

Television isn't everything

A behind-the-scenes observer at the recent Montreal World Film Festival would not have been mistaken in detecting the beginnings of an enormous sea-change in the character of Canadian filmmaking. That change can best be described by two entities: the first is specific to Canada and is the government agency Telefilm Canada; the second is specific to contemporary culture and it is television.

If the nature of what the latter word stands for was not yet all that evident in many of the 200 films from around the world being screened at Montreal, the former was already visible in the 30-odd Canadian 'films' entered in the various categories. Some, like Robin Spry's *Stress & Emotions* or Roger Cardinal's *You've Come A Long Way Ladies*, were outright made-for-television – U.S. television to boot. Others like Léa Pool's *La Femme de l'hôtel*, Denys Arcand's *Le Crime d'Ovide Plouffe*, or even Giles Walker and John Smith's *The Masculine Mystique*, would never have been made were it not for the 'grace' of television, either as a producing partner or eventual delivery system. Only three features – *Le Jour S*, *Les Années de rêve* or *Mario*, the only Canadian feature in competition – plus a handful of shorts and the one-of-its-kind *Mother's Meat & Freud's Flesh* could be said to be quite unrelated to television, which is to say, fated to the limbo of Canadian theatrical distribution.

Telefilm, on the other hand, was ubiquitous, either in the form of advertisements, in the persons of the agency's top brass or thirdly in a glut of statistics and production dollars noisily announcing that the future of Canadian film production resided on the small screen. In private conversation the message was the same: Canadian film must come to terms with television because television, as Broadcast Fund chief Peter Pearson likes to put it in a provocative formulation, "is everything." However, both the ubiquity of Telefilm and the largesse of the Broadcast Fund (one quarter of a billion dollars by 1988) are, it must not be forgotten, more the reflection of the consequences of a deliberate political choice than an irresistible fact of civilization.

Now there is no doubt that television today is the mass-medium and that it is devouring film just as much as film before it devoured literature. Yet what is true of television was true of film 20 years ago – or at least was still true enough when the Canadian government, in its wisdom, created the Canadian Film Development Corporation that is today Telefilm Canada. But then as now the problem was less the production of films than the distribution of them – and it is this problem that successive Liberal governments have simply refused to address. The conversion to Telefilm and the attempt to stampede Canadian film production into television is, in this sense, a political deflection: it attempts to make the best of a bad situation; the situation, however, remains unchanged.

It's not as though there's been no impetus to change the fact that Canadians by and large do not get to see Canadian films. The Quebec government last year courageously attempted through Bill 109 to begin the repatriation of Quebec screens – and the provincial film-funding bodies remain firmly committed to the principle that Canadians want to see theatrical films about themselves. Had the federal government supported that initiative (as was widely rumored it would), the Telefilm stampede into television production might have taken place in a more welcoming, more balanced and less despairing environment.

However, that federal support of Canadian filmmaking would not come about. The government's own studies (notably the Cohen task force on distribution) were in favor of such a turnaround, as were the federal government's own cultural bureaucrats. But the problem was elsewhere, where it has always been: in the Liberal cabinet. And, as was the case for C.D. Howe, Gérard Pelletier, John Roberts and Francis Fox, the cabinet is where the buck stops.

Not only did it stop, but the redirection of film distribution policies that had worked up through the bureaucracy was reversed. The result was a Film Policy that actively encourages even more distribution through the U.S. Majors and is full of empty talk of 'negotiations' with American interlocutors who either don't even know – or know too well – the nature of the problem.

Telefilm's abandonment of its mandate as the Canadian Film Development Corporation and its march into television production, then, must be seen in the perspective of a rout. And no matter how good or how Canadian are the projects Telefilm is funding, it remains that this reorientation is first and foremost a consequence of political spinelessness that no amount of industrialized television production can obscure.

Whatever the sociological difficulties of theatrical distribution (diminishing theatre attendance, skyrocketing production costs, the advent of video, etc.), few governments in the world have abandoned their nation's theatre screens with so little afterthought as the Liberals in Ottawa have done. And given such dishonorable beginnings, the strategy for Canadianizing the air waves that produced the Broadcast Fund leaves itself open to the suspicion of over-compensation.

On the industrial level, the first year of the Broadcast Fund – as the Fund itself reported in its informational document, "What Happened In Year One" – can claim a certain success in raising production. On the cultural level, however, not only is it still too early to assess the overall quality of the funded projects, but the reorientation would appear to have occasioned a great deal of turmoil, not the least among filmmakers suddenly forced to march to the broadcaster's unfamiliar, if not culturally crasser, tune. As one high-level Telefilm official put it: "There's an awful lot of pain and grief out there." The same official admitted that Canada's finest filmmakers – the Lefebvres, the Jutras and the Mankiewiczs – have yet to climb aboard the bandwagon and come to terms with the new rules of producing for Canadian TV. Tragically, nothing better underlines the culturally disastrous nature of the reorientation underway.

Fortunately perhaps, this is an election year. By the time this issue of Cinema Canada is in the reader's hands, the Canadian people will have passed judgement on the Liberal government and as well, though not a major issue in the recent campaign, on its handling of cultural matters. In the area of culture, the Conservatives have charged their opponents with insensitivity to Canadian cultural concerns; they have promised not to "hound or punish" Canadian artists, among whom one must, at some point, consider filmmakers; and they have vowed to disinter that skeleton in the Liberal closet, the distribution of Canadian films by Canadian companies in Canada. In other words, they are saying there's an alternative – and that it isn't Year One.

There is no important film producing country in the world which does not privilege the production of feature films for theatrical distribution. Certainly, the U.S.A. bases its entire reputation on that production, and there is the reason that the "made-for-TV-movie" is considered a sub-product of the theatrical activity. In France, England, Germany, Italy, etc., theatrical films are, as Nicole Boisvert says, "the calling cards" of the nations: the media through which reputations are made and national cultures known.

All nations are besieged by the same pressures as Canada: the strength of competition from the Majors, the arrival of pay-TV and video, piracy and the rest. But other nations fight. As was made clear at the APFQ convention, European countries protect their production by protecting their distribution. In France and Germany, literally no features are made without the financial participation of the television stations; yet these films, by law, may not be screened on TV until two years after their theatrical release. In France, the video of a film cannot be released until six months after the theatrical release, and in the rest of Europe, the waiting period is longer.

Legislation promoting theatrical features – protecting theatrical feature – is not simply a political whim. Governments of all tendencies have written such legislation because the issue is cultural survival, not industrial production. Once Canadian films find a genuine welcome in their own country, Canadian production may stand a serious chance of enhancing culture, as it does currently in Europe. Otherwise, the present rapid shift to television will be nothing more than a radical break with a past which failed to achieve the potential which our artists promise.

LETTERS

No to DGA

I am writing to clarify a small but important point in your article on "Industry Unanimous in Rejecting Distribution Policy," issue No. 110.

The project *Bay Boy* was written by a Canadian, produced by a Canadian and directed by a very well-known director, Dan Petrie. The Directors Guild of Canada and the production company "Bay Boy Productions" did negotiate and sign a Basic Agreement for the production covering all categories including the director.

The project was completed on time and on budget. It was only after completion of the production that the Directors Guild of America became involved.

The National Executive Director, Michael Franklin, of the DGA is pressuring the producer John Kemeny to sign

the DGA Basic Agreement on the basis that the director, although Canadian, is a resident of Los Angeles.

The DGA, as you know, feels its jurisdiction is anywhere a DGA member works, notwithstanding the work assignment being done in another country, or by an individual who is a member of an affiliated organization, or a citizen of the country where the work assignment is being carried out.

The Directors Guild of Canada objects strenuously to this policy of the DGA and to the policy of distribution of Canadian films being part of the American domestic market. To this end the DGC will continue to fight for the rights of its members and of fellow Canadians to ensure our rights and privileges are not sold down the river to Americans.

Mickie Currie
National Executive Secretary
Directors Guild of Canada