

# What is to be done?

## *The crisis in documentary*

In this issue a number of talented documentary filmmakers discuss what it is to be a committed documentary-maker in Canada today. It is not an enviable position. To have a point of view has become anathema to the keepers of the audience gateways. A case in point is the NFB's series on the Canadian economy: *Reckoning* which our national broadcaster refused to run because it was hosted by economist James Laxer, whose nationalistic passion was considered too partisan. Information as some neutral commodity is what is wanted.

A year ago the Department of Communications released a report on *Communications in the 21st Century* in which it noted that "Canada is in the midst of a profound shift in the foundations of its economic and social life. In the past three or four decades we have come to rely progressively more on the creation, communication and consumption of information as a source of jobs, wealth and social progress." The irony for Canadians is that the more central information becomes to our lives the less informed we are.

Information is mindless, digitalized grist for the computer mill. It is an undifferentiated commodity to be bought and sold on markets like steel or wheat. It is this commoditization of information that removes us from controlling and understanding our world. In order to move information around markets it has to be depersonalized. This is as true of information on a database as it is of news headlines on CNN or even, to a certain extent, the so-called "documentaries" on CBC's *The Journal*. Because what matters most is the processing of the information commodity to feed the technological machine.

In that process we become alienated from the reality that information supposedly represents. It is the work of documentary filmmakers to humanize information; to infuse it with human experience and make of it something that we live rather than consume. In documentary, a human mind and a human sensibility confronts the world; struggles with it; explores it. The audience of that documentary enters into that exploration and emerges from the experience changed in some fashion; changed in the way we are changed when we have truly assimilated experience or the way we are changed in an epiphanic confrontation with the world.

True documentary is as personal, as moving, as powerful as any drama; it is as true an expression of a nation as any other art form. It is one of the few barriers to the overwhelming homogenization that the information society brings in its wash.

When we consider how information-assimilated we are already to the United States, whether it be in film, television or databases, and in the context of the Free-Trade deal with the States, it becomes a matter of urgency to create an environment where documentaries, not as bits of information but as the personal expression of the creative mind, can flourish.

• • •

The following section came about as a result of a discussion between Connie Tadros and Magnus Isacsson as to how *Cinema Canada* could best cover the perceived crisis in English-language independent documentary film. The result was the initiation of a cross-country round table discussion, coordinated by Magnus. Although the original format was not strictly adhered to, the letters exchanged by Laura Sky and Moira Simpson, as well as the articles by Magnus Isacsson and Nettie Wild, are personal, provocative and insightful - like good documentary. Taken together they constitute the beginning of what *Cinema Canada* hopes will become an ongoing debate on the subject. (The editors would like to thank Magnus Isacsson for all his work in preparing this section.)

**DOCUMENTARY IS ONE OF THE FEW BARRIERS TO THE OVERWHELMING HOMOGENIZATION THAT THE INFORMATION SOCIETY BRINGS IN ITS WASH.**

**THE AMERICAN-BRANCH PLANT FILM INDUSTRY SEEMS TO BE SEDUCING INDIGENOUS PRODUCTION. INCREASINGLY I'M BEING ASKED IF I NEED A MAKE-UP PERSON OR A DOLLY-GRIP ON A DOCUMENTARY LOCATION. I WANT TO CONTINUE MAKING FILMS WHERE THE ENTIRE CREW CAN FIT IN A VAN.**

## Documentary – out in the cold

BY MAGNUS ISACSSON

**B**y some marvellous coincidence I quit my job as a television producer to become an independent filmmaker at about the same time that the expression "crisis of documentary" became current. It was a slightly bewildering experience. There I was, full of enthusiasm, having decided that this was the perfect medium for what I wanted to do. But all around me I heard talk of an "embattled tradition," a "dying breed," "an obsolete form," etc. Several well-known practitioners of the genre, including some friends of mine, were turning to docu-drama or fiction film. It was as if documentaries had suddenly become completely anachronistic.

That was four years ago. Since then, I have certainly discovered that socially critical documentary film and video isn't exactly *à la mode*, and that life as an independent is a constant struggle. I have also had an opportunity to reflect on the "crisis of documentary", which I think it's essential for us to try to understand so that we can act on it. Rather than seeing it as a crisis of one particular form of expression I have come to see it as one of many symptoms of a deeper social and intellectual crisis. I'll come back to that in a moment.

What little discussion there has been of the "crisis of documentary" has been quite confused. One of the reasons for this is that we lack clear definitions. For one thing, TV networks don't hesitate to refer to their current affairs reports as "documentaries". This makes it possible for the CBC for example to claim that it broadcasts lots of them, while actually cutting back on its own production of documentary specials and generally keeping independent documentaries out in the cold.

So what is a documentary? The definition cannot be a technical one. There is absolutely no way of distinguishing even a TV report from a documentary by using criteria such as the type of



Magnus Isacsson

narration, the pace of cutting, film vs. video, or whatever. The definition of documentary must be essentially political. A documentary is a documented point of view. It is a tool of discovery and critical understanding of our world and our society. As such, it promotes a certain vision, certain values. Sometimes it takes the form of a personal and political statement, but more frequently and more importantly, documentaries help to give a platform to those people in our society who have difficulty making their voices heard. These are the kinds of films we need to help us sharpen our perception of what is going on in our world, to fuel the kind of debate about social and political priorities which is essential in a democratic society.

Armed with that basic definition, we are better equipped to analyse the fabled "crisis of documentary". Let's be systematic about it.

First of all, documentary clearly is not a dying breed. In spite of the tremendous difficulties we experience as independent film – and videomakers, the sheer volume of documentary production in this country is quite astonishing, particularly in the context of widespread cutbacks.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, all rumors to the effect that the public doesn't appreciate documentaries are false. In fact, a series of studies and polls clearly indicate not only that there is a substantial

audience for documentaries, but also that a majority of the general public would like to see more of them.<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, there surely isn't a creative crisis, or a stagnation of the documentary form. Instead of enumerating all the highly creative works I have seen just in the last year, let me quote Geoff Pevere, one of the programmers of this year's Toronto (Festival of Festivals) Perspectives Canada program. He speaks of "the current bumper crop of fascinating and far-reaching Canadian documentaries," and states:

"In the past year, not only has a number of documentaries made here apparently increased, there is a richness of form and subject that is unparalleled in the medium's history."

In his article "Troubled Tradition: Canadian Documentary",<sup>3</sup> Pevere comes to the conclusion that "if the documentary isn't dead or dying of its own inertia, it is being slowly strangled into obsolescence." He is right. He then asks himself "If the documentary is so healthy and vital in 1988, why is it struggling to justify its existence? Whatever happened to this country's documentary tradition?"

Unfortunately, Pevere's attempt to answer this essential question is confused and quite misleading. Boiled down to their essence, his reasons are the following:

"Sources of funding, both public and

private, are dwindling as the popular priority continues to tip in favour of fiction features..."

– "...documentary is simply not a priority: not for the press, not for the government, and not for the public. The assumed cinematic hierarchy (irrational and arbitrary as it is) which places feature filmmaking as the most legitimate and creative form of cinematic expression, is firmly in place..."

"... Canadian documentary began to lose its institutional support at the same time that Canadian TV shifted its functional orientation from that of information to entertainment."

If documentary "shares with Canadian feature filmmaking the debilitating fact of existing in a constant state of comparison with the products of the American media machine, it suffers doubly because of a popular perception that places feature filmmaking at the apex of popular entertainment."

Although I think it's wrong to blame the public for the misfortunes of documentary, I think some of those points are well-taken. But they don't suffice to explain why documentary is in a crisis. There is a key piece missing in the puzzle. It's the question of the increased power and control over all documentary production exercised by decision-makers in the TV networks. And this is a question of freedom of expression and political control.

Most documentary filmmakers are passionately concerned with what is happening in our society, from a critical, challenging standpoint. They refuse to be complacent in the face of injustice. They bring an ethical perspective to bear on their material. They often take a stand, and they want to convince their audience to take a stand.

It is no coincidence that these are the kinds of films that are very hard to get shown on television these days. The reason is not that the public doesn't like independent documentaries, but that the decision-makers who control the most important distribution channels don't like them. In other words, the supposed unpopularity of documentary is a mystification promoted by self-serving network executives. The result of their discriminatory attitude is a distribution

*As a Montreal-based freelance director, Magnus Isacsson works for several English- and French-language television networks, for the NFB, and for the independent production company Alter Ciné.*

## Letter to Moira Simpson – Vancouver

Dear Mo,  
I'm sending you this letter to try to capture my thoughts and feelings about documentary film in Canada right now. I am going to begin our letters to each other on a fairly personal note.

A couple of summers ago, I underwent medical tests to determine whether or not I had a brain tumour. I had some unexplained symptoms and preliminary tests showed that this was a possibility. I can remember sitting in my family doctor's office quite casually actually, never expecting her to say what she did. In a fairly calm measured way she explained to me I would have to have further tests to rule out the possibility of a brain tumour.

My first and strongest need at that time was the need for information. I needed to know. I needed to know what the facts were. I needed to know what the possibilities were. I needed to know the opinions of the doctors and technicians who were conducting these investigations. I developed a voracious need for information, interpretation, and informed analysis.

The period of investigation didn't last very long, thank goodness, and within a short period of time it was clear that in fact I did not have a brain tumour. But I felt that the experience – as others have said before me – changed me and focussed me very substantially.

At the same time as I was going through this experience, I was in the middle of shooting the film that became *To Hurt and To Heal* – a film about ethical issues in the care and treatment of critically ill and dying children. Each day I was going into intensive care units, spending long periods of time with very ill children and their families as well as with the medical and nursing people who were caring for these children at these times of crisis. I was trying to show how decisions were perceived and how decisions were made in the care of these very ill children.

In fact, there were many things that I was focussing on during both the research and the filming. I was trying really to understand the relationship between suffering, loss – loving and maintaining life. I was trying to understand how patients and medical people balanced information, experience, and made decisions – decisions that so profoundly affected not only life and dying, but the quality of life as well.

I think, like all filmmakers, I was trying to understand personal issues, issues that had been very important for me that hopefully



PHOTO: VINCENZO PIETROPAOLO

Laura Sky (right) shooting *To Hurt and To Heal*

would have meaning for many people going through similarly difficult times.

One of the pivotal, ethical values in the practice of medicine is something that practitioners refer to as "informed consent". That is a process whereby the patient and/or the patient's family has the right to expect information from caregivers, not only around clinical findings, but around the meaning and the interpretation of clinical findings. On the basis of that information, the patient may decide to give or withhold consent for medical treatment. This process gives the patient and/or the family the right to make decisions about their own care, the right to make decisions about the quality of their lives, the right to make decisions about what happens to them. Well, needless to say, it's a complicated and contradictory process in most institutions.

The process of consent is based on information that those patients need, information about their illness in order to make effective decisions about their lives. Without that information or with a misexplanation of that information, their decisions may be faulty and may not be in their own best interest.

When I thought I perhaps had a brain tumour, my greatest fear at that moment was not so much the fear of dying or being dead, but the fear of losing control of my personhood, the fear of losing myself, the fear of losing physical function, and finally, the fear of losing mental function. I feared losing the right to participate in my own life.

When I was working in hospital in the clinical setting, in the intensive care units, I very often

watched parents of very young children face not only the fear of losing control and authority and the care and treatment of their children, but actually lose control over the lives of their children.

Over time, I came to integrate these thoughts, these experiences, into a broader analysis that affects my work and the work of other documentarians in Canada. I've come to think that the role of independent documentary – and I want to say specifically, independent

documentary, that is documentary that doesn't conform to the need of the state, or conform to the need of the media apparatus of the state – I've come to think that independent documentary plays or should play a vital function in the process of "informed consent" that operates on a societal level. Informed consent is not only an institutional or personal process in times of medical crisis. I have begun to see informed consent as a political process with which we are involved as documentarians in our broader communities. I think our function, our role, is to provide information, so that the members of our communities can make informed decisions on the strategies that are vital for dealing with very crucial issues in our society.

Let's take an issue that's on the public agenda now in Canada – Free Trade. If my government is trying to sell me a bill of goods around Free Trade, I need to know what in fact the deal is, what it means, what it will mean for me and my colleagues and my community and what we can do about it. I think that independent documenta-

problem which lies at the heart of the supposed "crisis of documentary." Why? Because it is becoming almost impossible to raise funds for a documentary film without the support of a broadcaster. Every producer – even the NFB – is becoming more and more reluctant to finance films which don't have a decent chance to be shown on TV.

The most important part of the crisis of documentary is precisely that: the difficulty of having them shown, and having them in their original form. Point-of-view documentaries are almost routinely turned down by broadcasters. (See my article: "Documentary in the age of Television," *Cinema Canada* No. 123, Oct. '85). The CBC has recently refused to air two excellent films: Hugh Brady's *On Indian Land* and Maurice Bulbulian's *Dancing Around the Table*. These films, which let native people present their views on self-government and the Constitution in their own terms, have yet to be broadcast on a Canadian network. At the same time, even those documentaries which are accepted by the networks frequently have to be re-cut and have their narration replaced to have a chance to be shown. (For example, Anand Patwardhan's *Bombay Our City* and Helene Klodowsky's *Shoot And Cry*, both shown on *Man Alive*, which is one of the few remaining openings for independent work on TV). And finally, many documentarists – even at the NFB – are adapting their entire productions to suit the taste of the television networks. (The increasing number of films made in segments which provide for frequent commercial breaks is one of the most depressing results.) This adaptation process is in itself one of the main threats to the documentary tradition.

This problem of access to air time for documentaries in their original form is but a symptom of a graver and more disturbing value crisis in our society. Why this fear of an independent perspective, of social criticism, of critical debate? Why does all "information programming" have to come with so much hype, such a fast pace, so many commercials, and so little thoughtfulness? Why the tendency to exclude points of view other than the ones considered "legitimate" or "credible" by TV bureaucrats?

Perhaps what we should be asking is not why our society seems to be so afraid of self-examination, but who in our society is. People who don't want to think that the problems of documentary have anything to do with the desires and policies of certain powerful elites strike me as incredibly naive. Would Canada be the only country in the world where those who wield economic and political power don't exercise a considerable amount of control over what ideas are broadcast on TV? It's a nice thought, but having worked in broadcasting for more than a dozen years, I certainly don't believe it.

Today's news broadcasts and current affairs television broadcasts promote a certain world-view. Their coverage is fractured,

Continued on page 16

ethnocentric, sensationalist. The networks generally interpret world events from the point of view of a western development paradigm implicitly considered exemplary. Similarly, they promote a view of our own society as a middle-class and democratic standard which can be used in judging the experiences of others, (minorities, foreigners, other nations).

One of the most striking examples of this is the way populations in the Third World are almost invariably presented as helpless victims whose only hope is either western aid or western-style development. Recently, the executive producer of a network TV program asked me if I couldn't put together "a 10-minute item about why the people in the poorest countries in the world have no way out." When I told him I just finished writing the scenario for a one-hour film precisely about how poor people in some places in Africa, Asia and Latin America rely on their own resources to break the vicious circle of underdevelopment, he looked at me with a sympathetic but skeptical smile and changed the topic. Last week, in contrast, I was shooting with some young immigrants from Africa. They feel outraged and personally insulted by the image of Africa projected on our TV screens. As they pointed out, it's an image which does nothing to educate and inform young people here, and which therefore doesn't help counter prejudice, stereotypes and racism.

Another case in point is the fate of native people in this country. In TV, a suggestion to cover the struggles of native people is usually met with an answer like "We already did something on Indians last month." However, the more tragic shortcoming is the lack of debate. "Stories" are okay, even sympathetic stories on the plight of native people and the strength of their traditions. But what about seriously trying to come to terms with our responsibility, as a society, for the scandalous situation of native people in this country. As with most moral issues where a serious discussion could rock the boat, the TV networks generally stop short of challenging our collective conscience. They want any discussion of such topics to be firmly set in a reassuring establishment framework. In this way they refuse to challenge indifference.

How is the distorted and fundamentally unethical media outlook on the world produced? Is there a vast conspiracy with cigar-smoking bosses pulling strings and making their media marionettes jump? Of course not. But there is a remarkably subtle and complex system for social and ideological control. It works by osmosis through shared establishment values. It operates by way of many different mechanisms: hierarchical control, hiring and promotion, policies and guidelines, very little censorship but a lot of self-censorship.

The production of television news and current affairs reports ("documentaries") is a highly

## Letter to Laura Sky - Toronto

Dear Laura,  
Thank you for your inspiring letter. Your analysis of informed consent poignantly reminds me of my father. Last month my sister, my brother and I had to decide whether or not he should have a critical operation. The surgeon recommended it so naturally we signed the consent form. The night before the operation the resident physician casually mentioned to me that surgeons generally "recommend the knife" and asked me if we had discussed my father's situation with his regular doctor, his neurologist, and perhaps with his nurse, in terms of post-operative care. She mentioned that if her own father were as frail as mine she would never let him be operated on. Well, after crazily phoning all these doctors in the middle of the night we reversed our decision. This time we made our decision fully informed.

From the personal to the political this decision-making process must remain the same. I share your fears about Free Trade. You speak of the voices of Canadian independent documentary filmmakers becoming marginalized: Canada as a country is becoming marginalized too. A recent poll claims that 72 % of Canadians say they don't understand the Free Trade deal. They feel they don't have enough information to make an informed decision.

I spent nearly two years directing one of the five films of the National Film Board's *Reckoning* series on the political economy of Canada. This series questions Free Trade. Despite excellent reviews from all across the country it was rejected by the CBC for what it claims to be a lack of objectivity. This example of institutionalized censorship is particularly disturbing to me considering the deep feelings surrounding this old Canadian debate. Our country is about to be turned inside-out to solve a few thorny trade irritants and we don't understand what is at stake. We have a government spending millions of dollars selling its Free Trade package and our series on the economy of Canada isn't even part of the debate.

As filmmakers, our wings have already been clipped by the proposed Free Trade deal. Look at how Flora MacDonald's film distribution policy was diluted so as not to jeopardize the progress of the Free Trade talks. The deal pits one sector of the economy against another: for example, film production subsidies may be retained at the expense of agricultural products. Free Trade locks us into a situation that prohibits any government in Canada from ever setting up a new crown corporation without first asking the



Vancouver-based, independent documentary filmmaker Moira Simpson.

United States for permission and proving that U.S. corporate interests - in this case the U.S. entertainment industry - would not suffer. Fat chance they would agree. This trade deal guarantees that we will never be able to gain more control than we now have in production, distribution or marketing. It has become virtually impossible to ever alter our present status of being a culturally occupied country.

Despite the fact that we are already the most foreign owned country in the industrialized world we are agreeing to harmonize our economy with that of a superpower ten times our own size right at a time when the American economy isn't doing so well. Many economists are now looking at the U.S. budget deficit and its disastrous trade imbalance and are wondering whether America's market-driven economy is capable of creating long term growth. Market-driven growth is the pumping heart of Free Trade. The essence of the deal is the belief that all sectors of the economy, including culture, should operate according to the whims of the marketplace. In the U.S., movies are commodities that must make it on a "level playing field" and the Canadian film industry is seen as merely an extension of the American domestic market.

In Canada, we have always been more philosophically aligned with Europe in our belief that culture is something intangible, more elusive - less bottom line than the U.S. entertainment industry. Like many countries in Europe we have always had a system (albeit flawed) of government subsidies, a process of public-private sector collaboration that enables us to have a say in shaping our own culture - a culture that reflects our own experience through non-distorting mirrors. Also like these other countries, Canada is experiencing the ongoing Americanization of its cultural industries.

Film production in B.C. is already much more dominated by the American film industry than

in central Canada. I am told that over the last several years more than 95% of local production has been American in source. This phenomenon is apparently building up a talent pool of skilled technicians. From what I can see, all sorts of people are getting rich on American dollars but they don't have time to work on local productions - and even if they did have time they couldn't afford to.

The American-branch plant film industry seems to be seducing indigenous production. Increasingly I'm being asked if I need a make-up person or a dolly-grip on a documentary location. I want to continue making films where the entire crew can fit in a van. Increasingly, I'm being asked when am I going to take the obvious next step and make a dramatic feature. I'm feeling as obsolete as the typewriter. I applaud filmmaking colleagues who are making dramatic features, and of course I want the Canadian feature film industry to flourish, but I want to continue making documentaries and I want to be respected for it. I fear that once the Free Trade deal goes into effect it will be even more difficult for documentary filmmakers to make socially and politically committed films.

Our Canadian tradition of filmmaking is under siege. We have always made films differently in Canada than in the United States. We have never had a centralized studio system, we have always been decentralized, we have always had a more flexible crew structure, we have never had huge budgets, we have never relied exclusively on the marketplace for financing, production has never had the same relationship with distribution. Again, our Canadian tradition is akin to both documentary and dramatic feature film production in Europe as well as Australia and many countries in South America. None of us have the infrastructure to succeed on American terms even if we wanted to.

Canada has always existed on the periphery of either the British Empire or of the United States. Now, Free Trade has made our struggle for an independent voice even tougher. Many of the recent market-driven policies of Telefilm Canada, the CBC, and the National Film Board seem to be taking us in the opposite direction. I sometimes feel like a stubborn old trapper but I believe we should be making films that build on our past traditions while boldly and with wild imagination tackling the future.

Laura, thanks again for your letter. I just reread the letter Magnus sent us outlining what he feels are the most urgent issues facing documentary filmmakers and I realize there are a number we haven't addressed. There's so much to discuss! I look forward to hearing from both of you.

Cheers,  
Moira Simpson  
Vancouver

Continued from page 14

ry film and video can play a role in the process of informed consent on a societal basis. We as filmmakers can provide not only information but we can provide a reflection of how people are experiencing a specific issue, and how they interpret it, how they analyse it and what in fact they plan to do about it.

Given this premise, something very frightening is happening, not only in Canada, but I think throughout Europe and North America as well. Systems of information are being fundamentally centralized. Film production and distribution is being not only centralized but also completely commercialized.

Most film production funding now comes to us through agencies that use, as their criteria, the commercial viability or the broadcastability of a particular program or if you or I go to Telefilm Canada with, say, at best, a feature-length documentary film, we in fact have to be able to prove that the film or video has commercial viability, has a distributor and/or a broadcaster. Broadcasting policy in this country at this time is enormously restrictive. The degree of control that broadcasters expect to have over the material that they put on television excludes the independent voice. It excludes the voice of the independent documentarian that represents other independent voices in Canada.

Documentary film, for broadcast now in Canada, is seen largely in magazine format, that is pieces of film or tape that are given a specifically limited period of time, that adhere to the standard television magazine - short, tight, upbeat, fast-moving, fast-paced and above all else, profoundly superficial.

Documentary now has become expanded news. And we know well that news formats are very controlled formats. News formats represent the mainstream opinion, the mainstream interpretation of crucial national and international issues. But that mainstream vision has come through a system of broadcasting and funding that excludes the notion of oppositional independent information. This enormously limits our function in providing information so that the citizens of our society can make informed choices in the political process. The power of funding and the power of broadcasting in this country has relegated those voices to the margins. Current funding and broadcast policy prohibits our role in the democratic process. Opposition, critical independence, has been fundamentally relegated to the sidelines of social process in this country.

Now, why does this matter? It matters because it means that democratic process has become fundamentally restricted. It means that the process of participation has become one that's based on distorted information or based

on enormously biased information that's presented out of the self-interest of those who control our society. It also means that our voices and the voices of the people that we represent in our films are in danger of becoming invisible. You may say, how can a voice be invisible? A voice not heard and a vision not seen, a reality not shown and a reality not revealed, is a reality that's invisible.

I remember when I was working in hospitals, I watched, in the moments of crisis and difficulty, that patient's need to believe in the authority of the doctor, to believe that the doctor's optimism was true, to believe that that optimism would reflect what they could expect in life. Well, let's extrapolate from that. Let's take that out of the hospital and take it into the street, so to speak.

We live in a society that's profoundly full of disease. We live in a nuclear society, we live in a society that, at best, struggles with racism, with sexism. We live in a society with very profound illnesses that need rather substantial treatment. But we are also a people in a perpetual state of crisis or trauma. At the same time many people have some kind of innate need at a time of crisis to believe in the beneficence of authority, to believe that authority will act in their best interest. And without information that reflects to them an oppositional view and alternative picture of reality, I think that these people often feel profoundly alienated.

What I'm talking about is a larger picture where the voices of our independence and the voices of the people we represent are being silenced. In a sense, our films are under the risk of being homeless in the broader mainstream vision. In reality, our films have many alternative homes. They have homes in the hearts of the people who need to watch them. They have homes in community organizations, trade union groups, women's groups, colleges, universities. But in terms of public screens, or in terms of publicly accessible screens, our films are homeless.

Oh, what do we do about this? I think the first thing we do on an individual basis is to insist on the value of recognizing our role, recognizing the role of the films that we fight to produce. I think we have to see ourselves in alliance with audiences who need to see the films that they encourage us to produce.

And so, in letters like this to you, in letters like this that we read, can share with each other, I hope that we develop a strategy so that we can refuse to have our work sent into exile, so that we can refuse to participate in the marginalization of the independent voice in Canada.

I'll stop now. I look forward to hearing your response.

Absolutely sincerely,

Laura Sky  
Toronto

streamlined affair akin to a sausage machine. Occasionally, just as in your local delicatessen, there are really excellent sausages, both spicy and nutritious. But these treats do nothing to change the fact that most sausages are tasteless and full of unhealthy chemicals. Fast-food, in other words.

Why is it assumed that the public wants that, and not in-depth, challenging point-of-view documentaries? Why limit the ideological spectrum only to certain kinds of treatment?

I think what is really not acceptable to TV is the socially critical and morally concerned point of view, especially if it's coming from quarters who are not in general agreement with the outlook of the power elites that dominate our society. TV news and current affairs programs give themselves an air of concern - often so fake that it is decidedly hokey. At the same time, they maintain many people and organizations who are genuinely concerned about social and political issues, and who are prepared to sacrifice something to promote them, in a state of marginalisation. They are given very little air time, and when they get some they are given little credibility.

The networks apply this logic of a certain middle-of-the-road establishment-oriented "objectivity" not only to the networks' own productions, but also to independent and NFB documentaries. The CBC for example, generally speaking expects such documentaries to correspond to its own criteria of balance, fairness, objectivity, etc. The effect of all this is to water down the social debate, to reduce the spectrum of "acceptable" options.

But faced with the threat of ecological destruction and nuclear war, with the persistence of racism and sexism in our society, we desperately need a real social debate. Such an open debate is required for a democracy to function properly. The unwillingness of mainstream TV to carry such debate is a grave sign of a deterioration of the democratic functioning of our society.

Conversely, therefore, an attempt to create a larger place for documentary films is in a very real sense a part of the fight for the freedom of speech, and for a more democratic society.

I have become increasingly convinced that important sectors of the public are no longer satisfied with the simplistic fare served up by the networks. Many people are in fact very frustrated with the superficial coverage offered by the networks. That is why new initiatives such as the Vision network, which is prepared to take up moral and ethical issues, are so important. And this signals a major change for independents. With the increasing fracturing of the audience, the possibilities of finding an outlet for more in-depth programs sincerely concerned with the state of the world will increase.

The badly needed effort to halt the decline of documentary in this country should not be seen

as just one big battle. Rather, there are many interconnected fronts which require simultaneous efforts.

We must fight to change the policies of the broadcasters so that they become more openminded, more responsive to community needs, more democratic. The present situation, where a small number of network bureaucrats elevate themselves into ideological gatekeepers in the name of public taste, is unacceptable. Beyond putting pressure on the networks to change their policies, we have to take this issue to the public.

- We have to put pressure on Telefilm Canada to re-orient its policies so that that body will give documentary a significant place in its funding, in a way that will truly further originality and creativity in the independent sector. This means that all TV networks, including educational TV, Vision TV etc., should be given increased weight as underwriters of a project... Beyond that, it means that funding should not only be contingent on network approval, but that Telefilm should be able to fund projects based on their originality and intrinsic value.

- We must defend the NFB from any further cutbacks. The NFB is just about the only remaining producer which is free from the *diktats* of television, the only place where documentary filmmakers have a real measure of creative freedom. But at the same time we have to work for radical change at the NFB which is sinking deeper and deeper into a swamp of partly self-generated stagnation and demoralisation. A central aspect of change is to promote the hiring of freelance directors at the NFB.

Independent filmmakers must continue to organize, as they have increasingly over the last few years. Together with other forces committed to independent production and a free public debate, we have to take issues of access and freedom of expression to the public, while continuing to make our views known to governments and institutions.

- And of course, we have to continue to do what independents do best: make high-quality, challenging, innovative, socially critical films. Because ultimately it is through our work that we will demonstrate that documentary film can make a crucial contribution to society.

Notes

1 Until this year, the Grierson Seminar has been an excellent way to take stock of the annual output of documentaries. Unfortunately, this year the seminar has been cancelled or at least delayed. The Ontario Film Association, which deserves much credit for sponsoring the event in the past, now has a serious responsibility to ensure that this event, which is so important to the documentary tradition, will continue.

2 See "Trends in Television Viewing", by David Crowley, Liss Jeffrey and Fraser McAninch, a report written for the NFB. It quotes several other studies, including the Thompson Lightstone Omnitel Study and the Audley Study. (*Qui Fait Quoi*, Sept.-Oct. 88)

3 In "Canadian Independent Film Caucus 1988 Festival" Issue # 8.

## Getting aired: the 'right' spin

BY NETTIE WILD

Consider two scenarios. 10:15 p.m. on a sopping November night in Vancouver. 600 people line up outside the Vancouver East Cinema. Their backs are turned against the rain as they wait to see a late-night screening of our

*Nettie Wild is a Vancouver-based documentary filmmaker.*

documentary film. *A Rustling Of Leaves: Inside The Philippine Revolution*. We sell out, turning 100 people away. After the film 300 stay for a discussion which the house manager closes down at 1:30 a.m.

2 p.m. in the bowels of the CBC. The network producer can barely keep his eyes open as he talks to me. He's overworked. Proposals "up to here". He's sorry its taken two and half months

to get back to me about the video dub I had submitted to CBC of *A Rustling Of Leaves*. The finished film runs one hour and 50 minutes. "Good action sequences," he says, but he would cut it a bit. To 54 minutes. "And" he says, prying those weary lids open, "it doesn't have the right editorial spin for the CBC."

Back at the Van East Cinema, we play to 1,850 people in three days. They don't appear too

concerned about the editorial spin. Those who disagree with the film's obvious point of view bring it up afterwards in the discussion. Nobody suggests to the house manager that the cinema shouldn't have shown *A Rustling Of Leaves* in the first place.

But how do we guarantee our film will be seen other than at our neighborhood repertory cinema? It is a problem faced by all independent

## Recommendations of the Quebec working group on independent documentary film

In October of 1987 a working group was set up to study the situation of French-language independent documentary film in Quebec. Representatives from l'Association des réalisateurs et réalisatrices de films de Québec (ARRFQ), and l'Association des producteurs de films et de vidéo du Québec (APFVQ) were joined by the Secretary General of l'Institut québécois du cinéma on the working group.

The mandate given the working group by the associations was to "evaluate, for the first time, with a statistical basis, the evolution of independent documentary production over a significant period of time (since 1978) to see if the often announced death of the documentary was real..."

Based on the exhaustive research by staffer Michel Houle, the working group produced a list of 13 recommendations which were endorsed by the associations and the Institute. The recommendations are grouped under headings according to whom they are addressed. i.e. governments and ministers, regulatory agencies, federal and provincial funding agencies.

The working group released its recommendations at a news conference at the end of November. *Cinema Canada* is pleased to be able to print the recommendations drawn from this important study.

### Working Group Members

APFVQ  
Nathalie Barton, François Dupuis

ARRFQ  
Sophie Bissonnette, Sylvie Groulx

Institut québécois du cinéma  
Bernard Boucher, Secretary General

Research staff  
Michel Houle

### Recommendations to French-language broadcasters

3 - That the conventional broadcasters, public and private, open immediately and progressively their programming schedule in order to accommodate on a regular basis more independent documentaries of all formats and so respond to the desires of the public.

4 - That the broadcasters adjust the monies assigned for the purchase of series or of independent Quebecois documentaries to the economic realities of current production costs.

5 - That the broadcasters take concrete steps to improve the promotion of the documentaries they present.

### Recommendations to funding agencies

6 - That the agencies (Telefilm, SOGIC) recognize that the documentary is dependent on a specific mode of production and that they adjust their eligibility criteria and their handling of projects accordingly, in particular: a) in choosing evaluation criteria for "scripts" which are specific to documentaries and not those based on fiction films.

b) in accelerating the approval process of projects, particularly in providing flexible mechanisms allowing for reshoots and "emergency shoots."

c) in demonstrating flexibility regarding the experience required of producers and directors.

### (A) Telefilm

7 - That feature-length documentaries be eligible for the Feature Film Fund, insofar as they conform to the requirements for the engagement of a Canadian distributor. 8 - That Telefilm give definite priority to "documentaire de création" (creative documentary) and that magazine-type programs continue to be ineligible for the documentary section of the Broadcast Fund.

9 - That the eligibility requirement of the Broadcast Fund for first broadcast of a documentary in prime-time be removed.

10 - That part of the regular Fund of Telefilm Canada be used for the development of documentaries.

### (B) SOGIC

11 - That the government of Quebec significantly increase the annual budget of SOGIC and that a substantial part of this budget be allotted to documentaries.

12 - That SOGIC continue to encourage the production of feature length documentaries; that it reevaluate its aid programs to distribution and exhibition companies in order to better recognize and support their efforts to market documentaries to theatres and secondary (institutional, community) markets; that it also encourage production of studies and pilot-projects to market documentaries on videocassettes.

13 - That the "prime à la qualité" (merit prizes) be created for feature-length documentaries or that they become eligible for the present merit prize program which is currently reserved for feature-length fiction films.

### Recommendation to governments and the Ministers of Communications

1 - That the cultural and educational mandates of public broadcasters be reaffirmed with strength and without ambiguity and that governmental funds be assigned accordingly.

### Recommendation to the CRTC

2 - That the CRTC include in its expectations and set as a condition of licensing provisions to ensure that statutory and regular time-slots are reserved for the broadcast of documentaries from the independent private sector, with the renewal of conventional broadcasters' licenses and of certain special services, public and private.

filmmakers (of documentaries and challenging dramas alike.) How in the hell do we get our work first produced and then later seen across the country when the networks and mainstream distributors are more conservative and less adventuresome than our audiences? (When was the last time the head of Current Affairs of any of the major networks stood in line to see a documentary?)

Vancouver filmmakers Kirk Tougas, Jim Monro, Colin Browne and I offer the following strategy as a starting point for getting independently produced films where they belong – in front of Canadian audiences.

First a reality check. Most 16mm documentaries over one hour cost \$350,000 or more. (For a drama it's between \$350,000 – \$750,000 minimum). These are the hard figures of an expensive medium. If an independent fails to raise the full budget either he or she reduces the film's scope and cuts the budget, and/or works for free. In my case, *A Rustling Of Leaves* owes \$175,000 in deferred wages to myself and the crew. This form of sweat equity has provided the interim financing for many Canadian documentaries and dramas alike, among them: *A Winter Tan*, *Life Classes*, *The World Is Watching*, *The Journey*, *La Guerre Oubliée*. Independently produced documentaries currently in production include John Walker's film on Paul Strand, Colin Brown's *White Lake*, Jan-Marie Martell's *Art and Annie*, Kirk Tougas and Tom Shandell's *RD Lang at 60*. This phenomenon of come hell or high water financing is a testament to the tenacity of the filmmakers. We further suggest that these films are the ones which in the future we will look back on and recognize as artistic, political and therefore cultural successes. In the final analysis, the independent film is not the poor country cousin of the film industry, but rather should be recognized as providing the lifeblood of Canadian film.

This recognition should manifest itself in realistic production funds for independent films (provided up front and on time) and access to Canadian audiences by way of television broadcasts. This focuses the discussion immediately on Telefilm Canada, the CBC and the National Film Board. Here are our suggestions:

Telefilm Canada: Or How to Break the Broadcast License Catch 22. You propose a challenging documentary or drama. The networks and the distributors decide to wait and see the finished product before committing and bang – you are left without a distribution guarantee or a broadcast license with which to trigger Telefilm. Short of the television networks opening up to more documentaries and independent dramas, a possible solution is for Telefilm to acknowledge a third triggering mechanism for its funds other than broadcast licenses and distributor's advances. This third trigger would be based on artistic merit and open to documentaries and experimental dramas. A



Nettie Wild

prerequisite for all projects submitted could be the previous support of a major Canadian jury such as the Canada Council or the Ontario Arts Council. This procedure would provide realistic production funds to produce high-quality independent films. (The better the quality, the more of a chance the film has to make its money back for the filmmaker and for Telefilm.) This process recognizes the validity of documentary and experimental drama and it directly addresses the problem of conservative networks and distributors who are usually unwilling to share the upfront risk necessary in producing original independent films.

Which brings us to the CBC and its editorial spin.

The following suggestions can apply to all the networks. However the CBC, funded by the Canadian people as it is, has a particular mandate to serve the general populace and the Canadian film industry. For these reasons we directly address the CBC.

We suggest the CBC program a weekly two-hour slot for short and feature-length independently produced documentaries. (A strong argument can also be made for a series of independently produced feature dramas). Each documentary program would be separate, but together they would provide a series of documentaries – films with a point of view and which give the time to address the complexity of life beyond the 30-second clip of the six o'clock news, or the 20-minute newsmagazine format. The CBC may shriek that Canadians are bored by full-length documentaries and will take offence at films with a point of view. The line-ups at the Vancouver East Cinema, however, tell me something different. And let's keep this in perspective. We are not suggesting anything which hasn't been successfully done before. Channel Four in Great Britain, for instance, has at least two documentary series, *True Stories*, and the *Eleventh Hour* (which can expand its slot up to two hours). In fact Channel Four's appetite for documentaries has led them to buy a number of Canadian films, supplying on a pre-sale basis a substantial percentage of the

budgets of *A Rustling Of Leaves*, *The World Is Watching* and *RD Lang at 60* to name three. Why has the CBC decided that average Canadian viewers are so much more fragile than their British counterparts? Perhaps the time has come for the CBC to stop safeguarding Canadians from Canadian cinema.

The National Film Board. We all have our theories about the Film Board and why it is in trouble. Massive government cutbacks appear to have crippled the Montreal lab and yet left behind a bureaucracy groaning under its own weight. And then there is that CBC producer. "We always have trouble with the Film Board," he sighs, "because they make films with a point of view while we at the CBC must maintain some balance." Eclipsed by television, NFB producers have increasingly geared their in-house productions to the educational market with 20-minute classroom shorts gaining priority over feature-length documentaries and their cumbersome budgets.

But our grumbling is laced with concern. The NFB lab might be the slowest in the country, but it's the best. The current profusion of educational films doesn't negate the NFB's

**WE ALL STAND TO PROFIT FROM A HEALTHY NATIONAL FILM BOARD WHICH THROUGH ITS DOCUMENTARY FILMS PROVOKES THOUGHT WITH A SENSE OF SOCIAL CONSCIENCE AND ARTISTRY.**

legacy of world-class innovative films. And even now, a good documentary, a real one with a point of view and all, can on occasion successfully navigate its way through the bureaucratic minefield of the Board. The NFB is definitely worth fighting for, but where do we begin? We suggest with increased support to independent filmmakers and direct access to television broadcast. First the filmmakers.

Independent filmmakers with new ideas and proposals pump life into any organization. The Film Board is no exception. The more freelance directors hired onto NFB productions the better. Coproductions between the NFB and independents provide an obvious partnership maximizing creativity, resources, and limited NFB budgets. Historically the NFB's strength lies in its toughminded documentaries and imaginative animation. In the long run this means NFB producers must be willing to hire those filmmakers who are willing to take the artistic and political risks inherent in successful and compelling film. In the short run, the NFB must immediately expand, not merely maintain, the Program to Assist Filmmakers in the Private

Sector (PAFPS). Under the PAFPS program NFB regional producers can offer in-kind services, including lab services, to independent filmmakers. Often it is a combination of Canada Council money and a PAFPS grant which will launch an independent film. Which brings me to that major crossroad of Canadian filmmaking, Richard Michaud's office.

Richard and his assistant Brian Ennis ride shot-gun over PAFPS from two small rooms in the NFB Montreal headquarters. A wall is lined with five clocks, one for each region. On any given day, film cans are piled in perilously tall stacks, leaning towers of images waiting to be shipped out to filmmakers across the country. Last fiscal year, Richard negotiated 140 PAFPS projects through the Montreal NFB lab. It's not an easy job. As budgets get tighter, regional producers offer more in-kind support than outright cash to outside projects. There's increasingly less room to move in Richard's office and an understaffed, overworked lab starts to scream. PAFPS is a main artery of Canadian filmmaking. It needs more space, more people and more of a priority at the lab.

The current fiscal restraints of the Film Board are very real. To whine for more money is useless. Therefore we suggest a complete reevaluation of NFB resources is needed with the intent of reallocating present monies within the Film Board towards 1) productions which artistically and politically challenge the frontiers of the documentary film. 2) hiring freelance filmmakers as directors of in-house productions or co-productions, and 3) building up of the PAFPS program and lab services.

Finally, this chronic shortage of cash will continue to plague the NFB until it finds a true audience again. If it is repeatedly shutout by the CBC, the Film Board will be relegated to making educational shorts. (Although the CBC is willing to co-produce with the NFB a historical look at the Mackenzie King years, Mo Simpson reminds us that the network completely balked at the NFB's *Reckoning* series which takes a critical look at current Canadian economic politics.) The CRTC and the CBC must realize that the National film Board is a full partner in Canadian culture and therefore create a time slot for NFB productions on our national network. Once the NFB has an audience, it can justify its need for increased funding. If, however, it fails to utilize the most innovative filmmakers inside and outside the NFB to create challenging cinema, the audiences will change channels and the NFB will revert back to making films for the Treasury Board. We all stand to profit from a healthy National Film Board which through its documentary films provokes thought with a sense of social conscience and artistry.

Contrary to the tired CBC producer, we believe Canadians are not frightened of a point of view.

*With assistance and espresso supplied by Kirk Tougas, Jim Monro and Colin Browne.*