ESSAY

on

The Development of the
Canadian Feature Film Production

Summer Term 1999
Hauptseminar:
Problems in the Cultural History of Canada

Professor Allan Smith
Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel,
Germany

written by
Stefan Wuttke
stefan.wuttke@iname.com
Contents

I. Introduction ................................................................................................................. 3
II. Early development of the film industry ................................................................. 4
III. Time of documentaries: the National Film Board ........................................... 9
IV. No popular culture, please: The Massey Report ........................................... 12
V. The crucial time: the establishment of the CFDC ........................................ 12
VI. Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 20
Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 22
I. Introduction

This essay deals with the development of the feature film industry in Canada until the establishment of the Canadian Film Development Corporation Act (CFDC). There are two main questions to be examined: firstly, what are the reasons for the lack of a notable feature film industry in Canada before the middle of the 1960s? And secondly, what were the important factors that led to the formation of the CFDC in 1967 and the following growth of the Canadian feature film industry? The essay wants to work out in particular how Canada’s special situation on the North American continent had affected the development. Or in other words, how big was the influence of the American film industry - directly or indirectly – on the Canadian development?

The essay is divided into 6 parts, following the chronological order of events. The following part is about the time from the introduction of movies to Canada to the 1920s. The third part works out the important role of the National Film Board in Canadian film making. In the fourth part the Massey Report is briefly described. The fifth part then covers the crucial time in the history of Canadian feature films as it describes the immediate events and circumstances that led to the establishing of a funding system which allowed private feature film production on a larger scale. Finally, the last part summarises the findings and draws a conclusion.
II. Early development of the film industry

Not surprisingly, the medium film instantly became a great success from the very moment of its invention - in Canada as well as all over the world. Only one year after the world’s first public projection of a film in Paris, the moving pictures found their way to Montreal, where the first movie show took place in June 1896. Already by 1908, the first permanent film theatres could be found in most major Canadian cities. More than 800 cinemas existed all over Canada by 1920. But the movies made their way into the countryside as well: the so called travelling picture shows presented movies to people living in more rural and remote areas.

The very first films made in Canada were scenic films of and about nature and the countryside (‘scenics’). Moreover, news events like the Klondike Gold Rush were filmed. Very common as well were films about and for sponsoring companies like the Canadian Pacific Railway. Moreover, the first dramatic work was shot by J. Rosenthal in 1903 ("Hiawatha” The Messiah of the Ojibway).

The growing American interest in Canada as a target market for films showed its results as early as 1914. American film content transformed into a Canadian one generated new genres like the northwoods melodrama and the Mountie film – movies made in Canada with Canadian characters but with typical American plots like the Western. Even Canada-based companies used American know-how, money and also Americans for key

\footnote{Clandfield introduces this term and although he doesn’t use it as a proper scientific term it is used here for practical reasons to describe the type of film mentioned (see Clandfield, David: Canadian Film. Perspectives on Canadian Cultures. Toronto, 1987).}
roles in production and acting\textsuperscript{2}. Nevertheless, some stories from Canadian history became popular for these production companies, and the first feature film made in Canada by a firm called Canadian Bioscope Company – *Evangeline* (1913) – was adapted from a poem about an event in Canada’s history.\textsuperscript{3} The success of – this mainly partially – Canadian movie making, however, was only temporary and all the companies had vanished by the middle of the 1920s.

It is not true, though, that there had been no notable Canadian film makers in the days of silent movies. Worth mentioning here is Ernest Shipman, who was quite successful in the 1910s and early 1920s. Among his first films was *Corporal Cameron of the North West Mounted Police* (1912), which set the standard for the genre of Mountie films. Later, he made seven feature films from 1919 to 1922 and always chose stories from popular Canadian fiction. The result were films like *Back to God’s Country* (1919) which was a great success. Shipman set up an independent film production in Canada and shot his films on location in the country too. In the end, he was forced out of the market by the big Hollywood majors. He is just one example of many other Canadian independent film makers who all had to face the same destiny in the long run.

Very much like the relatively small film producers just mentioned, newsreel companies followed the same development. Initially, they had been quite successful till the end of the First World War – one especially has to mention L.-E. Ouimet who did the pioneering work in Canada in this sector. But after the war, \
\hspace{360pt}\hspace{-360pt} \\
\textsuperscript{2} See Clandfield, David: *Canadian Film. Perspectives on Canadian Cultures*. Toronto, 1987, p. 3. \\
\textsuperscript{3} Although the poem itself was written in 1847 by the American author Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
again, big American companies took over the market and the Canadian firms were of no importance at all anymore.

The Canadian state and the provinces as well were much interested in movies from an early point in time on, but only to intensively execute censorship. As Vipond puts it:

"These boards ... were much more active and intrusive in their censorship than was ever the case with printed materials."  

The Canadian government became committed to film production basically for reasons of propaganda in World War I. Apart from the film Canada’s Fighting Forces from 1915, which was shot by a government official, it supported the advertising of war bonds. Then, a few years later, the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau (CGMPB) was established in 1924 to promote Canada’s resources not only abroad but also at home. This assignment shows two main government concepts of how the new mass medium should be used: firstly, the financial factor seemed to be important, getting money into the country by making Canada interesting to foreign – especially American – tourists. Secondly, there was the idea that showing Canadians themselves more of their own country and of their fellow Canadians improves their knowledge, understanding of and feeling for the nation. The idea of forming a national and cultural identity by the means of films can already be seen at this early point in time. It is very interesting to note that the entertaining side of the medium film was obviously of second interest, if not completely ignored. As a consequence, the CGMPB mainly produced and dealt with scenics. This policy didn’t change and so

---

4 See Vipond, Mary: The Mass Media in Canada. Toronto, 1989, p. 34.
the bureau continued to produce almost nothing but *travelogues*\(^5\) and scenics even after the invention of sound film. Only a very small number of feature films were actually made.\(^6\)

Although some provinces engaged in film production as well, their emphasis - again - was not to produce or support drama films. Like in Ontario and Quebec, the governments concentrated on educational films.

As one can see from the rough outline of events above, it seems that from the very beginning of Canadian film making there was some kind of diversity involving both the private and state sector. Short films, scenics, travelogues, news and even feature films were produced. While some genres like scenics and travelogues continued to be made, the feature film industry didn’t survive and was only marginally important if not non-existent in the 1920s. And this is not only because of the growing American influence: it is certainly true that the Hollywood majors did all they could do to secure their market in Canada but one has to take more reasons into account:

Firstly, the Canadian state never saw the need to support the private feature film industry by any kind of funding system or to artificially decrease the flow of American films into Canada by exhibition quotas\(^7\) (which worked successfully in European countries). This had several reasons\(^8\): no one inside the Canadian film industry itself – neither directors, producers, actors or exhibitors – asked the state for legislative action against the big and growing American influence. And there was no public

---

\(^5\) As the name travelogues suggests, the film is about travelling in the (often exotic or wild) countryside and actually shot on location.

\(^6\) E.g. *In the Shadow of the Pole* (1928) or *Lest We Forget* (1935)

discussion about a Canadian film industry anyway, and neither
government officials nor the intellectual elite encouraged an open
discussion about this due to a certain cultural conservatism which
saw the medium film as low quality entertainment.

Secondly, the private film sector was under high pressure from
the big American movie factories in Hollywood, so the relatively
small Canadian companies couldn’t compete without the essential
financial background which they didn’t have without support from
the state. The infrastructure necessary to become successful in
the film business involves vertically structured companies or a
system of firms from production to exhibition.\(^9\) This will ensure
that the films produced have a market and bring in money. No
Canadian company had ever had this structure.

Moreover, Canadian exhibitors had no interest in showing
Canadian films as American movies were simply very popular, so
there was a public demand for a constant import of American
movies. Canadian exhibitors and distributors were quite
comfortable with the success of Hollywood movies and saw no
need to change that.

All the factors cannot be looked at separately as they all
depend on each other. It would be wrong to say that the
Canadian feature film industry didn’t develop only because of the
dominating Hollywood majors. But it is surely true to claim that
the Americanisation of Canadian films and film production had
been a matter of fact to a great extent right from the beginning
of film production in Canada. To quote Ted Magder:

\(^8\) As Magder points out in Magder, Ted: *Canada’s Hollywood: The Canadian State and
\(^9\) Ibid., p. 24. Magder names the German company *Ufa* as an example for a vertically
integrated and thus successful company.
“Simply put, in the period from which Canada’s dependency in the feature film industry dates, broad-based interest in the indigenous production of feature films was non-existent.”

III. Time of documentaries: the National Film Board

The establishment of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) has been another important landmark in the development of Canadian films. The NFB obtained money from the state to produce films. Unfortunately, it did not engage in the sector of feature film production and only concentrated on educational films and documentaries.

When discussing the role of the NFB, one has to mention its founder and first director John Grierson. His concept of how to organise and operate a film industry within the Canadian state was the very basis of the NFB’s policies. He was leading the British documentary school in the 1930s, when he was asked for advice on the future of film making in Canada. As a result of the report he wrote in 1938, the NFB was established in 1939 to tackle the major problems: that there was no elaborated policy for propaganda films, that there were no trained and capable film makers and that there was a lack of interest in film making by

10 Magder 1993, p. 25
the state. Consequently, the NFB worked in several fields: it supported the distribution sector, especially the travelling shows, and opened regional film libraries. And more important, it improved production by bringing in British know-how concerning documentary film making. It did not support feature film making, however. Grierson’s opinion about feature film making dominated the NFB’s policies. He saw its task as to educate, inform the citizens and enforce their commitment to the state. As Magder writes:

“For Grierson, film making was a medium suited to education and to the development of a more informed and democratic public opinion.”

He thought that the ideal means for that were documentaries. He not only disliked Hollywood movies, he detested the concept of feature films itself which he regarded as low quality and nonsense – a view that had been shared by many cultural conservatives and state officials for a very long time. So the NFB concentrated on documentary film making and became very successful at home and abroad, in the beginning especially with war propaganda in World War II (documentary films like *Mr. Churchill’s Island* and *Canada Carries On*) and later with other topics too. Their films were highly regarded for their quality, both technically and in terms of content. The NFB also built the largest film studios in the world at that time and had a very well trained staff.

To sum it up, the National Film Board initiated a thriving film production industry in Canada, but only for documentaries. Grierson was very influential, yet he never suggested engaging in feature film production although the board had the technical and
financial background to do so. A good chance to start a state-sponsored feature film industry had passed unused. This was left to another institution and another time.

As a result of this development, Canada had a divided movie industry by the end of the 1940s. On the one hand, there was the private sector that successfully imported American feature films. On the other hand, there was the NFB representing the state sector which produced almost nothing but documentaries. “The former was the mainstream; the latter was marginal.”

After World War II, NFB films were not shown in America anymore, even in Canada they heavily lost screening time. On top of the diminishing success of the Board, it had to face high pressure in Canada itself. In the Cold War era, many officials regarded the NFB as being politically very left. State security even classified it as a “vulnerable agency.” As a result, it was faced with cutbacks and had to have its staff checked for leftist activities. With regard to film making, it had to limit itself to producing films that agreed to the official government policy. A few major successes saved the NFB from oblivion or worse, one being Royal Journey in 1952 (awarded the prize for best theatrical feature at the Canadian Film Awards), which portrayed the visit of the British Royal family to Canada.

---

11 Magder 1993, p. 53
13 See Magder 1993, p. 77.
IV. No popular culture, please: The Massey Report

The Massey Report was published in 1951 and was a summary of Canada’s cultural state of being. It was written from the high culture’s point of view and looked upon popular culture like movies as having no cultural value at all. And although its point of view on culture was simply outdated and the tone was very conservative, it rightly pointed out and warned of the great influence the American culture had on the Canadian people. But it drew the wrong conclusions: to oppose this American influence, the Massey Report suggested a state-sponsored “proper” – i.e. high – cultural production to form and strengthen the Canadian nation and identity, and for example saw documentaries and educational films as the best means for that. Consequently, it wanted the NFB funding to be increased for exactly this purpose. It totally ignored the possibility of a funding system for the private film sector, although this industry openly suggested a funding system to the state.

V. The crucial time: the establishment of the CFDC

As it has been shown so far, even after the advice of the Massey Report there had been no signs that the Canadian government would start to subsidize a domestic feature film industry or re-consider the role of the NFB. However, this attitude slowly changed and led to the establishment of the Canadian Film Development Corporation Act (CFDC) in 1967 and, consequently,
from a sporadic to a considerable production of feature films. In this chapter, we will look at the immediately preceding developments in several sectors.

The Canadian government of course is not the only one to blame for the lack of a significant feature film industry before the CFDC. Neither is America’s domination on the film market solely responsible for that. But together with other important factors inside Canada, e.g. the general economic situation, the film industry itself and cultural conservatives in society, they interactively shaped the status quo of the Canadian feature film industry of that time. Because all these aspects are interlinked and some of them took place at the same time it is important to have a look at several developments – political, economic and cultural – that influenced the Canadian federal government (which was responsible for setting up a funding system in the end) and finally made possible the establishment of the CFDC.

There were some very important changes in the political sector of Canada. By the end of the fifties, politicians began to fear economic and political dependence on the USA. At the same time, English-Canadian nationalism slowly started to take shape and the federal government wanted to take more responsibilities. But even more important were the effects of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec on the whole Canadian state: it had two fundamental and far-reaching consequences for cultural and political development: firstly, French Canadians developed the need for support and more guidance from the government, especially in the cultural sphere. The second aspect effected the English-Canadian side and the federal state as a whole as well: the
federal government now began to see the need to pay more attention to cultural affairs, especially as a means to promote the idea of national identity and interests. As Magder writes:

“The very political survival of the nation came to be identified with the search for a more highly developed sense of Canadian cultural identity. [...] Support for a feature film industry would just be one facet of a renewed and more urgent attempt to maintain and secure the cohesion of the Canadian state and Canadian society.”

In a way, culture became a tool of political interests and had to be supported by the state.

Furthermore, there were some open breaks with continental policies such as they had been so far. The times of the so called quiet diplomacy seemed to be over to a certain extent: For example, the Canadian Prime Minister openly criticised the American bombings of Vietnam. If this had become possible it could be likely now that there might even be some motivation to do something against the American domination on the cultural sector.

In the fields of economy, there had been some beneficial developments that made it easier and more lucrative for Canadian companies to engage in feature films production.

In general, there was economic growth in Canada in the middle of the sixties and the quality of life was raised throughout the country. Such a situation of course makes it easier for a government to spend money on the cultural sector. Thus, it

---

14 For example Walter Gordon’s *Royal Commission on Canada’s Economic Prospects* which warned of losing economic and political sovereignty in 1957.
15 See Magder 1993, p. 89.
would be more acceptable to the public and critics to set up a funding system for film production than ever before.

With regard to the film business in general, there are a few points worth mentioning: after World War II, some countries in Europe took legislative measures to cut down the import of American films and support their own film industry (the Canadian state didn’t move on that matter). To work around the restrictions, American companies now made their films locally in these countries and on top of that even received subsidies from these states. Thus, they quickly adopted to the European system and increased profits again (in Britain for example, they even received about 80% of the state’s funding money in 1965). American film companies were stable and on firm grounds by the end of the fifties and in the beginning of the sixties. But important here is that as a result of the development film production became decentralised and increasingly global. As a consequence for Canada, more and more films were actually shot and produced in the country – although many had the tendency to look like Hollywood films due to American money in the background.

Moreover, there was growing optimism inside the Canadian film business itself about developing an own feature film industry. This came from the success in television production. A lot of production companies emerged, often with American capital in the background. In 1957, there were about sixty private production companies in Canada, as compared to half the number in 1952.¹⁶ So people expected similar success in the feature film sector. Nevertheless, movie making was still very difficult for Canadian producers: they all had good technical

¹⁶ Magder 1993, p. 92.
equipment but lacked the experience in and know-how of feature film production. Some producers in fact managed to make successful movies because their films were American style, e.g. Nat Taylor’s *The Mask* (1960) and a company called Seven Arts. They both are an example of the fact that there was indeed (foreign and Canadian) money for making feature films in Canada, but simply not for films with Canadian content or look (because American companies dominated the market, Canadian film producers made films the way their American distributors wanted them, simply to avoid bankruptcy). But what was important in that respect is that there was some kind of positive thinking about having an industry producing Canadian films made by Canadians for Canadians.

In the economic sector, one especially has to mention Nat Taylor who had a great influence on the development. He was very successful in the film business as an exhibitor and TV program producer. He only produced some feature films himself and they had an American look (as *The Mask* mentioned above) to ensure success. He saw the need for support for a feature film industry only from the economic point of view and not from a cultural. Successful films had to have an American look. He suggested a funding system that subsidised films according to their success on the international market – and this idea would definitely have reinforced the production of American style films. However, his basic concept of sponsoring a movie industry certainly had some impact on the development.

In the cultural sector, it’s worthwhile to mention that the state had already taken some action to promote and support Canadian culture before considering a funding systems for feature films. The government supported parts of the Canadian press by tax
relief, it summoned the *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* and increased money for the *Canada Council*, just to mention a few actions the government took.

Moreover, as early as 1959, the Canadian-content regulation was introduced. It demanded a minimum of 55 per cent of Canadian content in television. And although it wasn’t very successfully implemented it showed that the state was indeed willing to intervene to make sure that more Canadian culture was promoted.

> "Unlike the establishment of the CBC, or the Canada Council in 1957, the ‘Cancon’ principle [i.e. the Canadian-content regulation] had a direct bearing on the everyday business practices of the private sector. It was a discrete, targeted form of intervention […] Its counterpart in the film industry would be an exhibition quota ensuring a minimum number of Canadian films on Canadian screens."¹⁷

What can be seen here is that the Canadian government had dropped the view that high culture would be the only proper culture and paid more attention to popular culture like television to reach more Canadians (as a nation-building effect of a common culture).

This view was especially shared by many young Canadians in business and politics. To them, it was important to stick to and support their own cultural industry to offer an alternative to American mass culture. And most importantly, Canadian culture had to be supported by the state because it was a – if not the – means of reinforcing the national and cultural identity.

With regard to the production sector, lots of frustrated NFB people formed the *Association professionelle des cineastes (APC)*

¹⁷ Magder 1993, pp. 104-105.
together with other independent Canadian film makers in 1963. Their basic aim was to get support from the state for a private feature film industry. There were other organisations like the Directors’ Guild of Canada (DGC) who had their own ideas about a movie industry in Canada and different suggestions to that state about a funding system.

But the state was (and is) responsible for setting up a funding system in the end. And it had become obvious that it had to initiate support for a feature film industry like in other cultural sectors. But it had to come up with a concept that would incorporate all the different ideas and suggestions. It seems clear now that the state didn’t act on its own when it introduced a funding system, there were many lobbies, organisations and people who directly or indirectly influenced the development and the government’s decision on the matter. And very importantly, Canada had to make sure that it didn’t upset its powerful neighbour in the south when promoting its interests in the film business. So the first step was to summon a committee: the Interdepartmental Committee on the Possible Development of Feature Film Production in Canada was established in 1963. Strange enough, there were no members from the film business present, only written suggestions from the industry were taken into account. This was yet another sign how political culture had become. The committee wanted to find out about a possible funding system for the private film industry and sent their first proposals to the government in 1964: it suggested a funding system on a loan basis. The exhibition sector was left untouched: a quota would not have been practical simply because there were not enough Canadian films to be shown at that time. The same applied to the distribution sector. To avoid conflicts with the
American majors, no intervention was proposed here. And to have successful feature films, the existing distribution system could prove vital.

These first ideas were made public in 1966 and happily greeted by the film industry, but not by the Conservatives who disliked the concept of promoting popular culture at all. Still, more details had to be worked out. The initial budget was to be $10 million to be spent over a period of five years, of which $8.5 millions should be given to production and the rest to awards and assistance like courses for technicians, directors, writers etc to improve their skills. Moreover, a definition had to be found for which films should receive financial support.

Because the preparations for Canada’s Centennial celebrations had a much higher political priority, the government passed the law to establish the Canadian Film Development Corporation Act in 1967. One year later, the CFDC was fully operational and giving out its first loans.

The CFDC wasn’t allowed to start producing its own movies. Its primary goal was to look for possibly profitable films and help finance them. Thus, it was supposed to establish a working feature film industry and then be dissolved. But it was working under hard conditions: the boom in the economy was over, so it had to work successfully and cost-effectively not to become the target of economical procedures taken by the state. Up to October 1971, it had supported the production of 64 films and used all the initial funding money of $10 million.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} Magder 1993, p. 137.
VI. Conclusion

When we look at the two questions raised in the introduction, we can note the following.

Firstly, the reasons for the lack of a notable feature film industry in Canada before the middle of the 1960s do not only lie in America’s domination of the market. When you look at the development of the feature film production from its beginning to the establishment of the CFDC, one thing has become quite obvious: the heavy influence of the American movie industry in Canada is not solely responsible for the late start of Canada’s own feature film industry. As we have seen, there are many reasons and factors linked to each other that have to be considered. Of course America’s influence had and has a lot to do with the development, but many forces inside Canada itself had their share here as well – for example the reluctance of many conservatives to accept feature films as an important part of culture and the interest of the Canadian exhibitors in a constant input of American movies. In that respect, film development in Canada is probably not unique in the world. But the closeness of America and Canada is most likely something very exceptional in the development of popular culture on a more global scale. Naturally, two states so close to each other have closer and more economic links than others. And economy plays a very important role in the whole of popular culture, just as it has done in the case of Canadian movies. To be sure, America definitely dominates the market in the cultural industry of popular culture. One could say, that the development of feature films in Canada is a drastic and highlighted example for the (American) way popular culture works on a global scale.
Secondly, when you want to try to explain the change of mind of the Canadian government in the matter of supporting private feature film production, again, many different - political, economic, cultural - reasons have to be taken into account. Of course the state had and has to decide in the end about sponsoring culture or not, but it is influenced by all these factors and can’t decide without considering them. So basically, the Canadian state had to come to see the necessity of having an own feature film industry. Being a big and heterogeneous country, Canada needs a common cultural basis to maintain a national identity (supposing that there is something like one cultural identity). The Canadian state realised very late that the movies had become very much a source for Canadians as regular cultural input. American pop culture had already found its way into Canada - and many other countries - when the state decided to break with the cultural conservatism so far. Popular culture found its way to the political agenda, but not because the state wanted to support the arts, rather because it saw pop culture as a good means to promote its concept of a national identity. The growth of the Canadian feature film industry was not a natural one. It was given momentum very much by political decisions - as well as a good economic situation and cultural reasons. Without support from the state, there would probably still be no significant feature film industry in Canada.
Bibliography


Encyclopaedia Britannica Online: http://www.eb.com
http://www.altavista.com
http://www.cajunculture.com/Other/Evangeline.htm