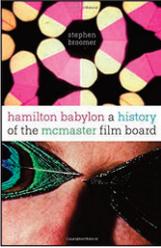


Review



Hamilton Babylon: A History of the McMaster Film Board. By Stephen Broomer. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 280 pp. ISBN: 9781442647787.

Stephen Broomer's *Hamilton Babylon: A History of the McMaster Film Board* is, at one level, a tale of the transit of some students at McMaster, an Ontario university known for its science and technology faculties, through a brief passage of time, 1966–1975, during which these students produced out of nowhere a fervent cinematic culture. During this decade of activity, the McMaster Film Board (hereafter the MFB) played, as Broomer's book demonstrates, a role crucial in the development of a viable Canadian independent and experimental film network. Both the MFB and the network that it helped develop were achieved through connections, not always amicable, with the world beyond the contestations of student body politics that facilitated the creation of a film industrial apparatus of production centres, distribution and promotion systems, film festivals and repertory cinemas dedicated to independent and experimental film. Less happily, the history of the MFB as related in Broomer's book is also a history of a certain failure: utopian hopes of liberation through cinematic avant-garde production aborted through fame, notoriety, careerism, malfeasance, and sociocultural conservatism.

Overall, the book takes a bifocal approach: on the one hand, we have the MFB itself, as it moves from being a slightly cliquish group influenced by the American Underground and the 1960s counterculture to becoming a training program for mainstream movie success, before degenerating into an organ of conservative, if not venal, elements of the McMaster student board. On the other hand, we have the story of the founder of the MFB as a film production centre, John Hofsess. A charismatic combination of dedicated artist, confidence trickster, and social utopian, Hofsess, a working-class outsider in the McMaster University student community, would rarely cease to be a problem for the university administration and the student government.

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Hofsess' aesthetic and social idealism, as reflected in his films *Redpath 25* (1966), *Palace of Pleasure* (1966–1967), and *Columbus of Sex* (1969), stands in contrast to the pragmatism of his eventual successor, Ivan Reitman. Unlike Hofsess' experiments in formal innovations, painterly aesthetic, and references to Norman O. Brown and Wilhelm Reich, Reitman would pursue two connected goals: the transformation of the MFB from a hangout for aesthetic and political radicals into a professional training centre with a stable financial/administrative structure and the furthering of his career in the North American film industries. In the latter, he would be undoubtedly successful, and Broomer implies that the seeds of his future successes germinated in Reitman's student work: *Orientation* (1968), a campus comedy that makes fun of the McMaster community that contains the elements—an uptight administration, incomprehensible fraternity rituals, randy if clueless freshmen, out-of touch academics, sexy seniors—that would make up 1978's *Animal House*.

Given the differences between Reitman's vision of a film industry that would combine saleability with technical proficiency and Hofsess' utopian goals, it is surprising to learn that the two men, along with MFB member Dan Goldberg, would collaborate to produce *Columbus of Sex*, the 1969 film whose troubled history somewhat overpowers the second half of Broomer's book. A bacchanal of various permutations of sexual activity and partners, *Columbus of Sex* was conceived by Hofsess to have a political purpose, namely, the overcoming of sexual repression by rendering the sight of non-hegemonic sexual behaviour commonplace, thereby removing its "shock" value. The film was screened on-campus, and promotion was limited. The rationale behind this was to emphasize that, by screening the film for university students rather than the general public, *Columbus of Sex*'s sexually charged imagery would be sheltered by principles of aesthetic and intellectual inquiry proper to an academic setting, rather than being open to the charge of violating community standards. So it was that on August 8, 1969, the film was screened twice at McMaster University to an audience of 300 students and a few besides, notably two elementary school teachers whose presence at this screening would remain enigmatic.

The police intervened during the second screening that evening, seizing projection equipment and the screening copy of the film before arresting Hofsess, Reitman, and Goldberg. The three men would be held for seven months while the authorities organized themselves sufficiently to mount a case for the prosecution of charges of obscenity. The three filmmakers/producers would eventually be found guilty, although not until after some fairly bizarre events in which testimonies would be retracted, Hofsess would renounce his claim as director, and the film would be picked up by a sleazy sexploitation mogul who would recut the film to suit his core audience—artistic integrity degraded into a soft-porn flick.

However, it is the legal arguments that both sides of the initial case made that should be lingered over, as they are troubling from a number of perspectives. For the prosecution, there was little to do other than offer evidence that the film was in fact obscene. Various Hamiltonians, none of whom were connected to McMaster University, were notable for their interest in experimental cinema, or, with the aforementioned exceptions, had attended the screenings, were called as witnesses to the film's obscen-

ity. There are obvious problems here: as these people were not experts in the cinematic tradition to which *Columbus of Sex* strove to contribute, what weight could their testimony have? Were they of unusual moral achievement? Would they have watched this film without external prompting? At the same time, and this is underplayed by Broomer, the defence's case had serious impediments that attenuated its effectiveness. It is undeniable that the defendants were in a position of being presumed guilty in the eyes of the court, with the onus on the defence counsel to prove their innocence. The strategy of the defence was to clarify what constituted an obscene or pornographic film in accordance with the standards of the day. Thus, if there were explicit depictions of sexual or blasphemous acts or speech in mainstream films that were not censored, then the same standard should be applied to more marginal endeavours.

This charge of hypocrisy, whatever its theoretical merits, has, in practice, very rarely worked; saying, as it were, "Gotcha!" to the censors presupposes the good faith of those who are in a position to deny such hypocrisy has taken place by controlling how the definition of obscenity is to be applied. More problematically, the defence counsel also proffered what might be called the Susan Sontag Defence: "The hard truth," Sontag avers, "is that what may be acceptable in elite culture may not be acceptable in mass culture, that tastes which pose only innocuous ethical issues as the property of a minority become corrupting when they become more established" (1980, p. 98). So, the defence counsel implied that the small group of students who were in the audience of these special screenings were, through membership in an educated elite, exempt from the standards applicable to, as Broomer puts it, "those steelworkers, housewives and clergy who would act as witnesses against the film" (p. 129). Broomer, who is otherwise alert to contradictions in the protagonists of this history, does not explicitly comment on the class divisions invoked here, likely due to his support for the aesthetic explorations of Hofess' work generally. It is in this spirit that Broomer emphasizes the prosecution witnesses' remarks on *Columbus of Sex's* formal innovations, which seemed, for the witnesses, as bad as the sexual explicitness; as one witness claimed: "The film made no sense, there's no relation between the so-called story on the soundtrack [derived from the Victorian erotic novel *My Secret Life*] and the pictures, and that too indicates it is obscene" (p. 161). The defence, then, was forced to walk a difficult path between asserting exceptional legal rights for an elite group while justifying non-mainstream culture to a hostile audience. That they failed to succeed in this is perhaps an indication of the continued unease with which experimental art is regarded by normative society.

Overall, Broomer provides his readers with an extensively researched examination of this marginal but pivotal moment in Canadian film history. Although *Hamilton Babylon* was published by a university press, the author's style engages with a more general audience of filmmakers and cinephiles as well as scholars of film history. Above all, it is clearly a work of passion. If certain theoretical assumptions or value judgments appear in this text, they are the result of Broomer's conviction, in both his scholarship and his artistic practice, about the significance of the experimental exercise of cinema. One last point is connected to this: a good deal of this book is taken up with lengthy descriptions and analyses of the films produced by MFB members, from the sublime—

Hofsess' films certainly, but also Peter Rowe's *Buffalo Airport Visions* (1967), G.W. Curran's *Walk On* (1969), and Eugene Levy's *Jack and Jill* (1970)—to the risible. The long descriptions are necessary for these films, most of which are in extremely fragile condition or lost altogether. Broomer has taken on the task of restoring, preserving, and exhibiting these films, and this book serves as a pendant to this restoration of an important moment in Canadian cinema.

Reference

Sontag, Susan. (1980). Fascinating fascism. In *Under the Sign of Saturn* (pp. 73-105). New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

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