

FILM REVIEWS

John Kramer's Has Anybody Here Seen Canada?

d. John Kramer, sc. Donald Brittain, ph. Douglas Kiefer, asst. ph. David Devolphi, Andreas Toulsson, animation. Meilan Lam, ed. John Kramer, re-recording Jean-Pierre Joutel, Adrian Croll, sd. ed. Abbey Neidik, sd. rec. Raymond Maroux, addit. sd. rec. Michel Hazel, prod. & edit. asst. Donna Dudinsky, m. Don Douglas, narr. Michael Kane, research Piers Handling, Maynard Collins, Pierre Véronneau, Kirwan Cox, exec. p. Arthur Hammond, p. Kirwan Cox, Mike McKennirey, unit mngr. Janet Preston, p.c. The National Film Board & The Canadian Broadcasting Company in association with The Great Canadian Moving Picture Company, (year) 1978, col. 16mm, running time 84 minutes.

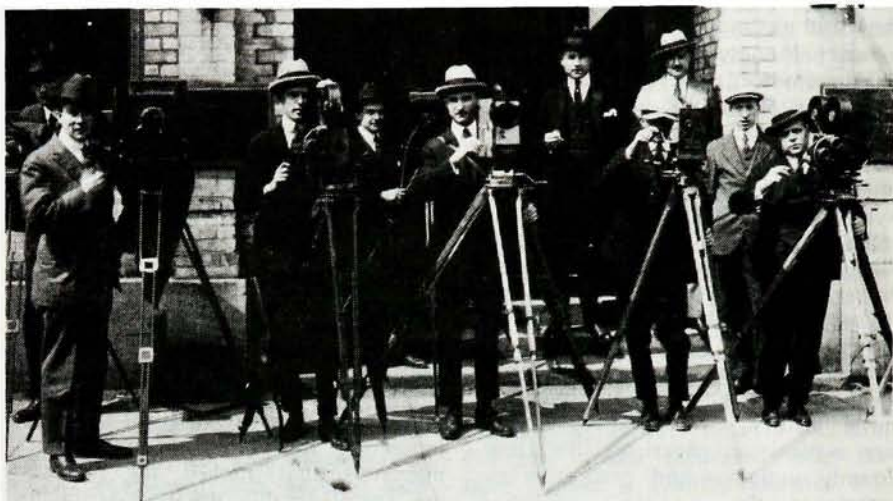
"Wonderful country, Canada," the American enthuses.

"You get used to it," is the Canadian's sarcastic reply.

That's the first chuckle in *Has Anybody Here Seen Canada?*, the joint NFB-CBC kaleidoscopic panorama of Canadian films from 1939 to 1953, now being distributed by the NFB after its April television debut.

Director John Kramer and writer Donald Brittain continue to evoke laughs, at times self-conscious ones, as they parade the Canadian past in film across the screen for 90 minutes. It is like entering a time machine, to be whisked back through the cultural past to a time which over half the present population never knew. That itself makes the experience exhilarating.

The film's purpose is more than just a trip down memory lane. The title derives from a mythical director's question on a Hollywood set as he sought clarification about a Canadian subject for his film. It was not necessary to go to Canada, for generally someone had been there and could help him out. The point is that the outsider was creating Canadian myths with almost no knowledge of his subject. Canadians, with no feature film industry of their own, were content to see themselves through the eyes of big brother. Since mythmaking was not the Canadian way, theirs was Hollywood's Canada.



The cameraman of the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau, the forerunner of the National Film Board

By the forties, Aunt Emma's thrill of seeing her first live Mountie and Roy Rogers singing about Canada's landscape to Trigger and Bullet were the baneful legacies Hollywood was imprinting upon the consciousness of millions. For decades Canadians and a world of filmgoers laughed at and paid to see this idiocy.

But not all outsiders emasculated the national self-image. In 1939 a different group of mythmakers had arrived to teach the youthful dominion how to recognize the essential qualities that make a diffuse population feel like a nation. Some forward looking politicians had invited documentary pioneer John Grierson from Britain to present a more realistic image of this country, especially on the international scene.

Prime Minister Mackenzie King, whom we see hopelessly inept before a camera, desperately needed some cosmetic. But Grierson and his brilliant team of propagandists had come on a mission, to transplant the documentary idea, to coax a reluctant North America into the world war and to crush the scourge of fascist aggression and racist poison. Art, Grierson had said, had to be used as a hammer. He created the National Film Board of Canada to drive home the political message.

So, from 1939 to 1945, under the dynamic Scotsman's guidance, Canada became world renown for its 20 minute theatrical shorts, propaganda which was not nationalist but internationalist in tone. Film producer Tom Daly has described the period as one in which there was little place for budding

auteurs. "Grierson often told us young Canadians 'You are not at it for your own blue eyes.' Ours was always a sense of working as a team." There were no credits given in wartime Canadian films and their messages promised a brave new postwar world. They insisted that Canada see itself in a world context and feel part of the titanic battle of the century between good and evil.

Grierson's chief lieutenant, Stuart Legg, describes how the NFB propagandists felt as they played a deadly chess match against Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels. We understand why, for moral reasons, the disastrous Dieppe raid was covered up nearly a year, then sandwiched between trivia about a Canadian Division's washing machine and troops playing soccer.

Unfortunately the film does not spend enough time describing just how NFB propaganda technique worked. Director Kramer wishes he could have devoted more time to this but the subject is so vast, it needs a whole film itself. The brief sequences from the Academy Award winning *Churchill's Island* demonstrate how rapid film cutting, integrated with Lorne Greene's booming narration and Lucio Agostini's stirring music set a pace which left the viewer nearly breathless.

The subject of the Soviet Union as wartime ally caused the Film Board more grief than was ever anticipated. The word communism was never once used in propaganda and the focus was consistently upon the brave spirit of the Russian people. 'All for one, one for all' was as close as the propagandists came to

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interpreting Soviet ideology, which is to say, never. As Legg reasons in the film, Russia was an ally of enormous importance in holding off the main German forces for several years from Western Europe. "We might not approve of their politics," he explains, "but we approved of their soldiery." So the NFB propagandists hailed the individual Soviet citizen as being fundamentally the same as his Canadian counterpart.

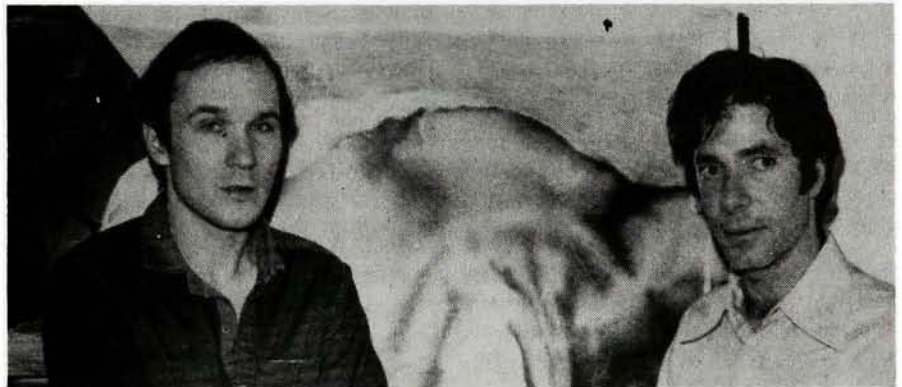
This was enough for closed, petty, anti-Semitic political hacks like Leo Dolan to seize the opportunity to smear the Board as suspect and in need of investigation. His shameful remarks to Ontario Premier Mitch Hepburn indicate how some smalltime Canadian politicians could never grasp the vision of a brave new world of international cooperation that the NFB propagandists were welding to Canadian minds. With the end of the war, the Government of Canada decided to cast its lot with the cold warriors who preferred national rivalries to peaceful internationalism. The era of 'political' filmmaking ended with the infamous Gouzenko spy scandal and its far-flung nets of guilt by association.

From 1946 the only feature film industry in Canada which flourished was that of Quebec. Hollywood could not bridge the language barrier, so it left Quebec alone. Thus the Church and Province worked hand in hand to mythologize a love of the land and in the long tradition of propaganda, to propagate the faith. The films of Quebec gave that lucky people the cultural breathing space that English Canada has never enjoyed. Seeing a number of Quebec film clips, the English Canadian realizes that he always has been the invisible man in feature films. As Britain puts it caustically, there were no Canadian heroes, no lovers, no clowns, not even villains. And few seemed to notice or care.

There would be no feature film industry developing in postwar English Canada because Hollywood had a connection in Ottawa — the Government of Canada. The ill-fated Canadian Cooperation Project convinced C.D. Howe to reject the idea of quotas and to accept Hollywood's promise to use more Canadian references to promote tourism; Lester Pearson would admit publicly Canadian puniness, while Louis St. Laurent would go to the Board of Directors of Famous Players when he ceased being Prime Minister. Things had not changed much since the 1930s. It was still Hollywood's Canada. After de-

scribing the politicians' sell-out, Kramer and Brittain, themselves propagandists favoring a Canadian feature film industry, blame (perhaps unfairly) the Canadian people whom they feel have let the politicians off the hook.

The film ends with the arrival of the all-pervasive light of television and the continuation of big brother's suffusion of mass culture over the weaker sibling. About the same time, a unique Canadian documentary filmstyle emerged, which concentrated upon portraying the roots and daily particulars of ordinary human beings. Today, the documentary tradition, ever-changing, hence ever-healthy, remains the bellweather of Canadian film. And the institution which sponsors so many of these films, the National Film Board, is 40 years old.



Alan "Bozo" Moyle and Steven Lack discuss Lack's painting (in background)

Allan Moyle's **The Rubber Gun**

d. Allan Moyle, asst.d. Simon Davies, sc. Stephen Lack, John Laing, Allan Moyle, ph. Frank Vitale, Jim Lawrence, addnal.ph. Nesya Shapiro, Thom Burstyn, camera op. Rich Bujold, Erich Block, Lois Siegel, Susan Trow, ed. John Laing, sd. Julian Olson, sd.ed. Julian Olson, Jacqueline Newell, m. Lewis Furey, l.p. Stephen Lack, Allan "Bozo" Moyle, Pam Holmes-Robert, Pierre Robert, Peter Brawley, Pam Marchand, Rainbow Robert, David Popoff, Wolf Schwartz, Lily Glidden, Armand Monroe, Joe Mattia, Bill Booth, Steve Crawford, Ron Snyder, Marty McDonald, Pietro Bertolissi, Alain Dumont-Frenette, Terry Coady, p. Stephen Lack, Paul Haynes, Allan Moyle, assoc.p. Bobby Sontage, Kenneth Salomon, Gilbert Mayerovitch, p.manager Norma Bailey, p.c. St. Lawrence Film Productions, (year) 1977, col. 16mm & 35mm blown-up, running time 86 minutes, dist. Pan Canadian Films.

The counterculture, to use that

Has Anybody Here Seen Canada? is itself a splendid example of how a documentary film can serve as a mirror of a society's culture, hopes, and fears both in the past and present. It is palatable, even entertaining history. Whether or not film is the most powerful of the mechanical arts, its projection of time and place frees humanity from the chains of permanent childhood and the tyranny of the present. Taken with its predecessor, *Dreamland*, this film should be required viewing for all who have chosen to make or keep Canada their home. For non-Canadians, it is a way of seeing that Canada, divested of its ridiculous stereotypes, has something to say for itself.

Gary Evans

now anachronistic sounding term, has not been well served by the films which have been made about it. Those negative critics of *Easy Rider*, such as Robert Fulford and Paul Schrader — whose views were once derided — are now seen to be more correct in their assessment of Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper's psychedelic exploits than those who enthused over it. Those pictures that followed in *Easy Rider*'s wake — *Two Lane Blacktop*, *Ripoff*, even *Zabriskie Point* — are now either forgotten or downgraded. The recent re-evaluation of the sixties and its consequences has not been all that successful in its turn. *Hair*, for all its charm and nostalgia, is as irrelevant as it ever was. *The Big Fix* not only exploits its post-Watergate cynicism, it revels in it. *Drying Up The Streets*, for all its self-conscious sordidness, remains at base a cops and robbers story.

It is in this context that Allan

Moyle's film *The Rubber Gun* should be seen. Moyle and his associates, Stephen Lack and John Laing, have chosen a popular subject, the drug trade, but instead of Robin Spry's slightly smug approach, they took a decidedly personal and "uncommercial" route. Made over a period of more than two years on a minimal budget, using as cast and crew people who worked on Frank Vitale's *Montreal Main* (see *Cinema Canada*, no. 46), it at first seems to be a documentary. What is being done here is that the common coin of modern cinema is being used in an electric fashion. Thus, one may see influences in Moyle's work from the New Wave, the direct cinema of Leacock and Pennebaker, the jumpy, loosely connected Pirandellian dramas of John Cassavetes and the gritty, improvisational street style of the young Martin Scorsese.

As in *Mean Streets*, Moyle focuses on a group of people who form a quasi-family, with a character who harbors doubts about the leading position he occupies therein. But the "family" of *The Rubber Gun* is not bound by anything as indissoluble as race or neighborhood, the way Scorsese's characters are. Their ties to each other, despite the artistic reasons that first brought them together, lie in their drug dependence, and the skill of Steve Lack, their leader, to keep them going in their business of dealing.

Steve is the figure upon which the film turns and, in spite of one's first impressions of diffuseness, the plots are quite carefully and clearly designed. The group's latest shipment of dope sits in a locker in Montreal's Windsor Station, but Steve knows that he cannot go near it, for the police have placed a phalanx of men around it. At the same time, Allan Moyle's screen persona, a naive McGill sociology student named Bozo who is doing his thesis on Steve and his "family," insinuates himself into their company. What he, and through him the audience, witnesses is the gradual breakup of the group under pressure. There is, however, a subtle difference in perspective which develops as the film goes on. The view that Allan Moyle the character has diverges from the view that Allan Moyle the director has, although they sometimes coincide. This game is carried even further with the character of Steve.

Steve Lack is a master gamesman; it is his wit which enables him to survive in the world of dealers. But the

audience is never too certain where Stephen Lack the writer is aiming the character. Is he playing with the audience, or with Bozo, whom he regards with bemused contempt, or is it both at once? This uncertainty is intended; it is built into the Pirandellian structure of the film. Some things, on the other hand, are made quite clear. Steve articulates perfectly what has happened to cause the collapse of the counter-culture in the seventies. "It used to be," he says, "they'd get stoned and go out and do something... now, it's like they are just reliving their old stoned..." The standoff between the "family" and the cops is an exercise in collective ennui. "They're as bored as we are, and believe me, they are bored..." Gradually, the narcissism which always underlay the movement comes to the fore in the ursine, all consuming Peter Brawley, the sexually insecure Pierre Robert and his dissatisfied wife Pam Holmes. And all the while, Bozo has been writing in his thesis that this group has been vitalized through drugs. Only Steve, who has kept up his art, seems to feel he can walk away from it all, even though one of his friends reminds him that he hasn't made a living for years from anything other than dealing.

In the end, the whole operation blows up when Pierre, who has been kept supplied with heroin by one of the cops, makes a move with Brawley to pick up the stash and is naturally caught, to the growling voice of Lewis Furey. Bozo, his thesis completed, gives a copy to Steve, who can no longer take this kind of patronizing that is redolent of the social sciences. "It's like," he says bitterly, "you expect me to croak..." Everyone has had their illusions shattered; Bozo on the street, Pam and her daughter on the road, Pierre and Brawley in St. Vincent de Paul Prison. Only Steve seems to be unscathed, as he works on his painting while Furey's voice cries on the soundtrack.

The collective approach to *The Rubber Gun* results in very strong and affecting performances from all concerned. In spite of a seemingly loose style, there is very little that is extraneous to the plot. Even those scenes, such as Steve showing off his sadomasochistic leather mask, and Steve and Brawley cruising a group of hockey playing boys, serve to illuminate the characters. The only areas that do not seem to be properly developed are the motivations of the cops, especially

Pierre's "friend," and the treatment of Pierre and Pam's daughter Rainbow. Moyle seems to see this little girl, an apparently normal child in spite of the fact that her mother took a hundred acid trips while pregnant, as the hope of the future, but he does not explore this idea further, as Alain Tanner did in *Jonah Who Will be 25 in The Year 2000*.

The fact that this film has finally gotten some recognition outside Montreal, thanks to the Cineplex in Toronto, is telling evidence that the co-production route is not the only future for Canadian features. Unfortunately, this may be the last of this kind of picture. Our distributors do not have the capital to risk, as Warner Bros. could with Claudia Weill's *Girl Friends*, and the cutbacks at the Canada Council and the National Film Board, (organizations that helped Allan Moyle and his friends) do not portend well. With the Canadian Film Development Corp. wedded to the "international" policy, the prospects that films like this will be made and properly exhibited, appear bleak. And that is a great loss to Canadian cinema.

J. Paul Costabile

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