

CRITICAL MASS: CANWEST AND ITS CRITICS



CanWest Global
Communications Co.

The denials came within a day of the charges. In one of her columns last March, the *Toronto Star's* media guru Antonia Zerbisias sounded an early alarm bell: CanWest Global Communications, owners of the biggest daily newspaper chain in the country, was planning on nixing a number of its regional arts critics and replacing them with centralized drones, she reported. The retort was as swift as it was dismissive: a CanWest press release denied any such plan.

Approximately eight months later, Zerbisias couldn't help but contain her giddiness, finishing her October 7, 2003 column by contending that indeed, two CanWest film critics had been elevated to "serve the entire chain" (a chain that includes Montreal's *The Gazette*, the *Ottawa Citizen*, the *Edmonton Journal*, the *Calgary Herald* and *The Vancouver Sun*), with the exception of the *National Post*.

Aspers would be overseeing such centralization, seeing as the family has always maintained its defiant Winnipeg—rather-than—Toronto—as-cultural-centre stance.) Take the CanWest coverage of the crucial Cannes Film Festival in May. This year, as part of what was clearly a cost-cutting plan, CanWest sent one critic to the south of France—fair enough, from a publisher's perspective, given the cost of airfare and hotels. (In previous years almost every newspaper would send their own critic.) Writing throughout the chain in her May 26, 2003 wrap, Monk wrote: "At times, over the course of this marathon movie schmooze that was largely viewed as the worst Cannes festival ever, it really did feel like cinema was dead."

Sticking to Monk's reportage meant that Brendan Kelly, an arts industry reporter and stringer for *Variety* who usually covers the event for *The Gazette*, didn't attend.

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Those two writers, as it turns out, are the *Ottawa Citizen's* Jay Stone and *The Vancouver Sun's* Katherine Monk. And, according to sources within CanWest, the decision to hire them as more or less national film correspondents came after film critics from across CanWest's daily empire were asked to apply for the positions. Despite these new positions, however, regional critics (like John Griffin and Brendan Kelly at *The Gazette*) appeared to continue to be on their beats.

It may just sound like so much more downsizing in a rapidly evaporating media world, but for a film culture and community as fragile and tenuous as Canada's is, I would argue that filmmakers, as well as journalists, should be deeply concerned about such cuts. Most obviously, a sense of regionalism will be compromised, if not completely lost, in such a shuffle. (On a side note, it's truly ironic that the

And that did mean the pages of the Montreal daily felt strangely different during this Cannes festival. It would be very hard to imagine, for example, that any Quebec critic would have spoken of this year's festival in such disparaging terms, given that the twice-Oscar-nominated Denys Arcand had just served up a stunning, double-award-winning comeback, *Les Invasions barbares*, which played to standing ovations. Not to mention that *Mambo Italiano*, considered a pivotal project in terms of the viability of the economic future of Quebec's movie business, screened at the Cannes market (but was not part of the Official Competition).

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BY MATTHEW HAYS

already suffers from a dearth of varied opinions in this crucial art and medium. I confess, it feels odd to complain about CanWest's canning a bunch of their critics; the chain (previously named Southam) has a long and rather disgusting history of treating arts reporting as something to be tolerated, rather than fostered. But simply downsizing the number of film critics who already work in these arts sections (through transfer or attrition) is hardly the answer. It has long puzzled me that the attitudes of "hard news" journalists in Canada have meant the sidelining of cultural coverage. Has no one noticed that the very best newspapers in the world, including *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, take their arts sections every bit as seriously as their news sections?

As for the franchising or synergy effect merely being something practiced by the crass mainstream press, witness the alternative Montreal media, who have, sadly and rapidly, been following suit. On Friday, October 10, 2003, *The Gazette* ran reviews of both the two main movie releases of that week (Tarantino's *Kill Bill* and the Coen brothers', *Intolerable Cruelty*) neither written by the paper's 19-year-veteran Griffin, but by the newly minted national critic Stone. A day earlier, the city's French-language weekly, *Voir*, ran precisely the same cover story of its English-language offshoot, *Hour*. Written by *Hour* critic Dimitri Katadotis, the Tarantino-interview cover was the result of a *Kill Bill* junket. The doubling up of coverage in both papers came a mere few months after *Voir's* film critic, Juliette Ruer—widely considered one of the city's best—was unceremoniously canned in a bid by the paper to save cash. (In the spirit of full disclosure, I must state here that I work for the *Mirror*, a competitor of both *Hour* and *Voir*.)

It might sound like sweet revenge for Canuck filmmakers. At last, all those critics who've killed so many trees trashing various movies are getting their comeuppance. But something's getting lost in the translation with the move toward all this evaporation, franchising and synergy of opinion. It may be a wet dream for cheap publishers but the effect, I suspect, will be felt throughout the Canadian filmmaking community, not just among journalists. It was the great Canadian thinker Northrop Frye who once suggested that "Where is here?" was the quintessential Canadian question, an existential streak he sensibly sensed running throughout so much of our literary and film culture. Here feels like it's getting a whole lot smaller.

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