

# CONTRASTS & SIMILARITIES

At the Tenth International Film Festival in Stratford, festival-goers found themselves face to face with two ebullient and expressive young filmmakers: Jerry Bruck Jr. and Michael Barry. Bruck came with *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, a 62-minute, black and white documentary, and Barry with *The Second Coming of Suzanne* – a 90-minute colour feature.

They shared striking similarities in outlook and approach – both filmmakers are actively (almost obsessively) involved in making films *they* want to make, yet they have two remarkably diverse approaches and vastly different film styles.

Jerry Bruck is a documentary filmmaker working in black and white out of choice. A Canadian from Montreal, Bruck's third film concerns U.S. activist journalist I.F. Stone, yet he deals with a universal subject – the right of every individual to have access to the truth and the right to express the truth.

Jerry Bruck Jr.

*Other films by Bruck: Celebration: The Counter-Inaugural, 1969, a 59-minute black and white documentary completed in 1970 dealing with former U.S. President Nixon's first inauguration. (A re-release is planned).*

*The Old Corner Store Will Be Knocked Down By The Wreckers, (1970) a 22-minute b/w film available through the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, Toronto. From noted urbanologist Jane Jacobs: "Jerry Bruck's film on a Montreal corner store tells more about city neighbourhoods and city life than whole textbooks on sociology and planning. It is also funny, surprising, tragic: in sum, a piece of real truth."*

*I. F. Stone's Weekly – Photographed/edited/written/produced/directed by Jerry Bruck Jr. Narrated by Tom Wicker. Location sound by Brian Ferguson and Nancy Firmin, Robert Leacock, Curt Wittig, Mark Woodcock, Gerardine Wurzburg, Sarah Yardley. Re-mix Engineer – Paul Jaeger. Distributed in 16mm and 35mm by the I.F. Stone Project, P.O. Box 315, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, USA 07417.*

Focussing on I.F. Stone and the newspaper he researched, wrote, edited, proofread, published and mailed out for 19 years after being blacklisted by the establishment press during the infamous McCarthy era, the film's vitality is irresistible and stimulating. All one's mental faculties come alive as the factual material is conveyed in a fast-paced blend of original footage, videotape excerpts, newsfilm, interviews, and "Izzy's" words both spoken and superimposed on the screen. The result is a fleeting, vivid glimpse into the world of I.F. Stone, writer and truth-seeker *extraordinaire*. A fine documentary.

Michael Barry, an American from Los Angeles, was specifically inspired by the writings of Canadian poet Leonard Cohen yet he also deals with a universal subject – the destruction of innocence by negative forces fostered in modern society – in a style Barry terms "surreal American fantasy".

Jerry Bruck, Michael Barry and their films provided a memorable lesson in the universality of filmmaking. Their presence also underlined the essential stupidity of insular nationalism (or, in Canada, anti-American sentiments) especially as they relate to the arts, for their work has greatly benefited from a thorough cross-pollination of cultures.

The following portraits include excerpts from the discussion periods held during the Festival as well as from interviews with the writer:

– Laurinda Hartt

Michael Barry

*The Second Coming of Suzanne, 90 minutes, 35mm, colour. Written and directed by Michael Barry. Production: The Barry Film Company, 1901 Avenue of the Stars, Century City, Los Angeles. Executive Producer: Gene Barry. Producer: Ralph Burris. Photography: Isidore Mankofsky. Editing and Montages: Frank Mazzola. The song "Suzanne" written and performed by Leonard Cohen (courtesy of Columbia Records). Original Music: Don Caverhill. Art Director: Elayne Ceder. Leading Players: Sondra Locke (Suzanne), Paul Sand (the Artist), Jared Martin (Logan), Richard Dreyfuss (Clavius), Gene Barry (TV Commentator), Kari Aualos (the Child), Gloria Stockton (the fat lady).*

*The Second Coming of Suzanne* is Michael Barry's first feature, a fantastical commentary on the state of American society, inspired by Leonard Cohen's song/poem "Suzanne". A vivid collage of symbolic images meshed with deliberately overdrawn characterizations and a minimum of plot, this volatile mixture has elicited both enthusiastic praise and violent anger from viewers. Though the flood of symbolism threatens to overwhelm genuinely haunting imagery, frequent passages of brilliance and an overall tone of gentle humanism make it impossible to dismiss this film lightly. One cannot deny the fascination for its ability to evoke intensely personal and unpredictable responses in each viewer.

## Origins of "Weekly"

"I wanted to make a film about what a free press was or could be. This was in 1970 when Nixon's doubletalk and doublethink had become institutionalized in newspaper headlines and on television and it was scary . . . I figured that approaching that idea through I.F. Stone's newspaper would be a way to make it interesting to watch. The second part of the idea was that if one man, working alone and from public material available to anybody, could uncover so much of what was going on beneath the surface – what did that say about the large journalistic organizations that bring us the bulk of the news every day? It suggests they weren't doing much of a job. . . . Certainly, there's no question that it's Izzy who makes the film come to life."

I.F. Stone's first response to someone making a film about him was that it was "nutty" and that Bruck was simply "crazy" to do it. By the time he saw the completed film, Izzy Stone loved it enough to make personal appearances at showings. Bruck's initial shooting commenced in 1970 and work proceeded in fits and starts over the next three years, directed by the presence (or lack) of money.

"I. F. Stone's *Weekly* was not an expensive film to make at all," states Bruck. "It cost roughly \$32,000 including a certain amount of expenses for myself over the three years." His approach to film involves a minimal number of people with basic necessary equipment. Bruck was producer, director, cinematographer, editor and writer of the narration, expanding this crew of one to a total of seven or eight as various people recorded location sound during three years' production. To pay his rent, Bruck worked on odd jobs between shooting periods. He was also involved in editing a collection of Stone's writings entitled "Polemics and Prophecies 1967-1970" published by Random House.

Completed and released in the fall of 1973, *Weekly* has won international acclaim, awards including the New York American Film Festival's Emily Award and the John Grierson Award, became this year's Underground Hit at Cannes, and was finally shown on Canadian television a year after its completion – delayed, in part, due to concern over its "lack of Canadian content".

## Distributing Your Own

From the outset, Jerry Bruck Jr. has promoted and distributed his own film. Why? "Half the reason was that I felt the only person crazy enough to make sure that it would be seen would be the person crazy enough to have made it in the first place. If I were a businessman, I would consider Bruck's film ideas a very risky investment. . . . Furthermore, the reason for my own distribution of this film is as a survival tactic. Making documentary films, independently, not pre-sold, is no way to get rich. If independent film production on this continent is to become self-sustaining, the basic ingredient is a direct connection between the producers and their paying markets. And I had utter confidence that I would see it through because I had that kind of personal commitment to it."

"I've been criticized by many distributors as a filmmaker who has turned into a distributor. The spectre conjured up is of somebody who puts aside what he should be doing in order to distribute a film. But the process of fund-raising often takes much longer than what I've spent distributing the film. If filmmakers do their own distribution and have any success at it, the net result will be more films. I think that is a good net effect."

"After I started, a number of other advantages became clear. The first one was money. Since January (1974) I. F. Stone's *Weekly* has not only recovered its production costs, but a considerably higher figure that was spent in making prints, promotion, posters, and all sorts of other enormous

## Origins of "The Second Coming of Suzanne"

"I heard the song "Suzanne" seven years ago. The first verse deals with a girl and gave me the image of a very pure young woman. The second verse deals with Christ, and the third concerns the girl again. Cohen doesn't interlace them – they're very separate. But from it I visualized the image of a female Christ – a young woman on the cross. I didn't know if this was what Cohen had in mind, but the idea stayed in my head for a very long time so I started to write about it in order to vent my obsession."

"We had gone ahead and made the entire project without the rights to the song. Cohen's lawyer had said, "No rights", and although I had the rights for other versions, I wanted Leonard Cohen's version. And his blessing. So I finally went to him with a rough cut. I was very scared – I had admired him for so long and his work has influenced me greatly – and here I was, showing him work that was vibrating off *his*. It was a very frightening screening. When it was over, he blew my mind! He was overwhelmed and he *gave* me the song. He said that to him, it was a perfect visual representation – an extension of the song, and that "We must have hooked up. It's yours – for free!" I don't know how I 'hooked up' but Cohen feels the film captured very much what he was saying."

## The Logistics

Michael Barry's work as writer/director and prime mover extended over three and a half years from screenplay to realization – dictated by the flow and ebb of money. "We'd get our financing and then it would fall apart. It was agonizing." The estimated budget is \$800,000 *on paper* – a projection of the ultimate cash outlay once all deferred salaries and expenses are totalled. Working totally outside "the big studio trap", Barry assembled a small union crew (working for scale – still the largest expenditure of available cash) and a 32-member cast working for half-scale through an experimental designation granted by the Screen Actors Guild. Elaborate production concerns were demanded by the surreal style, but most expenses – including equipment and lab costs and Barry's and editor/producer Frank Mazzola's salaries – were completely deferred.

"The way it all came together was through a love of film. All actors and crew members got minimal cash, plus promises of deferred cash and a percentage. The making of *Suzanne* was, in the truest sense, a gathering of artists – each fulfilling his or her specialty and working against the wishes of agents or managers. The artists were completely receptive to my personal approach – side-steppint agents – and each alliance made the next easier to achieve. Shooting was very businesslike – a tight two-month schedule, six days a week, 13 and 14 hours per day on location in and around San Francisco. This is not just one man's project – it's a composite of energies from start to finish. Each artist, on both sides of the camera, gave *everything*."

## Comments/reactions to criticism that the total budget reflects a "rich culture"

"The money wasn't spent because the film came from a rich culture or a rich bank. It was made by a lot of individuals who were willing to put up 'X' amount of time – I spent *three years* going from individual to individual begging, borrowing and putting it all together piece by piece! Not with cash – that's all on paper! Very little cash has been spent yet. Everybody's riding with it, trying to make the project work. Our culture was willing to support it and I'm glad it was willing to do that rather than spend the money on three car commercials or something like that. I'm pretty pleased and proud that a film as experimental as ours could be made at

expenses including subtitled prints for Cannes. Now it's starting to make money and will finance future films."

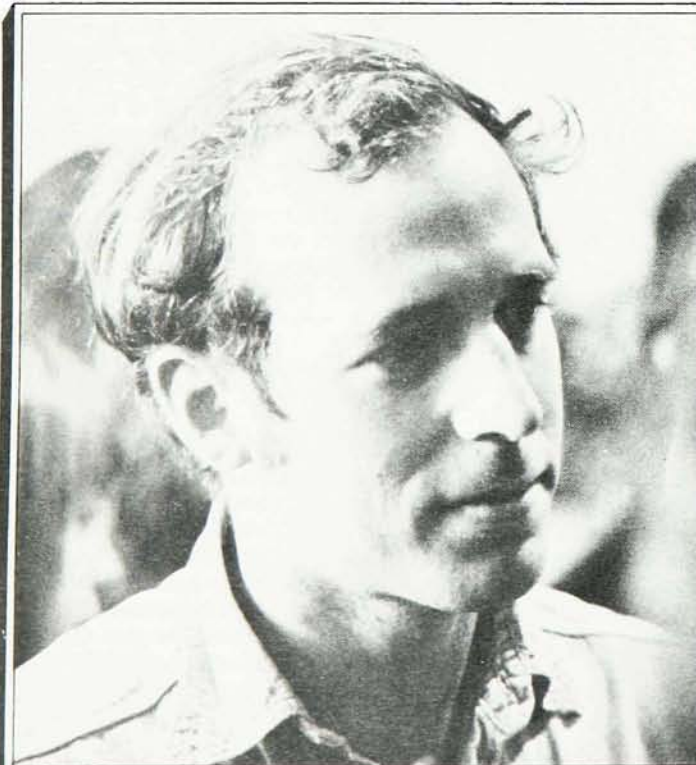
"I'm not going to spend my whole life distributing this film. I'm not going to spend more than another three months working on it full time. Filmmaking and distribution are two different emotional worlds. Producers and distributors *do not* share a community of interests. It should be generally realized that the daily practice in all forms of show business is a jungle daily practice. Everybody is battling, fighting everybody else with all kinds of dirty tricks. And to really enter into the process of the next movie, I'm going to have to step out of this. But you can never step out of it altogether. I see one day a week forever, writing special letters to people and so on. . . ."

Bruck plans to write down his experiences with film distribution and make the information available as soon as possible. "It's going to be about how to distribute films. Over the years this has been done by other filmmakers with other films and with relatively good results, but no-one has heard about those and how it's being done. I'm trying to codify and write down everything I've learned over the last year and make it available to anybody else who wants to do the same thing. As soon as I can type it up, it will be available for a dollar through the mail."

"What I'm trying to do in my 'pushy and arrogant' way, is to provide filmmakers with information that will help them look out for themselves. I want to demonstrate that one person - working alone, without prior experience, with only the haziest idea of what needs to be done, and certainly with no working capital to start with - can do this on his or her own."

### The Future

"I want to continue making documentaries and I want to continue making them in black and white - it permits a style of filmmaking that I think is important. I want to make documentaries that interpret the world and maybe in some small way help make it better." □



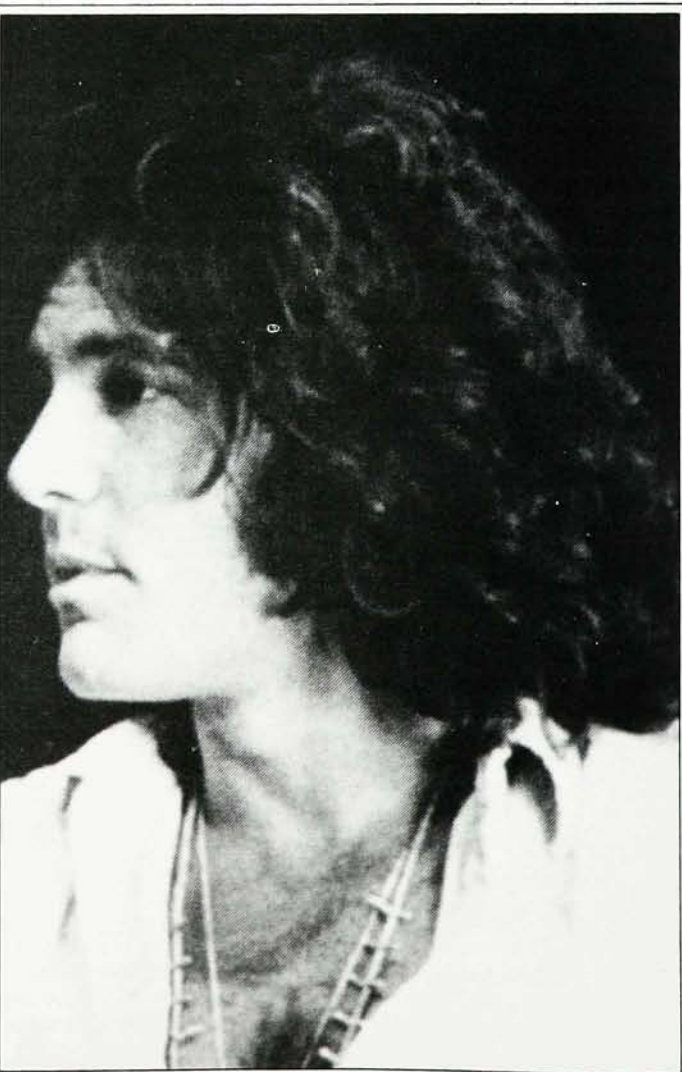
that level of quality and with as little cash."

Barry acknowledged that he is "going way out on a limb" by choosing to work in a commercial format (35mm colour features) with non-commercial concepts. However, his basic interest is in bringing experimental film approaches into the mainstream of film production, and he is prepared to risk rejection by both camps.

### The Future

"I don't think you can predict what is going to happen with this film. First I spent a year writing and rewriting it. Then directing and editing. *That* was a long process. Now we are selling and exploring where our market is. I resisted it at first, but now I'm realizing that it's part of the process. It's tiring, but if you want to maintain autonomy, you have to learn. I don't know anything about film festivals and distribution and all that - Frank and I are learning as we go."

**The Second Coming of Suzanne** has already won three awards at the 1974 Atlanta International Film Festival (Best First Feature for Michael Barry, Best Film Editor for Frank Mazzola, and Best Cinematographer for Isidore Mankofsky). "We want to make the next film together too. Frank and I want to start a company and trade roles making films - I'll write and produce and he'll direct and edit and then he'll produce and I'll direct. . . . Who knows if **The Second Coming of Suzanne** will make it? But if you don't have any goals, there is nothing to shoot for." □



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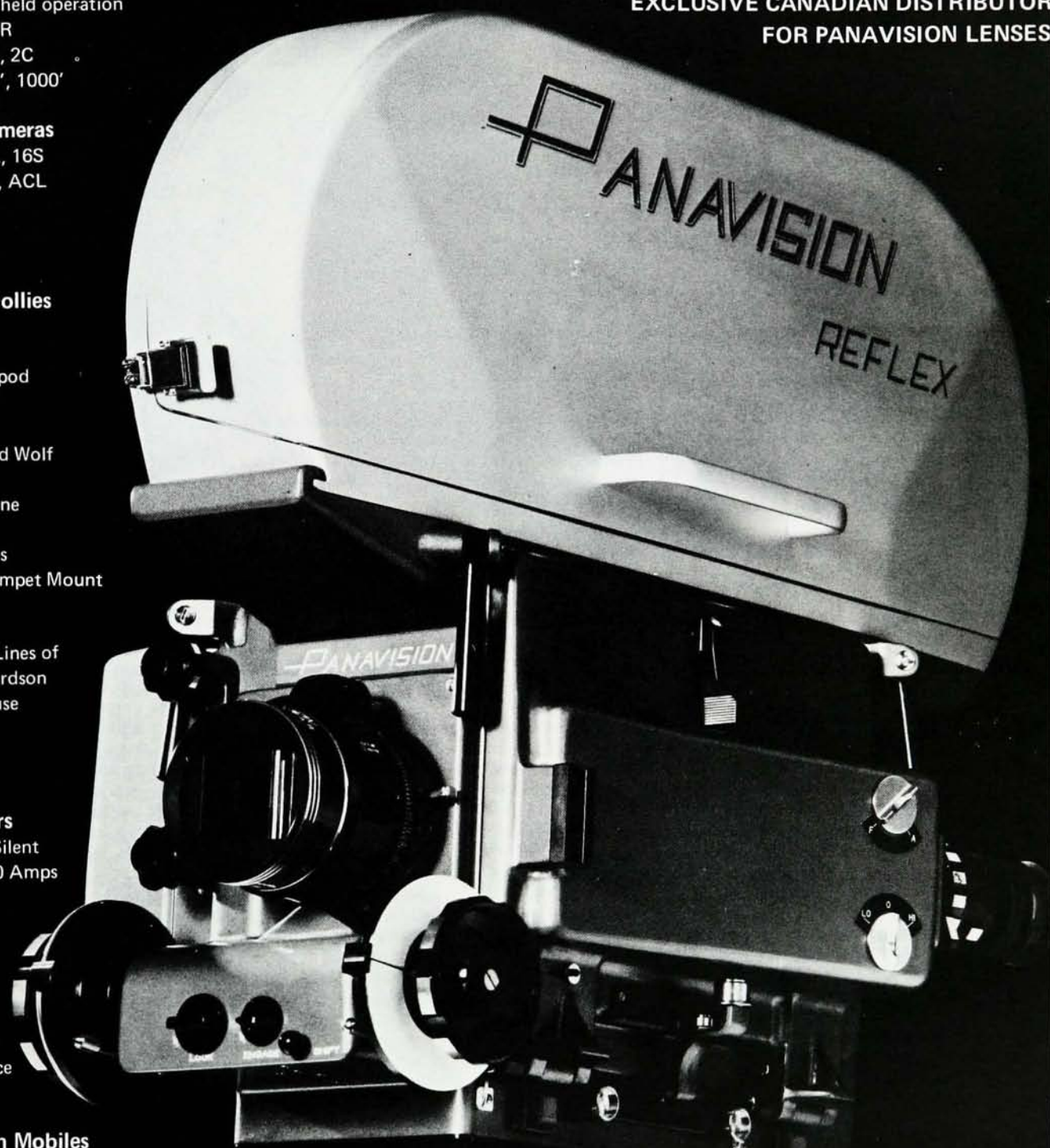
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