

ON (EXPERIMENTAL) FILM

by B. Sternberg

An Open Letter to the new Minister of Communications:

Dear Flora MacDonald, Welcome!

I want to bring to you the details of a situation that needs attention. I was a member of a Canada Council Film Production Jury that met in Ottawa this past May 19-24. The other members of the jury were David Rimmer of Vancouver, Jacques Leduc and Brigitte Sauriol of Montreal, and Vera Frankel of Toronto. With great care we studied and debated the merits of all applicants, reached a mutual decision as to which film projects deserved support and then were stunned by the huge discrepancy between the amount of money our decisions required and the amount available for allocation.

We were obliged to take a stand which we hope would force an amelioration of the

situation, not simply for this one juried competition, but for those to come. We refused to render a decision to choose only a handful from among equally worthy projects. Nor would we abandon the decision-making to a Canada Council employee. This stalemate became the basis of negotiation, one part of which was that a letter written by the jury be delivered to Maureen Forrester, Chairperson of the Canada Council; Peter Roberts, Director; Tom Sherman, Head of the Media Arts Section; and Françoise Picard, Film Officer. We asked that copies of the letter accompany the grant notifications by way of introduction to future action.

The letter in part stated: "It has been explained to us by Françoise Picard that the budget for film is insufficient to meet the requests which we support, and yet we find ourselves in a dilemma as a result

of the sheer quality of the applications in this competition. (It is also our view that this level of quality is not unusual.)

"After cutting the deserving candidates' budgets to the bone, and after eliminating four from our preferred list of 15, we are at a point where further cuts would make a travesty of our purpose for being here. As it is, having made the judgements we were asked to make, we have been compromised in the exercise of that judgment, by the severe financial restraints imposed on our work. How then, to meet the requirement to select the strongest and best applications?"

The letter went on to point out that there are funds in Canada, when allocations to Telefilm and the NFB are included, to provide for the development of independent film and films of vision such as the Canada Council supports, and we called for more equitable distribution of these funds.

"This is a central question for the existence of film in this country. This jury wishes to

state formally that its members consider it to be a major obligation of the Council to pursue a solution. We look forward to your constructive response," the letter to Forrester concluded.

At the time of this writing, there has been no response to the letter. Nor has there been a response to a resolution passed at the Annual General Meeting of the Association of National Non-Profit Artist-Run Centres (ANNPAC/RACA) held June 12-13 in Vancouver, which stated:

"We, the sixty-five member artist-run centres of ANNPAC-RACA, deplore the lack of funds available for allocation by the Canada Council's juries. The fund is so thin that decisions of juries cannot be implemented. Thus there is an erosion in the means to implement the basic principle of Council which is the peer-review system in a context of an arm's length policy. We support the awarding of grants according to merit and the process of peer assessment, and call for increases in the funds allocated to the Canada Council to ensure its ability to carry out its mandate."

In an interview in Ottawa, Vera Frankel, one of the jury members, made the following

statement: "The peer-review system is a valuable antidote to the psychology of deal-making so attractive to politicians and mainstream filmmakers. But even in purely business terms, the deal is only one reference point for achievement; research and development, respect for the power of the imagination, and community service are others. There are risks worth taking other than simply financial. Canada can have a far more wide-ranging film achievement than just what sells. Great gifts flourish in a supportive multi-track milieu; a range of different kinds and scales of talents and aspirations combine to form a whole complex system of forces that politicians often choose not to consider."

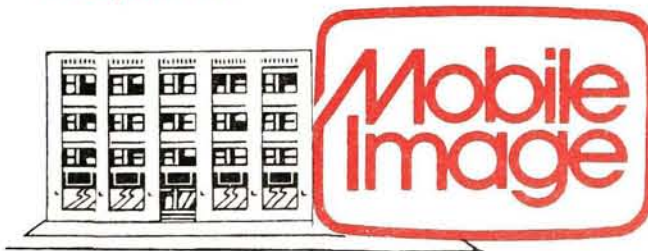
"There are those who applauded Masse's methods of divide and rule and his extravagant expenditures on spurious task forces; or, espousing trite notions of "survival of the fittest," or like to imagine that real film geniuses ought to manage without money. They are perhaps diverted as well by the playing of arts bureaucrats against filmmakers so evident to our jury."

"Regarding survival of the

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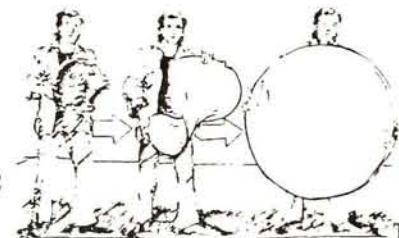
SIZES

20" (50 cm)

38" (96 cm)

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fittest: there are few things more demonstrably erroneous than Yes/No judgments of excellence, except perhaps for the law of the marketplace. After all, what sells, sells; but that doesn't mean the sale necessarily benefits more than the seller. Look at the ingredients on any package of junk food. Not much to build a cultural policy on. Production metaphors from business and economics apply to only half the story."

As you know, Flora, the Canada Council has responsibility for all film production that isn't shaped to the mass-media Hollywood model; film that addresses the art and practice of filmmaking and the Canadian experience without the primary condition for the film's existence being its marketability; films in all genres (feature, documentary, experimental) including first-time features by young filmmakers and all documentaries not produced by the NFB but by inde-

pendent Canadians; that is, all films not considered by Telefilm.

There are in the Council well-developed, nationally representative peer-review mechanisms for informed support; nonetheless, it has been given a huge and unreasonably burdensome role to play because the amount of funds is insufficient to meet these demands.

To return to the specifics of the situation: this jury reviewed the submissions of 58 appli-

cants (the number was 75 by July 15). After a thorough and rigorous professional appraisal which took into account more than marketability, having as its concern the environment for and impact of the work on the culture they help to make, we selected 15 deserving recipients, (later unfortunately reduced to 11). Having arrived at this decision, the jury learned that it had at its disposal a total of \$220,000 and, further, that this was to be allocated in amounts of \$50,000 per grant

where requested. This would mean four grants in all.

Now, Flora, you appeared in Toronto and Montreal recently to announce with pride the \$33 million allocation to Telefilm for features aimed at theatrical distribution (\$220,000 wouldn't cover catering expenses for one of these features).

We look forward to your rumoured announcement of an equally substantial increase to the Canada Council, the institution proven to be responsive to the deeper and wider needs of filmmaking in Canada.

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Ads come to cable

TORONTO — New regulations that allow some forms of advertising on cable television are an important breakthrough for the industry, Canadian Cable Television Association spokesmen say.

Revenue from limited forms of advertising on community channels will boost the local programming service, the national chairman of the Canadian Cable Television Association (CCTA) said in an announcement after new CRTC cable regulations were unveiled. Clint Forster also said advertising on other cable channels will benefit small business.

The CRTC approved limited forms of advertising on community channels in a new set of cable regulations announced Aug. 1, but also decided that conventional spot advertising will not be allowed.

Alphanumeric channels, which use still images of written text and graphics for airport arrival and departure, community bulletin board, weather and other types of information services, will not be regulated. Provided the messages remain in still image format the alphanumeric channels can include ads.

Each cable television operator must provide one community programming channel that previously could not show advertisements. Community channels, however, can now sell sponsorships that must appear before or at the end of programs as acknowledgements.

Beatrice Baker, a CRTC information officer, said the sponsorships will be much the same as those used on the American Public Broadcasting System network.

Community channels can also show credits in return for companies that provide the station with goods and services or work out exchange agreements. But revenue from contra, credit and sponsorship messages is to be funneled back into the community channel.