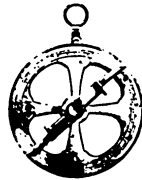
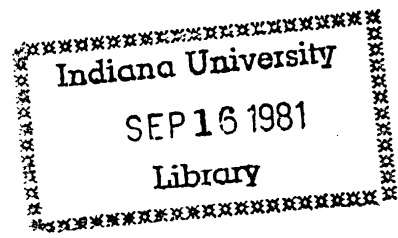


**JOURNAL OF
CANADIAN STUDIES**



**REVUE D'ÉTUDES
CANADIENNES**

<i>Editor</i>	JOHN WADLAND	<i>Directeur</i>
<i>Editorial Committee</i>	HARVEY McCUE JAMES PAGE MICHAEL PETERMAN (chairman) DENIS SMITH JAMES STRUTHERS	<i>Comité exécutif</i>
<i>Managing Editor Business Manager</i>	ARLENE DAVIS MARGARET PEARCE	<i>Gérante de la rédaction Administration</i>
<i>French Language Advisor</i>	TERENCE MELLORS	<i>Conseiller de langue française</i>
<i>Editorial Board</i>	DAVID CAMERON WALLACE CLEMENT RALPH HEINTZMAN MARGARET LAURENCE JACQUES MONET, S.J. W.F.W. NEVILLE GORDON ROPER DONALD V. SMILEY PHILIP STRATFORD T.H.B. SYMONS W.E. TAYLOR DONALD F. THEALL CLARA THOMAS MELVILLE H. WATKINS ALAN WILSON	<i>Comité de rédaction</i>



English-Canadian Cinema Since 1945

A crisis in Canadian society occurs whenever drastic and irreversible change threatens to elude the forces that work constantly to postpone it. Repatriation is such a crisis. And nowhere will the fallout of this symbolic gesture be more noticeable than in that most active of symbol-making arts, the cinema. Despite the best efforts of those who "hype" it and those who bungle its funding and administration — and independently of those heroic figures who have spent long and thankless careers attempting to present their nation's culture on the screen — Canadian film will, very soon, enjoy a moment as the most visible forum for the discussion of the new iden-

tity. Turmoil, as it usually does, will shape the new aesthetic. The cultural sea change to be sparked by repatriation and the energies released by regional fission are already working their way through a progression of cinematic codification: newscasts to documentary to docudrama to fiction film and on to animation and experimental works. When this new language is assimilated into all our cinema formats, the resulting art form will be unique; it is unrecognizable, unimaginable today.

The situation is far from unprecedented. Canadian cinema's most serious experiment with self-respect began in 1939-40, when John Grierson

7-27-82

used the wartime emergency to transform a minor co-ordinating role into the National Film Board of Canada. The birth of the NFB was not just an organizational shuffle or the creation of a new agency. Grierson force-fed a generation of Canadians on the ideal of a messianic, aggressive cinema system grounded in his need to bind the nation together through self-exposure. Backed by a government commitment then unprecedented in any democratic society, he imported the best available talent to train completely naive, would-be filmmakers to develop their own coherent aesthetic. In six years, Grierson mobilized an indigenous creative resource which had failed to develop spontaneously in the previous half century. In the seventh year he was deported.

Cinema in Canada can be neither more nor less than the product of its national will. When Canadians decide to have a country — as in 1919, 1939, 1967 and today — they begin planning Hollywoods of the North and find themselves lauded by an international community that waits patiently for their intermittent cinematic rejuvenation. When Canadians choose to de-emphasize their national identity, they turn on the national cinema with a vengeance. Scarcely had Grierson departed when a sleepwalking culture signed away its cinematic birthright. The now infamous Canadian Co-operation Project insured Hollywood a complete dominance of Canadian screens in exchange for a few travelogues and passing reference in sundry Hollywood features. The eight hundred world-class films produced at the wartime board are only now coming back to light, partly, one suspects, because a generation of Canadians was subtly trained to believe that work of that quality could not have been made in this country.

The story we attempt to sketch with our collection of insights into English-Canadian cinema¹ begins here, at zero. Peter Morris carefully chronicles the stillborn efforts of Film Board directors to sustain Grierson's vision in the years following the Hollywood sellout. Clearly, there was a desire to find new directions, to join the baby boom of national cinemas emerging in the post-war period. Yet even these directors were

not immune to the national lethargy:

...the Canadian films reflect a comfortable liberalism. No protest is implied, nor apparently necessary: the guiding dictum need only be "peace, order and good government." But some of the "real people in real situations" who had no place on NFB screens speak eloquently by their absence.

Among these "real people" were Canadian workers. Grierson, whose avowed goal was to present a dignified image of the working class, had built into the Board a concern with the nature of work in Canada. No arm of a capitalist government had been so ready to document discontent in the workplace. Yet, as Chris Whynot demonstrates, this capacity also fell victim to the post-war doldrums. Whynot shows us the post-war Film Board as a limp arm of Liberal policy, its insights into Canadian life no more exciting than the flyers arriving with baby bonus cheques. "By the middle 1950's the NFB was well established as a branch of the civil service whose position depended on the maintenance of the status quo."

Outside of the work of the Film Board, English-Canadian cinema had assumed a position in which most people were happy to leave it — a scavenger picking at the bones of the medium after larger beasts of prey had gobbled up its meat. If the Canadian public thought about its cinema at all, it assumed that anyone foolish enough to want to make films in this country deserved to be cut off from any significant means of production. This state of affairs inspired a charming, local ingenuity, "a popular mechanics era" of filmmaking, as Stan Fox calls it. When there was a passing crisis — such as the need to establish some sort of Canadian television to offset the American onslaught — filmmakers could be assembled and, if need be, given the opportunity to work and gain some exposure. This television crisis, augmented by the cultural isolation of British Columbia, led to the burst of innovation documented in Fox's article. The two hundred works produced at CBUT represent a creative explosion smaller in scale and regional in nature, but not qualitatively different from what had

(continued on page 116)

(continued from page 2)

occurred at the NFB ten years earlier. Yet these films sank quickly from sight because of the general *ennui*. They are all but impossible to obtain today. Fox's history is the first serious attempt to discuss them since the time of their production.

Another prod in the direction of a revived cinema was the revolution in film aesthetics brought about by the development of portable, relatively cheap camera/sound units in the late 1950s. In documentary, this represented more than a challenge to the voice-of-God narrator (who, in fact, lingers on at the Board and at the CBC despite the passing southward of Lorne Greene). It was a call for the re-evaluation of the relationship of the filmmaker to his subject and, inevitably, of the possibilities inherent in his medium. One tangible result of this re-evaluation was the series of experimental documentaries produced by the NFB's Unit B.² Indeed, the successes for Unit B lead to a resurgence of interest in the documentary filmmaker as artist. During the 1960s and 1970s there were few institutions in the film world that cultivated the image of the documentarian/author as did the NFB. In this collection, we have chosen studies of two of these figures. The first, Martyn Burke, began his career as a freelance journalist before moving to more interpretative forms of documentary (and finally, at present, into fiction film). Examining Burke's approach in two personal documentaries, *California Movie* and *Carnivals*, crew of *The Enterprise*, use a screen to "go where no man has gone before." An English-Canadian usually intention and pursuit. That the two films are views of an American milieu is also perhaps an indication of Burke's confidence in the strength and integrity of his own Canadian perspective.

Burke's work epitomizes a balance between the NFB's demands for an institutional style and an equally vociferous call for complete creative control on the part of the individual filmmaker. The acceptance of Derek May in this context is not nearly so complete. In his article on May, Piers Handling examines a director whose work is variously praised as an unexpectedly subtle handling of the medium and condemned as nothing more than subsidized narcissism:

His work has been described as difficult and self-indulgent. Critical reaction has often been hostile. His first film...was quite successful, while a not untypical review of his second film...was headlined, "More National Film Board Junk."

Handling places May's work well within the tradition of experimental cinema as it is practised throughout

the Western world. But is it within the ethos of the Canadian experience to go so far as to hire public self-expression? If May's work systematically unravels our English-Canadian expectations of the NFB as the source of slightly artsy travelogues, it also threatens our belief in sanctuary, our complacent sense that this country is large enough to provide a hiding place for everybody. May intrudes. These intrusions are not limited to Niagara Falls and Montreal but to his own family, his own psyche and, by implication, the family and psyche of his viewer. An American may, like the crew of *The Enterprise*, use a screen to "go where no man has gone before." A English-Canadian usually uses it to cover his window.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Jack Chambers' work comes so much closer to defining the nature of alternative expression in English-Canadian cinema. Where May searched for a personal poetry of the bizarre, Chambers discovered his internal landscape in the most ordinary of surroundings. *Circle*, the film discussed by Bruce Elder, is deliberately less than an experimental film in the ordinary sense, even less than a home movie. It is an attempt to discover a world, literally, in the artist's backyard. Like Chambers, Elder carefully dissects the sensibility that underlines the most simple of spatial and temporal landscapes. He finds within Chambers' work a world of contemplation and understanding. A distinguished filmmaker himself, Elder is able to follow *Circle* from a sidestreet in London, Ontario, through two centuries of Romantic and Realist thought. And then, like a zen master, he is able to appreciate the film for its own substance, and no more.

To leave the discussion of Canadian cinema at *Circle* is tempting. It would allow us to ignore the sort of question raised by the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee in its recently published guideline: "Should the objectives of film policy be more Canadian films or more films made in Canada?" But this particular moment in history denies us such an easy escape. We are making too many films to stop and work out a constitution of Canadian cinema; we feel the need to talk about ourselves too strongly to articulate policies. As Allan King points out in discussing our feature film industry, we may even be going too far and too fast to choose any one coherent direction:

What we don't have is any clear idea of what we ought to be doing. It's all very diffuse and policy is unstable. In fact, we have to make both kinds of film — the cultural and commercial. I don't think we can afford a concentration on one kind of

filmmaking. I think, for all kinds of reasons, we would not have a basis for work that way. Of course, King is right. After a quarter century as a Canadian director, he realizes that if Canadian cinema (and, for that matter, Canadian culture) exists at all, it comes to us as a series of surprises from a number of strange places. The generation of promising directors who made their debuts because of Canadian Film Development Corporation grants a decade ago are now found on "For the Record" or making surprisingly well-presented episodes of several otherwise dreary CBC series. Sadly, the CFDC's current rate of success is considerably less than it once was. Today the Film Board sometimes seems more concerned with videotaping and selling its past successes than with pursuing its original mandate. Yet there is some promise in its new regionalization programme. And, as Lulu Keating points out, there is a tremendous energy and excitement in Canadian Co-ops. Our mushrooming film schools yield exceptional — if seldom viewed — student productions. Independent producers and directors continue to live by their wits (as they always have). Everyone continues to cry out for better scripts. Many Americans and some Canadians are making a living by dressing Toronto as New York, Vancouver as Los Angeles. Meanwhile, only one Canadian feature in twenty turns a profit.

Michael Levine's knowledgeable, hard-nosed assessment of the financing of Canadian films leaves us with the impression that a new order is emerging from our recent crisis of prosperity. To no one's surprise, the successful film producers in this country have centralized, amalgamated, cross-financed and interbred. Creativity, romance, adventure may, for once, be restricted to writers, directors, actors, cameramen and editors.

Canadian filmmakers have always been the connoisseurs of forbidden fruit in various would-be Edens. The new generation of critics and historians have put the adventures of the cinematic infrastructure in a context that allows us to appreciate transient enthusiasm in the light of historical and international precedent. Peter Morris' *Embattled Shadows*,³ a history of pre-war Canadian cinema, creates just such a sense of *déjà-vu*. Peter Harcourt's numerous articles and polemics, in print and on the air, are highly sophisticated contributions that make essential reading. Even more important than the work of these individuals is the atmosphere of interest and enthusiasm that they and

their colleagues have generated at universities, in the popular press and throughout the Canadian environment. There will be no single definitive book on Canadian cinema just as there can be no single definitive film. The field is too vibrant. The myriad of ideas and visions prevents the predominance of any one approach.

What can this discussion contribute to the production of cinema in this country? When, in 1989, we celebrate the seventieth year of promises to build a Hollywood of the North and the NFB's golden anniversary, the authors of these articles will, no doubt, still be attacking the roots of lethargy and the quiet government sellouts that mark our film history. They will likely find our communications industry even more dominated by multinationals and they will continue to contribute briefs to the perpetual series of government bodies set up to receive them. We suspect that, by 1989, federal support for the arts will be not only more confused but greatly diminished. And there will still be a coterie of lazy, unimaginative critics compiling ill-informed diatribes into would-be books. However, between now and the end of the decade, it is reasonable to expect a scale of production and appreciation of English-Canadian cinema unseen since World War II. We hope that these articles will help to provide a context for what you will be seeing.

Seth Feldman and Gene Walz

NOTES

1. Francophone cinema in Canada, in all of its historical, political, and socio-economic manifestations, has developed almost entirely outside of the cinematic tradition discussed in these articles. Even within "national" institutions such as the NFB and CBC, the Québécois have maintained a fiercely guarded independence of style and aspiration. While we intend, in the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, to pursue the study of cinema in Quebec, we would, for the present, refer the reader to the most complete bibliography in the field, Pierre Pageau and Yves Lever, *Cinéma Canadien et Québécois* (Montréal: Collège Ahuntsic, 1977). The excellent series of publications by La Cinémathèque Québécoise, *Copie Zéro*, present a thorough review of the history and current achievements of this cinema.
2. See Peter Harcourt's "The Innocent Eye: Aspects of the Work of the National Film Board of Canada," *Sight and Sound*, 34 (Winter 1964-65); reprinted in Feldman and Nelson, eds., *Canadian Film Reader* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977) For another point of view on Canadian contributions to the development of the *cinéma vérité* aesthetic, see Bruce Elder's "On the Candid Eye Movement," in Feldman and Nelson, *op. cit.*
3. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978.