

A debate on Who's in charge?



● The working conference on being employed and unemployed; conference management seen from the rear; but the unemployed conference participants were seen full face

Ironic ethics: In the mind of the projector

by Allan King

One surprise to me about the controversy around *Who in Charge?* was the focus on ethics – mine and those of my colleagues, – conference director Gordon Lawrence and his fellow consultants, Dr. Austin Lee and Dr. Elie Debbane of McGill University. And I have been powerfully struck by certain ironies in some of the questions raised.

- For example, a psychologist with no firsthand knowledge of the conference, who claimed we invited people to the conference without telling them what it was about. But under cross-examination on the affidavit in which she attacked us, she admitted to convening a conference which purported to be a staff "professional development day" when in fact she set it up for her sponsors as a way to explore "sexual tensions" in their organization.

- Or the psychiatrist who, again on hearsay evidence, insisted that the participants would be unaware of the cameras and therefore be unguarded. She knew this from her own work which, it turned out, employed cameras hidden by screens (a practice I abominate). We, of course, had our five cameras in full view under a battery of lights.

- The two members, Chuck Gauthier and Sandra Nichol, who took legal action against the CBC and the sponsors of the Conference and myself, charging, among other things, that we had induced them to the conference under false pretences.

When I arranged a private pre-broadcast screening for them and their families in Vancouver, they smuggled a journalist into the screening posing him as *Allan King*, best known for his controversial documentaries, has directed three feature films.

Nichol's "husband" (according to Gauthier) and "boy friend" (according to Nichol). At the end of the screening I was amazed to see the journalist bring out his pad and pencil and begin a fierce cross-examination of me on the charge that I had enticed members to the conference by deception. When I turned the questions back on him and his behaviour he had the wit to recognize the irony and the grace to apologize.

- There were the two journalists – one on radio the other on television – who aired interviews with a conference member who has been jailed for 16 months for two crimes for which, in some weird way, he held the conference responsible. The nature of the crimes and the facts, as brought out in the trial are matters of public record; and they made it clear that the crimes arose out of the man's own life and experience, not the conference. Drawing attention to the facts and character of the events could be seen as damaging to the man, his wife and his children. By not using the material the journalists would deprive themselves of a story. But by using half the story and ignoring all the details, some credence could be given to the charge that the conference was responsible for the member's unfortunate actions. This would create further controversy and "a good story." It would also inevitably discredit to some degree the hard work of the conference and its membership. The journalists chose the latter course.

- The broadcast journalist who was deeply concerned about my ethics in using the shot of the lady who cried. That's understandable from a member of a profession which often seeks out people in *extremis* and records their anguish by words, microphone or camera for the edification of the public.

It's a difficult role and worth looking at. But before doing so, I'd like to underline some facts – at least as I hold them to be.

The Conference and the program based upon it did pre-eminently do exactly what it set out to do: offer unemployed people an opportunity to explore their experience of employment and unemployment and communicate that work to their fellow citizens. This they did, with great passion, power, courage and skill. They were admirable.

People were not brought to the conference by false pretences nor were they deceived by the convenors. They were each told precisely and at length in several personal or telephone interviews what it was we were offering and why. People who wanted to explore political or economic questions were told clearly that was not what we were offering but that members were free to explore those issues or talk about whatsoever they wished. There were no hidden agendas though clearly some members brought theirs – as they were free to do.

The first two-hour session explored all these issues and underlined the point that not only could people talk about whatever they wished, they were also free to leave. The point was underlined by participant Chuck Gauthier, who later sued.

It was alleged that some mysterious 'force' kept people at the conference. If there were such a 'force' I'd like to see evidence of what it was and to hear how three members were able to overcome it. One left at the beginning, one in the middle, one at the end, all for different reasons. They were treated with courtesy; no pressure was applied to suggest that they stay; they were driven to the airport in comfort. And of course people walked in and out of conference sessions freely frequently and without being

accused of rudeness.

Of course, having embarked on an enterprise, most people are quite naturally and humanly loathe to give it up. They have loyalties to the task they have assumed and to their fellow workers. This is hardly a mysterious dynamic.

What I do find interesting and worth exploring is why some of us sometimes feel a need to view so simple a feeling as loyalty as a mysterious and baffling 'force'. Why, further, is there a need to assume this force is a field on which the consultants practiced malicious and sadistic rites for the benefit of a sensational film? It seems to me the phenomenon says much more about the need to form such assumptions and project them onto others than it does about the consultants and me.

The underlying assumption in some of the criticism of the conference can be stated simply and directly. It is that Gordon Lawrence and I conspired together for nine months – and were joined in that conspiracy by two McGill psychiatrists, Dr. Austin Lee and Dr. Debbane – in a plot to induce thirty helpless unemployed victims to a remote and mysterious conference centre in order to persecute, exploit and belittle them for our own perverse gratification – as a cruel experiment (to prove what?) on the part of the consultants and, on my part, to produce a public spectacle for profit.

This is certainly possible but I haven't seen any evidence for it. The consultants and I actually thought it might be helpful to the participants and public in understanding and working with the experience of employment and, indeed, a large majority of the conference members felt this was the result for themselves personally.

The surprise to me was the fierce

unconscious need some people felt to destroy or suppress the work of the conference, or to divert attention from its main thrust: that unemployment can be horribly painful and disorientating and that perhaps we ought to exercise much more imagination about how to deal with the experience. The diversion was to focus on "ethics", "techniques" and "process."

It was naive to be surprised. I've had the experience before not only with *Warrendale* (a film about emotionally disturbed children), *A Married Couple* (which explored a marriage in conflict) and *Come On Children* (about alienated youth) but also with exactly the same subject - unemployment - 25 years ago.

The film was called *A Matter Of Pride*. It portrayed the experience of an unemployed salesman and his family. It was savaged in the House of Commons by the Minister of Labour of the time, who charged that the film made mistatements of fact. It did not.

It was one of the earliest films on television in which an actual person cried on camera - here the wife. There was an intense debate in the CBC as to whether the woman's grief should be edited out, i.e. censored. The minister claimed that since the family had been paid a fee, the wife's tears had been "bought" and somehow were not real. The CBC of the day chose to buckle under, to issue a public apology for crimes which were not committed, to reprimand the filmmakers responsible and forbid them from talking further about the matter. The impact of the film was vitiated and its impact on public debate was destroyed. To its credit, the CBC of today firmly fought off the in-

junction which would have blocked screening *Who's In Charge*?

In the case of *Warrendale* discussions were largely preoccupied with the "techniques" of the staff, the ethics of the program and of the filmmaker. No one much wanted to deal with the fact of the outrage the children had experienced in real life. Fourteen years later one reads Peter Synnowich's account of the horrors wreaked on one little girl - all in the cause of 'caring' for her - by some child-care institutions in our society. It's the same story we were telling half a generation ago. Others told it ages before that.

A similar thing happened with *A Married Couple*. All sorts of things were projected into the couple. And the projections said more about the projectors than about the couple. One quarter of the audience loved him, hated her. Another quarter hated him, loved her. A quarter hated them both and a quarter loved them both. Same couple. Furthermore, people made all sorts of unfounded assumptions about the actual couple on the basis of seeing one hundred minutes of film which, in turn, compressed events of a mere ten weeks of their life. I was always curious about the people who concluded, because the husband always wore red bikini underwear, that he wore the same pair day-in day-out. "How gross", they said. They couldn't form the more charitable hypothesis that he might have had many red pairs - which, of course, he did.

So what might be concluded from all this?

Certainly we crave good guys and villains. By preserving a paranoid position of fight or flight we can avoid the

real work of puzzling a question through. By assuming the worst about others we can maintain grievances which are precious to us. We love to shout at the Russians and they at us - so much so that apparently we will continue to do so even if it costs us the earth. We also love to idealize people, in the magical hope that we can be rescued from the hard work of dealing with reality.

Certainly we project all sorts of our own material into other people - not just love but also hate and hostility. This makes it difficult to see and deal with each other as we are. The projection is unconscious so it is very hard to catch ourselves in the act or to recognize the process when others do it to us. It makes it difficult to work together effectively because trust is eroded and all testing is seen as an attack. If we can't test each other's ideas we can't distinguish between what is fantasy and what is real.

We would often prefer to tell each other stories rather than explore realities.

Towards the end of the conference Gordon Lawrence put forward the notion that we, the employed, tend to put into the unemployed all our own fears about unemployment. We project into the unemployed our fear of being made helpless, unskilled, less than adult. That pressure he suggested, may produce such behaviour at times. I've been struck by the fact that some of the comment on the program assumes the members to have been helpless, unskilled, less than adult victims of a conference management which is assumed to have been omniscient, omnipotent and indifferent. In my view neither assumption is true and I've watched the conference tapes for many, many hours.

Indeed, the members seem to me to be articulate, passionate, full of fight and often sensitive to each other's needs. The need to see the conference members as helpless, incompetent minors, a need expressed most vehemently by those who profess to 'care' most fervently for the unemployed is interesting to think about. It's a profoundly patronizing perspective, and it is usually quite unrecognized. Who does it serve? In what way? Does it assist the unemployed to mobilize their strengths or does it tend to confirm them in their fear of their impotence?

For me the conference also pointed out our terror in the face of freedom, the paralysis which occurs when we are offered it or when we are reminded that we can take it legitimately.

Many people inside and outside the conference found it difficult to believe that members were really free to talk about anything, could have held their meetings at any time, anywhere in the conference centre - for example, in the common room reserved for their exclusive use. This would have shut out the consultants and cameras from all discussions. But of course many members did finally feel free to say what they wanted, explore what they wanted. It was very hard to do. It's very hard to accept freedom, assume authority.

Freedom is feared because it carries with it a terrible burden of responsibility. Who the hell wants that? We might have to do something ourselves, not just blame someone or pray to someone.

Much better to talk about the "techniques" of the consultants, the "deception" of the convenors and especially about "ethics."

Pawns of experience

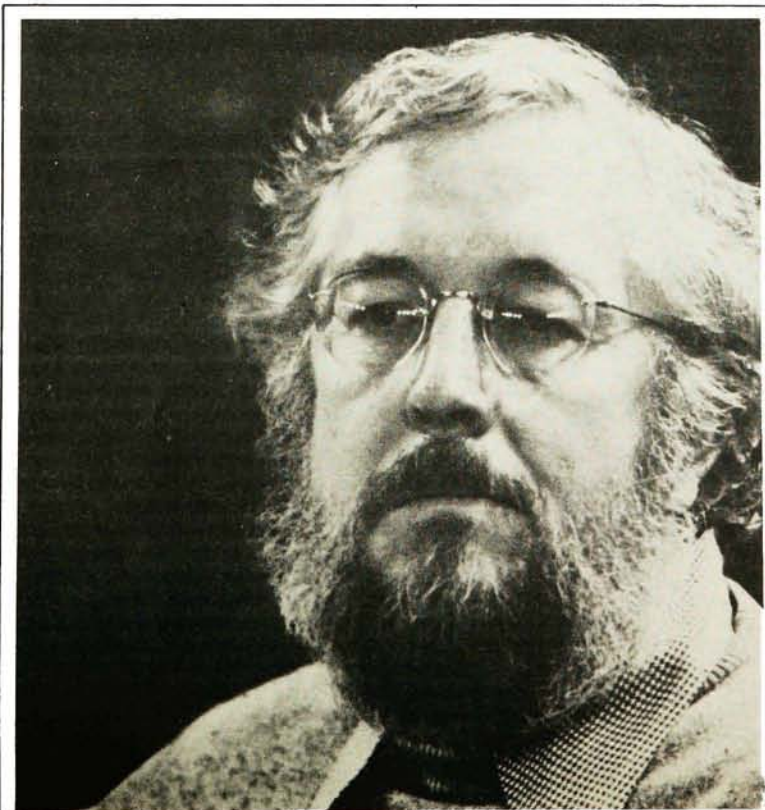
by Michael Dorland

For as long as one does not criticize the social function of cinema, all film criticism is only a criticism of symptoms and has itself merely a symptomatic character - Brecht

The result of all our inventions and progress seems to be that material powers become invested with spiritual life, while human life deteriorates into a material force - Marx

One of the consequences of living in the age of communications is that the human being experiences his own existence predominantly as a viewer of programming. In such a situation the task of the media is to re-create the content of human emotions in the hope of reconnecting them to the atomized experience of the individual viewer. A noble endeavor, some might argue, but seriously flawed.

For media-content becomes a collective emotional substitute for individual experience, because the media can only represent emotions in social, that is to say, in exteriorized or caricatural, form. Put slightly differently, the media represent emotion as *entertainment*, a paradox that systematically deflates the seriousness of the occasional claim to serve an educational purpose. That claim - to provide an opportunity to learn from experience - unfortunately constituted the heart of the justification for



● Allan King, sinister documentarian of the future

the production and airing of Allan King's recent two-hour documentary on the experience of unemployment, *Who's In Charge*?

The centrality of that educational concern defined both the way the program was produced and structured. Last January, a four-day conference was convened by a non-profit policy research organization called the Mungen Institute, of which filmmaker Allan King is the chairman. Funded by the Department of Employment and Immigration, the conference was organized by King and Gordon Lawrence, a former co-director of the Group Relations Training Program at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London. In England, the Tavistock Institute holds bi-annual conferences which explore the nature of group dynamics with respect to authority, leadership and organizations. Lawrence's role at the Canadian conference was to provide management consultation, aided in this by two Montreal psychiatrists, Austin Lee and Elie Debane. The CBC agreed to provide crew and equipment to videotape the conference and coproduce with King a television special to convey the conference to the country. TVOntario also invested. The filmic output of the conference was to constitute a two-hour television special and 10 half-hour training films. A feature film based on some of the conference is in script development.

A word about the Tavistock behavioral model employed at the conference is

necessary to understand what followed. Indeed, Allan King, in five pages of notes explaining the background to *Who's In Charge?* takes up at least three explaining the particular, not to say peculiar, format of the conference.

The notion of applied Laingian psychology in the hands of management is, to put it mildly, hair-raising. Whatever the value of the radical methods of R.D. Laing - to describe Tavistock by the name of one of its leading lights - in the case of schizophrenics or other victims of the family - the transposition of those methods to organizational situations would seem to call for qualifications that neither King nor the organizers of the conference appear to have clearly provided. Suffice it here, perhaps, to emphasize the indebtedness in Laing's thinking on organizations to Sartre's bleak vision of the concentrationary universe, with its accents on unfreedom and victimization.

From King's program notes, one gleams a general philosophical position stated as "We are born and we die and all that we accomplish in life is done within that span. We don't like to be reminded of the fact. It's unpleasant." This is a position that can probably be described as a form of punitive nihilism, which suggests that its application is also bound to be unpleasant.

The format of the conference, then, as defined by its organizers was to provide "an opportunity and resources for a group of unemployed people to explore their experience... and that the results of their work could be useful to our society in considering how best to work with the issue of unemployment." In practice, those objectives meant that the conference management would i) not answer questions, ii) get up and walk out at the end of every session, iii) leave without comment. Despite such provocative postures, the conference management nonetheless considered it part of its responsibility to provide precise boundaries of time, place, task and roles "in order that work be carried out effectively." The conference management would also provide their professional understanding of what was occurring in the conference, thus helping the participants mobilize their own authority to manage and care for themselves.

Into this situation arrived 30 unemployed people selected from across the country to approximate a profile of the unemployed population as to region, gender, and occupation (e.g., an unemployed teacher, a potash miner, the leader of an unemployed workers' committee). When Allan King argues that it was not known that the conference would produce "moments of intense feeling", one can fairly believe him. When he argues that the conference was not "manipulated" to produce an emotional effect, one can still grant him the benefit of the doubt. But when he says that the conference was not "set up" to that effect, one can only wonder at his disingenuousness.

The result was a well-publicized controversy: six of the participants took legal action to block the showing of the film. Though the application for an injunction was dismissed from court, the program, originally scheduled for May, was not shown on the CBC until Sept. 4.

But now that the great viewing public has shared in the experience, it is perhaps possible to move beyond the immediate controversy of the making of the program to more important questions on the uses of contemporary television. For instance,

would there have been any controversy at all had King only made the 10 half-hour training films; that is, had the showing of the program been limited to psychologists or directly concerned organizations in labor or management? Does not the source of the uproar around *Who's In Charge?* lie precisely in the fact of the revelation of an intensely private small-group experience to the basically indifferent general audience? A film like *Who's In Charge?*, when it runs on the same delivery system that dispenses soap operas or, for that matter, the evening news, is simply stripped of all its pretensions, and becomes just an unpleasant and voyeuristic invasion of privacy. In other words, it reveals itself socially, in the context of the indifference of an economic system that has made unemployment a deliberate policy, whether that unemployment is at 4%, 6% or 12%.

So it is not a very adequate justifica-

tion to argue, as Allan King does, that unemployment is an issue "likely to demand concern for a long time to come." When television is made the vehicle for demanding concern, it is only to be expected that the viewer's concerns get spread pretty thin, between concern over the arms race, concern over El Salvador or Brian Mulroney's chin. For, like the benumbed viewer himself, the medium's concerns are themselves singularly whimsical while being at the same time herd-like though impelled by the relentless search for novelty.

And yet it is perhaps on the question of novelty that the import of *Who's In Charge?* becomes clear. In part, the novelty was the program's emotionalism: in the anger and frustration of the unemployed participants; in their tears and confessions of suicidal thoughts; in their depiction, finally, of contemporary society's dirty little secret: namely that

human social experience is anguishing because it consists of the infliction of pain by the powerful against the powerless.

But to identify the infliction of the pain experienced by a small social group for the entertainment of a larger social group is to understand it as sadism. And it was the sadism of the program that constituted the real novelty of *Who's In Charge?*, Allan King's contribution to the sinister television documentary of the future.

For Huxley was wrong: the films of the future won't be "feelies" in the euphoric sense, but socio-psychic torture films reflecting the internal psy wars of the technological society's rediscovery of Social Darwinism.

If Allan King's *Who's In Charge?* is indeed a premonition of what's to come, one can only conclude with a paraphrase of Lincoln Steffens' famed remark: 'I have seen the future and it's shameful.'

Allan King's *Who's In Charge?*

Canadian filmmaker Allan King has been long associated with a *cinéma vérité* technique in which he reveals intimate aspects of social problems. *Skid Row* (1956) dealt with derelicts of Vancouver and *Warrendale*, his 1966 study of disturbed children in therapy, earned him reknown when the CBC and BBC refused to broadcast it. *A Married Couple* (1969) found a disintegrating couple (with acting experience) playing out their lives melodramatically. The subjects of these films were either helpless (the derelicts and children) or unwilling (the melodramatic couple) to call the filmmaker to account for his public display of their private lives.

Once again King uses this technique in *Who's In Charge? Canada's Jobless Speak Out*, which the CBC aired in September, ignoring the protests of some of its subjects. Thirty of Canada's unemployed came together to confront their situation in a four-day T-group experience before television cameras. The unemployed, if bewildered by the exercise, trusted King and signed releases which essentially waived their legal rights to object to the images King would use.

The group begins to coalesce as the participants vocalize the anguish of being unemployed. Their questions and calls for solutions are met with a wall of silence by the 'management' in business suits. An angered participant reminds the confused group that they, as unemployed, are experiencing real life while the consultants are only onlookers. The audience is thus cued to its role of comfortable anonymity.

In the ensuing days the male-dominated group articulates individual experiences emotionally. The psychoanalysts are keen to see them confront their emotions of panic and rage. Taking a page from Freud, they offer themselves as 'father' or hate-objects. The jobless are visibly shocked as the consultants rise poker-faced and exit wordlessly, signalling that the hour is terminated, just as a woman is confessing her deepest emotions.

The group lets its defences down

gradually, revealing the anger, humiliation and despair of unemployment, even thoughts of suicide. Members sustain each other as they fall apart. Throughout this the viewer learns much about group dynamics. The jobless attack the consultants as replicas of the very class antagonists who have brought them to this sorry state. The group is unable to control its destiny, either at the conference or in the workplace. But they are not fools. They need not have read Karl Marx to realize the historical forces working against them. An analyst offers a band-aid: "We manage conditions and resources for you to manage yourselves," he soothes. A female realizes tearfully that she has been had. She came to solve unemployment, not to make an ass of herself. "Who's In charge?" snarls another. He kicks a chair violently as management and King once again rise silently and leave the room at the end of the hour.

Rebellion follows. Some talk of the need for revolution. Having stirred the beast, an analyst denies the forces at work. Revolution will not solve unemployment, he counsels, because it is a simple solution. The group, a microcosm of Canada's 1 1/2 million unemployed, articulates its historical role: "We're a class of people who have no control over being employed." The analyst diverts this no-nonsense attitude by claiming that the group's rage is due to the imminent end of the conference.

The "falling-apart phenomenon" which nearly all participants have experienced, is good, a consultant pontificates, since it helps us put things together again. Unemployment turns adults into children and his role is to help them get their authority. The exasperated viewer might add, "Authority, sure - but what about a job? And are Canada's 1 1/2 million jobless on the verge of rebellion like them?"

A woman asks King if he bears responsibility for what might happen to the group in the future. He answers glibly, "I'm not God." He and we have been voyeurs of an intimate group confessional experience. A voice-over at the end informs us that a third of the group had found work nine months later. We never learn if credit for this should go to the conference, nor are the 'professionals' interviewed afterward to offer their reflections.

Last spring, six group members sought an injunction to stop broadcast of the show and they initiated a suit for dam-

ages for invasion of privacy, misappropriation of personality and willful affliction of mental cruelty. They failed to convince the judge, who assessed them with court costs. The unemployed, unaware of the fishbowl they had climbed into, stood humiliated and helpless once again, this time before family, friends and nation. How sad that King, the analysts, the Mergen institute or the CBC did not make the gesture to remove the material which offended the six or, like good winners, offer to pay the court costs.

Freedom to probe public and non-public figures is a dearly held right. But licence also implies responsibility to the subject. Common sense dictates that non-public figures have the right to control their public image. It takes great integrity to know the difference between a door closed to hide truth and one closed in the interests of commonly held values of good taste. Should artists gain commercially from voyeuristic exposés of traumatic and intimate moments of the innocent and inarticulate against their will? How pertinent is the admonition of documentary pioneer John Grierson: "Power without responsibility all down the ages is the prerogative of the harlot." *Who's In Charge?* indicates it is time for a fundamental reassessment of just what price *cinéma vérité* should pay to achieve its hard edges of actuality.

Gary Evans ●

WHO'S IN CHARGE? A working conference on being employed and unemployed, convened by The Mergen Institute, with funding from The Department of Employment and Immigration. **conference director:** Gordon Lawrence, organizational consultant **consultants:** Elie Debbane, M.D., Associate Professor of Psychiatry, McGill University, Gordon Lawrence, Austin Lee, M.D., Associate Professor of Psychiatry, McGill University **participants:** Peter Blackburn, Sylvie Carron, Jane Crawley, Doris de Young, Alex Bussin, Jana Cervinka, André Dagilis, Shirley Dowell, Leo Foisly, H. L. Gosain, Julie Larivière, Gordon Morrisseau, Kim Neuman, Emily North, Bob Perry, John Quarterly, Ron St. Pierre, Jack Sales, Mike Skinner, Bill Smith, Chuck Gauthier, Gary Hanel, Dave MacDougall, Donna Mundell, Sandra Nichol, Sam Organ, Larry Provenzano, Susan Robertson, Donna L. Séguin, Brad Wilson **cam.** Eamonn Beglan, Tom Farquharson, Peter Brimson, Martin Kaiser, Dave Wright **VTR ed.** Grant Ducharme, **switcher** Peter Osborne **audio** Jules Bergeron **lighting** Ron Earle **stills.** Lawrie Raskin **res.** Susan Crean with Doug Bames **asst.** Carol Fisher, Paul Robinson, Gina Kashi **unit man.** Gail Einaron-McCleery **tech.** p. Dick Ewing **service p.** Les Kottler **cons. ed.** Eric Wrate d. Sig Gerber **assoc. p.** Gail Carr **post-prod. sup.** Annika McLachlan p. Allan King p.c. Allan King Associates Limited, in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. running time: 120 mins.