

# Norman Jewison

## and Canada's new generation of filmmakers

*During the cultural exodus abroad of the late '50s, the departure of some of the brightest filmmakers from Canada was, in part, responsible for the various pieces of legislation that make up Canadian film policy today. When the Ted Kotcheffs, Norman Jewisons, Arthur Hillers, Sylvio Narizzanos and Sydney Newmans left, it was feared that Canada's talent would naturally continue to move away unless a vigorous, supportive and creative climate was developed.*

*Twenty-five years later, after the creation of the Canadian Film Development Corporation which became Telefilm, after the capital-cost allowance and the introduction of pay-TV, after the coproduction treaties and the coventure permissions, young Canadian filmmakers are still concerned that the climate in which they work is as forbidding as ever.*

*Filmmaker Bruce McDonald, who drives a cab for a living and chauffeured Norman Jewison during the Toronto production of Agnes of God, is one of these young, concerned filmmakers. Below, as Agnes has its world-première at the Montreal World Film Festival, he writes to Jewison, asking just what it takes before he and others of the new generation can get on with the business of making films.*

*Once a Toronto cabbie in his own right, Jewison was different from the other émigrés. In the early '70s, he was part of the Canadian film lobby. In 1976 at a meeting with Toronto's mayor along with other film nationalists that included Peter Pearson and producer Bill Marshall, Jewison, the spokesman, gave an impassioned speech in support of quotas and levies on U.S. films in Canada.*

*If today Jewison, with his years of experience, 26 Oscars and Canadian-based projects, no longer sees the need for quotas and levies, it is because he feels that things have gotten better over the years for Canadian filmmakers. He points to the ownership of Odeon which is now in Canadian hands, and the seed money that is available through Telefilm.*

*Seven years ago, Jewison moved back to Canada, and now lives on a farm near Toronto. He has remained involved in the politics of the Canadian situation. Twice he arranged for successive Canadian ministers to meet with Jack Valenti of the Motion Picture Association of America to hammer out elements of a film policy. In 1981, in a letter to the CRTC about the introduction of pay-TV, he commented, "I understand that over half the films made last year have not yet received distribution. This has been not only a shocking waste of investors' capital but has discouraged further development of many talented young Canadians. The Canadian feature film industry today, perhaps, has the talent but not yet the vision."*

*Jewison has often been perceived as one who had vision. It was because young filmmakers like Bruce McDonald turned to Jewison for vision that the following exchange, edited from an interview with Jewison by Cinema Canada editor Connie Tadros, took place.*

# Dear Norman, What is to be done?

by Bruce McDonald

When I got the job as your driver, during the shooting of *Agnes of God* I thought myself very lucky, yet I soon realized that the responsibility of making this simple twist of fate work out properly was mine, and mine alone. My imagination took off into the stratosphere because of who I would be working with on this film, but the bottom-line was that I had to get you to the set on-time, and anything less clearly meant losing the trust that you and these awe-inspiring people had invested in me; and it also meant losing the job if I was late.

It takes exactly 47 minutes to get from my place to your kitchen-door, but, of course, that is under optimum conditions: no traffic, clear roads, foot to the floor, a backbeat on the radio and a cup of steely black Java to sharpen reaction time after only a few hours of sleep. I might also add that this critical 47 minutes includes picking up *The Globe & Mail* and the time it takes me to find the keys to the Capri.

There were more close calls than you know about, and the most vivid in my mind was the time I snapped to consciousness just under the 47-minute limit, where every second ticking by became a few hundred yards lost on that fragile trajectory from my place in downtown Toronto to your place in the county. Dressing myself, running at a full gallop along College St., I realized that I'd locked the damn keys to the Capri in my apartment, along with keys to my apartment. Knowing that, at 6:30 in the morning, Nick the slumlord was not going to be too keen on coming across the roof to open up for one of his frothing tenants, and Rob, my roommate, had not been seen for several days, I was left to my instincts. Scaling the back fire-escape, I managed to swing over and kick in my bedroom window, climb in, scoop the keys and race back to the street, leaving an ugly bloom of shattered glass and a thunderhead of snowclouds approaching ominously from the west.

I came to truly appreciate the power and the traction of the eight-cylinder wagon that morning, screaming up the Gore Road, passing the more cautious demons who were slowing up for the drifting snow and treacherous patches of black ice. There

were no smiles at your farm that morning, and later, back home on College St., things were not much better, as Rob, returning home from whatever debauchery had filled his last three days, stumbled into the large snowdrift in the upstairs hall.

Anyway, just thought I'd drop you a line to keep in touch. I know it's been a few months, but I'd like to thank you again for all your kindness on *Agnes* and for allowing me to share in the making of the film.

*Agnes* was an incredible eye-opening experience for me in many respects, and I am honoured to have had you as my guide, storyteller and mentor. The hardest thing to get over initially was being 'just a driver' and being the bottom-guy on the ladder again, knocking about with people who were the very best in their field: Ken (*Dr. Strangelove*, *Barry Lyndon*, *James Bond*) Adams; Meg (*The Big Chill*) Tilly; Dick (*A Soldier's Story*) Rescigne; Ralph (*In the Heat of the Night*, *Little Big Man*, *The Conversation*, *Godfather II*, 2010) Girling; Bonnie (*Best Friends*, *A Soldier's Story*) Palef-Woolf; Tony (*Tom Jones*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Dune*) Gibbs; Richard (*The Terminator*, *Lovestreams*) Lightstone; Paul (*Amadeus*) Leblanc; Patrick (everything) Palmer; and on and on through living movie-history.

Over time, I figured that the best way to communicate with these cinematic legends was to listen, ask questions and whenever the banalities of everyday life were dealt with, try to throw in my two cents' worth about where to find the best goulash in town, or offer home-grown solutions on how to beat the cold. It unnerved me at first, when I heard d.o.p. Sven Nykvist talk, because I had always expected him to sound like John Simon writes in *Bergman Directs*. So when he told the stories, in his shy way, about his brother the doctor discovering strange microscopic animals that only lived on the skins of people who lived together, I laughed; we all laughed because Sven was so amazed by it all, so befuddled, yet so sincere. The jolt from god-status to human was always so unexpected, like the time I backed into this lady in the craft services' room, the first day of shooting. We both turned around and she stuck out her hand and said, "Hi, I'm Jane." Feeling a little foolish for having to quickly switch my raisin toast and cheese-whiz from my right hand to my left in order to return the greeting, I did notice that Jane Fonda looked a little sheep-

ish too, surrounded by all those jelly-donuts. It was nice the joke was shared, because the laughter helped clear away the pillars and Cecil B. De Mille. In retrospect, I think it was your dogs Barnaby and Barington that kept me grounded enough to relate to all of the cinematic mythology.

Seeing this organization at work; the precision and dedication of the crew; watching you move and be moved by it was (can't find a better word) very moving, as well as great education. During the takes it was magical to see this odd collection of professional gypsies simmer to a hush, while the director and actors passed their secrets, them giving so much and you embracing those gifts with compassion, control and heartfelt appreciation. Standing in the shade of the Arriflex, you mirrored the same emotional struggles your actors were going through in the soft bounce of Sven's light, yet you were right there to catch them as soon as the take was over. It finally hit home to me that in order for a director to genuinely give the actors what they need, to gain their trust, he must clearly define his role in that relationship and it must be intrinsic to them both.

It was fascinating to see you begin to win them over, each in a different way; with Meg, (Tilly), you became her understanding father; with Anne (Bancroft), you got along famously as her wise-guy, soul brother; but Jane (Fonda) was a little more difficult. It looked to me like you set the stage to play her long-lost boyfriend, trying to rekindle the shared passion she had chosen to sacrifice for her professional life of serious business. You cursed at their games and facades, twinkled at the little victories, and chuckled at the easy success of your bag of tricks.

It was between rehearsals of one of the Steadicam shots that the moment of truth finally came. You had just come upstairs after going through the scene again, and sat down beside Sven, in front of the video feed. Steadiman Dave Crone and the actors were downstairs preparing for the next take, and suddenly the radio mikes blossomed into an innocent eavesdropping device. You were sitting there with the headset on and obviously couldn't help but hear Jane and Anne, who were whispering secrets to each other like two chatty schoolgirls: "Well, do you think he's got it?" "What?" "You know, a vision" (pause). "Yes." "Oh, I think so too." You turned to Sven with that impish grin of yours and I

knew that you knew that you had won them over.

Lesser directors and producers seem to be in the business out of an adolescent need to wield power for its own sake, to make themselves feel important by controlling others. However, I see you operate in a way where you instill a sense of pride and importance in everyone who works with you, from the actors to the grips and even to the (toot, toot) drivers. I haven't worked on too many big features, but the sense that I got from some of the hard-core veterans was that we were all involved in something pretty special and out of that 'united we stand, divided we fall' attitude that you nurtured, everyone was willing to give that little bit extra. I guess that is what I came to appreciate most.

I'm glad you decided to stay at your farm rather than the nearby Holiday Inn or your friend's Mill House, because that gave me 45 minutes to an hour each night to ask questions, listen to stories and talk politics but, of course, that depended on how many shaken travellers we had to rescue on the icy backroads of Caledon. Do you remember the Volvo that spun out in front of us and flipped upside down into the ditch? It was only my second day on the job. This sudden jolt of reality did clear me of the one and only real fear I had before starting on the shoot: "Renowned Film Director Dies in Car Crash; Punk Driver Survives Unscathed." It would have been a little hard to explain to our fellow cab-drivers, because, after all, you are one of the rare drivers that made it.

I've always been a pretty good listener and you're a great talker so I wasn't about to stop you when you were on a roll. I could hear the real scoop on Hal Ashby's editing binges; manoeuvring McQueen and Dunaway in *The Thomas Crown Affair*; Pacino's addiction to infinite takes; the early days at the CBC; the wired craziness of live television at NBC; the difference in acting technique between Doris Day and Rod Steiger; your involvement with Bobby Kennedy and the Civil Rights Movement; the 'unusual' recording sessions on *Superstar*; dinner conversations with Trudeau and Lalonde; bizarre accounts of the English and their dogs; what makes a good red wine; *Rollerball*, and the exchanges with Sly on *F.I.S.T.*; Tony Curtis leading you around by the hand, on your first day as director on a film set; the hardships and ultimate acclaim at getting *A Soldier's Sto-*

Toronto filmmaker Bruce McDonald drives a cab for a living as Norman Jewison once did.

ry to the screen; the politics at Columbia, and on and on. And on and on we would slowly drive up the winding road to the farmhouse, the snow falling thick and quiet, while Damon Runyon's wise guys played on the radio. After seeing you in with Barnaby and Barrington, I began the long leisurely drive back to the city, replaying our conversation in my mind but this time coming up with lots of witty remarks and insights of sheer brilliance.

On a much smaller scale, I think I can relate to a lot of the things that you talked about over those many nights, and if you'll allow me to be so bold, that's the other point to writing you this letter.

I'd like to tell you a little bit about the world I make films in; who we are; why we, as a filmmaking community, connect, and the struggles we face with identifying ourselves. Toronto independent film is beginning to dance, yet I start to tread on shaky ground the minute I attempt to define just what it is that makes our particular collection of filmmakers a group. A lot of us have had our formal training in film-schools (Ryerson, in particular) and having been out for a few years, we have managed to support ourselves in the industry by working as editors, cinematographers, production managers, assistant this-and-that, or on staff at various production houses in the city. What makes us still vital is that we are continuing to produce our own films; drawing on the money we make from our jobs; the late night freebies from the production houses, courtesy of the goodwill of some of the veteran staffers; sporadic arts grants; post-production assistance from the NFB; and the intense loyalty generated by this network of friends and cohorts.

Stylistically, we range from the lyrical, somewhat perverse, mysticism of Peter Mettler's *Scissere* and Henry Jesionka's *Resurrected Fields* to the straight-ahead documentation of untouchable subjects as seen in Dale and Cole's *Hookers On Davie* and Ron Mann's *Poetry in Motion*.

There is a growing political consciousness in the group most apparent in some recent works such as Gomes and Kolumpar's *Downside Adjustments*, Luis Garcia's *The Earth Eater*, Janis Lundman's *Los Arados* and Judith Doyle's *Eye of the Mask*. The flip side of the social platter is exposed in Jeremy Podeswa's *Neon* and in Amnon Buchbinder's *Oroboros* which takes us on the mythical journey of the modern-day hero.

All of these films invest well in the liberation of the cinematic form, but none so explosively as Adrienne Mitchell's *Potsdammer Platz*. Even films that fall within the most classical narrative construction, such as Patricia Simms' *Freezer Burn*, Patricia Rozema's *Passion* and Atom Egoyan's *Next of Kin*, use direct references to the medium as essential metaphors in their stories, with curious and delightfully effective results.

Shooting schedules range from a few weeks, with Colin Brunton's *A Trip Around Lake Ontario*, to a few years as with Robert Shoub's *Snowscreen*. As far as methods of production go, we all get through it with varying degrees of fear and loathing, but aiming, always aiming, for efficient professionalism. This efficiency is often dictated by our lack of funds and limited shooting schedules and the filmmakers often find themselves trying to cut the entire pic. As young individuals, we are usually tuned to a particular area, whether it be editing, writing, shooting or producing, and we bring this skill to the production, relying on it, at the expense of the other areas. My own film, *Knock! Knock!* is one of the best examples of the shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later-method, yet



• Jewison shoots *Jesus Christ Superstar*

surviving the ordeal. After long months in the cutting room I'm beginning to see that proficiency or confidence in just one aspect of the production may expand those particular creative parameters to compensate for the lack of attention in the other areas. But next time around I would prefer to hook up with someone who uses their typewriter the way I use a Steenbeck.

I don't know about Hollywood, but maybe you can remember your first days driving a cab: going out on the streets the first couple of nights, Pearly's street directory clutched in one hand, radio in the other and a coffee between the knees, trying to book a position or grab a run amidst all the static-chopped chatter, getting lost at the same time and finally pulling into the garage after twelve hours of crazed weasels in your brain only to discover that you owe them ten bucks. But after putting in some time, you find that you're beginning to cruise, plotting outrageous shortcuts of your own, knowing how to play the mood of the dispatcher, and enjoying the conversations of all kinds of straights and freaks. Instincts take over from experience and you can stick the Pearlys under the seat with the tire iron, enjoy the ride, and make some cash to boot. Only experience will help us make our way.

We are all working on our next films, each in different stages of production, and I can begin to feel something very good happening. Even though we do not share a singular ideology insofar as method, style or content are concerned, we do share an intense dedication to our work, a very potent communal spirit and a desire to communicate our personal, cinematic and social concerns beyond the realm of our immediate support systems. This is tremendously encouraging.

But we are reaching a critical turning point. Some of us are realizing just how much money can be made in film by

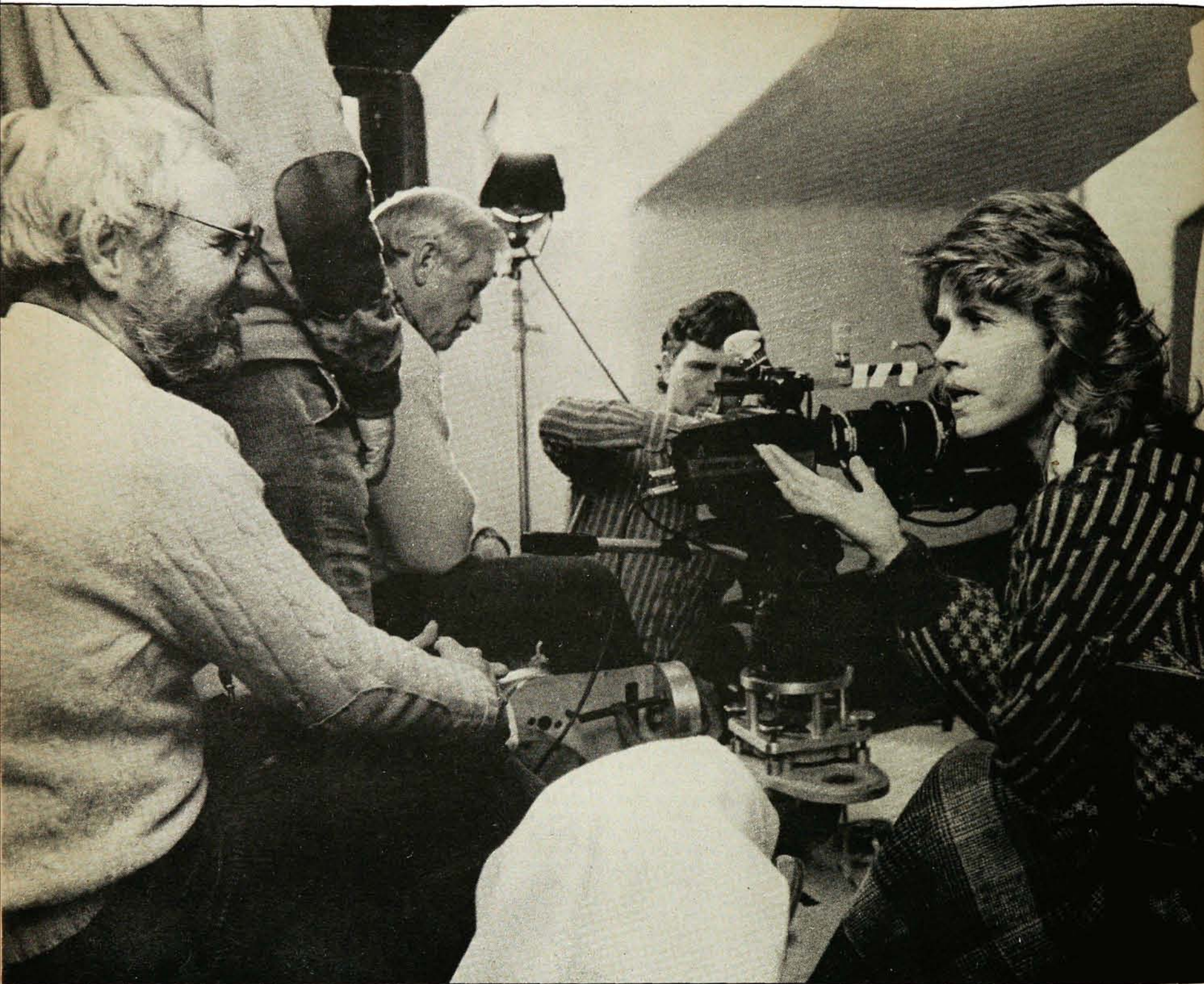
working for someone else; some are having difficulty justifying their involvement in schlock/rock videos and prefer to cut themselves off from those who question their motivations and aspirations; some are finding it hard, after a hard day's work, to put in the occasional all-nighter, to consistently miss the fringe parties and the once-only events that can be such a tease. Others are disappearing out of utter frustration at having years of work slip by unnoticed and unseen. The group is vital, yet also fragile enough to dissolve unless an urgency of purpose is maintained. There is no doubt in my mind that these filmmakers are willing to make the necessary sacrifices in order to continue with their work, but how do you fight the pathetic apathy of the all-consuming television junkie? Convert him with more of the same? Not a chance.

We need to get our work shown. The solution is that simple. It is only by public and critical response that we can even begin to see our strengths and shortcomings, and then, to act accordingly. The professional execution of these films has improved dramatically over the past two years, as we all begin to hone the skills and crafts we do best. Yet the public still has no idea that there is a fresh, raw alternative. We must convince a culture that is mainlining on *Dallas* and Doncaster Medical commercials that our films (perhaps not as slick and polished as their favorite cartoons) need not be seen as a terrifying withdrawal from prime-time, but as bridges to discovering the rhythms of their own particular heartbeats. We have learned to crawl, and now, tottering on our feet, we are wondering which directions we should take and which connections we should cut. It is 1985 and this group of filmmakers is determined to express their personal, social, and cinematic identities within the flaccid holding-pattern of the popular media.

Stay with me Norman, I'll get there yet.

Meanwhile, Canadian filmmakers are still faced with that infantile double-negative; a system that is hesitant, if not resistant, in its support for artists, and a cultural identity as nebulous and elusive as the American Goliath is overwhelming. The constant difficulties of production and distribution can be worked on at a practical level, through whatever means necessary, with tips from the Germans, Australians and others, but the latter element is going to require some serious soul-searching. Some have offered that it is that very search that comprises the Canadian experience, but I feel that the quest, whatever, has got to lead us someplace, and if that takes us right back to the beginning, at least we know we've been someplace and returned. The Germans have the Second World War to thank for their cinematic *angst*, but who do we have to thank for our very own cultural vacuum and resultant identity crisis? My bet is that it's someone who likes to twang 'Ain't that America' a lot.

But as I thumb through my Pearlys, I see that filmmakers in Canada have a strong cinematic tradition in social documentaries, the landscapes of our country, the landscapes of our chosen medium, and in American movies. A closer look at these four guiding elements reveals, in my eyes, that network news and its Pravda contemporaries have easily usurped the NFB/Grierson initiative of the documentary as a social antenna; the barren comfort of our landscapes is being challenged by the exiting influx of people from cultures all over the world. The explorations into the essence of the medium itself, charted by Snow, McLaren, Elder and others, have turned the 24 fps inside out, and their discoveries are internationally acclaimed and heatedly discussed — *everywhere but here*. The CBC should at least make a token gesture and have Bruce Elder direct an episode of *The*



• On the *Agnes of God* shoot: Jewison and Fonda

*Beachcombers*. With his salary Bruce could finance his next three films and Bruno would be a smash at the Berlin Film Festival.

The fourth, and surely the most populist of the influences on us, is our love of American movies. No one can film better musicals, can choreograph the action of a chase, build suspense, or concoct the most outrageous heroes from the common-man than the Americans. But that spirit today seems to be dead too, having eliminated the individual from both sides of the camera, and grinding out pimply spectacles in two shades, cartoon flesh and space-opera pale. Where *have* you gone, Mrs. Robinson?

The Toronto independents have watched the souring of their influences with bitterness and remorse. We are angered at the cultural band-aids the government promotes with such nearsighted pride, in their feeble attempt to maintain the facade called the Canadian Film Industry. Making the best of all they offer, we take part in the arts council's semi-annual lottery, but, win or lose, it is only a fraction of a more holistic equation to generate good films. We have sent out scouts to find out where the mysterious 'private sector' is located, if it exists

at all. Some have never returned, but I've heard cries and whispers that they are alive and well and living in Canada's fifth largest city, Los Angeles. We are, strangely, refugees in our own country; so why feel the restraints of a right and a wrong way to make a film? We might as well do it our way, steal what we want from the four tombs of our cinematic tradition, patch them together with the tools we are becoming quite handy with, backed up by our shared experience and then run with them, kicking and screaming. After all, it's life during wartime, and the films will only get better as long as we can remember our own history. Because, as we all know, the struggle against power is coincidental with the struggle against forgetting.

Which reminds me, we've got a potential audience to contend with. Being filmmakers, we must realize that if we are to progress in our work, we must make a concentrated effort to understand who we are talking to, and make an effort to establish a dialogue that will fire our imaginations and resuscitate the heartbeats of the viewer. As far as I understand it, though, everyone seems to be watching TV. And that, as the following quote from an article

called "America's Telescreens" in the April '85 issue of *Harpers'* magazine explains, is quite frightening:

*Thus, even as its programs push the jargon of 'honesty' and tolerance, forever counselling you to 'be yourself,' TV shames you ruthlessly for every symptom of residual morality, urging you to turn yourself into an object wholly inoffensive, useful and adulterated, a product of, and for other products. While Winston Smith is forced to watch himself in literal self-defence, trying to keep his individuality a hard-won secret, we have been forced to watch ourselves, lest we develop selves too hard and secretive for the open market. In America, there is no need for an objective apparatus of surveillance (which is not to say that none exists) because, guided by TV, we watch ourselves as if already televised, checking ourselves both inwardly and outwardly for any sign of untidiness of gloom, moment by moment, as guarded and self-conscious as Winston Smith under the Thought Police. As you watch, there is no Big Brother out*

*there watching you — not because there isn't a Big Brother, because Big Brother is you — watching.*

Still with me, Norman?

I hope so, because to me you have been an education, a point of clear focus and most important, an inspiration as a man and as an artist. You continue to make films that you believe in, that speak to us through characters caught in dilemmas essential to our own lives, balancing the cinematic stylishness of *Superstar* with a point-blank shot between the eyes in *A Soldier's Story*. You still like to think of yourself as a punk from the shadier side of the street, giving the big boys a good run for the money. You know, better than most, Fascists can't dance.

I appreciate you taking the time from your busy schedule to listen to my shy side of the conversation, and I hope some of it makes sense to you. All my best to your family, and give a big hello to Barnaby and Barrington. Thanks for letting me drive.

Most Sincerely,  
Bruce