

Three Modest Proposals Canadian Film "Industry"

by John Harkness

After looking at it for a long time, I've decided that Canadian Cinema is just fine. We make exceptional films like *Jésus de Montréal*, *Dead Ringers* and *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould*. We make interesting films like *Masala*. We make deadly dull films like *The Lotus Eaters* and *The Burning Season*. In the long run, it doesn't matter much what anyone says about the film industry, which will continue to lumber slowly along, much as it has for the past decade or so.

Instead, I've decided to offer a series of proposals that I think would do the film business and the Canadian soul a world of good. They will no doubt be ignored. I prefer to think of myself as being ahead of my time.

CLOSE ALL FILM SCHOOLS FOR AT LEAST FIVE YEARS

We have more filmmakers than we have projects for them to make, yet our film schools keep churning out little baby directors.

Jean Renoir, Kenji Mizoguchi, David Lean, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Orson Welles, Steven Spielberg, Federico Fellini, Billy Wilder, David Cronenberg - none of these people went to film school. More great films have been made by people who never saw the inside of a film school than by people with graduate degrees in filmmaking.

I also have considerable doubts about what they are being taught. A few years ago, a friend of mine was working for the Academy of Canadian Cinema on their director-observer program that took young filmmaking students and put them on the sets of actual, in-production films. During the course of interviewing the applicants, she discovered that an inordinate number of the students wanted to be the next Patricia Rozema. The idea that there are dozens of little filmmaking students out there, waiting to unleash their version of *White Room* on the world steals my sleep.

But what, you ask, about people who really want to make films? How can we deprive them of an educational opportunity? People who really want to make films will make films. If they are truly driven to make films, they will find a way. Personally, I'm with the American writer Flannery O'Connor, who, when asked if he thought that University writing programs stifled writers, said that it didn't stifle enough of them. The same thing is true of filmmakers.

Broadly speaking, universities have two objectives. The first is to develop an educated human being capable of thought and ready to contribute to the well-being of society. The second is to give a person the necessary skills with which to earn a living.

Canada's best and most successful filmmakers tend to make a film every three years or so. Deny Arcand, one of our most successfully serious filmmakers, took four years to get from *Jésus de Montréal* to *Love and Human Remains*. Film schools give students all kinds of skills, then turns them loose on a world where they can scrape together bits of money to make films that will never be seen. Before she hit with *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, one could find Patricia Rozema's name in the credits of one of those kiddie shows (either *The Elephant Show* or *The Polka Dot Door*) as third assistant director. I once asked her what the third A.D. did on a show like this, and it turned out that she was basically a kid wrangler. For this you need to go to film school?

When I say film schools, I include the Canadian Film Centre, whose chief contribution to Canadian cinema was its first class, which gutted Canadian cinema of a generation's worth of superb documentary filmmakers - Janis Cole, Brigitte Berman, Peter Raymont - who have produced damn little since their tour through the Norman Jewison *École de Haute Schmooze*. The Centre's most prolific graduate

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following six years of existence is Gail Harvey, whose two films, *The Shower* (aptly described by the Toronto Star's Norm Wilner as "No Exit staged by Molson's") and the "erotic thriller" *Cold Sweat* would be an embarrassment if anyone had seen them.

The American Film Institute program on which the Canadian Film Centre models itself works because there is a large and centralized film industry to absorb its graduates. The Canadian Film Centre has had almost 100 residents since its birth, and there is no industry in Canada capable of absorbing that many filmmakers, producers, writers, artistes.

STOP RELYING ON FILM FESTIVALS

The idea has grown that the best way to launch one's film is to get it properly positioned in a major Canadian film festival. At least two or three times a year, some poor neglected filmmaker complains that the selection committee at the Toronto International Film Festival's Perspective Canada program has some personal animus or profound lack of taste that has led them to ignore said filmmaker's magnum opus. They've done you a big favour.

It is actually a terrible idea to launch your film in English Canada at a film festival, for the following reasons:

Film festivals have evolved into a weird, self-contained exhibition circuit. It is almost possible for a filmmaker to spend a year or so trucking around the world, being stroked and interviewed at festivals from Cannes to Ouagadougou to Toronto to Sudbury to Vancouver to Delhi, from Tokyo to Telluride, from Park City in January to Havana in December. And what does the filmmaker get for all this, apart from a lot of frequent flyer miles and a certain exhaustion at the sound of his or her own voice and cosmic jet lag?

Not much - some festivals have a certain cachet in their own market - a prize at Cannes will help a film in Europe, though *Jésus de Montréal* tanked when it opened in Paris immediately after Cannes. But does a film's presence in the Toronto festival add to its credibility or salability when it comes to getting into a Cineplex in Windsor? I doubt it, frankly. I suspect people outside the film festival circuit are far less impressed by film festival honours than people inside the festival circuit.

But what about all the publicity? Let me show you how that one looks from the point of view of someone who does the interviewing. A film gets launched in Cannes - Atom Egoyan's *The Adjuster*, say, or David Wellington's *I Love a Man in Uniform*. The Canadian press pays appropriate attention, talks about the film, interviews the filmmakers and/or the stars, such as they are, and files stories home to a grateful public. For four months, nothing happens, and the film fades from the memory because the public has had, after all, no chance to see the film that they heard about.

In September, the film gets a Gala spot at Toronto, or a good spot in Perspective Canada, and the dog and pony show starts all over again. At this point, the papers do their profiles, the film has its Gala, and then finally, a week, two weeks, three months, six months later, the film finally opens, with a small advertising budget and one screen in Toronto's Carlton Cinemas or the smallest of the Cumberlands, and we in the press are offered the film one more time, at which point we are heartily sick of it. We are not your publicists. The distributors get shocked when we in the press don't get all wet at the thought of putting together a big spread on a picture that we've already covered, sometimes twice. It has become, before opening, an old movie.

The desire to see one's film play in a film festival screws up the release schedules big time, with all the independent distributors trying to get their films out in the three weeks following the Toronto festival, at the exact moment when their natural audience is really tired from two weeks of film festivaling.

Finally, here's something practical to think about. During the festival, people who really want to see the film will see the film - two shows in a three hundred seat theatre are six hundred tickets, and not one penny of it returns to the film or its distributor. Do you help the film by giving away seats?

**FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS SHOULD STOP
FUNDING FEATURE FILM PRODUCTION**

My fingers tremble as I process these words. I can't believe that I'm about to say what I'm about to say. Well, God hates a coward.

The governments, federal and provincial, should stop funding feature film production. The Canadian government has been pouring money into this financial dry hole for about a quarter of century now, and exactly what have we gotten for the millions "invested" - a film "industry" that lies continually in intensive care, tubes running in and out of its body, dozens of specialists running in and out of the room to monitor its pulse, blood pressure. It's a Karen Anne Quinlan of a film industry that no one's willing to pull the plug on.

I once spoke with a producer who had made films on both sides of the border, and he said to me that in the U.S. industry, to be successful as a producer, at some point one must satisfy an audience. It may be an audience plunking down \$8 to see the movie in a theatre, it may be an audience renting a video for \$3, it may be people tuning into your movie when it shows up on tv, but an audience must be satisfied or the film is a failure.

In Canada, he said, you never have to satisfy an audience. You have to satisfy Telefilm Canada, the Ontario Film Development Corporation, the CBC, the National Film Board.

That is, you have to satisfy a group of well-meaning, highly educated, cultural bureaucrats. This means three or four things. It means that a filmmaker would be far likelier to get approval for a movie that espouses whatever liberal cause is fashionable at the moment than for anything truly audacious, unsettling or interesting. I suspect that the entire career of the terminally tedious Anne Wheeler is based on the fact that she's a "two-fer" - a woman director and a regional director in one package, fulfilling a big chunk of whatever unconscious quota system exists in the minds of the culture-crats. (And that system exists. A few years ago, I was talking to one of the principals in Deepa Mehta's *Sam and Me*, who told me they had a devil of time getting funding because, someone at Telefilm told them, Telefilm already had an Indian film that year.)

When something daring comes through the English Canadian offices of Telefilm, like John Greyson's *Zero Patience* or Srivinas Krishna's *Masala*, one can bet that it is being funded not because it is daring, but because it fulfills some minority quotas.

Why does the government fund films? If the intent was to create a viable, working film industry which creates products that audiences want to see, then almost three decades of government funding has been an abject failure in English Canada. Good films have been made, but I would suggest that most of the best films have been made by people so obsessed with their visions that they would have been made whether the government funded them or not. People who need to make the films will make films, whether they get a grant or not. And people who are successful at making films that they have to make will continue to make them.

The government has never done the one thing essential to create a working film industry. It has never guaranteed Canadian films theatre space. How can we have a working film industry without control of exhibition? On those occasions in the past three decades when the various federal governments have made noises about quotas or box office levies, Jack Valenti, Hollywood's lobbyist/enforcer, has shown up and got the government to back down.

If the government really wants to create a viable film industry, they shouldn't be funding production. They should build a theatre chain that would let people see Canadian films in an environment comparable to that in which they see Hollywood films. Perhaps 60 screens to start, and then match distributors dollar for dollar on promotion and advertising. Then we'd see if there's any sort of market for Canadian films in Canada, rather than who is committed to getting grants, bridging loans and development money.

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