

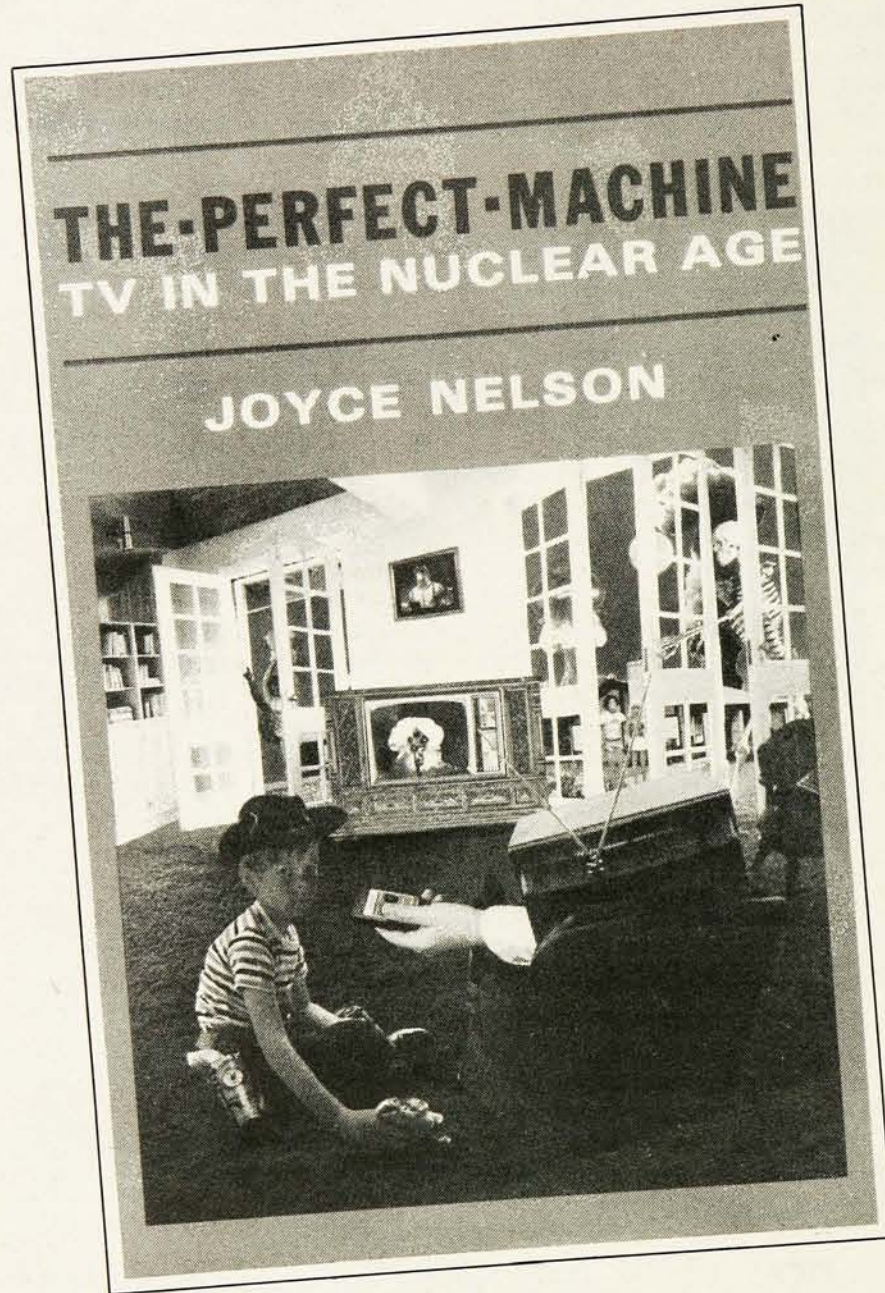
Joyce Nelson. *The Perfect Machine: TV in the Nuclear Age*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1987. 187 pp.

Joyce Nelson set out to conduct a political trial, and for this purpose has constructed the image of a perfect machine perfectly serving the interests of patriarchy, capitalism, and above all the U.S.A.'s nuclear weaponry industry. The historical evidence may give you insomnia and make you watch television differently. Part of what might keep you awake nights is the distress of trying to figure out what the evidence proves. The arsenal of arguments mounted against television is so total, so graphic, so determined to convict from all angles, so troublesome in analytic logic. *The Perfect Machine: TV in the Nuclear Age* is a troubling book. That's good.

Nelson is a genius at scouting out and piecing together previously obscure information about the political and economic machinations behind television's development and current production. *The Perfect Machine* traces scientific, industry and (U.S.) government debates in the early days of the nuclear and television industries. Their history is forged in their (apparently deliberate) simultaneous birth, and made further symbiotic by a number of factors: corporate links between the two industries; tying both to political and imperialist aims of the U.S. government; their arousal of intense scientific and political debate about physiological and social damage to citizens; and the suppression of this debate because of the ability of both industries to manoeuvre around potential protective legislation where it would interfere with corporate interests.

The history of the Motion Picture Export Association of America, and the portrait of political blackmail exerted by Jack Valenti worldwide on its behalf, will provide a familiar example of such government-industry complicity to those who have followed Canadian and Quebec governments' attempts to wrest some control of film distribution back from the MPEAA. There is a largesse of further information about television and its intersection with the U.S. military which is less familiar, and often frightening.

Nelson documents tangible links between TV and nuclear bombs by showing how television was used to glamourize the new nuclear weapons to early viewers, while simultaneously constructing a paradoxical image of the U.S.A. as potential victim of the weaponry of which it was still sole possessor. She also traces the debate around research concerning radiation damage from television screens, which was emitted (the damage, not the debate) from picture tubes and other components until the late '60s. As with the more vicious damage



threatened by domestic nuclear testing, research about health hazards from television radiation was ignored and/or suppressed throughout the '50s and '60s. The fictional construct of the U.S. as potential victim of anti-democratic aggression helped to legitimize nuclear testing and the suppression of critical information about its dangers; this fictional construct was a major accomplishment of television programming in the postwar period. With bombs signifying both American technological genius and the need to defend democracy from foreign aggression, criticism of radiation hazards was clearly dull and unpatriotic. What helped to suppress information about radiation from television was the political clout of the television/electronics industry, coupled with the apparently universal conviction that it was better for an American to die than be without television. "Better dead than red", they said when I was a kid.

When Nelson describes television's role in naturalizing the bomb, with all its photogenic images of unimaginable violence and destruction, and when she traces the postwar development of a television culture favourable to American military interests, the writing is informative, graphic, and generally convincing. TV proves itself as the magician amongst (technological) magicians "because it stages its own disappearing act while it reveals the workings of other technologies' magic". She attempts to 'expose' this magic through the sequential unmasking of a number of productive processes: news, religion, laugh tracks, audience research. Thus combined these come to resemble a mastermind at work: the operation of 'patriarchal culture'. This monolithic structure of power, ideology, culture, and political control finds its apotheosis in the unified "perfect machine" of television, and so

determines the shape and meaning of all television programs and effects.

The problem is that Nelson's analysis of television processes depends on the absolute conflation of patriarchy, capitalism, religion, technology, and progress, a conflation which she claims is enacted and ritualized through television. Nelson's assemblage of Jungian feminism, Marxism, and neo-McLuhanist neurological research provides her with the moral energy to attack television from all sides. *The Perfect Machine* applies this model to searing analyses of television technology, news, advertising, political coverage, product previewing, TV evangelism, narrative structures in sitcoms and crime series, audience research, corporate imperialism, nature programming, space exploration, and spectacle. No summary can do justice to the energy and thoroughness of the attack, but rather will tend to expose its vulnerability: its eclecticism, its logical equivocations and hyperbole, its claims about television's unmitigated effects on its audiences.

Nelson's perfect television perpetrates passive submission to authoritarianism, consumerism ("You don't ask for a product: The product asks for you!" explains one advertising expert, who candidly applies his techniques to political campaigns), and above all, "reactionary modernism", a religious faith in technology combined with conservative nostalgia for values of the past. Television privileges the visual and thus instills a passive, isolated mode of spectatorship; it has intensified this effect by replacing live programming, which "tended to continuously expose its spectacle as a human construction", with a controlled flow of technologically "sweetened" pre-recorded programming. Here as in all other of its aspects, TV is part of the death culture held in place by patriarchy; the favoured instrument of technological necrophilia, it formally privileges content dealing with death rather than life.

Nelson believes that television is a technology with direct impact on the neurological functioning of the brain, suppressing the left hemisphere and thus the capacity for critical logical thinking. This raises the first of a number of questions: should we worry so much about whether the programming is live or pre-recorded, when the signals from the screen are suppressing half of our brain in either case? Or about how TV affects the content of televised political campaigns, when it determines our responses technologically? Perhaps this seems a minor methodological quibble, if each claim is accurate in its own terms. But if content makes a difference, the implications are quite different from a prognosis that says that it doesn't. If this television is all television, the political implications for non-American viewers and producers are grave. Nelson solves potential contradictions by condemning everything, attributing all to its service to the bomb.

I have myself written about links between

television and bombs, and am sympathetic to this project. However it is difficult to remain credulous, for instance, when the author argues that the development of television arose as a deliberate ploy to seduce Americans and the world into acceptance of nuclear aggression. Surely the logic of capitalism also functions on a less apocalyptic level: by developing markets and profits, even where doing so valorizes anti-patriarchal impulses. No doubt the subject deserves some critical hyperbole. But underlying occasional lapses into dubiousness are a number of claims about society and television which need to be sorted out.

Following the work of Jungian psychoanalysts, Nelson describes society as needful of a "ritual container" now supplied by television: containing "in the sense of managing, subduing, encompassing", and "as the techno-institutional frame for programming". This "containing" process is aptly described, and helps explain programs ranging from news to sitcoms and crime series, related opposites which construct a clear representation of passive audience and privileged hero. Here "the deep structure of American prime time" is seen to be completely harmonious with the coherent or unified interests of patriarchy and the state. But what is patriarchy, then, exactly?

For Nelson, patriarchy and capitalism are one and the same: "Patriarchal capitalism remakes all nature into technological simulacra and fashions its technological systems to imitate the 'feminine'; its purpose is to sweep us all into an unconscious collectivity exploited by the power drives of the elite few." Following Jungian feminists, Nelson posits a "feminine principle" which is simultaneously suppressed and co-opted by patriarchy. This is not the place to enter into an argument about the eternal feminine; but this view of patriarchy has consequences for the discussion of television.

One of the effects of modern media, I believe, is to displace power from the ideological vestiges of a once stable patriarchy, and from the nation-state, and to shift it to the abstract exchange processes of capital: to the circulation of commodities, to consumption, to the displacement of cultural or geographical stability, to the cultivated and reabsorbed desire for realization and change. Patriarchy and capitalism aren't the same thing, they derive from different historical social structures, and perpetrate somewhat different structures of feeling or thought. They overlap and work together, but they can also conflict. A totally static social or mythic structure isn't useful to the circulation of commodities, which works by knowing how to trigger and channel real desire. This conflict gets played out every day on television, and on our bodies.

Nelson describes *this* process clearly; we see the success of advertisers in inscribing the memory of their product in our unconscious and triggering physical responses to it on the shelf.

For her all television is an analogue of this physiological process, a function of patriarchal containment of instinctive processes. But if patriarchal containment is exerted technologically through the inculcation of passive and isolated audience reception, or through neurological brain suppression, why talk about content at all? Is the audience pacified regardless of the content, because of the way we watch? Even families with their sets on constantly may not be watching, or may not be watching the way her analysis assumes. So researchers claim.

Maybe American TV allows for no such distinctions. Then is the conflation of technology, economic function, content, neurology, and politics, a characteristic of American television, or is it technologically inherent in television as a medium wherever it is, whatever it does? What about video? What about Vietnam?

Part of the difficulty is in writing about television at all. Almost anything you say about television and the state are *always* unified in their interests, notwithstanding her arguments, any more than church and state were when religion provided that "ritual containment" now supplied by television, or any more than patriarchy and technology are now, in all instances. One could recognize that television represents and articulates some very contradictory dynamics: nuclear arms (and television's role in defending them) are just as horrifying.

It's not easy to know how much these points

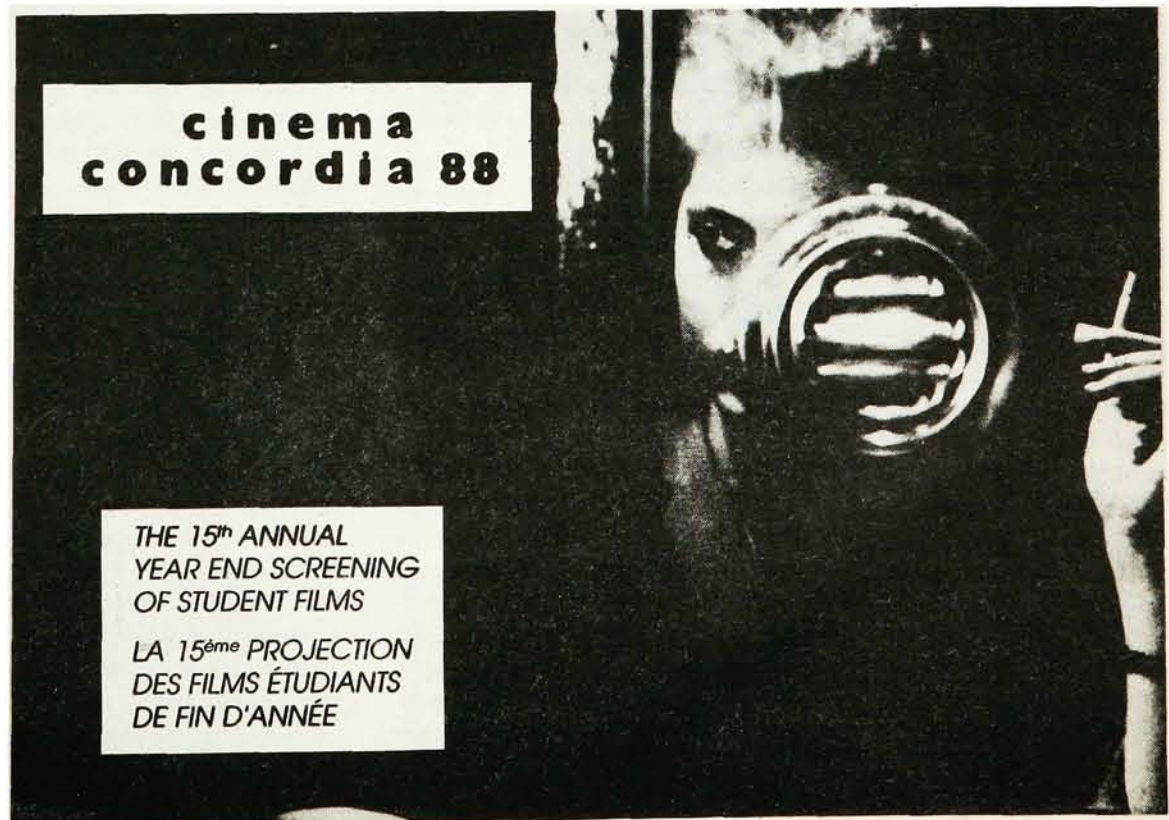
matter. "As Hans Magnus Enzenberger writes, 'You don't have to be Hegel to catch on to the fact that Reason is both reasonable and against Reason.'" (as Nelson writes in her critique of patriarchy). *The Perfect Machine* situates all of the ills of patriarchal capitalism, including the loss of the body and hatred of the feminine, the rise of an object-centred culture, the positing of an ideology of democracy in place of the real thing, in television, which is itself situated as a product of the (American) state. Television might (or might not?) function differently in different places, or at different times: here all television is fundamentally American, which makes cultural nationalism (with respect to television) contradictory and irrelevant. The result is a deterministic view of technology and politics similar to McLuhan's - though unlike McLuhan, Nelson provides a sharp critique of the "global pillage" of American expansionism, and substitutes eclectic negativity for his famous eclectic optimism.

There is an emotional and spiritual pleasure to be gained by conflating patriarchy, technology, and progress, which contributes to *The Perfect Machine's* critical punch. It's full of forceful perceptions. I'm still not convinced that these are all the same or always in cahoots. I'll leave aside the complete passivity and thus irrelevance of audiences. The problem is evident in the book's total conflation of television and the bomb. They may have shared birthdays, mutual corporate interests, and comparable roles in the mythologization of technology. But

exaggerating the interconnectedness of the two is hard-core functionalism, incapable of supplying more supple explanations. For Nelson, every aspect of television is totally determined by television's links to, and service for, the nuclear arms buildup of patriarchal capitalism. This can produce occasional incredulity or other projections.

If *The Perfect Machine* raises critical qualifications, its intentions justify the effect. "Patriarchal capitalism," Nelson argues, "having excluded and repressed the feminine and its wisdom, has substituted global technological systems in its place. . . Television is like the 'good mother': available 24 hours a day, catering to our 'needs', comforting, reassuring and entertaining us, even holding and returning our gaze just like in the mother-child dynamic." Some of these qualifications may arise from the instinct to defend the pleasures of such a good mother. Some refer to questions that cannot be easily resolved. There is no doubt, in either case, that *The Perfect Machine* offers valuable information and leaves powerful effects. Nelson has collected some crucially important historical material that everyone interested in television should know, and has analysed it from the perspective of very contemporary (if sometimes contradictory) critical theory. It is polemical, eloquent, and courageous. It also has a great cover. It should be read.

Jody Berland •



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THE 15th ANNUAL
YEAR END SCREENING
OF STUDENT FILMS

LA 15^{ème} PROJECTION
DES FILMS ÉTUDIANTS
DE FIN D'ANNÉE

David Clanfield. *Canadian Film History*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987. 136 pages. \$9.95.

David Clanfield has written the first book of Canadian film history that deals with the subject from its beginning in the late 19th century to its accomplishments in our own time.

This is no mean achievement in a field where few have dared to venture. As it is the only book available on the subject, it is of great interest to anyone involved in the study of Canadian film and should therefore be looked at with a critical eye.

Clanfield seems to address a central question, "How did Canadian film develop as a distinctly national form of cultural expression?"

Hence, the structure of the book – six chapters, tracing the development of Canadian film in a generally chronological order. The last chapter, on animation and experimental film, points to a bias in the author's point-of-view: animated and experimental films are left out of the chronological history because Clanfield sees the main line of development of Canadian film as moving from documentary to fiction.

Thus the first chapter, "From Origins to Grierson: 1896-1939," deals with the rise and fall of the early feature film industry and the ascent of the documentary. The next two chapters deal with the history of documentary film, English-language and French-language respectively, since 1939. The fourth chapter examines the outgrowth of the Québécois fictional film from its roots in the documentary movement. Chapter five then deals with the English-Canadian fictional film since 1939. Here again, the link between fiction and documentary is examined. In addition, Clanfield looks at some English-language filmmakers who have been formed by influences other than the documentary such as those trained in dramatic production at the CBC (Paul Almond, Norman Jewison). However, by this time we have reached page 96 of the book's 128 pages. The main thrust of its historical analysis is already completed.

CBC drama, like the experimental and animated films, are included so as not to be left out, or because they could not be left out. This kind of problem, I suspect, usually develops when one uses the 'organic growth' model for film history. All these bits and pieces just can't be fit in.

It is true that the link between documentary and fiction is at the core of much of the critical writing on Canadian film, as Clanfield himself points out. However, he follows this bias rather than taking a fresh look at Canadian film history. On the whole, the book seems to suffer from a reliance on secondary sources rather than basing itself on original historical or critical

thinking. Sources for most of the critical opinions given are cited. But even when this is not done, the criticisms are somewhat familiar.

The book, however, does answer its central question, "How did Canadian film develop as a distinctly national form of cultural expression?" It does this first by tracing the development from documentary to fictional film but also by following the struggles of Canadian filmmakers with the American domination of the industry and by charting the role that the Canadian government has played. Being the history of a national cinema, the book does try to deal with the interaction of social, political and cultural factors in the making of that cinema. It does this fairly well in some places. But the book as a whole suffers from its length: 128 pages is simply not an adequate length. One could quip that maybe we do not have much of a national cinema to write about, but I think this is not so. Peter Morris's *Embattled Shadows*, which deals with only the very beginnings of Canadian cinema, is twice as long.

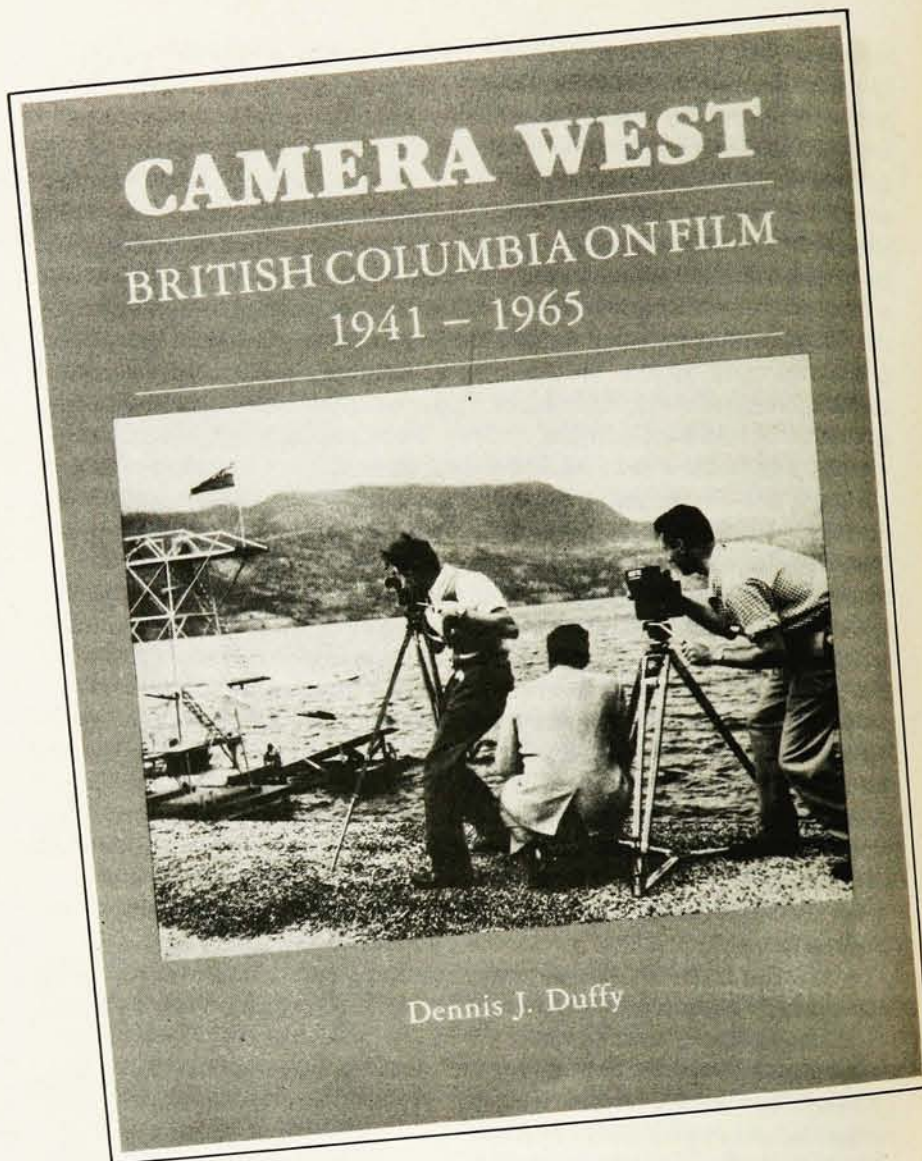
The short length of *Canadian Film History* means that there is little space to explore most areas with enough depth to clarify the interaction of the historical factors involved or to give us a critical understanding of the works of the filmmakers. Although many filmmakers are mentioned, only a few lines of description is usually given for each of the films. On the whole, it is a useful guide to the study of Canadian film history – all the bases are touched. But the real book is still to be written.

Mary Alemany Galway •

Dennis J. Duffy. *Camera West; British Columbia on Film, 1941-1965*. Victoria: Provincial Archives, Sound and Moving Image Division.

Plus ça change... While assembling material for this B. C. edition of *Cinema Canada*, we received a review copy we received a review copy of *Camera West; British Columbia on Film, 1941-1965*. It clearly demonstrates that the challenges faced by filmmakers in the late '80s are not unique to either the region or the time. To wit:

"The first incursion of Hollywood film crews, in the 1920s, was drawn primarily by the varied scenery... In the 1930s they set up a branch plant here and made features of dubious quality, taking advantage of Canada's membership in the British Empire to exploit the British quota restriction on imported films... (it) was revised in 1938 to exclude films made in the Dominions. The immediate result was that there was no



longer any advantage to shooting in Canada, except for the scenery, and the Hollywood studios generally found it simpler to shoot in the U. S. A. anyway."

Substitute the cheap Canadian dollar for the quota system and you'll understand the concern that today's U. S. investment could also disappear into the sunset.

Duffy also documents the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't business of television:

"In 1960 KVOs-TV Bellingham (Washington) established a film unit in Vancouver to produce commercials for its Canadian clients... In 1963 it became Canawest Film Productions, a KVOs subsidiary... Around 1965, the Hanna-Barbera studio in Hollywood contracted Canawest to produce episodes of various cartoon series. (They) included *Abbott and Costello* and *The Beatles* and ultimately required a staff of 90 animators and artists... Canawest closed down in 1977 when the Canadian government's Bill C-58 removed the tax exemption formerly allowed on advertising purchased through American companies."

Camera West reaches back to the work of B. C.'s first locally based commercial cinematographer A. D. 'Cowboy' Kean, "an ex-cowpuncher who

got his start in movies filming the Vancouver Exhibition and the departure of troops for Europe during World War I." It covers the heyday of CBC-TV production including the landmark *Cariboo Country* series (which is now being considered for revival), the struggles of the West Coast NFB offices and the meagre contribution made to filmmaking by private broadcasters. Duffy concludes:

"What is becoming clearer today is the existence of two separate streams of filmmaking in the province: one that might be called the film 'industry'... and a second, burgeoning independent stream."

The book is divided into two sections, the first being the quite readable historic overview. The remainder is an exhaustive filmography detailing all that is known of the 1,082 film projects ever shot in B. C. Duffy has also dug into the still photo archives and found wonderful pictures of early filmmakers at work in the most adverse conditions.

Further information is available from Derek Reimer of the B. C. Provincial Archives at (604) 387-6262.

Mark O'Neill •