



The Independent Scene In Their Own Words

rent crop, but with a significant difference.

While the previous works were largely characterized by a romantically melancholy and politically paralyzing solipsism, many of the new films take the culturally defining fact of alienation (while this, more than anything else, is what makes Canadian culture Canadian, we tend not to boast about it), and cast it in critical, ironic and occasionally even positive terms. With revealing frequency, many contemporary Canadian independent features (including *Family Viewing*, *Faustus*, *Life Classes*, *Mermaids*, *Tuesday Wednesday* and *Savannah Electric*) deal with states of chronic alienation: like their antecedents, the Canada they reflect is a place where authority is both absolute and indifferently, where the family is oppressive, and where respite for individuals is found only in dreams, genuine escape being apparently impossible. But many of these new films demonstrate an unprecedented self-consciousness about this inherited state of alienated defeatism, and approach it with an eminently (de)constructive arsenal of denaturalizing devices such as irony, humour and satire.

Mermaids and *Life Classes*, for example, both deal with women characterized by a feeling of profound social ineptitude — nothing new for Canadian movies, apart from the significant fact the protagonists are women. But both also chronicle the process by which this alienation is turned into a triumph of sorts: *Mermaids* concludes with an exhilarating reification of the fantasy-prone heroine's right to fantasize, and *Life Classes* lets its pathetic, barefoot and pregnant subject blossom into a confident artist. While these are perhaps the most blatantly upbeat examples of the recent transformation of Canadian cultural alienation by contemporary independent films into something altogether different — something almost positive — they aren't alone.

All of the films mentioned here (and some that aren't) indicate a striking collective refusal of the profound pessimism that once served as the defining theme of Canadian feature filmmaking. But it's not a passive refusal, expressed in the turning of heads the other way. Recognizing that this, perhaps more than anything else, is the prevailing condition defining Canadian culture, these filmmakers face the fact and, on the pathway to alternative models, work their way through it. In doing so they are not only pointing the way out of the paralyzing darkness of Canadian cultural defeatism, they're challenging the formal boundaries of Canadian feature film practice.

Finally, I guess it boils down to this: films like these haven't been made in this country before, and, if it weren't for the determined efforts of filmmakers working self-consciously in particular contexts while exploiting the expressive potential offered by limited conditions of production, they wouldn't get made at all. That's what I call independence.



Bachar Chbib

I am again pacing between my two storefront offices, wondering how far I got that day on the European leg of the Canadian Independent Film Tour: from frustrations, to anxieties, to interspersed moments of success.

On Independent

Low-budget and not independent filmmaking is the right term to use in our society. None of us are independent in making mass media films — not I, not Alliance, not Rock Demers and not even MainFilm. There exists no such thing as a 'film industry' and never will. It's all one big government hoax. The words 'film industry' seem to be more glamorous than Unemployment Insurance. An industry arises out of a long-term stable demand for a product such as oil, steel, textiles, food ... not Canadian entertainment. Only in the United States, India and a few other countries has it become a national industry, due to the large markets they each hold.

In this massive northern land with specks of people, and an 'industry' that cannot approach a worldwide appeal significant enough to make the investment return a profit that will make the 'industry' survive independently from government, the notion of a Canadian Film Industry is a waste of taxpayers' money. We have yet to see a government-subsidized industry stand on its own two feet. Finance Minister Wilson's eventual abolition of the taxbreaks is a sign of hope for a national industry. Telefilm's mandate already has been outdated in the late '80s.

Putting our money in entertainment under the guise of culture in order to prevent Valenti's men from gobbling up our national identity is an expensive way to avoid the truth of the matter. We need our money to be spent on creating a 60 per cent Canadian content law in our communications industry; we need our money to erect the CRTC out of its impotence so that it may reinforce these laws; we need television on the side of Canadians; we need to own our own theatres; we need government intervention in corporate mergers, monopolies and conflicts of interest; but most of all we

need to get rid of the cowards running our federal and provincial communications portfolios.

Television, with its patriarchal history, developed an ideology in which pleasing the simplest audience meant pleasing all the viewers. In other words educational regression is alive and well on the tube. How can we advance as a nation with such an ideology? Pay-TV, multiple channels, community programming, satellite transmission, and VCRs will slowly bring that age to an end. Intellectuals say Canadian identity is on the verge of collapse with the advent of Free Trade. I believe we will be coming out of these years more aware of our cultural identity than ever, more Canadian than ever.

Canadian, for me, is a land of many people sharing their cultural differences and living together without the insecurities that produce national barriers. We are an example to the world. This is our greatest national export product. Our southern neighbour thrives in a similar environment. However, their monolithic national ideology makes it very different from Canada.

Here we can retain our multicultural identities without selling our soul to a common cultural currency. These were the liberal Trudeau years that I was raised in. Then, immigrants were respected and were welcomed with open arms — the long-term benefits they bring were understood by Canadians. In those years the National Film Board of Canada had a mandate that reflected these times and our hopes for the future, presenting us with films that teased our day-to-day reality, showing us what we are and what we can become. Now drained in bureaucratic hogwash, it has lost its power to mirror actuality, it is unable to secure young innovative filmmakers that reflect the new generation, and it barely survives the present political harassment. The educational values of the '60s and '70s films have disappeared. The NFB now produces, at best, mediocre work.

We are low-budget. We are independents because the 'Industry', Telefilm, the Film Board and television no longer reflect Canadians truthfully. We may be unseen. We may be poor. We may be a little off broadcast quality. But we are Canadian cinema, real Canadian cinema.

We are sprouting from the underground, from the provinces, from the Arctic, from the ethnic communities, from the co-ops and from the storefront businesses. One of these days bureaucrats shall be dead. Long live our cinema!

August 16, 1987

- Telefilm Canada still won't recognize small-business independent filmmaking.
- The PAFST grant at the Film Board is still frozen to low-budget independent features since last year due to increased pressures from private sector labs, they say.
- The Canada Council is as incestuous as ever, and the clock stopped ticking there in 1972 in some post-mythopoetic structuroformalist limbo.
- The CRTC fears that 60 per cent Canadian content means that the Inuit are going to take over the airwaves.
- The co-ops can't get organized because they don't know which ass to lick.
- And I'm still trying to squeeze money out of the following institutions for the European leg of the Canadian Independent Film Tour:
Telefilm Canada
Ontario Film Development Corporation
Société générale du cinéma du Québec
Canada Arts Council
The Honourable Lise Bacon
The Honourable Flora MacDonald
The Manitoba Arts Council
Dept. of Culture,
Recreation and Fitness,
Nova Scotia
Ministry of Tourism Cultural Services B.C.
Arts Abroad Ontario
Film Manitoba
and Ontario Arts Council.



Peter Wintonick



We are not alone

No. No this is not the come-on line for another of those silly extraterrestrial bestsellers. These are but a few brief musings by a budding internationalist film person who feels strongly about what we have accomplished in this country *vis à vis* the "low-budget, non-commercial, independent, new, young, quality, *auteur* film"...in other words *cinema*, the kind of films we like. What I characterize as a cinema of resistance: fundamentally and spiritually indigenous, special, vigorous and 'different'. We all know what different means.

As a director of a videotape project which brought together many of the world's better known independent cinema directors and as the Canadian co-ordinating producer of Peter Watkins' *The Journey* - which meant sharing thoughts and ideas with independently-minded film people in a dozen countries - and having recently returned from an international conference on the low-budget, independent film in Hamburg, West Germany, I now feel that there is a bright phoenix rising on the horizon. It may be nameless at this point but it is characterized by a new and collective understanding that we must help each other to take back our film cultures.

We see the phoenix in the form of a thousand Cranes in Japan where virtu-

ally all the industry is dominated by four production and distribution companies who monopolize *Variety* magazine's coverage of Japan's national cemetery cinema. The future lies with young filmmakers in Japan who are turning to video or to super-eight and who are creating their own festivals and distribution companies. Or in Hong Kong where low-budget film was born, the phoenix is a new genre created by non-commercial directors. Or in South and Central America where jungle birds of paradise scream of a new and political cinema in countries where the conditions for the creation of cinema are as extreme as anywhere else. In Africa which is creating new birds as the ostrich pulls its head out of the clay of de-colonization. In India and in China where the songs and dances of live birds struggle to be heard. In Australia where the Emu is learning to fly. In America, where Eagles are in cages or are becoming extinct, the phoenix rises out of the inner cities. In the Soviet Union, which is beginning to let the birds fly again, they make ever-widening circles in a glasnost sky. And even here,

in Canada, the loons are loose. We should join the aviary and learn that we, too, are birds that can fly.

In Hamburg all the European producers, directors and distributors working in low-budget film got together to create a lobby group as a thorn in the side of the European Parliament and the European Economic Community. It seems to be hurting. Networks were created, not the kind that broadcast television programs, but the kind that connect people to people, as a way of joining forces to strengthen independent Eurofilm. Pilot projects were originated and discussed, models for organizing alternate satellite broadcast systems (S.E.P.T. in France). New and future media, co-productions problems (how to avoid making all films which are co-produced end up looking like Euro-pudding) and distribution problems, language and cultural barriers, the particular problems that women must overcome in media production. There were even stimulating simulations of the problems encountered on the road to production. While it might have been easy to cynically de-

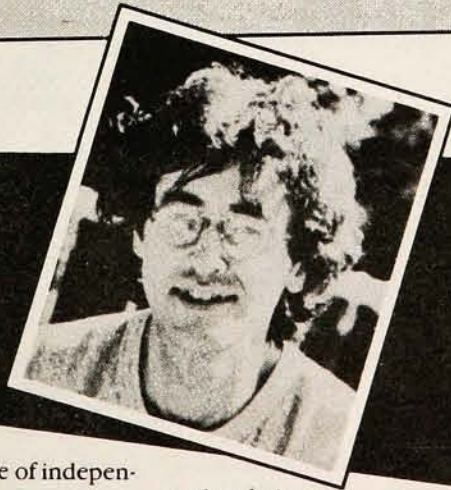
nounce the whole exercise as futile when one is faced with the reality of the dominant cinema, what set this forum apart from all the others I've attended was not only the high degree and quality of the debate, which was generally free and open to all without having to rely on dictums from a podium, but the fact that everyone there (about 400 people) was there because they loved 'independent' film, wanted to work to preserve it and make it rise again.

An analogue perhaps paralleling that of our experience here in Canada was brought forward by Michael Algar, from Ireland (which he called the Newfoundland of Europe). Ireland is dominated by British and American films which make up 90 per cent of the box office returns. One company dominates access to screens and distribution. Programs are more or less controlled by London. As one small way of turning back the tide Algar is establishing a new Irish Film Centre in Dublin to bring the forces that create a true Irish cinema together.

It is in this possibility of forceful lobbying and self-initiation that even the Canadian independent cinema could begin to take steps to correct our collective fate, discover our wings, leave the nests of government subsistence and demand support from the businesses and the people of our country. However impossible our own geography, we live in a world where we communication and cultural workers (which are the official free trade terms for filmmakers) should be at home all over the world.

Peter Wintonick ●

Jean Beaudry



Independent Cinema for me is that cinema which we make outside the usual modes of production - without the financial support of government subsidies and/or industry financing - either because the project does not meet the criteria for acceptance, or because of a desire to remain outside the circuit of profitability and marketing. At the 1986 *Rendez-vous du cinéma Québécois*, we talked of a 'contraband cinema.' I would say that making an 'independent' film is like wanting to build a Chevrolet in your basement. This will never give you a real Chevrolet (Thank God!) but rather hybrid models, which

are precisely the great value of independent cinema.

But regardless of how much you like to tinker with machines or whether you have a will of steel, sometimes the Chevrolet won't work at all. It's not because we have fewer means that we're more creative, that we have better ideas. But it happens sometimes that a 'contraband' film, a home-made Chevrolet, bursts wide the screen of Normality, astounds audiences and astonishes critics. We then begin to talk of 'independent' and ask ourselves if it isn't important for our

national cinema.

It's not because of its successes that independent cinema is valuable but by its very definition. By being outside the usual modes of financing and production, independent cinema has the means to escape the fashions and stereotypes of industrial filmmaking. The simple act of putting together a Chevrolet in one's basement necessarily upsets technical standards and calls into question an art which, sullied by the industry, vitally needs to be questioned.

As for the difficulties we encountered in directing *Jacques et novembre*, suffice it to say it was shot for less than \$15,000: four fresnel lamps made up our lighting equipment, we spent several weeks doing research to find a free hospital room, etc., etc.

On the other hand, we were often compensated for these difficulties by the extraordinary involvement and generosity of people with whom we worked and/or dealt. These relations also make up a vital component of creative filmmaking.

For me, the greatest difficulty was definitely to overcome doubt. After each refusal of aid or financing - and there were many - we were invaded with systematic doubt. We had to have a kind of madness to be obstinate enough to want to start that damned Chevrolet. We put it together in a little apartment on Casgrain Street with the hope of telling a story which resembled, and spoke to, people here.

Jean Beaudry ●



Patricia Gruben



Here in Canada, a filmmaker is called 'independent' not in contrast to the studio system, as in the U.S., but in contrast to the State — most notably represented by the CBC and the National Film Board. And even though many small production companies might be considered 'independent' in the sense that they freelance, they are really 'dependent' on the civil service for aesthetic control of their work. So I would define the independent filmmaker as someone who does not put 'balanced programming' at the top of their list of cinematic goals.

The freelance films that are made for that Sunday night slot on CBC are equivalent in terms of budget and subject matter to the work of American independents like John Sayles, Robert Young, and Horton Foote. It's probably easier for Canadians to raise money to make films like those than it is for Americans. They only have American Playhouse, we have a whole pantheon of institutions.

But it's much more difficult for us when we want to make films with the kind of edge that you see in the work of Jonathan Demme, Alex Cox, or the Coen brothers — films that appeal to a more sophisticated theatrical audience. And it's even more difficult, of course, if the films are formally innovative. Mark Rappaport, James Benning, Yvonne Rainer, Sally Potter, Chantal Akerman, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg have all had their work

shown on European TV. There's not a broadcast outlet, hardly even a repertory theatre in English Canada, where I could hope to see these films.

I'm offended when I hear statements the government television networks make about how important it is to show original work, and then find out they're always talking about *Anne of Green Gables* rather than *Crime Wave* or *Faustus Bidgood*. The people who could be spending their energy helping introduce innovative new talent are hung up on Canadian Content instead, which seems to be an excuse for a '50s aesthetic in acting, cinematography and dramatic structure. This country has a contemporary culture. It has the best potential in the world for cultural cross-fertilization, through our weird combination of immigrants and satellite technology. Why do we keep setting our films in some cardboard nineteenth-century Eden that looks like a theme park?

They are maybe 12 or 15 people across the country that are doing really original, interesting low-budget features. Some of them are more accessible than others, but all of them have great difficulty getting financed and distributed. There aren't many producers

willing or able to take a chance on that kind of work, to push it through to international distribution agreements where it might have a chance in the specialty market.

The greatest difficulty independent filmmakers face is that most of the time we have to take on the financing, producing and marketing as well as all the other jobs involved in filmmaking. I look forward to writing, directing, editing, sound-editing, and sometimes doing a bit of acting for my films. But it's pretty difficult for one person to do all that and be equally good at the business end of things; and even harder to persuade someone else to do the dirty work when the hope of financial success is so ephemeral.

Still in all, in spite of all the obstacles I've mentioned, I think the worst thing that can happen to an independent filmmaker is a defeatist attitude, the idea that only some change in the tax laws or Telefilm's policy or the Canada Council's budget is going to allow you to work. Or as one of my colleagues says, there are a lot more people running around trying to create a film *industry* than there are people trying to make films.

Last year we started a film develop-

ment workshop called Praxis, which takes on feature scripts with artistic merit and brings in accomplished writers, directors and production people to help bring those projects closer to realization. The scripts run the gamut of artistic possibilities. We try to mix in a few really challenging projects along with others that we know will have an easier time getting funding, and to give them all the same credibility, the same access to producers and to tough-minded structural critique. Our administrative structure is very small, and the idea behind Praxis is quite simple. But it was exciting to watch those projects improve radically in a few weeks, just because of the talent and motivation of their originators, and the commitment of the guest professionals in intensive work sessions. And three of our seven recent projects have found producers already. So I think there is room for talented people in this country to find their way.

I'm all in favor of insisting on more support for our work from the funding agencies. But I haven't found a country yet where it's easy to make films. I've run into a lot of embittered filmmakers who blame Telefilm, geography and politics for their inactivity, and are unable to stand back and admit that their projects might be improved. And yet I believe that people would be better able to accept criticism and devote creative energy to their work if they felt there was some bridge between these two solitudes of commercial cinema/corrective TV drama, and *auteur* filmmaking. Right now we have mutual suspicion and lack of respect, and the kind of vital creative energy that a film culture needs to survive is buried under a paper storm of tax credits, mandates and hype.

Patricia Gruben •

François Bouvier



I've been asked two questions: first, why are the support and development of an independent cinema important to our culture? And, second, what are some examples of the problems faced by independent cinema and what solutions do you suggest? Although these questions seem pertinent and totally topical to me, I find it horrible that they should be so!

I find it hard to believe that even today we are asked those questions. Not because we have so often answered them, nor so much because we have, ineluctably, so often proved that independent cinema is not only important but *essential* to a culture. But because it's all so crassly evident.

It seems I can only answer these questions with banalities, generalities and clichés. Which makes me ask, "What is independent cinema?" Does it still exist when it is ruled by financial imperatives, calculations of profitability and marketing studies? Can filmmakers preserve their independence, their liberty, their freedom to create? Or must they censor themselves so as to conform to a mold, a pattern, a model? I say that independent cinema is that cinema which has the audacity and the courage to *create* while fighting for the freedom of creativity. If

that is independent filmmaking, not only is it important and essential for a society's culture (what is culture if not the free expression of creativity?) but, along with other forms of free expression, it is that which *makes* culture. Ours. We wouldn't know how to speak of culture if we don't speak of liberty — that which we have and which we preserve, and that which we don't have and hope to acquire.

Why is the development and support of independent cinema important for a

culture? I am tempted to answer by asking another question: Is culture important for a society? If it's not, then neither is independent cinema, nor its support and its development.

Examples of problems? *Jacques et novembre*. A tale of seven years which I can't sum up in a few lines but which, in itself, contains all the difficulties which an independent production can face. Even if it's an old story (1977-1984), it remains the one which spontaneously comes to mind. But, on reflection, the difficulties we faced permitted us to escape a whole series of constraints. We had no money, but we had time. To be sure, no film gets made without difficulties, but you have to know how to choose them. For *Marie s'en va-t-en ville* (1987), we chose the 'difficulty' of working with money! And its imperatives.

For me there is only one difficulty: liberty and its price. And I don't yet know very well how to make the equation between the two.

François Bouvier •



Sophie Bissonnette



Independent cinema has an important relation to commercial cinema. Firstly, it's a cinema that allows both for the development of a new wave of filmmakers and for the production of *auteur* films. Independent filmmakers are primarily preoccupied with culture.

What I find a bit tragic about the current film-funding policies, at both the provincial and federal level, is that we're only developing a commercial cinema. We must maintain a balance, an equilibrium between the independent cinema that primarily pursues cultural objectives and the commercial cinema that primarily pursues economic objectives. People like Denys Arcand and Léa Pool are now making hit films because they were able to develop their skills and ideas as independents. As such, they took risks which are an essential ingredient in developing culture.

What we managed to gain from the institutions in Quebec over the years has now been sabotaged. It's dramatic. What preoccupies me most at the moment is what's happening to the documentary. In Quebec we had succeeded in getting documentaries funded by Telefilm. Telefilm itself has done a study showing that documentaries are quite profitable in relation to their budgets. They sold well abroad, were invited to many festivals and were shown on TV. Yet, at this moment in Quebec it has become almost impossible to independently produce documentaries. That's why I now find myself making my next film at the National Film Board like many other Québécois filmmakers.

Under the present circumstances, it took me two and a half years to get *Quel Numéro What Number* off the ground. It's inconceivable in documentary to wait two and a half years to finance a documentary. You are filming real events with real people. Reality doesn't wait for you to get money to film it.

We conducted a survey with over 20 documentary filmmakers at the Association des réalisteurs et réalisatrices du Québec in February. It was astonishing

how everyone found themselves in similar situations. First of all people can't find a production house. There are very few private producers who are now interested in doing documentaries. (Production houses get a percentage of a budget to produce a film. It's much more interesting to get 15 per cent or 10 per cent of a million than of \$250,000. It's a very simple economic law.)

Moreover, there is no encouragement from the institutions especially since money is tied to a broadcaster's commitment. There are no quotas of any kind so that a certain part of Telefilm's budget or Société générale du cinéma's budget, for example, is allocated to documentary. And even when the SGC claimed it had money set aside for documentary, people couldn't qualify because they couldn't get a broadcaster or a production company to do it. That's why exhausted documentary filmmakers are now running to the NFB.

The problem is that broadcasters are not interested in documentary. They always invoke commercial considerations. Yet, the directors we spoke to said that when the TV station publicized their films, they got very good ratings.

There are more than economic considerations, however many filmmakers mentioned in this survey that they chose to work in documentary because it offered more freedom in expressing themselves and they enjoyed the risk involved in the confrontation with reality inherent in documentary. I believe this is what is really at issue here.

In documentary we submit a script where we give a broad outline of what we are going to do but, since we are dealing with real people, we can't write line-for-line what we are going to be shooting. This gives the filmmakers a lot of freedom and this is what makes the documentary approach so exciting; you're still scriptwriting as you edit. But it also presents a level of risk that broad-

casters don't like because they can't control it. They don't get prior approval of what a subject in a documentary is going to say or what the final film will turn out to say.

What scares them most is that documentary has always been associated with social criticism, that it speaks of what is happening in our society, that it gives a voice to people who otherwise rarely appear on television. Filmmakers are no longer allowed controversy. All criticism is absolutely unacceptable. Which is why we often end up with really washed-out, banal documentaries on television. The minute you present a project to Telefilm which deals with a contemporary issue, it's rejected as 'public affairs' which, it must be remembered, has been excluded from the Broadcast Fund by the government. This conveniently prevents the production of any social criticism or point-of-view films.

The *auteurs* are fading into the background and with them the right to express different perspectives. It's really the investors and the production houses that are in control. At the directors' meeting we came to the conclusion that the principle of the primordial importance of directors in a film needs to be reaffirmed. The specific recommendations we made as regards documentaries were that quotas be set at Telefilm and SGC, that these institutions allocate budgets for documentary and that documentary have access to all funds, including the Feature Film Fund. Evidently, broadcasters also have to be forced to fulfill their public mandate and make room in their schedule for documentary. In prime-time. There is a large public out there for documentary whose needs are not being met and who want to see challenging personal films.

On TV they now only accept documentaries piecemeal, and only if their marketing people tell them that

they will be able to get publicity. What is completely ignored is the mandate of public television to the general population. Public TV should have a different and more specific mandate than private TV. With all the budget cutbacks, public TV begins to resemble private TV more and more because it is more and more enslaved to the laws of the market — it now ignores the specific market and its commitment to the public in favour of the film which is going to get very high ratings and sell beer.

The recommendations we made also dealt with distribution. We asked that subsidies be specifically allocated to documentary for promotion in all markets including 16mm theatres. The strategy for the launching of a documentary film has always been to launch the film in a theatre like l'Outremont, le Milieu or the Cinéma Parallèle. This launching often loses money but it's an investment in promotion which then allows one to make money on the educational and community markets, then on TV and the developing video market. At the moment there are almost no theatres where documentaries can be shown and, if the trend continues, there will be fewer and fewer.

We're asking for more flexibility from the funding institutions, for example, to recognize small companies and to allow filmmakers to individually present projects in development and in preproduction without needing a broadcaster or producer. The problem is that even if you have an idea for a project, you can't even develop it if a broadcaster or producer isn't interested and that's where the process gets blocked. At least if you can get money to write a screenplay, it's easier to convince a broadcaster or producer because you have something to show.

Finally, special mechanisms have to be developed in the institutions to accommodate the very specific nature of documentary because delaying a project may mean axing the film. We should also be able to deal with people within the institutions who are knowledgeable about the documentary approach.

I can now count the people making independent documentary film on one hand. I lived it myself. It took me three and a half years to make *Quel Numéro What Number*. I don't want to live that twice. It doesn't make sense.

Sophie Bissonnette •



Chris Gallagher



The word "independent" implies an individualistic, endeavour largely self-sufficient. Filmmaking is by nature an interdependent process that feeds on the creativity and services of many people, as such the term "independent filmmaker" is really quite contradictory.

The corporate studio that owns the means of production and exhibition is truly independent, however that system has come to represent the antithesis of independence. The independent filmmaker is one who produces outside of a corporate structure, which usually implies low budget and smaller scale.

To me, the term independent has come to refer to a certain content and form that is attempting to succeed outside of the formulas that dominate mainstream cinema. This is where the

value of independent cinema lies. Generally the filmmakers' ideas spring from a personal source which represents an indigenous reflection of our culture rather than the very self-conscious, market-researched ideas common in the mainstream.

The lack of substantial budgets available to independent filmmakers means they are not tempted to rely on big stores, big stars, exotic locations or special effects to captivate an audience. Perhaps genuinely interesting and plausible stories, multi-dimensional characters and stimulating visual designs are characteristic of good independent films

out of financial necessity.

My own work was not created in the context of a company or an institution and can be defined as independent. I have been financially assisted by government funding agencies, which is a form of dependency, but the content of my films has never been dictated by these groups.

Of course being independent comes with real problems, mostly financial. Grants provide funds for projects but do not provide a living for the filmmaker. One cannot work full-time for months without an income. The larger one's films become, the more inadequate

grants are as a financial source, to say nothing of the fact that, of course, there is no guarantee they will be forthcoming. This means one seeks private and Telefilm funds which often dictate alignment with mainstream formulas.

The distribution of an independent film usually involves even more work and more frustration than fund-raising. Many distributors will not risk a full distribution campaign (which all films need to succeed), if an identifiable audience is not readily apparent.

From my perspective, an independent filmmaker can also become genre-cast; where people feel you do not wish or are unable to work in a genre other than that of your last picture, be it documentary drama, or experimental.

I do not feel that the term "independent" implies a great moral or political righteousness or that it refers to strictly financial concerns. It represents a type of filmmaker whose ideas and motivations come from himself and whose commitment is not solely dominated by profit.

Chris Gallagher •

Brigitte Berman



I don't know if all the problems facing independent filmmakers can be fixed. It's really tricky. I'm not even sure that I'm the right person to comment on it.

I'm kind of a special case. Kind of an oddball. I've taken so long to make my films. **BIX: Ain't None of Them Play Like Him Yet** was made over four and a half years. **Artie Shaw: Time is All You've Got** was made over three and a half years. With **BIX** I was tracking a most elusive character who died 50 years ago. To dig up all the research was a phenomenal amount of work. That alone took a long time. I had to start from scratch. I literally traced back into every newspaper from those days. I mean you have no idea how many letters that is. You write a letter and then you have to wait. And you have to be patient. By the time they write back to you and then send you to somebody else it's just very time-consuming. I don't think either one

of those films could have been made as thoroughly by doing them differently. I think this was the only way to make them. Some things need time to be made and these were just that kind of film.

I couldn't afford to pay myself and I needed the security of a job. This meant I could only work evenings and weekends. Also both films have quite big budgets. They *grew* into big-budget documentaries. And even though I had the grants and I had an investor and I had the support of Don Haig at Film Arts, I still needed money. So a lot of my own money went into the films. Then, once the films were finished, I took them to distributors and to the festivals, just trying to get them shown. The Festivals Office of Telefilm Canada was incredibly helpful with this.

It was very difficult getting the money

to make my films. Finding investors for documentaries is almost impossible, to begin with. And I was also dealing with an American subject. If I had chosen some great Canadian and done a one-hour film, I think it would have been much easier. The kind of subjects I chose were unique and eccentric and totally untouched territory. My films don't have that nice, easy TV format. That's why they won awards. That's why people love them. But at the same time to find a theatrical distributor for documentaries is also very difficult. You have to run 10 times as hard and spend 10 times as much money to promote a documentary for much less return. In a sense I gave myself the big problems. But I don't want to do it the same way again though. You see, it was a learning experience.

I got grants. I got grants from the On-

tario Arts Council and the Canada Council. They were terrific. I could not go to Telefilm because they didn't fund documentaries then. I still needed more money but I was lucky I got that support — The Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council are the ones that give you the beginnings and the courage to start. Telefilm helped me with my Oscar campaign in Los Angeles. I never could have done that without them. Telefilm stepped in when I really needed them.

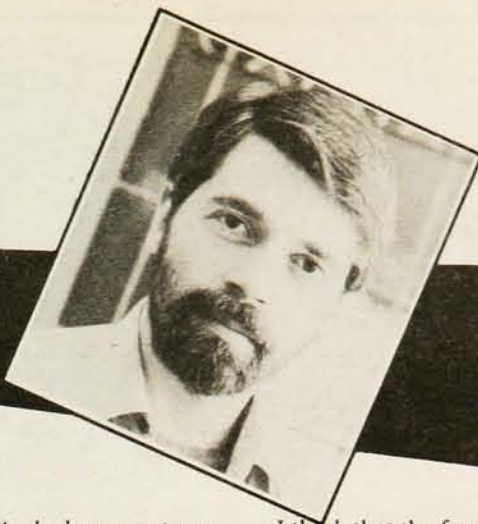
Canada is in a very fortunate position. When I've travelled to the festivals in the States, I became aware how difficult it is down there. I feel I've been lucky. I could never have made my two films in the States or in England. Here I could make them because of these agencies.

Nevertheless, my next film is going to be a feature. For now, I'm leaving documentaries. Though I may well make another one at some time in the future, never again in the same complicated and often frustrating and lonely way. I would never want to do one again like that. I would not advise anyone to. It's very tough because you're in limbo for a long long time. Also it's just not worth it because there's no money to be made in it. They were really a labour of love.

* Transcribed from a conversation with Brigitte Berman



Leon Marr



If we want a notable film industry, we have to go to independent filmmakers who have ideas. The *auteur* sort of route. And they are the ones that demand most of our support. We can't compete with Hollywood on their terms. That kind of industry is not viable in Canada. I used to joke, saying that if Telefilm accepted all the films they rejected, they probably would have done better. They couldn't have done any worse.

Now there has been a turnover. Linda Beath, who comes from an independent film background, is working there. And Wayne Clarkson, who is incredibly knowledgeable about film and independent filmmakers, is at Ontario Film Development Corporation. You notice an immediate difference when you talk about film — you can talk about cinema. You couldn't do that with the people who were at Telefilm before. They were business people. And they were great at talking balances and budgets and distribution guarantees. But that's not what film is about, for me anyway. I'm very encouraged by Linda being at Telefilm.

Telefilm gave us some money to develop a script for *Dancing in the Dark* but they did not invest in the production. This was in the spring of 1985, before the 'new order'. We had a script and

we did revisions. A deal was set up. There was a budget. Don Haig was the executive producer and Tony Kramreither was the producer. Tony had private investors. We had \$250,000 committed from the CBC. We applied to Telefilm for production funding and they kept stalling. I don't know if they were just unwilling to invest or if they did not have the funds available. I was not involved in those negotiations. But I did speak to Don on a weekly basis to find what the hell was going on.

The ongoing scenario for about five months was "Call us next week or next Monday." Then of course you would call them and they wouldn't be there. They'd be in Montreal. If you'd get through, they'd say "Call us at the end of the week." This went on for the rest of the summer. I remember we had a meeting in April with all the producers and everybody and decided we'd be in pre-production in May. We didn't get into pre-production until October. Don and Tony were completely fed up by this time, and decided that if the film was to go that year, then we'd have to do it without Telefilm. And we did.

I think that the former people at Telefilm saw themselves as a big Hollywood studio, which is not the way to go about making films in this country. The best films are coming from the independents, and they deserve support. I know I had help initially from the Ontario Arts Council, for example. Which was very useful. I received four grants from them over the years, which enabled me to develop and produce my own films. Since then, their grants have gone up quite a bit. I think they're doing quite a good job. I only had one dealing with Canada Council and I did get some money from them.

I think Telefilm should just accept the fact that a certain percentage of their money is going to be a total write-off and perhaps take more risks with people that they wouldn't normally take risks with. What do they have to lose? So, they never heard of this guy before but he has an interesting idea. And if he has no track record, well they don't have to give him a lot — just enough to write a script. Some kind of mechanism must be built into the system to allow for that kind of person and that kind of risk — the capac-

ity to handle that sort of person and again say, "This is a risk, we realize it, and we're prepared to write this off completely." They couldn't do any worse than they've done in the past. As I said before, I sense things have changed since Linda joined Telefilm. I hope they're moving in this direction.

Telefilm has to divide their resources and say so much is going to go for off-the-wall stuff, so much for low-budget, so much for the bigger-budget films. And most importantly they have to concentrate on script development, this has been the weakest area in our film industry, yet it is the most crucial. It's very simple — without good scripts, you can't make good films. Period. It all starts there. And it's really the most economic investment they could make.

I remember about four years ago I was working with Don and I had a script idea. We asked for \$12,000 in development funds. Just \$12,000 and they passed! And that week some horror film in which they had invested half a million dollars opened in town and I'm thinking, "Wait a minute! We're not asking for half a million here. We're asking only for \$12,000. There's something wrong". Just recently Don and I went to Telefilm for development funding for another script and this time we asked for a lot more money. And this time they gave it to us! Things must be improving. Although I'm sure a lot of it has to do with the success of *Dancing in the Dark*. But I hope the doors are also being opened for other independents.

*From an interview with Leon Marr

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