

BOOK REVIEWS

Seeing Ourselves; Films for Canadian Studies by James E. Page
National Film Board of Canada, Montreal 1979, vi & 210 pp. \$3.95

Professor James E. Page's *Seeing Ourselves* is a well-written, earnest attempt to provide a source book for the use of film in the teaching of Canadian Studies to students from Kindergarten through University. Page is the current president of the Association for Canadian Studies. He served as part of T.H.B. Symons' Commission on Canadian Studies. To a degree, his book is a response to that Commission's 1976 report, *Knowing Ourselves*, which attempted to rectify the misuse and underuse of audio-visual resources noted in that document.

Responding to that report could have

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been an ambitious undertaking. The 1980 NFB/CBC Catalogue alone lists some 1700 titles. To this would have to be added the resources of private producers, circulating collections, and those archival materials that could be put into at least limited distribution.

Seeing Ourselves however, does not represent a digestion of the total resources available. Instead, it concentrates on some 300 titles from the current NFB/CBC catalogue. Of these, 130 films receive detailed treatment under topic headings that include: Art and Artists, French-English Relations, History, Literature, Native Studies, Political Process, Quebec, Regional Studies, Urban Studies and Women's Studies. A second section provides 200 to 500-word reviews of the selected films, while titles that failed to make the final cut receive sporadic reference throughout. The indexing is formidable.

While Page makes the standard disclaimer — i. e. that much of his selection is a matter of personal taste — his method of choosing films does leave room for argument beyond mere quibbles over individual titles. The decision to exclude films made outside the NFB and CBC is itself worth protesting. While *Seeing Ourselves* was sponsored by the NFB, it is being distributed through the Canadian Film Institute — an organization with a responsibility to the entire Canadian film community. The book leaves the reader wondering whether any of Canada's independent filmmakers may have produced anything worth studying under the topic of Art and Artists, French-English Relations, Native Studies, the Political Process, Quebec, or Women's Studies. Certainly a large addendum, and perhaps something of an apology, is needed.

The bias against privately-produced films carries over to a bias against older works. Barely ten percent of the films chosen by Page were made before 1970. In this respect, he treats the past even more shabbily than does the NFB or the CBC. In their 1980 catalogue, the two public institutions reserve approximately 25 percent of their collection for films more than a decade old. Had Page gone beyond this one source, the bias toward

more recent work would be even more apparent — and even less justified. More importantly, the inclusion of archival films might have served to bring these works into general distribution. While teachers should be made aware of Nancy Ryley's 1972 *Grey Owl*, they should also know that the original *Grey Owl* films exist. Their demand for those films could make them more easily available.

The third bias reflected in the selection is that against drama, or dramatic reconstruction, alternate forms of documentary and film as art. Page does his duty by asking teachers to alert their students to the fictional nature of acted segments within documentaries, such as the *Adventures in History* series. But beyond that, he is reluctant to recommend dramatic material other than the obvious (*Drylanders*), and the unquestionably outstanding (*The Best Damned Fiddler from Calabogie to Kaladar*). Why does he not take full advantage of the possibilities for Women's studies inherent in King's *Maria*, or consider what Carle has to say about Quebec in *The Merry Life of Leopold Z*? More importantly, could he not discuss filmed drama as part of Canadian culture and, at the same time, come to terms with the use of drama in the documentary context?

What about coming to terms with documentary itself? Although Page includes Rubbo's *Waiting for Fidel* in the top 300, the film doesn't make the final cut — I suspect, because it lacks that voice of God firmness that characterizes most of the book's choices. Certainly, depriving any public school class of Rubbo's *Sir! Sir!* — because it doesn't teach in a didactic, straightforward manner — is at least a misdemeanor. More seriously, the role of citizens addressing the political process as presented in the *Challenge for Change* films cannot be ignored, even if these films are less accessible than standard social studies expositions. It is the role of a book like *Seeing Ourselves* to not only mention these films, but to take on the difficult task of providing a context for their use.

Finally, one is at a loss to understand why Page does not make a more extensive use of those films that would be most

appealing to young audiences — the NFB's extensive animation collection. Again, the most obvious choices are present Low's *Romance of Transportation in Canada*, as are the prestige films (Leaf's *The Street*). But what about the work of Co Hoedeman? And Norman McLaren? **Seeing Ourselves** may be the first book-length publication by the Board to completely ignore McLaren. This may sound like a radical departure, but given Page's purposes it is, at best, a damaging oversight.

A cynic might accuse Page of merely culling the NFB/CBC collection to provide harassed teachers with rainy day lesson plans. In reality, this would be an injustice to Page, to **Seeing Ourselves**, and to those who will use the book intelligently as a tool for sophisticated programming. That said, one is still left with the impression that here, film is being used as illustration rather than provocation. Perhaps, contrary to the book's intentions, students should not be presented with films that are right on topic, prepared by a benevolent bureaucracy to meet their every need. Perhaps the job of relating a film to what is being studied is itself the lesson to be taught. And perhaps students should be presented with films that are somewhat less accessible, and slightly beyond their age group expectations. Certainly, more effort is needed to make all parties aware of the functioning of informational media, and its role in the formation of the Canadian reality.

Seth Feldman

Seth Feldman teaches film at the University of Western Ontario and, with Joyce Nelson, edited the Canadian Film Reader. He is currently president of the Film Studies Association of Canada.

Making Connections : The Behind The Scenes Story.

by Wade Rowland

Gage. Toronto. 1979. \$10.95.

On Sunday June 12, 1977, at nine-thirty in the evening, the CBC showed the first of two ninety-minute programs called *Connections* — an exploration of the nature and extent of organized crime in Canada. By the standards of the day, the programs represented a mammoth undertaking, involving three years of research and the expenditure of \$500,000. Through a carefully orchestrated campaign of selected leaks to pertinent columnists, the programs received bountiful advanced publicity, and were viewed by an audience in excess of anything the CBC had ever experienced. Some estimates ranged as high as 1.0 million viewers.

In writing *Connections*, Mr. Rowland takes the reader along the troubled, tortuous, and sometimes very dangerous path that ultimately led to international recognition for the producers and a re-evaluation of television journalism. What is crucial about these shows is that they attempted to weld investigative journalism and film technology to produce the immediacy and intensity of *cinéma vérité*. The interviews were painstakingly scouted, then shot under trying circumstances, usually from the back of surveillance vans that were frequently changed to avoid recognition. Detection could have meant a lost interview, wasted film, and the possibility of physical danger. Previously, television had concentrated on spot news and analysis, but *Connections* attempted to break out of those restrictions to provide a panorama of association and geography that spanned most of North America and

parts of Europe: the desire was to keep the welter of facts and faces alive and fresh for the audience. The crew's job was facilitated by the latest in technology: camera equipment perfected by the U.S. military in Vietnam, lenses capable of multiplying light eighty-thousand times, body pack recorders and concealed microphones. The crew members themselves demonstrated courage, and almost manic dedication to their goal that at times seemed impossible to achieve.


Rowland's interview-oriented account leaves little doubt that the project suffered from more than the usual number of personality clashes. Originally, the project stemmed from a collaboration between Jim Dubro and Bill Macadam, who were working on a series of proposals in hopes one might interest the CBC Current Affairs Division. Dubro was responsible for the research and Macadam for the packaging and presentation of the material through his production company, Norfolk Communications. One result of their collaboration was the program called *The Fifth Estate: The Espionage Establishment*. The lessons learned and the success encountered during that venture whetted Macadam's appetite for bigger game. Encouraged by Peter Herrndorf, then newly appointed head of Current Affairs, who was anxious for properties that might stir the moribund department into life, the organized crime project was begun under a secret code name on December 9, 1974.

As the research progressed, several problems surfaced. First, there was reluctance on the part of the Canadian law enforcement agencies to admit that such a thing as organized crime existed. Second, it became evident that to get information from one source, it was necessary to provide information from another.



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