

Introduction—Debate at RIDM

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Hello. Thank you for coming. It may seem self-serving at worst and naïve at best for the head of a public cultural agency to pose the question of today's debate. It is neither. It stems from my ongoing attempts to understand on what basis I can act. What are the valid arguments which both justify the continued existence of a National Film Board and which would guide its direction? When I have looked for guidance in the cultural sector I found none. What I saw was a sector that had, to all extents and purposes, abandoned debate and reflection in favour of a circling of the wagons. Their case for culture tended to be reactive and nearly always about the defence of funding of cultural activities.

Perhaps not a surprise in a sector that always has a sense of being under attack or underappreciated (regardless of the government) and with more than a little touchiness about its value: we have, it seems, a necessity to prove that we belong in the real world of grown-ups doing the real work of making money. In the process we have abdicated any serious discourse about the nature of culture and the public space. We've accepted the terms of reference of the so-called "real" world without ever challenging them. The defensive posture, the argument of the economic benefits of cultural activity, may be necessary as a tactical move, but if that is all there is, if it displaces the more fundamental questioning of the premises on which we build a foundation for the public realm and within it cultural activity than we have done ourselves grievous harm.

Not the least of the harm is in the narrowing of our spheres of thought. We do not pose questions that may render us uncomfortable because that kind of questioning is seen as undermining our case for the financial support of culture. For example, we repeatedly argue that culture is important because that is how we understand ourselves as a country. To me this is a cliché, one of those motherhood ideas that need to be rigorously questioned. How does it actually do so? What mechanisms are at work that distinguishes the impact of a Canadian work on our audiences from non-Canadian particularly when we note how overwhelming other cultural influences are? And so on. Yet, it is exactly that kind of questioning that is deemed taboo within the cultural sector because it would be seen to be granting aid and comfort to our perceived enemies.

Instead of debate, we take positions and we do so as collectivities. We tend to assert on behalf of a particular group: APFTQ, CFTPA, UDA, SARTEC, etc--- artists, directors, producers, and so on. Again, an approach that may be useful tactically but, if that is all there is, it stifles the ability to think in a free and probing way. Innumerable times, I have had people say to me, "I can say this to you privately, but I couldn't say it publicly." That's the nub of the problem. In a subsidized world with limited means of funding you don't want to bite the hand that feeds you. You keep quiet. Self censorship is rampant in our industry.

The debate around these kinds of issues is not new. Culture, national identity and the role of the artist were hot points in a debate that roiled mid to late 18th century Europe. A vigorous correspondence

criss-crossed Europe and involved such luminaries as Kant, Herder, Hume, Boyle and Goethe. Artists, scientists, writers, philosophers. What is striking is the breadth and depth of the exchanges. What is distinctive about our age is how culture has become impoverished. It is no longer part of a broad intellectual current. It is limited to what we find in the culture pages of the newspaper and whom we privilege as artists.

This is not an attack on artists; it is an attack of how we have debased the issues of cultural engagement. If, as a sector, we have come under attack it is partly because of that narrowing in which we have willingly collaborated not least for self-interest. We have made an implicit Faustian contract. We have limited the scope of who participates (artists however we wish to define them) and in what they participate. In return we seek financial support. It is why all the discourse around support for the arts inevitably comes to a question of money. And everything else we say about the importance of culture is little more than window dressing repeating a series of unquestioned and banal clichés. It is our *trahison des clercs*.

If I cited the comparison with the 18th century it is also for two other reasons. It was in those extensive cross-fertilizing exchanges that the modern notion of the public realm was born, that which is so under attack and eroded today. Secondly, it was a period of rapid social and technological change brought about by the relentless momentum of the industrial revolution.

We are going through a not dissimilar moment now. The digital revolution is as profound as the industrial one and the shifting social terrain is as radical.

That is why it is urgent to rethink the world and in particular the nature of the public realm and the role of culture within it. This is a long term project; and we are not used to acting for the long term. But I think it essential. I think it essential to set our horizons in years and decades and not simply today and tomorrow. It's time to start now. I hope this moment can be one small start. I would like to thank Marie Anne Raulet, Philippe Baylaucq and RIDM for joining me in the launching of this adventure. And I would like to thank our panellists who have accepted to join the fray—a process whose outcome we cannot define.

Now it is over to you, Catherine Perrin.