

A history of great ideas and lost opportunities

After 46 years of struggling to fulfill its mandate, the Canadian Film Institute is on its last legs.

by Penelope Hynam

On January 13, 1981 a small article appeared in the *Globe and Mail* with the headline "Film Institute May Die From Lack of Funds." It went on: "*The Canadian Film Institute is facing a drastic cutback of services and possible extinction unless it can persuade the government sources that provide approximately half of its budget to release an emergency expropriation of \$106,000.*" The executive director Frederik Manter was quoted as saying about the 46-year-old organization that "to avoid termination we will have to cut back on our publications and our National Film Theatre. To do that would mean that we are no longer an institute."

This little article is significant for more than one reason, the main one being that it is the first piece about the Institute to appear in the media in recent memory. The CFI has managed to maintain such a low profile in the past 20 years – in a period when every other cultural organization has been dissected, praised, blamed, and in the spotlight over various issues – that the film student who recently said to me blankly, "the Canadian Film What?" can hardly be blamed for his ignorance. The article is also significant in that with very little fanfare, kudos or regrets it could be signalling the end of an era.

What is this organization that seems to be "facing extinction" before it has even reached a respectable middle age? In the seemingly endless parade of film and cultural initials in Canada – the CBC, CFDC, NFB, CCA, CCFM, CRTC and on and on – the CFI has been comparatively ignored and neglected, for reasons not entirely of its own making. How many of us know that it is the second oldest film institute in the world? How many even care? What is a "film institute" anyway?

In 1935 a group of alert Canadians established the National Film Society as an independent, non-profit, federally chartered organization whose main purpose was "*The encouragement and promotion of the study, appreciation, and use of motion and sound pictures and television as educational factors in the Dominion of Canada and elsewhere.*"¹ Although not explicitly stated, its main concern was the increasing domination of Canada's film market by American commercial and educational product. The Society wanted to counteract the lack of opportunity for Canadians to see films from foreign coun-

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tries, particularly Britain, in our American-owned theatre chains (yes, Virginia, they owned them then too). Based in Ottawa with branches in the provinces, the Society would make available to Canadians films that would otherwise never be seen on our screens. It would also make people aware of the problems and choices in the educational film markets in Canada. Its formation coincided, not incidentally, with a low point in Canadian film production and an increase in Hollywood's world-wide takeover of film markets.

The stated aim of the Society was wisely comprehensive and general. Its impetus was the same as that behind the formation of every national film institute. Just two years earlier, the British Film Institute (BFI) was founded on much the same principles, although it is interesting to note that from the beginning the British were not afraid to make their mandate more clearly nationalistic: "to promote the various uses of the film as a contribution to national well-being."² In the following decades



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the American and Swedish Film Institutes, among others, would be established. During these years the basic and necessary functions of any film institute were clearly laid out:

- an archival program to collect, preserve and document films and film-related material, both from the indigenous country and from around the world;
- a publication program producing books, catalogues, research papers, etc. on or about film, filmmakers and television, mainly but not exclusively from the institute's own country;
- an exhibitions program connected to

a National Film Theatre or theatres across the country, which would program a wide variety of films for the public screenings;

- and a distribution library of educational, artistic or historic films for rental or loan to individuals, schools, groups and universities, etc.

From the very beginning money to finance the activities of the National Film Society was, if not a problem, at least an uncertainty. Ironically, given the main reasons behind its formation, the Society was supported in its first years partly by grants from the American Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations. Grant money also came from the British Imperial Trust, an arm of the British government. In its first five years the Society did a remarkable job, given the size and complexity of the country, in creating a network of film societies and 16mm screenings for fascinated audiences from coast to coast.

World War II provoked the formation of the National Film Board in 1939, and an unprecedented increase in Canadian film production and distribution stimulated by the war effort. After the war, the National Film Society stepped into the void created when the NFB ceased its travelling exhibition circuit. The distribution film library was greatly expanded, and according to its own pamphlet published about 1947, the Society was moving ahead in all the "traditional" institute fields: a library, research, catalogues, rental services, film society branches and an information service. All that remained to be done was to change the name officially to the Canadian Film Institute, which came in 1950. The organization maintained its independent, "voluntary," non-governmental status which initially gave it a great deal of freedom, and later was to play a role in its financial and credibility problems.

An archival department was started in the early 1960s under executive director Roy Little who, with Peter Morris, had produced a document entitled "A National Film Archives for Canada." Despite initial government enthusiasm for the plan and verbal promises of support, it took some time before Morris officially became curator of the Canadian Film Archives in 1964. But even then financial support was not forthcoming and the Institute maintained the Archives out of its own operating budget for the first few years. Despite the less than ideal conditions Morris persevered and began the work of building up what was eventually to become a valuable collection of films and documents.

At that time the Canadian Film Archive holdings were stored in a large warehouse in Beaconsfield, Quebec, and because of the lack of funds the

nitrate film was not properly stored nor air-conditioned. The CFI had urgently applied for a grant from the government for \$65,000 to transfer much of the footage to safety film – a request that months later had not even been acknowledged much less granted. And in 1967 the predictable happened. One hot day the volatile nitrate stock self-ignited, and the ensuing fire destroyed many of the valuable films. It was a bitter blow to the Institute and its curator, and angry statements were made to the press blaming the government for its lack of support. Then Secretary of State Judy LaMarsh retaliated with a strongly worded letter to the president of the Institute taking exception to its statements. It was probably the most daring line that the Institute had ever taken publicly, and this chastisement from the highest government source seems to have permanently intimidated the board of directors. (At least it has never again publicly taken as strong a line on any issue.)

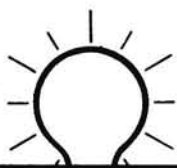
The Archives did survive that blow, and by 1973 the collection had again been built up to an outstanding level, including 5,000 films conserved, 140,000 films indexed, 150,000 stills collected, and an extensive library of important film books and periodicals (some now rare) in place.

But an even bigger blow was looming, unbeknownst to many at the Institute. Under the executive directorship of Gordon Noble the CFI suffered its most serious financial crisis to date, just as its archival collection was becoming more and more valuable. Because a small and undistinguished collection already existed in the Public Archives in Ottawa, the government was very interested in improving it by acquiring the superior CFI collection. So in 1974 the board of directors and Noble arranged to avert the financial crisis by "donating" the Canadian Film Archives to the Public Archives in exchange for the support of some \$50,000 a year in various areas of Institute activity. The entire collection was squirreled away into the vaults of the Public Archives, over the objections of many, including Institute curator Morris. He was vociferously opposed to the takeover "*because the Archives is a place where things get buried and that's not to my mind what an Archives ought to be... an Archives ought to be like the National Gallery. Of course it's a place that conserves and collects but if it doesn't do a cultural role as well, if it doesn't show things, if it doesn't publish books and have lectures and discussions, and generally get involved in arguments about whatever the artistic issues of the day are, if it doesn't do those things then it's just a dead agency,*"

it's just a warehouse of the most sophisticated kind."

Losing the Archives "carved the heart" out of the Institute, a radical operation from which it could never be expected to recover. Morris, one of the more enlightened people ever to work for the organization, left to become a professor of film, and Gordon Noble went to a good job in the Secretary of State's office.

To maintain its original mandate, the Institute now concentrated its energies on three departments: the distribution library, publications, and the National Film Theatre. In the '60s Morris was also instrumental in starting up the publications service. One of the first works to appear was a three-part catalogue of Canadian feature films made from 1913 to 1969. In 1969 Morris initiated the publication of *Film Canadiana*, the annual catalogue that all students of Canadian film are familiar with as the most comprehensive compendium of all the shorts and features produced in this country every year. Further pieces published were connected to retrospectives at the National Film Theatre. As Canada began to take its film history and filmmakers more seriously, the Institute led the way in the publishing of monographs on our filmmakers - Ron Kelly, Terence Macartney-Filgate, Allan King, Norman McLaren, Gilles Carle, Richard Leiterman, Don Shebib, to name a few - and books of research and scholarship of film culture. The most recent is Peter Harcourt's excellent book on Jean-Pierre Lefebvre.



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Under the director of publications Piers Handling the department is continuing to provide unique and necessary contributions to creating a sense of worth and importance in Canada as a film-producing country.

Reflecting upon the success of the British Film Institute, Handling points out that the BFI is so influential "because they have more of a sense of film culture, which is what's lacking in this country to some extent, and that is really, as I see it, the role of the CFI - to develop an awareness of one's own film culture - as well as, and I think this is just as important, to develop an awareness of other countries' film cultures... and to actually make people aware that there is a body of filmmakers and creative people out there who are in some ways second to none. I mean, just because they are ours, and their films look different, doesn't mean they are less valuable than Francis Ford Coppola or the more publicized people."

The National Film Theatre and its regional affiliates in over 10 cities across

the country is the other obvious *raison d'être* of the CFI. The main theatre of the NFT is in the Public Archives in Ottawa. Although it was never designed as a movie theatre it has been the home of an impressive number of screenings in recent years. Some 300 films are shown annually, three or four nights a week. Under programmer Stephen Bingham and regional programmer John Sharkey the Canadian material has increased to 40% of the total films screened. (Even in the days when it showed only 20% Canadian films - a disgraceful amount for a National Film Theatre - it was still showing more Canadian movies than the commercial theatres.) Recently a retrospective of the 17 features of Quebec filmmaker Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, who is recognized internationally but almost ignored in English Canada, toured 13 towns and cities with the filmmaker present to hold workshops. Now in the planning stage is a Festival of Canadian and international women filmmakers and an accompanying filmography of Canadian women independents. It's this kind of cultural commitment that should mark every Institute activity.

But that has not been the case, and therein lies the rub. The history of the CFI has sadly been one of lost opportunities: lost through a combination of crippling financial problems and over-cautiousness from the various boards of directors who seem to have been consistently more interested in maintaining a low and acquiescent profile, than in being in the vanguard of any change for the better in our film industry. Time and again they have missed the boat on many key issues, through timidity and lack of vision. For example, they did not recognize the importance of starting a monthly film magazine of international and domestic film news and critiques, such as *Sight and Sound* put out by the BFI. That crucial gap was filled by private magazines like *Take One*, *Cinéma Québec*, *Motion* and then *Cinéma Canada*, and the eager response to these publications showed that the need was there. Again, when the option was given to the board of moving the NFT from its inadequate and dull accommodations into a special mini-theatre that would be built into the new National Arts Centre, it decided to play it safe and remain in the present space.

Another case of a lost opportunity was in moving the NFT to Toronto, a major film production center where the potential audience would increase tenfold, and it could have a hope of regularly supporting itself through its box office receipts. The CFI experimented with running an NFT at the old Radio City theatre on St. Clair Avenue. The first year was a great success, but because of an anticipated lack of funds to cover a rent increase the next year the location was moved from the commercial 800-seat venue to a much smaller music library screening room which rather resembled a church hall. The program lost its excitement, its audiences, and a lot of money. The CFI Ottawa powers were so cowed by that failure that the experiment of only two years was allowed to go no further. Meanwhile repertory cinemas like *Cinéma Lumière*, the *Revue* and the *New Yorker* began to open and pull in audiences that were just waiting for such alternative film opportunities. Gerald Pratley, on the board in the late 60s, tried to convince it of the need for a permanent NFT in Toronto, but to no avail. Pratley finally gave up and persuaded the Ontario

government to start its own form of film institute. In 1968 the Ontario Film Institute was established with Pratley as director and with a very suitably equipped film theatre at the Ontario Science Centre (its one real drawback being its suburban location). Now we have the ridiculous situation of Toronto being the only city in Canada which has neither a National Film Theatre affiliation, nor even occasional program exchanges with the NFT.

The unwillingness to involve itself clearly and publicly in the key issues of Canadian film, the insistence on not rocking the boat, have often been excused on the grounds that the Institute has to tread a fine line between the public and the private sectors. Government sources of support must not be antagonized. But a look at the financial history and structure makes one wonder what has been so worth these sacrifices. Since 1950 the Institute has existed on an impossible and chaotic budget with grants, research contracts and direct appropriations coming in ever-changing amounts from ever-changing government departments. Since 1970 alone the CFI has received money from more than 15 branches of government with only three agencies, the Canada Council, the National Film Board and the National Research Council, as regular yearly contributors. But even their support varies from year to year as contracts change and they experience their own internal budgetary problems. In 1974 the Canada Council grant was \$90,000, in 1978 it dropped to \$70,000 and increased again in 1980 to \$85,000. The NFB support has varied from a low of \$10,000 (1970) to a high of \$85,000 (1980), and dropped drastically to a projected amount of \$17,000 for 1981.³ (It was this decrease that brought the existing crisis to a head.) With this kind of fiscal uncertainty hanging over it like the sword of Damocles, it is a small miracle that the Institute has produced so much of value, and attracted the people of calibre that it has. But on the other side of that coin, it is amazing that past executive directors and boards have tolerated such a state of affairs for so long.

The British Film Institute is constantly being referred to as a role model, but that institute has been in the enviable position of having a budget directly granted from Parliament, in a lump sum which now amounts to \$11,000,000 annually. (The American Film Institute's budget also comes directly from Congress to the tune of \$12,000,000 a year.) The CFI's budget has never exceeded \$1,000,000. This year the projected total is about \$900,000, higher than usual because of funds for the biennial Ottawa International Animation Festival. Too much of the energies of the staff and Institute directors are subverted into constantly looking for ways and means of surviving, and not enough time is spent in defining cultural priorities and making long range plans. The Institute has never had a director who was capable of or allowed to play a cultural leadership role.

In 1975 Frederik Manter was brought in when the organization was not expected to survive the twin blows of losing its Archives and operating from a deficit position. His appointment to such an important job came as a surprise to many. An American, born and raised in the Los Angeles film milieu, he had only been in Canada for two years. His Canadian experience, working briefly in advertising at *Cinéma Canada*, and at the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution

Centre, was hardly the background required for such a critical position as director of our national film institute. He is now generally credited with keeping it going financially against great odds, and with hosting (every other year) the successful International Animation Festival. But a financial manager and money-juggler was, and is, only a temporary and near-sighted answer to the Institute's long-range problems. Its lack of will, its acceptance of an unproductive financial structure, its inability to look into the future and seize initiative in many areas can all be traced to the lack of a courageous, far-sighted and culturally committed executive director. Until the board of directors and the government view the Institute (and Canadian film generally) as an important element in our cultural structure rather than an entertaining side-line, it will never take the appointing of its executive director with any real seriousness.



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The crisis that came to a head in December 1980 is indeed serious. In the past 18 months 12 people of a staff of about 31 have been laid off (some having the dizzying experience of being laid off and hired back again within a week as extra funds trickled in). The Institute is rapidly losing its ability to make money. The percentage of what it earns through publications, film rentals, and the NFT has dropped from 71% in 1970 to about 45% in 1981.⁴ Some would argue that it shouldn't have to make money at all. Film professor Peter Harcourt points out with irony that "if you show you can make money you'll never get enough government financing; you have to lose money to gain respect, you have to lose as much money as the opera or the symphony orchestras, and the people will say, yes, you're valuable."

An emergency meeting with government representatives called by Manter and the board in January resulted in an extra grant from the Department of Communications to "help alleviate the Institute's current cash flow problems." The letter from the Minister of Communications Francis Fox, which Manter happily shows off, goes on to say: "I am fully supportive of your efforts to promote the work of major Canadian film artists in Canada and throughout the world... Department officials are now working to help establish a rational federal funding policy for your organization, and I will look forward to a satisfactory resolution of this prob-

(cont. on p. 41)