

National Post

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Now critic famed for sharp tongue

John Harkness

Kate Robertson, National Post Published: Saturday, December 22, 2007

John Harkness didn't just write about movies -- his very existence was cinematic in nature.



After a huge windfall from the Web site partypoker.com, Now magazine's senior film writer started buying his clothes in Italy and donating money to local cultural centres, said Michael Hollett, Now's cofounder, editor and publisher.

An art lover, Harkness would choose an artist, and then visit every gallery around the world that carried works by that artist.

"What a filmic life he had," Hollett said.

When Harkness missed his deadline on Tuesday (his first in 26 years), staff grew concerned and someone was sent to the critic's house. The 53-year-old was found dead. Reportedly, it appeared as if he'd been sitting down to watch a DVD. The cause of his death is not yet known.

Well-loved by his colleagues, Harkness sometimes enraged film-industry insiders with his larger-than-life personality and cutting one-liners. Of one movie, he said, "I'd rather watch my parents having sex than watch this film."

According to Hollett, Garth Drabinsky, producer and co-founder of Cineplex Odeon theatres, once demanded that he fire Harkness, after Harkness complained to GQ that the media treated Drabinsky too kindly. Hollett ignored the demand, even after Cineplex pulled their ads.

Born in Montreal in 1954, Harkness was raised in Halifax and Sarnia, Ont. After studying English at Carleton University in Ottawa, he completed his post-graduate work at Columbia University in New York under the mentorship of well-known film critic Andrew Sarris.

In 1998, Harkness, who'd written for Now since its first issue in 1981, compiled a list of his 10 favourite westerns: *The Wild Bunch*; *The Searchers*; *Once Upon a Time in the West*; *The Hour of the Gun*; *Rio Bravo*; *The Naked Spur*; *Ride the High Country*; *Seven Men From Now*; *Wagonmaster*; and *Unforgiven*.

He'd recently joked with Hollett that his salary was pitiful compared with what he was making through pokerparty.com last year.

"He didn't have to work anymore, but he loved film that much," said Hollett. "He was so committed."