

Cultural Daily

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America Needs a National Film Commission

Hoyt Hilsman · Thursday, September 8th, 2011

With the Toronto Film Festival getting underway this week, it's worth pointing out the crucial role that national film commissions like Canada's National Film Board and Telefilm Canada have played in the global film marketplace. These agencies of the Canadian government not only assist filmmakers in the production of their films, but also help global marketing, distribution and promotion of Canadian films in general. The result has been a boon for Canadian filmmakers and an important source of revenue for Canada.

Like Canada, most nations recognize that films are a valuable export and that, in a competitive global marketplace, filmmakers need help in marketing and distributing films outside their own countries. In addition, with the growth of international co-productions, filmmakers need assistance from their national film commissions – who are part of an international network — to provide information to facilitate those partnerships.

Since national film commissions are pretty inexpensive to operate and can reap huge economic benefits for a country, virtually every developed nation, and many in the developing world, operate these commissions. However, there is one nation – the only one in the Western world – that does not have a national film commission. Guess who? The United States.

There are lots of reasons for this glaring omission, but let's start with the obvious one — we have never needed a national film commission. Since Hollywood has always been (and continues to be) the dominant player in the international film market, it never needed any help. The Hollywood studios had their own international network, and didn't see any reason to for a national film commission. In fact, it was in their interest to discourage such an effort, since it might to undermine the clout of the studios.

While we don't have a national film commission, we do have a de facto arbiter of rules and standards — The Motion Picture Association of America, the industry association of the six major movie studios. Founded in 1922 by the early movie moguls, the MPAA is the single most powerful voice for American films and has played a key role in the global success of American cinema. Jack Valenti, the former aide to LBJ who ran the MPAA for nearly forty years, was a skilled and passionate advocate for Hollywood, championing the movie industry and crafting a ratings system that the public could rely on.

During Valenti's tenure, the movie business changed radically from a mostly domestic industry

dependent on US theatrical revenues into a global business that relies on foreign ticket sales and a multitude of technologies and distribution platforms. However, the structure of the MPAA has changed little, and consists of only six members – Disney, Fox, Universal, Paramount, Sony and Warner Brothers. With the exception of Disney, all of these studios have become subsidiaries of larger media conglomerates. And many of the most important film companies and filmmakers in America (including DreamWorks and Steven Spielberg) — not to mention theater owners and other industry groups — are not members of the MPAA and have no voice in its activities. While the MPAA never set out to be a representative organization – it has always operated essentially as an industry cartel – the changing nature of the global film business raises questions about the effectiveness of the MPAA as the chief promoter of American films.

There are two important forces driving the global film market today. The first is the advent of digital and internet technologies that are changing how films are produced, distributed and consumed. These new technologies have offered opportunities for Hollywood – for example, many more distribution platforms – as well as challenges, including widespread film piracy. In addition, the explosive growth of countries like China, India, Russia and Brazil – to name only a few – has increased worldwide audiences for film, but also threatens to change future viewing habits, as global audiences look for new stories that reflect their own experiences and cultures.

Industry organizations like the MPAA are simply not up to these challenges. While it may be an effective lobbying organization for the studios, it has focused primarily on anti-piracy efforts and the ratings system, but has done little to address the broader challenges of the global market. This is due, in large part, to competing interests among the members of the MPAA, who are huge conglomerates that can rarely agree on a broad agenda.

The best vehicle to address the challenges of the global market would be a national film commission – a public/private organization that would include representatives of both the film industry and the federal government. While it would be politically difficult to establish a strictly governmental body, a compromise solution might be a private/public partnership that would enlist the power of the United States government in the global market without limiting the freedom of the film industry.

The American film industry is one of our most important engines of economic growth and, during these tough economic times and in the face of a rapidly changing global marketplace, it does not make sense to rely on a small group of tradition-bound studios to lead the industry into the future. Only a private/public partnership that reflects a broader swath of the film community is capable of maintaining this critical source of jobs and revenue.

Although the Hollywood studios, networks, unions and other organizations might resist the idea of a national film commission, it is arguably in their long-term interest to have a more representative organization in place. Perhaps most importantly, a national film commission could have a positive impact on the creative potential of the American film community by connecting it more directly to other national film commissions and thereby to the global marketplace. Now is the time for America to take this crucial step towards the future.

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