster led to a position with the CBC in 1942. He was to stay with the CBC until his appointment as vice-chairman of the CRTC in 1968. It was while he was at the CBC that the strong personality so apparent in his years with the CRTC began to assert itself.

Alex Frame, who later worked as a producer with Peter Gzowski, was one of the young talents whose career was initiated by Harry Boyle. Frame describes his old boss as a "very creative bureaucrat" and "the most inspirational kind of boss you could possibly have. He just loved people that raised hell!"

Boyle is passionately concerned about the type and quality of programming being presented to the Canadian public. As chairman of the CRTC in 1977, Boyle headed a Committee of Inquiry into the National Broadcasting Service. Asked to consider whether or not the government should hold a Royal Commission on the public broadcasting service in general, the committee recommended against the establishment of a Royal Commission at the time.

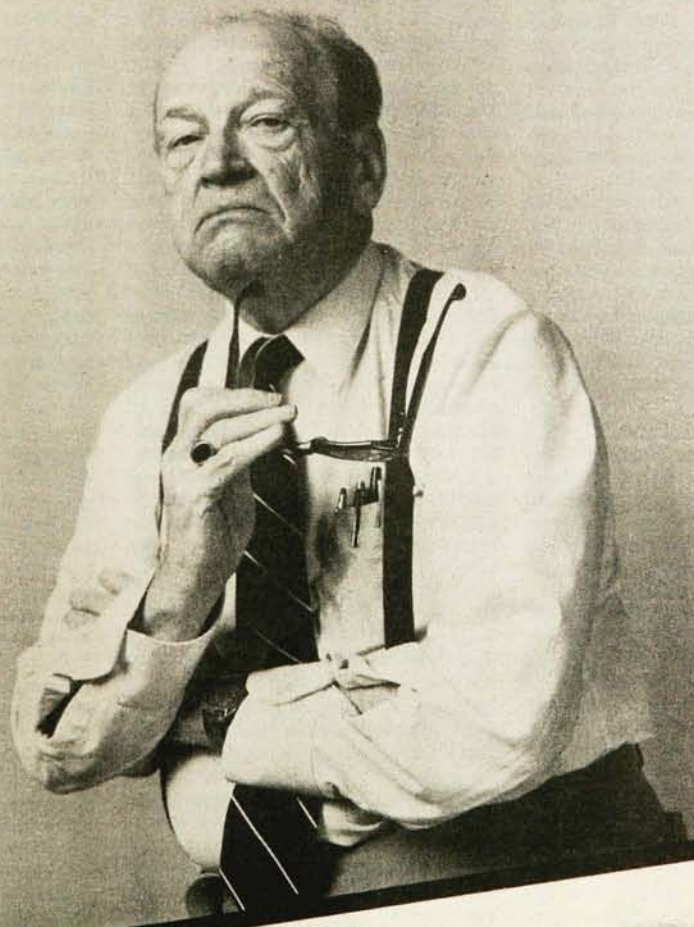
"When the present issues in Canada are clarified," the Boyle committee concluded in July 1977, "when the CBC has had a chance to show what it can do on its own initiative, when some firmer trends become apparent in technology, when Parliament has reconsidered its relation to the CBC and other cultural and communications agencies, a fuller inquiry will then be needed..." Five years later, the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee tabled the controversial Applebert report, recommending drastic changes in the CBC as Canadians know it.

Boyle's awareness of the explosive impact of advancing technology has made him a continual - and thoughtful - agitator in the media. "The questions we've got to ask," Boyle has written, are ones like what are we going to do "with all this [new technology]? What the hell good is it and just what's it all going to do for humanity?"

Since leaving the CRTC, Harry Boyle has been a consultant and public speaker and has written extensively on media-related questions. One of his current projects includes a book on his long association with media philosopher Marshall McLuhan. Boyle is a member of the jury for UNESCO's \$50,000 Marshall McLuhan award for outstanding contribution in the area of contemporary communications.

Aileen Weir is a recent graduate of Queen's University Film Studies.

Photos: Pamela Gawn



**Cinema Canada :** *Do you consider the recommendations of Applebert to be beneficial to the present situation in Canadian culture ?*

**Harry Boyle :** I have a certain sympathy for the committee. I think the Applebert report reflects pretty well what they heard – particularly in regard to the CBC. It's like a man with a balky mule – if you want to get its attention you have to hit it over the head with a stick. The CBC is a monstrous organization in terms of size and effort. Like the country, it sprawls over everything. And it's 45-47 years old now. Like everything else in life, it's become bureaucratized – terribly bureaucratized. Everything you look at is bureaucratized: from the university to the church, to business, to labour. It's the common sin of our generation. So Applebert tried, really, to hit it to make it wake up and do something. I believe, firmly, that the only way the CBC can survive is as a non-commercial organization in contrast to everything else. And, until they come to that realization, I don't think there's any hope for it.

**Cinema Canada :** *So you believe, then, that the CBC should be totally subsidized by government...*

**Harry Boyle :** Yes, completely, completely. You know, we've invested 50 years of effort, of talking, and everything else in national broadcasting. We're either going to have it or we're not going to have it.

I started in private commercial broadcasting and I have no quarrels with it. One of the things that many well-wishers in this country overlook is that it is perfectly legitimate – in fact, it was set up that way in the first place – to be a public/private system. Whether you like commercial broadcasting or not, it's there and it's legitimate. I started in private broadcasting and I was in the CBC, but I'm still convinced that they don't work together. They have two, different objectives. When you're in private broadcasting, the objective is to present material that will attract attention to the commercials. It's as simple as that. Public broadcasting should be broader than that and it should be there as an alternative for those people who want to see it. And I don't think it has to be elitist, it has to be common sense.

**Cinema Canada :** *Do you consider there to be such a thing as arm's length from the government in the CRTC ?*

**Harry Boyle :** Well, there used to be. It was arm's length certainly during the period of time that I was there. As a matter of fact, that was one of the reasons, one of the contributing factors why I left, was because there was some evidence that parts of the government wanted to direct – and they couldn't. There was no legislation for it and I abhor the present legislation which does give direction. I don't mind government giving direction to a public agency, if it does it in a public way. But I don't like it when it goes by order-in-council. Our whole democratic system is threatened by this curse we have at the moment of government finding ways to avoid exposure in Parliament.

**Cinema Canada :** *With the new Canadian content regulations that have just been released, do you think the CRTC is being stiff enough? Are they a feasible approach for the protection of Canadian culture ?*

**Harry Boyle :** I became involved in the first place with regulatory bodies in 1967 when I was hired by the Board of

Broadcast Governors, which became the CRTC, to investigate, as part of a committee, the proposition of whether you could have qualitative rules on Canon. We looked at every aspect of it and came to the conclusion that it was almost impossible. You couldn't do it. The bulk, quantitative approach was the only crude way that it could be done, because, after all, whose judgment is it ?

**Cinema Canada :** *What about the point system that has been suggested? Do you think that is a valid approach to the problem ?*

**Harry Boyle :** I think it's very complicated. I have never known any rule that you can't find a way to get around. You've just got to encourage some kind of disposition within them to make them see that it's in their own interest to do it. The blindness, it seems to me, of private commercial broadcasting, is the fact that imitation of what is American is a very poor route to take because you can't do it. You just can't do it. The idea that American broadcasting is the epitome of broadcasting is stupid. It's not. It has very little relationship to the whole proposition of American culture. As a matter of fact, it's a misnomer. It's one of the causes of the great misunderstanding of America in the world – this pervasiveness of American entertainment programs on television.

So, the only way you can somehow get ahead is to have some kind of control, and try and find the goodwill of the broadcasters. They object. I remember when we brought in community broadcasting on cable. There was a hell of a howl! They were all screaming about it – it was dictatorial, and so forth. But they discovered in the long run, that it was one of the best things that ever happened to them. It gave them a route in the community and those cable companies that have tried to invade the U.S. have discovered that it was their "open sesame" because they were farther ahead than anybody else. We've been fighting for 45 years about this proposition in this country. It's a gross commercial instinct as opposed to a kind of instinct that there is something in broadcasting. I don't think broadcasting is the be-all and end-all of culture but it's a contributing factor. It has some point. And it strikes me that the attempts to evade it are terrible.

**Cinema Canada :** *Is the CRTC feeling a lot of pressure right now, with pay television, Canadian content and so on ?*

**Harry Boyle :** It seems to me that there is a tendency in Ottawa at the moment – largely because of economic pressures – to industrialize. Everybody's on the bandwagon about industrializing, about finding a new formula. The government is desperately trying to find its way out of an economic morass. The thing that I worry about is this process of industrialization. We've got all this technology, and now we're going to subsidize television films, but the thing is you have to get an international market. I think that the CRTC represents that longstanding kind of common consensus that existed in the country – not always totally accepted, but still there as a body – that the whole communications process represents more than just simply money, industrialization and economic prosperity. It has a stake in this country going back to when we first discovered that we needed some kind of communication link. They're hanging on in many ways to that kind of ethos. And the pressures that exist in a government

which is obviously trying to save its skin, and which may be indeed completely confused because of the technological situation, and there you have the opposing forces.

**Cinema Canada :** *If the CBC were to relinquish its production facilities to the independents as suggested in Applebert...*

**Harry Boyle :** The difficulty about it is this: if you are going to have a broadcasting organization, it must have its own production facilities. It's got to have them. Now, there is a constant tug-of-war in an organization like that between the in-house production staff and the independents. And what develops over a period of time – unless there is a very strong leadership – is a kind of freemasonry amongst the insiders to keep the outsiders out. There's got to be an attitude laid down and clearly followed all the time that what matters is originality and creativity. Now, one of the great problems in terms of how you maintain the inside operation is by making it more flexible than it is. Tenure and pensions have to be adjusted somehow or other, so that people can move in and out.

**Cinema Canada :** *Do you think that's true of the NFB as well as the CBC ?*

**Harry Boyle :** Yes, although I think the NFB has had more outside people working for them recently – probably because of financial strictures. When I talk about the CBC as an institution – a non-commercial institution – it should be as a kind of Mecca for creative people. It's a very funny thing about creativity no matter what form it takes – books, films, etc. Some people are one-shot people. Brilliant, but they never manage it again. But they should be given the opportunity. The difficulty when you institutionalize creativity is that it becomes like everything else. It gets down to a dull, boring, anything-we-can-get-away-with level. There are exceptions to it, but the tendency is there. And then you have these opposing forces – you have the defensiveness of the people inside who don't want the competition of the outsiders. Then you have the outside people screaming and often making extravagant demands. But the management should keep going back to that attitude I mentioned. They should be looking at it all the time, and saying "We want the best; we want the original; we want daring; we want things that will show we are alive and well!" And I've often thought that one of the great problems about the running of the CBC is the way they handle their budget. They carve it up and then it goes down administratively so that the people who run the CBC have no control. It's the people down there who control the budget that hold the real power. It might be a very good idea for the president of the CBC to hold back so many million dollars and say that it's open to anyone. Whoever comes up with the best original idea will get that money – open to insiders and outsiders. I think you'd find that it would sharpen the whole approach because that would become the prize to aim for. But when you do that, again you have to make a value judgment. Whoever would make it, for example, the president, it would be his subjective judgment, his decision. Whereas, the difficulty in a bureaucratized organization, creative or not, is that everything is done by committee so that no one can find the scapegoat.

Creative organizations, like all other

organizations, run into problems. One of the great things about a recession, is that it shakes up every institution. They all have to ask themselves, do we need this, do we need that? And they clean house. Then they go back to normal activities and the old barnacles grow back on the hull. The trouble with creative organizations is that they are very often the last to do such a house-cleaning. It's very easy to criticize but very difficult to do. And how do you find, in a creative organization, without being cruel to older people who have had a career there, opportunities for new people who have new ideas? The older, more experienced people feel they deserve a pension and they get defensive. It's the curse of every organization. But this is the difficulty of a public organization.

**Cinema Canada :** *If the CBC were to provide a genuine alternative, as Applebert suggests, do you think it would be elitist? Would that eliminate mass entertainment as such ?*

**Harry Boyle :** We have swallowed the mythology that all people want is mass entertainment. We swallow an awful lot of mythology. An example: there's been a common agreement in America that TV news was going to knock newspapers for a loop. So newspapers consolidated. Now we discover that when you analyse the real heart of the TV newscast, that it's not nearly as influential as people thought. I was just reading that only 9% of Americans watch CBS news five nights a week. This is against the whole mythology!

Let's face it – North America is conditioned towards certain forms of popular entertainment, but that doesn't mean there isn't room for a lot of other things. All of us, at one time or another I suspect, have had a kind of starvation of the intellect and have wanted better things on TV. It doesn't have to be elitist, it can be for quite a broad audience. This business about calling the CBC elitist – well, if you took that to its ultimate, you wouldn't have museums!

We haven't been able to get the proportions into our minds. We spend millions of dollars on a museum or an art gallery and several hundred thousand people in a year come and see it – not as many as would watch one television program. So we haven't been able to put this into focus – we're still bemused by this business of a mass audience. But in this mass audience, how many of them are just wasting time? How many are really paying very much attention to the program? How many are gunning from one program to another? I mean, people can watch three programs at once and not miss a thing – they're as predictable as night and day. That's the kind of thing that happens in the control situation of TV. But I defy you to do that with something like John Le Carre's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* – particularly if you get it without commercials. One of the greatest complaints I've heard came from people who saw it on PBS and couldn't abide it on CBC when it came with commercials. Of course, the difference is that American (and some British) productions are designed simply to attract your attention to the commercials.

**Cinema Canada :** *What about Canadian film in all this? Do you think the CFDC has been an effective institution as it stands now ?*

**Harry Boyle :** I don't know. I really don't know. You hear so many conflicting

opinions. It's still pretty hard to identify any one film as being true blue Canadian. And it's so easy to make fun of the idea. But there's a kind of intrinsic quality... I mean, when you watch a Bergman film, or a Rossellini film (or indeed when you watch some of the Australian films and certainly when you watch a Yugoslav or a Polish filmmaker's film, somehow or other you look and see something that you know is unique. There is something being portrayed there that is real. And even in Australian commercial films, you suddenly realize that that film couldn't have been done any place else. Films like *Gallipoli* or *Breaker Morant* - there's a hurt, a great hurt in the Australian psyche about that first war and it comes through in the films. You go away with a sense of it. Well, most of the films produced in Canada are universal - they're made to be sold anywhere and don't have any relationship whatsoever to the Canadian psyche. It may still take some time...

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you feel that the much-talked about idea of the Canadian as victim has any bearing on the present Canadian situation? Are we lacking a national confidence, perhaps even a national identity?*

**Harry Boyle:** I think we've carried that whole idea a bit too far. You know, I sometimes think there's more currency to the idea of Canadian as exploiter, rather than as victim. There has been a great hesitation - although I must say that in more recent years it has changed - but there has been a great temptation in this country for people not to invest money, or do things in terms of the Canadian operation. And I do mean exploiter, because in many ways we go around crying the blues about this all the time. I'm sick and tired of hearing this business about being misunderstood by the U.S. The U.S. doesn't understand itself. I know America very well. I've lived and travelled and worked all over the place. Every part of it is different. And the people in one area... well, in Kentucky, for example, they think you're going to the moon when you tell them you're going to Detroit! There is just this parochial, local kind of bias. We have a tendency to look at America as being a total whole - waving the flag and pledging allegiance, and all that - but it's diverse and it's changing. It has a very great possibility of becoming a bilingual Spanish nation. I was told that next to Mexico City, the city with the largest concentration of Spanish-speaking people in it is Los Angeles. Two-thirds of Miami is Cuban and you'll find all across the south an enormous concentration of Mexicans and Spanish-speaking people. So the whole complex is changing and we have this tendency to oversimplify it by thinking of it as a homogenous whole. It's not.

**Cinema Canada:** *What about Canadian regionalization? Do you think that that should be given more emphasis by the CBC? You said in an article once that "Canadian broadcasting in itself should be the constant reminder that Canada is more than Ottawa, Montreal, or Toronto." Do you believe that this aim is being reached?*

**Harry Boyle:** First of all, I'm convinced more than ever that the greatest decentralization of all is going on in America. We usually don't become aware of it until it happens. Reagan has nothing to do with it - he just happened to be in the right point at the right time. He thinks he's leading a parade when

actually it started before he came.

It goes back for many years. And part of it is a fundamental change in attitude towards the central governing body. People have a stronger sense of their region and their locality, which is partly based on economic survival. There is a reaction against the kind of centralized proposition, and more and more of a determination to do things on one's own. Forty-two per cent of Americans now live outside cities. And they're not agricultural - only three per cent are. And I suspect that the same thing is going on here.

We're in a post-industrial era. It's an era with which we don't quite know what to do. It's an era where it's possible for people to have more power than they've ever had before - at home, individually - because of information. Not just the media, either, but the whole process of information. The basis of how we're going to live is changing. The Third World is rapidly becoming - and will become within the next ten years - the purveyor of many of the things we now make ourselves. They're taking over from Japan, for instance. There are electronic industries now in Taiwan, and Malaysia and Sri Lanka. Even the Japanese are now abandoning steel. So we're faced with a new situation. And that proposition about identification locally has always been with people. It's even in this city [Toronto], believe it or not. Nobody seems to understand that this is one of the most parochial cities you can imagine for the people living here. It happens when a city gets to be a certain size.

And when a country gets to be a certain size, the pressures start to appear and so does the fear. Fear of the unknown, fear that leaders will get you into trouble, nuclear fear, economic fear, and the list goes on. So you go back to the localized level. The destruction of the family means that people are looking for something else. The old, familial ties of husband and wife, which are now so impermanent in many ways, mean that those people are looking for some kind of attachment, some kind of strength or foundation. I think that anyone in the CBC (if it were a non-commercial organization) would be looking to try and encourage people in those regional areas - just as they would inspire people who work on a broader, more national scale - to try and examine themselves and bring up what they do.

Let me give you an example: CBC is addicted to Nashville. If you look at what they carry, it's old-country Opry music. But it bears no relation to what goes on in the Maritimes. There's a whole indigenous field of music there - and in Quebec, and in the West - that remains untapped. You travel, and you go into Moose Jaw or someplace and here's a guy singing songs that he's written himself. They're not about the Grand Old Opry. That's an example of what I mean. The second point is you don't take universalists who have been trained and live in the central location, and send them out to interpret what's out there. You encourage the people who are there to do it.

**Cinema Canada:** *So you think there should be a balance between national programming and local programming on the CBC?*

**Harry Boyle:** No geometrical or mathematical balance, just common sense. There should be a place for regional programming on the CBC. We should also remember that there are a lot of



familial ties across the country. Particularly since the last war, there has been a great upheaval of people moving. It's a transient population. But very often, it is these very people who become the most fixed in their allegiances to a locality. They are aware of it more than the people who are living there.

**Cinema Canada:** *What steps would you recommend should be taken to safeguard or protect Canadian culture in the advent of the technological revolution - particularly pay-cable television and the incredible influx of now accessible American programming?*

**Harry Boyle:** I don't think you can protect it. Protection takes the form of making certain that it is available. Let me tell you where I think it all began. The first real evidence of the necessity of having a voice of our own came in the 1939-1945 war. Nobody else would do it. You knew that if you depended upon newspapers or depended on press services, your coverage wouldn't count. So the CBC accomplished a tremendous amount by building a magnificent overseas service. It was a particular, focal kind of thing. Everybody listened because that was where they found out information. Every family had some kind of tie overseas. There was a period of reconstruction after the war and the radio service was concerned dramatically with the whole process of the reconstruction of the country.

When television came along, it had a difference. It scared the hell out of everybody. Everybody wanted into it but they were all scared by its mystery and they made a lot of mistakes. But when it started to get a life of its own, when [Norman] Jewison and the others like him started to produce, it just terrified the brass. So they started to put a repression on it and that generation left. It's never really recovered because there's always been that fear on the part of the creative people that as soon as they get moving they'll be stopped. Take the *Seven Days* example. It was an arrogant, stupid program in many ways but it had vitality and it opened everything up. If it had been handled properly those reverses could have been properly channeled but it was also a protest against the system. Whether the people

knew it at the time or not they were protesting. They wanted to break the system.

The crisis at the moment it seems to me is that we must give a voice to the young people, give them some freedom. We have to invite them, make a Mecca for them to head for. There will be some good, some bad, and some indifferent. But the important thing is to take a chance on them, let them roll and that would change it. We're probably in the peak of conventional television right now. From now on it will probably become more and more fragmented. And fragmentation may very well be the greatest thing to ever happen. It will get us off this proposition of believing that something is important simply because five million people watch here. I mean *Shogun* is probably the biggest piece of crap I think I've ever seen and *Winds of War* was a big, overblown ridiculous thing, but kind of fun. I watched it because I was in Florida and didn't have much else to do and I got hooked on it the same as anybody else. But by the end of it, I was mad at myself because I'd wasted all that time, especially since it was so predictable.

But getting back to this other point - you've got the basis for it. You've got the CFDC (good, bad or indifferent), you've got the NFB, you've got the CBC... You've got all these things that you've invested billions of dollars in over the last fifty years. Now they've got to be re-shaped, re-changed so that they're *au courant* with what's going on at the moment.

The need at the moment is not for protection - it's stimulation! The vast majority of Canadians live in Canada out of choice, and if you've lived in any number of other countries, you understand why. Because we still have one, precious thing - and that's freedom. More freedom than any other country - more than the U.S. We have a basic social justice system, that, in the main, is much better than any other I've been in. And that's inherent in our culture. The other point is that most of us are children of immigrants, and, included in our collective consciousness, is the point that all of these people come from some kind of oppression. That, too, is inherited, and you become very aware of the fact when you travel. In three or four generations, look at what has been accomplished! Most people don't articulate their desire to be here, but if you pin them right down to it, they'll admit it. The secret of the whole thing is to stop politicians playing around with it. Somebody should make up their mind and say that we still need something to be there. We may not need it for the same reason as before, but we have to stop these puerile notions that we'll fall apart if we don't do this or that. That's nonsense. In the main, we'll survive.

Today we face massive readjustment in our social system, at a time when the means of broadcast distribution threatens us with a flood of American programming based more on Hollywood standards than on any reflection of American culture. There is no way to build protective dikes against it, and while we are urged simply to accept it passively as a normal consequence of our location. I remain convinced that Canadians deserve and will support a truly Canadian broadcasting system that will serve, in our increasing confusion, as a point of reference and stability while we grope towards a realization that if we are to succeed in tomorrow's world it will be through our own efforts and not as a passive satellite of America.