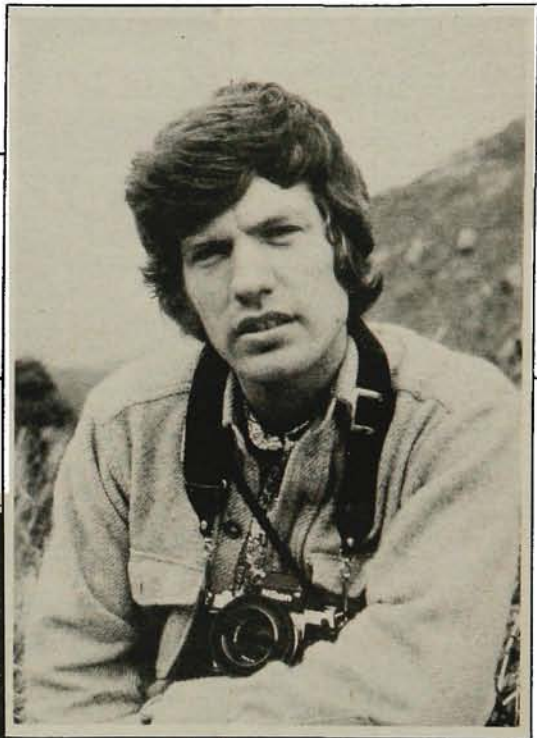


INTERVIEW

Peter Raymont : voyeur of the power structure

by Peter Pearson



● Flora MacDonald presses the flesh in Raymont's candid look at a leadership convention

photo: National Film Board of Canada

On his 33rd birthday, Peter Raymont sat down to talk. For the past ten years, he has been producing a series of documentaries which together represent a significant contribution, and considerable work.

His ancestry shows throughout his films: a National Film Board seriousness, almost dogged in places, critical and yet dispassionate, more given to content than style. Peter Raymont is like Peter Raymont films.

Small wonder. Most of his important work has been done either in, or in association with the Film Board. Stylistically, one sees the influences of Tom Daly, Donald Brittain, Mike Rubbo all through his work. And yet, Peter Raymont is already distancing himself from his mentors.

His cameras have found their way behind closed doors. Flora, Scenes from a Leadership Convention, watches Ms. MacDonald aspiring for the Tory

leadership in 1976. The Art of the Possible looks at Bill Davis and his cabinet. Two of Raymont's most impressive films were shot in the Arctic. Magic in the Sky, a marvellous exposure of the hypocrisy of Canadian communications policies, and Arctic Spirits, on the whimsy of fundamentalism, fire and brimstone imposed upon the Inuit.

Magic in the Sky has been sold to ITV in Britain, as well as to German and Swedish television. The film has been nominated for an award in the communications category at the American Film Festival.

Two of Raymont's films have recently been aired on CBC: Falasha the story of the Black Jews of Ethiopia, and Prisoners of Debt: Inside the Global Banking Crisis, reviewed in this issue of Cinema Canada.

On occasion ebullient, more often thoughtful, for the first time Peter Raymont looked back on the past ten years.

Peter Pearson: What is this fascination of yours with other worlds? You've just finished doing a film in Ethiopia on the Black Jews, you now want to go to Sri Lanka, to see how television affects people in other countries. Is it hard to make films about Canadian subjects?

Peter Raymont: Well, I made a film about the impact of television on the Inuit, and their struggle to create their own indigenous television network. I think it's a fairly good film, but that one of the problems with it, in terms of showing it in Canada, is that it is about Canadians. Maybe one has to be more exotic in making that sort of a statement, I don't know.

Peter Pearson: What do you think Magic In The Sky is about? Don't tell us what it's about, tell us what you think it's about.

Peter Raymont: Well, to use a '60s term, it's about cultural imperialism, and how powerful ideas are when transmitted like that. We are all Inuit or something. But a lot of people don't seem to get that

point. So I'm trying to see if I can make another type of film, which more directly deals with that issue: the issue of how television changes people. Sri Lanka's just getting involved in television, they're experimenting with television, and training the people to work with television.

Peter Pearson: All of your films have been made or directed towards television. Do you have any instinct to work for anything other than television?

Peter Raymont: I was so disappointed when the first film I directed at the Film Board didn't get on television. And everyone said to me, 'Oh, don't worry about it. Television, that's just something else. That's just a delivery system or something, and you shouldn't worry about it, whether or not your films are seen.' I mean, God, I couldn't understand that.

Canadian director Peter Pearson is visiting professor at Queen's University Film Studies.

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It's clear that what you have to do is set up co-productions right from the start, or pre-sales right from the start. That now is a Film Board policy, did you know that? They've now set a policy that any hour-long documentary they make has to be a co-production with the CBC, with guaranteed air dates.

Peter Pearson: As a filmmaker with the National Film Board background, it's interesting that you make films that are concerned with, obsessed with, preoccupied with television. It appears in all three of your major political films, *Magic In The Sky*, *Flora*, *Art Of The Possible*. You don't really reveal the presence but clearly there's a television camera in all those rooms.

Peter Rayment: Television's so important to everyone's life in North America. Because I've never really worked in television, inside the television business, I'm still fascinated with how it works, how it affects people. I just shot a drama, a Film Board drama workshop... and in the corner of the room there's a television set going (laughs) between these two actors. I have a love-hate relationship with television. Or something like that.

Peter Pearson: Do you have any sense of television's impact on the formation of Canada as a society? Or let me change the question to the impact of television on the Inuit.

Peter Rayment: That was the point of that film, really. It's a metaphor... the extraordinary introduction of television into the Canadian north, the launch of the Anik satellite, and all that before the Inuit people or anyone up north is ready for television, or understands television, or is capable of producing their own television. It's just a one-way street. It's a metaphor for what's happened to Canada, with America sitting next door, and what's happened to countries all over the world. To suddenly get fed this machine, *Dallas*, *The Edge Of Night*. I hoped that, by making a film in the north, not only would the film be useful to the Inuit people in their own self-examination, in their own struggle to hang on to that culture and that language, but that it would also help Canadian people to understand how dangerous and enormous the American television machine is, and how much it has affected Canada.

Peter Pearson: When it was shown on television, what was the reaction?

Peter Rayment: Well, it hasn't been shown on television. It's been shown in the Canadian north on television. But not in the Canadian south.

Peter Pearson: Why not?

Peter Rayment: Because CBC won't buy it. Or won't air it. They have very few hours available, and it's not considered by the programming people at CBC to be an issue of great national concern. For the most part, people who have screened it at the CBC, see it as a film about the concerns of the Inuit people with their own television production problems. It tries to be much more than that. A lot of independent filmmakers have great trouble getting their films on the CBC. Not just *Magic In The Sky*.

Peter Pearson: One of the things that *Magic In The Sky* does, and which appears in all your other films, is that you deal with the shamans of society. The *Magic Men* who basically bring us



● Doing what comes naturally: Bill Mulholland in *Prisoners of Debt*

the message of goodness. Of a better world. It doesn't matter whether it's Francis Fox descending out of his aeroplane to bring the Eskimos television, Bill Davis descending out of his cabinet to bring us good news of cabinet decisions, Flora MacDonald descending to offer herself up graciously to the leadership of this country, or the fundamentalist preacher offering his message of God into these little villages in the north. Is that all whim?

Peter Rayment: I'd never thought of that before, actually... *Magic Men*, study of magic men. They all have a pitch, or an act. Yeah. They're all fascinating characters, that's for sure. There's a new one now. Bill Mulholland, the chairman of the Bank of Montreal. He's the star of a film called *Prisoners Of Debt*.

Peter Pearson: And he feels that salvation is earnest, Presbyterian capitalism?

Peter Rayment: That's right. Banks are very powerful... For myself, I've always thought more of trying to examine who has power and why. And how they use it. That's how I've always sort of perceived it. When you have guys like that, you need to have some sort of an analysis of them. Some sort of an investigation of what they're doing and who they are.

Peter Pearson: Why are they doing it?

Peter Rayment: I guess they get off on it. It's an extraordinary ego gratification process. None of them make a great deal of money. The politicians or the preachers.

Peter Pearson: *Flora*, for example. Why does she do it?

Peter Rayment: She loves it. It's her life. It's her whole life. People love her, you know. People respect her. People know her. There's something very exciting about it, something very magnetic about their life, the life of any politician, I suppose. To be recognized. That's what they need.

Peter Pearson: I have this theory that the only reason why we make documentaries in this country is because John Grierson moved the Presbyterian pulpit out of the church and into the National Film Board of Canada. That would make you a Presbyterian preacher going around and looking at other Presbyterian preachers and commenting on their preaching in terms of your own preaching.

Peter Rayment: What was Grierson preaching? What was his message?

Peter Pearson: Get the working man on the screen...

Peter Rayment: I once co-directed and edited a film called *The Working Class On Film*, which was one of Grierson's philosophies of filmmaking. He also felt that film was a great educational tool...

Peter Pearson: The word he used was propaganda, and it's kind of interesting that in this day and age the Americans accuse the Film Board of making propaganda when that was Grierson's highest aspiration: to make propaganda.

Peter Rayment: That's right. And John Roberts denies that the films are propaganda. Of course they are propaganda, very good propaganda. Films for a cause. That was the second film in the series we were making, Susan Scouten and I, a series of films about Grierson's ideas and ideals. The second one was *Propaganda*, for which we already had a cutting copy, but the film never got finished.

It was part of a thesis Susan was doing at McGill on Grierson, and somehow the films disintegrated, and the money dried up. And the films never got finished. The first film, *The Working Class On Film* won first prize at the American Film Festival. We never got to make the rest.

Peter Pearson: Let's get back to this idea of the preacher. How much of a preacher are you?

Peter Rayment: I don't think of myself as much of a preacher.

Peter Pearson: You're fairly moralistic concerning Bill Prankard in *Flora*.

Peter Rayment: He liked the film. Most of these people in these films like them. I find it strange. *Flora* didn't like the film at all. But most of the others end up liking the films they're in. I think people read into films what they want to read into films. They see in it what they were looking for.

Peter Pearson: Fairly preachy in *Magic In The Sky*.

Peter Rayment: Yeah, yeah, well I have a great... I really love the north, and I spent a lot of time with the Inuit people, and when you see something like that happen, that sort of injustice, or whatever it is, you gotta do something about it.

Peter Pearson: How much do you want to make films, and how much do you want to preach?

Peter Rayment: (laughs) Well, films are a good way to talk to people. I mean you reach so many people at once. And you can do it in a beautiful way. You don't have to stand up there and preach. You can do it more gently. And probably in the long run more effectively.

Peter Pearson: Can you do it more effectively with documentary than with any other form?

Peter Rayment: I don't know. I haven't tried to experiment with dramatic filmmaking, just trying to learn that whole craft and skill. I'm in the Film Board workshop and I'm hoping to make some dramatic films in the next little while. Take a film like *The China Syndrome*, or *Missing*: great films that a documentary could never do as well, never reach as many people emotionally. A lot of people just won't watch a documentary because they know it's a documentary. They won't even give it a chance.

Peter Pearson: Why is that?

Peter Rayment: They'll watch the *Winds of War*, which was dreadful, I thought, before they'll watch any documentary. The best documentary you could possibly make in the world won't reach a tenth of the audience that a mediocre drama would. People have this thing about documentaries, and they think that they're not going to be entertained; they think that it's going to be boring. So they just won't even give it a chance.

Peter Pearson: It's interesting that you in fact still cling on to that notion of issues when you want to tell stories. In other words, is there not a level within the Peter Rayment consciousness where you just want to tell stories, where you want to engage the world for the story's sake, without any sense of it being an *Aesop Fable* or a little morality piece?

Peter Rayment: That's what filmmaking is, it's storytelling, all types of filmmaking. The best filmmaking is telling a story, whether you're doing it in a documentary or whether you're doing it in a dramatic form. You're telling a story. People only watch it if it's a good story, well told.

Peter Pearson: Then let's go back to the documentary. What do you do when you have the best elements of the story not on camera?

Peter Rayment: That's the great challenge of the documentary. Especially when you're making a film about politics or banking or something like that. You

Photo: National Film Board of Canada

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just can't be there all the time. Or they won't let you in. So you have to find other ways of weaving it in.

Peter Pearson: For instance?

Peter Raymont: You tell it with a shot, that isn't actually the shot. And you make it into another shot. Or you use sounds or voice-overs, narration. The writing in a documentary is very important — in the type of documentaries I make anyway.

Peter Pearson: Do you do all your own writing?

Peter Raymont: I have. The banking film was written primarily by Bob Collison. That was a great collaboration. He's a magazine writer, primarily, who's written a lot of business things, for Canadian Business and Saturday Night (he's a Saturday Night editor). And that was great for me to work with him, writing the narration and structuring the film. But before that, I'd written all my own narrations.

Peter Pearson: Let me backtrack a bit and throw an hypothesis at you that one of the reasons that audiences do not naturally come to the documentary is that they feel they're being had, with all of those elements of technique you just mentioned. Does that pose any kind of problem for you?

Peter Raymont: I'm not sure that's true. In fact, they're being had more when it's all acted out, when it's dramatized. That's always the battle, isn't it, within the documentarist who's starting to make dramatic films. That's always the conflict. How close do you get to the truth, the emotional truth? Can you get to it better through a documentary or through a drama? It's hard to know. In really trying to get inside power centres, and understand how they work — you know we were the first to get a film crew inside a cabinet meeting, the first to get inside the boardrooms of a bank, or the first to get inside the inner-working machinations of a leadership campaign — but you're still not really there, you can't be there — you can't be shooting all the time, and you can't always get those crucial moments when decisions are made. And so there are times when you just feel you've reached the limits, making that type of documentary. And you've got to start trying to do it in other ways.

Peter Pearson: There's two basic patterns of documentary that developed with *cinéma vérité*: one, which was the fly-on-the-wall technique that Pennebaker and Drew developed; the other was here-I-am-in-the-middle-of-the-movies, the style of Jean Rouch, the French documentarist, and the kind of stuff that Mike Rubbo now does. Do you feel yourself pulled towards one direction or the other? Who are your masters, by the way?

Peter Raymont: I've been the fly-on-the-wall through all those films that you've seen. As much as possible unobtrusive; you know, wear a suit, or a parka, try to sneak around. Pennebaker and Wiseman are the guys I really respect.

Peter Pearson: How about Brittain?

Peter Raymont: And Donald Brittain, sure, he's great. A lot to learn from him. I think he tends to overwrite, and sort of, overmanipulate the material. I often wish in a Brittain film that I could hear more of what is actually happening, what is actually coming from the people

on the screen. But I wouldn't want to criticize Donald Brittain. In the Ethiopian film (*Falasha*), there's a lot more first person, and you hear the filmmaker, you hear me talking about our struggle to make the film, and you even hear me arguing with people, with our Ethiopian government guide who was giving us a hard time. So there's a lot more first-person-feeling in that film. And when you narrate your own films, you get the first-person back into them in a way.

Peter Pearson: Does the audience know it's your voice?

Peter Raymont: No, probably not.

Peter Pearson: These questions about documentary style, are they intellectual questions for you?

Peter Raymont: They are. I don't think about that sort of thing, about the style of the filmmaking. I just go and make the film. Although I'm always pushing the cameraman to walk, to move, and that becomes a sort of a style when you see it and when you edit it. I mean so many of these films I've made in the last few years have been shot in offices and in boardrooms and in meetings. Pretty tedious situations, if you don't move. So if you walk down this corridor into this room, and kneel down on the floor and get a shot, I think people would be much more engaged in this sequence in the film, than if we just turned the camera on, a two-shot of us sitting here...

Peter Pearson: But, don't you think that those style questions are absolutely central to what the content turns out to be?

Peter Raymont: When I'm making a film, I just find that those sorts of moments — decision-moments — come inspirationally, naturally. You just feel happy, we've got to do it this way. It feels right.

Peter Pearson: Let me push you in another area. Do you have any sense of being in a documentary tradition in this country? What's the documentary that impressed you the most?

Peter Raymont: *Under The Volcano* was a great, great film that stretches the whole documentary tradition to another dimension. There's a film that Brittain made in the early days, called *Fields Of Sacrifice*, which was going to be this awful film made for the War Graves Commission. A sponsored film. He made it into a piece of poetry, just a gorgeous film.

Peter Pearson: Brittain's formula, you know, is two-parts realism to one-part poetry. Do you have any sense of having to insert poetry into your stuff?

Peter Raymont: No, I don't think of myself as a poet at all, I think of myself more as a journalist than a poet. The poetry is maybe in the lighting, or the sound editing, something like that. I don't think of myself as a poet, really. My main craft is editing. That's what I really love. What the Film Board really gave me was the opportunity to experiment with editing. I'd sit for nights and hours and just try every possible way of cutting two shots together, to discover what worked and what didn't work on my own. That was a great opportunity. You couldn't do that anywhere else. Then after a while, you get very fast at it. Because you know, you can do a hell of a lot in a documentary with editing.

Peter Pearson: Have you ever been

struck by a desire to do some of the bigger subjects? For example, nuclear annihilation or pollution of the planet? The subjects that turn the continent into insomniacs?

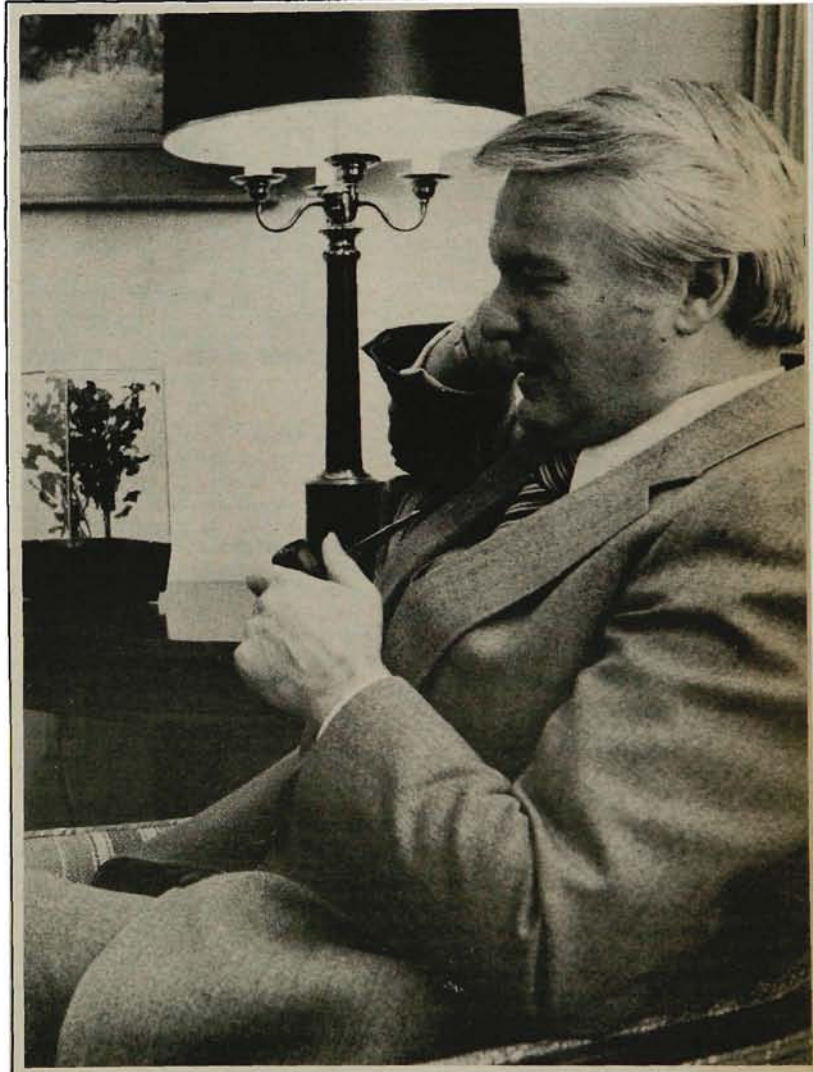
Peter Raymont: Those subjects scare a lot of people off too because they are so huge. And you wonder, 'God, how can I possibly make a film about that? It's so enormous.' But if you narrow it down, there's a film I'm helping get made on the cruise missile, which is something very specific that you can get a handle on, and the film has to be made very quickly in the next few months, and that's obviously about the nuclear holocaust. But it's something immediate that we can deal with, and do something

the other. Would it not be a shame that if *The Journal* is the system in this world, that Donald Brittain's films look like Peter Raymont's films that look like John Grierson's *Canada Carries On* series?

Peter Raymont: It's unfortunate there can't be at least one night a month, or one night a week, that's what it should be, for documentary film. And everyone would know that Friday night at nine o'clock, or whatever it is, that they're going to see...

Peter Pearson: But they're running a documentary every night of the week... on *The Journal*...

Peter Raymont: But they are, as you



● A film first for Raymont: getting inside Bill Davis' cabinet

about. I may also make a film for Amnesty International, which is another of those enormous causes. To do something specific, that's the only way to deal with those massive causes: boil them down to, 'Ok, what can be done?'

Peter Pearson: What's your reaction to something like *The Journal*, which seems to have taken over every square inch of air-time?

Peter Raymont: No more documentaries...

Peter Pearson: Not only that, but no more variation and style of documentaries. They're turning out those 12-minute documentaries every night, but one would be very hard pressed to know the difference between one and

say, of a certain style, and they're 10 minutes long, or 15 minutes long, sometimes longer... there are some very good Film Board films that have never been seen by Canadians because this huge chunk of air time has disappeared. That's what they should do on CBC, they should just say that every Friday night, at nine o'clock, you're going to see something different...

Peter Pearson: And what would that replace?

Peter Raymont: I don't know.

Peter Pearson: I do. Dallas.

Peter Raymont: Is that the hour I picked? Well, that's the dilemma. There's got to be some more time for documentaries. There are just no documentaries

left anymore. I think the CBC Current Affairs people produce six one-hour documentaries a year. And there are some very good Film Board documentaries and a helluva lot of independently made documentaries that are never seen.

Peter Pearson: Are you involved in any of the fights for a film industry? In any fights about the CRT, the Directors' Guild? Are you interested or not?

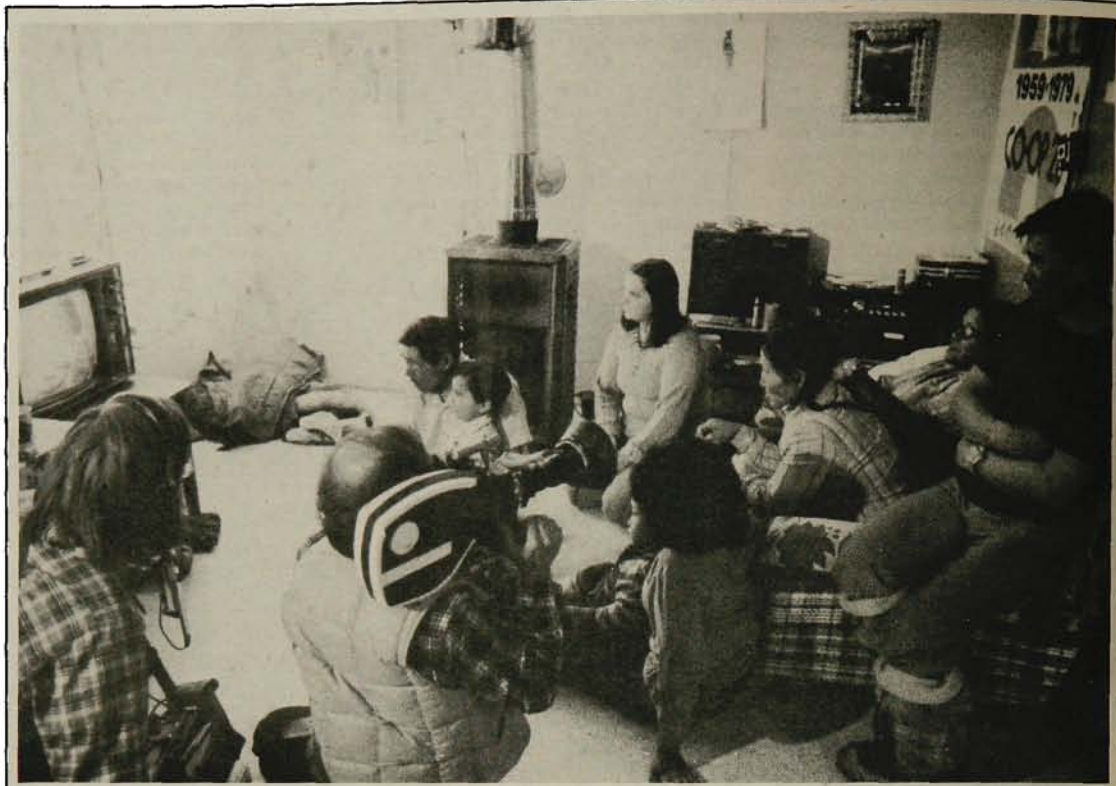
Peter Raymont: I suppose I should be. I feel that I should be, sometimes. But there seem to be a lot of people working on those committees for those causes. And I get very worked up concentrating on my films. It's hard to go to meetings. But I suppose I should, from time to time and get involved in those causes.

Peter Pearson: What kind of a career do you see for yourself? Obviously, having worked fairly industriously... how many films have you made?

Peter Raymont: I think I've made or directed 16 films. I feel much better about myself now than I did four or five years ago, when I left the Film Board in Montreal. I was never on staff at the Film Board, but I was working fulltime at the Film Board. For eight years, seven years in Montreal. And then I left and moved to Toronto. I felt I had to get out of the Film Board, get away from that building, that whole institution, which was starting really to stifle me. So I started making films independently in Toronto and got much more involved with the CBC and television than one could be in Montreal.

You either become much more of a TV journalist and get more into a style of documentary filmmaking cut for television, or you get more into drama and you learn that whole craft and skill. The middle ground isn't there anymore.

I keep trying to make those types of films in the middle ground, the documentary in the Grierson style of documentary filmmaking. But increasingly there's less room for that. There's less money for that. So I've got to really decide whether I'm going to direct myself much more into the television style. The reality is how do you raise the \$100,000 you need to make a one-hour



● An Inuit family watching its favorite TV program, "The Edge of Night", in a scene from the shooting of *Magic In The Sky*

documentary in Canada these days? Christ, that's the problem for a filmmaker in making the films he wants to make. How do you do it independently? How do you do it, through the Film Board-CBC co-production-pay-TV? Whatever you can do. Raise money independently. How do you do it? That's the great struggle. Because if you can't do that, no matter what great ideas you have and how much talent you may have as a filmmaker or causes you wish to plug or espouse, you can't do it if you can't raise the money. And you've got to do that on your own, it seems. So you've got to get together with other people who are good at raising the money.

Peter Pearson: I would like to know whether you see any connection between your total disinterest in the cultural politics of the Directors' Guild and ACTRA etcetera, and where all the policy initiatives came from that have allowed you to survive so far?

Peter Raymont: I suppose I should be more interested in those things. But you seem to be doing such a great job on it that you don't need Raymont coming to your meetings.

Peter Pearson: Well, you see, you raise a question that is obviously very provocative. Which is that it's extremely hard to finance films in this country. Why do you think it's so hard to finance films?

Peter Raymont: The money isn't there. Why isn't the money there?

Peter Pearson: Why isn't the money there? Why do most Canadian filmmakers have the political sophistication of Joe Clark?

Peter Raymont: Traditionally we've been babied along. Getting out there and hustling, raising the money on our own, putting together the budgets, putting together those co-production deals has not been a skill that people have picked up. The only way to pick it up is by doing it. And there aren't that many

people doing it. Certainly you don't learn about that at Queen's Film Department studies or working inside the National Film Board or the CBC.

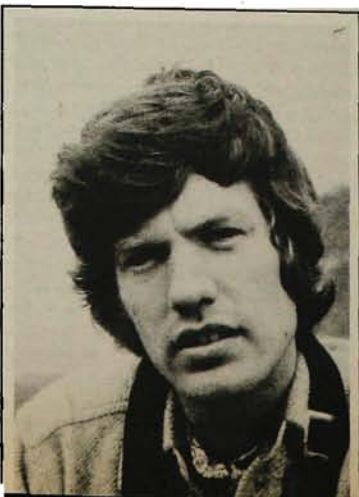
Peter Pearson: But the initiative to create within the CBC a department for Independent Production, where do you think that initiative came from?

Peter Raymont: Peter Pearson struggling away inside the department of Communications.

Peter Pearson: Not Peter Pearson.

Peter Raymont: No, that's great that that happened. And it's only because of that that a lot of these things are going to continue to be made. And that's true. I suppose I should get more involved in the politics of filmmaking.

Peter Pearson: The question that's more intriguing is: Here you are, somebody that deals, in films, with issues that deal with direct or indirect political issues. You have more than passing knowledge of how the political process works, and yet within your own life, you don't seem to have much interest in the political process, per se, as it affects your own survival, existence, future, and so on?



Peter Raymont: I'm more a voyeur of politics than I am an active participant in it. I guess that's kind of lazy. I'm more an anthropologist of politics than I am a doer.

Peter Pearson: I think it goes with the disease of being a one-eyed peerer through cameras.

Peter Raymont: Yeah, what disease is that?

Peter Pearson: The sense of being a voyeur.

Peter Raymont: The fly-on-the-wall where you only really say what you want to say when you've edited the film. Actually, I get very frustrated because I'll finish a film, and I'll show it to people, and then I'll sit like this, and be interviewed about the film on radio or television or something, or I'll write an article about it and I'll say a lot more passionately what I feel about the subject than I said in the film that I made. Pretty stupid, eh? That's kind of a self-censorship that comes from that political passivity that you're talking about, I guess.

Peter Pearson: Here you are, a guy with significant talent, unaware that maybe your political passivity may lead to the same kind of self-annihilation that happens when the Edge Of Night is imposed upon the Inuit, for want of a better metaphor.

Peter Raymont: That's a good metaphor. So what do you want me to do?

You know it's funny, because I've been really busy making these films in the last few years, and I hear about meetings taking place and organizations forming around causes for more independent production. Those things seem to be happening, and I just keep making the films. You know, in this type of independent filmmaking, you have to keep making films. You have to start researching three others while you're editing the last one. Or you die.

Filmography One-hour documentaries directed by Peter Raymont

Prisoners of Debt – Inside the Global Banking Crisis co-p. NFB-CBC; 57 min.; 1982-83

Falasha : Inside the Politics of Agony p. Matara Film Productions; 2 x 27 min.; 1982-83

Magic in the Sky co-p. Investigative Productions-NFB; 57 min.; 1981

History on the Run – The Media & the '79 Election p. Investigative Productions; 57 min.; 1979

The Art of the Possible p. NFB; 57 min.; 1978

Flora : Scenes from a Leadership Convention p. NFB; 57 min.; 1976