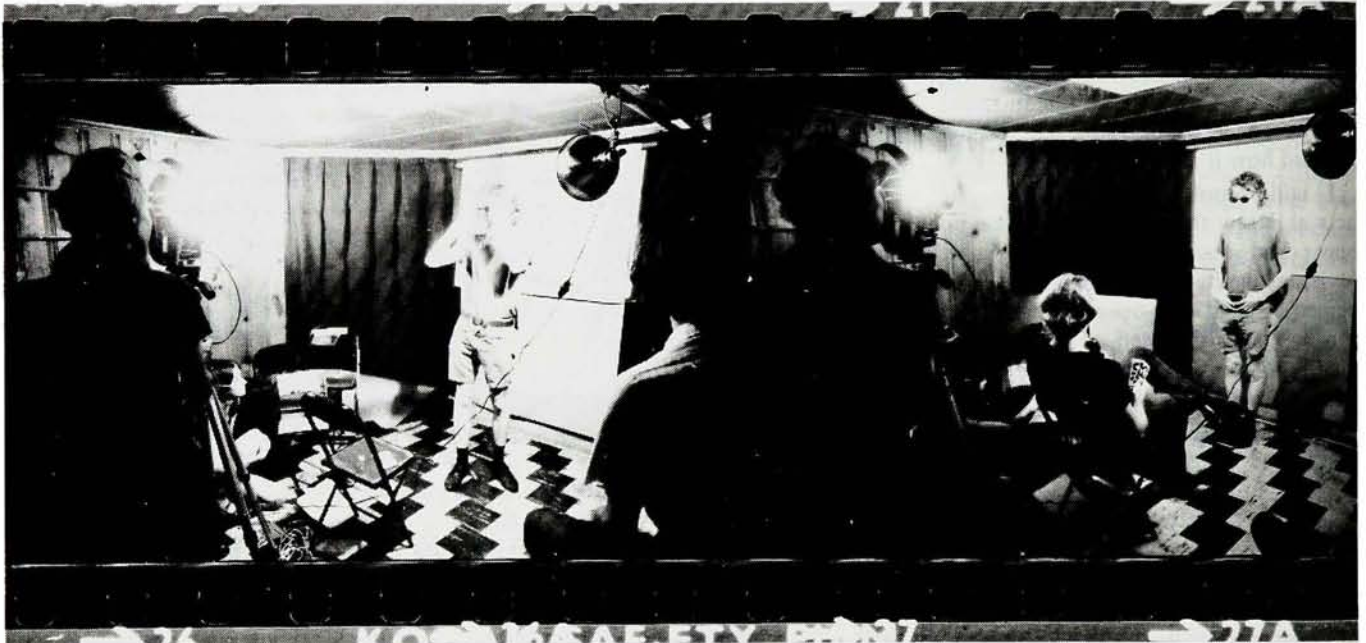


a tentative analysis

by Bruce Elder



The basement screening room of the Canadian Film Makers Distribution Centre on Jarvis St.: 'good times centre'

The group of filmmakers who originally gathered at Rochdale College were a diverse group though for the most part, on the basis of their interests, they could be placed in one of three categories. Some wanted to found a Co-op for primarily political reasons. In their view, the Co-op's most important function would be to attempt to change those conditions which made the production and distribution of Canadian films, and particularly Canadian feature films, a virtual impossibility. The other groups were more concerned with establishing a production collective. But even between these two, there was what proved to be a serious split. One group was interested

in the production of documentaries and dramatic shorts with commercial appeal; the other in the production of "experimental" films of a more innovative character.

The fact that the Toronto Film Makers Co-op comprised three groups with such very different aspirations made the task of defining a single direction for the Co-op a very difficult one indeed. Essentially, the problem was never solved. Thus, in its first years, the Co-op divided its time and energies between political work, such as the preparation of briefs, writing reports for the media and contacting government officials, and work as a production collective.

The political activities of the Co-op were soon assumed by the Council of Canadian Film Makers which, because it had a much broader base of support, could deal with these issues much more effectively. Once the CCFC had been established, most of those who had been drawn to the Co-op because of their political concerns withdrew.

The relationship between the remaining groups, however, remained undefined. Over time, it became quite apparent that the two groups held very different ideals for the Co-op. The "experimental" filmmakers were, on the whole, committed to the mutual

sharing of skills on productions undertaken by individual filmmakers and to the building of a community sympathetic to alternative modes of filmmaking. The "commercial" filmmakers, on the other hand, were committed to collective production and to the establishment of a facility which would allow the chronically underfinanced beginning commercial filmmaker access to that sort of professional equipment required in the production of commercial films. And while both groups were committed to the exchange of skills, information and ideas, each of them



Bill Boyle (left) and Ron Evans from the Ontario Arts Council at the opening of the Co-op on Portland St.: 1973

had different ideas about the best way to accomplish this. Those wanting to get a foothold in the commercial industry wanted classes in basic filmmaking skills, while the "experimental" filmmakers preferred a combination of an informal system of screening/critique/discussion and more formal master classes designed not to provide basic skills but to enhance skills already possessed.

There is nothing in any of this that makes these two ambitions incompatible. Organizations harbouring equally divergent aspirations have been able to survive through efforts at mutual understanding and accommodation. In the case of the TFC, however, certain decisions brought these two ambitions into conflict. Perhaps the most important of these was the decision to acquire a substantial amount of professional

production equipment to be paid for, not through grants, but through rentals. Such equipment included two Steenbeck tables, a sound transfer and mixing facility and a Kudelski tape recorder. This decision meant that the Co-op had to embark on a decidedly more commercial course in order to pay for this equipment.

One point merits special comment here. One explanation that has been advanced for this course of action has been that it was dictated by the Canada Council's decision not to continue supporting the Co-op's increasing operating costs. This explanation seems to me unsatisfactory. From what I have been able to determine, this policy did not reflect any lack of desire on the part of the Council to continue supporting a filmmakers' co-operative in Toronto. Rather, it reflected the policy, appropriate in my view, to channel a greater portion of its funding into creative areas, such as production, master classes, and other activities of direct and immediate benefit to filmmakers, rather than the area of operating grants. The Co-op could very well

have developed programs in keeping with the spirit of this policy. Indeed, such programs would have led to much greater membership involvement than was characteristic of the Co-op's latter years.

This was not what the Co-op did, however. It embarked, instead, on an effort to establish revenue generating programs. These new programs significantly changed its character. Equipment that could not be paid for from rentals at rates "experimental" filmmakers could afford was purchased. In order to meet the costs of this equipment, the Co-op had to make great efforts to attract commercial filmmakers. As a result, the nature of the Co-op changed. It became more a loose alliance of small businesses than a collective of filmmakers.

Workshops, too, ceased to be a forum for the mutual exchange of skills and became instead rather grand affairs taught by leading "professional" filmmakers. As a result, they too had to have a broad appeal. Consequently, they ceased to serve the specialized needs of the innovative filmmaker. □

Chronology of the Toronto Film Makers Co-op

- 1971: Co-op founded at Rochdale College
First coordinator: Stuart Rosenberg
Second coordinator: Jim Murphy
Seed money of \$500 from Province of Ontario Council for the Arts (POCA)
A \$500 donation from Fin Quinn
- 1972: Third coordinator: Jerry McNabb
First grant from POCA \$1,500
First Co-op film as an Opportunities for Youth project
- 1973: Susan Sutherland, coordinator
Cinema Canada revived by George Csaba Koller and Agi Ibranyi-Kiss
Co-op collaborates with Canadian Film Makers Distribution Centre on the Canadian Film Festival at the Poor Alex
Sandra Gathercole, coordinator
Move to 406 Jarvis Street
- 1974: Bill Boyle, coordinator
Move to 404 Jarvis
- 1975: Move to 67 Portland Street
- 1976: Renovations of 67 Portland Street
- 1977: Renovations of additional portions of 67 Portland Street
Acquisition of mixing studio with Wintario grant
- 1978: Bill Boyle resigns as coordinator
Co-op dissolves with \$58,000 deficit.