

# The Daily Grind

Why Canadian film is ignored by mainstream media

BY BRUCE BAILEY

**L**OS ANGELES - Nobody gets tired of ordering you to have a nice day. Waiters and waitresses announce their first names before they hand out the menus and then threaten to come back later to see how you're doin'. Almost everybody seems to be in therapy - and it's not something they're embarrassed to talk about. Try and stop 'em.

The stereotypes are all there, alive and living in Technicolor. They strut and flex and gaze inwardly in a consciousness zone that has little or nothing to do with the Great White North. And yet, the average Canadian filmgoer is probably a lot more familiar with these three-dimensional cartoons than he is with what happened in *Les Bons débarras*, *Goin' Down the Road*, *Peanut Butter Solution*, *Bayo* or any of the 78 feature films lensed last year in our own home and native land.

It's an irony worth pondering. And it's a particularly nettlesome one for me to face during this leave from almost nine years as a film reviewer in the mass media that so many Canadian filmmakers see as largely responsible for the national indifference to their work. Nonetheless, I'm not about to cry *mea culpa* without an explanation - a sort of affidavit which, I hope, will go some way toward soothing those egos which have been bruised or, worse yet, ignored by a seemingly heartless, self-satisfied and flippant critical Establishment with a red-white-and-blue flag for a brain.

Before we get into the nuts and bolts of the day-to-day infrastructure - the critic's machinery that stands between your work and fair exposure to the public - let's put it into its journalistic context. After all, the treatment accorded Canadian filmmakers by reporters on the arts is more or less a function of the broader principles - if you can call them that - which guide the mass media as bottom-line operations.

It may be icy comfort to Canadian movie people, but the fact is that their neglect at the hands of their own country's mass media is shared by just about anybody with a genuine artistic vision. The work of a new legitimate artist - what Marshall McLuhan defined as someone with "one foot in tomorrow" is of little or no interest to a journalistic Establishment disposed toward reporting what recognizable "talents" did yesterday. Partly because



Some blame - *Gazette* film critic Bruce Bailey takes his employer and other mass media outlets to task

Canadian filmmakers do not have the benefit of the grand-scale publicity circuses that systematically divert the attention of journalists toward Hollywood, they generally end up, at best, as sideshows in the daily coverage. Put simply: If the public doesn't already have a handle on the subject, the mass media are not about to give them the passkey.

From an artistic point of view, the situation is deplorable - even obscene. But from the perspective of newspaper management, turning out a product calculated to appeal to the L. C. D. of readership taste and knowledge is the only responsible way to run a large-scale business - as in "nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the public." Both sides are probably right in their own ways, but because their ethical vocabularies are so radically different, there's virtually no hope of a dialogue that will yield any significant practical results.

Case in point: two or three years ago, the *Montreal Gazette* management set up and chaired a meeting between its critics in the Entertainment Department and representatives of local artistic communities. The idea - at least officially - was to provide the artists with a fair chance to air their complaints about the paper's treatment of the arts in Quebec. The sources of discontent were made abundantly clear; the

paper was taken to task for insufficient and/or shallow and/or incompetent coverage. The critics launched a defense based on the limitations of a 35-hour week and the priority system built into writing for a largely middle-class anglophone readership. And both management and the critics took some pains to point out the nature of the beast - or monster: daily newspapers are primarily a "reactive" medium - that is, they're oriented toward responding on an immediate, superficial level to events (such as the opening of a *Rambo* movie) of predetermined general interest. If you want a serious discussion of subjects with minority appeal (e.g. a Canadian filmmaker) or of heretofore unheralded talents, you're pretty much confined to the "reflective" media (which would include such publications as *Cinema Canada*).

At the meeting in question, the sides seemed to see each other's point of view well enough. But it would be naive to suppose that there was any real understanding going on here. Corporate-minded executives and entertainment critics with artsy pretensions have a hard enough time getting along. When you pit the Establishment against artists who wouldn't know a regular salary if they tripped over it, the encounter may be cordial enough - but in the

end, you're right back where you started.

The vicious circle is still in place wherever you look: the mass media don't give adequate coverage to Canadian film because the industry is not of general interest; the industry is not of general interest because it's not covered. How do you remedy the situation? You don't.

By their very nature, subjects of minority interest are only going to get serious, extensive coverage in specialized (i.e. small) media outlets. The sad irony here, of course, is that this is where you're going to find the most thoughtful writing - the analysis worth reading - but this is also where you rarely find the skilled professional journalist or an audience large enough to effect a significant change in the marketplace.

Journalists writing for the mass media have been known to have a profound thought or two about Canadian filmmaking, but these observations - if they have any real complexity at all - are unlikely to see the light of day. There are a number of reasons for that.

For one thing, there's rarely enough time for the critic or reporter to reflect on the subject before the piece goes into print. You might have spent five years and all your physical and emotional energy getting your film together, but that doesn't count for all that much when the journalist is under the gun. Deadline pressures are such that it wouldn't be uncommon for a daily critic to log in a whole review within an hour (including travelling time) after the screening. "Background" pieces don't fare much better. Nobody around my office gasped with amazement when it took only three hours for me to research *Quest for Fire* from scratch, get to and from a hotel interview with the director and write a story that filled the Saturday section front.

The mass media's ineluctable insistence on immediate reporting is a pressure endured by everybody in the biz. But on top of that, the critic has assumed an obligation to be entertaining. We operate on the axiom that readers who opt for "soft" news - a review, a feature - have some right to get a kick out of the prose, whether or not they have seen the film or have any intention of going. The net effect is that time which would have been spent in mulling over your film in the best of all possible worlds is in fact given over to constructing zippy copy.

At the risk of sounding condescending, I should also point out that at most newspapers - and that includes *The Gazette* - the critic does not simply write until he or she has said what has to

Bruce Bailey, film critic for *The Gazette* in Montreal, is currently on leave in California where he is writing a book.



be said and then stop. More often than not, the critic is operating under the constraints of available space. Sometimes those pre-defined limits can leave the critic with a bum rap – and a certain public embarrassment. When I had to do the review of *Heaven's Gate*, for example, I was given six inches to make my points about a movie that took several very painful hours of my time to watch. A few days later, I got a letter attached to a copy of Jay Scott's lengthy piece on the same subject in the *Globe & Mail*. Why, the reader wanted to know, was I so glib and superficial about a film that Mr. Scott felt was worthy of so much attention?

As it so happens, the treatment we gave to *Heaven's Gate* was not at all typical of what happens to most Hollywood films by name directors. Its fate was more along the lines of what befalls most Canadian movies. Partly because the editor (assuming the role of the "average reader") is usually unfamiliar with the Canadian movie or personality at hand, it usually gets substantially less play than a Hollywood product that happens to be a sequel or has been puffed up by months of PR flak. Hence, the critic may be given reams of space and prominent placement for *Crocodile Dundee II*



– a film about which nothing of any density could possibly be said – while *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, a far more complex and socially relevant film, stands a good chance of getting relegated to a back page and dismissed in short shrift.

No matter which film we're dealing with, however, the daily newspaper reviewer generally falls far short of concerning himself with what T.S. Eliot would call legitimate work in the field – "the elucidation of a work of art and the elevation of taste." Normally, we're

confined to the less-than-glorious task of identifying the cast, summarizing the set-up and expressing a consistent opinion in a familiar voice and posture.

Once that humble task is complete, the piece is still subject to editing – and often to cutting, regardless of what space requirements we were originally told to meet. It's then topped by a headline written by somebody else, usually a copy editor. The head should reflect the sense of the feature or review, but at most papers, it must also "fit" within narrow limits left to right, top to bottom. In practice, that means that an accurate head that does not fit will *always* be rejected for a less accurate one that does match the space.

Makes you wonder why the blurb writers for movie ads take those headlines seriously enough to quote them. And indeed, the whole process is enough to leave you wondering why so many Canadian filmmakers take the treatment they get in the press to heart – as if they're being affronted on a personal level. What they do have every right to get upset about has less to do with the validity of the opinions themselves than with the way that decisions made under duress can have such devastating effects on so many careers. ●

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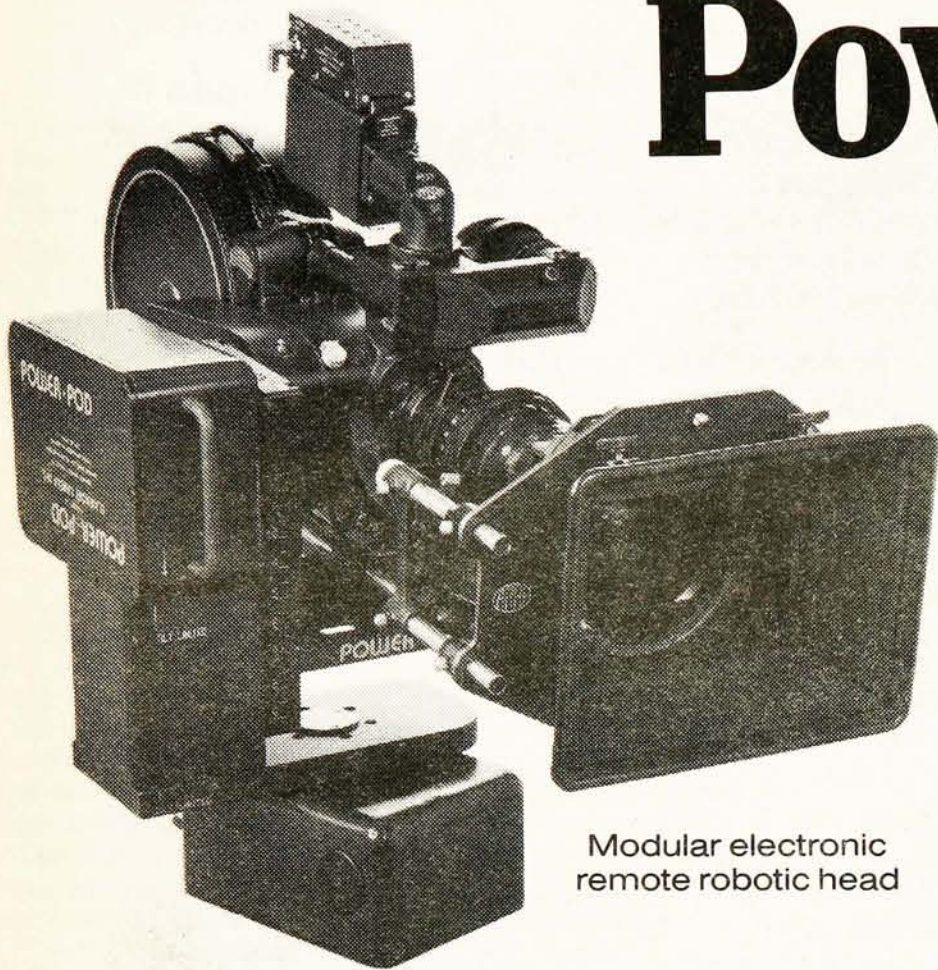
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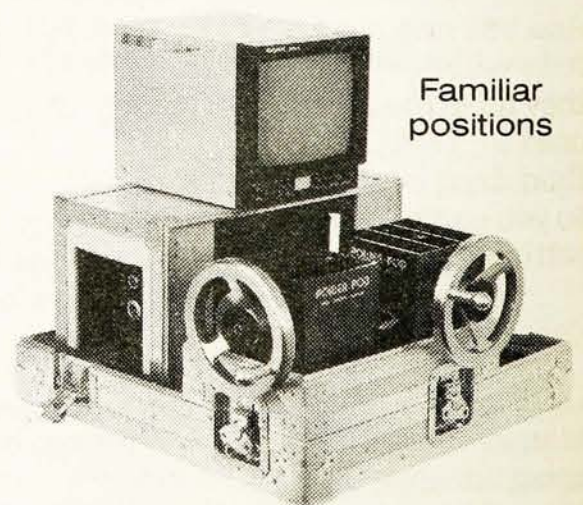
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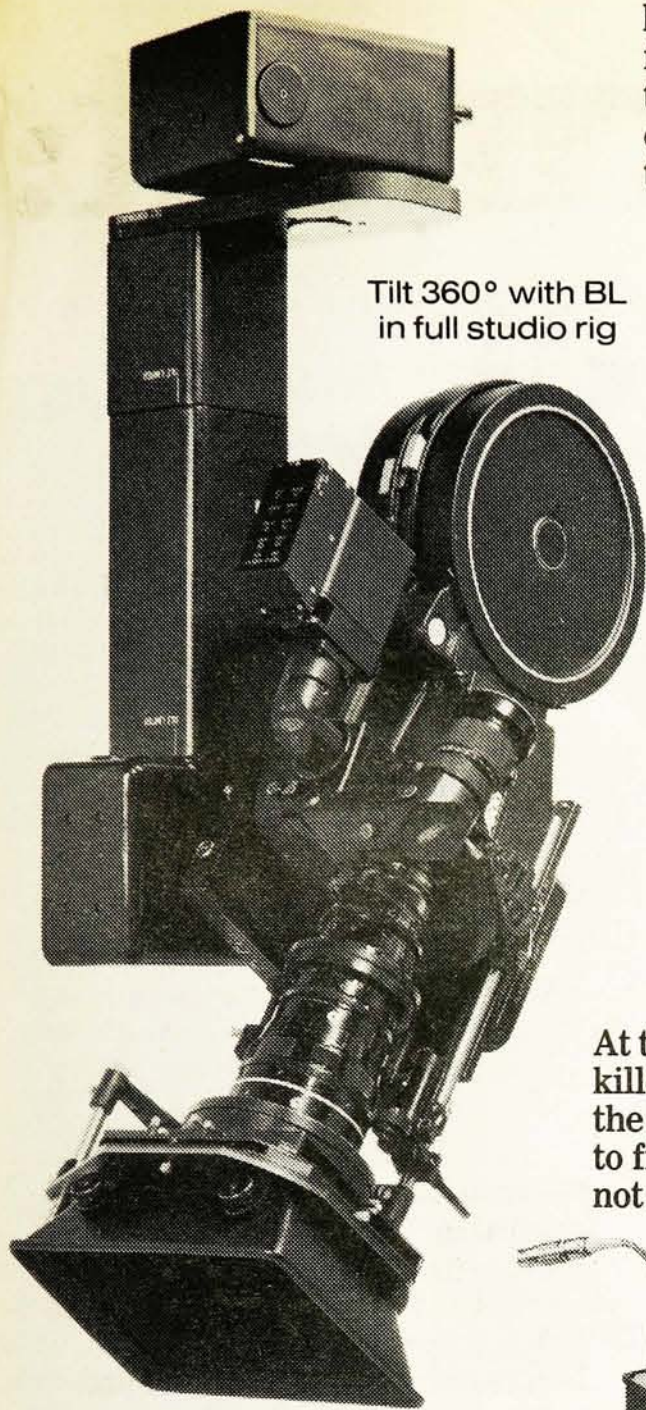


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The Zapper Box

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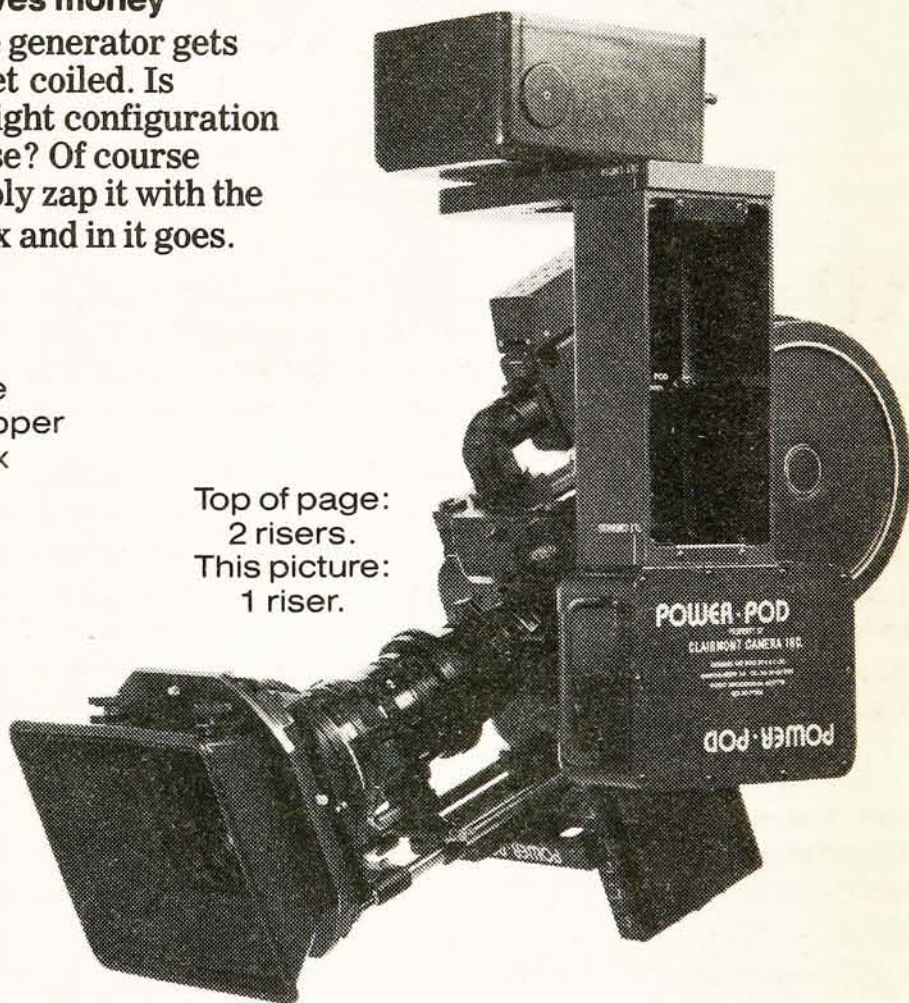
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