The work of foreign agents

Why is it that the National Film Board will not just roll over and die quietly? It has already been declared dead by Applebaum-Hebert, and even the most sympathetic of observers walking through its now-empty halls smell an advanced state of decay — sans purpose, sans direction, sans distribution, sans leadership. As a functionally effective organization, it has already ceased to exist and only waits the stroke of the bureaucrat's pen to put it out of its misery and will it, officially, from the face of the earth.

And then suddenly — and it would seem out of nowhere — it hits the headlines south of the border. Its praises are sung by all three American networks on successive nightly news broadcasts. Editorialists and articles appear in The New York Times, The Washington Post and serious newspapers across the country. American senators and congressmen besiege Film Board offices with requests for films. This is no way for the dead to behave.

To understand what has kept the Film Board alive, one must look, not to the past, but into the present. A small print is then added to the National Film Board and its history for existence over forty years ago. And here we encounter some ironies. The U.S. Justice Department wants to label National Film Board films "political propaganda," the work of "foreign agents." The irony is that they are completely right. Many of the Board films are propaganda and, much as we like to think of ourselves as one big happy undefended border, Canadians are foreign agents (although it does take a rather large stretch of the imagination to think of James de B. Domville as an agent). The U.S. Justice Department is right, but it is forty years too late. The foreign agents are no longer on American television. The British government recently provided the same service, founded the National Film Board. Its express purpose was to gain access to American movie theatre screens and influence the isolationist members of the south to save England by joining World War II.

But the war was over as the U.S. Justice Department launched a fire into the organization — a fire which still burns today, despite the crippling organizational effects of bureaucracy and old age. He created a National Film Board that is truly an independent voice. Secure in its funding, it is able to put its considerable resources behind films that mean something. It makes films that are controversial subjects. It is free to make films which are not particularly popular. It does not have to rely on the generosity of large corporations and is not permitted to bend the governmental hand which feeds it.

The United States thrives on the myth of liberty of expression. But anyone who has experienced the actual workings of the American media will appreciate the ways in which the National Film Board is a truly unique organization. There are, in fact, no independent voices on American television. In the much vaunted private sector, there are a sprinkling of fund-starved, independent documentary filmmakers, but few people get to see them. In the American film world, you are free; as long as you are rich.

"Foreign agents," yes. "Political propaganda," yes; if you define propaganda as anything different from popularly held opinions. Grierson, who reviled in controversy, must be looking down on his child with amused glee. Damned from without, arthritic from within, the old place still has some kick left in her.

Ronald Blumer

Ronald Blumer, ex-NFB freelance, has written and co-produced two series with Bill Moyers for Public Television and is currently working on a CBS science special with Walter Cronkite.

Alberta consensus

A consensus of Alberta filmmakers has formed in response to the pending changes in Canadian film and broadcast policy. The following points state our major areas of concern:

1. The Applebaum-Hebert Report recommends drastic CBC cutbacks, while the DOC speaks of creating a $30 million fund for the purchase of independently produced programming. Given the conflicting positions of the Applebaum-Hebert Report and the DOC on the issue of CBC, it would be ideal to reserve our position on the CBC and state the following: Regardless of changes made in the CBC, our regional production industries need more access to CBC airtime and markets and more of our opportunity to speak to and hear from other regions of Canada via our national network. Centralized budgeting starves the creative potential of the regions. Broadcast policy plans for reorganization of the CBC network should include measured steps to enhance regional autonomy and distribute significantly the proportion of the total CBC budget with more resources to the regions for the purpose of stimulating and purchasing independent productions.

2. The Applebaum-Hebert Report speaks of a possible profit tax on private broadcasters to "upgrade the quantity and quality of Canadian programming" while the DOC speaks of creating a "Broadcast Program Development Fund." A pool of some $30 million derived from the Consolidated Revenue Fund or by a regional profit tax on program production by cable and pay television subscribers. We support the upgrading of Canadian programming which has demonstrated the greatest potential and achievement in business promotion in the Canadian visual images industry over the past year. Robin Lecky, a partner in Creative House, was, however, somewhat disturbed by the actual layout and placement of the Eyesore which has demonstrated the greatest potential and achievement in business promotion in the Canadian visual images industry over the past year.

Robin Lecky, a partner in Creative House. A list of the Eyesore which has demonstrated the greatest potential and achievement in business promotion in the Canadian visual images industry over the past year. Robin Lecky, a partner in Creative House.