

PERSPECTIVE CANADA?

Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films

CANADIANS working in popular culture always seem to be involved in an ironic enterprise. After all, there has been very little "pop" in our culture until quite recently. Up until the 1960s, this country produced precious little in the way of populist entertainment – few comic books, hit records, or feature films. Most Canadians who chose to become entertainers, from Mack Sennett to Paul Anka to Joe "Superman" Siegel, did so in that hospitable environment down south. It has only been since Expo 67 and Trudeauania that Canadians have begun to see themselves as representatives of a society that can produce cultural objects just for the sheer pleasure of doing so.

In Ted Magder's new book, *Canada's Hollywood*, the skewed history of Canadian feature film making is incisively detailed. It's a sad and deplorable tale. Magder is a great believer in the positive effects of pop culture, although like most Canadians, he is no practitioner; in fact, he is the Director of the Mass Communications Program at York University. Nearly half of his work describes something that barely existed – feature filmmaking in Canada before 1963. The silent films of Ernest Shipman, the "quota quickies" of the 1930s, and the Quebec boomlet from 1943 through 1954, are placed within their particular social and economic contexts. Although no aesthete, Magder makes it clear that none of these films affected this country's popular ethos in any way comparable to the films from such countries as Britain, France, and, of course, Hollywood, U.S.A. He makes it quite clear that this nation's film-going sensibilities had been completely colonized from the inception of commercial cinema.

The one exception up until the mid-1960s, was the National Film Board which quickly achieved international acclaim for its newsreel productions. Although Magder acknowledges the considerable contributions that the NFB made (and continues to make) in the documentary and short subject categories, he sees the

Board's influence as being "far from positive or constructive" in the area of feature films. John Grierson believed in educational cinema; he thought Hollywood's movies were silly and superficial. By choice, the NFB posed no threat to the studio system. The U.S. majors were only too happy to allow the NFB to win



Bear Island: "a dreadful turkey"

awards for "worthwhile" films while they reaped the lion's share of profits off their self-proclaimed "domestic market," Canada.

When Canadian feature film production finally began, it was already too late in the day to start the process of challenging the U.S. studios for a market share of "their" cinemas. One of the strengths of Magder's book is its lucid presentation of the exhibition system in Canada. Essentially, the situation that existed at the end of WWII is still in place today. Famous Players and Cineplex Odeon have an "entente cordial" which allows them to control a majority of the screens in Canada through their contracts with all the major producers in Hollywood.

By the late 1960s, a variety of convergent events ranging from the films of Claude Jutra and Jacques Godbout, to Trudeau-era nationalist bureaucrats Pierre Juneau and Judy LaMarsh, to independent filmmaker Allan King, were creating the atmosphere that finally shamed the federal government into drafting a feature film policy. For a "miserable ten million dollars" (LaMarsh's phrase), the federal Liberal Party created the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) with the intent of

force-feeding a film industry on to this "elitist" country.

The CFDC and its successor, Telefilm Canada, have acted as the banker for the then-nascent, now-adolescent, film industry. Over the years, great art-house hits have emerged under this system. From Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* to Claude Jutra's *Kamouraska* to Atom Egoyan's *Exotica*, the CFDC/Telefilm Canada can claim credit for helping to finance nearly every important Canadian feature film made over the past 26 years. Unfortunately, they must also accept responsibility for a myriad of artistic and financial disasters like *Bear Island* and *The Last Chase*. Those dreadful turkeys, and a host of others, were financed for "commercial" reasons, particularly during the heady days of the late 1970s and early 1980s when a 100 percent capital cost allowance made private investment in film production look like a sure thing.

These days, the vast majority of commercial fare being produced in Canada is television shows like *E.N.G.* and *Due South*. As an entity, Telefilm Canada has been forced to act both as a cultural producer and as a commercial banker. Magder recognizes this contradiction.

Where does this leave feature filmmaking in Canada? With distribution and exhibition of films still firmly in the hands of the U.S.-controlled media giants, we have limited access to our own Canadian screens. All attempts to impose quotas for Canadian feature films have been scuttled by Hollywood. Probably the last major policy initiative was proposed by Flora MacDonald in the early Mulroney years; it died, in Magder's words, "a rather unsightly death." Will things change? Magder doesn't think so: "It is hard to imagine a future that will look much different from the past."

With no hope for controlling our own distribution systems, Magder endorses the notion that "we need public support for cultural production," like the films of Egoyan and Rozema. Pop culture will remain where it always has been, in the hands and hearts of Americans – and those Canadians who decide to journey south to join them.

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