A history of great ideas and lost opportunities

After 46 years of struggling to fulfill its mandate, the Canadian Film Institute is on its last legs.

by Penelope Hynam

On January 13, 1981 a small article appeared in the Globe and Mail with the headline "Film Institute May Die From Lack of Funds." It went on: "The Canadian Film Institute is facing a drastic cutback of services and possible extinction unless it can persuade the government sources that provide approximately half of its budget to release an emergency appropriation of $108,000." The executive director Frederik Manter was quoted as saying about the 46-year-old organization that "to avoid termination we will have to cut back on our publications and our National Film Theatre. To do that would mean that we are no longer an institute."

This little article is significant for more than one reason, the main one being that it is the first piece about the Institute to appear in the media in recent memory. The CFI has managed to maintain such a low profile in the past 20 years - in a period when every other cultural organization has been dissected, praised, blamed, and in the spotlight over various issues - that the film student who recently said to me calmly, "the Canadian Film Institute What?" can hardly be blamed for his ignorance. The article is also significant in that with very little fanfare, kudos or regrets it could be signalling the end of an era.

What is this organization that seems to be "facing extinction" before it has even reached a respectable middle age? In the seemingly endless parade of film and cultural initials in Canada - the CBC, CFDC, NFB, CCA, CCFM, CRYC and on and on - the CFI has been comparatively ignored and neglected, for reasons not entirely of its own making. How many of us know that it is the second oldest film institute in the world? How many even care? What is a "film institute" anyway?

In 1935 a group of alert Canadians established the National Film Society as an independent, non-profit, federally chartered organization whose main purpose was "The encouragement and promotion of the study, appreciation, and use of motion and sound pictures and television as educational factors in the Dominion of Canada and elsewhere." Although not explicitly stated, its main concern was the increasing domination of Canada's film market by American commercial and educational product. The Society wanted to counteract the lack of opportunity for Canadians to see films from foreign countries, particularly Britain, in our American-owned theatre chains (yes, Virginia, they owned them then too). Based in Ottawa with branches in the provinces, the Society would make available to Canadians films that would otherwise never be seen on our screens. It would also make people aware of the problems and choices in the educational film markets in Canada. Its formation coincided, not incidentally, with a low point in Canadian film production and an increase in Hollywood's world-wide takeover of film markets.

The stated aim of the Society was wisely comprehensive and general. Its impetus was the same as that behind the formation of every national film institute. Just two years earlier, the British Film Institute (BFI) was founded on much the same principles, although it is interesting to note that from the beginning the British were not afraid to make their mandate more clearly nationalistic: "to promote the various uses of the film as a contribution to national well-being." In the following decades the National Film Theatre or theatres across the country, which would program a wide variety of films for the public screenings;

- and a distribution library of educational, artistic or historic films for rental or loan to individuals, schools, groups and universities, etc.

In the very beginning money to finance the activities of the National Film Society was, if not a problem, at least an uncertainty. Ironically, given the size and complexity of the country, in creating a network of film societies and 16mm screenings for fascinated audiences from coast to coast.

World War II provoked the formation of the National Film Board in 1939, and other independent increases in Canadian film production and distribution stimulated by the war effort. After the war, the National Film Society stepped into the void created when the NFB ceased its travelling exhibition circuit. The distribution film library was greatly expanded, and according to its own pamphlet published about 1947, the Society was moving ahead in all the "traditional" film areas: a library, research, coast to coast rental services, film society branches and an information service. All that remained to be done was to change the name officially to the Canadian Film Institute, which came in 1950. The organization maintained its independent, "voluntary," non-governmental status which initially gave it a great deal of freedom, and later was to play a role in its financial and credibility problems.

An archival program was started in the early 1960's under executive director Roy Little who, with Peter Morris had produced a document entitled "A National Film Archives for Canada." Despite initial government support for the plan and verbal promises of support, it took some time before Morris found a successor, and became curator of the Canadian Film Institute in 1964. Despite initial government support was not forthcoming and the Institute maintained the Archives out of its own operating budget for the first few years. This, along with other than ideal conditions Morris persevered and began the work of building up what eventually became a valuable collection of film archives.

At that time the Canadian Film Archive holdings were stored in a large warehouse in Beaconsfield, Quebec, and because of the lack of funds the nitrate film was not properly stored nor air-conditioned. The CFI had urgently applied for a grant from the government for $65,000 to transfer much of the footage to safety film. The Secretary of State for Canada was interested, but months later had not even been acknowledged much less granted. And in 1967 the predictable happened. One hot day the volatile nitrate film ignited, and the ensuing fire destroyed many of the valuable films. It was a bitter blow to the Institute and its curator, and angry statements were made to the press blaming the government for its lack of support. Then Secretary of State Judy LaMarsh retaliated with a strongly worded letter to the president of the Institute taking exception to its statements. It was probably the most daring line that the Institute had ever taken publicly, and this chastisement from the highest government source seems to have permanently intimidated the board of directors. (At least it has never again publicly taken as strong a line on any issue.)

The Archives did survive that blow, and by 1973 the collection had again been built up to an outstanding level, including 5,200 films conserved, 140,000 films indexed, 150,000 stills collected, and an extensive library of important film books and periodicals some now rare in place.

But an even bigger blow was looming. Unknowingly to many at the Institute. Under the executive directorship of Gordon Noble, the CFI suffered its most serious financial crisis to date, just as its archival collection was becoming more and more valuable. Because a small and undistinguished collection already existed in the Public Archives in Ottawa, the government was very interested in improving it by acquiring the superior CFI collection. So in 1974 the board of directors and Noble arranged to aver the financial crisis by "donating" the Canadian Film Archives to the Public Archives in exchange for the support of $50,000 a year in various areas of Institute activity. The entire collection was squirreled away into the vaults of the P.L.A. Archives, over the objections of many, including Institute curator Morris. He was vociferously opposed to the takeover "because the Archives is a place where things get buried and that's not to my mind what an Archives ought to be... an Archives ought to be like the National Gallery. Of course it's a place that conserves and collects but if it doesn't do a cultural role as well, if it doesn't show things, if it doesn't publish books and have lectures and discussions, and generally get involved in arguments about whatever the artistic issues of the day are, if it doesn't do those things then it's just a dead agency.

In its first five years the Society did a remarkable job, given the size and complexity of the country, in creating a network of film societies and 16mm screenings for fascinated audiences from coast to coast. The American and Swedish Film Institutes, among others, would be established. During these years the basic necessary functions of any film institute were clearly laid out:

- an archival program to collect, preserve and document films and film-related material, both from the indigenous country and from around the world;
- a publication program producing books, catalogues, research papers, etc. on or about film, filmmakers and television, mainly but not exclusively from the institute's own country;
- an exhibitions program connected to...
it's just a warehouse of the most sophis-
ticated kind."
Losing the Archives 'carved the heart' out of the Institute, a radical operation from which it could never be expected to recover. Morris, one of the more enlightened people ever to work for the organization, left to become a professor of film, and Gordon Noble went to a good job in the Secretary of State's office.

To maintain its original mandate, the Institute now concentrated its energies on three departments: the distribution library, publications, and the National Film Theatre. In the '60s Morris also started a film festival with friends, and in 1967 he organized the publication of Film Canadians, the annual catalogue that all students of Canadian film are familiar with as the most comprehensive compendium of all the short and features produced in this country every year. Further publications, published and then lost, were concentrated in a more systematic way. One of the most recent is Peter Harcourt's excellent book on Jean-Pierre Lefebvre.

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