An NFB producer answers Applehert

"... 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 NFB to do the Picasso show 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 craftspeople, now spend about 40% of the English production budget, not counting the work done by independent filmmakers and craftspeople who say that the NFB is a recognized leader in the development of animation and documentary technique as it continues to break new ground and set international standards of excellence.

Mon Oncle Antoine, produced by the National Film Board, is perhaps the most honored 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 prestigious screenings at Canadian embassies around the world.

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are standing in the way of the planned go-to 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 firewall 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 Boraz's Nuie, nominated for an Oscar in 1989, 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, recording, loan of equipment and advice, and other facilities, to other independent filmmakers in Canada and abroad. Incidentally, it is strange that the report did not reiterate 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 the NFB's 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 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 FORCED ATOMAT, a new, automated, bilingual information system, providing complete information on Canadian audiovisual production wherever it is available on film, video, library, distributors, teachers, producers and directors; the cable TV experiment on the South Shore in Montreal, through which the NFB can provide free distribution and direct exhibition on home video screens, to the subscribers of Telecable Vidiotrois; the planned national cablecasting channel; the planned automated, bilingual information system (subject to CRTC approval), perhaps by satellite, for repackaging of existing films is already underway; the fact that all NFB films are already available on videocassette (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, while misleading or totally erroneous.

The committee charges, for example, that "Neither the production of the NFB nor the existence of the NFB (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.

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 total 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 253, in order to lay blame more squarely on 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, are remarkable, and this includes films, which in fact the tidal waves of American material crashing over the border, that it is one of its many 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 the documentary is one of the most successful 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 training and experimentation, for education and for entertainment, for communication and artistic expression, film is the great and universal vehicle for the express of ideas and feelings."

A very large part of the reason for that is the presence of the NFB as a permanent, institutional home for the art, free also of the restraints of format and content of time, of mass audience requirements - of television. Innovation and painstaking animation is the cornerstone of the "genuine cultural heritage" admired by Wildenhahn. It also serves as a good deal more than their training ground and experimental laboratory: it is the place where they can do their important work as filmmakers, one of the very few places in the world where they can do it. That is also why "many of the skilled filmmakers who were once dependent on the NFB" are still, in fact, drawn to the NFB, as are their successors in the next generation.

The position which the report suggests between independent filmmaking and working for the NFB is a false one. As already indicated, a high proportion of the filmmakers who work for the NFB today, especially in the regions, but also at headquarters, are independent. 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 at all. 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 preeminence in documentary films, as alleged here.

The section's concluding statement, that the NFB's mandate, "to interpret Canadian life 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 programming, although it is produced by Canadians, is not, by its nature, Canadian. It is also a ridiculous assumption, 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 culture that it has room for two such a calling, including film, in face of the tidal waves of American material crashing over the border, and serves as a good deal more than their training ground and experimental laboratory: it is the place where they can do their important 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 dependent on the NFB" are still, in fact, drawn to the NFB, as are their successors in the next generation.

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It appears there is a discrepancy between the provided image and the text content you've shared. The text you've provided seems to be discussing the National Film Board (NFB) and its impact on Canadian public service broadcasting. However, the actual image contains text about families of those suffering from terminal illness and includes a reference to "bout de mon âge". The information provided may not be directly related to the content in the image. If you have any specific questions or need further assistance, please let me know!
by throwing out a bunch of figures

...years, is rich It is hardly surprising that

...institutions. An estimated two-thirds of Canadian films used in schools are from the NFB. (As in many other sources, most of the material used is non-Canadian, mainly American.)

The Symons Commission on Canadian Studies, which studied this question, reached the conclusion that the NFB's role is to "both ... use of 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 the 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 exact 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 designate 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.

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, filmers, cameramen 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 services, 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 $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 the region, 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...
of the NFB's still photography activities, including the Government Photo Centre and the Photothèque. These will be given to the Department of Sound 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 doesn't want to know about that, too), and because other people in Canada are getting late in the report. One begins to think the members have taken leave of their senses.

**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 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.

The committee, not seeming to know where money is from, would like to see libraries and schools, if possible, 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 available to Canadians, on a demand basis, more widely than almost any other films. They have been accessible to these millions who saw them through school and library collections, the over 3,000 theatrical bookings and 1/2 thousand television screenings, including 11 films shown on the CBC's national network. The CBC thinks sufficiently well of our system that we can be considered a Canadian television corporation.

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's no longer occupying centre stage, because it is not a 'staple' of television or theatre.

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 medium of piracy.

Among others, all NFB films, old and new, will be available at any decent
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 man of a travelling NFB projectionist, "Where do we see your films?" will finally be answered: "At home. Whenever you want.

For filmakers, 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 be fulfilled by independent producers. But, for now, and the percentage is steadily being increased as a matter of NFB policy. Why the committee feels that government departments should not be expected to pay for viewing the NFB, and some of the most talented filmakers 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 integrity, 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 contractering those films to private industry (and presumably screening 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 Alberta Committee.

Never, surely, could the dear old Department of Supply and Services, boldly checking the current tide of film fads and forest of hand 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.

"The film community should be given a considerable and measured 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 away, to our International Distribution Office 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 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 film makers and distributors in a variety of ways. But, no doubt, these facts would have clouded the image of the NFB's "institutional inertia."

The government should be advised on film activities and policies by the Canada Council, 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 theliche might be fulfilled, as if all this ignorant, foolish and biased injury were not enough, in the Film Chappe'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, "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.

(Interest is 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 out 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 injury to holders. Like other Canadian public enterprises it is a reproof to the religion of free enterprise and an obstacle on the road to universal, commercial happiness.

What is said, too, is that the report fails to examine, or even identify, the real problems of the NFB (or CBC) and only begins to look at problems of private filmmaking in Canada when it looks at the problems of theatrical distribution and exhibition, the disinterest of Canadian television, French-Canadian culture, and the misuse that many private feature producers and promoters have made of public funds through the Capital Cable in a communique reviewing Canadian policy.

The problems of Canadian film, like the problems of other aspects of Canadian culture, are complex. The slick of Supply and Services through the domination of our market – theatre, television, educational and now home video systems – is a far more princely American, material, and chronic underfunding (including underfunding of the NFB and CBC) in face of the scale of that domination.

To propose crippling two of the few institutions which have made and are making an effort in that direction is preposterous. An excellent communique reviewing Canadian cultural policy.

Unfortunately, the total inadequacy of funding for Canadian films, no matter how much of a band-aid 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 independentists – though probably far from the majority – to focus on the NFB alone. As we have seen, some of these same institutions, their obvious inability to meet all the demands being made on them with present resources, their obvious selections which, however, are probably no greater than those of any other institutions and may be a good deal less than those of most, and the inevitable instant discomfiture 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.

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We know that it will not be to the advantage of the film community, the country, or Canadian culture as a whole.

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 one of its most thoroughly, bilingual institutions.

Based on information available at the time of writing this report, more detailed analysis reveals that 51% of the English Production Branch's budget is spent on or in support of the independent film community, while the French Production Branch has a budget of $7,000,000 and spends 55% of its budget on or in support of the French-Canadian film community. The committee has not reflected 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.