

## An NFB producer answers Applebert

# "... ignorant, foolish, biased and insulting..."

by Arthur Hammond

*In November, after three years of work, the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee (Applebaum-Hébert Committee) handed down its report and recommendations. In its section on filmmaking, the Committee suggested a new role for the National Film Board. The 43-year-old government agency would be divested of all its production and distribution functions, as well as many of its other activities. It would be "transformed into a centre for advanced research and training in the art and science of film and video production." What follows is a slightly-edited version, prepared for Cinema Canada, of an open letter that has been sent to members of the Cultural Policy Review Committee by the staff of the Ontario Regional Production Studio of the NFB. It was written by Arthur Hammond, a senior producer for the Studio in Toronto.*

Whatever the quality of other parts of your report may be, the chapter on Broadcasting is appalling and the chapter on Film manages the not inconsiderable feat of being, at once, ignorant, foolish, biased and insulting.

Since the National Film Board made a presentation to your committee and since the NFB's most recent annual report is readily available, your apparently total ignorance of what the NFB is actually doing these days goes beyond being astounding, to the point where it seems deliberate.

Had you taken the trouble to do your homework and study the materials available to you, you would realize that the NFB is already doing most of the things that you say it should do in the future, as well as a number of others that you haven't thought of. And you would also realize that, far from being the gloriously plumaged but dead duck which you attempt to make it appear, the NFB remains a vital and central force in Canadian filmmaking, research and distribution.

### Praise from New York, L.A.

When, from January to August last year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York ran its major retrospective of NFB films (followed by retrospectives in Chicago, St. Louis, Los Angeles, San Francisco, with Hawaii and other major centres to come - including Toronto, in Fall '83), the Museum's Associate Curator of Film said that "it was as natural for the MOMA film department to do a National Film Board retrospective as it was for the Museum to do the Picasso show." The difference is that the NFB is not dead. As Ron Haver, of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, added, when his institution subsequently put on its NFB animation retrospective: "The NFB is a recognized leader in the development

*This open letter is printed courtesy of Le Syndicat général du cinéma et de la télévision (Section Office national du film).*



● **Mon Oncle Antoine**, produced by the National Film Board, is perhaps the most honoured Canadian feature ever made, having won eight Canadian film awards and six prizes in international festivals. It is about life in a small Asbestos town in Quebec in the days before the miners' unions.

● **Why Rock the Boat?**, an NFB production, is one of the most widely-seen of Canadian features, having been shown in theatres from coast to coast, as well as in prime time on Canadian, British and German TV networks. It has also been shown at prestige screenings at Canadian embassies around the world.



of animation and documentary technique as it continues to break new ground and set international standards of excellence."

The more than 2,000 awards its films have won, nationally and internationally (including 3 Palmes d'Or from Cannes, 5 Robert Flaherty awards, 11 awards from the British Film Academy, 47 American Academy Award nominations, and 6 Oscars) were not given out of charity, but in competition. (Ten of the Academy Award nominations and four of the Oscars have been in the last five years.) The fact that its current work continues to make it one of Canada's few world-class institutions is widely recognized - but not, apparently, by your committee.

The fact is that the NFB is currently going through one of its most vital periods of change and innovation. In spite of real problems, which your committee failed to identify, including severe and continuing financial restraints, the NFB is making some of its best films ever, employing a wider range of Canadian talent than ever, reaching more people than ever, by more means than ever.

### Regional production

How does it come about, for example, that the committee totally ignores the development of regional production studios at the NFB, which, in the last ten years, and with increasing momentum in the past four or five, has been the major thrust of the English production branch (and, to a lesser extent, of French production)? Studios in Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto and Halifax, working almost exclusively with independent filmmakers and crafts people, now spend about 40% of the English production budget<sup>1</sup> not counting the work done by independents for the Montreal studios of the NFB. Only continuing government austerity and rising costs (which have meant a real decrease in production funds recently)



are standing in the way of the planned 50-50 division of English production funds between headquarters and regions.

These regional studios, working with some of the 'aspiring young filmmakers of unusual talent,' for whom the committee supposes we need to become a 'centre for research and training,' are producing some of the best work in the country. (*Ted Baryluk's Grocery*, the Canadian entry at Cannes this year, is an example, from the NFB's Winnipeg studio; Phillip Borso's *Nails*, nominated for an Oscar in 1980, from our Vancouver studio, is another.)

The committee also totally ignores the very considerable programme of assistance, in the form of film and sound stock, processing, loan of equipment, of editing and other facilities, advice and other help given to independent filmmakers across the country. It ignores the fact that prints of independent films are bought by the NFB and listed in its catalogue, and that the Distribution branch gives a great deal of advice and assistance to independents on the distribution of their films in Canada and abroad.

Incidentally, it is strange that the report did not resurrect the usual complaint about the NFB's 'high overhead' or 'low cost efficiency' in film production. The scope of the assistance programme is one indication of where some of our so-called 'wasted' money goes. Sooner or later, it seems, almost everyone in the country – and some from outside it – who wants to make a film will come to the NFB for support, assistance or advice. Many of them get it, but providing it demands a considerable amount of the production staff's time and energy.

### Distribution innovations

Equally, the committee makes no mention of the innovations in distribution methods which the NFB is making for its own and other Canadian films: the development and installation of FORMAT, a new, automated, bilingual information system, providing complete information on Canadian audiovisual products, of great value to film librarians, distributors, teachers, producers and directors; the cable TV experiment on the South Shore in Montreal, through which 800 NFB films are available on demand, on their home TV screens, to the subscribers of Télécâble Vidéotron Ltée; the planned, national cablecasting of NFB films on a regular basis (subject to CRTC approval), perhaps by satellite, for which repackaging of existing films is already underway; the fact that all NFB films are already available on videocassette (in which form a number of them will also shortly be available in retail outlets).

In addition to such serious omissions, the report makes a large number of tendentious statements and unsubstantiated assertions about the NFB which are either misleading or totally erroneous.

The committee charges, for example, that "Neither the production of the NFB nor of the CBC has attempted (our italics) to challenge the domination of our television and movie screens by U.S. feature films," totally ignoring its own explanation elsewhere in the report that the domination of our movie screens results from the way theatrical distribution and exhibition are controlled and carried out in Canada, and from the absence of any positive or supportive provincial legislation.



● *Games of the XXI Olympiad* is a two-hour feature that was edited down from almost 100 km of footage shot by the NFB during the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal. Rather than being a simple record of the Games, the film deals with athletes in every event as individuals.

It also ignores the fact that to challenge U.S. feature domination even on our TV screens would have required a level a production funding for the NFB and CBC so far in excess of what both agencies have had, that the charge is ludicrous. The NFB's entire annual production budget of \$28 million, for both English and French, is equivalent to the budgets of two or three average U.S. theatrical feature films. Some channels carry that many in a single evening.

The other fact is that, of the worthwhile Canadian feature films made, a significant number have been made or co-produced by the NFB, and that, as far as Canadian television screens are concerned, had it not been for the production of the CBC and NFB, not just the features, but almost everything appearing on them would have been American.

### Short subjects

On page 253, the report says, "Some of the NFB's production found its way into cinemas as 'short subjects' to accompany feature films, but this field has never been adequately developed as a market for Canadian film producers, although there is a move today in that direction." (Something which will be news to film producers.)

The report returns to this subject on page 263, in order to lay blame more squarely in the NFB's lap: "Its short films are seldom shown in Canadian

theatres because theatre owners do not believe these films have audience appeal." In fact, the reason that theatrical shorts have become rarities – not just NFB theatrical shorts, but all theatrical shorts – is that features have grown longer and the market for shorts, which were rarely economically viable anyway, has all but disappeared. As a result, the NFB has virtually stopped making them, though some of its short films made for other audiences, especially animation films, do get shown in some theatres. When they are shown, in the right circumstances, some are remarkably successful. Recently *Why Me?* ran in Los Angeles for eighteen months and *The Sweater* has been a great success in Canada.

The elegiac section on "The National Film Board as Pioneer" on pages 256-7 – a sort of bone thrown to a dead dog – is particularly rich in misinformation, half-truths and unsupported assertions. It suggests that "The NFB has served as a training ground and experimental laboratory for many of Canada's filmmakers who have achieved international reputations" but that "it is independent production which now attracts many of the skilled filmmakers who once were drawn to the NFB." In fact many of the illustrious filmmakers it lists as examples, and many more it might have listed, still work at the NFB on a full-time, or occasional basis. It has served

and serves as a good deal more than their training ground and experimental laboratory; it is the place where they do their mature work as filmmakers, one of the very few places in the world where they can or could do it. That is also why "many of the skilled filmmakers who were once drawn to the NFB" are still, in fact, drawn to the NFB, as are their successors in the next generation.

The opposition which the report suggests between independent filmmaking and working for the NFB is a false one. As already indicated, a high proportion of the people making films for the NFB today, especially in the regions, but also at headquarters, are independents. Not all Canadian filmmakers, certainly, want to work for the NFB, but I would imagine that there are very few who would not welcome the opportunity of making a film for it. The NFB's ability to attract and employ talented filmmakers is limited only by its (in real terms) shrinking resources, not by any loss of pre-eminence in documentary films, as alleged by the report.

The section's concluding statement, that the NFB's mandate, "to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations," has been increasingly assumed by the CBC's news and public affairs programming is ludicrous on at least three counts. In the first place, much of the *content* of CBC news and public affairs, although it is produced by Canadians, is not, by its nature, Canadian at all, but international. Secondly, even if one accepts, as is true, that the CBC and NFB do some work which is similar, so what? Is this country so rich in cultural productions of any kind, including film, in face of the tidal waves of American material crashing over the border, that it can afford to abandon one of its major sources because someone else is doing similar work?

### Documentary is an art

Thirdly, and perhaps most seriously, the committee seems unable to distinguish between documentary film (an art form, as well as an informational medium) and news and public affairs programmes. This is ironic, since documentary and animation are the forms of film in which Canada has distinguished itself. In the words of a recent article in *The Globe and Mail*: "As propaganda, as a medium for observing, persuading, exhorting and educating – in short, for communicating an artist's view of the world – the documentary remains one of the most vital, if neglected, art forms in the world. And in Canada, as in few other countries, it has evolved into what Klaus Wildenhahn, the West German television documentarist, admirably calls 'a genuine cultural heritage'".

A very large part of the reason for that is the presence of the NFB as a permanent, non-commercial practitioner of the art, free also of the restraints and pressures – of format, of time, of mass audience requirements – of television. Innovation and painstaking animation or seven or eight cuts of a documentary film is a luxury that a private producer or television cannot afford on a sustained basis, but it often results in films which will be screened for a generation – or for as long as films continue to be screened.

The NFB's major contribution as an institution has been to take the legacy of Flaherty and Grierson and with it create a continuing body of work that is the cornerstone of the "genuine cultural heritage" admired by Wildenhahn. The committee's bias in favour of feature films and television leads it to ignore or



● *Gala*, a 90-minute NFB documentary, is considered by many to be the most important film ever made in Canada. Its subject is a unique gala performance by eight major dance companies at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. It shows not only the performances but also fascinating glimpses of backstage activities.





● Norman McLaren, one of the modern cinema's greatest innovators, has been on the staff of the National Film Board since 1941, two years after the founding of the Board. His unique animation films, which often involve drawing directly onto the celluloid, have made him more widely known abroad than perhaps any other Canadian artist.

that there are other kinds of significance, and that 'the Canadian public' is not a homogeneous mass, but composed of many different audiences. From these audiences, demand for our films is so strong that our offices cannot satisfy it on their present restricted print budgets.

What does "staple" of television programming mean? If it means that NFB films don't fill several hours of prime time television a day, like American sitcoms, of course they don't. One doesn't do that on an annual budget of \$28 million, for English and French production, and with a host of other audiences to be served. (But it is the NFB's intention, as indicated above, to have its films fill several hours of national cable television a day, given the CRTC's blessing and some funds to do it).

Nevertheless, NFB films are, even now, a very important part of Canadian film shown on television, both here and abroad, and in quality even more than quantity. Of the six most recently completed films of the Ontario studio, for example (those released in the past twelve months), one hour-long film, *After the Axe*, was seen by 1,070,000 viewers on CBC television, will probably be repeated, has been sold to West German television and is currently being versioned to a half-hour for the PBS network; a second hour, *Taxi!*, has been bought by the CBC; one half-hour, *Steady As She Goes*, has been on CBC-TV twice; another, *Ridley: A Secret Garden*, is being negotiated with the CBC; and a 20-minute film, *The Forest in Crisis*, has been on TV Ontario. Not insignificant, surely for 5 out of 6 – and these are all films which will have a different, longer and probably far more useful life than that provided by TV.

Already, two of these same six films have been invited to the Margaret Mead Film Festival in New York; two have won Golden Sheaf Awards at the Yorkton Film Festival; one a Canadian Film Award for cinematography, another an American Film Award in New York and

a Cindy Award in Chicago; and yet another an award from the Society of American Foresters, in Cincinnati.

### Success on prime time

Documentaries from other NFB studios, which were among the most popular shown on prime time television in the past year, include *The Road to Patriation* (947,000 viewers), *Arthritis: A Dialogue with Pain* (974,000) and the two co-productions with the Cousteau Society (close to 2 million each).

In French last season, thirty-two NFB films were broadcast on Radio-Canada and five on Radio-Quebec. *Cordélia* was seen by 1,385,000 viewers, one of the largest audiences for Les Beaux Dimanches; *La surditude*, our film about deafness, was shown with special sub-titles and was seen by 528,000 people. This season it was an NFB film, *La récolte des dollars*, that attracted by far the largest audience to date (493,000 viewers) for the Radio-Canada series *La semaine verte*.<sup>2</sup>

In 1981-2, there were over 7,000 English telecasts and over 1,300 French telecasts of NFB films in Canada, and in 1978-9, the last year for which audiences were estimated, 789 million of the NFB's world audience of over 1 billion was reached via television; in Canada 159 million of the 254 million viewers of NFB films saw them on television. Not bad for an outfit with a production budget of \$28 million, whose films are not intended to be a "staple of television programming".

But to go on, as the report then does, and assert that NFB productions are not a staple of educational institutions in Canada either is to misrepresent the facts so astoundingly, even for this report, that one is left breathless and mind-boggled. The catch, of course, is the insertion of the red herring, "curricula." Since curricula are the responsibility of provincial department of education and vary from province to province, the NFB has never made films to fit specific curriculum requirements

downgrade this heritage. Its proposal to cut off the NFB's main production capacity really offers nothing in its place. Its assumption that the solutions it offers for features would also be appropriate for documentaries and other, non-feature films of the highest quality, is incorrect. Far from the NFB no longer occupying "a central position in Canadian film," as this section asserts, we would assert that it occupies as central a position as ever. If there are others who also occupy central positions, good. God knows, we need them all.

(Observe the language the report chooses, to buttress its case, in talking about the NFB: "It continues to issue film and video productions from its facilities in Montreal". One is to assume that no one associated with the NFB actually has ideas, struggles with the creative and technical problems of turning them into films or works at distributing them across the country and around the world. No, film and video productions just, somehow, continue to "issue from facilities in Montreal," like toothpaste from an uncapped tube oozing down the side of the sink.)

### Unsupported assertions

A few pages later, the report, unbelievably, tops even this high level of misinformation, misunderstanding, unsupported assertion and shabby analysis. In "A New Role for the National Film Board" (p. 263), it makes the following string of extraordinary statements. "The Board's output of new work no longer represents a significant film experience for the Canadian public. Its short films are seldom shown in Canadian theatres because theatre owners do not believe these films have audience appeal. Nor are current NFB productions a staple of either television programming or even the curricula of educational institutions. The NFB's displacement from centre stage has occurred for a number of reasons, of which institutional inertia is not the least important."

What on earth does the committee consider 'a significant film experience', and what Canadian public is it talking about? Ask medical audiences and the families of those suffering from terminal

illness whether they find Malca Gillson's *The Last Days of Living* a significant film experience; ask the aged, or those with old parents, if Georges Dufaux's *Au bout de mon âge* is a significant film experience. Ask women's groups across the country – and many men who see it – if Bonnie Klein's *Not a Love Story* is a significant film experience. Ask people concerned about nuclear war and the survival of the human race if Terri Nash's *If You Love This Planet* is a significant film experience. One could go on and on.

The committee is so biased towards the commercial feature and mass market television, that it fails to remember



● *Hot Stuff*, a nine-minute cartoon film, was made by the NFB for the Dominion Fire Commissioner. It traces man's carelessness with fire, from its discovery to the present day, and is an example of the NFB's imaginative and humorous approach to the serious subject matter of many sponsored films.



though, in consultation with the Council of Ministers of Education, it has adapted some of its films to fit in with curricula. But, when it comes to the use of films and other audiovisual materials in Canadian educational institutions, the NFB is far and away the largest source of Canadian material. An estimated two-thirds of Canadian films used in schools are from the NFB. (As in many other spheres, most of the material used is non-Canadian, mainly American.)

The Symons' Commission on Canadian Studies, which studied this question in depth at the university level, came to the following conclusions about the NFB's role: "Both (its) productions and its distribution facilities drew uniformly favourable comment in briefs and letters to the Commission... the Board's efforts demonstrate an extraordinary contribution to education in this country." This was only seven years ago. If anything, the quality of the NFB's production and its value to Canadian educators has increased since then. Could the Applebaum-Hébert committee possibly have been examining a different country? Or was it wearing blinkers?

### Based on misinformation

Based, then, on the above misinformation, we are told that the NFB has been displaced from centre stage (as if the committee, which, Heaven help us, was also studying the theatre in Canada, was unaware that more than one actor could occupy centre stage, or that even important characters take up different positions on the stage at different times). This as a result of, among other things, 'institutional inertia'. This charge, from a committee too inert to discover what has been going on at the NFB in recent years, is rich. It is hardly surprising that many of the recommendations which flow from it are foolish.

Before it gets to those, however, it has one last fling at the red herring fishery by throwing out a bunch of figures

comparing the budgets, for dissimilar periods, of the NFB, the CFDC, and the film section of the Canada Council (with the cost of the Capital Cost Allowance thrown in for good measure.) This purports to show that the NFB is getting too much money. There is absolutely no analysis of what the figures mean, no recognition of the fact that the NFB has a vastly more extensive and complex range of activities than either the CFDC or Canada Council film section, no attempt to evaluate the return for their money that Canadian taxpayers get in each case.

How, for instance, if we are to be crass about it, would the committee weigh the dollar-value of the NFB's enormous international reputation, against the rows of CFDC and CCA-assisted feature films that sit on shelves, unseen and undistributable, or the critical scorn that has been poured on many of them when they have been seen? We say this not to denigrate the CFDC. Film production is a risky business at the best of times, and losers outnumber winners even in Hollywood. But it does indicate that there is not much sense in comparing the cost of a fruit truck and a banana.

The report does not mention that many of the film projects assisted by the Canada Council are *also* assisted by the NFB (not to mention that we assist many more that the Canada Council has nothing to do with.) The report does not even indicate that, within the 1981-82 \$66 million spending total which it quotes for the NFB, some \$10 million was for the production of films for government departments, most of which is done by independent producers, though administered through the NFB. Nor that over \$8 million is for rent for the NFB's various premises, in Canada and abroad, and for accounting services, all of which goes straight back to the federal government through the Department of Supply and Services and the Department of Public Works.



● *La Bête lumineuse* is a documentary about a week-long moose hunt and how this activity brings out the human strengths and weaknesses of the hunters.

It does not reveal that, of the \$28 million budget quoted for English and French production at the NFB, a very high percentage was earned, or spent on films made by independent producers, filmmakers, craftspeople and private laboratories and other facilities.

If one really wants to get some sense of proportion and try to gauge what Canadians got from the NFB in 1981-2 in return for the \$48 million it was voted by Parliament, consider that the recent Hollywood flop *Annie* is reported to have cost about \$50 million, *Heaven's Gate* about \$40 million, and the publicity alone for *Gandhi* \$13 million.

At \$48 million, the range of NFB ser-

vices, from still photography, educational slide sets and filmstrips, film production for multiple audiences in English and French, national and international distribution, technical research and development, cost Canadians in 1981-2, \$2.00 a head, or less than half the price of one movie ticket. Statistics Canada cost them \$6.00 a head, and the Department of National Defence, which will be paying over \$37.5 million for each of 138 F-18 fighter planes, cost \$210.00 a head.

The fact is that to do its job properly, to expand in the regions, give work to all the talented or promising filmmakers who would like to work with it, satisfy the public's demand for prints and videotapes of its films, and embark on new methods of reaching that public by cable and satellite, the NFB needs much more money, not less. So perhaps do the CFDC and the Canada Council, but the report's bald presentation of non-comparable budgets from all three organizations will not help anyone to make that judgement.

### Recommendations

What, then, of the report's recommendations? The chief is that the NFB become a centre for advanced research and training in the art and science of film and video production, and that it cease to produce films other than as required for this purpose.

One is struck again by a number of things which are apparent elsewhere in the report: the committee's perverse desire to punish success, its lack of knowledge or understanding of the worlds of film and broadcasting, and its underestimation of the vital need for every possible source of Canadian cultural production.

A little further on, it remarks on "the pioneering and much-praised achievements of the NFB photo gallery", which it feels should be built upon. What does it propose? Not, as any reasonable person would suppose, that the NFB, which has been responsible for the pioneering and achievements, be given the resources to build upon it, but, incredibly, that it be taken away from the NFB and be given to a yet-to-be-created Contemporary Arts Centre. Removed with it will be all



● *L'Âge de la machine*, a drama set in northern Quebec during the 1930s, is part of the NFB's Adventures in History series, designed primarily for classroom use. It is one of many films in which aspects of Quebec culture are presented to English-speaking audiences.



of the NFB's still photography activities, including the Government Photo Centre and the Phototheque. These will be given to the Department of Supply and Services, on the principle, presumably, that if you have photographic business, you should take it, not to the leading photographic service in town, but to the office supply store down the street. What other reasons are given? None.

Similarly, in the Broadcasting chapter, the private television industry, which has done next to nothing for Canadian culture, has a finger wagged at it, and the CRTC is advised to get tougher with it, while the CBC, in return for its lone, valiant and badly underfinanced attempt to maintain a *Canadian* television system, against all the odds, is to be rewarded by being gutted of its TV production capacity.

And so, consistently with the committee's upside-down view, the NFB, to whose achievements it pays crocodile compliments, whose production record is the single great accomplishment in Canadian film and one of the great accomplishments in Canadian culture, which, in spite of the odds, is in one of its most innovative and vital periods (though the committee doesn't want to know about that), is also to be stripped of its production capacity—except insofar as it relates to training and experimentation. Why, in Heaven's name, a reasonable person might ask? Apparently because CBC is producing TV news and current affairs (though the committee would like to put a stop to that, too) and because other people in Canada are now making films, too.

One may note, in passing, that the NFB already engages in research and training, and could do more if it had the money, but that most of its training takes the form of apprenticeship, through professional work with skilled professionals on real productions, which is the best way, and which can only take place if the NFB remains a production centre.

Indeed, the report is self-contradictory in this respect. It points out that the Board's mandate required it "to engage in research and film activity and to make available the results thereof to persons engaged in the production of films" and that "in carrying out its responsibility, the NFB earned a position as a leader in the evolution of cinema." What it does not seem to realize is that the research was not carried out in a vacuum, but in connection with the production of films: that it was production, and the research and development it gave rise to, which made the NFB a leader, not the research itself. The NFB's research has been applied, not theoretical, and will probably only continue to flourish in the real world of the demands of production.

### Irrational ideas

The report's astonishing first recommendation is followed by a train of other largely misbegotten and irrational ideas. One of the most astonishing of these relates to the distribution of NFB films, which the committee, with great originality, thinks should be "available to be seen by Canadians." Never mind that the NFB has been making them widely available for over 40 years, currently makes them available on film or videocassette (the committee "anticipates" this happening "before long") through 27 offices across Canada, has imaginative plans to make them available by cable, will shortly make them available through retailers, has contracts with libraries and school systems all across the country to make them even more widely available.

The committee, not seeming to know this fact, would like to see libraries and schools become more effective distributors of them. So would we. So, probably, would the libraries and schools, if they had the resources. The committee rarely if ever considers where money is to come from.

It is estimated that there were 50

million individual viewings of NFB films by Canadians last year, through loans from our offices alone, in addition to the millions who saw them through school and library collections, the over 3,000 theatrical bookings and 8 1/2 thousand television screenings, including 21 films shown on the CBC's national network. The CBC thinks sufficiently well of our system that we are contracted to distribute selected CBC productions for it in Canada.

So what does the committee propose? By now one has begun to anticipate: the CBC should take over the distribution of NFB films, a function for which it has no organization, no experience, no money and probably absolutely no desire. This is one of the things the committee thinks the CBC should do instead of making Canadian programmes. It is, after all, getting late in the report. One begins to think the members have taken leave of their senses.

### Availability of films

One of the committee's many failures is that in talking about availability, it doesn't distinguish between the high visibility or accessibility of the vehicle—the theatre or television screen—and the low availability or accessibility of what it carries, the individual film or TV programme.

Up to now, contrary to what many people suppose without having really thought about it, NFB films have probably been more available to Canadians, on a demand basis, than almost any other films, certainly than theatrical features or television programmes. Try seeing a particularly interesting feature, of even the recent past, Don Shebib's *Going Down the Road*, for example, or Martin Ritt's *The Molly Maguires*, or Jerzy Skolimowski's *The Shout*, or Vittorio De Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*.

If you live in a big city like Toronto, or Montreal, or Vancouver, they might turn up at a repertory cinema, or film society, or on late-night television, but it might

take years and you might very well miss them when they did turn up. If you lived in a smaller town, of course, you probably wouldn't have had the chance to see them in the first place. If you really knew your way around, you might try to find out whether the original studio or someone else distributed 16mm prints of them, and write away to Toronto, Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles, to try to rent a print.

If it was a particular TV programme you wanted to see, your chances would probably be even more remote. The notion that television films or television programmes have been accessible because television is on all the time, or that feature films have been accessible because there's always something playing at the local theatre, is nonsense. Yet it is what lies behind the committee's assumptions and allegations about the NFB no longer occupying centre stage because it is not a 'staple' of television or theatres.

Accessible films are those that people, including people outside large cities, can get hold of and screen relatively easily, any time they want to, as many times as they want to. NFB films, available for sale or on free loan at 27 offices across Canada and through many school and library systems, have been in that situation for many years.

Rather than proposing ways of decreasing the availability of NFB (and, incidentally, CBC) films, by turning over their distribution to the CBC, the committee might have reflected on the revolution that is now taking place in the distribution and accessibility of films in the form of the videocassette and disc. We are on the threshold of the day when films (and some television programmes) will be as accessible as recorded music, or even books, retrievable virtually on demand through purchase, rental, library loan or, the currently most popular method, piracy.

Among others, all NFB films, old and new, will be available at any decent

● **The Last Days of Living** is a one-hour documentary by the NFB about the Palliative Care Unit of the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. The film shows techniques used in caring for the terminally ill—listening, sharing, touching, music therapy—and is considered an essential film for health-care professionals and volunteers.





public library on disc or cassette, along with the Encyclopedia Canadiana, the Dictionary of Canadian Biography and the collected works of Pierre Berton. People will have home libraries of their favourites (and the NFB has one hell of a lot of films whose interest simply doesn't wear out on repeated viewings). The old question, first asked by Cro-Magnon man of a travelling NFB projectionist, "Where do we see your films?" will finally be answered: "At home. Whenever you want."

For filmmakers, and for documentarians particularly, the golden age of film distribution is about to begin, when their work will be easily accessible to anyone who really wants to see it. As indicated earlier, the NFB is already moving vigorously in that direction, but the committee wasn't interested in such fundamentals.

### Sponsored films

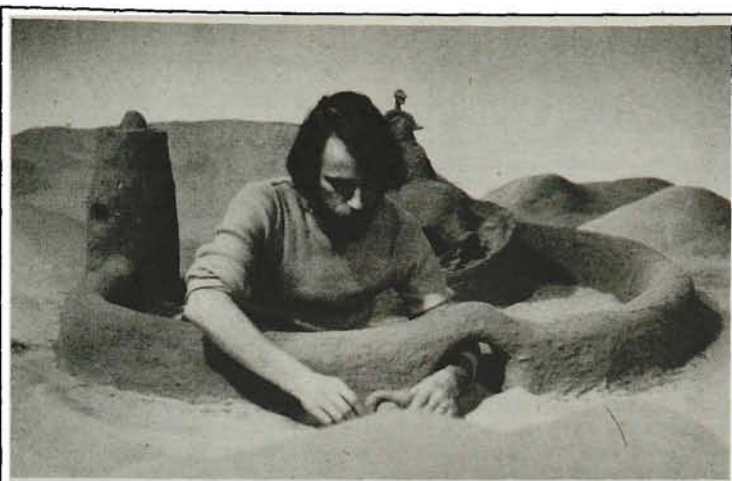
Other recommendations in the report can be dealt with more briefly: "all film and video needs of federal government departments to be filled by independent producers." Most already are, and the percentage is steadily being increased as a matter of NFB policy. Why the committee feels that government departments should not have the *choice* of using the NFB, and some of the most talented filmmakers in the country, if they want to, is only explicable by its own bias against public production agencies. Some of the best government-sponsored films in the world, which astonish foreign observers by their freedom and creativity, have been made by the NFB. Ask the Dominion Fire Marshal about *Hot Stuff*, for example. This is another unique aspect of Canadian culture which the committee would carelessly stamp out.

"The work of contracting those films to private industry (and presumably overseeing their production) at present handled by the NFB Sponsored Programme Office in Ottawa to be transferred to Supply and Services," a particular favourite of the Applebert committee.

Never, surely, could the dear old Department of Supply and Services, busily checking its mountains of paperclips and forests of coat stands, have dreamed how large a future loomed for it in the reshaping of Canadian culture. However, since Supply and Services has no experience in this work and the NFB Sponsor Programme officers have, they would presumably simply change hats. This might soothe the troubled breasts of some private producers, who cannot even bear to see the NFB's name on a letterhead or contract, but it would achieve nothing else. Supply and Services would soon become the devil the NFB is perceived as now.

"NFB's international distribution to be taken over by Film Canada." Since the committee thinks that Film Canada is such a good idea, it might have had the grace, before proposing to give it and our international distribution offices to the CFDC, to acknowledge that the Film Canada Centre in Los Angeles, which is presumably its model, was set up by the NFB, is funded by the NFB, and headed by an NFB employee, a former director of our New York office.

It might have acknowledged, too, that our international distribution offices, responsible for most of those 826 million viewers abroad in 1978-79, do assist private Canadian filmmakers and distributors in a variety of ways. But, no doubt, these facts would have clouded



● *Le Château de sable*, from the NFB's French animation unit, has won 18 awards, including an Academy Award Oscar. It tells a humorous fable about the Sandman and the fantastic creatures he sculpts out of sand.

the image of the NFB's "institutional inertia."

"The government should be advised on film activities and policies by the CFDC, CBC, CRTC and Canada Council, as well as by the NFB." Any child in Ottawa, interested in film, could have told the committee that it already is.

And then, that the cliché might be fulfilled, as if all this ignorant, foolish and biased injury were not enough, in the Film Chapter's final paragraph and peroration, comes the insult - to all the highly talented people, some of them people of genius, who work and have worked not only at the NFB and CBC, but as independent artists and technicians in film and television in Canada. The report acknowledges that Canada "can generate film artists and technicians of the highest calibre." But, it goes on sadly, "Until now the best of them have had to seek their livelihood elsewhere, depriving Canada of their talents. Hollywood's studios and boardrooms are well populated with Canadian performers and directors; the film and television screens in the U.S., France, and Britain attest to that. It is time to lure these artists back..." and so on.

### Talent that remains

Yes, some very talented Canadians have gone abroad to work, especially if they want to work in features and television. But just as many, probably far more, equally talented Canadians have stayed and worked in Canada. (And, believe it or not, talented people have come to work in film in Canada, too, from all

over the world, including the U.S., and have often subsequently become Canadians. Some, for instance, have come because they wanted to work in documentary or animation at the NFB.)

Their staying to work in Canada is not a sign of inferior talent, any more than the emigration and success abroad of the others is a sign of superior talent. The committee surely cannot be so colonized in its thinking that it believes that. Rather, it has clearly become so infatuated with the commercial feature film and mass audience television that it no longer knows what it is saying, or what is being said on its behalf.

(It is interesting to speculate about who actually drafted the Film chapter of the committee's report. If one had, like the police, to construct an Identikit of The Unknown Assailant, one might speculate: someone who knows little or nothing about what the NFB has been doing in the past few years, but has listened to a lot of second-hand backbiting and gossip; someone who is closely connected both with the CFDC and the private feature industry; married to an employee of Supply and Services.)

After one has exhausted one's anger at this shabby document, one is left feeling sad, sad that, once again, one has to defend an outstanding public institution, imperfect though it may be, against ignorant and prejudiced denigration, and against a pervasive market mentality which is always ready to believe that things private and commercial are in their nature good and to be encouraged,

while things public and non-commercial, if not downright bad, are probably wasteful and substandard, and to be discouraged if they can't be got rid of entirely.

The NFB's persistent excellence and the excellent value that, in fact, it gives for its money, stands in the way of this belief and is a source of constant and acute irritation to its holders. Like other Canadian public enterprises it is a reproach to the religion of free enterprise and an obstacle on the road to universal, commercial happiness.

What is sad, too, is that the report fails to examine, or even identify, the real problems of the NFB (or CBC) and only begins to touch on the real problems of private filmmaking in Canada when it looks at the problems of theatrical distribution and exhibition, the disinterest of Canadian private television in Canadian culture, and the misuse that many private feature producers and promoters have made of public funds, through the Capital Cost Allowance and the CFDC.

The problems of Canadian film, like the problems of other aspects of Canadian culture, are chiefly two: lack of access to our own public, through the domination of our market - theatre, television, educational and now home video screens - by non-Canadian, principally American, material, and chronic underfunding (including underfunding of the NFB and CBC) in face of the scale of that cultural domination.

To propose crippling two of the few institutions which have made and are making an effort in that direction is irresponsible in a committee reviewing Canadian cultural policy.

Unfortunately, the total inadequacy of funding for Canadian films, no matter how the existing pot is divided up and spread around; the impossibility, therefore, of adequately employing or developing all the film talent in this country that deserves to be employed or developed, may lead some independents - though probably far from the majority - to focus their frustrations once again on these same two institutions, their obvious inability to meet all the demands being made on them with present resources, their obvious imperfections (which, however, are probably no greater than those of any other institutions and may be a good deal less than those of most), and conclude that the Applebaum-Hébert proposals, particularly the proposal to gut the NFB and CBC of their production capacity, will be to their individual advantage. We suspect they will be badly wrong about that. We know that it will not be to the advantage of the film community, the country, or Canadian culture as a whole.



● *La Quarantaine*, the NFB's latest feature, stars some of Quebec's best-known actors and actresses. It is about a reunion of childhood friends who have now all reached middle age.

<sup>1</sup> Based on information available at the time of writing. A subsequent, more detailed analysis reveals that 55% of the English Production Branch's budget is spent on or in support of the independent film community. And this does not include \$4,000,000 (out of a total of \$7,000,000) in sponsored projects contracted out to private companies or independent filmmakers by the NFB's Sponsor Programme Office. About 30% of the English Production budget is spent through the regional studios, but this figure does not reflect the value of the major part of the assistance program in the regions - such as loan of equipment, space and advice - which is neither costed nor budgeted. It is probably worth one-third as much again.

<sup>2</sup> It is remarkable that the committee, in spite of having a Quebecois co-chairman, has little to say about the problems of French-Canadian filmmaking or distribution. Predictably, it has nothing to say about the fact that the NFB, producing and distributing films in both languages, was one of the country's earliest, and is one of its most thoroughly, bilingual institutions.