

# REVIEWS

## Don Owen's Unfinished Business

Don Owen is the Canadian Orson Welles in the sense that critics have never allowed him to live down not living up to his first feature, *Nobody Waved Goodbye*. Yet Owen's first decade as a feature director (1964-1975) coincided with the worst possible time for a filmmaker to attempt to come-of-age stylistically (the '60s and all that) and survive financially (the tax shelter and all that). Nevertheless, the fragmentary nature of Owen's production since *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, especially the decade of virtual silence since *Partners*, suggests that we might refer to his entire oeuvre by the title of his latest film, *Unfinished Business*.

A sequel/remake to/of *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, *Unfinished Business* traces the story of Izzy (Isabelle Meijas) from disaffection with life at home with Mom to running away to Queen Street, involvement in the anti-nuke movement, the Litton bombing, discovering sex, and eventual reconciliation with her father.

The problem with *Unfinished Business* is, God help us, the generation gap. Not the one between Izzy and her parents (Peter Kastner and Julie Biggs, the original troubled teens of *Nobody Waved Goodbye*), but between Owen and his subject.

The problem is that while we tend to perceive a new generation every few years, there are actually about 20 years to a generation. Owen, born in 1935, is part of the generation of WWII (the '50s are the hangover of the '40s, just the way that the early '70s were a hangover of the '60s). Being a late WWIIer, he was capable of great empathy and identification with Peter and Julie, who were very early '60s. Izzy, however, is '80s, and Owen doesn't quite grasp the differences between the generations (I'm not sure I do, and I'm a late '60s person). One only has to look at films by some really young directors - John Gianvito's *Flowers of Pain*, or Leo Carax's extraordinary *Boy Meets Girl* - to know that people coming-of-age in the '80s express their angst in different ways than those of the '60s (catatonia seems a preferred model).

Izzy's rejection of her comfortable life in North Toronto, and the ensuing plot, are not merely expressions of adolescent angst expressed in terms of the wrong generation (not to mention details such as the kid who freaks out on what is supposed to be coke and acts like he's on a bad acid trip), but the impossibly compact time-structure simply makes the events wildly improbable. After all, Izzy is a supposedly intelligent late teenager at one of Toronto's better high schools. Is it conceivable that she has never heard about the anti-nuke movement, or seen a film about the effects of nuclear war? (She must watch television - didn't she see *The Day After*? It was probably assigned in class!).

Finally, there is Owen's selection of Queen St. West, the home of the hip in Toronto (insofar as anyone in Toronto is hip - with their slavish reliance on New York and London, the best most Toron-

tonians ever achieve is trendy). The desperate sincerity of anti-nuke politics is the opposite of the sort of drop-dead cool that hipness demands. The milieu is more Cabbagetown than Queen W. Owen himself is so unhip it's a wonder his ass doesn't fall off (this is a compliment, by the way - the merest manifestation of hip generally makes my skin crawl). This is why Parachute Club is such a perfect choice to give *Unfinished Business* the patina of hip, even if they are seen rehearsing with uncommon enthusiasm in the middle of the afternoon, though from the record-perfect sound one wonders why they rehearse at all.

That's the downside. The upside is that for every scene that makes you gasp with disbelief, there is one that demonstrates Owen's extraordinary touch with actors (he is the only director in history to get interesting, believable performances from Alexis Kanner and Hollis MacLaren) and ability to guide them to the emotional truth of a scene.

The early scenes between Izzy and her mother give a very precise sense of how the widespread dissemination of psychobabble has given the appearance of greater communication that are actually new ways not to communicate. Izzy's amiably teasing chatter is just a new version of Peter's sullen silence in *Nobody Waved Goodbye*: a little game called "How far can I push them this time?"

Peter Kastner brings a genuine rueful poignancy to his role: the young, inarticulate rebel without a cause may have become a commercial director, but he knows how events have a way of overwhelming adolescent inspiration.

Then there is Isabelle Meijas. If this were a country with any sort of rational production/distribution/publicity system, a performance like this would mean that she would immediately be talked about in Hollywood - Meijas has star quality like you wouldn't believe - bright, funny, unconventionally gorgeous. It is always difficult to tell with

new performers (she had done a couple of unreleased tax-shelter movies before this) how much of a performance is the actor's and how much the director's. But given that Meijas is the only survivor of the dull grey pall that hangs over *The Bay Boy*, it is safe to say that her performance here is no fluke. She has two or three scenes (especially a farewell in a bus-station with Peter Spence) in *Unfinished Business* that are as good as anything I've seen in years.

What's unfortunate about *Unfinished Business* is that it is the germ of a great movie, but it decided to grow with its roots up. The commercial compromises made (when a director has been out of work this long, they are understandable) to turn the film into a movie about kids has destroyed the movie that Owen would have been the ideal director for - the one about old rebels becoming comfortable and not quite being able to figure out the dissatisfactions of their children.

John Harkness ●

**UNFINISHED BUSINESS** d./sc. Don Owen p. Annette Cohen, Owen d.o.p. Douglas Kiefer loc. man. Marc Dasso cast. d. Diedre Bowen extras Peter Lavender cont. Tannis Baker a.d. Martin Walters 2nd. a.d. Rocco Gismondi 3rd a.d. Howard Rothschild asst. to d. Patricia Rozema props. Enrico Campana make-up Ava Stone choreo. Johanna Householder sd. eds Peter Thil-lay, Michael O'Farrell re-rec. Hans Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll 2nd unit. cam. Anthony Bliss asst. art d. Andrew Owen ward. mist. Maureen Gurney const. man. Jon Bankson p. coord. Fran Solomon post. p. coord. Grace Avrieth p. assts. Arthur Reinstein, David Flaherty, Steven Fegelman lab. National Film Board of Canada acct. Judy Rosenberg admin. Marie Tonto-Donati, Sandie Pereira stunt. coord. Dwayne MacLean, Shane Cardwell stunts Peter Cox, John Stoneham, A. (Tye) Tyukodi, Brent Mayar, Leslie Munro p. man. Bob Wertheimer songs Parachute Club, Stand Film p.c. Zebra Films, Toronto l.p. Isabelle Meijas, Peter Spence, Leslie Toth, Julie Biggs, Jane Foster, Melleny Brown, Chuck Shamata, Peter Kastner, Ann Marie Mac-Donald, Ann Medina, Marc Gomes, Maggie Huculak, Reg Dreger, Mark Dennis, Allegra Fulton, Skip Prokop, John Stoneham, Brent Meyer, Harry Mc-Williams, Kurt Freund, Irene Pauzer, Dora Dainton, Theresa Tova, Shane Cardwell, Bruce McFee, Gail Kerbel, Jim Bearden.

● Germ of a great movie: Isabelle Meijas and Peter Spence in *Unfinished Business*



## Edie Yolles and John Bradshaw's That's My Baby

Under a veneer of mildly inept comedy, *That's My Baby* is a mildly disgusting, reactionary tract that must have at some point looked as feminist and progressive and '80s-optimistic as all hell. I mean, what could be more Sunday-supplement upbeat than a young professional couple who break up over whether or not to have a baby, get together again, have the baby and triumph over the difficulties? The idea is a natural; things must have only turned vile when Edie Yolles and co-writer, co-director John Bradshaw, actually began to put it down on paper.

For starters, it's the husband who wants the baby and we're supposed to like him for that; he's the hero. Nothing wrong with that, only they've made him almost impossible to like. This is a man who, in 1984 when jobs are scarce, drops out to "find himself," who springs his desire for fatherhood on his unsuspecting wife loudly and in a public place, who gets resentful at his wife's career success, gets jealous at her mild (very mild) career-motivated flirtation with a co-worker and petulant at her sensible objections to parenthood.

This is an emotionally-retarded 19-year-old in a 30-year-old body and Timothy Webber plays it to the hilt, hard-selling the "boyish charm," hammering home the explicitly self-pitying lines and pulling Bill Murray-moves all over the place while trying to replace their essential sleaze with sincerity. It makes you wonder what his wife - Sonja Smits doing her not-bad best with lines like "I love him because... he skips stones and makes me laugh" - sees in him. More to the point, it makes you believe that there is no way on earth this man is fit to raise a child.

Yet that is exactly what he wants to do - full-time child-rearing for personal fulfillment and so the wife can continue her career - and Yolles and Bradshaw are determined that nothing shall stand in his way. So the wife's objection that there's no way she can be the sole support of two of them, let alone a third, in their sandblasted lifestyle, is swept aside with his, "We'll manage. I'll get a job I can take the baby to," and that's the end of it (yes, we then see him working in a daycare centre, but with his utter lack of skills and experience, there's no way he's anything but a volunteer). We never see any financial hardship arising from the baby. We don't even see him facing any hardship when his wife is gone and his money has run out; his house and lifestyle stay in place despite his inability to hold even a menial job. In fact, his wife's reasonable objections are never dealt with, though they are the whole basis for the conflict: what reunites them is simple marital lust and a little sweet talk.

When it's not dealing with the hero's conflicts - which is most of the time - *That's My Baby* deals with nothing in particular. The bulk of the movie is made up of not-particularly related incidents whose comic punches are vitiated by half-developed ideas, Webber's acting and the Valium-inspired





● Sonja Smits in *That's My Baby* does her not-bad best

pace. Or conversely they're hammered in with far more weight than the flimsy material can bear. Visually, the best that can be said is that the compositions keep our attention on the actors; the worst is that when it tries for anything more (like the baby's p.o.v. fish-eye lens), the camera becomes as leaden as the jokes.

With nothing much going on, you have a lot of opportunity to mull over what is there and, more significantly, what isn't. There is the baby's glorious conception, for instance, and the even more glorious return from the hospital. But there's not much pregnancy, just a few shots in a scene that's really about something else altogether. There are kids, throughout, adorable, well-behaved little moppets to demonstrate the depth of Webber's desire and to cement our approval of it. But there isn't a single infant, not one screaming, colicky, shitting, nerve-slashing little bundle of endless demand to remind him, and us, of the reality of the situation – not until his own child comes along and then the business of baby care is reduced to little more than a showcase for his devotion and a montage on the subject of togetherness: first she gets up for the 6 a.m. feeding, then he does, then they do it together. The stress of the situation all falls on the wife, who weeps because she's so tired and then, at the end, throws a paranoid fit because she thinks he might be planning to take a job and some of the child-care will fall to her. Not only is the scene a transparent set-up to make her look weak and bitchy and hopelessly selfish (something she isn't until the very end), but haven't these people ever heard of babysitters?

What this all adds up to is a false, lying view of a real situation, with all the genuine conflicts and feeling (except the husband's) glossed over or removed. Yolles and Bradshaw might be inclined to claim they gutted the picture in the name of light comedy, but that isn't what comes across. What does come across is a political position, one that says a woman is selfish and shallow for preferring a career; that makes the man the sole family-leader and executor of the really important decisions and that says that having a baby will reunite and weld a broken family. Taken individually, none of these statements is necessarily 100% wrong; taken together, they form a stance only slightly less repressive than that of the Christian Right.

I don't think Yolles and Bradshaw are naive; they've too carefully and com-

pletely warped their subject for me to think they've got anything but exactly the movie they wanted (except for its being a dog). Which makes me wonder how this movie ever got made. Perhaps it looked great on paper when it came time to assemble funding and the major participants, including the NFB. Or it's that everybody in the film industry from exec producers to location caterers is suddenly having babies and it's possible that, in the totally justified delight and sentimentality of new parents and the somewhat less innocent pride of seeing one's own life directly reflected on the screen (for Webber and Smits are media professionals by trade), everybody who might have cast a critical eye on the project was too busy seeing a sentimentalized version of themselves to do any actual thinking. Which is too bad. When *That's My Baby* bombs, as it will, the next people to come along with the same idea will have a hard time getting it off the ground, even though they just might be the people to do it with the backbone and heart the subject deserves.

Andrew Dowler ●

**THAT'S MY BABY** d. Edie Yolles, John Bradshaw p. Edie Yolles sc. Bradshaw, Yolles d.o.p. W.W. Reeve orig. mus. Eric N. Robertson 1st. a.d. David Hynes art d. Anne Beeton loc. sd. Gord Thompson, Marc Chiasson add. sd. Daniel Latour (mixer), Cory Siddall (boom) cont. Tannis Baker ward. mist. Annie Nikolajevich ward. assts. Leoni Wilkins, Carmel Devost McLean make-up/hair Lee Lanham asst. hair Freddie Gooden props mist. Liz Morgan props assts. Patrick Moore, David Thompson, Chris Beeton, gaffer Sandy Carroll best boy Ira Cohen elect. Dave Willetts gen. op. Adam Swica key grips Christopher Dean, Dave Zimmerman asst. grips Mark Silver, John Darakjian add. cam. Brian Hebb 1st asst. cam. Steve Deme 2nd asst. cam. Helen Henshaw 2nd a.d. Martin Weinryb 3rd a.d. Alison Till p. assts. Haim Akum, Mitch Harrison loc. man. Bruce A. Sefton p. man. Cynde Scott p. acct./cast. asst. Debra Scott p. sec. Melody Comrie craft serv. Trudy Morris stills R. Hugh McLean, Ian Murray, Sandy J. Singers sp. efx. Martin Malevoir strip choreo. Nion cast. Anne Weldon Tail, Martin Hunter extras Film Extra Services marketing cons. Bill Reser ad. Stephen Withrow, Edie Yolles ed. assts. Ron Rice, Micki Laval post. p. sec. Barbara Lawrie, Sharon Robertson post. p. coord. NFB Grace Avrieth NFB admin. Marie Tonto-Donati, Tamara Lynch sd. ed. Michel B. Bordeleau Foley Andy Malcolm re-rec. Hans Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll titles Louise Overy, Serge Gaudreau graphics David Schorr post. p. studios National Film Board of Canada colour. 35mm running time: 96 mins. 35 sec p.c. Gemini Film Productions Ltd. Ip. Timothy Webber, Sonja Smits, Joann McIntyre, Lenore Zann, Derek McGrath, Daniel Buccos, Kate Trotter, Matt Craven, Les Carlson, Jack Mather, Frank Moore, Peter MacNeill, Meredith Winning, Caroline Stirk, Norma Edwards, Michael Wong, Evan Neister, Kathryn Winning, Gary T. Furlong, Pat Weaver, Mary-Ann Campanelli, Debra Scott, Lionel Percell, Charles Wong, Shawn N. Mitchell, Michele Williams, Mathew Sharp.

## William Fruet's Bedroom Eyes

Recently there was *The Surrogate*, a sexually-centred murder mystery, and now we have *Bedroom Eyes*, which bills itself as "A Sensuous Mystery" and is basically the same thing – sex, violence and whodunit. Two in a row means we've got a trend on our hands and a fairly depressing trend it is, but more of that later.

As an example of the mystery genre, or of schlock, *Bedroom Eyes* isn't really all that much like *The Surrogate*, which was a bad movie built on a good idea with a little good acting. *Bedroom Eyes* is much more pure than that: a bad movie with no ideas and no good acting. Well, maybe some okay acting. Angus MacInnes cruises easily through the hero's role, hitting all the right notes and getting what laughs he can. He's not great, but at least he's not painful to watch. As for ideas – zip. What happens is, this wimpy little stockbroker jogs at night to unwind, steps in a pile of dogshit, stumbles into the bushes to clean it off and finds himself pulling a peeping tom number on a moderately mammalian redhead. He likes it a lot, so he goes back for more and we get the sex we're paying for – nothing really heavy, though, no battery-operated devices sliding in and out of heavily lubricated orifices, no new tricks with the ever-popular mix-master – just a little light lesbianism, bondage and a threesome, all glimpsed briefly through a window. So much for "Sensuous."

What is interesting, though, is that here's a movie where the hero's a pervert. He's peeping because he's cracking from the stress of the job. He knows it and so he goes to a shrink and she tells him right away that there's no way he's a pervert. So much for "interesting." The shrink is played by Dayle Haddon and she's arguably the worst thing in the movie. On top of being hideously miscast – she looks like she just graduated high-school and has none of the calm and authority we associate with working shrinks – she can't inflect her lines to anything even approaching their content and you can almost hear her thinking, "I must move my eyebrow just... now..." to indicate concern.

Anyway, the stockbroker keeps going back – he finds the redhead fascinating in an exotic, whorish way and for this to work, so should we. But, while Barbara Law does look convincingly whorish, you get the impression she was given that look by someone who really doesn't like whores.

Eventually, he witnesses the murder we've been waiting for all along. Actually, he doesn't witness it; he's distracted at the crucial moment, and so we don't see it either. Later on, the cops find a body. So much for violence.

The cops, of course, suspect our hero, so he runs off and hides with the shrink who, in a boggling lapse of logic and professional ethics, promptly takes him to bed, thereby turning into his girlfriend, a role Haddon performs no more credibly but at least we don't have to think of her as a shrink anymore. So much for the rest of the movie.

Except for the climax, in which the redhead now revealed as the killer – and we knew it all along, so much for "Mystery" – ties our hero to the bed, strips down to her underwear and proceeds to run a scene of sexual domin-

ation on him. Since we know by now that all those things she did back when he was spying on her were part of a plan and not motivated by pleasure at all, this makes absolutely no sense, but by this time we're not expecting it to. The scene, of course, turns violent and, though there is one good shot in which the redhead, an antagonist on either side of her, tries to go in two directions at once, the rest is ludicrous, thanks to blocking and camera placement that show, with crystal clarity, that the redhead is viciously slashing the air two feet from the nearest body.

*Bedroom Eyes* is the latest in a string of dogs for director William Fruet who, like Paul Lynch, seems to be a case of a good man gone bad. It is not that I have any objection to Fruet, or anybody else, doing sex-and-violence quickies. I come equipped with the standard-issue Canadian subconscious – reeking of incest and cannibalism – and I'm quite happy to get my sub-artistic thrills at the movies. But the thrills should be there. I want a bit of style, imagination, pulse-pounding excitement, qualities that come readily when the films are made by people actually in tune with the material (think Cronenberg). Fruet, like Lynch, most assuredly is not and it shows in every frame.

As I said, I think we've got a trend toward this kind of movie on our hands. Slasher movies have finally died out (thank God), and nobody's figured out what to do next. But the demand for sex-and-violence lives on and, while they wait for guidance from the next John Carpenter, producers have fallen back on a classic form – the mystery – to fill it. This can be both a bad thing and a good. Bad, because the mystery requires actual plotting, character development and the mounting of scenes more intricate than simple stalk-and-slash. Good, because someone might actually be moved to fulfill those requirements. It's not likely, though, and, since there's no new Carpenter on the horizon, I think we can sadly conclude: so much for the next two years.

Andrew Dowler ●

**BEDROOM EYES** d. William Fruet sc. Michael Alan Eddy d.o.p. Miklos Lente mus. d. Paul Hoffer ed. Tony Lower art d. Lindsey Goddard cost. d. Julie Ganton cast. Liz Ramos p. man. Gerry Arbeid 1st a.d. Michael Zenon cont. Monique Champagne p. Robert Lantos and Stephen J. Roth asst. p. Andras Hamori post. p. sup. Jennifer Black asst. p. man. Jeff King story ed. Laura Phillips 1st. a.d. Michael Zenon 2nd a.d. Rocco Gismondi 3rd a.d. Howard Barish loc. man. Chris Danton asst. loc. man. Woody Sidarous focus puller Christopher Bonniere clapper/loader Stuart Shikatani key grip Brian Potts grip Trudel Reynald gaffer Maris Jansons best boy Ken Salah elect. Peter McAdam sd. mix. Douglas Ganton boom Gary Oppenheimer asst. art d. David Davis art trainee Norma Rose key set dresser Christine MacLean 1st asst. set dresser Barry Kemp 2nd asst. set dresser Debra Deeks props Don Miloyevich asst. cost. des. Gaye Gardiner ward. Rose Mihalyi hair. Jenny Arbour make-up Sandy Duncan sd. ed. Tony Lower 1st asst. sd. ed. Bev Neal 2nd asst. sd. ed. Michael Fruet Foley Peter McBurnie re-rec. Terry Cooke p. coord. Alison Dyer asst. p. coord. Elizabeth Young sect'y to J. Jo Anne Bates p. sec. Jennifer Scott p. acct. Dorothy Precious asst. p. acct. Marr Morgan asst. cast. Arleen Glickman extras Faces and Places unit pub. Linda Shapiro Public Relations asst. unit pub. Lori Burak press kit Barbara Righton stills Rick Porter p. assts. Dan Dunlop, David Webb, Melanie Lambertsen craft serv. Jesse Cohoon titles & opticals Film Effects colour Medallion post-p. Soundmix Ltd. p. services Otto Salamon Productions Ltd. p.c. Moviecorp VIII Inc. (RSL Entertainment Corp.) Ip. Kenneth Gilman, Dayle Haddon, Barbara Law, Christine Cattell, Angus MacInnes, Alf Humphreys, Jayne Catling, Lawrence K. Philips, Al Bernardo, Paula Barrett, James B. Douglas, Nick Nichols, Bunty Webb, James Loxley, Alan Katz, Bill Lake, Danny Higham.



## Mini-Reviews

by Pat Thompson

### KODO

This exciting performance documentary vividly communicates the exhilaration of an astonishing young company of musicians and dancers known as Kodo, the heartbeat drummers of Japan.

The members of the troupe live communally on Sado Island in the Japan Sea, 200 miles north of Tokyo. The daily round begins with a 10 km run and includes gruelling exercises plus a complete dedication to perfecting their music. This constant striving keeps the mind and body in harmony.

The necessity for rigorous training is more than apparent from a performance by Kodo. The beating of the drums – from small with a high tone to large, cylindrical mammoths – requires stamina, fortitude and superhuman energy.

A sonorous, almost demonic drumming pervades the whole film, especially from the largest drums, around which the musicians brace their legs and club away. The huge barrel-shaped drum on a stand is pummelled at each end by a musician. The booming, shuddering sounds positively exude from the screen in waves that can almost be seen. At one point the narrator explains that the "spirit of the drum enters the drummer" and there's doubt about it after witnessing these artists in performance.

An interesting sidelight is that Kodo commissions modern drum works, and a featured composition in the film is Maki Ishii's "Monochrome." The troupe is followed as it leaves Sado Island to attend a drumming festival at the National Theatre in Tokyo, where this work is performed. They pack their own equipment, travel tatami-mat class on the steamer to the mainland, and are then plunged into the frantic pace of a big city.

This truly poetic film blends the simplicity of nature with the art of age-old drumming in a splendid manner. The rain on the flowers and leaves of Sado Island, increasing in intensity, gradually slips into the drumming of Kodo – and then fades



● Kodo is a truly poetic film just crying for an audience

into the roar of the ocean. One is always conscious of the sand and the sea as the drummers practice on the shore as the waves foam in. In loin-cloths and headbands, muscles rippling, poised against the sunset, they appear as living statues.

A 10-minute extract from the film was blown up to 35mm and shown at the Festival of Festivals in Toronto last year. However, it was only a teaser for this full-length glimpse into the life-style and performance of a unique troupe of musicians. Here's a stylish, informative and vastly interesting piece just crying out for an audience.

p.d./ed. Jacques Holender **assoc. p.** Christine Norman **cam.** Rene Ohashi **sd.** Charles Bagnall **sd.mix.** Daniel Pellerin. **p. man.** Barbara Sweete **gaiff./grip** Maris Jansons. **narr.** Michael Crabb.

The Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT) held its first collective screening at the Bloor Cinema in Toronto in April. LIFT is a co-operative production group of Toronto filmmakers dedicated to supporting and encouraging independent films outside of CBC, NFB, and private film companies. It receives support from The Canada Council, NFB and Metro Toronto Arts Council, and the screening was funded by the Ontario Arts Council.

A program of seven 16mm films was introduced to a fairly large, but plainly partisan audience. It's a long time since such a non-bias crowd has been encountered in Toronto – quite a refreshing change. And it was good to see a repertory house branching out with a program of short films.

The show opened with *Get The*

*Sensation* by Keith Hlady, a four-minute, grainy b&w effort. It aimed to squeeze comedy out of a visit to the dentist, ending up with the horrific buzz of a drill almost drowned out by screams. The audience laughed loudly and applauded. (The man across the aisle just kept on munching stolidly on his popcorn). *Las Aradas* followed, (reviewed in Cinema Canada No. 112) a chilling eight-minute colour film enunciating a massacre by San Salvadorean soldiers, for which Janis Lundman won a 1985 Canadian Short Film Showcase award. (The man across the aisle didn't flinch.) *Under The Table*, a dreamlike document exposing the terror and uncertainty of illegal immigrants in North America, was perhaps a bit too long at 24 minutes in Spanish with English subtitles. However, the script by Jose Luis Goyes who lived in Toronto clandestinely for two years, gave a raw authenticity to the efforts of filmmaker Luis Osvaldo Garcia. (The man across the aisle yawned.) *Z*, one-minute of excruciating splashes drawn on clear leader with coloured markers by Michael Korican, whizzed by like Halley's Comet. (The man across the aisle cleared his throat.) *Unclassified Two*, another mess of b&w shapes drawn on film and accompanied by a cacophony of horrid sounds was surely longer than one-minute. (The man across the aisle shifted uneasily in his seat.) *Ratstonegamics* by Linda Outcalt was too much – 28 minutes of b&w ravings by an obsessive paranoid about the oppression of the masses, accompanied by a series of repetitious (and mostly American) pop images. The manic piano music was perhaps appropriately entitled "Seething". (The man across the aisle trod firmly out of the theatre, never to return.) The final gum-drop was Bruce McDonald's *Let Me See...* (and don't forget the three dots – everyone stressed this endlessly during the film). Made when McDonald was a student at Ryerson – and seen many times by this reviewer – its first fatal charm has definitely worn thin. The filmmaker should retire this 30-minutes of b&w juvenalia to his archive for good.

Pat Thompson ●

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## SCAN LINES

by Joyce Nelson



## Broadcasting in Canada : the myth of the "single system"

Another great flurry of debate, white papers, policy studies, commissions and god-knows-what-else official grappling is once again underway in an attempt to deal with Canadian broadcasting. In the midst of all the verbiage, it's useful to take a look at a structural problem that, to my way of thinking, is central to the whole morass. Not surprisingly, that problem is embedded in, and masked by, language itself. In this case, the crucial phrase, enshrined in the 1968 Broadcasting Act, is the notion that we have a "single system" of broadcasting. Those two words have done more to screw up our airwaves and broadcasting sovereignty than any other two words in the English language. It's worth considering their origins.

In 1932 when Parliament passed the first Broadcasting Act, it created a broadcasting system that was entirely unique. In order to see its uniqueness, we have to look beyond the surface at its structure. Superficially, the system created in 1932 would seem to be a "mixed" system including both public and private broadcasters, with the publicly owned Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (the CRBC which became the CBC) playing the predominant role. But the reason the CBC was to play the predominant role is that the 1932 Broadcasting Act granted it two major functions. The publicly owned network was empowered to engage in broadcasting and also to regulate all broadcasting in Canada.

By giving the CBC the powers to both broadcast and regulate all broadcasting in Canada, Parliament made the public network the controlling frame for the whole system. The CBC, with its public-service goals, was to set the boundaries within which the private-sector broadcasters would operate. The private stations were permitted to exist only as very small, circumscribed adjuncts within the national system, and their purely financial incentives were to be well-bounded and structurally overridden by the powers and goals of the public-sector CBC.

In order to picture the 1932 broadcasting structure, think of a big circle (the CBC) containing within itself a tiny circle (the private broadcasters). The CBC, as both broadcaster and regulator, would ensure that any broadcasting element contained within its boundaries contributed to the national goals outlined in the Broadcasting Act. By granting the CBC these dual powers (or, to use a phrase from Gregory Bateson, by making the CBC "the higher logical type"), the Act created what was quite clearly a "single system" for broadcasting in that the structure was non-contradictory to its goals.

Parliament, however, failed to honour the integrity of what it had created and, over the years following the 1932 Act, neglected to adequately fund the CBC so that it might fully function according to its dual structural role. Nevertheless, that structure remained in place until the late 1950s: a single system for broadcasting because the CBC provided the boundaries within which the private broadcasters would operate.

However, with the financial prospects of television on the horizon

during the early '50s, the private sector lobby began to really push for changes. Private broadcasters found a sympathetic ear in the person of Tory leader John Diefenbaker who was in favour of private-sector gains. Campaigning in 1958, Diefenbaker stated (as reported by *The Globe & Mail*, March 19, 1958) that "the time was long overdue to assure private stations competing with the public broadcasting system that they would be judged by an independent body as the need arose. They should not be judged by those who are in competition with them..." The statements reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the broadcasting structure, and, not surprisingly, under Diefenbaker, the new Broadcasting Act of 1958 removed regulatory powers from the CBC and granted them to a separate, independent broadcasting regulatory body - the Board of Broadcast Governors (BBG), which later became the CRTC.

What's most important about this 1958 piece of legislation is that it tried to pretend as though nothing significant had happened to the broadcasting structure. The Broadcasting Act of 1958 refers to "the continued existence and efficient operation of a national broadcasting system" - implying that there was still a "single system" like the one constituted in 1932. But obviously, the new structure was much more like two systems - one public and one private - with a referee for both.

Using the image of one big circle (the CBC) containing within itself a small circle (the private broadcasters), we can see that, by removing regulatory powers from the CBC, the Act effectively took the small circle out of the confines of the big one, made them about equal in size, and set them both to bouncing off not only each other but a third entity as well - the independent regulatory agency. This radical change in the Canadian broadcasting structure was effected but not acknowledged by the Broadcasting Act of 1958 which blithely continued to speak of a "single system" upholding the old national, public-service goals even though the private sector had now been made fully competitive with the CBC and able to operate within the financial incentives of the marketplace. A de-

cade later, the Broadcasting Act of 1968 perpetuated the illusion by still referring to a "single system" of broadcasting "to safeguard, enrich and strengthen the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of Canada."

Since 1958, the private broadcasters (in order to get and maintain their licenses) have always made glittering promises about how they will contribute to Canadian broadcasting sovereignty. But because their real goal is financial - and since the revised, but unacknowledged structure frees them to follow this incentive - they simply import U.S. programs because that is cheaper than producing their own. For its part, the broadcasting regulatory agency has seemed to think since 1958 that by assisting and fostering the private broadcasting sector, somehow - perhaps cumulatively - that sector's contribution to the stated national broadcasting goals might add up to something significant enough to prove that there is indeed a "single system."

In fact, there is no "single system" for broadcasting in Canada. At one time there was, at least in structure and in theory - but the 1958 Act effectively abolished it, while pretending nothing had been changed. It is this pretense - maintained by valiantly reiterating the old goals (which actually did fit the old structure), and by continuing to insist on the use of the phrase "single system" in the Act and in CRTC decisions - that has eroded and destroyed broadcasting sovereignty.

To use an analogy: the human body is a single system. Its various parts cooperate and coordinate to maintain life. Though we may speak of 'the nervous system' and 'the circulatory system', these various functions do not compete with one another. If they do, the body dies. In terms of broadcasting, the private sector does compete with the CBC. Perhaps it always did, but at least in the old structure that impulse was contained, bounded and kept in place so that its energies might contribute to the health of the whole. But the 1958 Act changed the structure and freed the private sector to be a fully separate entity. It does no good to go on pretending that there is a "single

system" when that is simply not the case. Of course, acknowledging the 1958 structural change certainly opens up a huge can of worms, and it's no wonder that the legislators at the time preferred to pretend nothing had happened.

As things stand, however, the myth of the "single system" has worked extremely well for the private sector, which has been fostered and pampered over the years by a regulatory agency bent on proving that this "single system" exists, and works if only the private sector can become strong enough. Whatever the motivation, there are any number of historical examples - the Greenberg/Bronfman bailout of pay-TV's First Choice, and the creation of "superstations" being the most recent ones - which suggest that the illusory notion of a "single system" has been continually used to justify decisions which simply cater to private-sector expansion. In 1980, for instance, the CRTC allowed the merger of Canadian Cablesystems Ltd. of Toronto and Premier Communications Ltd. of Vancouver - creating a corporate cable-TV entity three times larger than any other cable firm in Canada. To those who opposed the creation of such a large conglomerate because of the dangers of concentrated media ownership, the CRTC (according to *The Globe & Mail*, July 13, 1980) "pointed out that the Broadcasting Act spoke of a 'single Canadian broadcasting system'." On the other hand, when the CBC wished to use that "single system" to distribute its proposed TV-2 network via cable, the CRTC nixed the proposal by protesting that the service would reach only a limited audience.

More recently, the CRTC has agreed to let private TV stations cooperate in producing "Canadian content" shows, with each getting on-air credit for them. Meanwhile, the CBC, which is clearly committed to producing quality Canadian programming, gets its budget axed. In a speech Feb. 7 this year to The Canadian Club, CBC president Pierre Juneau stated that, after the most recent \$85 million cut, the CBC will have suffered budget cuts of more than \$420 million in the past seven years, or "more than \$60 million a year."

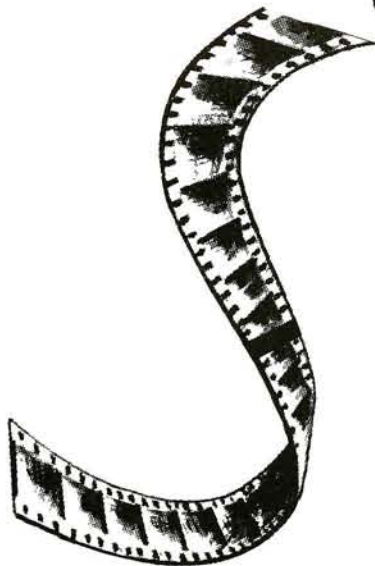
To me, it's clear that the myth of the "single system" of broadcasting is the mechanism which has been used over the years to simultaneously pamper/expand the private sector and demote/hamstring the CBC. This doesn't explain why such decisions have been made, though the results suggest certain highly political conclusions. Nevertheless, it looks for all the world as though in practice things have come full circle: back to a (this time implicit) structure similar to that of 1932. Now, though, the labels for the circles in our mental imagery are decidedly different. As of 1985, with the government and regulatory agency rather obviously "on-side" with the private sector - and having been "on-side" for quite a few years - the private broadcasting sector seems to have become the "higher logical type." Today it's private broadcasting that's the bigger circle containing within it the smaller circle, a circumscribed, well-bounded, and effectively curtailed CBC.



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