

The Cinema We Need cont'd

**The Telefilm
We Need
Peter Pearson
prophet
of profit**



**by Bill Nichols,
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The "Cinema We Need" debate taking place in these pages must be grounded in the "cinema we're getting" statements of government agency representatives. Because they are not sitting back waiting for the debaters to make all their points before deciding how they should respond supportively. Especially noteworthy are the initiatives of Peter Pearson, executive director of Telefilm Canada, and one of our best-known, most ardent cultural nationalists. While issues such as

realism and experimentation, the avant-garde and the narrative mainstream, are getting sorted out, Telefilm Canada, among others, is quietly at work establishing the norms and conditions that will decide what the dominant, mainstream, commercial, brand-name Canadian cinema and television future will be. (We use "cinema" for convenience since it is the term invoked by the debate and extend it to refer to image culture that may appear in film, television or video formats.)

This future is determined in large measure by interpretations of Telefilm Canada's mandate, which then become matters of policy. Focal points of that mandate are:

to promote rational growth, high employment and economic stability within all sectors of the television and film industries. Within this context, the primary goals of Telefilm Canada are to increase Canadian content in terms of the cul-

tural reflection of individual productions and to increase the number of Canadian films and television programs in distribution in Canada and abroad.

To reach these goals, Telefilm Canada seeks to improve the quality of Canadian films in terms of their artistic and commercial potential.

Peter Pearson's interpretation of this mandate results in a description of cinema vastly different from the one envisioned by any of the "cinema we need" debaters. On Nov. 7, 1985, Pearson came to Queen's University to deliver a speech at a conference entitled "Canada's Industrial Realignment: Managing the Challenge," sponsored by the students of the Queen's School of Business. Pearson was invited to speak to an assembly that would include some of the major business leaders in Canada, including Donald Carty, CEO of Canadian Pacific Airlines; J. Stuart MacKay, president and general manager of Selkirk Communications Limited; Gordon Gow, CEO of Gandalf Systems Group; Gerald Heffernan, president of Co-Steel International Ltd.; F.R. Curd, vice-president of General Motors of Canada Ltd. and about a hundred others, as well as guests and other participants. Because he had been told that he would be speaking to all the assembled business leaders, Pearson prepared a written text and, although a last-minute change in plans meant that his presentation was one of four slotted for the same time, delivered to sub-groupings of the assembly, he delivered his text as prepared. In it and in an informal discussion he had with students from the Film Studies Department, Pearson made his current vision of what kind of cinema Canada needs vividly clear.

In his speech, Pearson recounts the numerous successes that Telefilm has been party to, from *Joshua Then and Now* and *Le Matou* in commercial cinemas, to *Isaac Littlefeathers* and *Hal Banks* as television specials, and from television series like *The Campbells* and *Night Heat* with CTV to *Anne of Green Gables* with CBC and *A Time for Miracles* with PBS. He speaks of the crucial importance of the television industry and of the vital need to put licence fees in Canada on par with other major entertainment-producing nations (from an average of 2-20% of production costs at present to 80-100% of costs as is common in the United States) so that producers can recoup their investment and develop a sound economic base. He spoke, more informally, of the hope that theatrical distribution could eventually break the American stranglehold and repatriate Canadian movie screens.¹

1. Pearson pointed with considerable interest at this point to the acquisition of the Plitt Theatres chain in the U.S. by Garth Drabinsky's Cineplex Odeon Corp. This means that a Canadian, Drabinsky, may soon be in a position to dictate terms to the major Hollywood studios, insisting on the right to distribute product in Canada in exchange for access to his U.S. chain. (Whether this will benefit Canadian cinema as a cinema that is distinctively Canadian or only guarantee that more of the profits from *Rocky V-XX* remain in Canadian hands, remains to be seen. For Peter Pearson it is at the least a signal of what free-trade — something already abundantly in evidence — in the film industry means: not so much Canadian access to the American market as access to our own market; even if the products sold in it do not change significantly, at least the degree of Canadian access to the profit from that market will.)

These are hopes that the Canadian film and television industry, the people who actually attempt to earn a livelihood making material for film and television exhibition (and who can hardly be characterized fairly, in Bart Testa's supercilious phrase, as a "gaggle of sleazoids", *Cinema Canada*, July/August, 1985, p. 27, without lapsing into the less-tainted-than-thou posture of idle contemplation) might well enthusiastically share with Peter Pearson. It would not be hard to see why he has a great deal of industry support; it is even easier to see why when we move to the heart of his speech in which he makes an appeal he assumes other business leaders will readily understand and perhaps even actively support through their future investment policies.

This portion of Pearson's speech is worth quoting at length. It is, in many ways, Telefilm Canada's rejoinder to the debate on the cinema we need:

Why are Canadian producers, thus, (with regard to licensing fees and their chances for investment recoupment) so disfavored, compared to their American, French, British and Australian colleagues? Well, I think we have largely failed to create a viable, competitive Canadian presence on our film and television screens — competitive both culturally and economically largely because, decade after decade, we have talked endlessly about culture in the abstract, but we have almost totally ignored one primordial ingredient:

And so, I am here today, as the head of a cultural agency, to talk not about culture but about profit.

If we can't find a way to enable Canadian entrepreneurs, working in the cultural industries — the independent producers, the private broadcasters, the independent distributors and exporters — if we can't find a way for them to make a profit, then probably nothing has a chance of improving. Twenty years from now, we will have the same impatient speeches as we had twenty years ago. Our only hope, then, is to shake off the record that has paralyzed the cultural sector in Canada for too long.

So, to all the tired prophets who are still trying to solve Canada's cultural dilemma with high-flown principles, and who pretend that they are prophets without honour in our own land, I suggest that there is no honour without profit... Profit for the producer, return on investment to the speculator, earnings to the broadcaster and advertiser...

Pearson concluded: "When the Bible asks, 'What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and lose his own soul,' we must ask of the cultural choices now facing Canada, can a nation expect to gain its soul, if it does so without profit?"

At this point, it profits us to examine Pearson's profit motive a bit more closely, although, to be fair, this was not a presentation to avant-garde filmmakers, nor to champions of the realist tradition in Canada, nor to the academic community and the cultural nationalist lobby that wants, first and foremost, a film culture, with or without profit, rather than a film industry. It is partly an

appeal to hard-headed businesspeople, who probably have less exposure to or interest in Canada film than many, to consider the film culture industry as a worthy investment vehicle. Still, the speech is not incompatible with other statements that Pearson made, statements that in sum offer a distinctly entrepreneurial, commercial vision of the cinema we need. Though not verbatim, the following points are what we understood Pearson to be saying:

- The industry is booming. The pool of proven talent has been sucked dry. Decent camerapeople are earning \$3000-3500/week and other salaries are equally high. The industry exists: it doesn't need to be primed or created. It just needs more access to its domestic markets and more talent to do more production.

- Beginners should start at the top. Don't pace yourself. Don't do one thing in the hope of doing another thing five years later. Do what you want to do now. Aim high and act. Be bold. But don't ask Telefilm for help until you've got a proven track record and a distribution deal in your pocket for a commercially viable concept.

- The real fun is in megaprojects, the \$10 million movies. Canada should not be deprived of an upper limit close to the sky. The big-name Canadian talent wants to play and can play in the international, Hollywood league. If we want to keep them at home we have to give them something of equivalent magnitude to what they can find elsewhere.

- The goal is economic success internationally. Canada has a corner on late-afternoon television shows for kids, particularly with *The Edison Twins*. These are things that make an industry tick.

- 'Winning' in negotiations with an American network in bargaining over the production of *Night Heat* meant that any sense of a distinctly Canadian locale and Canadian identity could be readily sacrificed since the key goal of placing Canadian talent in most of the key positions, including the lead roles, was achieved.

- Telefilm Canada is known in Hollywood as a "player," not as a national lobby group. Telefilm comes to town to make deals and will make them with whomever it chooses when there is an attractive package. The most receptive co-players are often those at the fringe (but not the outer margin) of the traditional Hollywood power nexus, less the major studios than Disney, HBO, CBS and PBS, among others.

- Canadian cinema does not need an infrastructure that includes the training of new talent. For every one job there are 20 applicants (Pearson made this statement despite his previous assertion that the pool of known talent had been dried up at present). For every training opportunity there will be 20 applicants. It is simply a multiplication of players; the same hungry, talented ones will rise to the top no matter what the system; it is more economical to let the market in talent take care of itself than to intervene.

- A "million-dollar fund," comprising a small fraction of Telefilm's overall assets, which would disperse monies in small packets of \$10,000-50,000 to aspiring filmmakers is not worth consideration. It is the top of the pyramid that needs bolstering, not the bottom.

- Non-fiction material should be taken

elsewhere. Telefilm is in the entertainment business. (Pearson uttered, as an aside, the acknowledgment that he would have to stop saying that he hates documentaries: he'd get into too much trouble if he didn't.)

- There may not be a Canadian identity to protect or serve. In questioning, Pearson suggested that most viewers identify themselves more vividly with other groupings. He attributed the success of *My American Cousin* to an international audience of pubescent youths who identified powerfully with the film. The audience today is an international one made up of strata such as women, yuppies, blacks, the elderly and so on. Canadian entrepreneurs should look for films that speak to these groupings regardless of nationality rather than to something we might call a "Canadian" film. In any event, if Canadian identity has a regional inflection, it is almost certainly too small an audience target to justify megaproject-type investments.

- Does this mean that the future of Canadian film is to have films and television shows made by Canadian passport holders with major international reputations who make big-budget, Telefilm-backed productions for specialized but international audiences, with the remote hope that a distinctly Canadian cultural identity might eventually secure the economic base from which it could finally flourish? Pearson's answer was a strong yes to the type of film envisioned and a heavily qualified maybe to the hope for the distinctiveness that our prophets without honour long for.

This is not a pretty picture to slip inside the frame that holds the Elder/Handling/Harcourt debate. It is another view entirely — one that may be predictably compatible with the policies and vision of the Progressive Conservative government, and with a federal history of flirting with cultural nationalism while sustaining a *bona fide* marriage to the model of the Hollywood cultural industry. The debate about the cinema we need may seem hopelessly idealist from Pearson's perspective as a well-endowed banker eager to make deals. The economic imperative of Pearson's scheme may seem hopelessly mercenary, shrewd as investment policy but of no more importance to the quality and texture of Canadian cultural life than the creation of a Canadian subway car or nuclear reactor or shoe industry.

What can be done and whether Telefilm Canada's vision reflects a wisdom we will come to respect are the big questions that continue to loom before us. Peter Pearson has made his contribution to the debate on the cinema we need vividly clear, even if it has been promulgated inside a different forum. What is less clear is why the sense of opposition and conflict between ideals and practical policy is allowed to continue as a built-in assumption of the debate. Why, for instance, are the acknowledged practical policies not recruited towards the service of the ideals? This would require, of course, that these ideals be held by those in positions of power, that Peter Pearson, for example, believe in the existence of a Canadian cultural identity, not merely an economic and political identity. There is considerable doubt about this, given his comments on the international nature of audiences stratified by

class, sex, race and age, but not by nationality. This cultural "one-worldism" would be lovely - if it did not contradict economic realities which still seem to have considerable room for national imperatives: film and television business profit from the Northland (Canada) still tends to land in the pocket of the other half of this faithful, "domestic" couple (the United States).

Hoping against hope that Pearson, as head of a national cultural agency with an extremely large amount of Canadian taxpayer's money, does indeed have some sense of a vital Canadian cultural identity, one might then propose that Pearson attempt a carefully poised balancing act. What he must balance is the dual nature of film/television as commodity and as art. While Pearson seems to be very eager to right an (apparently) old imbalance and deal with the commodity nature of cinema, transforming Telefilm Canada into an investment banker after the best deals, he has a equal obligation to pay heed to the other half of the equation, the art of Canadian cinema - unless, that is, a "Made in Canada" or a "Made Partly with Canadian Investment Funds That Mean Canadians Get Some of the Gravy" label is an adequate definition of art, culture and national identity. For the shoe industry, it may well be more than enough; for the cinema, the question seems open to considerable doubt.

Telefilm needs to define Canadian content sufficiently so that more than passports or the absence of gross sexism is necessary to qualify a project

as Canadian. However, recent interpretations of the Telefilm Canada mandate subordinate artistic quality and Canadian content. Priority must be given not only to recouping investments, but, at the same time, to increasing the range of productions, to stimulating new aesthetic and thematic directions (Canadian genres, perhaps, rather than imitations of American ones), to encouraging new talent and to cultivating an audience for a diversified range of cultural production that distinguishes itself as Canadian. It's not enough to invest in "middle-of-the-road/safe" productions, like *One Magic Christmas*, which are tailored, or denatured, to be saleable in world markets.

The commercial exigencies are there. Telefilm Canada must make its money back by helping Canadian productions that make back the costs of their production and then some. And certain tactics, such as proposed increases in licencing fees paid by Canadian networks are clearly sensible. Other tactics, for instance the use of American production models, are less sensible and more lacking in imagination. Moreover, the complete capitulation to these commercial exigencies proposed by Pearson's call for profit is highly unbalanced and suggests that he has lost the sense of proportion that can make the government's role not only of a matter of industrial "pump-priming", but also of cultural "risk-taking" as well, including the very risk of sustaining a distinctively national culture in the face of potential foreign domination.

The notion of "cinema" embraces many disparate institutional practices - from the independent artisan of the avant-garde to the bureaucrat-crafts-people of NFB, from the academic scholars and the students curious enough to want to know about the cultural heritage that now issues in *Night Heat* and *The Edison Twins*, to the reviewers and critics who valiantly provide us with the consumer reports we need, and from the political cineastes to the Hollywood-North dealmakers. Peter Pearson speaks to and for only one segment of these practices (or perhaps a fraction of one segment), but it is a crucial one. The fate of our entertainment industry, even the determination that there ought to be government intervention in the structuring of that industry as well as in the fostering of Canadian culture per se (in the manner of the Canada Council), has serious repercussions for the kind of work that can be done throughout the country. It will not be only the big-name talents who are affected, even if they are the ones to whom Telefilm Canada decides to address itself; it will also be all those other talents, together with their multiple audiences, whose horizons and opportunities will swell and subside with every change of government policy and national will.

Peter Pearson sent a rejoinder too late for us to incorporate.

We want to acknowledge his re-

sponse and make some clarifications. First, our report of what Pearson said at times draws inferences from his actual statements which Pearson does not consider to be what he intended or meant. But they are what we understood. The inference that a training program is not needed, for example, derives from his repeated refusal to entertain the idea of Telefilm's setting aside funding for beginning efforts by unestablished filmmakers at the level of \$10-50,000. Pearson reminded us that he has strongly advocated a National Film School and that other agencies do provide support for beginning efforts (though usually in different categories from Telefilm). On this occasion, though, Pearson did not stress these points but emphasized that he saw Telefilm's future directed toward the top of the production pyramid.

Second, we did not attempt to judge what Pearson said in light of what Telefilm has done. Pearson reminded us that its achievements are considerable and some - support for regional filmmaking; documentaries; for efforts by relatively inexperienced people - provide an important corrective if his remarks are used to understand Telefilm's history or track-record. We chose instead to treat his remarks as suggestions of future policies and of the type of cinema we may get in the light of the "Cinema We Need" debate. Space prevents further clarification here, but we hope that the future role of Telefilm Canada can remain a subject of further discussion and debate.

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