

# The NFB: Inventing Canada— Again?

by Lyn Martin

NFB has proven to be less the "eyes of Canada" than it is a reflection of the Canadian condition: tentative, self-critical, self-conscious and well-intentioned.

Bob Verrall, executive producer of English Production at the NFB, zeroed in on it when he said recently: "There has been too much nonsense talked about the so-called National Unity crisis in Canada. People working in cultural agencies know quite well this is not the real issue; but National Identity is. And there's a profound distinction to be made between the two. At the Board we know this, and I wish we had been more daring in stating it, and doing something about it."

In view of this "cultural crisis" and visibility problem, we can hardly expect the NFB to "see Canada, and see it whole" when there are so many disparate parts that the whole becomes elusive. Nor can we expect the NFB to propagate Canadian culture when we lie cheek-to-jowl to the most powerful film and television industries in the world.

In terms of the national images we do have, the majority of them have come from public sector institutions like the CBC and the NFB. They have not come from the CTV or the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC), and probably never will. Under the Capital Cost Allowance (CCA), the commercial sector's rather checkered and less-than-noble performance has resulted in films which have little to say about this country. As NFB filmmaker Albert Kish says, "If you took away the NFB and the CBC there would be nothing. How would you know that you are in Canada?"

## The demise of documentary tradition

Last year, Albert Kish was commissioned to make a film on the 41-year history of the NFB. *The Imagemakers* suggest that the NFB invented Canada, both as a political and cultural entity. As a stream-of-consciousness mosaic of clips from 60 NFB films (laboriously selected out of 600), the film traces the evolution and consolidation of a national consciousness in Canada.

Through the eye of the NFB documentary, Kish believes that Canada's changing perceptions of itself were as much invented as they were document-

ed, and that this was accomplished in a subtly cumulative manner. "In the beginning they had to sell the war, and in order to do this they had to create a country with an ideological base." Consequently, the birth of a national consciousness was as much a projection of the NFB's eye, as it was the object of it.

The NFB documentary evolved over the years out of a primitive but effective propagandist style into the more complex, essayist style which has now become popular with television tabloids like *The Fifth Estate* and *60 Minutes*. There was always something recognizably NFB about an NFB documentary: quietly competent, unassumingly hard-hitting but usually "safe", with an eye for the unusual, slightly humorous detail. Kish calls the NFB style "lyrical realism."

The documentary tradition in Canada traces its beginnings to the Canadian Pacific Railroad film unit. Kish maintains that documentary film is Canada's only folklore. But he detects a gradual disenchantment with the medium as it loses its audience to feature films. "At the NFB we have tried every style and every subject, and we are beginning to realize that even the worst feature film now gets better results. Take for example an average classroom film on menstruation. If we were to put it in a dramatic form and call it, say, 'The First Accident,' it would surely have a much greater impact that a dry documentary with the 'voice of God' explaining what happened."

Kish's colleagues at the Board have privately admitted to him that they would like to get out of documentary and into dramatic feature films. Robin Spry was one NFB filmmaker who did just that, leaving the Board in 1977. And although Spry has enjoyed a certain commercial success since then, he realizes that the Board is still the only film production outfit in Canada, aside from the CBC, where a filmmaker can

make "socially oriented films of specific value to Canadians, without having to worry about the film's international commercial value."

Because of this, he would like to see a freer exchange of talent both within and outside of the Board. More input from outside free-lancers and more ventures into the commercial milieu from NFB staffers would ideally benefit the Canadian film industry as a whole, while at the same time safeguarding against a ghetto mentality within the Board. However, at this time, the Board is in a financial straitjacket enforced by Ottawa, and does not as a consequence contract out much work to the private sector. Spry blames the government for allowing an institution to exist — which is there to serve a definite need — without the necessary funds to support its goals.

## A question of visibility

At 42 years of age, the Board has, perhaps unkindly, been compared to a "Grande Dame" suffering from institutional if not constitutional middle age. And like that middle-aged lady who can recall a more vital youth, it still wants to run on the steam of a past era, a time in which principles, priorities and directions were more clearly defined. But the Board no longer has the potent forces of John Grierson or the war to fuel it. It no longer enjoys the freedom of a more affluent and idealistic time which was the '60s. Like so many of our other institutions, it has fallen the graceless victim of more stringent and cynical times. If it is to survive its mid-life crisis, it must revitalize itself, its priorities, and re-align itself with the new realities in media technology. It must also make a concerted effort to seek increased exposure of its product.

Domville stated in his Commissioner's Report: "The fundamental purpose of making films... is to provide the individual Canadian with a sense of his or her own cultural identity. And that challenge is greater than ever. The cultural environment has changed and is changing radically. We are experiencing a veritable explosion in the cultural industries with almost exponential growth in the number and impact of new communications technologies. The danger is that communications growth and technical innovation become ends in themselves, divorced from the content they are meant to provide."

Jacques Bobet, executive producer of the *French Drama Program*, agrees. "There is a great deal of what I call 'video Muzak' in the communications market today... Film Board films are just one little part, and we strive desperately to rise above the level of this muzak." He fears that the NFB product risks being lost in an "enormous cloud" of audiovisual material, and to gain visibility it must be just that cut above the rest.

Bobet maintains the primacy of the NFB as a cultural agency rather than a straight information agency, stressing the cultural value of film above the informational value. "That cultural value can become a motivation which will change what you learn into what you can live with. There is no culture

As Canadians we've become accustomed to much rhetorical speculation on the subject of our National Film Board. The same redundant, almost clichéd statements are circulated time and again. So often we've heard that the NFB put Canada on the map, that it is our best known export and most effective public-relations tool. We hear NFB officials such as government film commissioner James de B. Domville lament that the Board enjoys a wider recognition internationally than it does within the borders of Canada. And when we complain about the Board, which we often do, the same tired litany arises every time. It is a waste of government funds and the tax-payers' money. It is an ivory tower, effete and inefficient. Its distribution system must be ineffective because the films do not have sufficient visibility. It is full of "deadwood" (it used to be full of "Commies"). It is an unfair competition to the independent filmmaker and private producer in Canada. And on it goes...

Granted, some of these claims contain substantial truth. But by repeatedly identifying certain catch issues, we run the risk of taking the Board for granted, as if its story has already been told, and as if it is no longer necessary for the Board to tell Canada's story. In the thick of the rhetoric we lose sight of the larger, more complex and crucial issues — the very same gut-level issues which are tearing this country apart today: political, economic and cultural.

If the NFB is unsure of what it is, or what it should be, it is only because Canada is unsure. And Canada is unsure because we do not know, and have never had, clear, consistent and above all visible images of who we are as Canadians. To a large extent the country remains invisible to itself. In this, the

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without emotions, and what is needed with information is a little bit of emotion."

Whereas it is true there can be no culture without emotions, it is even more obvious that there can be no valid cultural process without sufficient access to the cultural product. And this is where the NFB's visibility problem translates itself into a distribution problem. For the most part, the theatrical distribution channel in Canada has locked out the NFB and the independent Canadian producer in favor of the American product. The economics of the situation now dictate that the NFB must explore the distribution channels offered by the new technologies in the electronic media.

#### Distribution through the electronic media

Sandra Gathercole, former chairperson of the Council of Canadian Film-makers, and CRTC consultant, said at a recent symposium on the NFB held at the University of Toronto, that the future of the NFB lies in television, or more generally, in electronic distribution systems. "To trace the decline of the social influence of the NFB," claims Gathercole, "would be to trace the rise of the influence of TV... But we should not confuse this fact with not needing the NFB. We need the Film Board, the Film Board needs TV, the Film Board needs the country, but the country and TV need the Film Board even more."

So far there has been some conflict of interest between the NFB and the CBC, due more perhaps to a series of anomalies and petty jealousies than to anything else. The Board complains that the CBC does not give sufficient exposure to the NFB product, that it is poorly promoted beforehand, that it rarely receives prime-time coverage, and that some of the NFB's best films are even rejected outright. One such film, according to Kish, was Mike Rubbo's *Waiting for*

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*Fidel* (1974), which the CBC rejected on the grounds that it was "amateurish." "Next week the *New York Times* gave the film half a page, calling it the best film ever made on Cuba; and after seven years it is still going strong," claims Kish.

Donald Brittain admits that since he left the Board to work for the CBC twelve years ago, his films have always been assured of prime-time coverage, with enormous publicity behind them. But he understands the CBC's exasperations with the Board, citing the NFB's disrespect for sticking to air-date deadlines, or its bad track record in adhering to film running-time limits.

The relationship of the French Production section of the NFB to Radio-Canada is much more amicable. Director of French Production, Jean-Marc Garand, estimates that over the last three years the French unit has co-produced 35-40 films, which Radio-Canada agreed to pay for sight unseen. Currently they are in co-production on two features and a docu-drama series. Still, Garand would like to see a better access to Radio-Canada's grid in terms of getting the films televised on a pre-ordained dates, in particular time slots.

Despite the fundamental differences between the mediums of television and film, NFB distribution people are nevertheless well aware of the writing on the wall, and have finally begun to make some headway in the television market.

Director of distribution Bill Litwak talked enthusiastically about Videotron, "the most interesting of the on-going experimental distribution projects." Videotron is a Montreal-based, on-demand video service with approximately 30 channels at the present moment. The Videotron library holds about 600 NFB titles. Subscribers phone in and ask to see any given film which appears in the catalogue at a certain time. They are in turn told to switch on to a selected channel at a prescribed time. According to Litwak, NFB films are proving to be extremely popular.

As we move into the era of TV "narrowcasting" with increased channel capacity on the vertical as well as horizontal bands, it will be possible to have more and more special channels devoted to certain subjects.

Naturally there was great optimism

that the CBC-2 and Télé-2 channels, originally scheduled for Fall 1982, would have been potentially significant for the exposure of NFB and other Canadian films. Theoretically, the CBC would have had the support of the government and the CRTC to tap those presently underexposed and fallow cultural resources. And a user-pay service could have conceivably generated considerable revenues - which in turn could have been implemented to commission work from independent Canadian producers.

Litwak still envisions the second networks - when and if they are approved - as scheduling regular series of NFB films each week, programmed around specific themes. At this point, he sees CBC-2 and Télé-2 as much more realistic ways of getting NFB and Canadian films to the public than pay-TV.

Canada is presently the most 'cable-ized' country in the world, and as such, the NFB knows that it is in its best interest to explore this potential market. According to Litwak, cable TV is now utilizing NFB films on an ad hoc basis, primarily as filler material. But he would like to see NFB films on cable in a much more concerted fashion.

One of the things distribution is looking into for the next fiscal year is to select an area of the country for a pilot study, and with the cooperation of a cable company in that area, to start programming NFB films on a regular basis. A lot more money will be invested in promoting this project because one of the factors restricting the viewing of cable is adequate prior information of what's to be televised, and the fact that the competing major networks put a lot of money behind promotion. Built into this pilot study would be a feedback mechanism to identify the viewers and measure the impact of the films.

Says Sandra Gathercole: "The fundamental problem in this country is that we have a very sophisticated distribu-

tion capacity to carry imported images of another country. We do not have now and have never had, the capacity to produce and distribute the kind of product that speaks to ourselves. We have managed to sit with the NFB, one of the greatest film resources in the world and not use it. The fact that 1% of prime time of the national network is devoted to the national film agency is ridiculous. If we are serious about maintaining a presence in the North American media market that is coming at us, we just cannot afford not to use the resource which is the NFB."

#### Theatrical distribution

If it's a question of how to best utilize the NFB product, should the film purist cringe in horror as the deathknell is sounded for theatrical screenings of NFB films? Are we to mutely accept that in future the NFB will discharge its mandate primarily through television?

"Personally I think a mechanism has to be found to create incentives for the distribution in Canadian cinemas of Canadian films," says Bob Verrall. "Quotas and levies on the box office have been talked about for years. We appear to be the only country in the world that doesn't consider we should be doing something like this. We watch hundreds of millions of dollars cross the border southward each year, and we go on pretending we can be an equal partner without some regulation which will create the necessary (Canadian) market."

Many lobby groups such as the Council of Canadian Film Makers, the Canadian Conference of the Arts, and past Secretaries of State, have put a lot of thought into how legislation in favour of Canadian films could be worked out. But somehow it never gets past the talk stage.

Says Verrall: "We know there are people in provincial governments who are ready (to table legislation) but somehow it never gets looked at as a priority of the first reign. Whether the Applebaum-Hébert Commission (The Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee) will be the instrument remains to be seen."

Indeed the situation for Canadian film is as adverse today as it has always been, with the distribution system totally dominated by the Americans. But as Jacques Bobet predicts, "When you try to reverse patterns of cultural domination (through government legislation), it translates very quickly into money, and then you will see the resistance you are met with."

Bill Litwak notes that this type of cultural legislation would not be final because it comes under provincial rather than federal jurisdiction. "So if this legislation for creating incentive measures does happen, it would happen in a few provinces but not necessarily across the country. It is by no means an easy area, but we have been trying to increase an awareness of the problem."

The theatrical distribution issue is at best thorny and sensitive. But let us not deceive ourselves. The Canadian product, even if it was given the extra push it needs to make the commercial screen



Albert Kish



William Litwak

- be it through quotas, levies on the box office, incentives or the like - would still be competing with the American product. To be competitive we must produce quality films that Canadians are going to want to watch. And to produce quality films, we need a massive infusion of funds into the production industry. Without funding we are not going to get the talent in this country working often enough to produce the kind of quality we need to be competitive. As Verrall emphasizes, a good director is not going to develop the skills he needs to compete in the marketplace if he only makes a film every five years. There must be continuity of work, and this requires a constant source of funds. "Without this infusion of funds, the film industry in this country is a dead duck."

**The NFB and the private sector**

For NFB features co-produced with the private sector, the capital cost allowance will continue to be important. Some of the partners the Board will be co-producing with will be using the tax shelters as a way of raising their share of the money. Thus the Board has officially, through the Film Commissioner, declared its support for the continuation of the CCA. Although the tax shelter succeeded in creating a massive infusion of funds into the film industry in 1978/79, cultural objectives were lost sight of. It became an industry of dealmaking over filmmaking.

"To guarantee the money in the first place," explains Verrall, "we had to guarantee that we were making international movies - whatever they are - which would sell in the American marketplace. It's now doubtful that many of them will even do that. So we, the collective 'we' being the filmmakers, have made some mistakes. We have been guilty of a failure of imagination, and the investors will be much more cautious now. But the tax shelter could

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still be an important instrument with which to raise enough money to sustain a volume of work which will keep the talent in this country busy."

The CFDC was originally established as a complement to the NFB. The NFB was to be primarily responsible for documentaries and/or non-feature films, while the CFDC was to stimulate the making of feature films in the private sector. Gathercole would like to see this guiding line changed in the future so that it reads: "The CFDC makes commercial films aimed at making money, if that is possible in this market, and the NFB makes those films for us and about us, independent of the marketplace and independent of whether or not they're going to make money."

The distinction between the NFB and the private sector, however, is not likely to be as clearly defined as all that. Their interrelationship is growing increasingly contentious and complex.

When the NFB was created 42 years ago, there was no commercial film industry capable of producing the films the country needed, so there was no question of the Board posing any direct threat to the private sector. Today the picture is different, with a viable commercial industry legitimately complaining that it cannot compete with a government-funded production agency which undersells the private sector product, and which coordinates the film requirements of government departments.

There is some question as to whether or not the NFB *should* continue to coordinate the films sponsored by government departments and agencies. With the proliferation of these departments today, previously clear lines of responsibility have become blurred in overlapping authorities.

Assistant film commissioner François Macerola admits that the commercial sector is now capable of producing 95% of sponsored films. He believes that the Board should retain the role of executive producer of these sponsored films, but that their execution should be increasingly left up to the commercial producers.

"We didn't wait for the private sector to get in touch with us. We contacted them to say we'd like a new agreement concerning the Sponsored Program,

which won't be based on the financial volume of production... What I would like to find is a kind of cinematographic *raison d'être* for the NFB's involvement in the execution of films from the Sponsored Program, rather than a financial, mathematical solution," states Macerola.

This "cinematographic *raison d'être*" infers a kind of artistic value judgement which would be left up to the discretion of the NFB. Straightforward information films, such as shorts on the metric system or fire prevention, would be delegated to the private sector, whereas the Board would continue to involve itself with the more noble, developmental or cultural undertakings such as the *Santé Afrique* or *Challenge for Change* series.

In any event, it appears obvious that for financial reasons, and in the pursuit of Canada's cultural goals, there must be a closer collaboration between private and public sector film production in Canada. And this collaboration is likely to be catalyzed by an increasing awareness of a commonality of interest be-

tween private and public sector. There must be a continuity of a certain volume of production to ensure the viability of a Canadian film industry. As Macerola predicts: "The price we will have to pay in order to have a real Canadian film industry is that we will have to join forces. We can no longer rely on the private investors."

**The NFB: A Crown Corporation?**

For the past two years there has been some talk about the possibility of the NFB being reorganized as a crown corporation. Macerola believes that the Federal Cultural Review Committee will make a recommendation to that effect. The Board's funds now stand at a composite ratio of 75% government subsidies to 25% revenues from sales and rentals. Federal government agencies like the Board operate under fixed budgetary constraints; the Board, for example, has always had difficulty convincing Ottawa that 85% of its budget is spent during the summer - which is usual in the film industry.

As a crown corporation, the Board would have greater administrative flexibility over the disbursement of funds, and the freedom to transfer funds from one year to the next.

Says Macerola: "With crown corporation status it would be easier to adjust ourselves to the production of films. Our first goal in becoming a crown corporation would be to better answer the needs of our filmmakers and our distributors, instead of answering the bureaucratic needs of the various government ministries and departments."

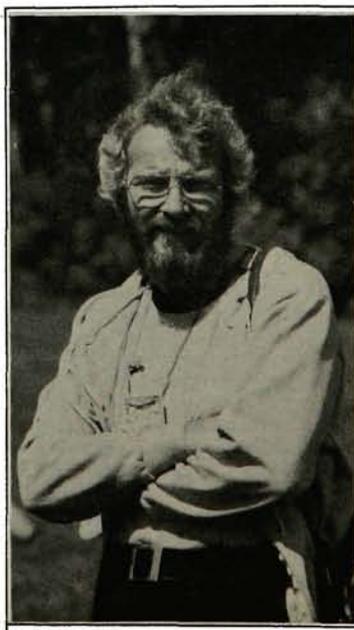
**T**he NFB is currently undergoing a renovation, and the changes promise to be more than just cosmetic. Structurally the Board is less than sound. Like any institution which has grown too big, it has become over-bureaucratized, wasteful, and inefficient. Hopefully, measures taken in such directions as the regionalization program, co-production with the private sector, crown corporation status, or a more wholly-integrated cooperation between production and distribution, will render it more responsive to its mandate.

The institution still exists for quasi-moral reasons of public interest, but the moral emphasis seems to be shifting in reflection of the times. The previously-prescribed documentary film with a social conscience is evolving into a prescription which promotes film as more of a cultural product. Whether or not this is the magic formula remains to be seen.

The fact is that 42 years and 4000 films later, the Board is, like the country, still waging a battle for credibility. Clearly, more effective ways of improving access to Canadian culture must be found, if only to improve the nation's capacity to know itself as distinct from its southern counterpart. Until then, no cultural institution will be free from serious scrutiny. ●



Jean-Marc Garand



Bob Verrall