



Technology can be beautiful, as **The Challenger** proves

The Challenger: An Industrial Romance

d./p. Stephen Low **co-d.** Michael Rubbo, Roger Hart **exec. p.** Roman Kroiter **assoc. p.** Michael Rubbo, Harry Gulkin **ed.** Roger Hart **sc./narr.** Stephen Low **d.o.p.** Andreas Poulsson **sd. rec.** Bev Davidson **sd. ed.** Ken Page **re-rec.** Hans-Peter Strobl **p.c.** National Film Board of Canada (1980), in co-operation with the Government of Canada Industry Trade and Commerce **col.** 16mm **running time** 57 min. 23 sec. **dist.** National Film Board.

Although it was probably not Montreal director Stephen Low's conscious intention with **The Challenger: An Industrial Romance**, he has succeeded in making a film which proudly lives up to the National Film Board's original mandate to produce films which instill in Canadians a sense of pride in belonging to Canada. But **The Challenger** accomplishes this sincerely, without affectation and with only subtle propaganda. The film tells a Canadian success story — a gamble which paid off — and goes a long way toward relieving what Canadair chief Fred Kearns calls the inherent Canadian inferiority complex.

The Challenger is a documentary which explores Canadair's great corporate gamble to be number one in the executive jet market. With unwavering optimism and faith, the company embarked upon an industrial adventure which could either pull them back from the brink of insolvency or become "the most embarrassing industrial turkey in Canadian history."

The Challenger executive jet was a \$200 million investment which eventually proved to be "the greatest idea ever built

with Canadian dollars." Developed from an original idea conceived by Bill Lear of Lear Jet fame, the Challenger promised to fly faster on less fuel and be more comfortable than any of its competitors. The remarkable thing about the Challenger is that in spite of the fact that it was a mere idea on paper for many years, it nevertheless sold faster than the extant jets of its competitors.

Low conceived the idea of making a film about the Challenger after the project was well underway at Canadair. With a guarantee of the firm's full cooperation, he sold the NFB on the idea. The film took two years to shoot and another six months in the editing. Low conceded that the proximity of the Canadair plant to the NFB allowed him a broader perspective on the project's progress. He was informed of the events as they developed at Canadair and could jump in a vehicle with his equipment and crew and be just down the road on location in a matter of a few minutes.

The thoroughness which this accessibility afforded is apparent in the film. Virtually every aspect of the jet's development — from design stage through high finance funding, politics, aeronautical engineering, corporate meetings and international salesmanship — is covered as the film cross-cuts from one development to another. And out of this action emerges a mounting tension of suspense as the plane evolves from idea to design to fact and as credibility builds against the doubt projected by competitors. All this time the Challenger is gradually emerging as a personality. We first hear of it as an idea discussed by Bill Lear and Fred Kearns.

We then see it as a design on paper, as a cardboard mock-up, as parts of the whole on engineers' drafting tables, as pieces in assembly plants. Piece by piece it is assembled in a hangar. The sounds of gently whistling wind and eerily plucked strings are the sounds of distilled concentration as the silent workers bend to their tasks.

The camera tentatively approaches the dark, silent, and as yet foetus-like aircraft with a circular movement suggesting an awed and reverential distance. Mysterious, spacey music gives us the feeling we are in the presence of some as yet undefined personality waiting to be born.

Low utilizes his keen filmmaker's sense in structuring his shots so that they appear to anthropomorphise the machine. The Challenger comes to life as we see a rear shot of the plane in the dark depths of the hangar, awaiting its debut into the world. As it finally rolls out, sleek and shining, into the sunshine and the fanfare of trumpets and a cheering crowd, the camera dollies after it. We then have an outside shot of its nose emerging from the hangar, a high angle of its entire body, then some close-ups. The editing generates a feeling of excited curiosity and exultant discovery.

The film's heroes are there to welcome the Challenger's unveiling: Jean Chrétien, then Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce who had the optimistic foresight to convince the Federal Government to loan millions to the project; Canadair President Fred Kearns, the calm and powerful ex-Spitfire flyer who pushed the idea from conception to birth; Harry Halton, the company's chief design engineer who gambled with his own life as he supervised the complicated construction while confined to a wheelchair. These three men along with the American super-salesman Barry Smith, who executed a brilliant and effective sales campaign of "humble arrogance," are, aside from the Challenger itself, the film's central characters.

Low both wrote and narrated the script. It is a well-written script, but the narration, beginning in a somewhat low-keyed monotone, detracts from the exciting content. However, the unemphatic narration does add a personal and sincere touch.

The Challenger was recently awarded the Silver Award at the San Francisco Film Festival and was voted Best of Category winner in Commercial Sales and Public Relations.

Lyn Martin