The NFB: Inventing Canada—Again?

by Lyn Martin

NFB has proven to be less the "eyes of Canada" than it is a reflection of the Canadian condition: tentative, self-critical, self-conscious and well-intentioned.

Bob Verrall, executive producer of English Production at the NFB, zeroed in on it when he said recently: "There has been too much nonsense talked about the so-called National Unity crisis in Canada. People working in cultural agencies know quite well this is not the real issue; but National Identity is. And there's a profound distinction to be made between the two. At the Board we know this and I wish we had been more daring in stating it, and doing something about it."

In view of this "cultural crisis" and visibility problem, we can hardly expect the NFB to see "Canada, and see it whole" when there are so many disparate parts of the whole becomes elusive. Nor can we expect the NFB to propagate Canadian culture when we lie cheek-to-jowl to the most powerful film and television industries in the world.

In terms of the national images we do have, the majority of them have come from public the eyes like the CBC and the NFB. They have not come from the CTV or the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC), and probably never will. Under the Capital Cost Allowance (CCA), the commercial sector's rather checked and less-than-noble performance has resulted in films which have little to say about this country. As NFB filmmaker Albert Kish says, "If you took away the NFB and the CBC there would be nothing. How would you know that you are in Canada?"

The demise of documentary tradition

Last year, Albert Kish was commissioned to make a film on the 41-year history of the NFB. The Imagemakers suggest that the NFB invented Canada, both as a political and cultural entity. As a stream-of-consciousness mosaic of clips from 80 NFB films (laboriously selected out of 600), the film traces the evolution and consolidation of a national consciousness in Canada.

Through the eyes of the NFB documentary, Kish believes that Canada's changing perceptions of itself were as much invented as they were document-
At 42 years of age, the Board has, perhaps awkwardly, been compared to a "Grande Dame" suffering from institutional if not constitutional middle age.

Sandra Gathercole, former chairman of the Council of Canadian Film Makers, and CRTC consultant, said at a recent symposium on the NFB held at the University of Toronto, that the future of the NFB lies in television, or more generally, in electronic distribution systems. "To trace the decline of the social influence of the NFB," claims Gathercole, "would be to trace the rise of the electronic media.

The relationship of the French Production section of the NFB to Radio-Canada is much more amicable. Director of French Production, Jean-Marc Garand, estimates that over the last three years the French unit has co-produced 35-40 films which Radio-Canada agreed to pay for sight unseen. Currently they are in co-production on two features and a docu-drama series. Still, Garand would like to see a better access to Tele-2's viewing capacity to carry imported image of another country. What we do not have now and have never had, is the capacity to produce and distribute the kind of product that speaks to ourselves. We have managed to sit with the NFB, since it is the greatest film resource in the world and not use it. The fact that 13% of prime time of the national network is devoted to cultural programming is ridiculous. If we are serious about maintaining presence in the North American media market that is coming at us, we must not use the resources which is the NFB.

Theatrical distribution

If it's a question of how to best utilize the NFB product, should the film purist cringe in horror as the deadnkleel of the NFB is now utilizing NFB films on an ad hoc basis, primarily as filler material. But he would like to see NFB films on cable in a much more concerted fashion.

Says Sandra Gathercole: "The fundamental problem in this country is that we have a very sophisticated distribution mechanism to identify the viewers and make sure they will see the films televised on a prescribed date, in particular time slots.

Despite the fundamental differences between the mediums of television and film, NFB distribution people are nevertheless well aware of the writing on the wall and have finally begun to make some headway in the television market.

Director of distribution Bill Litwak talked enthusiastically about Videotron, "the most interesting of the on-going experimental distribution projects." Videotron, a Montreal-based, on-demand video service with approximately 30 channels at the present moment. The Videotron library holds about 500 NFB titles. Subscribers phone in and ask to see any given film which appears in the catalogue at a certain time. They are in turn told to switch on to a selected channel at a prescribed time. According to Litwak, NFB films are proving to be extremely popular.

At first they are locked out the NFB and the independent Canadian producer in favor of the American product. The economics of the situation now dictates that the NFB must explore the distribution channels offered by the new technologies in the electronic media.

Distribution through the electronic media

Sandra Gathercole, former chairperson of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers, and CRTC consultant, said at a recent symposium on the NFB held at the University of Toronto, that the future of the NFB lies in television, or more generally, in electronic distribution systems. "To trace the decline of the social influence of the NFB," claims Gathercole, "would be to trace the rise of the electronic media.

The Board complains that the NFB is typically more to the influence of TV... But we should not confuse this fact with not needing the NFB. We need the Film Board, the Film Board fuse this fact with not needing the NFB.

The biggest problem is that the NFB's visibility problem translates itself into a distribution problem. For the most part, the theatrical distribution channel in Canada has locked out the NFB and the independent Canadian producer in favor of the American product. The economics of the situation now dictate that the NFB must explore the distribution channels offered by the new technologies in the electronic media.

Distribution through the electronic media

Sandra Gathercole, former chairperson of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers, and CRTC consultant, said at a recent symposium on the NFB held at the University of Toronto, that the future of the NFB lies in television, or more generally, in electronic distribution systems. "To trace the decline of the social influence of the NFB," claims Gathercole, "would be to trace the rise of the influence of TV... But we should not confuse this fact with not needing the NFB. We need the Film Board, the Film Board fuse this fact with not needing the NFB.

The biggest problem is that the NFB's visibility problem translates itself into a distribution problem. For the most part, the theatrical distribution channel in Canada has locked out the NFB and the independent Canadian producer in favor of the American product. The economics of the situation now dictate that the NFB must explore the distribution channels offered by the new technologies in the electronic media.

Distribution through the electronic media

Sandra Gathercole, former chairperson of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers, and CRTC consultant, said at a recent symposium on the NFB held at the University of Toronto, that the future of the NFB lies in television, or more generally, in electronic distribution systems. "To trace the decline of the social influence of the NFB," claims Gathercole, "would be to trace the rise of the influence of TV... But we should not confuse this fact with not needing the NFB. We need the Film Board, the Film Board fuse this fact with not needing the NFB.

The biggest problem is that the NFB's visibility problem translates itself into a distribution problem. For the most part, the theatrical distribution channel in Canada has locked out the NFB and the independent Canadian producer in favor of the American product. The economics of the situation now dictate that the NFB must explore the distribution channels offered by the new technologies in the electronic media.

Distribution through the electronic media

Sandra Gathercole, former chairperson of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers, and CRTC consultant, said at a recent symposium on the NFB held at the University of Toronto, that the future of the NFB lies in television, or more generally, in electronic distribution systems. "To trace the decline of the social influence of the NFB," claims Gathercole, "would be to trace the rise of the influence of TV... But we should not confuse this fact with not needing the NFB. We need the Film Board, the Film Board fuse this fact with not needing the NFB.

The biggest problem is that the NFB's visibility problem translates itself into a distribution problem. For the most part, the theatrical distribution channel in Canada has locked out the NFB and the independent Canadian producer in favor of the American product. The economics of the situation now dictate that the NFB must explore the distribution channels offered by the new technologies in the electronic media.

Distribution through the electronic media

Sandra Gathercole, former chairperson of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers, and CRTC consultant, said at a recent symposium on the NFB held at the University of Toronto, that the future of the NFB lies in television, or more generally, in electronic distribution systems. "To trace the decline of the social influence of the NFB," claims Gathercole, "would be to trace the rise of the influence of TV... But we should not confuse this fact with not needing the NFB. We need the Film Board, the Film Board fuse this fact with not needing the NFB.

The biggest problem is that the NFB's visibility problem translates itself into a distribution problem. For the most part, the theatrical distribution channel in Canada has locked out the NFB and the independent Canadian producer in favor of the American product. The economics of the situation now dictate that the NFB must explore the distribution channels offered by the new technologies in the electronic media.
We do not have now, and have never had, the capacity to produce and distribute the kind of product that speaks to ourselves. We have managed to sit with the NFB, one of the greatest film resources in the world, and not use it. The fact that 1% of prime time of the national network is devoted to the national film agency is ridiculous.