

Two writers in search of Canada's vanishing cultural identity

Reflections on a generic void

by Sam Zero

Recently while I was discussing the state of film production in Canada with some cinema enthusiasts, a woman of native Canadian birth invited herself to our table and pressed upon us the question: What is Canadian Content? However much my companions and I tried to respond in short phrases, her insistent repetition let us know that she was not about to leave without a satisfactory answer. She was compulsive in her questioning and often interrupted when, in an obviously doomed attempt, we continued the conversation that we were having before she imposed. But she was not to be ignored, and neither was her justifiable inquiry.

What is Canadian content?

One of the first available answers was that Canadian Content is a program set up by the government to get more Canadian-produced programs into the airwaves. That meant any program with a certain amount of Canadian talent used in production, or produced mainly within Canada was said to have "Canadian Content." This was not the answer she had hoped for, nor was the suggestion that if she, as a Native Canadian, were to produce a film, or radio program, then that would truly be Canadian Content, and more so if it were about Native Canadians. But she was not asking this question as a means to retrieve an ego-raising response from a group of second- or third-generation Canadian Anglos.

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I began to realize that the problem was neither with her nor us, but with a confu-

sion of the meaning of the word 'content'. Part of the confusion about the exact denotation of this word was brought about by the aforementioned government program. Canadian Content regulation is set up to serve two purposes. First: it is intended to encourage more Canadian production by restricting broadcasters to a certain percentage of programs with 'Canadian Content' about, by and for Canadians. Secondly: it is supposed to make Canadian viewers more aware of their country and, by national relation, themselves, creating a sense of identity and unity in one swift stroke. Canadian Content, in this understanding, becomes the assimilation of identity to unity. But, as Northrop Frye stated in the preface to his book *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (1971), "It is not always realized that unity and identity are quite different things..."

Frye correctly defines "unity" as being "national in reference, international in perspective, and rooted in political feeling." As such it has been the historical concern of Canadian governments, Liberal and Conservative, since Confederation. Our first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, proposed the Canadian National Railway as the answer to the question of unity, having identified the major contributor to disunification as the vastness of the sea-to-sea width of our country. But the technology of the railroad did not solve the problem. It, in fact, magnified the dichotomy between southern and northern Canada. Similarly, the technology of the media has failed to bring a sense of unification, not because of the way it is used, but in the understanding of the problem to which it is applied.

Frye makes the distinction between unity, as political, and identity as "local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture" and thus defines

the foundations of "Regionalism" which, in turn, has been confused with content and has created Canada's alphabet soup.

Regionalist "content" has become as mechanical as government technology, though it has maintained the basic definition of the word itself. Content, being what a work of culture is about, has become, in the push for regional expression, confined to works that contain scenes of Ontario when produced by Ontario creators, Quebec when by Quebec's creators, and so on to all points of the compass. Regionalist content loses that inherent influence of a "specific environment... that provides a circumference for an imagination" when it is force-fed the flavour of that environment. The influence of the environment in which one is raised is natural and needs no outside push or it becomes too mechanically aimed and acquires a characterless stagnancy. Having recognized the regional nature of Canada, however, the central state instruments of Culture decided to use it in its attempts to unify the nation, thus: identity into unity equalling, not content, but Canadian Content.

The assimilation of these two "Canadian" problems has produced the effect which Frye predicted in 1971: "Identity to unity produces the empty gestures of cultural nationalism." This effect is, perhaps, more favourable than if the assimilation were to be accomplished in the other direction: "Unity to identity produces the kind of provincial isolation which is now called separatism." The one places the various identities of each region before the nation providing a security in the ideal that the people make the country while still demanding pride in what the country is: unity through individual association. The other places the onus on the country's position as provider and keeper of all the various identities which amounts to

unity through the generation of guilt: we owe our country our loyalty because without it we would falter. In the latter instance, regional self-esteem is quelled and the only way for it to rise is through separation and self-building. In Canada, however, the "gestures of cultural nationalism" brought forth in the former, remain "empty" because the regional identities in our country are strongly maintained. It is possible to remove someone from a region but not to take the influence of a region in which one is raised out of the creative imagination of the individual.

To add to the disparity between regional identity and national unity is a growing sense of Canada as a nation containing many nationalities. Since the '70s when Frye wrote his book, and Pierre Berton wrote his epic historical mythologies, *The National Dream* and *The Last Spike*, thousands of immigrants have poured into Canada from all over the world. Being an immigrant nation to begin with, plus the presence of Native Canadians, the added flux has increased the resplendency of our divergence. If, like the United States, we had tried to engulf these immigrants into Canadian society, perhaps it would have been possible to instill in future generations a likened flavour for Truth, Justice and the Canadian Way. But we have never had any unified idea as to what that 'way' could be, so even a latent application of "the melting pot" is doomed. Now, more than ever, it is possible to say that Canada will never achieve the kind of national unity that it is seeking.

Content, as the assimilation of identity to unity, cannot assimilate something that will never truly exist. Content, then, is equivalent only to identity. When the woman injected herself into our conversation, the question she was really asking was: What is Canadian identity? We could not give her a satisfactory answer because we all perceived a different identity: one urban, one rural, big city, small city, western, eastern, and one an immigrant from Britain. The government's answer of bringing it all together under one roof with a technologically induced idea of oneness fails because each room is different, each window looks out on a different perspective, and each television is tuned to a different station. The mass-media nationalist blitz has served to make Canada a microcosm of McLuhan's Global Village.

What is Canadian Content?

In the June 1985 *Cinema Canada* editorial there is a picture of the poster designed for the Canadian Conference of the Arts. It shows a gilded frame with nothing in it and the editorial is called "Framing Canadian Content." The writer of the piece sees the "absolute blank" as a "perfect metaphor for the present state of Canadian cultural life." The piece goes on to explain this metaphor in relation to the poster's context: as a poster for the con-

ference's 40th anniversary. It clarifies the hypocrisy of having Canadian Content regulations when the government has been "dismantling what precious few national institutions it possesses." The criticism is justified, but the reading of the metaphor is far from accurate. The frame contains a large white space — but it is not empty, it is full of people in a snowstorm. The snow job has been provided by a government that wishes to present a glittering, well-defined, and self-contained nation where, as we have discovered, one does not exist.

The multi-cultural, multi-lingual fact of Canada makes alphabet soup a natural state of being. Chaos has always been a part of our existence from the time the pioneers tried to tame the forests. We are caught up in the blizzard and the government is trying, as it always has, to overcome the blur of nothingness with technology. Now, as the editorial states, the government is trying to get Canada onto the international scene — technologically. But reaching out holding the last golden spike and saying here we are, does not change the fact that Canada is a generic void.

With the golden symbol, and the identity soup, the government presents Canada as a whole. "In our world..." says Frye, "the sense of a specific environment as something that provides a circumference for an imagination has to contend with a global civilization of jet planes, international hotels, and disappearing landmarks — that is, an obliterated environment."

The new technology is not rails, or plan-

es, or print, but mass popular media like film, television, and radio. In this cultural scheme, Canada is not a whole but a hole into which outside stimuli are dumped, or out of which rich resources are dug. On the international market, we can only become more empty, more "no name" as more ready access is given to our people, not because of any action on the government's part, but because that is the way we have survived and will continue to survive.

National identity, like human identity, can be determined by characteristics of behavior and attitude. Canada is all over the place; international in population, yet maintaining a hick-town back-fence chattiness. We are like the sleeping giant off the coast of Thunder Bay; we lie in a Jungian dream of self-discovery waiting for an analogue alarm to wake us into a digital world. The confusion and chaos of our inner self has the effect of self-negation. We remain laid-back, relaxed and grounded. But, in our inherent nothingness, we have found being. In a strange paradox, our very lack of identity has become who we are: inert matter. In this state we hold on to the greatest potential for growth, because from zero, one can go in any direction. So far, it has been a struggle to stay where we are most comfortable, something we have become very good at doing.

We are happy in our niche of a nameless national culture. This, *beureusement*, is, oddly enough, brought on by the same predicament that transforms Canada into a generic wasteland. The amount of push and-pull we allow our international influ-

ences has made us a great balancing point for indecision. Like the fulcrum in Margaret Atwood's poem *A Place Fragments* "...where this trivial but/stringent inner order/held its delicate balance/with the random scattering or/clogged merging of things..." our lack of identity holds a delicate balance between our sound sleep and evaporation in the international maelstrom. The paradox continues in that the thing that gives us our "ordered absence," as Atwood describes the wilderness in *Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer*, is the very thing that will annihilate us, but slowly, like the "unnamed whale" at the end of that poem.

International by nature, situated as we are between the two superpowers, and relying heavily on the world market, we cannot afford to present a national identity where none exists. To do so would place a heavy reliance on the general feeling of national unity which would swing the onus around to assimilation of unity-to-identity which would only serve to make physical the cultural disparity of our regions. At that point the giant will disintegrate, never to wake. We are still young and a little spoiled by the benefits of European industrialization, another revolution we were not much a part of. If we are to develop a national identity, then let it grow from the creative efforts of the people whose prerogative it is, when they have the desire, to create, if not for Canada, for other people. Until such time as this identity emerges, let us be content to survive, enjoy a beer and keep asking:

"What is Canadian Content?"

'85 Genies: reaction

Like any text, Canadian content is open to strong or weak readings. For many reasons, English Canadians tend to ward weak readings of their own texts. This does not mean there aren't strong reactions — and Cinema Canada's reading of the '85 Genies elicited some. Unfortunately, most of these reactions were often misreadings. Comments like "the most racist article the magazine has ever run" or "totally negative" or "yes it's true, but it's disloyal to tell tales out of school." Interestingly none of the more vociferous reactions were articulated in written form.

One of the rare written responses was the following, from retired NFB producer Jacques Bobet, the father of the Canadian feature film:

"All my compliments (and thanks) for your article on 'The '85 Genies... etc.' in the May issue of Cinema Canada.

"If this letter is late in reaching you, the article itself is one that we'll remember for a long time to come."

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An expert in the field of film promotion, Jacqueline Brodie has been well-known for the past eleven years as the Assistant Director of the former Ottawa Film Festivals Bureau. Before that, she spent seven years in promotion at the National Film Board in Montreal. In August 1984, Jacqueline Brodie founded her own company, Maxipromo, which provides a wide range of services.

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