

# Film Board favorites down the years

by William Weintraub

Recently, during a sleepless night, I sat down with a National Film Board catalogue to choose my 15 favorite films of the last 35 years. With so many tempting titles, it was not an easy task; but by 4 a.m. I came up with the list that follows. How many of them have you seen recently?

**1947**

**Où sont les chansons d'antan?**

4 minutes, color, 35mm

To the haunting tune of an old Iroquois lullaby, sprightly puppets dance, thanks to the animator's wizardry. They are attired in the colorful costumes of British and French soldiers of the 18th Century. At the climax of the dance, they beat their swords into plowshares, over each others' heads, to illustrate the unity that Canada finds in its diversity.

**1951**

**We're All a Bit Nuts**

32 minutes, b & w, 16mm

It's no longer shameful to be mentally ill. John's parents are disturbed about his unnatural attachment to his pet turtle, feeling that a boy of 38 should not act that way. But they are cheered up when a kindly psychiatrist explains that John is merely "off his rocker" and will have to be locked up. It all started in childhood, Dr. Kalbfuss explains, and members of the community should not snigger so much. For professional audiences only.

Filmmaker and author William Weintraub wrote the screenplay for the NFB's comedy feature *Why Rock the Boat?* which won an Etrog. His novel *The Underdogs* (McClelland and Stewart, 1979) was on the Canadian best-seller lists.

**1953**

**In Union There is Strength**

18 minutes, b & w, 16mm

Something happened a couple of months ago at the company picnic and Local 861 of the Canadian Brotherhood of Steamplaters and Dieshafters (CIO) is up in arms. Stan Lubbock, a young shop steward, weighs the grievance made by Miss Grace Plunkett, of shipping. Could Management, as represented at the picnic by Mr. Jack Craddock, actually have done this to Gracie? The pros and cons are given and it is left for the audience to decide whether there should be a nationwide strike or whether Gracie should simply be a good sport and settle for a bit of sick leave come February.

**1955**

**Muscles of Molybdenum**

46 minutes, b & w, 35mm

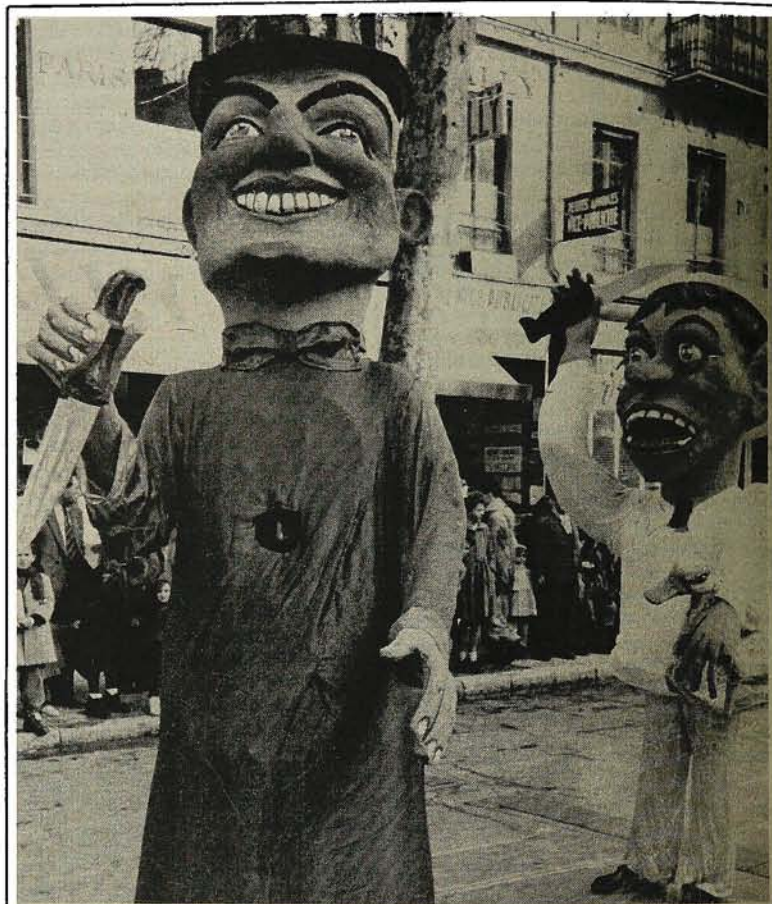
Giant earthmovers bite into the tundra, mountains are shifted, and the camp cook cries "Soup's on!" as Canadian mining experts prepare to wrest rare molybdenum from the soil of Belcher Island. Here is the story of molybdenum - from assay to di-oxyfraction, from crusher to smelter, from sulphiding to alloying, from re-carbonization to petrodeactivation - as seen through the eyes of an Eskimo boy and his dog.

**1956**

**Crafters of the Valley**

9 minutes, color, 35mm

Ever since they came to Canada, Bjorn Bjornsterjen and his wife Ulgga have potted in their own kiln. At first, their purple-glazed ceramics were known only locally, but now they are famous throughout the Pasquoidiac Valley.



● Male chauvinist behaviour is denounced in *Home Porno*. Like many NFB productions, this documentary shines a fearless searchlight of truth into the darkness of contemporary social evils.

● Grace Plunkett and Jack Craddock relax during a lighthearted moment at the company picnic in the searing NFB documentary *In Union There Is Strength*. Grace's union later filed a grievance because of her surprise pregnancy.



**1959**

**The Noble Compromise**

29 minutes, b & w, 16mm

It is 1866. Sir Henry Shadbolt, least famous of the Fathers of Confederation, has had a tumultuous night in the Legislature. With bitter dispute still ringing in his ears, he trudges wearily home through the snow. In his bedroom, he looks down tenderly at his sleeping wife, the lovely and helpful Agatha. If only she knew the trouble he was having with the Grits... he tiptoes across the room, unbuttoning his wing collar. Imagine his surprise, as he opens the cupboard door, to find Sir Charles Tupper standing there. As he ejects Lady Agatha and Tupper into the snow, Sir Henry Shadbolt realizes that the moment for decision has come. Should Prince Edward Island really join this dubious federation?

**1962**

**Candid Car**

29 minutes, b & w, 16mm

The automobile pollutes, congests, kills. To find out what men in the automobile industry plan to do about it, cameras were concealed in the Salesmen's Washroom of Honest Al's Used Cars. The film consists of a lively and only slightly-censored cross-section of Canadian conversation, covering such topics as hockey, women, money, horse-racing and beer. The fact that automobile safety is never once mentioned proves the filmmakers' contention that Canadians need more films on this urgent subject.

**1964**

**It's A Small World**

59 minutes, b & w, 16mm

Robbie is a young Scottish salmon gillie; Frank is an autoworker in Oshawa; M'hwana is a youthful giraffe herder in Uganda; Philippe is an apprentice croupier in Monte Carlo. You might think they have nothing in common, but one thing unites them - they are all in this film.

1969

**Plinth**

16 minutes, color, 83mm

Filed in 83-millimeter Jumbo-scope, this epochal production was made to celebrate the 64th birthday of the Province of Saskatchewan. It had its premiere there, projected from the ceiling to the floor of the largest grain elevator in Estevan, with members of the audience lying suspended in hammocks all the way down. It's a fast-cut, multi-screen rhapsody, with sequences filmed in New Zealand, Lapland, Swaziland, Newfoundland, Somaliland, Cleveland and St. Hyacinthe, Quebec. "Essentially the film relates the myth of Medusa and the Seven Sacred Cucumbers," explains its director, Cordovan Rubric. "It is our hope that audiences will leave the theater feeling that they finally understand the Meaning of Life."

1972

**Hanging Around in Boobapur**

58 minutes, color, 16mm

Filmmaker Rolf Bunkle goes to Boobapur, in northern India, to study the ethos of a group of colorful street urchins. Bunkle is noted for appearing in his own movies, and in this film we see him learning various age-old skills from the Boobapur urchins, including the elements of shoplifting in the bazaar. The arrest of Bunkle by the authorities makes for an exciting sequence, and the film ends with a sad comment on the corruptibility of local officialdom when the Canadian Consul finds that the only way he can secure the filmmaker's release from jail is by paying the warden a bribe of 6,000 rupees.



● Honoria Fingerbaum, the renowned feminist activist, is the narrator of *Home Porno*.

1986

**The Helping Hand**

39 minutes, color, 16mm

In the lonely outpost of Often-Begone, the squid jiggers face economic ruin. The more they jib, the less squid they seem to have. The provincial government sends them an ice-crushing plant, but it doesn't help much. An economist from the university comes to show them how to set up a co-operative, but there is still hunger, scrofula and illiteracy. Salvation comes only when the squid jiggers send for Mr. Semyon Zagorin, of the Fisheries Development Board, Leningrad. Mr. Zagorin shows them how to set up a Soviet, and how to dynamite the headquarters of the United Fish Wholesale Corporation, Ltd. The squid jiggers are now prosperous and literate, and to show their appreciation they have recently sent a delegation to Colombo, Ceylon, to instruct underdeveloped fishermen there in the manufacture of plastic bombs.

1988

**The Be-In**

175 minutes, color, in 73 interlocking triple-concept loops

As an experiment in generational gap-assessment, the Film Board hired 47 young drop-outs to stage a Be-In. Seventy-eight media-deprived elementary-school pupils were brought to the Be-In, to observe and react. A cross-section of 32 kindergarten teachers was given 8mm cameras to film the reaction of the elementary-school pupils in their confrontation with the Be-In environment. When developed, the 8mm footage was screened for the drop-outs, whose post-adolescent reactions to the pre-pubescent assessments of the pupils were fed into a computer. The resultant grid will eventually be incorporated into a multimedia filmstrip kit which will include a sample of Precambrian schist, three pruning hooks and a fresh orange.



● Director Ron Englund relaxes during a lighthearted moment in the shooting of *Never a Shrimp Boat*, in the swamps of Louisiana.

1975

**Never A Shrimp Boat**

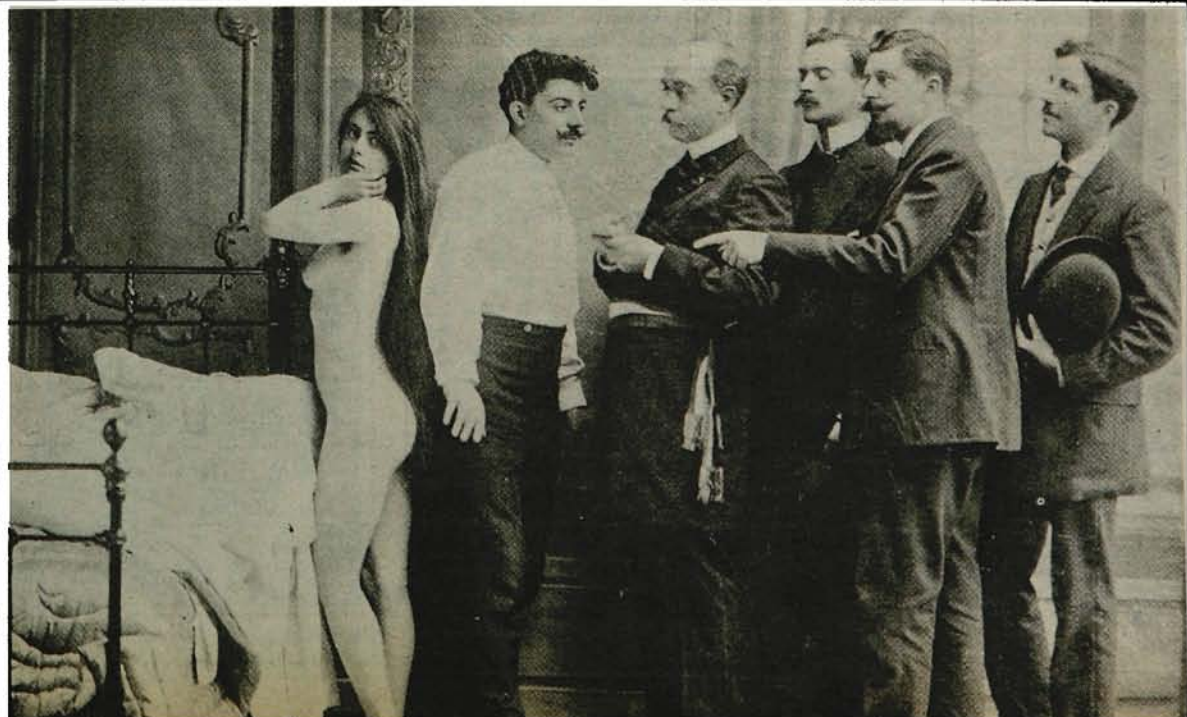
58 minutes, color, 16mm

"But in the end, Jack Snodgrass flew far too close to the sun, and the wax of his hopes melted, betrayed by dreams of glory - and a five-cent cigar." This striking line of narration comes over haunting, crepuscular shots of skaters on the frozen Rideau Canal in Ronald Englund's award-winning documentary about expatriate Canadian shrimp fishermen eking out a precarious living in the swamps of Louisiana. Film buffs will notice that the narration of this film, written in Englund's inimitable rhythmic style, is identical - word for word - with the narration of another film Englund was working on at the same time, about the Montreal Expos baseball team. "Through a clerical error, we gave the narrator the wrong script to read during the recording session," Ron Englund explains, "and nobody noticed anything wrong until we looked at the answer print. My co-workers thought it incongruous, hearing all this baseball talk over shots of shrimp boats at dawn, but I personally found its lack of relevance to be strangely poetic. So we let it go." Englund was right, as usual, as the film went on to win the Golden Sardine Award at the Lisbon Festival of Piscatorial Productions.



● Bjorn Bjornsterjen, renowned pottery maker, relaxes during a lighthearted moment in the NFB's lyrical *Crafters of the Valley*.

● NFB filmmaker Rolf Bunkle (white shirt) is arrested by the authorities in Boobapur, India, where he went to film the habits of colorful street urchins. One of the urchins may be seen at extreme left.



1978

**Getting High on Ecology**

28 minutes, color, 16mm

The Throgmorton Brothers, Cliff and Griff, live at Squelch Bay, on Vancouver Island. Determined to do something about the ecology, through appropriate technology, they build a mulch pile out of their daily potato peelings and apple cores. They pour a bit of Pepsi-Cola onto the mulch and within a few days it is fermenting nicely and giving off methane gas. They collect this gas and store it in their Pepsi bottles (family size). Then they build a small, two-man Zeppelin out of old coat hangers and green plastic garbage bags. Filling the wee airship with the methane gas, they soar high above Squelch Bay and set their course northward for Nanaimo, where they will attend a conference on Solar Refrigeration. Their personal, fuel-efficient Zeppelin will have cost them only \$12.78, after they get their refund on the Pepsi-Cola bottles.

1982

**Home Porno**

2 hours, color, 35mm

The Women's Movement is deeply disturbed by the chauvinism of cynical young husbands who persuade their wives that it's O.K. to set up their home videotape cameras in the bedroom, to record moments of conjugal activity. Our film shows Hubert and Melissa Upjohn, a typical young couple, sinking ever deeper into this contemporary mire. To underscore the squalor of their so-called "hobby," the bedroom sequences in our film are very brightly lit, with no details lost in the shadows. And there are scenes (not for the squeamish) in which Hubert and Melissa exchange videotapes with other young couples in the neighborhood. Our film (presented strictly as a public service) is narrated by the renowned feminist activist Honoria Fingerbaum, who finds the visuals so deplorable that she can barely look at them. Occasionally bursting into tears because of the profundity of her emotions, Ms. Fingerbaum draws attention to Hubert Upjohn's brutally macho propensities, as demonstrated on one particular evening when he appears to be in such a hurry to get on with the videotaping that he forgets to take his socks off. ●