We're Asking The Wrong Question

by Sandra Gathercole

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Most countries of the world assume their own art as basic, make it the bulk of their cultural diet, and assign whatever room is left to imported material. That is why every film producing country of the world, save our own and the United States, applies some form of control on the number of foreign films permitted on their screens.

In Canada we are beginning to seriously question whether we ought not to impose similar controls. At least two hundred of our filmmakers, and others in the industry, think we should, and have endorsed a quota for Canadian films as the major proposal in the list of recommendations opposite.

This is encouraging. But what is discouraging is that we are still only discussing a move which has long been starkly obvious as the only solution to the major stumbling block of our industry – distribution. The discussion would be more relevant if it were centering, not on the pathetic question of how many Canadian films we should permit on our screens, but rather on the more germaine question of how many of their foreign counterparts we should permit.

Five years ago the Canadian Film Development Corporation was created to fill the void which stood in place of our film industry. It has done that. But despite the dramatic increase in the number of Canadian feature films produced in the last few years there has been no corresponding increase in their distribution and exhibition.

This contradiction is central to the development of the Canadian industry and it won't be solved by producing more and better films, much as the CFDC would like to pretend that it will.

Films are made to be shown: if they are not their production becomes an exercise in futility. As long as Canadian films are being denied access to their natural forums all other questions of their development remain academic. Without a breakthrough in film distribution, paralleling that of production, the CFDC will merely be working at cross purposes with itself, and the Canadian industry will be racing its engines without going anywhere.

Fewer than half the feature films produced in Canada in the last eight years have received commercial distribution. Of those which have, most were poorly promoted and inadequately exhibited. The facts are depressing:

In 1969, the last year for which Dominion Bureau of Statistics figures are available, there were 1428 commercial cinemas in Canada; 90 million admissions were paid; 118 million dollars were grossed; 669 films were exhibited; 10 were Canadian. It is doubtful that more recent statistics, when they are available, will show substantial changes in the relative percentages.

Intentionally or not the system is rigged. Foreign films long ago assumed squatter's rights to the captive Canadian audience. It is a control which they took by default and have come to take for granted. As long as Canada had no film industry of her own the situation was tenable. But as more Canadian films are produced, and arrive to be marketed, the problems of this modus operandi become more evident and more serious.

The decks are stacked against the Canadian film trying to enter the commercial distribution system. This places an impossible handicap on the economic and artistic growth of the industry. It also reduces the Canadian filmmaker to the soul destroying status of beggar in his own home, and prevents him from earning a living in a popular cinema which is generating over 100 million dollars a year.

What is worse, it cheats the Canadian public who may want an authentic alternative to the Americanization of their culture, and who have paid 10 million dollars to get it. It is their tax dollars which have been invested in the production of these films, most of which they have had no chance to see. For John Q. Public it is pretty discouraging: – unless he lives in a relatively high population area he will not have seen Etrog winner **Goin' Down the Road,** though he will have read much about it.

– unless he lives in Vancouver or Toronto he will not have seen Etrog winner **Neon Palace.**

– unless he works for the National Film Board he would not have been able to see **Mon Oncle Antoine** during the eight months following its completion. Even after this film's unprecedented sweep of the Canadian Film Awards, he would not have been able to see it for several weeks unless he had attended the Awards themselves.

– unless he lives in Toronto and attended the single midnight screening – or the single Art Gallery of Ontario screening – last summer, he will not have seen Etrog winner **The Only Thing You Know.**

– unless he lives in Quebec and speaks French he will not have seen any but a handful of the highly praised films of Quebec.

– if he does live in Quebec he will have seen virtually none of the recent English Canadian films, including **Goin' Down the Road,** unless he lives in Montreal and speaks English.

– unless he belongs to a group which rents films privately he will have had no opportunity to see **Breathing Together** (termed "the most important ideological comment on the radical American youth culture" by Amos Vogel), **Eat Anything, More Than One,** among others.

– unless he is a personal friend of the filmmaker he will have no chance now to see a number of films – **Crimes of the Future, Zero the Fool, Stereo** – which flitted by in specialized screenings, film awards (sometimes the only screenings films receive), or quick commercial showings in a major centre.

– unless he is attending school it is unlikely that he will have seen more than one or two, if any, of the multitude of international award winning films of the NFB. As a result he probably doesn't understand or appreciate the outstanding reputation of that organization.

– if he is to see the results of his investment on television he will have a long wait: only four of the approximately 100 recently produced Canadian feature films have been shown on Canadian television, public or private.

These are feature films. The Canadian public's chances of seeing, or even knowing of the existence of, the hundreds of Canadian shorts, animation and experimental films – among them renowned names as Chambers, Snow, Wieland – are practically nil as they are almost all in non-commercial distribution only.

PROPOSALS FOR CANADA'S FILM POLICY

A general film policy for Canada is now being prepared by the Secretary of State's Department. What it has to say will determine much of the future course of the Canadian film industry. Hopefully it will emerge as an effective instrument of change, reflecting a major re-thinking of the problems and potential of the emerging industry as well as the policies governing its growth.

To contribute to such an assessment, the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op drew up a twelve point platform of recommendations which were circulated last fall to 400 filmmakers across the country. More than 200 endorsements were received from a wide segment of the filmmaking community. These endorsements, together with a lengthy brief, were recently presented to the Secretary of State. A list of the recommendations, and a partial list of those signing them, appear below.

The following are among those who endorsed the proposals for a new film policy: Allan King; Graeme Ferguson; Don Shebib; Michael Snow; Joyce Wieland; Bob Crone; Colin Low; Morley Markson; John Hofsess; Bill Fruet; Sylvia Spring; Tom Shandel; Peter Rowe; Robin Spry; Wally Gentleman; Clarke Mackey; Elwy Yost; Dick Ballentine; John Herbert; Doug McGrath; F. J. Quinn; David Acomba; Dennis Miller; National Film Board staff; commercial production houses; actors; film teachers; artists in allied fields.

1. **The integration of Canadian feature films into the mainstream of commercial distribution by establishing a Canadian content quota for all commercial film exhibitors.** This would be a logical extension of the principle of the C.R.T.C. and have as precedent the policy of England and most European countries. As theoretical guidelines: an initial quota of 15 per cent on feature films and 50 per cent on shorts, to be increased in proportion to the productivity of the Canadian industry.

2. **The establishment of an independent network of small, low overhead cinematheques to exhibit Canadian shorts and features of limited commercial potential.** This network could be funded initially by the Federal Government, and operated by an Opportunities for Youth type of program employing youth in an area of great interest to them.

3. **The expansion of the Canadian Film Development Corporation, or the establishment of a new agency,** to co-ordinate the efforts being made to create a Canadian film industry, and to ensure the artistic and cultural, as well as commercial development of Canadian films.

4. **The foundation of a National Film School,** similar to the National Theatre School in Montreal, to bring together young filmmakers and the pool of talent which does exist in this country.

5. **Fuller utilization of the existing production, distribution and promotion facilities of the National Film Board,** in the interests of all Canadian filmmakers, and the expansion of the role of the Canadian Film Institute as a free information resource centre and national archive.

6. **Redirecting of promotion efforts towards "selling" Canadian films to Canadian audiences rather than "selling" Canadian facilities and funds to American producers** as is now being done by private and Provincial interests. A national promotion campaign, similar to the one successfully waged on behalf of Canadian manufactured goods, would go a long way in overcoming Canadians' highly conditioned psychological distaste for their own films by creating an awareness of the cultural implications of film going habits. The "made in Canada" symbol on all advertising materials would iensure that Canadian films were readily identified as such.

7. **Redefinition of Canadian content** to include a film's artistic and cultural determinants, as wellas its cast, crew and facilities.

8. **Measures to impress the two major television networks their responsibility as natural distribution vehicles for Canadian films.** Both CBC and CTV should be providing a primary market for independent Canadian short films by commissioning, or investing in, their production, and a secondary market for commercial Canadian features by pre-production purchasing of television rights.

9. **Re-evaluation of the present method of film financing,** with consideration to:
   - guaranteeing an amount proportionate to the production cost of any Canadian film be invested in its promotion.
   - providing sub-titling for French and English Canadian films to facilitate their national distribution.
   - financing of shorts and documentaries, as well as features.
   - ensuring the blow up of outstanding 16mm shorts and features to allow commercial 35mm distribution.
   - re-instating a partial system of outright grants on a competitive basis.
   - discontinuing the distribution pre-requisite in funding.
   - publicizing the existing tax incentives for the investment of private Canadian capital in film production.
   - imposing a Federal tax on revenues of non-Canadian films which exceed a set gross, to be invested in the production of Canadian films.

10. **Continuation of the present system of pre-production grants** to permit the development of original Canadian screenplays.

11. **Review of the existing censorship inequities** Province to Province, and film to film.

12. **Broader representation of those directly involved in the film industry** on the agency carrying out Canada's film policy.

What can the Canadian public conclude about their investment? They have little choice other than to assume, graciously but mistakenly, that this first batch did not turn out. Thus the myth of Canadian inferiority is perpetuated. The Canadian public is forced to return to their conditioned dependency on the imported films on which they were born and bred, convinced that the situation is a reflection on the calibre of Canadian films.

Although most of the distributors and exhibitors would have us believe otherwise, this is a very misguided premise. It simply is no longer true that Canadian films are not good, not ready, or not profitable. Many of our recent features have been internationally acclaimed: Time magazine named Allan King's **A Married Couple** one of the ten best in 1970; influential New York critic Judith Crist cited Don Shebib's **Goin' Down the Road** as one of the best of the year; Claude Jutra's **Mon Oncle Antoine** won awards in Moscow and Chicago; Morley Markson's **Zero the Fool** won awards at Ann Arbor and several other American festivals (after being turned down as an entry in our own Canadian Film Awards); the Los Angeles Herald Examiner chose Paul Almond's **Act of the Heart** as best film.

Of four Canadian features playing in Toronto last November (which was some kind of record in the exhibition of Canadian films) all were grossing over $5,000 weekly, and one was grossing $20,000 weekly. The maximum weekly operating expense of any Toronto theatre is $3,000, so none of these films was bankrupting its exhibitor.

Of the Canadian films which have managed to get distribution, many have demonstrated the advantage, commercially and artistically, of combining Canadian audiences with their own films. The fact that there have not been more is primarily a function of the biased law of supply and demand which governs film exhibi-

tion in this country.

Canadian features are being kept on the periphery because the main arena is rented out. Two foreign multi-national corporations – Famous Players Canadian Corporation Limited, a subsidiary of the American conglomerate Gulf and Western, and Odeon Theatres (Canada) Limited, a subsidiary of Britain's J. Arthur Rank Organization (Odeon is British but operates in the North American market with largely American produced films) own or control, directly or indirectly, over two-thirds of the commercial cinemas in Canada and virtually all of the high grossing downtown cinemas in urban centres.

Between them they take in 70-80 per cent of the gross theatre revenues in Canada, which amount to well over 100 million dollars annually. Through company linked distribution networks the companies also supply themselves with most of the films which they exhibit, creating virtually a closed circuit. In other words they have a functional, if not legal monopoly. This control provides their parent companies with an additional 5-10 per cent on their profits which they are loathe to relinquish to the growing number of Canadian films.

The situation is compounded by the fact that 80 per cent of the distribution companies in Canada are similarly foreign owned. That percentage may now be higher: of the 20 per cent which were Canadian two have been sold (IFD and Cinepix) and two have gone bankrupt (New Cinema and Film Canada).

Who controls the outlets for a film industry also, by definition, controls that industry. Because these foreign owned companies literally control the cinemas of our country their attitudes and actions are crucial. To date, their record has been abysmal.

Most Canadian feature films do not succeed in obtaining commercial distribution and those which do are too often considered, booked, and promoted as losers by the exhibitors. It is hard not to fulfill such a prophecy: the expectation of failure is almost as effective a block to success as non-exhibition.

The films which do succeed do so despite the hostile distribution machinery, not because of it. They are either tied into the system in their production; produced by companies which can afford to pay for their promotion and lobby for their space; or they succeed, as **Mon Oncle** and **Goin' Down the Road**, on the strength of sheer superiority and American critical acclaim. Too many of the others wind up on the 16mm distribution circuit, which functions effectively within its limited territory, but which means commercial death for a feature film.

By implying that Canadian films are "inferior" and Canadian filmmakers who complain about the lack of distribution are "hypochondriacs", the distributors and exhibitors are engendering a serious sense of futility in our best young filmmakers. By limiting the availability of these films they are also undermining the new found confidence of Canadian audiences in their own art and artists.

They do a further disservice to that audience by assuming that it is synonymous with the American, and selecting the films which are exhibited on the basis of a common standard. Ironically, in this myopia they may be doing as great a disservice to themselves as anyone else. The rate at which Canadian audiences have been turning away from the box office, and the rate at which they resurfaced to make at least two of our recent features strong box office successes, should have suggested to good businessmen that their standards may be as wrong economically as they are culturally.

Since **Easy Rider** rang the death knell for the standardized box office formula, no one, least of all American studios, has been able to predict which films will win an audience. What we do know is that what isn't put into theatres, won't; and what is put into theatres but not promoted, won't. Some Canadian films lose money: some **any** films lose money. Imported films as a group are not penalized because some of their number drop hundreds of thousands at the box office. Film exhibition is a high risk business. To be in it is to be prepared to gamble and exhibitors do it every day – but not on Canadian films.

Mr. H. Blumson, a senior executive of Odeon, claims that his company cannot take any responsibility for Canadian films because "we're in business to make money . . . you have to give the people what they want." On the subject of a quota he says "I don't see how you can impose it without putting theatres out of business."

Another recognized leader of the Canadian film industry, Mr. Nat Taylor, head of Toronto's IFD, also operates on the assumption that no one in his right mind would actually want to see Canadian films. In an editorial in the November/71 issue of his house organ, the Canadian Film Digest, in which he set out to discuss the merits and drawbacks of a quota in "a sensible and dispassionate manner", he began by terming a quota a 'make work' project designed to create employment, and stated that "we know of no other arguments to further the case." To make his point clear, he went on to say that it is difficult " to get people to pay to see films which they would rather avoid. It is questionable whether, even in dictatorship countries, people can be forced to look at movies they do not want to see. It must follow, therefore, that legislating theatres to play movies no one wants to see is, after all, not the answer."

As Mr. Taylor does not cite a single example of these economic and popular disasters on which he bases his argument we must assume that he just feels it in his bones – an old and much respected method of skirting facts, and of selecting films for exhibition.

The Globe and Mail's Martin Knelman once termed film exhibitors "people whose only connection with the greening of America is their own desire to cash in on it". The attitude of these men bears him out. Certainly it stands diametrically opposed to the imaginative energy going into the production side of the industry, and is an affront to it. As a determining attitude for our fledgling industry it is not good enough.

Somewhere the commercial imperative has to be at least tempered by the cultural imperative, and this task surely has belonged to the CFDC. But the CFDC has consistently and scrupulously avoided responsibility for the broader issues underlying the industry's development, including the crucial one of distribution. When questioned about the problem by the Commons Committee on Broadcasting last spring, the CFDC's President, Gratien Gelinas, illustrated in his answer, the confusion and ineffectualness which has too often characterized that organization:

> "We have been much concerned with this problem lately and are studying the matter very deeply and as fast as we can. We might come to a conclusion one way or the other, regarding this problem which is, we admit, a crucial one."

The CFDC's Executive Director, Michael

Spencer, took another tack. Testifying before the same committee, he made the claim that "In every case there has been distribution of the Canadian films in which we have invested." As Mr. Spencer must surely be aware, there is a grave distinction between distribution and commercial distribution. His omission of the word "commercial", in assessing the distribution situation in Canada, was expedient: it was also dangerously, if not deliberately, misleading. Most Canadian films, failing to achieve commercial distribution, are assigned to the Co-ops and private companies which supply the schools and film societies. Their distribution does not approximate theatrical distribution but solely because they exist could Mr. Spencer make his claim that all CFDC financed films have received distribution.

Overriding the contradictory positions of Mr. Gelinas and Mr. Spencer at their annual accounting to the Commons Committee, has been the CFDC's repeated claims that distribution is really the responsibility of the filmmaker – a dubious stand as it seems obvious that exhibitors who are impervious to the persuasion of a Government agency will be even less susceptible to the appeal of any one filmmaker. With ascending absurdity, the CFDC has most recently adopted the philosophy of primary distribution of Canadian films through television – a suggestion which contradicts the raison d'etre of any film industry.

By their head in the sand posture the CFDC has wound up contributing to the problem rather than alleviating it. They have poured millions of tax dollars into the production of films without making anything more than a perfunctory effort to ensure that these films, once produced, are allowed to compete in the marketplace on an even footing with their foreign counterparts. Since exhibition is the only way in which films can reward their maker and their audience, as well as recover their investment, both public and private, this failure on the part of the CFDC remains a total and criminal paradox.

The CFDC could have, and should have, counteracted the destructive effect of the distribution bottleneck. They could have, and should have, run interference for the industry to prevent the problem rather than tailing along lost in its wake as they now are.

Without asking exemption from the economic realities of the industry, this country has a right to expect more enlightened attitudes and imaginative leadership than it has been offered by the two entities which effectively control it: the chains and the CFDC.

If the CFDC is going to persist in functioning as the blind banker, refusing to acknowledge or deal with the fundamental problems of the industry which it has spawned; if it is going to so misunderstand the purpose of that industry as to allot approximately 30 per cent of its initial 10 million of Canadian taxpayers' dollars to American major studios filming in Canada; if it is going to abdicate from any responsibility for the cultural survival of the country by encouraging the production of American derivative films, sometimes referred to as the bastardization of our industry and more unkindly referred to as the "Bassetization" of our industry; if it is going to show no interest in the care and feeding of the infant industry, over and above its support and maintenance, then it should be thanked for the fact of creating the child but dismissed from the job of rearing it.

If the chains are going to ignore, beyond their present tokenism, the increasing demands of Canadian films, and the polite demands of Government, to take some responsibility for the exhibition of Canadian films in "their" theatres; if they re going to continue to treat Canadian films as a pestilence while they show inferior imported films in their place; if they are going to continue to demonstrate their incapacity to operate on any principle larger than profit; if they are going to function solely in the interest of their parent companies and blatantly against the interests of the country in which they are operating, then Government intervention is required to establish minimal rights for our indigenous films.

Decisions with the repercussions of distribution cannot be abandoned to the wisdom of Mr. Taylor and Mr. Blumson. Canadian films do not need special concessions but they do need a foothold in the distribution process from which to feed audience demand until it becomes its own incentive. In order to get it, exhibitors will need the incentives attendant on a quota to overcome their intransigence, and its crippling effects on the Canadian industry.

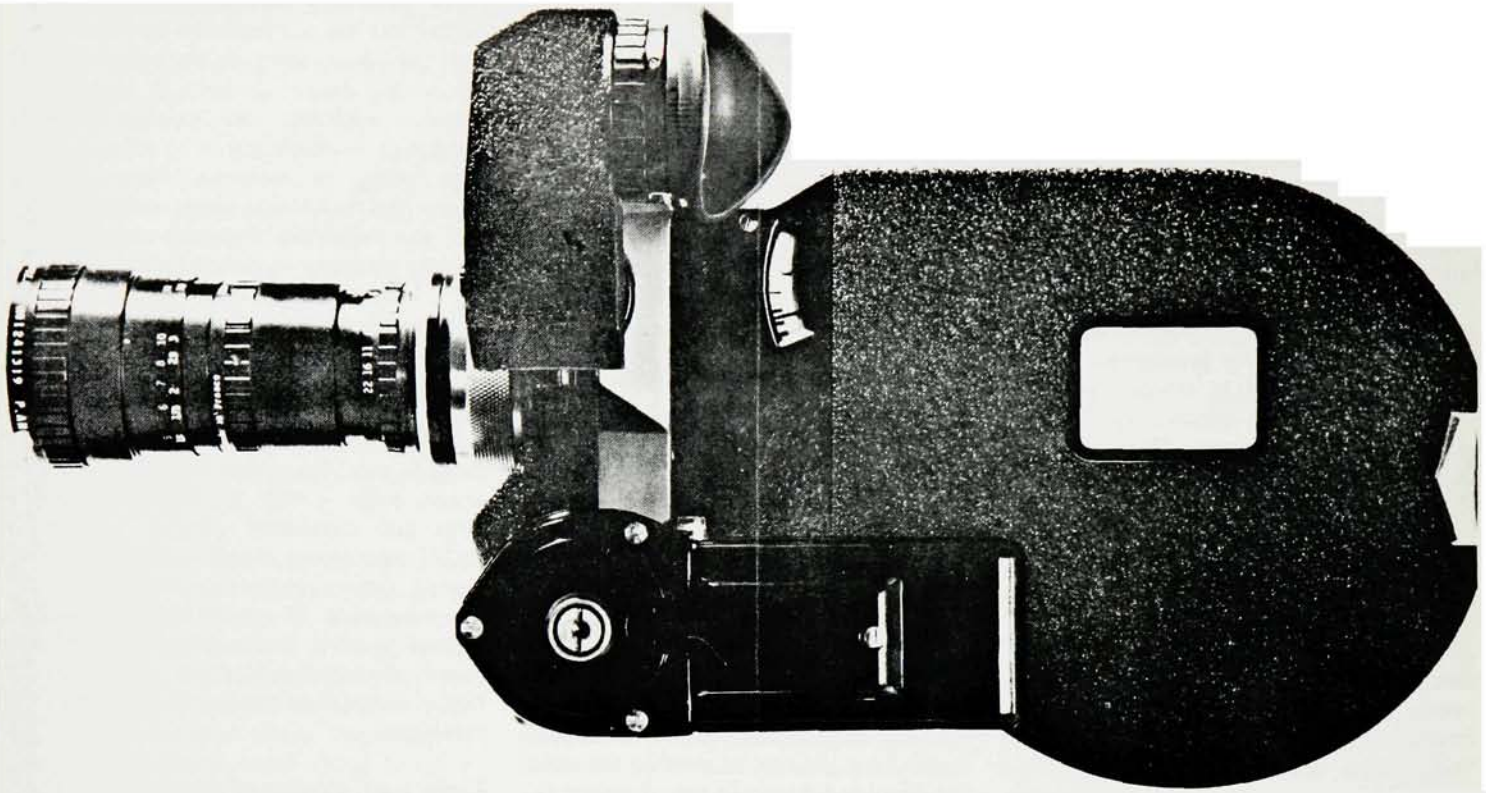
A quota is far from a radical move: it has precedents in the experience of other countries, and very successful precedents in the positive results of our own CRTC regulations. The Federal Government has twice publically threatened to impose quotas but has not followed through. At this late date there is no longer any choice: we cannot pretend to take our industry seriously while continuing to place it in double jeopardy by refusing to dopt protective measures which most other film industries, more established and less vulnerable than our own, have deemed necessary to their survival.

By requiring that commercial film exhibitors screen Canadian films a given number of weeks per year on a percentage basis which reflects the growth of the Canadian industry – initially 15 per cent for features and 50 per cent for shorts – we would forge a link between Canadian films and exhibitors' profits. As the CRTC regulations dramatically demonstrated, assuring the platform encourages the emergence of artists and financial backers to fill it. It also guarantees a new found interest in production and promotion of national material on the part of its exhibitors.

There is no question of the feasibility of filling a 15-50 per cent quota immediately. More than 100 Canadian feature films have been made in the last five years; more than 300 Canadian shorts are in distribution with the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre alone. They would quickly be augmented were the conditions of growth guaranteed by a quota.

There are arguments advanced, in some circles, against a quota: that the films thus produced would be inferior quickies; that it constitutes censorship of foreign films; that it would bankrupt the theatres. These points are immediately called in question by the fact that many other countries applied quotas and survived the consequences. But there are other refutations.

A certain proportion of films produced, initially at least, in any growth spurt would no doubt be very sad – it happened to the CFDC. But then such an accusation implies an existing standard to live up to, and few of these films could be sadder than some of the imported films which the present system sloughs off on us by playing "short and wide" under the tie-on arrangements. Junk is junk: if we must have it there is nothing to fear in replacing the bottom of the imported heap with the bottom of the Canadian heap. As for shorts, there may be some who would protest the loss of the packaged travelogue but it's a risk we'd have to take. *Cont'd on page 48*



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