Ironic ethics:
In the mind of the projector

by Allan King

One surprise to me about the controversy around _Who In Charge?_ was the focus on ethics mine and those of my colleagues - conference director Gordon Lawrence and his fellow consultants, Dr. Austin Lee and Dr. Elie Debbane of McGill University. And I have been powerfully struck by certain ironies in some of the questions raised.

- For example, a psychologist with no firsthand knowledge of the conference who claimed we invited people to the conference without telling them what it was about. But under cross-examination on the affidavit in which she attacked us, she admitted to convening a conference which purported to be a 'staff professional development day' when in fact she set it up for her sponsors as a way to explore 'sexual tensions' in their organisation.

- Or the psychiatrist who again on hearsay evidence, insisted that the participants were unaware of the cameras and therefore be unguarded. She knew this from her own work which, it turned out, employed cameras hidden by screens (a practice I abominate). Of course, had we our five cameras in full view under a battery of lights.

- The two members, Chuck Gauthier and Sandra Nichol, who took legal action against the CBC and the sponsors of the conference and myself, charging, among other things, that we had induced them to the conference under false pretences.

When I arranged a private pre-broadcast screening for them and their families in Vancouver, they smuggled a journalist into the screening posing him as 'Allan King, best known for his controversial documentaries, has directed three feature films.' Nichol's 'husband' according to Gauthier and 'boy friend' according to Nichol. At the end of the screening I was amazed to see the journalist bring out his pad and pencil and begin a fierce cross-examination of me on the charge that I had enticed members to the conference by deception. When I turned the questions back on him and his behaviour he had the wit to recognize the irony and the grace to apologize.

- There were the two journalists - one radio the other on television - who aired interviews with a conference member who has been jailed for 16 months for two crimes for which, in some weird way, he held the conference responsible. The nature of the crimes and the facts, as brought out in the trial are matters of public record; and they made it clear that the crimes arose out of the man's own life and experience, not the conference. Drawing attention to the facts and character of the events could be seen as damaging to the man, his wife and his children. By not using the material the journalists would deprive themselves of a story. But by using half the story and ignoring all the details, some credence could be given to the charge that the conference was responsible for the member's unfortunate actions. This would create further controversy and "a good story." It would also inevitably discredit to some degree the hard work of the conference and its membership. The journalists chose the latter course.

- The broadcast journalist who was deeply concerned about my ethics in using the shot of the lady who cried. That's understandable from a member of a profession which often seeks out people in extremis and records their anguish by words, microphone or camera for the edification of the public. It's a difficult role and worth looking at. But before doing so, I'd like to underline some facts - at least as I hold them to be. The Conference and the program based upon it did pre-eminently do exactly what it set out to do: offer unemployed people an opportunity to explore their experience of employment and unemployment and communicate that work to their fellow citizens. This they did, with great passion, power, courage and skill. They were admirable.

People were not brought to the conference by false pretences nor were they deceived by the convenors. They were each told precisely and at length in several personal or telephone interviews what it was we were offering and why. People who wanted to explore political or economic questions were told clearly that was not what we were offering but that members were free to explore those issues or talk about whatsoever they wished. There were no hidden agendas though clearly some members brought theirs - as they were free to do.

The first two-hour session explored all these issues and underscored the point that not only could people talk about whatever they wished, they were also free to do. The point was underlined by participant Chuck Gauthier, who later said:

"It was alleged that some mysterious 'force' kept people at the conference. If there were such a 'force' I'd like to see evidence of what it was and to hear how three members were able to overcome it. One left at the beginning, one in the middle, one at the end, all for different reasons. They were treated with courtesy: no pressure was applied to suggest that they stay; they were driven to the airport in comfort. And of course people walked in and out of conference sessions freely and without being accused of rudeness.

Of course, having embarked on this enterprise, most people are quite naturally and humanity loath to give it up. They have loyalties to the task they have assumed and to their fellow workers. This is hardly a mysterious dynamic. What I do find interesting and worth exploring is why some of us sometimes feel a need to view so simple a feeling as loyalty as a mysterious and baffling 'force'. Why further, is there a need to assume this force is a field upon which the consultants practiced malicious and satirical rites for the benefit of a sensational film? It seems to me the phenomenon says much more about the need to form such assumptions and project them onto others than it does about the consultants and me.

The underlying assumption in some of the criticism of the conference can be stated simply and directly. It is that Gordon Lawrence and I conspired together for nine months - and were joined in that conspiracy by two McGill psychiatrists, Dr. Austin Lee and Dr. Elie Debbane - in a plot to induce thirty helpless unemployed victims to a remote and mysterious conference centre in order to persecute, exploit and belittle them for our own perverse gratification - as a cruel experiment to prove what? on the part of the consultants and, on my part, to produce a public spectacle for profit.

This is certainly possible but I haven't seen any evidence for it. The consultants and I actually thought it might be helpful to the participants and public in understanding and working with the experience of unemployment and, indeed, a large majority of the conference members felt this was the result for them personally.

The surprise to me was the fierce
unconscious need some people felt to destroy or suppress the work of the conference, or to divert attention from its main thrust: that unemployment can be horribly painful and disorientating and that perhaps we need to exercise much more imagination about how to deal with the experience. The diversion was to focus on "ethics", "techniques" and "process".

It was naive to be surprised. I've had the experience before not only with Warrendale (a film about emotionally disturbed children), A Married Couple (which explored a marriage in conflict) and Come On Children (about alienated youth) but also with exactly the same subject - unemployment - 25 years ago.

The film was called Matter of Offence. It portrayed the experience of an unemployed salesman and his family. It was broadcast in the House of Commons by the Minister of Labour of the time, who charged that the film made misstatements of fact. It did not.

It was one of the earliest films on television in which an actual person cried on camera - here the wife. There was an intense debate in the CBC as to whether the woman's grief should be edited out, i.e. censored. The minister claimed that since the family had been paid a fee, the wife's tears had been "bought" and somehow were not real. The CBC of the day chose to buckle under, to issue a public apology for crimes which were not committed, to condemn the filmmakers responsible and forbid them from talking further about the matter. The impact of the film was vitiated and its impact on public debate was lost as a result.

The CBC of today firmly fought off the intervention which would have blocked screening Who's In Charge?

In the case of Warrendale discussions were largely preoccupied with the "techniques" of the staff, the ethics of the program and of the filmmaker. No one much wanted to deal with the fact of the outrageous the children had experienced in real life. Fourteen years later one reads Peter Synpnowich's account of the horrors wrecked on one little girl - all in the cause of 'caring for' her - by some child-care institutions in our society. It is the same story we were telling half a generation ago. Others told it ages before that.

A similar thing happened with A Married Couple. All sorts of things were projected into the couple. And the projections said more about the projectors than about the couple. One quarter of the audience loved him, hated her. Another quarter hated him, loved her. Another quarter hated him and a quarter loved them both. Same couple. Furthermore, people made all sorts of unfounded assumptions about the actual couple on the basis of seeing one hundred minutes of film which, in turn, compressed events of a mere ten weeks of their life. I was always curious about the people who concluded, because the husband always wore a red tunic, this man could have held their hearts in his hand.

What makes it difficult to see and deal with each other as we are? The projection is unconscious so it is very hard to catch ourselves in the act or to recognize the process when others do it to us. It makes it difficult to work together effectively because trust is eroded and all testing is seen as an attack. If we can't test each other's ideas we cannot distinguish between what is fantasy and what is real.

We would often prefer to tell each other stories rather than explore realities.

Towards the end of the conference Gordon Lawrence put forward the notion that we, the employed, tend to put into the unemployed all our own fears about unemployment. We project into the unemployed our fear of being made helpless, unskilled, less than adult. That pressure he suggested, may produce such behaviour at times. I've been struck by the fact that some of the comments on the program assumes the participants to have been helpless, unskilled, less than adult victims of a conference management which is assumed to have been omniscient, omnipotent and indifferent. In my view, neither assumption is true and I've watched the conference tapes for many, many hours.

Indeed, the members seem to me to be articulate, passionate, full of fight and often sensitive to each other's needs.

The need to see the conference members as helpless, incompetent minors, a need expressed most vehemently by those who profess to 'care' most fervently for the unemployed is interesting to think about. It's a profoundly patronizing perspective and it is usually quite unrecognizable to people who do it. Why is this the case? Does it assist the unemployed to mobilize their strengths or does it tend to confirm in them their fear of their impotence?

For me the conference also pointed out our terror in the face of freedom, the paralysis which occurs when we are offered 'choice' when we are reminded that we can take it legitimately.

Many people inside and outside the conference found it difficult to believe that they would be allowed to talk about anything, could have held their meetings at any time, anywhere in the conference centre - for example in the common room reserved for non-productive use. This would have shut out the consultants and cameras from all discussions. But of course many members did find it hard to free themselves to do what they wanted, explore what they wanted. It was very hard to do. It's very hard to accept freedom, assume authority.

Freedom was feared because it was associated with it a terrible burden of responsibility. Who's going to do that? Who's going to take the responsibility of having to blame someone or to pray to someone.

Much better to talk about the "techniques" of the consultants, the "deception" of the convenors and especially about "ethics".

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**Documentaries**

The production and airing of Allan King's recent two-hour documentary on the experience of unemployment, Who's In Charge?
The centrality of that educational concern defined both the way the program was structured and the content.

Last January, a four-day conference was convened by a non-profit policy research organization called the Mengen Institute, of which filmmaker Allan King is the chairman. Funded by the Department of Employment and Immigration, the conference was organized by King and Gordon Lawrence, a former co-director of the Group Relations Training Program at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London. In England, the Tavistock Institute holds biennial conferences which explore the nature of group dynamics with respect to authority, leadership and organizations.

Lawrence's role at the Canadian conference was to provide management consultation, aided in this by two Montreal psychiatrists, Austin Lee and Elie Dube. The CBC agreed to provide crew and facilities. To its credit, the conference welcomed and coproduced with King a television special to convey the conference to the country. TVOntario also invested.

The initial conference was to constitute a two-hour television special and 10 half-hour training films. A feature film based on some of the conference is in script development.

A similar film has been made by the Germans. The Tavistock behavioral model employed at the conference is a product of the Mengen Institute, a product of the tendency toward experimental "documentaries" which has been in the air of late.

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**Pawns of experience**

by Michael Dorland

For as long as one does not criticize the social function of cinema, all film criticism is only a criticism of symptoms and has itself merely a symptomatic character - Brecht.

The result of all our inventions and progress seems to be that material powers become invested with spiritual life, while human life deteriorates into a material force - Marx.

One of the consequences of living in the age of communication is that the human beings experience his own existence predominantly as a viewer of programming. In such a situation the task of the filmmaker is to re-claim that which is intended for human emotions in the hope of reconecting them to the atomized experience of the individual viewer. A noble enterprise, some might argue, but seriously flawed.

For media content becomes a collective emotional substitute for individual experience, because the media can in fact represent emotions in society - that is to say, in exteriorized or caricatured form. Put differently, the media represent emotion as entertainment. To its credit, its content, that systemic deflates the seriousness of the occasional claim to serve an educational purpose. That claim - to provide an opportunity to learn from experience - unfortunately constituted the heart of the justification for

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* Allan King, sinister documentarian of the future

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necessary to understand what followed. Indeed, Allan King, in five pages of notes explaining the background to Who's In Charge? takes up at least three explaining in detail, not to say peculiar, format of the conference.

The notion of applied Laingian psychology in the hands of management, is to put it mildly, hair-raising. Whatever the reader may think of Allan King or the particular, not to say peculiar, the value of the radical methods of R.D. May, was not shown on the film. Though the application for an injunction was dismissed from court, that neither King nor the organizers of the conference, nor are the 'professionals' interviewed afterward to offer a public display of their private confessions of suicidal thoughts; in their depiction, finally, of contemporary society's dirty little secret: namely that the future won't be 'foolish' in the euphonic sense, but psycho-sociological films reflecting the internal pay wars of a social order in its own society's rediscovery of Social Darwinism.

If Allan King's Who's In Charge? is indeed a premonition of what's to come, one can only conclude with a paraphrase of Lincoln Steffens' famed remark: 'I have seen the future and it's shameful.'

### Allan King's Who's In Charge?

Canadian filmmaker Allan King has blessed us with a verite technique in which he reveals intimate aspects of social problems. Skid Row (1956) dealt with delinquents of Vancouver and the controversial study of disturbed children in therapy, earned him reknown when the CBC and BBC refused to broadcast it. A Married Couple (1969) found a disintegrating middle-class couple airing their private lives melodramatically. The subjects of these films were either helpless (the delinquents) and unwillin (the melodramatic couple) to call the filmmaker to account for his public display of their private lives.

Once again, King uses this technique in Who's In Charge? Canada's Jobless Speak Out, which the CBC aired in September, ignoring the protests of some of its subjects. Thirty of Canada's unemployed came together to confront their situation in a four-day T-group experience before television cameras. The unemployed, bewildered by the jobless, asked him to sign and released which essentially waived their legal rights to object to the images King would use.

The group begins to coalesce as the participants realize the anguish of being unemployed. Their questions and calls for solutions are met with a wall of silence. They become angry. An emotional effect, one can still grant him the benefit of the doubt. When he says that the conference was not set up to that effect, one can only wonder at this disingenuousness.

The result was a well-publicized controversy: six of the participants took legal action. Although the application for an injunction was dismissed from court, the program, originally scheduled for May, was not shown on the CBC until September.

But now that the great viewing public has shared in its experience, it is perhaps possible to move beyond the immediate controversy. Those who make the program are to be congratulated on their handling of this important questions on the uses of contemporary television. For instance, Allan King does, in a way, emphasize the demand for a demand for a content for a long time to come. When television is made the vehicle for demanding concern, it is only natural to expect concern to spread pretty thin, between concern over the arms race, concern over El Salvador or Brian Mulroney's choice of film, and to himself, the medium's concerns are themselves singularly whimsical while being at the same time hard-learned through insight, the relentless search for novelty.

And yet it is perhaps on the question of novelty that the import of Who's In Charge? becomes clear. The program's exploration of joblessness was the program's emotionalism: in the anger and frustration of the unemployed participants: in their tears and confessions of suicidal thoughts: in their depiction, finally, of contemporary society's dirty little secret: namely that human social experience is anguishing because it consists of the infliction of pain by the powerful over the powerless.

To identify the infliction of the pain is a small step. But to recognize that social group is to understand it as sadism. And it was, perhaps, the sadism of the program that was so disturbing to the medium's concerns are themselves singularly whimsical while being at the same time hard-learned through insight, the relentless search for novelty.

### Gary Evans

**WHO'S IN CHARGE? A working conference on employment and unemployment, organized by the Department of Employment and Immigration.**