

**Closed Circuits
The Sellout of Canadian
Television**

by Herschel Hardin
Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.
Vancouver, 339 pp.
ISBN 0-88894-446-2
\$24.95 (cloth)

Timing of the publication of Herschel Hardin's *Closed Circuits: The Sellout of Canadian Television* couldn't be better. Not only is the country in the grip of yet another of what CBC president Pierre Juneau recently termed "those painful cultural self-examinations about Canadian broadcasting", but it's nearly Christmas, a time during which Canadians, avid readers as a nation, indulge in lavish, patriotic book-buying. With any luck, *Closed Circuits* should obtain the very wide readership it deserves.

For here is a book that attempts to grapple with what is perhaps the most widespread of Canadian cultural contradictions, one that is far from abstract, but sits prominently in the living-rooms of the vast majority of Canadian homes: namely, why is the Canadian broadcasting system, which the statutory legislation defines as "predominantly Canadian in character and ownership," in fact, predominantly American?

Closed Circuits' straight-shooting answer is: because the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), the federal agency charged with applying the Broadcasting Act, has built the system that way. And the book's 332 pages are, on one level, an apparently straightforward, muckraking chronicle of 20 years of mismanagement of the public airwaves, from the inflated nationalist rhetoric of the 1965 Fowler Committee Report which blueprinted the current system to the CRTC's inspired 1982 erection of the coping-stone of 'Canadian' broadcasting - discretionary pay-TV that consists of some 24 channels, 17 of them outrightly American and the rest Canadian in name only but 90% American in content.

However, *Closed Circuits* is also many other things besides. For one, an extremely partisan history of a TV consumer lobby group, the Association for Public Broadcasting in British Columbia, of which Hardin was the founding president in 1972, and its many battles with the Commission. Above all, *Closed Circuits* is a simply splendid political pamphlet by one very angry and embittered Westerner confronting the Bermuda Triangle of Toronto-Ottawa-Montreal, its cultural myopia, two-faced economic imperialism, and schizophrenic rhetorical hypocrisy. Beneath *Closed Circuits'* shiny cover seethes the entire panorama of internal Canadian hatreds.

Because broadcasting in Canada is to Canadians what gun-control is to Americans - a very far cry from what McLuhan meant by medium 'cool'. And Hardin's *Closed Circuits* is a 'hot' book; whether, under the circumstances of Canada's current broadcasting mess, a 'cool' look at the CRTC might not have been more helpful is probably for readers themselves to decide.

However, Hardin does make several crucial points (in addition to a lot of digs, sneers, jibes, and asides that are

often very funny) well-worth repeating here.

The airwaves in Canada are the property of the Canadian public. Private Canadian broadcasters are licensed to make temporary use of the public airwaves on the basis of a contract, known as a Promise of Performance, which can or cannot be renewed depending on how it's been honoured, between the would-be licensee and the federal institution that represents the authority - the cultural sovereignty, if you will - of the Canadian public in its ownership of the entire Canadian broadcasting system. This does not mean that only the CBC or the provincial networks are supposed to be as Canadian as possible in an otherwise U.S.-imported, privately-owned broadcasting system. It means that the broadcasting gestalt in Canada rests upon a different concept of public life than the American one.

Secondly, there is no such thing as on the one hand, taxpayer (or public) television which everybody is stuck paying for, and on the other, 'free' or commercial television which pays its own way. It is *all* public television in that the public pays one way or another: directly through taxation or indirectly through the socially wasteful and infinitely more costly financing of commercial television overheads. "No other business," Hardin observes, "has such exorbitant overheads on raising money, except for speculative stock promotions whose notoriety and marginality are well understood."

Thirdly, the CRTC is not so much the simple regulator of a marketplace as it is a court of public broadcasting law, not quite the Supreme Court of Canadian broadcasting (since cabinet can order it to review its decisions and, besides, wants greater direct political control over the CRTC) but almost. In theory, the CRTC possesses, in the name of the Canadian public, enormous powers.

At least, that's the theory according to Hardin, a theory pretty much supported by the mountain of nationalist rhetoric that has accumulated since before the 1929 Aird Royal Commission that eventually led to the creation of the Canadian broadcasting system.

The practices - and it is in documenting their laxity that *Closed Circuits* is at its best - are, however, something else again. Much like the CBC's own not especially courageous administrative history, the sellout of Canadian television is the sad saga of a handful of public administrators, materially, intellectually and politically ill-equipped to withstand the whirlwind of an 'international' media-biz culture, of which they themselves, through the course of day-to-day affairs, have simply become an integral part. As Hardin writes, "Ultimately, it's not a story just about broadcasting politics, or even about hypocrisy and degeneration of public administration. It's the story of the whole Canadian landscape."

And this is a landscape that, from the hardware point-of-view, is one of the technological marvels of the world, but from the software side (both as a case-study in public administration and even more so as an education in the failure of Canadian cultural nationalism), conceals a cultural disaster of singularly epic proportions

If former CRTC chairmen like Pierre

Juneau and John Meisel have tended, no doubt at moments of depression, to blame the disaster on the treacherous Canadian public (the first for being too small, the second for being half-American), Hardin aims the bulk of his ire at the corrupt political culture of central Canada. Which is all the more curious in that Hardin seems to have completely forgotten the main point of his own 1974 book, *A Nation Unaware*: that what characterizes Canadian culture, political, economic or other, is precisely its immense ignorance of itself. That Hardin gets so exercised in *Closed Circuits* because the CRTC did nothing but prove yet again to what a lamentable degree ours is a nation unaware is, to put it mildly, contradictory.

Among other limitations to *Closed Circuits* is the lack of footnotes, as well as the absence of any developed conceptual framework by which to grasp an entity as complex as the CRTC. Hardin's Four Laws of Regulatory Agencies, if amusing, are, alas, hopelessly inadequate to the task of understanding.

Finally (and this is less a specific failing of Hardin's book than it is one, if not the central problem facing any discussion of the future of Canadian broadcasting), what cultural effects have 50 years of exposure to U.S. media had on the Canadian public (when a far less pervasive but nearly equally lengthy dosage of Canadianism has visibly had so little impact)? Northrop Frye, for a while one of the CRTC's top ideologues, has argued that post-national Canada has, in reaction to the United States, developed a unique North-American culture, neither Canadian nor American, but in some international no-man's land of its own, a sort of cultural free-trade zone. If this is so, then the CRTC's role has been neither a cultural tragedy nor a political disaster, but (as it sees itself) that of an enlightened, orderly transitional agent in a civilizational shift to a post-national, post-cultural, purely technological system of image consumption.

Hardin's book offers one every impassioned view of a potentially much larger process, debate over which is, happily, far from complete. In the meantime, *Closed Circuits* is a welcome smack that's sure to keep the Canadian media ball where it should be: bouncing hard.

Michael Dorland •

**Jump Cut:
Hollywood, Politics
and Counter-Cinema**

edited by Peter Steven,
Between The Lines Press,
Toronto, 400 pp.
\$29.95 (cloth),
\$14.95 (paper)

Since its founding in 1974, the U.S. film magazine *Jump Cut* has become one of the most lively and provocative forums on this continent for in-depth analysis of Hollywood cinema, Leftist counter-cinema, and film theory. At the same time, its prose style has consistently remained accessible to readers outside the halls of academe but willing to be challenged by current considerations of cinematic theory and practice. This selection of 25 articles published in *Jump Cut* over

the years is entirely welcome, especially because it will acquaint a wider readership with the ongoing *Jump Cut* project.

Editor Peter Steven, Canadian associate editor for the periodical, has organized his selections into five major sections which also reflect *Jump Cut's* continuing political concerns. Part one, "Hollywood: The Dominant Cinema", includes five very insightful articles that offer challenging readings of Hollywood film genres, specific films and star characterizations. I especially liked Charles Eckert's brilliant discussion of Shirley Temple as numinous icon associated with the role of capital in Depression-era films, and Dan Rubey's analysis of *Star Wars* as patriarchal machine-romance with fascist undertones. This first section of the anthology (and the longest one) is, to my mind, the strongest section of the book, encompassing a wide scope of critical concerns, analytical techniques, and writing styles that compellingly illuminate the films under discussion.

Part Two, "Independent Filmmaking in North America", moves out of the realm of mainstream cinema into the work of radical counter-cinema, the politically-committed documentary movement which began in the U.S. in the early 1930s and re-emerged during the political struggles of the 1960s. Particularly helpful in acquainting the reader with the history of this movement are the articles by Russell Campbell and John Hess. Campbell's "Radical Cinema in the 1930s: The Film and Photo League" provides a wealth of information on early shooting styles, montage techniques, and distribution practices. Hess's "Notes on U.S. Radical Film, 1967-80" is a fine overview, including the work of newsreel, women's movement and labour documentaries. This section feels well-rounded, including two pieces that deal with the work of politically-committed minority filmmakers, and two that consider individual films: *Union Maids* and a recent Canadian work, *A Wives' Tale*.

Unfortunately, Part Three, "Women's Counter-Cinema", seems the weakest section of the anthology. Editor Steven has devoted precious space to two entries that seem decidedly slight. "The Politics of Positive Images" is a two-part critique of a published annotated guide to women's films called *Positive Images*. Similarly, "Starring Shirley MacLaine" is a two-part entry composed of a book review of Patricia Erens' *The Films of Shirley MacLaine* and Erens' rejoinder. While both these pieces perhaps raise some interesting issues, they strike me as clearly tangential, especially in comparison to another entry in this section: Julia Lesage's brilliant analysis of D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*. Unfortunately, there is no article in this section devoted to a feminist reading of a woman-directed feature. In other words, there is little in this section to suggest that women-made feature films are decidedly different from the mainstream or can be read interestingly through feminist analysis.

Part Four, "Gay and Lesbian Cinema", is barely half the length of the other sections, but includes four quite good pieces that are thoroughly informative and illuminating. Richard Dyer's "Rejecting Straight Ideals: Gays in Film" is especially good on stereotyping, and

Michelle Citron's clear analysis of the work of Jan Oxenberg is particularly useful for understanding the radical practice in lesbian filmmaking.

The last section in the anthology, "Radical Third World Cinema", has five very strong pieces which go a long way toward fully informing the reader on filmmaking work in Africa, Latin America, and Cuba. Tom Waugh's "In Solidarity: Joris Ivens and the Birth of Cuban Cinema" seems wonderfully well-written and usefully fills a gap in our understanding of both Ivens' career and the roots of Cuban filmmaking. Also particularly noteworthy is Julia Lesage's careful delineation of problems of cross-cultural understanding when viewing Third World film through Western eyes.

The only significant overall problem I find in *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter-Cinema* is that it includes just one piece dealing with Canadian politically-committed documentary, though that movement has a long and complex history which has contributed much to radical counter-cinema. Moreover, the magazine *Jump Cut* has not ignored the work of Canadian filmmakers over the years, as its Canadian associate editor must surely be aware. With only one entry in this collection, dealing with a single film, the book (and ironically, it has a Canadian publisher) wrongly conveys a sense of invisibility as far as Canadian political filmmaking is concerned. And that's really too bad.

Joyce Nelson •

ASPECTS OF CINEMA

Several new volumes in the "Studies of Cinema" series, reviewed below, provide a significant source of scholarly exploration of the broader aspects of film (*UMI Research Press, 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106*).

The writer's contribution to film is examined in **Ben Hecht, Hollywood Screenwriter** by Jeffrey Brown Martin, and **Hollywood and the Profession of Authorship 1928-40** by Richard Fine. Both books prove searchingly the question of creativity in a commercially controlled milieu and a profit-oriented studio system (*UMI \$39.95 ea.*).

Dana B. Polan examines, in **The Political Language of Film and the Avant-Garde**, the esthetics of experimental film in works by Eisenstein, Brecht, Oshima and Michael Snow. In **Abstraction in Avant-Garde Films**, Maureen Cheryn Turim analyzes the challenge of innovative cinema to current film theories (*UMI \$39.95 ea.*).

In **Soviet Cinema of the Silent Era**, Denise J. Youngblood brings to light the cultural politics and institutional de-

velopments that marked its evolution between 1918 and 1935. In **Struggles of the Italian Film Industry during Fascism**, Elaine Mancini describes the losing battle waged by Italian film producers for independence from government control (*UMI \$44.94 ea.*).

Four outstanding directors are discussed in new volumes of the informative "Guide to References and Research" series published by G.K. Hall, Boston. In **Cecil B. DeMille**, Sumiko Higashi remedies the scarcity of serious critical material with a thorough archival search (\$35). In **Elia Kazan**, Lloyd Michaels praises Kazan's belief in cinema as a medium for artistic expression and his talent for mise-en-scène (\$35.) **René Clair** by Naomi Greene traces the French director's career from early experimental films to his mastery of the medium (\$48.) John Allyn's **Kon Ichikawa** assesses the accomplishments of the versatile Japanese filmmaker (\$45). Each volume includes thorough documentation, biographies, full filmographies, bibliographies and archival sources.

Barbara Leaming's sweeping biography, **Orson Welles**, draws a fascinating portrait that does justice to an uncommonly gifted artist. Exceptionally well-researched and with full access to Welles himself and his private collection of documents, it reveals the astounding range of his achievements and offers a first-hand interpretation of a complex man whose troubled childhood affected his entire life (*Viking, NYC, \$19.95*).

Christopher Finch's definitive work,

The Art of Walt Disney is re-issued in its sumptuous original large format edition at a notably reduced price. It combines a lavishly artistic presentation – 763 superb illustrations, including 351 full color plates and 12 fold-outs – with an extensive study of Disney's career and animation techniques (*Abrams, NYC, \$29.95*).

Many of Hollywood film industry's recent corporate changes and top personnel shifts can be traced to the financial and artistic disaster that befell Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* and its producers, United Artists. The whole sad story is told in **Final Cut**, a riveting account by Steven Bach, former UA head of production. Boundless self-indulgence, extravagant carelessness and creativity running amok constituted the mainspring of this \$36 million peccadillo that should (but will it?) teach a salutary lesson to the Hollywood establishment (*Morrow, NYC, \$19.95*).

A scholarly survey of sexual ambiguity as a basis for plot motivation, **Hollywood Androgyny** by Rebecca Bell-Metereau discusses sex role reversals – female impersonation, transvestism, homosexuality – in over 250 films, from Charlie Chaplin to Dustin Hoffman (*Columbia U. Press, NYC, \$24.95*).

George L. George •

Correction: In a recent Bookshelf column, the title of Richard E. Van Deusen's expert book on cost controls was incorrectly stated. Its title is **Practical AV/Video Budgeting**, published by Knowledge Industry Publishers, White Plains, NY, at \$34.95.

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