

A TALE OF TWO CINEMATHEQUES

By Lee Parpart

In the never-ending debate about perceived fairness in cultural funding in this country, once again Ontario is getting “the fuzzy end of the lollipop,” to quote the memorable Marilyn Monroe quip from *Some Like It Hot*. Particularly egregious is Telefilm Canada’s favouring of Quebec-based events celebrating 100 years of film in Canada. Out of the six major projects related to the anniversary (which takes place over this summer), only one—a tentative (but as yet unrealized) agreement with the Cinematheque Ontario to strike a 35mm print of Don Shebib’s seminal *Goin’ Down the Road*—has anything to do with English-Canadian cinema. The remainder of Telefilm’s \$574,000 funding went towards a director’s cut of Claude Jutra’s *Kamouraska*; financing for *Voilà le cinéma* (Jacques Rouffio’s life of Charles Pathé); investment in the documentary series *L’anecdote cinéma*; production funds for André Gladu’s *La conquête du grand écran*, a feature film on the history of Quebec cinema; and the production of 12 trailers paying tribute to Quebec film.

However, a closer look at the operations of the Cinematheque Ontario and the Cinémathèque Québécoise reveals a great deal about the nature of federal and provincial cultural funding in Upper and Lower Canada. While the Cinematheque Ontario has spent the last eight months fighting for its life amid disappearing federal grants and dwindling provincial support, its older and more established *sœur*, the Cinémathèque Québécoise, has been enjoying a major renaissance. Not only is the cinémathèque québécoise still in line, at least for the time being, for operating money from the Canada Council (a luxury the Cinematheque Ontario has never enjoyed), it is also in the process of receiving a \$15-million facelift and expansion. Meanwhile, the Cinematheque Ontario is looking at major (but still unspecified) cuts to its \$1.1-million provincial grant, and has been told it won’t be getting any more federal operating money after this year. None, zero, zilch.

The discrepancy looks mind-boggling at first glance, but makes a bit more sense when one realizes that it’s due to a confluence of events: the Cinémathèque Québécoise finally getting its way after an intense 10-year lobbying effort; a planned federal withdrawal from the whole business of supporting cinémathèques; and the arrival of the Common Sense Revolution in Ontario. While Mike Harris has been carrying out his cultural clearcutting, the Quebec government (with substantial help from the federal heritage ministry) just happens to be fulfilling all of its cinémathèque’s wildest dreams.

Unfortunately, all of this has the effect of reinforcing the commonly held belief that Quebec has had a cakewalk when it comes to accessing federal cultural dollars. “There have been huge disparities over the years between Quebec and English Canada,” said Allison

Bain, government liaison for the Toronto International Film Festival Group, which operates the Cinematheque Ontario and the accompanying Film Reference Library. “They get a far higher percentage of [the] cultural dollar.”

While this is an almost impossible assertion to prove, the folks at the Cinematheque Ontario are quietly beginning to wonder if they’ll ever get their fair share of federal cultural dollars.

And it’s a fair question, despite the fact that the Cinémathèque Québécoise has been working on its capital program for a decade and despite the semantic games that invariably arise when officials are called on to describe how cultural money is being spent. Federal Heritage Minister Michel Dupuy (who has since been replaced by Sheila Copps) may have insisted that infrastructure grants be considered separately from operating grants, and that plus or minus a few million dollars in building money, everyone is getting the same basic treatment from the federal government. But the bottom line remains the same—the Cinematheque Ontario and the Film Reference Library are being allowed to atrophy, while the Cinémathèque Québécoise forges ahead, all wired up and equipped for the next century.

At the same time that Dupuy was personally eliminating the Cinematheque Ontario’s \$200,000 operating grant (a cut that has since been staved off for one year), he was making sure that the Cinémathèque Québécoise received its \$98,000 federal grant and an extra \$3-million on the side. With the help of another \$11-million from the Canada-Quebec Infrastructure Program and the province of Quebec (and \$1-million to be raised from the private sector), the Cinémathèque Québécoise has been able to buy the old school next to its Montreal building and will erect a new headquarters in the spring. The plan is to digitize completely the Cinémathèque’s library, turning it into a fully wired “médiathèque” with Internet access and CD-ROM technology for all, while adding two new halls for screenings and interactive exhibitions about cinema and television.

Anyone with an interest in Canadian film (of any sub-state national stripe) can only be thrilled at this prospect. Personally, I can’t wait to visit Montreal this spring and see how much of the block at St. Denis and de Maisonneuve is devoted to the preservation and presentation of my favourite national cinema. And there should be no doubt the Cinémathèque Québécoise—a marvellous institution that comes closer than any other in Canada to embody the true goals of a cinémathèque on the classical European model—deserves this project, which is the fruit of intense effort and negotiations with all levels of government.

Meanwhile, however, the Film Reference Library, in its new headquarters at Yonge and Carlton—which has become an invaluable resource for students, scholars, researchers and people working in the



Photo: Jacques Rouffio

Jacques Rouffio's VOILÀ LE CINÉMA: Quebec celebrates the centenary of cinema in style, while English-Canadian cinema falls off the edge of the world.

film industry—is in danger of developing serious gaps in its collection. The worst-case scenario—that of it being mothballed—still hangs heavy in the air. Any further reduction in funding could seriously harm the value of the collection, which includes 2,000 movies on video, 1,200 films in storage, 11,200 biography files, 42,000 film title files, 13,200 film books, 6,500 movie posters, 8,800 slides, 161,000 movie stills, all of the Toronto film festival's files over its 20-year history and all of David Cronenberg's movie-related papers (donated on an ongoing basis). The library continues to accept donations of film-related material, but its acquisitions budget has been put on hold; all of *Cinema Canada's* editorial papers sit in boxes with little hope of being catalogued anytime soon; film prints being held in non-climate-controlled storage are in danger of turning into vinegar (although Peter Harcourt and others are currently working on a solution to this); and the Cinematheque's screening program is offering 25 per cent fewer films this year than last.

While we're used to the Cinémathèque Québécoise being the *la soeur ainee*—the one with the true film archives; the one with linguistic advantages and the cultural and political support needed to keep it strong and well-funded—some of us assumed, or at least hoped, that the Cinematheque Ontario would gradually be able to catch up. While the Cinematheque Ontario has never received the kind of funding that would allow it to preserve the negatives of those films not being saved by the National Archives of Canada or the Ontario Archives (i.e., the work of Ontario independent filmmakers, especially those doing short and experimental work), its other functions still make it the best resource for English-language film in Canada. Nobody else screens the kind of material that routinely shows up in the cinematheque's popular Carte Blanche series (an ongoing forum that invites leading Toronto filmmakers to guest-curate a selection of films), or in its annual Canadian thematic programs. In 1994, for example, Concordia University professor Thomas Waugh curated *The Fruit Machine*, which brought together 83 films and videos by Canadian gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Who else is going to show David Sector's *Winter Kept Us Warm*, Cathy Jones's *Outport Lesbians* or Gwendolyn's *Prowling By Night*?

Ironically, both the success of the Cinematheque Ontario up to this point and the roots of its current predicament can be traced back to 1990, when the province decided to place the Ontario Film Institute (OFI) under the care of the Toronto film festival. As OFI founder Gerald Pratley tells it, this decision was unilateral. Before the Cinematheque Ontario came under the festival's wing, Pratley says, there was an active plan (and a promise from the Ontario government) to turn it into a free-standing film institute on the model of the British Film Institute or the Cinémathèque Française. But this heavenly proposal withered and died in the time it took Pratley to serve a couple

of provincial henchmen a pot of Earl Grey tea one afternoon in 1989. "These two men [junior provincial officials] I'd never met called and said they wanted to talk about the big move (into our new premises, which were going to be in the Harbourfront complex)," Pratley recalls. "They came up, I served them tea, and in the course of our meeting they calmly announced that the film institute was going to become part of the festival."

Pratley was devastated because he knew, from experience and observation, that "festivals don't run film institutes, it's the other way around." While he hoped that the Festival would treat his film library and screening program with as much loving care as he had bestowed on them since 1969, he couldn't be sure. Happily, most observers agree that the Festival Group has done a first-rate job of maintaining and updating the library, while the screening program—under James Quandt's superb care—has become a critical and popular success, earning nearly a quarter-of-a-million dollars in ticket sales and sponsorship last year.

But the fear is twofold: (1) that the feds are punishing the Cinematheque Ontario for being too closely connected to the Toronto International Film Festival; and (2) that the Festival Group may not be willing (or able) to go to the wall for the Cinematheque Ontario and Film Reference Library in the event of further budget cuts. While it's too early to tell how Sheila Copps will see the situation, Dupuy clearly didn't like funding a cinematheque that shared resources with a film festival which earned \$3.7-million in revenues last year.

Film lovers in Ontario (indeed, anyone interested in English-language Canadian film) should be lobbying to convince the province and the federal government to recognize their shared responsibility for Ontario's film heritage. That period during the 1980s which has become known as Ontario's New Wave won't amount to much in the long run if the films are not available to future generations for study and enjoyment. Quebec and the federal government manage to fund the Cinémathèque Québécoise at seemingly comfortable levels year after year. The Cinematheque Ontario and the Film Reference Library—indeed English-Canadian cinema—should be accorded the same treatment and respect. ■

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