

# Thunder over the docudrama

## Symposium highlights NFB's world-class role



• NFB's panellists, from left: Don Brittain, Adam Symansky, Paul Cowan, Jacques Godbout (hidden), Jacques Leduc (hidden), Anne-Claire Poirier, Dagmar Gueissaz Teufel (hidden), and Giles Walker

photo: Ron Diamond

by Thomas Waugh

The strongest beast in the '80s jungle of nonfiction filmmaking has been a mongrel – the docu-drama. Combining the traditional documentary elements of "direct" live action and archival montage with dramatization of one sort or another, the format includes a huge range of cinematic choices which the shortland term "docu-drama" can only suggest. The trend has been noted in the U.S. (*What You Take For Granted*, *Far From Poland*, *When The Mountains Tremble*), and to a lesser extent in Europe. In Cuba, however, it's been a staple for 25 years. In Canada, a McGill University symposium in early February was a forceful reminder not only that the docu-drama has been the major format for "A" movies at the National Film Board for several years, but that the Board has become a world leader in expanding the possibilities and range of this hybrid.

An imposing lineup of the NFB's major creative brass, both French and English, was assembled by McGill instructor Michel Choquette for the event, entitled "Docu-drama, Fact and Fiction," and included directors Donald Brittain, Paul Cowan, Jacques Godbout, Jacques Leduc, Anne-Claire Poirier, Dagmar Gueissaz-Teufel, Fernand Bélanger, and Giles Walker, joined by producer Adam Symansky. A fascinating assemblage of excerpts from their films, from Poirier's 1978 classic *Mourir à tue-tête* to strong recent titles like Cowan's *Democracy On Trial: The Morgentaler Affair* and Bélanger and Gueissaz-Teufel's brand-new dazzler *Passiflora*, set the terms for a spirited debate among filmmakers and a large crowd of over 300 people, and along the way provided a useful capsule survey of the docu-drama territory.

It is surprising that the debate about

Thomas Waugh teaches film at Concordia University.

political, ethical and aesthetic issues, often evasive and cut short, was as substantive as it was. There was considerable talk of the ethical problem of deception, of the balance between artists' right to interpret reality and their responsibility to sensitize audiences to the different gradations of imaginative reconstruction. Yet there could have been a sharper analysis of the clear alternatives between the openly self-reflective manipulations of Poirier in *Mourir* and the more seamless, potentially more deceptive reconstitutions of Brittain's *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks*. All documentary is creative manipulation, of course, but some artists let the audience in on the process more than others.

A minor diversion occurred when a squadron of Air Force veterans repeated once again their over-publicized charges of inaccuracy regarding *The Kid Who Couldn't Miss*, Cowan's icon-bashing work about our most famous war hero, Billy Bishop. Until the veterans and the Canadian Senate started huffing and puffing, the film was undeservedly ignored by this country's media (like all important work produced here, whether by the Board and or by independents). Now the Lewis Carroll-style keffuffle has become a symptom of almost everything that's wrong on our cultural landscape: from the complicity of the media in the attrition of our culture to the inaccessibility of much indigenous cultural production to the vast majority of the population, even, it appears, of the most basic church-basement kind of documentary. The veterans incident, a dialogue of the deaf, was a good object lesson of the chronic audience crisis that filmmakers are seeking to resolve by means of new, more popular (i.e. dramatized) forms.

Another digression I found very suggestive followed the excerpt from *Mourir*, Anne-Claire Poirier's famous film about rape, so traumatic even in an excerpt presentation eight years after the fact, that the audience forgot all

about docu-theory and wanted to talk about rape all over again. Docu-drama's power to raise social issues is not to be lightly dismissed by critics of its moral simplifications, historical distortions and ethical risks.

One thing I would like to have heard more about concerns the distinction between historical works, resorting to reconstruction to fill in the gaps in archival collections, and docu-dramas dealing with current affairs. The latter category, judging from films navigating the minefields of sexual politics, seems to enlist dramatization to get around the ethical and political dangers of controversial subjects. Although some panelists made the astonishing claim that docu-drama was a new form for dealing with old subjects since there are no new ones left, this assertion was dramatically contradicted by the films on such new subjects as reproductive rights (*Democracy On Trial*), sexual violence (*Mourir à tue-tête*) and gay liberation (one of several concerns of *Passiflora*), themes that the NFB had always been too edgy to confront in conventional documentary terms.

The emphasis on the novelty of docu-drama techniques requires rethinking. It is undeniable that the docu-drama vogue is an almost unanimous current reaction against the stock-shot/interview format of the '70s (which was in turn was a reaction against the "here-and-now" orthodoxy of '60s *vérité*). Still, most panelists seemed unaware that virtually every docu-drama technique employed by the new generation has been tried before, some as early as the '20s and then more or less continuously ever since. Paul Cowan's brilliant work with Henry Morgentaler reconstructing events from his own past has its antecedents as far back as Flaherty's *Nanook Of The North* (1922) and Joris Ivens' *Misère au burimage* (1933), and Jacques Leduc's technique of inserting professional actors into "real-life" situations (*Le Dernier glacier*) can be traced back as far

as Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien Que Les Heures* (1926) and Pare Lorentz's *Fight For Life* (1940). No one seemed to notice that one excerpt presented, from Brittain's *Bethune*, is 22 years-old! Filmmakers, like everyone else, need a sense of history in order to profit from the experiments – and the mistakes – of our ancestors. A footnote in this department is that the NFB shares the responsibility for our forgetfulness: among the most recent casualties of the Board policy of prematurely yanking films from circulation are the 1967 Newfoundland Project films of the Challenge for Change program. Small wonder we think everything we do has never been done before.

Despite the overall success of the symposium, a few criticisms regarding its organization are in order. Was it necessary to concentrate the discussion exclusively on NFB work? Input from such independents as Paul Tana, Jacqueline Levitin, Nick Sheehan or Brenda Longfellow would have usefully broadened the debate in addition to representing docu-drama strategies available to low-budget filmmakers. Instead of indulging in PR partisanship, the Board should have seized this chance to demonstrate its oft-touted solidarity with independents.

Questions were also raised regarding the scheduling conflict with the *Rendez-vous du cinéma québécois*. In competing with the annual celebration and taking-stock of Quebec cinema, the organizers are guilty at best of blithe ignorance and bad manners and, at worst, of downright destructiveness. If ungenerous souls may well feel that McGill University has a historic stake in welcoming the return of the good old days of duo-solitudinous Montreal, the NFB need not help abet such divisiveness.

Even so, congratulations are due to the NFB and McGill for keeping the issues of our cinema alive before a large public. Many repeat performances are to be hoped for.