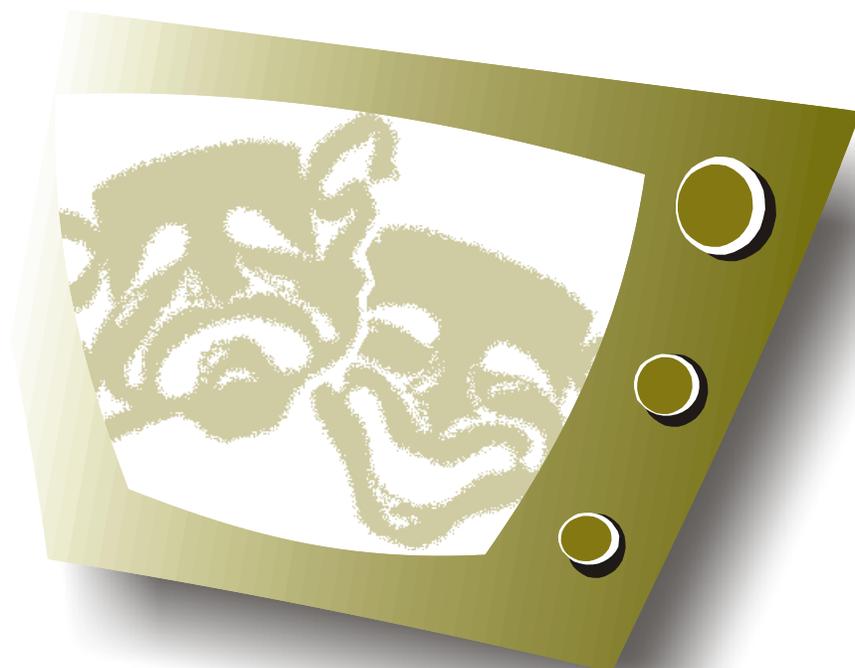


What About Tomorrow?



*A report on Canadian
French-language drama*

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Guy Fournier has written the original version of this report which has been translated by a third party.

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I. Preface

Last November, when CRTC Chairman Charles Dalfen asked me to conduct a study on French-language television drama in Canada, I had no idea where this study might lead me. I know the television industry "by heart," but many of the results of this study still surprised me.

Even though I suspected that the past and current successes of our French-language dramas were no guarantee of a trouble-free future, I also found that their producers and broadcasters have their own concerns about what tomorrow may bring.

Especially in the private television industry, there is concern about the ever-growing cost of dramas, which affects the cost of licence fees as well. Producers and broadcasters also worry about the stability of government assistance. On this score, they can scarcely feel reassured by the federal government's recent decisions to cut its contribution to the Canadian Television Fund (CTF) by \$25 million and to increase tax credits for foreign productions shot in Canada. Producers and broadcasters also believe that virtually all of the mechanisms through which government aid is provided are too cumbersome and too bureaucratic.

The people I interviewed unanimously criticized the way the CTF operates, though they regard the Fund itself, and the money that it provides for drama productions, as essential.

My study dealt only with French-language drama and the "technical" environment surrounding it (assistance, regulations, tax credits, etc.). But my interviewees often made comparisons with English-language Canadian drama.

For example, French-language broadcasters and English-language broadcasters have diametrically opposed views about drama. The French-language broadcasters take it as a given that original dramas are largely responsible for maintaining audience loyalty and drive the entire programming schedule. One broadcaster even told me that in Quebec, "in any given time slot, the only way to beat a competitor's ratings for a drama is with another drama!" This just goes to show the drawing power that continues to be ascribed to original French-language drama.

In contrast, my respondents were convinced that English-language broadcasters air original dramas only because they have to. In other words, while French-language broadcasters cannot do without Canadian dramas, English-language broadcasters would do without them gladly!

These very different viewpoints can have significant impacts.

On the English side, for example, people think that more expensive dramas would have more success with audiences. Yet it already costs \$3.71 to reach one Anglophone viewer with an original drama, compared with only 79 cents per Francophone viewer! Government assistance might be adjusted to direct more funding to a smaller number of productions, but that would be contrary to the actual needs of the Francophone market, where the number of productions is more important than their cost.

It certainly seems significant that the two most successful shows on French-language television over the past decade—*La p'tite vie* and *Un gars, une fille*—are relatively low-budget dramas that could have been produced without government assistance! But these successes would never have been possible if Quebec had not already been producing large numbers of dramas. As they say, practice makes perfect!

The French-language television market is very different from the English-language market, and it seems more and more illogical for their assistance and regulatory mechanisms to necessarily be parallel. The two markets are so dissimilar that these mechanisms should be adjusted accordingly, so that sometimes they would be asymmetrical. Telefilm Canada already operates asymmetrically in its performance bonuses for French-language and English-language feature films, so such asymmetry should not offend anyone, even if it is not customary in federal government culture.

I would now like to conclude this preface with a word about the two agencies that are paying for this study.

As far as the CRTC is concerned, readers will probably not be surprised that the television broadcasters I surveyed regard the Commission as a necessary evil in general, but a genuine nuisance when it comes to television "content." The issue of priority programming seems to be a particular sore point.

On the other hand, with the exception of the broadcasters, the entire French-language television community believes that the CRTC plays a fundamental role and that, without it, our television would be largely "foreign" and not as excellent as it is recognized to be. The CRTC, it is felt, must continue to make maximum use of the *Broadcasting Act* and to exert all of its regulatory and moral authority over radio and television.

Almost all of the people I interviewed felt that the majority of government assistance should be automatic, and that selective assistance is absolutely necessary to allow the production of innovative dramas that go off the beaten path. Both broadcasters and producers, with few reservations, appreciate the role that Telefilm plays and are fairly satisfied with the way that it plays this role.

- **Broadcasters and producers are concerned about the growing cost of producing dramas and worry about the stability of government assistance.**
- **Canada's French-language and English-language television markets are so different, especially as regards drama, that their differences must be taken into account in regulating them and providing them with government assistance.**
- **People want the CRTC to continue to exert all of its regulatory and moral authority over radio and television.**
- **Selective assistance is essential, and people are fairly satisfied with the way that Telefilm Canada is managing it.**

II. Methodology

After reviewing all of the documentation that I was given when I visited the CRTC on December 9, 2002, I conducted a series of interviews with people who are involved in French-language television drama in a variety of ways. These interviews touched on all the issues included in my terms of reference. Since I promised all of my interviewees the strictest confidentiality, I will describe their roles in the industry as follows, without identifying them:

- 6 Canadian producers, one of them an Anglophone involved in English-language productions outside of Quebec;
- 8 representatives of broadcasters (either members of senior management or managers in charge of drama programming for their networks); these eight people included at least one representative of each of the three major "conventional" French-language networks;
- a deputy minister of Finance of the Government of Quebec who was involved in the creation of the Quebec tax credit;
- the top official of two professional organizations concerned with this study on French-language television drama;
- a former president of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/Société Radio-Canada;
- a former Chairman of the CRTC; and
- a specialist on research in the audio-visual field.

This report is based in part on these interviews and in part on my 46 years of television experience:

- as a screenwriter, since 1957, for French and English television in Canada and for the three television networks in France, along with a stint as a story editor and story consultant for American television;
- as a producer (Les Films Claude Fournier Ltée, Onyx Films Inc., SMA Inc., Les Productions du Verseau Inc.);
- as a broadcaster (shareholder and vice-president of TQS for three years);
- as a consultant (vice-chair of the Government of Canada's Advisory Council on Telecommunications and Canadian Sovereignty in 1978; chair of the Government of Quebec's Commission d'étude sur le cinéma et l'audiovisuel in 1981 and 1982);

- as director of an organization providing support to Quebec's film and television industry (first president of the Institut du Cinéma et de la Télévision, now SODEC); and
- as a participant in international television seminars (Ottawa, Montréal, Toronto, Toulouse, Aix, Paris, Brussels, etc.) and chair of juries for television festivals (Banff, Monaco, etc.).

III. A Brief History of French-language Television Drama

Since the early days of French-language television, dramas have been an important part of the regular programming.

In its very first season, 1952-1953, Canadian television was bilingual, and the broadcast day began at 8 PM. Little need be said about this first season.

But starting in its second season, Radio-Canada began presenting four original half-hour French-language dramas every week: *Rue de Galais*, *Gros plan*, *Les Plouffe*, and *Corridor sans issue*, as well as a situation comedy, *La feuille au vent*.

In 1959, a dubbed U.S. series was broadcast in prime time and became one of the most popular shows on French-language television: *Papa a raison*.

In the following years, the number of original dramas grew, though very gradually.

On February 19, 1961, CFTM (Télé-Métropole) came on the air. One month later, it began broadcasting a 15-minute drama series, *Ma femme et moi*, at 7 PM every evening, Monday through Friday. This experiment was not a brilliant success, and it was abandoned the following season. It was not until the 1965-1966 season that CFTM took the risk of airing a new drama series, *Cré Basile*, a situation comedy very freely adapted from the American success, *The Honeymooners*.

CFTM added another drama in each of the following seasons until 1969-1970, when it discontinued all of them except *Cré Basile*.

In the next season, 1970-1971, *Cré Basile* was replaced by *Symphorien*, and for the first time in the history of French-language Canadian television, two original drama series were scheduled against each other. *Les Berger*, on CFTM, was designed to dislodge *Mont-Joye*, on Radio-Canada, and succeeded in doing so. The next season, Radio-Canada moved *Mont-Joye* to 8:30 PM so that it would no longer have to compete against *Les Berger* head-on.

In 1972-1973, Radio-Canada took command of the Monday night air waves with three original series running from 8 PM to 9:30 PM. On Tuesday nights, Radio-Canada's dominance was also assured by another hour and a half of original drama series: *Les belles histoires des pays d'en haut* and *Rue des Pignons*.

Drama had clearly taken off and become the driving force behind Radio-Canada television, ensuring unshakeable loyalty from its viewing audience.

Until the end of the 1980s, the number of original dramas aired by the two

major conventional French-language networks remained essentially unchanged, but it began to grow rapidly once the government began to offer assistance for certain television programs, including dramas.

In 1985, when the Pouliot family and I filed an application for a licence for a second private French-language television network, we promised to broadcast a daily drama. *La maison Deschênes* first aired at 6:30 PM on August 31, 1987, and it finished its run on December 20, 1989, after 289 episodes.

This incursion by a private network into the field of daily drama led Radio-Canada to launch one of its own, *Marilyn*, on September 16, 1991. This time, it was scheduled for the very start of prime time, 7 PM. The series ran for 300 episodes and left the air on March 31, 1993.

On September 16, 1996, Radio-Canada launched another daily drama in prime time, *Virginie*, which is still garnering huge audiences—sometimes over a million viewers—even though it will have broadcast its 839th episode by the time the current season ends on April 17, 2003. There is every likelihood that *Virginie* will remain on Radio-Canada's broadcast schedule for at least a few more years.

What role have foreign dramas—and American ones in particular—played on French-language television in Canada over all these years?

Until the early 1990s, French-language Canadian television always broadcast dubbed American series in prime time. Some of the most successful, besides *Papa a raison*, included *L'homme invisible*, *Le Saint*, *Les incorruptibles*, *Ma sorcière bien-aimée*, *Mission impossible*, *Perdus dans l'espace*, *Bonanza*, *Hawaï 5-0*, *L'homme de fer*, *Miami*, *La loi de Los Angeles*, and *Mannix*. Within this category, *Dynastie* and *Dallas* were in a class of their own.

But though some dubbed American series did sometimes make it into the top 20 in viewership, they were always the exceptions. When matched up against original French-language drama, they never had a chance.

Nowadays, when Radio-Canada airs foreign dramas in prime time, they attract a negligible audience. At the same time, on TVA, foreign drama draws less than a 30 per cent audience share.

TQS, for the moment, is marching to its own drummer. Foreign dramas account for about 80 per cent of its viewership for fiction programming. But this is just a temporary situation, or at least, that is what the network's management claims. As TQS becomes more profitable, it will start presenting more original dramas, and there is every reason to believe that they will enjoy just as much success as they have on the other French-language networks. But TQS's overall orientation suggests that it will still be broadcasting fewer hours of drama than the two other conventional networks.

The situation for prime-time drama on French-language television in Canada is comparable to that on English-language television in the United States: almost all of the drama broadcast in prime time is original-language programming.

After the United States, France is the country that is most similar to French-speaking Canada. In prime time, 75 per cent of the drama programs aired in France are original French-language productions.

Since the early 1990s, TVA has managed to overcome Radio-Canada's lead in the marketplace mainly by investing in original drama. TVA could never have accomplished this without the various forms of government assistance because the costs of producing drama programs of such high quality would have been prohibitive.

Over the past decade, TVA has put countless original drama programs up against Radio-Canada's programs. Bit by bit, TVA has narrowed the gap with Radio-Canada, then caught up with it, and then raced past it. TVA is even in the process of conquering Monday nights, a long-time stronghold for Radio-Canada.

I will return to this subject later in this report.

- **U.S. and other foreign dramas have never succeeded in dislodging home-grown French-language dramas on French-language Canadian television, and those American dramas that have made it into the top 20 in the ratings have always been the exception rather than the rule.**
- **Original French-language drama programs drive the entire programming schedule for the major French-language networks and are the means by which they have been able to maintain audience loyalty.**
- **It is largely thanks to government assistance—public money—that private television has been able to produce drama programs of the same quality as public television's and eventually surpass them in the ratings.**

IV. The Origins and Development of the Star System on French-language Television

Original French-language drama has always had great success on French-language television in Canada, but never so much as in recent years.

The first successes had to be attributed largely to the television medium itself. Ever since television was introduced in Quebec, it has brought us together in a way that has been unprecedented anywhere else in the world. After religion, which enabled us to survive the English conquest, and after language, which protected us from the invasion of American culture, television has done nothing less than enable the emergence of an "instant" culture in Quebec.

For anyone whose national culture and heritage go back some centuries—that is, anyone who is French, British, or German, for example—it may seem hard to believe that in Quebec, television triggered a veritable social revolution and the development of a national culture in a way that even the most starry-eyed optimists could never have imagined. Television has become the preferred and usually the only means of expression for Quebec artists and craftspersons.

Before television, there was no culture in Quebec, there was only folklore. Television was not an effect of the Quiet Revolution, it preceded it and served as a fuse to touch it off. Though television magazines and public affairs programs also played an important role in this regard, no one can deny that television drama led the way and was the major force behind the changes in Quebecers' behaviour and perceptions.

Quebec's star system is by no means irrelevant to the success of its French-language television dramas and in fact explains a good part of it.

From the earliest days of French-language television in Quebec, seasoned authors have played an active role as screenwriters. Roger Lemelin, Germaine Guèvremont, Robert Choquette, Claude-Henri Grignon, Réginald Boisvert, and Louis Morisset were all well-known names when television first appeared. Thanks to the vision of men like Gérard Robert, one of the pioneers of drama programming on Radio-Canada, all of these authors were immediately recruited to write for television.

At that time, in every other country, successful authors had turned up their noses at television as a medium unworthy of their talents. But Quebec authors had an economic incentive to get involved in television. The potential readership for books in Quebec at that time was very limited because Quebec's population was relatively small and uneducated and had no literary traditions. Hence, Quebec authors could scarcely survive on the earnings from their books and instead turned to television as a way to make a living.

Some ten years later, other authors who had already begun to earn reputations for their stage plays, films, and novels (all media whose popularity was growing because of television) began to write for the small screen as well. They included such names as Marcel Dubé, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, Claude Fournier, and Denys Arcand. Janette Bertrand, already a top-name actor and journalist, achieved further resounding success as a writer for television. So did Lise Payette, who came from radio and politics; Pierre Gauvreau, who had been a producer at Radio-Canada; Denise Filiatrault, who was already a star actress; and the list goes on.

In the 1980s, a new wave of talent began to surface, including Michelle Allen, Christian Fournier, Suzanne Aubry, Louise Pelletier, Johanne Arsenau, Réjean Tremblay, Fabienne Larouche, Michel D'astous, and Anne Boyer. Then came other new names, such as Sylvie Lussier, Stéphane Bourguignon, Guy-A. Lepage, and Isabelle Langlois.

In the age of radio, there was only one weekly that covered the medium, the newspaper *Radiomonde*. In contrast, television quickly gave rise to a wide range of newspapers and magazines, *Écho-vedettes* being one of the first. Since then, dozens more have hit the newsstands, and some of them (*Sept Jours* in particular) are of critical importance to the stars themselves.

After studiously ignoring television for several years, all of Quebec's major French-language dailies literally allied themselves with it to increase their own readership. First they introduced columns that talked mainly about Quebec's own television shows. Then, gradually, they created the television page, and finally entire entertainment sections where television always got most of the ink.

French-language television has supported its stars from the very beginning. As early as the 1960s, talk shows appeared, and who were the guests? Actors and screenwriters from our own television dramas. Lise Payette, Michel Jasmin, and Jean-Pierre Coallier hosted long-running talk shows that created new stars and raised the profiles of people who were already star actors, screenwriters, and composers for Quebec television dramas.

Radio got into the act as well, by hiring television stars to host programs where the guests themselves were television stars as well.

Quebec television networks created their own on-air magazine shows to promote their stars. *Bon dimanche* was part of the TVA schedule for years, and now every network has magazine shows that play the same role in French Canada that *Entertainment Tonight* and similar shows play in the United States.

The star system that exists today and that ensures the success of our French-language dramas and many other programs (variety shows in particular) is the result of 50 years of effort. In short, French-language television is reaping the harvest that every part of the industry has been sowing since its very earliest days.

The best example of the spectacular effectiveness of Quebec's star system is the phenomenal success of TVA's *Star Académie* this winter. True, the "convergence" of all of Quebecor's undertakings has contributed almost naturally to this success. But just as true, TQS might have achieved nearly as big a success, even though it has far fewer communication resources than Quebecor. I will return later to this phenomenon as well, one of the many social phenomena that originated in French-language television in Quebec.

Another interesting example is offered by the Pepsi-Cola Company. In 1985, even though Michael Jackson was the international spokesperson for Pepsi-Cola, the company decided to treat Quebec as a "distinct market" and hired Quebec author and humorist Claude Meunier to replace Jackson in Quebec. Sales of Pepsi, which had been number two, fairly far behind Coca Cola, shot up immediately. Eight years later, Pepsi was in first place, and it is still there. Since March 10, four young Quebec artists have replaced Meunier as Pepsi spokespersons, but he is still associated with the brand.

In English Canada, people tend to feel that a star system would only open the gates of Hollywood wider and faster. This is far from true.

For all practical purposes, Paris is no farther from Montréal than Los Angeles is from Toronto—scarcely three hours farther by airplane—and the market in France is infinitely larger than our market in Quebec. In fact, the French market is nine times larger than Quebec's, just about the same ratio as the U.S. market to the English Canadian market. Thus, Quebecers might have entertained the same fears as English Canadians, but we did not, and it turned out that we were right not to.

Many of our artists have distinguished themselves both in France and in other countries. Some of these artists have even had more success abroad than at home, and continue to do so. Their names include Suzanne Avon, Luc Plamondon, Gilles Vigneault, Lara Fabian, Marie-Jo Thériault, Marcel Béliveau, Sol the clown, Nathalie Choquette, Mark Drouin, Anthony Kavanagh, Robert Marien, and Anick Bissonnette.

Other Quebec artists have never felt the need to be known in Paris, and these are no small names either, since they include Claude Meunier and Yvon Deschamps. Many others have pursued and continue to pursue careers in Paris and Montréal simultaneously—Yves Jacques, Monique Mercure, Denys Arcand, Diane Dufresne, Denise Filiatrault, and Luck Merville, to name a few. Céline Dion and André-Philippe Gagnon have brilliant careers in the United States, and André Gagnon is a star in Japan. Actors such as Geneviève Bujold, Jean LeClerc, and Daniel Pilon have spent a good part of their professional lives in the U.S. And the list goes on.

All of these artists have returned to Quebec from time to time to take part in productions here, just as Christopher Plummer, Donald Sutherland, and several other English Canadian actors who are stars in the United States

continue to appear in roles in Canada as well.

To build a star system, you need to believe in it and to have faith in your artists. You need to be convinced that by building them up, you will achieve just as much, if not more, success as if you had banked on foreign stars.

The recent creation of large conglomerates that include radio, newspaper, television, and Internet outlets could facilitate the development of a star system in English Canada. In Quebec, Quebecor Media will obviously broaden the base for our star system still further, and other undertakings, such as Gesca and Radio-Canada, will follow suit.

The motivation for building a star system does not have to be cultural. It can be solely economic, because as every country that has developed one knows, a star system is something that pays off!

- **From its very inception, the way that television has brought people together in French Canada has been a genuine social phenomenon.**
- **The primary source of the success of television drama in French Canada has been a star system that has been built up step by step over half a century.**
- **For the past 20 years, viewership for U.S. and English-Canadian television programming in French Canada has fallen by more than half.**
- **The phenomenal success of *Star Académie* must be largely attributed to Quebec's star system.**
- **To build a star system, you need to believe in it and to have faith in your artists. The recent creation of large media conglomerates could facilitate the development of a star system in English Canada.**

V. Other Reasons for the Success of French-language Drama

In 1993, Jean-Yves Croteau, of the Cinémathèque québécoise, quite aptly wrote that Quebec television dramas "have been a great psychodrama, a national cultural stage." He added that no one could "write seriously about the history of Quebec without considering the way that these dramas have served as a crucible for our attitudes and ideologies."

"By following their development closely," he goes on, "we can see how public and private attitudes and values have evolved... We can see the advent of the Quiet Revolution, the assertion of women's rights, the onset of the sexual revolution... and the growing cultural diversity of Quebec."

In other words, from its earliest days, Quebec television drama has reflected Quebec and its society. Our TV dramas "looked like us" and we recognized ourselves in them. In addition, they modelled a more generous set of values for the public and thus unpretentiously engaged in a form of mass education.

Our fiction programming has so obviously been the mirror of Quebec that, until the past few years, it has never included anything besides family dramas (*Les Plouffe*, *Cormoran*, *L'héritage*, *Entre chien et loup*, etc.), period dramas (*Les belles histoires*, *Les filles de Caleb*, *Le parc des Braves*, *Le temps d'une paix*, etc.), historical dramas (*d'Iberville*, *Le courrier du Roy*, etc.), and comedies about families (*Peau de banane*, *La p'tite vie*, *Moi et l'autre*, etc.) or neighbourhoods (*La p'tite semaine*, *Mont-Joye*, *Symphorien*, etc.). With very few exceptions, it has never included any Westerns, police or detective dramas, or fantasy or science-fiction programs.

While it is not entirely untrue to say that language may have contributed something to the success of Quebec television dramas, to say that it has been the main if not the only factor is to insult all the talented people who work in French-language television, and the broadcasters themselves. Unfortunately, this misconception continues to be expressed—in part, perhaps, to justify English-language television's ineptitude and lack of vision in its own dramas.

What explanation can there be, for example, for CBC English television's having almost turned its back on drama in the 1970s, to concentrate on public affairs and docudramas?

If language were the only explanation, why have American series dubbed into French gradually disappeared from Quebec screens altogether, except for a few afternoon "soaps"? It is not because Francophones are allergic to dubbing. Every movie theatre in Quebec offers audiences a choice of watching American films in dubbed French versions or original English versions under the same roof, and the dubbed versions do just fine. Another example: the huge success that dubbed versions of the U.S. hit series *Dynasty* and *Dallas* enjoyed on

Quebec television.

It has now been nearly 20 years since the CRTC made the bet that the more French-language programs and networks French-Canadians had to choose from, the more effectively the growth in viewership for American television in French Canada could be stemmed. It was largely because of this bet that the CRTC gave its backing for the creation of Télévision Quatre-Saisons (TQS) and, subsequently, numerous specialty networks.

This bet—about which I personally was quite skeptical—has paid off in spades. From 1982 to 2001, English-language television's audience share has fallen from 14.4 per cent to 6.5 per cent, and there are no signs of this trend's reversing in the short term. At the same time, viewership for French-language television has grown by nearly 4 per cent!

Still other factors also have contributed to the success of French-language drama in Canada.

The number of years that many series have stayed on the air has definitely been one of these factors—certainly one of the least discussed, but also one of the most important. In our French-language television industry, as in the U.S. television industry, it was immediately assumed that how long a program stayed on the air was of fundamental importance for viewer loyalty. French-Canadian television broadcasters instinctively—and probably also because they did not have the resources to do otherwise—gave most of the series that they put on the air enough time to capture an audience and, in the end, this worked to their advantage.

Many major French-language series have run for many years. Among these, the following must be mentioned:

15 years: *Les belles histoires des pays d'en haut*

11 years: *Rue des Pignons*

8 years: *Les Berger, Entre chien et loup*

7 years: *Symphorien*

6 years: *Toi et moi, Terre humaine, Le survenant, Du tac au tac, Chop Suey, Épopée rock, Un gars, une fille, Ent'Cadieux*

5 years: *Quelle famille, Cré Basile, Le paradis terrestre, Mont-Joye, Chambres en ville, Peau de banane, Jamais deux sans toi, Quatre et demi, L'or du temps*

4 years: *Le clan Beaulieu, Le parc des Braves, Monsieur le ministre, Moi et l'autre, L'héritage, Les filles d'Ève, La bonne aventure, La p'tite vie*

The series *Watatatow*, which targets the youth audience, has just celebrated its 1000th episode and is still running.

On average, the 30 series listed above (and this list excludes youth-oriented series and daily drama series) have enjoyed a run of about six seasons! Taken alone, these 30 series—out of the more than 1 000 original series and mini-series produced in French since Canadian television began—have accounted for the equivalent of 175 seasons of programming!

What enabled French-language Canadian television to produce so many original series and programs was that, in its very earliest days, it cultivated highly economical production methods, of the same kind developed by certain American producers in studios in Atlanta, Georgia, in the early 1980s. These methods involved shooting very few outdoor scenes, if any. Almost everything was shot in the studio, with a very limited number of sets. Almost all salaries were kept to a minimum, except those of the star actors and screenwriters, because volume was what counted.

This very distinctive production culture enabled broadcasters to give French-language drama series such long runs, which in turn let them build such loyal audiences.

As a perverse effect of government assistance to the television industry, this economical production culture is now disappearing, and the new culture supplanting it is far more expensive. Costs run from \$450 000 to \$1 million per hour of programming, which makes long-running series economically impossible.

I will return to this issue later on.

- **From its earliest days, Quebec television drama has reflected Quebec and its society. Viewers have recognized themselves in these dramas and identified with them.**
- **Even though the language "barrier" may have been one of the reasons for the success of these French-language dramas, it is far from the most important one.**
- **One of the keys to the success of French-language series has been the long runs that they have been allowed to have. Thirty of the longest running series have been on the air for an average of six seasons!**
- **An economical production culture has made such long-running series possible, but as a perverse effect of government assistance, this culture is rapidly being lost.**

VI. Forms of Assistance and Ways They Should Be Changed

Canadian Television Fund (CTF)

There are two things about the Canadian Television Fund that everybody—broadcasters, producers and screenwriters—agrees on: its disappearance would be catastrophic for French-language drama productions, but the way that it works now is a genuine calamity for all the programs to which it contributes, and for dramas in particular.

Everyone criticizes the CTF for its disastrous lack of flexibility. Its application deadline creates spectacular bottlenecks that have repercussions on the actual production of the programs. Dozens of programs end up having to be produced simultaneously in a relatively short time, which creates a scarcity of skilled labour, inflates wages and salaries, complicates casting, and overburdens post-production services.

Not only are the CTF's rules becoming harder and harder to follow, and even to decipher, but the CTF is constantly changing them, sometimes just days before the deadline. The CTF also requires a tremendous amount of documentation, and if a project is rejected for lack of funds, or because a broadcaster has other priorities, all of these documents have to be updated before they can be resubmitted the following year.

Simply put, regarding the CTF's operating methods (though not its existence), absolutely no one has a kind word to say!

Moreover, the CTF is having adverse effects that could not readily be foreseen when it was first established.

Certainly one of the most serious of these effects is that the CTF breaks up, or at the very least distorts, the traditional relationship between broadcasters and creators, be they producers or screenwriters. In economic terms, this was traditionally a purchaser/supplier relationship. Here too, opinion runs unanimously against this rupture in a relationship that is entirely normal in any market economy.

For example, broadcasters who want to be completely ethical cannot originate any projects of their own without making them ineligible for CTF funding. Broadcasters must therefore either act underhandedly or resign themselves to partly relinquishing their programming privileges.

Until recent years, the people who write and develop ideas for French-language television drama had a special relationship with broadcasters, and this relationship was even one of the reasons for this drama's success. Most of the great French-language drama series have in fact grown out of this close relationship between a writer and a director or someone else in charge of programming within the broadcaster's organization—generally, the director of drama programming.

For example, in 1975, I could never have written the comedy *Jamais deux sans toi* without the help of Rolland Guay, who was then a director at Radio-Canada, no more than in 1989 I could have written the drama series of the same title without the involvement of Andréanne Bournival, Radio-Canada's director of programming, and Hélène Roberge, their director of drama. Most of the great variety shows and series on French-language emerged from this same kind of collaboration. For yet another example, the close ties between Jean Bissonnette, an employee of Radio-Canada, and creative talents such as Jean-Pierre Plante and Stéphane Laporte enabled several important programs to achieve success.

This kind of relationship is no longer possible without compromising a project's access to the Fund, so some authors and creators have managed to extend it in a sense by becoming producers themselves. In this way, at least they eliminate the producer as a second barrier between themselves and the broadcaster, in addition to the CTF.

Ever since it was established, the CTF has been changing its rules constantly, always with a view to correcting problems with its operations or to attenuate some of their adverse effects. If I can believe what my interviewees told me, each successive corrective action has led to others which have led to still others that only made matters worse.

Another perverse effect of the way that the CTF currently operates—and I could say the same thing about Telefilm—is that it reduces the number of episodes per series considerably. Because assistance funds are not unlimited, and costs have a nasty tendency to keep rising, most of the projects being proposed to the CTF (and to Telefilm) are for 13 episodes, and often fewer.

Nowadays, a series with more than 13 episodes (say 26 or 39), or even one with more than nine or ten episodes (such as *Fortier*), can easily be stretched out over five or six seasons (*Tag*, *Omertà*, *L'ombre de l'épervier*, *Cauchemar d'amour*, etc.), so that viewer loyalty often becomes tenuous.

It is no secret that one of the most important ingredients for winning viewers' loyalty is the number of episodes that you offer them. This is somewhat less true than it was a few years ago, partly because of the way that specialty networks are fragmenting the audience and partly because of the slightly less important role that television has played since the advent of the Internet, but it

is still true nonetheless. To succeed, a series absolutely must establish a lasting relationship with its audience. Many series that have had very, very long runs (*Les belles histoires des pays d'en haut*, *Entre chien et loup*, *Ent'Cadieux*, *Virginie*, etc.) have not only maintained their audiences, but have even increased them over the years.

Despite these obvious facts, the funding agencies—to spread their assistance around as much as possible and thus compensate for the limited funds at their disposal—continue to favour short series that go directly against long-established principles of television programming.

Though these agencies do not realize it themselves, this policy of spreading government assistance so thin, together with the increased production costs that government assistance helps engender, have made television broadcasters gun-shy. Rather than worry about airing series that are very short, they almost seem to prefer it. If a short series fails, the losses will be less painful, to be sure. But if it succeeds, it's just as sure that the success will not be so resounding as it could have been. The stingier that broadcasters become with the number of episodes they offer their viewers, the more these viewers will be inclined to surf off to another channel, and the ease of clicking a remote combined with the number of channels available makes this a constant temptation.

This trend toward shorter series can have some very adverse consequences. It has happened before (and it will happen again) that entire sets have had to be rebuilt because the decision to produce a sequel was not made until a program had already gone on the air and received especially high ratings. The cost of this tardy decision: \$1 million!

When series are so short, they must rebuild their audiences every season, and there is always the risk that these audiences will erode from one season to the next because of the loss of momentum. Sometimes, when a series is broadcast over two or three seasons, with a small number of episodes each season, the second and third seasons receive ratings just as high as the first, but usually, they do not.

The effect on production costs is often devastating. If the first season of a series is a big hit with the audience, the actors will quite naturally ask for large pay hikes, and all of the craftspeople will follow suit. And sometimes it even happens that certain actors, the stars of the series, are no longer available to continue their roles.

This policy has serious implications for the screenwriters themselves. Sometimes they do not learn that the broadcaster wants to continue their series until its first season is already on the air (because the decision was waiting on the ratings). In the meantime, they may have shifted their attention to other projects, which they will have to defer in order to go back and work on the first series in which by now they are often less interested. In such cases,

these writers will be working more out of a sense of duty and professionalism than out of enthusiasm and inspiration.

This point is worth stressing: two of the factors that have most contributed to the success of French-language television dramas are the length of the series and the drama's identification with its authors. Both of these factors are being undermined and may even be destroyed by the current assistance policy.

The way that the CTF operates needs to be overhauled. On the French-language side, opinion is unanimous on this score, just as it is, for all practical purposes, on the idea that access to the CTF must not be reserved for producers and broadcasters "jointly," but for broadcasters alone.

I have neither the mandate nor the authority to determine in this report how the CTF should operate, if a decision to overhaul it is in fact made. But I think that the appropriate mechanism can be defined more easily than the current access method was.

The new operating procedure could be as follows:

- determine which programs are eligible, on the basis of a set of objective criteria, just as we do now
- determine the financial envelope to which each of the broadcasters is entitled

Each broadcaster's envelope could be determined according to the amount of licence fees paid in the preceding year to independent producers for eligible programs. For example, if the amount paid by broadcaster X represented 20 per cent of the total licence fees paid by broadcasters, then broadcaster X would be entitled to 20 per cent of the total envelope. Other mechanisms are also possible, of course. The point is to find the most flexible one, and since this would come down to a simple accounting exercise, it should not pose too many problems.

- reimburse the broadcaster in the year after the eligible programs are aired, until the envelope to which the broadcaster is entitled has been exhausted

This mechanism would eliminate the infamous application deadline that everyone complains about, as well as all its negative consequences. It would re-establish the direct relationship between producers and broadcasters, it would give broadcasters back full control over their programming, and it would eliminate some of the expenses involved in developing proposed series and programs by reducing the uncertainty about how much funding they will receive. Lastly, this mechanism would cut red tape significantly.

To make productions possible, the licence fees that broadcasters pay to producers would obviously have to be increased by at least enough to offset the shortfall that producers would experience if they no longer had access to the

CTF. And nothing would prevent the CTF from continuing its current policies in order to encourage gradual increases in licence fees.

- **The disappearance of the Canadian Television Fund would be a catastrophe, but the way that it operates now is a calamity.**
- **The CTF is having several perverse effects, one of the most serious of which is that it breaks up the traditional relationship between "purchasers" and "suppliers."**
- **Another perverse effect of the CTF-and not the least important one-is that it makes it nearly impossible to program long series that can gain a loyal audience.**
- **Series comprising 26 or 39 episodes have to be aired over three, four, or even five years, with interruptions that make them lose momentum and force them to rebuild their audiences.**
- **The infamous CTF application deadline has pernicious effects on the creative process, places a heavy burden on producers, and generates an inflationary spiral by concentrating production in short time periods.**
- **Access to the CTF should be reserved for broadcasters, for whom a monetary "envelope" would be established each year. To compensate producers for their loss of CTF funding, the licence fees that they receive from broadcasters would be increased accordingly.**

Tax credits

Just as with the CTF, opinion regarding the tax credits is unanimous: their disappearance would be catastrophic for the production of the best French-language television programs, and especially for the production of drama programs. But producers also live with the fear that the federal government, the Quebec government, or even both, may decide that these tax credits have been abused, and eliminate them suddenly.

I was surprised to learn about such fears on the producers' part, and even more surprised to learn that these fears are generalized. Most of the producers feel that though the tax credit is a laudable initiative that has led to the creation of many jobs and many high-quality television programs, its scope has been widened excessively. One of these days, they believe, some minister of Finance will assess the costs and benefits and simply do away with the tax credit entirely, rather than simply tighten it up.

Public opinion might also push government in this direction. Many viewers are astonished to see their governments listed in the credits for programs that are distinctly lightweight and sometimes even in questionable taste.

But there is a sharp dichotomy between how the tax credits look from an

economic perspective and how they look from a cultural perspective.

From the perspective of officials in the Department of Finance, the income tax credit is justified if it ensures stability or growth in an industry that would be struggling otherwise, and if it creates well-paid jobs that will generate a good volume of income tax and other tax revenues for the government.

But from the perspective of the Department of Cultural Affairs and related departments, the income tax credit is justified if it allows the production of high-quality television programs that could not be produced without it.

In general, people tend to believe that the tax credit is being abused when it provides "overfunding"—in other words, when it reduces broadcasters' costs for programs that they would produce even if it did not exist.

People also deplore the fact that production companies belonging to broadcasters, such as J.P.L. Productions (TVA) and Les Productions Point Final (TQS), have been given access to tax credits for the programs that they produce.

The entire industry regards Radio-Canada's decision to stop producing its daily series *Virginie* in-house, and to outsource it to an independent producer in order to receive income tax credits, as an abuse, to say the least. Especially since Radio-Canada will continue to provide most of the services for this production, services for which it has been footing the entire bill ever since this soap first aired many years ago.

How should we go about reducing access to the tax credits?

The answer is complicated by the fact that these tax credits are an entirely automatic form of assistance and that it is essential for them to remain so.

If it were not for the specialty networks, we could easily reduce access to the tax credits by limiting them to programs that are first aired in prime time, and by limiting prime time itself to 3 or 3 1/2 hours per evening. In this context, programs for children and youth would have access to the credits regardless of what time of day they aired. This approach would eliminate many talk shows as well as some programs that may offend the public, because none of the major broadcasters airs or would air any such programs in prime time.

But then there are the specialty networks, which do not have the same kind of broadcasting imperatives at all. It would be pretty hard to defend a policy of refusing tax credits to the producers who provide prime-time programming for the specialty networks.

If we want to reduce access to the tax credits, we must do so in a way that takes both the broadcast times and the types of programs into account. More restrictive definitions of the types of programs that are eligible would not raise any outcry—quite the opposite.

Since I submitted my preliminary report on March 11, and as I had suggested it would at the time, the Government of Quebec has reduced its tax credits as follows:

- the maximum base rate has been reduced to 15 per cent from 16 2/3 per cent;
- the eligibility requirements for variety shows have been revised, and they must be broadcast between 7 PM and 11 PM, 7 days per week;
- programs in the magazine category must be broadcast between 6 PM and 10 PM, 7 days per week; and
- programs produced by the production subsidiaries of private television broadcasters will no longer be eligible, after 31 March 2003.

The federal government would do well to harmonize its tax credits so that they do not contradict those provided by Quebec or other provinces.

To conclude this section, I scarcely need add that the industry has had a lot of trouble stomaching Finance Minister John Manley's decision to reduce his government's contribution to the CTF by \$25 million, at the same time as he was increasing the tax credit for foreign productions shot in Canada.

- **The elimination of the tax credits would have serious consequences, but the industry would like their use to be restricted.**
- **The best way to tighten up the tax credits is on the basis of the types of programs eligible and the hours when they must be aired.**
- **It would be in the federal government's interest to harmonize its tax-credit rules with those of the provinces.**

Telefilm Canada

In general, neither producers nor broadcasters have negative comments to make about Telefilm Canada, except regarding some of its components, such as its co-production department. Most of the producers and broadcasters feel that this agency is playing its role well and carrying out its mandate effectively. But they would like it to show even more flexibility, especially as regards the number of deadlines it sets.

From the various discussions that I had, two ideas emerged.

The more radical of these ideas was that Telefilm should return to its original mandate—feature films—and get out of television entirely. In this scenario, the money that Telefilm now spends on television would be paid into the CTF, and all assistance for television programs would become automatic, within, of

course, the limits of the funds available. The people who favour this approach cite two reasons for doing so: because it would make the relationship between broadcasters and producers a direct one, and because it would be more in keeping with the laws of the marketplace.

The other approach proposed is more middle-of-the-road. Its champions would like a portion—let's say half—of the assistance that Telefilm currently provides for television to be paid into the CTF, for the same reasons that I have just cited, while the other half would continue to be distributed selectively. The criteria for this selective assistance would be more sharply defined and would be very specifically designed to favour the most original, innovative projects that might not secure funding if all forms of assistance were automatic.

Be that as it may, if neither of these approaches seems to appeal to the powers that be, the French-language production industry seems capable of living with the status quo.

On several occasions during the various conversations that I had regarding Telefilm, a particularly original idea about its mandate was raised. This was the possibility that Telefilm could play a "corrective" role with regard to television dramas. Here is what I mean by this.

As long-time observers of the television industry know full well, television programming tends to run in cycles. Thus, for example, there may be several years when sitcoms are especially abundant, then several when they almost disappear, while one-hour drama series take over. If a new wave of half-hour sitcoms then arises, these one-hour dramas may in turn give way to half-hour dramas that can be more readily programmed into the schedule alongside the sitcoms, and so on. Quiz shows and variety shows also come and go in waves.

The CRTC has partly corrected this situation by establishing its system of priority programming.

Telefilm could play a similar but somewhat different role with regard to television fiction programming by encouraging comedies when television was becoming too dark and serious dramas when it was becoming too light and fluffy. The people I spoke to would even be prepared to see Telefilm momentarily favour drama projects that featured new faces and new directors in order to help refresh and renew television drama as a whole.

But a regulatory role of this kind is not easy to play. It requires great skill on the part of the staff who carry it out, a watchful assessment of current programming, and an acute awareness of current trends and directions.

This desire to see Telefilm play a corrective role was expressed not only by the producers I spoke with, but also, spontaneously, by at least two broadcasters' representatives.

To me, this seems to indicate a remarkable degree of confidence in Telefilm and a tacit admission that automatic assistance will always have to be counterbalanced by some form of selective assistance.

- **Two different ideas emerged from the discussions regarding Telefilm. One was that Telefilm should get out of television entirely and let the money that it now spends on television be channelled into the CTF. The other idea was that only half of this funding should go into the CTF, while Telefilm continues to use the other half for its selective assistance program, but applying more sharply defined criteria.**
- **The industry could also very easily live with the status quo as far as Telefilm is concerned.**
- **People would be prepared to see Telefilm play a certain corrective role as regards drama.**

VII. Co-production

I have been asked to give the question of co-production of drama programs special scrutiny, in particular because only a small percentage of French-language Canadian drama programs are co-produced.

There are several reasons for this phenomenon.

In this section, I will briefly review each of them, and then take a closer look at one of them in particular:

- double shooting

Even though double shooting does not constitute a form of co-production strictly speaking, I would like to end this section with some words about it, because there seems to be a trend toward encouraging it, in particular between French-language broadcasters and English-language broadcasters, but most of all within CBC/Radio-Canada.

The economy

It may surprise you when I write here that one of the perverse effects of all the various forms of assistance for television productions has been to limit and practically eliminate co-productions in French, even though SODEC's figures on international co-production trends seem to demonstrate the contrary.

In the 1960s, I myself participated in a good many Canada-France co-productions, through companies in which I was a partner—Les Films Claude Fournier, Onyx Films, and SMA Inc. These co-productions included *Valérie et l'aventure*, *Jo Gaillard*, *La feuille d'érable*, and several others. Without co-production, these series, in particular *La feuille d'érable*, for which Canada was the majority co-producer, would not have been possible. They would never have happened because neither Canada nor France would have had the resources to produce them on its own. At that time, the licence fees paid by the broadcasters were the only source of funding for French-language productions in Canada because government assistance did not yet exist.

In the late 1980s, I authored a 26-hour drama series called *L'or et le papier*. This series was co-produced with France, again without government assistance. All the funding came from the licence fees paid by Radio-Canada and France 3.

I mention these examples, but I could mention others as well, such as the productions by the Héroux brothers (Denis and Claude).

But now that Telefilm Canada has become involved in television, the CTF has been established, and the tax credits have been introduced, it has become possible to fully fund expensive series, series that cost far more than any of those I just mentioned.

Why would anybody go to all the trouble of putting together co-productions now that there is no longer any economic need to do so? Why would anybody subject themselves to all the strenuous discussions and inevitable constraints that co-productions involve? Why would they want to bother negotiating with foreign partners and complying with foreign countries' requirements when they did not need to? Our French-language broadcasters are frankly not interested in co-productions, and they do not mind saying so.

Once the economic reasons for getting involved in co-productions have been eliminated, what other reasons are left?

- Practical considerations: Sometimes the story line naturally calls for a production to be shot in another country. In this case, a co-production arrangement may even be more economical.
- Political considerations, in the broad sense: This is why Radio-Canada, as a member of the Communauté des télévisions francophones, has sometimes "forced" its foreign partners to participate in co-productions!

France

It seems obvious that France should be the most natural partner for our French-language drama programs, but unfortunately, it is not, and I cannot foresee a day when it might become so.

There are a number of reasons for this.

First and foremost, France has chosen a very different path for its drama programming than we have chosen for ours. Over 50 per cent of France's drama programming for television consists of made-for-TV movies (telefilms), whereas our broadcasters do not program any. This difference alone eliminates half of the market for fiction programming.

Some small efforts were made in this area about ten years ago. A few telefilms were co-produced in the following way: one film would be made that was almost entirely Canadian (sometimes with a French star) and another that was almost entirely French (sometimes with a star from Quebec), and then there would be an exchange. But this experiment was not continued because our broadcasters did not want to program any telefilms.

Why? Because they are expensive to produce-even those that were produced by the method that I have just described had budgets slightly over \$1 million-and very costly to promote. It is more economical to promote a series or a mini-series that covers several hours of programming than to promote a TV

movie that will take up only two hours of air time.

France also produces some series, and of course, so do we. In this case, the obstacles to co-production are different, and I will mention some of them in this section.

Surprising as it may seem, there are some strictly cultural obstacles to France-Canada co-productions—we are separated by a common language! This statement may seem facetious, but the fact is that our cultures are different. Our authors do not tell stories in the same way, and our directors do not pace their programs in the same way. There are far more differences between dramas produced in Quebec and those produced in France than between those produced in Quebec and those produced in the United States.

Personally, I have worked as a screenwriter in France, in Quebec, in English Canada, and in the United States. In Toronto and New York, I did not feel at all on foreign ground, professionally speaking but, in France, I certainly did. And these differences have become more pronounced over time. In the early 1960s, Quebec authors and French authors told their stories in almost identical ways. But in Quebec, screenwriters soon moved toward a much more American way of doing things, while in France, they did not. They remained French, while we became Americanized!

These are no mere petty professional differences. In the context of a co-production, they can take on considerable importance and create obstacles that are hard to overcome.

And if that were not enough, French television broadcasters are totally allergic to Quebec accents, while Quebec broadcasters feel exactly the same about French accents. The rules of the Union des Artistes prohibit dubbing actors in their own language, but producers have often asked Quebec actors to put on a "mid-Atlantic" accent for the version to be shown in France. Such dubbing, however, represents a substantial additional expense. In the other direction, most French actors are so well-known in Quebec (largely through their films) that Quebec viewers would die laughing if they heard them speaking with Quebec accents, or if Quebec actors' voices were dubbed over their own.

Exchange rates

The impact of exchange rates on co-productions cannot be ignored. By its very nature, any co-production takes a long time to mount, and exchange rates can often change considerably between the time that the agreements are signed and the time that production begins. For example, one of my interviewees told me about a France-Canada co-production for which the various contracts were signed almost two years ago, when the euro and the Canadian dollar were almost at par. This production is supposed to begin shooting in the next few months, but the euro has now risen so much that it is worth even more in

Canadian dollars than the U.S. dollar is. After having overcome all the other obstacles involved in putting together a co-production, the producers of this one may be forced to postpone it indefinitely unless the broadcaster agrees to pay a higher-than-usual licence fee or the producers resign themselves to an inevitable substantial loss.

I would like to stress here that the tables of co-production statistics based on data from the certification of productions for the income tax credit can be deceiving. These tables show a steady increase in all types of co-productions (both with other countries and with English Canada), regardless of whether the original language was French, English, or some other language. For example, in the 11 years from 1990 to 2000, 405 English-language and French-language television productions were co-produced, for an average of 37 per year. The average Canadian participation was about 50 per cent, for a total of \$2.145 billion, or an average of \$195 million per year. The provisional figures that I was given for 2002 show this gradual upward trend continuing.

What must be kept in mind, however, is that children's programs (in particular animated programs) and documentaries account for the lion's share of the statistics in these co-production tables. Adult television drama accounts for only a small share, and if you consider French-language drama alone, the percentage is even tinier.

The figures on the number of co-production agreements can also be deceiving. Today, Canadian producers can point to more than 50 co-production agreements, but many of these were signed to accommodate only one or two productions, and others were signed for purely political reasons. Thus the number of signed agreements is not in and of itself any guarantee of a co-production market that would be expanding exponentially.

Differences in production methods and culture

One well-known aspect of co-productions is that the poorer partner always gets dragged along by the richer one. In other words, when a Quebec producer gets involved in a co-production with France, for example, the production will automatically cost more, even if you do not count the costs directly associated with the co-production process (travel, accommodation, legal fees, etc.). According to statistics from SODEC, for example, from 1998 to 2000, the average cost of a one-hour program (all types combined) was \$124,053 if it was not co-produced, and \$494,662 if it was.

For all practical purposes, regardless of what country a Quebec producer might consider as a potential co-production partner, there is every chance that production costs will be substantially higher there than in Quebec.

In theory, this cost differential should not apply to co-productions with other Canadian provinces, and yet it does! Quebec producers do not save any money,

and actually incur higher costs if they engage in co-productions with English-speaking producers in Ontario or British Columbia.

According to SODEC, from 1998 to 2000, a one-hour French-language drama costs an average of \$258,722, while the average for a one-hour English-language drama was \$1,281,269. What makes this difference all the more striking is that the programs in question are usually produced less than 600 km from each other! And what makes it even stranger is that, in general, English Canadian actors are paid less than their French Canadian colleagues because there is no real star system in English Canada.

As one might ask with tongue in cheek, what's wrong with this picture?

This situation is even more ironic when you consider that the average French-language drama will be seen by five times more viewers than its English-language counterpart. As some of my interviewees told me, it's a lucky thing for English Canada that government assistance for television productions is based on the size of the English- and French-speaking populations, and not on the size of the audiences!

The production-cost gap between French-language drama and English-language drama is so large that it would be well worthwhile to create a task force of a few qualified people to analyze this specific issue. Some questions it might examine: What costs cause this gap? How might it be reduced to a more reasonable size? Would English-language dramas that cost, say, half as much as those being produced today actually reach fewer viewers?

It has been more than ten years now since I worked as a screenwriter in Toronto. At that time—and there is no reason to think that things have changed—this cost differential that I just mentioned consisted not of actors' and writers' salaries, but rather of budget items such as development, casting, shooting time, legal expenses, the predominance of form over narrative, etc.

While Canada's Francophone producers were creating a production culture of their very own, Canada's Anglophone producers were creating one that copied the Americans' and that resembled Hollywood more than the East Coast, where production is generally less costly.

Bureaucracy and deadlines

I will not dwell on this issue. I would simply like to point out that the considerable paperwork that all the assistance agencies demand and the application deadlines that they impose present significant obstacles to co-productions, especially those where the partner country offers more automatic forms of assistance.

Those producers whom I spoke to who are involved in co-productions unanimously deplored the complex bureaucracy of the co-production department. They told me that it is more nitpicking than its counterparts in

many other countries, that its rules do not always harmonize with those of other countries or even with those of our own forms of assistance, and that all of this creates numerous obstacles that are highly discouraging. What tops it off, they told me, are the changing rules about Canadian content.

Double shooting

In a country where there are two official languages, double shooting might seem like a very natural idea because it would allow a single production to reach two audiences, each with an original version in its own language.

Double shooting, even when it does not take place in the context of an intra-Canadian co-production, nevertheless costs much more in English Canada than in Quebec because of Quebec's economical production culture, which I described earlier. In the coming months, two productions will be double shot in Montréal using these more economical production methods. The producers concerned believe that they are going to achieve substantial savings because they will end up with two original versions, and I agree with them.

Does this mean that there might be a clear-cut comparative advantage to double shooting drama programs in Quebec, so long as they are not intra-Canadian co-productions? That is a possibility, and the task force that I suggested earlier could investigate it.

CBC/Radio-Canada's current management seems to want to encourage double shooting. From time to time over the years, the corporation's management has wanted its English and French networks to join forces to produce drama programming. This seemed entirely natural in the early days of television, when *La famille Plouffe/The Plouffe Family* was broadcast in both French and English, with the two versions played by the same actors, but it soon became "abnormal."

A few series produced by the CBC's English network have subsequently been aired in dubbed versions on the French network. Because Francophone audiences are used to dubbing, these series did not do so badly considering that Radio-Canada never went overboard to promote them. In contrast, the response of the CBC's Anglophone audiences to French-language dramas dubbed into English has always been somewhat mixed. This response has nothing to do with the quality of the shows, but rather with the fact that they were dubbed, which Anglophone audiences are not at all used to.

It is no secret that, outside of corporate headquarters in Ottawa, relations between CBC/Radio-Canada's English and French networks have never been all that good. Regardless of the kind of programming involved, Toronto and Montréal have each always been convinced that they held a monopoly on the truth, and each has always turned up its nose at the other's success. One fairly significant example is that CBC's English network has not seen fit to acquire the rights to the French network's comedy series *Un gars, une fille*, which has been a hit in a dozen other countries around the world.

It is even more surprising given that the concept of the series is adapted into a complete, all new, production with no dubbing and no double shooting.

Except during the first two years of its existence, Canadian television has so far failed to reap the potential benefits of having two cultures and two official languages. The boundary between French and English television has always been airtight. *Last Chapter/Le dernier chapitre* is a kind of exception, and there will probably be others. But what we really need is a concerted effort to take advantage of the exceptional circumstances created by the existence of two television industries, one English-speaking, the other French-speaking, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, but not the same ones!

There are some really exciting avenues to explore here—another fine job for the task force!

- **The various forms of assistance have eliminated almost all of the economic reasons for Quebec producers to mount co-productions with either France or English Canada.**
- **France, Quebec's most natural partner, does not produce the same kinds of drama programs that we do.**
- **Quebec screenwriters take a distinctly North American approach to storytelling, very different from that taken by French-language screenwriters in other countries.**
- **The television industry in France has not gotten its viewers used to hearing Quebec accents, and Quebec broadcasters claim that their audiences get annoyed when they hear continental French accents on their television shows.**
- **Exchange rates have a major effect on co-productions, and the unfavourable exchange rate of the Canadian dollar against the euro is having a very negative impact.**
- **The substantial differences between the production cultures of French and English Canada work against intra-Canadian co-productions.**
- **The bureaucracy that handles co-productions, the discrepancies between its rules and other countries' rules, the discrepancies between its rules and those of our own forms of assistance, and the application deadlines for these programs all place obstacles in the way of co-productions.**
- **The difference between the costs of similar programs produced in French and in English in Canada is so large that a task force should be struck to examine this matter in depth.**

- **The boundary between French and English television in Canada has always been airtight. We have never reaped the benefits that having two cultures and two official languages should normally provide.**

VIII. Sales to Other Countries

Despite some laudable if always sporadic efforts, French-language Canadian dramas have never had much of an impact on Canada's export figures—not even on those that focus on exports of cultural "products" alone.

One Montréal company, Distraction Formats, specializes in selling concepts and scripts for drama programs. It has had only limited success so far, and I was unable to obtain any precise figures on its export sales or on the revenues that it has generated for the owners of the rights to the programs that it markets.

On the other hand, one remarkable success has been the sale of the concept and the scripts for *Un gars, une fille* to a dozen foreign countries. Here too, however, it was just about impossible to find out how much revenue these sales have generated, but the amounts have certainly not been negligible.

There are various programs in place to promote the sales of French-language Canadian drama in other countries. SODEC spends just about \$1 million every year to promote Quebec producers and distributors under the *Horizon Québec* umbrella at various festivals and trade shows and to raise Quebec's cultural profile at international events. And Telefilm has its own marketing fund.

These initiatives are all well and good, but producers and distributors wonder whether we should not also be providing a form of income tax credit or similar assistance based on the amount of air time that Canadian dramas manage to obtain on foreign television channels. This form of assistance would give Canadian producers and distributors a major incentive to spend time and money on developing foreign markets.

- **There are various forms of assistance to promote exports of French-language Canadian programs, but people in the industry believe that an assistance program should be established to recognize the actual successes that Canadian productions achieve in foreign markets, based on the amount of air time that they actually get there.**

IX. Future Outlook

It is never easy to talk about the future, whether the subject is television or anything else. Rather than making any predictions that could easily turn out to be wrong, in this section I will offer you some thoughts on the current state of French-language television in Canada, as far as drama is concerned. These thoughts should shed some light on the future. In addition, I will express some of the things that people in the industry are currently worried about. These worries too can provide some useful insight into the fears that people have for the future.

The first source of concern is the steady erosion of Radio-Canada's viewership. The sense of unease about this issue that had been hovering in the background for the past three or four years came to the fore early this year, when the results of the BBM fall surveys for the Greater Montréal Area came out, showing Radio-Canada ranking less than 2 per cent ahead of TQS. Meanwhile, in the Nielsen ratings, TQS had been running ahead of Radio-Canada all fall.

Among the shows with the top 10 ratings, there were six dramas and four variety shows. None of these programs was foreign, which is typical, but only two of them were from Radio-Canada—*Un gars, une fille* and *La fureur*, both of which have been running for several seasons and will be going off the air this year.

On the face of it, this fall survey should have been good news for TVA, whose 33.8 per cent market share is easily twice Radio-Canada's. But at TVA too, this survey gave cause for concern.

No one denies that Radio-Canada has played a leadership role, and an essential one. It has set quality standards that have pushed private television to constantly raise its own. But ever since government assistance from various sources (the CTF, tax credits, Telefilm Canada, etc.) has become more and more significant, TVA, as we saw earlier, has succeeded in dislodging Radio-Canada from all of its strongholds.

This situation clearly reflects what I call the schizophrenic nature of Radio-Canada, which has to maintain a balance between its role as a public institution (with a mandate to inform Canadians and to defend Canadian culture, Canadian heritage, and Canadian unity) and its role as a commercial broadcasting undertaking whose survival depends to some extent on its ratings.

While Radio-Canada was lowering its standards in an attempt to recover the ratings it had lost, TVA was raising its standards to match Radio-Canada's. In this strange race, which in the best case might have ended in a tie, Radio-Canada has ultimately emerged the big loser.

TVA is part of a large conglomerate, Quebecor, whose current financial needs

are tremendous. TQS is struggling to stay in the black, to pay off its accumulated deficit, and to build up a financial cushion. In other words, both of Radio-Canada's competitors have a pressing need for profits. If, as can be expected, Radio-Canada finally drops to third place among the French-language generalist networks, what motivation will the private networks have to invest more and more on programming, and especially on costly forms of programming such as drama?

All the evidence, and not least of all the ratings, shows that private television has done a better job than Radio-Canada of making government assistance "pay off."

If government assistance is to continue, won't the government eventually be tempted to put Radio-Canada on the same footing as private television with respect to all of its entertainment programming (fiction, variety, talk shows, etc.), and maintain its status as a subsidized public broadcaster for the other part of its mandate only? Isn't this the path that the government headed down, without really knowing or realizing it, when it decided to let television broadcasters access all forms of assistance except statutory subsidies?

Since things rarely return to an earlier status quo, I strongly doubt that the government assistance granted to private television through independent producers will cease (some of this assistance has in fact been made possible by a reduction in the appropriations for CBC/Radio-Canada).

Under the circumstances, within a few years, if not sooner, the scenario that I have just described for making government assistance more of a "paying proposition" will surely receive thorough debate. The results of this debate may substantially alter the future environment for the production of television drama.

X. Advertising

Here we come to the heart of the matter.

Television broadcasters are looking for new sources of revenue that can replace advertising revenues, which are trending downward rather than upward. The specialty networks, with their more targeted audiences, are slowly nibbling away at the pie of advertising dollars. Major advertisers such as Culinar and Danone are now allocating part of their budgets to the specialty networks.

Since drama programs are still the locomotive for the generalist networks' programming, it is mainly through dramas that the networks are trying to increase their income and thus reduce the cost of the licence fees they pay. The devices that the networks use for this purpose include product placements, merchandise tie-ins, contests, and heavy use of logos on screen. At this point they really seem to have reached the limit in this regard, or at least the limits of their viewers' tolerance. But the problem is as big as ever: dramas cost more and more to produce, and if their quality is to be maintained, other sources of revenue must be found.

A broadcaster like TVA will never agree to let the cost of its licence fees exceed its estimated potential revenues. The quest for new revenue sources is thus already a major concern, and it will only become more so, especially if younger audiences continue to drift toward the specialty channels (28.5 per cent of their viewership).

XI. The Depersonalization of French-language Drama

From its earliest days until the mid-1980s, French-language television drama was highly personalized. Without even looking at the credits, you could recognize the style of screenwriters such as Roger Lemelin, Marcel Gamache, Réginald Boisvert, Pierre Gauvreau, Gilles Richer, and Claude-Henri Grignon.

But nowadays, this high degree of personalization has almost disappeared. Perhaps this is yet another perverse effect of government assistance, which began precisely in the mid-1980s. Perhaps it reflects the gradual disappearance of the direct ties that used to exist between broadcasters and the people who created and wrote television programs for them. Perhaps it reflects some shortcomings among the people in charge of drama in the broadcasters' organizations, or some timidity among broadcasters and producers that makes them imitate other people's successes or produce sequels instead of tackling new subjects. Or perhaps it is all of these things. Whatever the case, television drama has now become so depersonalized that one producer even told me he feels as if he is "painting by numbers!"

Government assistance has clearly raised the overall quality of television series, but the improvement does seem to have been more in production values than in the quality of the stories being told.

The first thing needed to capture an audience is a good story. But government assistance, by allowing producers to shoot more scenes outdoors, to use "natural" sets, and more characters, costumes, visual effects, and sound effects, has raised audience expectations, not to mention inflated the salaries of performers and craftspeople. I do not think we can go backward, but I do think that we will have to resign ourselves to either increasing the amount of assistance or producing fewer dramas, with all the consequences that will have for viewer loyalty. The day is not far off when television drama shows will share the fate of feature films: they will all cost a lot, but from time to time, a low-budget series will become a blockbuster, just as sometimes happens with feature films that were shot on a shoestring.

The very nature of French-language television drama has changed a great deal. In the earliest days, most of our television dramas were family dramas, and the family was even the dramatic setting of choice. In both form and content, these programs met a need for their viewers and helped them to identify by showing them cultural touchstones that they could recognize. Without wanting to overgeneralize, I would say that this is no longer entirely the case.

According to a study by the Centre d'études sur les médias at Université Laval, in Québec, from 1993 to 2001, the number of acts of physical violence in Quebec television dramas rose from 772 to 3,689, for an average of 40 acts of violence per hour. Acts of psychological violence started at the same level and have followed the same growth curve. What makes these figures all the more

troubling is that the majority of these violent acts were aired before 9 PM. The quest for ratings obviously has something to do with this trend. Though television dramas from French Canada may still be less violent than those from the U.S., they are also far more violent than those from English Canada. The statistics that I just quoted certainly will not surprise any faithful viewers of series such as *Le dernier chapitre*, *Fortier*, or *Omertà*...

For some fifteen years now, our television dramas have not hesitated to push the boundaries of the acceptable, to demystify institutions that used to be sacred and to question values that everyone used to share. The use of street drugs like cocaine or ecstasy, for instance, has become so commonplace in television drama that any social opprobrium that used to attach to them has now vanished. Meanwhile, "reality TV" shows have exacerbated the modern tendency for people to share their most intimate secrets shamelessly.

Over this same period, French-language television dramas have scarcely attempted to reflect the new face of this country. For whatever reason (lack of creators and performers from other countries, broadcasters' trepidation, fear of negative audience reactions, etc.), these programs have not yet succeeded in absorbing the new demographic realities.

Not that the Anglophones have done any better. As one Anglophone producer confided to me, "The networks want drama to be white!" And yet, the number of viewers of foreign origin is increasing steadily, and if they cannot identify with the stories they are being told on the small screen, they will simply stop watching. Drama programming costs too much for us to afford to ignore this growing pool of viewers. Reflecting the new face of Quebec and of Canada is one of the challenges that the drama programs of the future must meet.

XII. Reality TV

Despite appearances, reality TV is nothing new. *Candid Camera*, which became *Les insolences d'une caméra* in French, and then *Surprise sur prise*, a success that Quebec producer Marcel Béliveau exported to several countries, including France, were reality TV, as were *Drôles de vidéos* and other programs based on the same premise—taking people by surprise.

Historically, reality television borrows from the documentary form. *An American Family* was first aired by PBS in 1973 and, two years ago, Télé-Québec applied essentially the same format to a Quebec family. In 1992, MTV launched *The Real World*, and then in 1997, singer Bob Geldof launched *Expedition Robinson* on Swedish television.

By becoming scripted, reality TV had just been disconnected from real life! Thus reality TV no longer has very much to do with reality. In 1999, reality TV went interactive with *Big Brother*, a concept launched on the Veronica network in the Netherlands by John de Mol, who gave his name to the company Endemol.

The merchandise tie-ins for reality TV are a whole industry in themselves: records, videos, party games, magazines, telephone calls, clothing, accessories, jewellery, etc. To date, some 100 tie-in products have been developed, and they have been a veritable windfall for the networks. In France, for example, for *Loft Story I*, the telephone calls alone brought in \$15 million. Also in France, *Star Academy* has been a huge hit, and Jenifer Bartoli, who emerged as the winner in 2001, has sold 600,000 albums! For comparison, that is as many albums as Céline Dion's last record sold in France!

MixMania, which aired last fall on VRAK-TV, and *Star Académie*, which is currently airing on TVA, are direct offshoots of this new form of reality TV and, in proportion to their market, are achieving comparable success.

When I conducted this study in Quebec, I found the same response to reality television that I saw in France two years ago: nobody had a good word to say about it, but everybody was watching it!

Is reality TV a threat to television drama? Might reality TV unseat television drama as the engine that drives the programming schedule?

Reality TV has brought back many viewers who had stopped watching much television, and if only for this reason, we should be happy about it. Reality TV has stirred things up, and that is a very good thing, because after all these years, our television industry, like that of all Western countries, is in major need of renewal.

Reality TV could well help to transform the television dramas of the future by shaking up broadcasters, producers, and screenwriters and forcing them to find new ways of telling and presenting stories. I have no doubt at all that as long as we are inventive and provide a clear framework for its future development, television drama will remain the leading force in our television industry and probably on all generalist television networks throughout the world.

- **The steady decline in Radio-Canada's ratings is a source of growing concern and could compromise the future of quality drama on French-language television in Canada.**
- **The fact that private television has been more successful than Radio-Canada in making government assistance pay off could contribute to a re-examination of a portion of the mandate of our public television broadcaster.**
- **The generalist networks have little chance of increasing their share of advertising revenues, and will have to find other sources of income if they want to carry expensive programming such as dramas.**
- **Government assistance seems to have had the effect of gradually depersonalizing French-language television drama in Canada.**
- **Quebec television drama has pushed back all the boundaries and even become very violent, but has not yet succeeded in reflecting the new demographic realities of life in Quebec.**
- **Though reality TV is nothing new, in recent years, it has begun to take off, and since the start of the 2002-2003 season, it has become a shattering "reality" in Quebec.**
- **By shaking our creative talent up a bit, reality TV could contribute to the renewal of the dramatic genre.**

XIII. Conclusion

I wish to thank the CRTC, and its Chairman in particular, and Telefilm for having entrusted me with this study. I hope that it will prove useful to the Commission, Telefilm and to the other relevant agencies in their future initiatives to encourage the production of drama programs in both English and French in Canada.

Respectfully submitted,

Guy Fournier
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