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table of contents

Guest Editors' Introduction	1
Feature Articles	
Ian Taylor	A Private Game: Canadian Heritage Professionals and the Protection of Archaeological and Cultural Property 5
Valda Blundell	Speaking the Art of Canada's Native Peoples: Anthropological Discourse and the Media 23
Henrietta Fourmile	Aboriginal Heritage Legislation and Self-Determination 45
Adrian Marrie	Museums and Aborigines: A Case Study in Internal Colonialism 63
Mark Finnane	Censorship and Conservatism: An Historical Case for Conceptual Divorce 81
Jennifer Craik	The Expo Experience: The Politics of Expositions 95
John Shepherd & Jennifer Giles	The Politics of Silence: Problematics for the Analysis of English Canadian Musical Culture 113
Peter Anderson	What the People Want: Recent Debates about Arts Funding in Australia 127
Commentaries	
John Gatt-Rutter & Colin Mercer	Languishing Languages 145
Tony Bennett	1988: History and the Bicentenary 154
Karyn Laroche & Will Straw	Radio and Sound Recording Policy in Canada 163
Peter Harcourt	Canadian Film Policy: Cultural Process or Industrial Commodity? 167
Eileen Saunders	The Depoliticisation of Gender: Sex-Role Stereotyping and Broadcasting Policy 174
Chris Dornan	Sign Off 180
ACSANZ '90 Conference Notice	186
In Review	187
Notes on Contributors	195

Canadian Film Policy: Cultural Process or Industrial Commodity? A Polemical Analysis¹ — Peter Harcourt

Since 1899, when James Freer, a Manitoba farmer, first showed his films on prairie life in London, England, under the aegis of the Canadian Pacific Railway, film-making in Canada has rarely been seen as an activity valuable in itself but as a medium of communication useful for performing extra-filmic tasks.

Following the success of Freer's films, the CPR commissioned other short film subjects (and this time, from British and then American production companies) not for their own sake but for use as strategic vehicles to promote immigration.

Since Canada is so close to the United States and since its film industry was so quickly taken over by American interests, Canada has no equivalent to the Australian film pioneers like Raymond Longford or Ken G. Hall. While there were some attempts to produce feature films in Canada in the first three decades of this century - the most successful film was Ernest Shipman's *Back to God's Country* (1919) - film distribution fell into the hands of the American-controlled Famous Players company as early as the 1930s, and indigenous Canadian fiction feature production was systematically discouraged.

There continued to be, however, small government bureaux, again making informational films for educational purposes. These different bureaux were all consolidated by the Film Act of 1939 which resulted in the founding of the National Film Board of Canada, with the evangelical John Grierson serving as National Film Commissioner.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, the extra-filmic purpose of the film board was clear: its major task, unquestionably, was to mobilise the patriotic sentiments of Canadians and to help the Allied forces win the war. The war-time series - 'Canada Carries On' and 'The World in Action' - were enormously successful and received extensive screenings in Canadian theatres. Indeed, some of the 'World in Action' films even played in theatres in the United States.

At the end of the war, however, this increased sense of ourselves as Canadians, as a nation able to project images of ourselves onto our own screens, was soon to be taken away. With no discernible extra-filmic purpose, production floundered as no cultural film policy had ever been devised. And yet, as far back as 1931, the then Prime Minister of Canada, R.B. Bennett, had said: 'For years I have been convinced that the film situation is one of very great danger to this Dominion...'

Nevertheless, after the war, when the government was threatening to put a freeze on American entertainment assets in Canada - assets which might have been used to design an indigenous Canadian film industry - the government of C.D. Howe and Lester Pearson compromised with the Motion Picture Association of America and accepted what has been called the Canadian Co-Operation Project.

Under this arrangement, Canadians agreed not to set up a rival industry to the Hollywood industry and, in return, Hollywood promised both to produce more of their films in Canada and to make references to Canada in selected American movies in a way that might be beneficial to the Canadian tourist industry. So in 1936, in *Rose Marie*, we had Nelson Eddie, dressed up as a Mountie, singing songs to Jeanette MacDonald in the Rockies; and in 1955, in Anthony Mann's *The Far Country*, we had Jimmy Stewart in Montana making meaningless references to Canadian birds while pretending to be in the Yukon.

In our first little films that were made at the beginning of this century had been designed specifically to attract immigrants, now Hollywood films were being made containing favourable references to Canadian geography supposedly to attract tourists!²

In spite of the absence of federal cultural initiatives, however, in the early 1960s, some feature films were made - some of them by the National Film Board. By a bit of cheating, in 1964, both Don Owen and Gilles Groulx managed to produce, with extremely limited funds, two of Canada's undoubted classics of the cinema - *Nobody Waved Goodbye* and *Le chat dans le sac*. Other films were also made at that time - most notably Claude Jutra's first feature, *A tout prendre* and Pierre Perrault's classic evocation of the vanishing life on the Isle aux Coudres in the St. Lawrence River, *Pour la suite du monde* - both made in 1963.

From these individual initiatives, once again the federal government was encouraged to act. In 1968, the Canadian government created the Canadian Film Development Corporation. Initially comprising a lump sum of ten million dollars, this fund was designed to encourage and promote the production of fully indigenous Canadian feature films.

And so it did. But since it did nothing either about distribution or exhibition, most of the films made (say) between 1968 and 1977, although acclaimed by many critics, had very limited exposure in Canadian theatres and virtually none at all abroad. Although films like *Goin' Down the Road*, by Don Shebib (1970); *Paperback Hero*, by Peter Pearson (1973); *The Rowdy Man*, directed by Peter Carter but written by and starring the very famous Canadian, Gordon Pinsent (1972); and, in Quebec, *La vraie nature de Bernadette*, by Gilles Carle (1971); *Mon oncle Antoine*, by Claude Jutra (1971); *J.A. Martin, photographe*, by Jean Beaudin (1976); *Les maudits sauvages*, by Jean Pierre Lefebvre (1977); - all these films constitute, in the 1960s and early '70s, what I have called our 'invisible' cinema. They are all extremely distinguished, subtly nuanced and unmistakably Canadian films, both in their pacing and in their locations. But they were seen by very few people, either in Canada or around the world.

In 1974, in the effort to attract investment funds from the private sector, a law was passed allowing a 100% tax write-off for private investment in Canadian feature films. As a result, in 1975, there was a small boom in feature film production. But by 1977, when Michael McCabe was appointed chairman of the Canadian Film Development Corporation, the whole tone of film production had

changed. As in Australia after 1981, when direct subsidies were replaced by even more generous tax incentives, so too in Canada, in the late '70s, with the tax incentives in place, one-time real-estate dealers, now turned film producers, were mobilising private funds, packaging deals, and putting together projects designed for the mass-market, North American audience. People were no longer talking about making distinctively Canadian films: the object now was to gain access to the highly profitable North American entertainment industry.

Hype was now the name of the game. As new players entered the field, budgets quadrupled and a lot of money changed hands. But very little of this money found its way into quality products on the screen. The few good films that did come out of this period - films like *Atlantic City* (1981) and *Quest for Fire* (1981) - although very successful commercially, were scarcely Canadian in any cultural sense of the word. And many other films were made that never left the shelf. This period of speculative investment led to what I have called our 'unwatchable' cinema.

There is a sense in the air today (and this sense is very strong within the assumptions - I wouldn't want to call it thinking - of our cultural legislators) that the small-budget, indigenous films of the previous period didn't do too well because, finally, they were qualitatively not really good enough.

This sense is mistaken. These films didn't do well because they were released within an economic infrastructure controlled by American interests and designed to favour the American product. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, only one and a half per cent of the Canadian boxoffice was ever re-invested in the Canadian product. At the same time, by the 1970s, something like 300 million dollars was leaving the country, tax free, as profit on the American product. In those days, even a 10% tax on these profits would have paid for the operations of the National Film Board! Furthermore, while there had been some initiative put into the production of feature films, none at all had been put into the distribution or exhibition of these films. Film distribution and exhibition in Canada were still controlled by the American majors.

For a cultural policy to be effective, it has to be economically viable. Guarantees concerning distribution and exhibition are crucial, as are nowadays some further guarantees of a window within a national television network. For instance, none of the films of our classic, indigenous cinema were ever screened by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The CBC, then as now, thought and thinks of itself as having other, more important, things to do.

Since the establishment of the Canadian Film Development Corporation in 1968, while there has been a series of government measures to promote an indigenous film industry, these measures have been economically myopic and culturally ineffective. Furthermore, if these policies have all been more in the nature of industrial than of cultural strategies, it is questionable at the moment whether in the long run they will prove effective even as industrial strategies.

Arguably, the entire debate in Canada concerning the culture of moving images (as archivists now refer to film and television) has been misfocused. It has

increasingly posited the cultural against the commercial, the social against the industrial, films made about ourselves for our own consumption against films that erase ourselves for the sake of international profit - i.e. for films that pretend to be American. At the same time, no government agency, federal or provincial, has had the courage or foresight rigorously to tamper with the economic base of our culture of moving images.

As one of our most astute cultural commentators, Sandra Gathercole wrote, over ten years ago:

America is a media imperialist. It invented the concept of the free flow of information to justify its own unilateral penetration of foreign markets. The country which controls the world's film markets has not neglected to control its own. In fact, America is the world's most xenophobic and protectionist media market. It shares with Red China the distinction of having less (2%) of its television time devoted to foreign programming than any other nation (Russia imports 5%). The last time UNESCO checked, the US stood alone as the world's most protected movie market: 95% of all movies are domestic [*Cinema Canada*, 47, June 1978].

With the conversion in the early 1980s of the Canadian Film Development Corporation into Telefilm Canada, the funding situation has altered dramatically. As if to prove themselves economically wise, the people at Telefilm devised a three-part funding system: one third public funds from Telefilm; one third either from a film distributor or from a television station; one third from the so-called private sector. That sounds sensible. But it is not.

With the 100% Capital Cost Allowance was in place, it was possible (although still difficult) to raise funds from private investors. But in 1987, as if to get ready for a free trade agreement that was then being negotiated with the United States, the CCA was reduced to 30% over a two-year period and the private funds immediately disappeared. While there is still a lot of film-industrial activity going on in this country, nearly all Canadian companies are working hand-in-hand with an American distributor or an American television network. Atlantis Films, for example, a little Canadian company in Toronto that, a few years ago, made its mark by bringing Canadian short stories to Canadian television screens, is now working almost exclusively in co-production with the Disney studios and with Home Box Office in the United States. In the 1980s, official policy in Canada is still encouraging filmmaking less for its own sake as a cultural process than as an impersonalised, industrialised commercial product.

It would be naive at this time to insist on the potential importance of culture as a bonding agency within society when we are living within a late-capitalistic system that is increasingly committed to the commodification of virtually every aspect of our social and political production; except that, in Canada, because we have not rigorously examined the long-term economic results let along the cultural implications of our legislated strategies, there is no guarantee that even the present industrial activity will continue.

At the moment, American companies are in co-production with Canadian companies because of our federal subsidies for *their* co-productions and because

of the fact that the Canadian dollar is cheaper than the American dollar. Meanwhile, as happened in Great Britain in the 1960s, when tax breaks and monetary exchange favoured production in that country, if the value of our dollar changes, and if - in the spirit of the free trade agreement - our subsidies are reduced, the American companies will pull out, leaving our industry over-inflated by the American presence and without an on-going industrial infrastructure of our own.

In 1977, when Michael McCabe took over the Canadian Film Development Corporation and the capital Cost Allowance began to affect the production of cinema with full force, the control of production passed from the hands of the writers and directors who had initiated our earlier cinema into the hands of producers and speculators. Film became, for a short period, as exciting as any other commercial activity. More than that, oil magnates in Alberta were all agog because, with the right kind of investment in the right sort of property, they might get to hang about with a Hollywood star!

While this commercial bonanza has decreased significantly, the producers and speculators have retained control of film and television production in Canada. Television series have been designed on the American model, in co-production with the American networks. While not recognisably Canadian in the old-fashioned sense of the word, nevertheless, some of these series have been quite distinctive. Especially *Adderly*, with its one-handed hero and the comic play within its basic crime-show plot; but as a series, *Adderly* lasted for only three years.

Night Heat, a far more violent and fast-paced American imitation - yet still very good as a television series - has lasted four years. Work has been created for Canadian actors and technicians but without establishing any sense of anything distinctly Canadian. Within this type of lottery mentality, the shows finally get dropped by the American co-producers because, while they are comparatively cheap to produce, they do not command the audiences and therefore cannot command the advertising dollars of a *Barney Miller* or a *Miami Vice*.

Canadians - especially Canadian federal agencies - learn very slowly, if at all, the basic tricks of economic survival in the present commodified world. Whether it concerns cars, aircraft, tractors, or movies, to have a guaranteed market throughout the world, one must produce a product that is both economic and distinctive. In the short term, for the sake of job creation, one can produce American cars on Canadian soil or American movies in Canadian studios; but in the long term, as shifts occur in the international exchange of money and as the American-dominated entertainment industry becomes more and more banal, any country that wishes to survive must produce a product that is distinctive in some way, that offers an alternative to cultural homogenisation, that conveys a sense of pride in being simply what it is - as so many Australian films have done.

But take the case of Sweden. In a country that boasts a population of a little less than the province of Ontario, Sweden produces its own motor cars, its own

fighter aircraft, and it certainly produces its own movies. It has been able to achieve this independence because it has been prepared to alter and control the economic infrastructure of its own production. In terms of film, the same film company, *Svensk Filmindustri*, that, back in the 1960s, was making a fortune on the distribution of *The Sound of Music* was financing the maturing productions of the Swedish art-house master, Ingmar Bergman. The profits of a highly popular entertainment industry were being used to finance a film industry that was indigenous to Sweden. There is no reason that, with a little savvy and more than a little courage, the same sort of situation might not have been created in Canada.

At the moment of writing (November 1988), a québécois initiative concerning the distribution and exhibition of American films has been lost with the recent defeat of the Parti Québécois in that province; while a comparable federal initiative has been seriously watered down in preparation for our recent federal election. While there were many issues at stake in this election, it came to be fought almost exclusively on the issue of a free trade agreement with the United States. With the election now over and the Progressive Conservatives back in power with a majority, the free trade agreement will undoubtedly go ahead in one form or another. Given our past history, it is doubtful that any political party is likely to emphasise any cultural issue, especially since many Canadians now fear that essential features of our country like our medical and social services may even be in jeopardy.

Apart from these political struggles, however, arguably, our puritan tradition has played its part in never encouraging Canadian leaders to take seriously our culture of moving images. Puritan traditions always mistrust the value placed on pleasure, especially on any pleasure that might be derived from works of art. It is perhaps partly the result of this mistrust of the graven image that our films have always been made for extra-filmic reasons and never for film by and for itself. Initially, there was immigration; then there was tourism; and now there is this great emphasis on an exportable commodity.

While the battle for our own independent film and television production has always entailed a struggle against American interests in this country, it has been a struggle less with the Americans themselves than with the American interests already established in Canada. Industry knows no nationality. Money knows no cultural pride. Corporate Canada has always wanted to be American. It has always wanted free trade. The Canadian corporate film tycoons want to experience the glamour of having an office in New York and of working in Hollywood.

The question is, however, especially now that the Conservatives are back in power, are there enough non-corporate Canadians that not only want a culture of their own but who will work towards establishing an economic infrastructure which, while striving to access the world, will have an independent rationality of its own and at least a measure of economic self-subsistence?

If Canada wants to survive both as a cultural and economic entity, it would

seem that we should have the enterprise to look somewhere else than exclusively to the United States. In the wake of the recent election, however, focused as it was on the issue of free trade with the United States, the situation is critical: have the Canadian people perhaps now lost their last change to exercise any alternative option?

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