

The leveler of debate

In March of 1989, I was informed by *Cinema Canada's* Toronto editor, Tom Perlmutter, that a review of my book, *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking The Grierson Legend*, was being prepared by Susan Schouten Levine, and I was asked if I would read her submission and provide a response to it, to be published in the same issue in which her review was to appear. This, I was told, would contribute to "debate" on important issues. I immediately agreed to this proposal, but that was the last I heard from *Cinema Canada* until the published review appeared on my doorstep. For whatever reasons, *Cinema Canada* backed down from its initial idea, an unfortunate decision because Ms. Levine's review is such an obvious attempt to not only kill debate, but also to sweep all offensive facts back into the dustbin of historical amnesia. If the review entitled "Joyce Nelson Goes To War" (*Cinema Canada* #165) is any indication of the level of "debate" conducted in small-liberal circles, then the country is in more trouble than I thought.

Ms. Levine seems to have spent the ensuing months on the telephone, rather than in reading any of the more than 90 sources cited in my book. This penchant for the phone-tree, instead of studious fact-checking, gets her into trouble as a credible reviewer, but it did help her to amass a collective hydra-head (comprised of five other hostile Grierson devotees) through which a communal howl of outrage might replace any serious grappling with the text at hand. It is highly ironic that this hydra-head accuses me of "lack of scholarship", "distortions" and "half-truths". The degree to which this collective review is willing to simply deny historical facts that don't fit their assumptions indicates that I am confronted by not just outrage here, but active repression.

It is a well-documented fact (see both Forsyth Hardy's *John Grierson: A Documentary Biography* and Elizabeth Sussex's *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary*) that Grierson maintained his connections with, and received funding at various times from, the Rockefeller Foundation throughout the 1930s, through the War, and into the postwar period. It is also a well-documented fact that the Shell Film Unit, formed in 1934, was based on a report written by Grierson at the instigation of Jack Beddington, director of public relations for the oil cartel known as Shell-Mex-BP: formed by Shell Oil, Rockefeller's Standard Oil, and British Petroleum. Grierson's consulting advice on the PR use of film by Shell International led to an important association with Beddington and Shell-Mex-BP which lasted through the war. Clearly, such a role raises important questions about the primacy of multinational corporations in Grierson's

political vision. Ms. Levine deals with such complexities by simply asserting: "Grierson did not, for example, work for the Rockefellers and their multinational corporations. He merely had a Rockefeller Foundation Research Fellowship. Distortions of this type are characteristic of the book."

Ms. Levine also finds fault with my "absurd colonialist theory" and especially my analysis of the compilation film model adopted by Grierson for the wartime NFB. But again, she deals with this by simply changing the facts. With regard to the "Canada Carries On" series, she asserts: "The majority of these were not compilation films, but shot on location." Had she bothered to read Gary Evans's book, *John Grierson and the National Film Board*, she would have found on page 119: "Canada Carries On" shot some original Canadian footage but mainly used stock shots. These came from commercial and non-commercial sources, from state and military units of allied nations and neutrals, as well as from captured enemy material."

Similarly, she and hydra-head member Bob Verrall try to diminish the significance of Grierson's co-productions with Hollywood by reducing them to a mere "four short Victory Bond clips from Disney." If they had read Forsyth Hardy's text, they would have found on page 111 that in one 1941 trip alone, Grierson and Legg "lined up a dozen films to be made in co-production."

But it is in the review's critique of my analysis of Grierson's "Film Policy for Canada" that the collective hydra-head's limitations become most startlingly clear. Ms. Levine quotes me as saying: "As Peter Morris effectively argues, such a policy recommendation actually anticipated, and was undoubtedly the basis for, the infamous Canadian Cooperation Project of 1948..." Having apparently not read anything in Canadian film scholarship for several years, Ms. Levine rushes off to seize the only Peter Morris article she can think of - the one published in *Take Two*, edited by Seth Feldman in 1984 - and begins to hurl quotes to show how unscholarly I am. She thereby concludes: "The ridiculous Canadian Co-operation Project of 1948 had no similarity to the proposal Grierson wrote in 1944. But the lack of similarity does not prevent Nelson from saying that it inspired the CCP. Nelson says: 'Grierson's 1944 'Film Policy for Canada' was circulated in Hollywood where it probably inspired the MPAA, which hatched the nearly decade-long Canadian Co-operation Project."

Had Ms. Levine bothered to read Peter Morris's landmark article (duly acknowledged and footnoted in my text), "Backwards To The Future: John Grierson's Film Policy For Canada," in Gene Walz, ed., *Flashback: People and Institutions in Canadian Film History* (Montreal: Mediatexte, 1986), she would have found not only a thoroughly devastating analysis of Grierson's Film Policy, but one which

links it to the CCP in no uncertain terms. Ms. Levine's dearth of reading matter gets her into further trouble when she writes: "Nelson believes that Grierson's article, 'A Film Policy For Canada', was responsible for delaying the development of a feature film industry in Canada. She calls it a 'policy recommendation to the Canadian government', which it was not... This was no secret government policy recommendation." Again, if Ms. Levine had bothered to read the relevant Morris article, she would have found on page 25: "Grierson left for a visit to Hollywood in November 1944, immediately after submitting to the Department of External Affairs a confidential statement on 'Relations With The United States Film Industry'. In this document, he spells out, in more official terms, the same views expressed in 'A Film Policy For Canada'; and on page 31, Morris argues that Grierson's Policy "led inevitably to the Canadian Cooperation Project and the moribund state of the commercial film industry for more than two decades."

Although Ms. Levine would like the reader of her review to think that my analysis comes out of nowhere (or left-field, if you prefer), I am in fact building from (and indebted to) this 1986 work by Peter Morris, a debt I fully acknowledge in my text. That Ms. Levine does not know this significant piece of Canadian film scholarship, and did not bother to look it up, is an indication of somewhat dubious qualifications as a reviewer of my text.

Joyce Nelson
Toronto

Susan Schouten Levine replies:

Joyce Nelson faults me for not reading Gary Evans' book, *John Grierson and The National Film Board*. Yet Gary Evans himself makes the following statement in the acknowledgements at the beginning of his book:

A special thanks to friends Ronald Blumer and Susan Schouten, whose interest in and knowledge of the subject in general and Grierson in particular encouraged me over the years of the project. In our many discussions before, during, and after the writing, their comments and criticisms were most helpful in giving cohesion to the whole.

Perhaps Ms. Nelson should take a closer look at her own sources, instead of resorting to inaccurate and ad hominem attacks on the reviewer.

Que le débat commence!

May I make a contribution to the debate surrounding Joyce Nelson's new book on Grierson *The Colonized Eye*. Not as euphonious a title as *The Innocent Eye* (Caldor Marshall on Robert Flaherty) and not nearly as good a book either.

Grierson hired me to work at the NFB in June 1940 and I stayed until April 1941. I then joined the Army. In August of that year, I travelled with him on a troopship to the U.K. and acted as his personal assistant for about six weeks, while he was trying to organize an operational film unit in the Canadian Army. My only contacts with him after that were social and took place in England in the '50s and '60s where he used to live quite close to my parents, and in Canada on his visits to Montreal. Thus I was lucky enough to work with him in the early NFB days, when he was planning for the moment when he would take over the Motion Picture Bureau and control a production facility (which he did starting in June, 1941). My contemporaries at the Board particularly Jim Beveridge, Nick Read and Don Fraser were actively consulted. Grierson always liked to get the views of the younger generation.

The plan, as it developed, was to produce two series for the theatres, one to inform Canadians about what was going on in the world (*The World in Action*), the other about what was going on in Canada (*Canada Carries On*). There was also a program to produce 16mm colour films for the rural circuits, which Grierson was then organising with the help of Philias Côté who was one of the Canadian members of his small staff at the time. Contrary to Nelson's contention that all NFB productions would be compiled from other sources, the first *Canada Carries On* was already being shot in Halifax and we expected to be actively involved in shooting and scripting. By 1942, the NFB staff numbered in the hundreds mostly engaged in the process of making films - not just editing them.

I worked as a cameraman and editor on two 16mm colour films before I left the Board: *Iceland on the Prairies* and *Peace River*. Nelson includes these titles in her list of NFB productions which are somewhat paternalistic and odd "because there is virtually no reference to contemporary problems affecting these regional groups." That's really odd because so far as I was concerned out there, shooting *Peace River* for example, the problems of the people were a large part of the subject. We were doing sequences on the people involved in air transport, mining developments, the radio station in Grande Prairie and how it could assist the local community, the problems of farming and homesteading, etc. Far from being paternalistic, Jim Beveridge and I were a lot younger than the people we photographed for the film. Nelson, having no idea of the technical equipment available to us - neither sound nor video magnetic tape existed - assumes that we had failed to interview the people living in the region on film, as one would in the 1980s. Some more research would have invalidated her point, so why go to the trouble?

In any event, NFB productions of that era were oriented to people, in significant contrast to the Fitzpatrick Traveltalks - all longshots of cities and tourist attractions - which were part of

every theatrical program and every Canadian's perception of information films in those days.

The general subject of the book - Grierson's supposed intention, as an agent of the U. K. (and the U. S. major film companies), to sidetrack the production of feature films in Canada in the interests of those two countries is pretty ridiculous. Susan Shouten Levine's review in your July/August #165 issue has effectively demolished her arguments.

Grierson's wartime role in Canada was primarily to disseminate information on the war efforts. To do this he had to get the films made and get them to the people. To force the U. S. controlled theatres to provide the time was essential to his purpose and he did this so well that Canadian shorts remained a part of Canadian cinema programs long after he had left the country and only disappeared when shorts were eliminated from theatre programs. But he must have run up against a lot of opposition from the theatre chains and distributors both inside and outside Canada. With Fitzgibbons, the head of Famous Players, and his U. S. bosses against him, it's not surprising he had to have solid support from the Prime Minister. It's a good thing he had it.

Nelson's interpretation of Grierson's "A Film Policy For Canada" sent me back to the original - fortunately reprinted in Fetherling's *Documents in Canadian Film* (Broadview Press 1988). Reading it as a whole, and casting my mind back to the war front in Italy where I was when it was first published, I think it is a realistic appraisal of the situation at the time. Grierson, after all, wrote it near the end of his tenure as Commissioner. He knew the strength of the opposition in the U. S. film industry to any Canadian attempts to impose quotas. He had already made a decision to leave Canada and continue the production of *The World in Action* in New York. He had no further commitment to Canada. It made sense at the time to suggest that American production companies should produce entertainment films here rather than that we should make them ourselves. (The infamous Canadian Cooperation project was several years in the future). Grierson had created, in the National Film Board, a world-class organisation for the production and

distribution of documentary and information films. Why do anything to jeopardize it? Least of all recommend giving it up for a doubtful future in features?

But even if Grierson had called for a feature film industry at the time, who would have rallied round the flag? When Guy Roberge, Grierson's successor as Film Commissioner did so 18 years later, there was massive indifference from English Canada. It was the young Turks from Quebec - Claude Jutra, Gilles Carle, Denys Arcand, Denis Héroux and their producers André Link, John Dunning and Pierre Lamy who took the risks and got the show on the road. The future feature filmmakers were still in high school in 1944.

Grierson was not a feature film man as his later experience with the Group Three program of the NFDC (U. K.) showed. He was called in to do an information job for Canada which he did superbly. Any of us who have dealt with the U. S. majors know how tough they are. Tough and very well supported by the Canadians who run their theatres and distribution companies. He is to be commended for getting the theatre time he did for *Canada Carries On* and *The World In Action*. He could never have persuaded the Government to agree to a quota for Canadian features - we couldn't do it years later with a lot more support than he had. Indeed, we are lucky that we managed to get one for Canadian content on private television. I'm sure it was a close-run thing.

A historian has a duty to put things in perspective, to give the reader a feeling for the state of mind of the people at the time. So far as Nelson is concerned, writing about Canada in the 1940s, the people had no determination to make sacrifices to win the war and no fear that the Nazis, the Fascists and the Japanese would destroy our very way of life. Rather than battle for survival, we should have been battling for a Canadian feature film industry.

I'm sorry, but Joyce Nelson's current contribution to the history of Canadian cinema just can't be taken seriously.

Michael Spencer
Montreal

**We shoot,
edit, gaff and grip,
build sets, paint
sets, record sound,
create effects,
art direct,
transport, publicize,
coordinate,
take stills,
handle the books,
continuity and
playback.**

**We also bend over
backwards.**

You name it, we do it. ACFC is an independent union. So you'll be dealing with some very flexible people. Not a lot of rigid rules.

We're the only ones in the business with a tiered rate system. Which means you can save 15% on productions of 1 million and under, 10% on productions 2.5 million and under. And 5% on those under 4 million. (For American producers that's even better than the 80 cent dollar.)

And besides money, we'll save you time and headaches. Believe it or not, you can sign up any of our 730 craftspeople by signing just one contract.

So, give us a call. We'll go through all kinds of acrobatics to help you.

**Association of
Canadian Film Craftspeople**



Ontario: Cinevillage, 65 Heward Ave., Suite 105, Toronto, Canada
M4M 2T5 TEL (416) 462-0211 FAX (416) 462-3248

British Columbia: 1395 North Grandview Highway, Vancouver, Canada
V5N 1N2 TEL (604) 254-2232 FAX (604) 254-7790

Manitoba: 63 Albert Street, Suite 302, Winnipeg, Canada R3B 1G4
TEL (204) 943-1866 FAX (204) 943-1860

**POSITION AVAILABLE
FULL-TIME**

**EM/MEDIA
ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGER**

Active Artist-run Electronic Media centre with a mandate to facilitate independent media production within the artistic and cultural community. **Exciting potential and challenges.** To work with Board & staff. Oversee all operations, activities; maintain necessary finances, systems, strategies. Spokesperson-liaison. Self-motivated, responsible, energetic individual; excellent communications skills, 2 years (min) Arts Admin. experience (preferably ARCs/Production Co-ops), familiarity with IBM (S-S, W-P, D-B) soft/hardware an asset. SALARY: \$18,000 - 20,000 / annum (depending on experience). 35hr. flexible week, negotiable health/dental, affordable living, temperate climate, lively arts community.
EM/MEDIA is a pro-active, equal opportunity employer.

DEADLINE: November 15, 89

START January/90 (A. S. A. P.)

Send resumes & references: HIRING COMMITTEE, EM/MEDIA 1014 MacLeod Tr. S. Calgary T2G 2M7. Further INFO. (403) 263-2833