

# tacking into the wind

Among those who offered a global perspective at Trade Forum '80 were Marc Gervais and Robert Verrall. Both keen, long-time observers of national film developments, their Forum presentations, reprinted below, reflect the mood of the industry debate, summer 1980.

## an industry assessment

by marc gervais

Assessing the present state of the film industry in Canada is no easy task. For one thing, just about every facet of the business is changing with alarming rapidity. Moreover, in this kind of undertaking, the figures and statistics even of past years are difficult to collate. Add to that the fact that probably no one here has seen the great majority of the fifty or sixty films produced in 1979, and you get a rough idea of the general lack of definite data.

Most of the participants in Trade Forum '80 are involved in film from the *business* and *industry* point of view. As such, your concerns centre on the raising of money, the setting up of the conditions for creating the right kind of product, and, finally, for the selling of that product. All pretty essential activities, to say the least.

But you will notice that a number of people on the opening panel do not — at least at the professional level — necessarily share those priorities. There are theorists, film reviewers, critics, what-have-you, here as well; and they help fill out the picture. For the industry can never ignore that its product is not like most

market products. It creates *cultural* artifacts — people's hearts and minds. So, the artistic dimension (call it what you will) is ever present.

Put it another way. Can you imagine a civilization whose painting, writing, music, architecture, theatre were totally void of cultural or artistic values? Whether we like it or not, movies share the role of the other arts. This mass entertainment medium is not just a commodity to be bought and sold.

A realistic approach to film, then, cannot be reduced to an either/or option; rather, it is rooted in a duality, embracing both the cultural/artistic and the commercial/industrial.

Keeping this rather obvious, but utterly essential consideration in mind, then, what is the state of the film industry in Canada today? To put it baldly: if we are to believe recent reports, we are in a *disaster* area, the films are terrible, nobody is buying them, and the investment is no longer flowing in.

Assessment or indictment? Are we dealing here with objective analysis, or is

the wave of negative comment presently inundating the Canadian feature film industry nothing but one more manifestation of the old Canadian self-put-down syndrome, that we have experienced time and again over the years *ad nauseam*?

A group such as this one here at Trade Forum '80 cannot afford to side-step the issue, pretending that there is no basis for the bad reporting. The accusations being made are of a kind, if true, to put the movie business right *out* of business. What, in fact, is our feature film situation? What can be improved through vigorous action motivated by *enlightened* self-interest?

Any approach to the making of films has its own particular pitfalls, its avenues to self-destruction. In the sixties, for example — when feature filmmaking in Canada went through a kind of re-birth — a daring, sociological, personal, artistic-

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Marc Gervais is a Montreal film critic and an associate professor in the Communication Arts Department at Concordia University. He is the author of *Pier Paolo Pasolini* edited by Seghers in Paris.



ally ambitious *auteur* cinema was the way of life, with film directors literally running the whole show. The results, in certain instances, were truly impressive, giving Canada an elitist international reputation. But in terms of box office or mass appeal, that approach did not lead to success.

A dozen years later, just two or three years ago, we hurtled headlong into another era; that of the film *entrepreneur* working in the wholly new context of a massive, complex industry in the throes of trying to create itself without benefit of a normal gestation period. In many ways — especially at the level of sheer quantity — the results have been prodigious. But the pitfalls are gigantic ones. And they have not always been successfully circumvented — to put it charitably.

So here we are in year III, more or less, of the Great Canadian Feature Film Explosion, with the entrepreneurial option which gave it birth facing very heavy criticism. Where is the film industry today? Well, one way to answer is to pause by each pitfall, gazing sadly at the mangled, aborted creatures lying therein, those pathetic symbols of what is worst in the Canadian feature movie scene.

**Model no. 1 : the worst.** Our recent history has had too many examples of the quick kill operation, where the important



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thing is to get *any* film going, no matter how bad, because, thanks to tax benefits, the entrepreneur can raise the money and take a huge cut right off the top.

Even the most naive financial rookie can see how deadly this practice can be for any film industry. For a fledgeling such as ours, it is nothing short of catastrophic. Fortunately, through the setting up of norms, rules, etc., the industry has already taken serious steps to protect itself from this sort of thing.

**Model no. 2 : the typical now aberration.** The entrepreneurs — producers, executive producers, brokers, accountants, lawyers — sincerely wish to make films that will be successful at the box office, and so give their investors a real profit. So far so good. The trouble is, very often, that these entrepreneurs have precious little background in film at *any* level. But they have a naive belief in some sort of magical "Hollywood" success formula. And, deep down, they *feel* they understand what goes into a popular film much better than the director — whom, in any case, they distrust. So, in a direct reversal from the *auteur* days of the sixties, they move in on the creative side of the process, invading the domains of the directors, script writers, and editors. There are some instances of creation by board room committee, no less with sadly predictable results.

In this kind of creative venture, you need a tame director; preferably a Hollywood veteran who knows how to make a movie that *looks* as if it were made in the U.S., and who realizes who is paying his salary.

How many movies of recent vintage, silly pastiches that help give Canada the reputation of being a dumping ground for things that Hollywood has turned down, fall into this unhappy category? A rhetorical question indeed.

The producer role is an immensely challenging and difficult one. No wonder, then, that it probably still is the weakest area in the Canadian feature scene. The conclusion should be obvious: rather than usurp the *director's* function, the producer should strive mightily to become truly competent in creating the conditions that permit directors, etc., to make good films. Needless to add that that applies to the financiers as well. Perhaps one of the most promising signs of late is the growing number of Canada's most qualified directors who are being given the chance to share in the boom. They, too, however, must learn the rules of the new game, which is anything but a one-man show. Their return in force should help improve the general level of product.

**The formula.** Let's go back to that

famous recipe that so many believe in. Unquestionably, the world seems to have given Hollywood first rights to every popular market. Different countries will each go in their own, particular, national direction; but when it comes to films of *mass, popular, international* appeal, they seem to leave that to Hollywood. Is it a question of know-how, or what?

So, says Canada, we've learned our lesson; we too will do it the Hollywood way. What is the Hollywood way? Strong stories, interesting characters, action, conflict, and romance right up front! Imitate that recipe, right?

**Right. And wrong.** By and large, Hollywood's dominance in world film viewing can no longer be accounted for by empty, unconvincing imitations. Television, alas, has inherited them. The Hollywood "formula" today which produces the movies that everyone wants to see (successful, by the way, *both* at the popular *and* artistic levels) has two components, so to speak. On the one hand, the best American films still adhere to the popular approach outlined above. But — and this is what Canada must learn — the elements within that approach are revitalized, made immensely exciting and fresh by their enormous involvement in *American* life/culture/history/socio-political problems, by their artistic daring, and by their explorations of human nature and the whole human condition.

The examples are clear, all pervasive: **Apocalypse Now, Manhattan, Kramer vs. Kramer, Norma Rae, China Syndrome, Brubaker, All That Jazz, Being There, etc., etc.**

By all means, then, let's imitate Hollywood, but let's go *all the way*, by imitating what truly works for Hollywood. And above all, let's kill the false, inhibiting debate that has crippled our creativity for years; the one that sets up false oppositions between Canadian culture and art on the one side, and box-office-success/selling-out-to-the-Americans on the other. Canadians should try to make *good* movies. Period. If they do just that, instead of cranking out empty, soul-less copies, "Canadian" values and culture will surface.

In other words, use the Hollywood know-how and expertise, but inform it with our own spirit and involvement — just as the Americans do in their own films, which happen to be the best in the world.

**The neglected area.** One of the questions one keeps hearing nowadays at major international film festivals goes this way: "Where are those marvelous films you Canadians used to make?" Indeed, any assessment of the present



situation has to concur with a major criticism of the entrepreneurial system: the rules of the "big" game have prevented small, inexpensive, personal, artistically or culturally ambitious films from being made — especially on the English-speaking side. The Québécois scene still permits a number of these films to do very well, and Toronto did have its **Outrageous** not terribly long ago — but the big money cinema will kill all of that.

Commercially fragile works must be given a chance; and young Canadian directors need a developing ground. And so, the industry, along with private sector TV networks, such as CTV, Télé Métropole, and Global, should join in with the various government agencies, such as the CBC, CFDC, NFB, Canada Council, and the increasingly important provincial bodies, in rationalizing the funding of these films, and in getting them shown. Models of cooperation in other countries abound. It is simply a question of getting together and planning; and, yes, rationalizing what in many instances already exists piecemeal, with the clear realization that two different kinds of cinema exist, with different sets of expectations and rules. Is it not possible for Canadian groups, provinces, what have you, to work together, instead of undermining each other out of mutual jealousy, power, and greed?

One could, of course, go on and on discussing various aspects of the present situation; underlining the problems, pointing out the shortcomings. The process is a necessary one; and indeed, if negative enough, it affords the Canadian soul limitless pleasure. Even the mere sketching out of the situation seems to inevitably lead to a gloomy conclusion. Is it all bad, then, and are those crying out disaster giving us a true picture? I think not.

Production may have been reduced this year, but it is far from being wiped out. Canadian investment may not be as easy to come by, but it has not disappeared; it is merely more cautious and demanding, profit-wise. A certain weeding out and tightening of the ranks is in evidence; but that could be to the good. The industry is streamlining its operations, and getting itself seriously to the task of correcting abuses. That is really good.

Canada now has the real basis for a serious film industry. There is a growing work pool of skilled specialists for the many complex aspects of feature film-making. There are studios and labs. A class of skilled and experienced producers is in the process of being created. There are even mini-majors, Canadian style, emerging! Above all, there are ways

to raise money. Finally, very promising break-throughs have already occurred in the crucial area of distribution.

At these levels, yes, the progress has been prodigious.

And yet — and this brings us to an essential topic for this panel's discussion — the negative reports have persisted, especially since the Cannes Festival last May.

If we are to believe certain things written about Cannes in, say, *Maclean's*, or *The Toronto Globe and Mail* or *The Toronto Star*, the Canadian films — and the entire Canadian presence, really — were a disgrace. Some of the writers were angry — angry because a few CFDC-sponsored meetings or junkets took place on a specially-for-the-event rented yacht instead of in hotel reception lounges; angry at the weather; angry at Dennis Hopper's **Out of the Blue**, which was not even an officially accredited Canadian film; and angry at Gilles Carle's **Fantastica**. Canadian films were the laughing stock, we are told. The hype surrounding them was ridiculous. What's more, Cannes proved — by extension, mind you — that the whole Canadian feature film industry was, and is, a fiasco.

Excellent Québécois films such as **L'homme à tout faire (The Handyman)** and **L'affaire Coffin**, which were very well received, were scarcely mentioned in these reports. On the anglophone side, some of the least inspiring market products were used as key examples. The simple fact is that, few of the most promising Canadian films were shown "openly" at Cannes; but that certainly did not prevent the publication of sweeping, all-embracing negative reports.

All of this, naturally, raises questions about critics and reviewers, about their qualifications and their responsibility. Critics are rarely held to an accounting. Too often, a smart, put-down, one-liner covers up lack of understanding or failure to do one's homework; and personal biases, feelings, animosity, etc., can colour the critical outlook. More important, it often happens that a critic operates from unstated, or even unconscious principles — a priori's, prejudices, ideologies — which he or she rarely has to defend, yet which determine the judgement.

Be that as it may, such emotional and lopsided outbursts — giving in to the Canadian penchant for downgrading anything Canadian — could do a lot of harm, not only with potential audiences, but with potential investors and government policy makers.


A much fairer estimate would be to point out that the last couple of years have given us, in addition to the many

silly things, perhaps a dozen films that are solidly professional — not masterpieces, to be sure, but movies that can stand decently on their own merits. And I have a strong feeling that some of the films about to be released will furnish many of us with pleasant surprises.

The situation is far from being the disaster it is made out to be. Granted, criticism should be tough, but it should stop demanding a rate of success attainable no place else. It should also stop debasing an entire industry's output before even having seen most of its recent films.

We are in an enviable position right now. If we use the opportunities wisely, clean up our act, and avoid the very real pitfalls — in a word, if we use our native intelligence — then almost anything is possible. *Right now!*

Anything valid and durable, however, will always have to be based on the final consideration: the making of good films. Admittedly, the streamlining and improving on the financial side is of enormous importance. But the ultimate value has to be the movie itself. That is the bottom line.



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# ccfm sermon on the mount *by robert verrall*

Mr. Chairman, for identification purposes I would like to title these brief remarks "CCFM Sermon On The Mount."

I have the honour, and the duty, to represent some 11,000 members of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers. I believe that what I have to say will reflect the views of most of them.

From its inception the CCFM has lobbied vigorously for legislation which would increase massively the amount of money available to a financially starved industry.

The CCFM applauded the introduction of the 100% Capital Cost Allowance (CCA) as one of the measures needed to generate money for production, and this within the framework of a cultural program of relevance to Canadians.

We wish to be positive and forward looking, but this will be meaningless if we are unwilling to assess, and incapable of understanding, what has taken place these past two years or so, as a result of the tax shelter.

The program to date has been, for the most part, a cultural disaster, and I think

we should have the guts to admit it. No amount of pointing to the need to establish an industrial base, and what Mr. Vennat calls "an infrastructure," will disguise the fact that we've been charging down the wrong road, motivated by a common human failing — greed. The program has been abused — there has been fronting and exorbitant fees with too much money going everywhere but on the screen.

## Quotes from Maclean's Newsmagazine :

*"With remarkable unanimity, these Montreal producers are concerned about the future of the Canadian film industry. All agree the boom is over. The debate is whether it will be followed by a full-fledged bust, or a mere settling-out. Says Guy Fournier, producer of Fantastica : "We've killed, or almost killed, public financing. There's been a lot of short-term thinking and a lot of films have been made that won't make their money back."*

If the CCA, which is in reality a form of public subsidy, is to be continued, and we believe its continuation is essential — for a number of years anyway — then we must be able to justify its existence before the public. This means we must demonstrate clearly that the abuses of the past will stop. We are in real danger of having created an industrial base and infrastructure in support of yet another branch plant. Surely this is a corruption of the original intent. We believe it's not too late to redeem the situation — but it almost is.

Regulations will have to be tightened, and in such a way as to encourage those Canadian producers who are both in charge of their own shops and committed to cultural objectives of value. Self policing will have to take place.

No one, of course, should be prevented from making films with foreign stars — or so-called "international films" — if they wish; and if they can raise the money to do so (more power to them) outside the Tax Shelter. It is believed by some that without the glamour of big name stars and big-budget hype, investors will not be found.

We prefer to think that the worthy dentists, doctors, lawyers and others who have been willing to invest in film, may not be so cynical, or greedy, as to be disinterested in the cultural survival of the country — nothing less is at stake. If this proves not to be the case, then the tax shelter should probably be aban-

doned as unworkable. We say, let's find out.

Of course, the CCA won't solve all the problems, so a market mechanism must be found which will complement the CCA and create the incentives for Canadian distribution.

We believe that the notion, held by some, that culturally valuable films are necessarily non-commercial, is nonsense and ignores the history of cinema. Don Owen dealt with this yesterday when he spoke so forcefully about the fallacy of the presumed dichotomy between commercially viable entertainment and culturally important films. Australia is a good example.

Ten or more years ago the films of Don Shebib, Peter Pearson, Don Owen, Gilles Carle, Gilles Groulx, Claude Jutra, Allan King among others, were an inspiration to the generation of Australian filmmakers whose work is now increasingly in demand around the world and in the United States in particular; films made by men and women with something of interest to say about themselves and for themselves. And because they do it well, they make films of interest to everyone. Perhaps we will now be inspired by their example. God forbid that they should begin to imitate us! (Admittedly, it is more expensive to transport chequered cabs and American licence plates across the Pacific.)

Finally, a word about Quebec. I happen to be a member of an English-speaking minority working in Montreal. It was interesting, to say the least, to witness from that vantage point, the telecast last spring of the Canadian Academy Awards show — at a time when the referendum debate was heat-in up. What became clear to many of us that night was this: the issue in this country is not one of national unity, but it is one of national identity. Quebecers instinctively know this. To them, the show put on in Toronto — a celebration of a second-rate American dream — was confirmation of what they have supposed all along; that the rest of the country, if it hasn't already lost its identity, is hell bent to do so. We say to the producers and investors — you have to prove them wrong! ■

*Robert Verrall joined the National Film Board in 1946. He currently heads the NFB's Studio B — the English production studio. He has been president of the NFB union, the SGCT (technical category) for the last two years, and was elected chairperson of the Council of Canadian Film Makers this year.*

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