

# Giving Credit: The Canada Council and Canadian Independent Cinema

"If the man of action is without conscience, he is also without knowledge: he forgets most things in order to do one, he is unjust to what is behind him and only recognizes one law—the law of that which is to be."

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*

"The dreamers ride against the men of action, oh, see the men of action falling back."

Leonard Cohen, "The Traitor"

"A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine."

Samuel Beckett, *Company*

## When asked recently

which cultural text best represented the times we live in, I suggested Miguel de Cervantes' sprawling, picaresque, utterly contemporary comic novel of 1605, *Don Quixote*. As the polite smile of my interlocutor plummeted into puzzled, even fearful looks, I tried to clarify. We live in an era largely governed by those who believe like *señor Quixote*, but *without* his compassion, that the world exists as it is written in books. Don Quixote thought the world conformed to what he read about it in his library of romances. Today, we have an alarmingly conformist climate in which the world is believed to exist as it is written in books by, say, Adam Smith, Milton Friedman, Conrad Black or Bill Gates. All complicating considerations of time, history, culture and community have been shelled by the blunt, infinitely parroted arsenal of business-speak: "competitive," "investment," "globalization," "the market." These terms, brandished like weapons to flatten, to divide and to make us forget, constitute the inadequate, stale and largely borrowed vocabulary of "men of action." They are to be found coast-to-coast in Canada, riding out of their libraries wilfully, even contemptuously, blind to that which may confound what they have read. Under the law of "that which is to be," there is no time to be confused by dreams or imagination. And so, year after year, the cuts to cultural institutions keep coming: CBC, NFB, OFDC, OAC, CFMDC and many others.

In the midst of this darkness, however, arrives a significant and politically potent anniversary. The Canada Council turned 40 in 1997, marking four decades of public funding of the arts. Significant because any cultural institution that can survive that long, and through the brutal attacks of the last 15 years in particular, is something to celebrate; politically potent because the success of the Canada Council's funding of independent cinema in Canada has been largely responsible for the development of a generation of film talent that has now taken a prominent place in the film and television industry. It also detonates arguments favouring a narrow, strictly commercial approach to film production. Indeed, look at the credits of any film of any kind made in Canada in the last 20 years and you are likely to find the Canada Council's name. While detailing all its contributions could fill this entire magazine, even a partial list of film artists helped by the Council speaks volumes: Jean Pierre Lefebvre, Michael Snow, Bruce Elder, Patricia Rozema, Mike Jones, John Paizs, Guy Maddin, William D. MacGillivray, Richard Kerr, Mina Shum, Peter Mettler, Atom Egoyan, Jeanne Crepeau, Clement Virgo, Barbara Sternberg, Mike Hoolboom, Cynthia Roberts, Joyce Wieland, Thom Fitzgerald, Bruce McDonald. Imagine for a moment if these artists had not been supported at the outset, had not been able to experiment and learn their art and their craft. In this sense, the impact of the Canada Council's support has been nothing short of miraculous.

**While** it has provided grants to writers, visual artists and musicians since its inception in 1957, the Canada Council did not officially fund filmmaking activities until 1972, with the setting-up of a film program. In response to a growing audio-visual artistic community, the Council established the Media Arts Section in 1983. It is no coincidence that since then, a few years after the infamous tax-shelter era, the Canadian cinema has witnessed a veritable explosion of talented, now internationally renowned, independent film artists. The 15 years since has put in place an infrastructure of opportunity for filmmakers who make films by listening to and speaking with their own voices. In this infrastructure has flourished a dynamic film culture, despite an almost total exclusion from the Hollywood-



controlled Canadian commercial exhibition systems, that is vibrant, tenacious and, through a vital nexus of film cooperatives, festivals and artist-run distribution centres, continuous.

The current head officer of the Media Arts Section, Martine Sauvageau, calls this the Council's niche. Outside the larger budgets and more commercial work, it is that humble but critical area of filmmaking that is artist-centric, independent and committed to expressing Canadian ideas. "We are the only agency dedicated to independent film, and in particular artist-driven works," she explains. "The Council is also the only agency to fund new media and video work, which will increasingly be part of the future of cinema. To put it briefly, we support independent filmmakers with artistic merit, as determined by our peer jury process, and give priority to innovative works. I should say that we have nothing against the industry, but we support and defend the independent artist."

The ongoing development of this niche happens on three levels: creation, production and dissemination. Grants for script development, production, travel to festivals and marketing are directed at the independent artist. Beyond these, there are funds for film festivals, special screening programs, cinemathèques and critical writing about the work produced. On however small a scale, the Council does cover all the bases. As Sauvageau argues, "the interaction of these three levels has always been the crux of the Council's collaborative role in the film community. You must support all three or one or the other will die. For me, and I say this frankly, I think we must dedicate more funding to the dissemination of work. Reaching audiences is very important and I think the Council can do a better job than we have in the past. This issue must be addressed." Part of this problem of dissemination, Sauvageau observes, is also to get recognition of the Council's contribution to the art and to the industry of film in Canada. Its essential developmental role often goes unacknowledged in discussions about Canada's film and television business.

Ms. Sauvageau's concern for the lack of recognition of the Council's contribution in the larger sense is well-founded, as relatively few Canadians watch Canadian films, let

**Guy Maddin's  
Tales From the Gimli Hospital**



William D. MacGillivray's *Life Classes*

Andy and Michael Jones's *The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood*

alone read the end credits. Within the independent film community itself, however, there is unanimity: the Council is essential to our maintenance and further development of a truly Canadian film culture and is now starting to reap great benefits for those in whom it invested at the outset. As this public investment ultimately helps generate private profits, it is curious why anyone in the business or political sphere would argue against public funding of institutions such as the Canada Council.

As one example, Halifax-based producer Terry Greenlaw of Picture Plant argues that William D. MacGillivray's award-winning *Life Classes* could not have been made without Council grants. She says, "Council grants give you credibility and trigger money from other funding agencies. We couldn't have made films like *Life Classes* and *Understanding Bliss* without the support of Council." For his part, MacGillivray adds, "the Council is more than just funding, although that is important. It is also, through the jury process, a way to expose your work to others in the country. In my case, it was through Council juries that Jean Pierre Lefebvre and Peter Harcourt took notice of my early films (*Aerial View*, *Stations*). This helped enormously to develop subsequent film ideas, as a dialogue was set up thanks to this process. That kind of role can't be quantified in a ledger, nor should it be."

## Veteran

independent producer Greg Klymkiw, formerly of the Winnipeg Film Group and now at the Canadian Film Centre, has had

dozens of films produced, promoted, and distributed with the help of the Canada Council, including features by John Paizs, Guy Maddin and Cynthia Roberts. "This is the one cultural organization that has provided funding to the art of cinema with one string only: that the artists create truly indigenous and independent Canadian work. The contribution is absolutely invaluable. Without the support of the Council, *The Last Supper* (invited to more than 100 international film festivals and winner of the Teddy Award for best gay-themed film at the 1995 Berlin International Film Festival) would have been nothing more than a disease-of-the-week movie playing Sunday nights on CBC." While Klymkiw dislikes the new, less frequent structure of funding competitions, which he argues may dangerously retard artists' abilities to work consistently, he is insistent on one point: "If we are to have a truly indigenous film culture, we need institutions like the Canada Council."

At the moment, the most influential voice of support belongs to Atom Egoyan. Egoyan, now an artist of international stature and success, never forgets how he was able to develop his career in Canada, from Council-supported works such as *Family Viewing* (1987) to, a mere decade later, larger budget, industry-funded films like *The Sweet Hereafter*. "I am a creation of the arts councils. Their support at the beginning was crucial to my development as a filmmaker. I can't emphasize this enough: public funding of the arts, especially for filmmaking in Canada, is critical." Ultimately, given that the Canada Council funds everything from production to distribution to exhibition (the modest

## Canuck

version of vertical integration!) to the very magazine you hold in your hands, internationally acclaimed experimental filmmaker Mike Hoolboom offers perhaps the most cogent and accurate appraisal of its multifarious role: "Without it, everything would stop."

The contribution to Canadian film culture by the Canada Council is inestimable. In the last 15 years alone, Council has provided support at the beginning of careers which would bring international recognition, interest, and, yes, money to Canadian filmmakers. It has also supported the early developmental stages of young filmmakers who have gone on to make films and money for private film companies; a convincing example of how the mixed economy works. Despite quixotic arguments to the contrary, the private and public sectors are not mutually exclusive and, moreover, the funding of institutions like the Canada Council creates considerable cultural and material wealth. One can hope that the cultural politics will shift in the face of such an overwhelming success, but in an era of increased corporate concentration and incessant, almost hysterical attacks on public institutions, that remains a tenuous hope. Nonetheless, the commitment of \$25 million in additional funding for the Canada Council for five years by the current federal Liberal government is heartening. Even with that glimmer, though, all members of the tenacious community of dreamers must remain vigilant against those many "men of action" who, as we speak, are leaving their libraries and are preparing to ride. ■