

# Political documentaries, dramas and free trade

BY PETER RAYMONT

I recently returned from a very exciting two weeks in Europe. My documentary *The World Is Watching* was invited to the International Documentary Film Festival in Nyon, Switzerland, and Telefilm Canada's Festival Office generously paid my way. On the way home I spent a couple of days in London where a friend took me to the premiere of films made by students graduating from the British Film School. The trip introduced me to a large group of successful European filmmakers who are actively making "political" documentary films.

Like many Canadian filmmakers I've been in despair about the future of the type of committed filmmaking sparked by John Grierson's vision. Ironically, as a result of some fierce political lobbying, funding for documentaries is now feasible in Canada through Telefilm and (in Ontario anyway) the OFDC. But as we all know, there's profound non-interest in "point of view" documentaries from most Canadian television programmers and even less interest from theatrical distributors. And without a prime-time TV broadcast license or a commitment from a distributor, the government agencies cannot invest in your film.

I was expecting the festival in Europe might be another sad and tedious bitch session about how difficult it is to make hard-hitting documentaries, and get them seen. Instead I found the event wonderfully revitalizing and invigorating. Here were filmmakers from all over the world (including the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Japan, and Australia) who had real careers making politically committed documentary films.

Each day from dawn to midnight we met in a perfect Swiss high-school auditorium in a perfect Swiss town on the shore of Lake Geneva to watch and discuss each other's films. It was terrific. It reminded me of those great days at the National Film Board in Montreal in the early 1970s when we'd watch each other's rough cuts and then sit around in the cafeteria or in bars and just talk about films and causes and dreams and working together. A mixture of French and English filmmakers - directors, producers, cinematographers, experienced old gaffers and keen young assistant editors, animators and lab technicians, all excited about filmmaking.

In London, at the graduate film screenings we



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saw 40-minute mini-features, dramas and documentaries, beautifully made, with passion and commitment. At the reception after, I talked with keen young students in their early twenties who feel they have a future career as documentary filmmakers! Something you'd never hear in film or journalism schools in North America.

Here, film students want to be Stephen Spielberg or, when they think of "film-making" for television, they want to be Ann Medina. Ask a Canadian if they've ever heard of Donald Brittain, Mike Rubbo, Martin Duckworth, Harry Rasky, Beryl Fox, Don Haig, Tom Daly, Colin Low, or John Grierson. There won't be a second generation of these pioneers.

In North America the documentary is seen, by everyone, as a training ground, a steppingstone toward making THE FEATURE. I remember a couple of years ago, at a meeting at Telefilm, Peter Pearson remarked, "Making another documentary, Peter! Aren't you ready for the feature world yet?"

Those students graduating from the British Film School and the seasoned documentarians at the Nyon Festival don't see themselves at training school. In Europe, the documentary filmmaker is a respected professional in his/her own right.

So I returned to Toronto thrilled with the injection of enthusiasm for the craft of the documentary and the belief in committed filmmaking. I hope I'll have the chance to continue making *cinéma vérité* investigations of the world, but the situation back in Canada is making that increasingly difficult. Sure our documentary had a great premiere at the

Toronto Festival of Festivals. Sure it won the Gold Hugo at Chicago and those awards in Europe. But the brutal fact is that the best documentary I could possibly make will reach a tiny fraction of the audience that would watch a mediocre drama. And the bottom line for me is reaching people with my work.

The problem of being alienated from an audience was why I, like many filmmakers, become frustrated with the NFB 10 years ago and left Montreal for Toronto - to try and set up co-productions between the NFB and the CBC so our documentaries could be seen. There's a vast store of wonderful films made at the NFB, films which Canadians taxpayers fund each year but never get to see. Today, as network TV people and the funding agencies constantly repeat, the priority is for indigenous Canadian fiction.

These nationalist political priorities and "market-driven" thinking have coincided with my own interest in exploring human emotion from deeper inside than I've been able to achieve in my documentaries. And by making a feature, I'll inevitably reach a much larger audience.

About a year ago, I applied to the Canadian Centre For Advanced Film Studies to learn all I could about the art and craft of feature filmmaking. It's been a fascinating nine months. I've learned a great deal about working with actors, screenwriters, the structure of a screenplay, blocking, feature film marketing and distribution, all that stuff. But what has really struck home in all the workshops we've done is that, (as Rod Stieger said to us when he's judging a script), the key "ingredient" - in a feature script, in any type of filmmaking - is

credibility. And if there's one thing documentary filmmakers have an eye and a feel for, it's credibility.

Whether or not I am successful in making feature films, I hope I'll always be able to make documentaries. They are the root, the soul of the Canadian cinema, and the Canadian conscience. The documentary film has helped us define who we are, for ourselves and for the rest of the world.

I'm convinced that the sad state of the political documentary in North America is largely a reflection of the conservative times we live in. The free trade deal which will inextricably suck us closer to the American way of life makes the struggle even more urgent.

One of the hottest topics of conversation for me in Switzerland was the influence of the European Common Market - free trade in Europe - on independent political filmmaking. I know the comparison is not wholly valid - the nations of Europe are rooted in thousands of years of culture and tradition, most with their own language (like Quebec - whose voters feel more secure culturally and are among the strongest supporters of Canada/U.S. free trade). And, unlike Canada of course, European nations are not "sleeping with an elephant", struggling to survive next to the most powerful economic force in the West. But the fact is European Free Trade has not diminished cultural/political sovereignty in Britain, Holland, Italy, France and Germany. Many would argue cultural sovereignty has actually been strengthened as a reaction to the EEC.

With economic homogeneity Europeans have insisted on preserving national cultural identities. I only hope this what happens in Canada - that we use the Mulroney/Reagan free trade agreement as a way of openly insisting on the funding and exhibition of indigenous, outspoken, films - documentaries and drama, that are unabashedly, definitely, unapologetically Canadian.

I'm convinced the best films, the films which are universally applauded and awarded, are films deeply rooted in a culture, in a way of life. These are the films - documentaries and dramas - which will make money and, in their own way, do their part to say to the world, these are Canadians, we are special. Canadian artists must, I feel, have a clear goal now, a common purpose, to help insure a Canadian identity survive economic continentalism. And I bet that, in the process, some beautiful and profitable Canadian films will be made. ●

Toronto-based documentary filmmaker Peter Raymont is currently a director resident at the Canadian Centre for Advanced Film Studies.