

The place of Canadian content in a universe unfolding as it should

"First of all, this country must be assured of complete control of broadcasting from Canadian sources, free from foreign interference or influence." – Prime Minister R.E. Bennett (1932)

There is a dark underside to the federal government's recent strategic initiatives in the area of broadcasting policy. For all the high-sounding phrases about Canadian content and the preservation of a Canadian identity only conceal a political debate from which, according to *The Globe & Mail* (Mar. 16, 1984), the Canadian public has been excluded. That issue, the subject of on going high-level talks between Ottawa and Washington, is free-trade with the United States – namely, the total integration of Canadian industry into what a recent Cabinet document called "the North-American regional market."

The history of Canada's cultural industries, particularly the Canadian film industry, provides a stunning example of what free-trade with the Americans entails for Canadian culture. In our film industry, the theatrical exhibition and distribution sectors have since the 1920s been integrated into what the American Majors call "the U.S.-Canada market," and the sad but true story of Canadian filmmaking is that of repeated failures to extricate itself from the stranglehold of integration. The Canadian Film Development Corporation's recent name-change to Telefilm Canada is the confirmation that failure is now a *fait accompli*.

In this shrinking from albeit ungainly, bureaucratic and oft misguided attempts to generate a *Canadian* film industry/culture to the trimmer and more specific function of developing a television program industry lies an enormous admission of defeat. A defeat that will shortly be crowned by the long-awaited but emasculated Film Policy, a fitting emblem of the Trudeau years' liberal nationalism. Ironically, just when Trudeau, the great anti-nationalist leaves the political scene, Canadian cultural nationalism too finds itself reduced to a position similar to Quebec's after the loss of the 1980 referendum on independence. Because, both then and now, what is left in ruins is the dream of cultural independence.

For Canadian filmmaking, this dream was already badly mangled by the boom-and-bust of the tax-shelter years, and by an unmistakable producer orientation towards internationalism's golden high-roads. The name-change to Telefilm Canada marks the demise of what was left of the dream of Canadian film development and consecrates a new realism directed towards television as the locus of Canadian culture.

The reversion to a more traditional preoccupation with issues of broadcasting content and delivery means the definitive abandonment of the motion-picture exhibition/distribution sectors to its 'natural' masters. Quebec's valiant attempt last year to repossess some control over theatrical film structures might have succeeded, if backed by a similar determination on the part of the federal government. But that determination is non-existent and, as these lines are written, Québec cultural affairs minister Clément Richard is eating humble pie with the Majors in Los Angeles.

And so today Canadian cultural industries rein in their wagons around the old campfires of the Canadian broadcasting system at a time when that system is under considerable technological attack and, as CRTC chairman André Bureau puts it in this issue, when increasing numbers of Canadians "are effectively disconnecting themselves from the Canadian broadcasting system." If the broadcasting system has belatedly become the last line of defense of a Canadian identity, it is perhaps worth recalling how much ground has already been abandoned.

In 1932, as Tanya Tree's feature on Canadian content in this issue notes, Prime Minister R.B. Bennett stated unequivocally: "The use of the air... that lies over the soil and land of Canada is a natural resource over which we have complete jurisdiction (and) I cannot think that any government would be warranted in leaving the air to private exploitation and not reserving it for development for the use of the people." And yet successive Liberal governments from Mackenzie King onward would do exactly what the Conservative Bennett considered unthinkable. Only now, after 50 years of ever-increasing private exploitation of the air has the CRTC come to define the nature of that jurisdiction in terms of a Canadian television program.

Again, it is to the undying credit of the Canadian public-sector in film and broadcasting that such a long, hard battle has been fought to defend Canadian air, our last natural resource, from the predations of private enterprise, both foreign and home-grown. But the battle has been a losing one – with severe casualties, not the least being the progressive destruction of the National Film Board, a sacrifice of Canadian identity that, as Jacques Bobet movingly relates in this issue, will prove irreplaceable.

In this lengthy context of erosion and defeat, there are nevertheless signs that with the new conservatism comes a realization that what little remains must be defended. With, finally, some agreement between the CRTC, the CFCVO, and Telefilm Canada on what the CRTC calls "minimal requirements" as to the definition of a Canadian television programming, there is now a common base for defensive action to safeguard the skeleton

of Canadian identity. There is a related agreement that this line of defense can only be maintained by a broad partnership between the independent private-sector, the CBC, the Broadcast Fund and related regulatory agencies. For its part, Telefilm Canada is reported to be showing an openness and cooperativeness that was all too rare when it was the CFDC. Even a kind of low-grade nationalism is said to be blowing through the usually airless bureaucracies.

In theory, it should now be possible, given sufficient mechanisms and a sense of purpose, for the various institutional components to effect that fundamental reorientation of the broadcasting system away from disguised American programming that the CRTC's Canadian program criteria would like to bring about. In this perspective, Telefilm Canada's world-wide search for television coproduction treaties looks potentially very positive.

But the Liberal stewardship of the federal government leaves behind it a highly ambiguous legacy. It may have achieved in the narrower area of television exactly what it refused to accomplish in film: namely, use of the levers of public ownership and public money to reinforce both the private production and distribution of Canadian programming for, in Bennett's words, the development of the people. Paradoxically, however, providing the Canadian content has now devolved upon the private sector. The great unknown is and remains the extent to which the Canadian private sector can take the idea of Canadian content seriously – something it has always fought tooth and claw in the past.

If that private sector or even a part of it can rise to its cultural responsibility, something can perhaps still be salvaged from the wreckage of the Canadian filmmaking dream that began first at the NFB, then in 1968 with the creation of the CFDC. If not, then having taken the option to open the airwaves to private exploitation will turn out to have been a political and cultural catastrophe from which this country will never recover. And the very fact of the free-trade talks only underscores that such an outcome is far from remote.

LETTERS

Porn policy protest

(An open letter to all ACTRA members)

We don't know about you, but we were both angered and dismayed by the recent ACTRA Policy Statement on pornography and censorship. We were not involved in generating it and we do not approve of it.

We would like the following points to be known:

1) We resent the fact that this policy statement was released to the press and presented to the Fraser Committee *before* it was sent to ACTRA members for a reaction by those members who could not be present at the annual meeting of January 28-29, 1984. We feel that this was reprehensible behaviour on the part of ACTRA's Board of Directors, and we do not accept that the policy statement represents the majority opinion of ACTRA because it was never submitted to the vote of the entire membership.

2) We disagree vehemently with the interpretation of the premise and function of a trade union as expressed in the policy statement; that is, we do not feel that it is ACTRA's place to tell the artists who form their membership about their art, and what shall and shall not be "tolerated" and "condoned" by ACTRA concerning their membership's choice of subject matter or form or tone of expression. We feel that this is a matter of personal taste and moral sense, and that Canada does not need yet another regulating, restricting, overseeing, committee-ridden body to interpret matters of morality and art for its artistic community.

3) We disagree with many of the assumptions and statements within the policy, and single out for special con-

demnation the resolution that "the most effective and just approach to restricting obscenity is to outlaw proscribed conduct."

4) We are appalled that ACTRA would want to set up what could be called the ACTRA CENSOR BOARD OF PRE-PRIOR RESTRAINT, which would empower it to censor films *even before they were made*. Not even the Ontario Censor Board at its most restrictive has ever dared to do this. We resist with all our heart any changes within ACTRA such as these proposed which would lead it to become another reactionary and repressive force in the life of this country.

With the foregoing in mind, we respectfully ask

a) that ACTRA refrain from lobbying for changes in legislation respecting obscenity,

b) that ACTRA refrain from adopting and implementing its resolution as per its Policy Statement which would secure changes in conditions of work and terms of employment within the production industry insofar as these deal with questions of obscenity, pornography, censorship, sexual mores and the artistic life of its membership, and

c) that ACTRA publicly withdraw its Policy Statement on Pornography and Censorship.

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ACTRA's lengthy reply will be printed next month on Cinema Canada's Opinions page.