



● Miller Brittain: Self-portrait

## ATLANTIC CINEMA: Portrait of a region

by Frank McGinn

Atlantic Canada needs an annual film festival because there is an industry here that would not otherwise be recognized. It would continue to exist, as it has for some years now, but it would not be seen to exist. This is an unpleasant state of affairs, as any Atlantic filmmaker (or Invisible Man) will tell you. It means that people tread on your toes and don't say they're sorry. This can lead to resentment. It also means that you can't check your appearance in the mirror before a big date. You have no way of determining whether you look great or have something hanging from your nose. This can lead to self-doubt. The purpose of the Atlantic Film Festival is to exorcise these regional demons. By displaying the best films of the region's best filmmakers, it hopes to win Atlantic Canada the honour of being taken seriously. And by bringing these films and filmmakers together, it hopes to promote a local sense of shared identity.

This year was the festival's second try. Last year it was held in St. John's, Nfld., and did not create a big stir. Halifax was a better choice: it has more media to focus attention and a larger, more voracious film audience. (There are only two alternative cinemas here: Dalhousie University's Film Theatre and The Wormwood Dog and Monkey Film Society, just sufficient to create an appetite for alternate cinema without being substantial enough to satisfy it.) The festival was well-publicised and comparatively well-attended. More film-goers than ever now know that, even though a film was produced in Atlantic Canada, it isn't necessary a documentary about fish. And more filmmakers than ever now know that they aren't alone in choosing to work in Atlantic Canada.

In other words, there were two festivals happening simultaneously. One was for the enlightenment of the local

film fan and one was for the enlightenment of the local filmmaker. They overlapped some but there was a basic difference of response. The film fan hadn't realized that there was an Atlantic film industry. That's because he never knew where he could go and see such films. Most of them were marketed internationally and stayed there. The local film fan came to the festival equipped only with the desire to learn.

And what he found were films that could hold their own at any festival. Some of these he liked a lot and some he liked less. The festival opener was one of the latter. *Threshold*, starring Donald Sutherland, was entirely out of order. The story of the world's first artificial heart implant, it was a poor choice for the festival's most prestigious slot for two reasons. First, it was a numb, lethargic movie. It had all the trappings of a documentary with none of the attendant, real-life excitement. Second, it had nothing to do with the region beyond the fact that Sutherland went to high school in Bridgewater, N.S. A far more appropriate opening number would have been Salter Productions' *Siege*. This is a grade-A grade-B movie filmed in Halifax by the Donovan brothers. Their stated intention was to make the kind of violent thriller for which there seems to be no end of a market, and they succeeded. Screened on the second evening by invitation only, *Siege* proved to be a tense, gripping adventure with genuine, Atlantic content. The tale is set unashamedly in Halifax and milks that historic city for all the murky atmosphere it possesses. Although everyone who saw it agreed that *Siege* would have been a far more appropriate kick-off than *Threshold*, it could only be shown privately because distribution rights were still being negotiated. But for the film fan, it was a real eye-opener: you can make real movies down here.

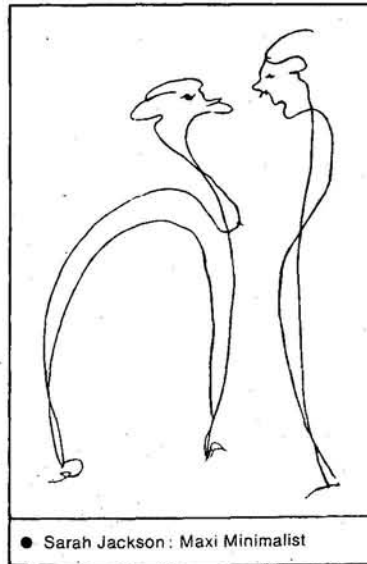
The festival continued to impress with the quality and variety of the entries. The feature film industry is not yet

extremely active, although *Siege* gives one hope that it soon will be. But experimental cinema is alive and well, as are documentary, educational and industrial films. The makers of all these were also in attendance, although with a different set of responses. First and foremost, the Atlantic filmmaker appreciated the rare chance to show his film or films before such a wide audience. This is not an opportunity which comes often, although the festival will change all that if it remains an annual event. Also, viewing the latest works of other Atlantic filmmakers reveals what standards the competition is setting. And, last but not least, the festival provided an opportunity for discussions with distributors and other filmmakers on the state of the business in Atlantic Canada.

The first of the discussion panels was called "Marketing Private Sector Films." Featured guests were three filmmakers and two distributors. The audience was comprised mainly of other filmmakers and the discussion was for their profes-

sional benefit. Conflicting advice was given them on how to best market one's film. Roman Melnyk, Independent Productions, CBC Toronto, agreed with Lawrence Carotta, Carotta Films Ltd., P.E.I., that you should research your market before you make your film. Know your market and talk to it, they recommend. Ramona MacDonald, Doomsday Studios Ltd., responded that she didn't believe in streamlining films. She maintained that originality should be the sole criterion of the independent filmmaker. If it's good, she said, it'll find its market. This led to an animated discussion on the merits of idealism versus the benefits of working within the system. One school of thought believed that, since Atlantic Canada is out of the mainstream anyway, you might as well go all the way out. If you're a renegade, act like a renegade, was its rallying call. The opposing view held that it's precisely because the region is so isolated that it can't afford to play the maverick. Bankers don't care about ideas, just financial details, was how they expressed it. As the arguments wore on, of course, each side came to accommodate more and more of the other's position. No idealistic filmmaker was so naive as to hold that financial matters are unimportant and no practical filmmaker was so cynical as to hold that originality was unnecessary. Discussion ended with both sides agreeing that Atlantic Canada had already laid the foundation of a fine film industry and it was up to them to make the world realize it. Ramona MacDonald summarized the general feeling when she said that, in this region, the quality of the films is way ahead of the reputation of the films.

The other major panel, held on the closing day of the festival, was supposed to be the wrap-up and definitive word. Titled "The Film and TV Industry in Atlantic Canada," it featured nine heavyweights from the National Film Board, the CBC and the national and regional pay-TV networks. They were there to



● Sarah Jackson: Maxi Minimalist

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## Second Atlantic Film & Video Festival



**CONGRATULATIONS!**  
to the winners of  
the second Atlantic Film  
and Video Festival  
Thanks to all participants,  
volunteers and suppliers

**FÉLICITATIONS!**  
aux gagnants du deuxième  
Festival de film et de vidéo  
de l'Atlantique  
Merci à tous les participants,  
les volontaires et les fournisseurs

### AWARDS

**BEST FILM:** *Miller Brittain* (Kent Martin, Charlottetown)  
**BEST DIRECTION:** Kent Martin for *Miller Brittain*  
**BEST OVERALL ENTRY:** *Miller Brittain*  
**BEST SOUND:** *Transitions* (Barbara Sternberg, Sackville, N.B.)  
**BEST EDITING (VIDEO):** *In the Name of Jesus* (CBC-Newfoundland)  
**BEST EDITING (FILM):** *Sarah Jackson* (Ramona Macdonald, Halifax)  
**BEST SCRIPT (VIDEO):** *Star Reporter* (Cordell Wynne, Halifax)  
**BEST SCRIPT (FILM):** *Transitions* (Barbara Sternberg)  
**BEST CINEMATOGRAPHY IN FILM OR VIDEO:** *River of Light* (Walter Delorey, Cape Breton)  
**BEST CHILDREN'S ANIMATION:** *The Magic Carpet* (Torquil Colbo, St. John's)  
**MOST PROMISING FILM OR VIDEO MAKER:** Prize shared by Peter Wood, James Casey, Brian Saunders, Chris White and Cathi Beattie, for *The Grave Quakes*, produced for Cable 5, Moncton  
**BEST INDEPENDENT VIDEO PRODUCTION:** *Star Reporter* (Cordell Wynne)  
**BEST VIDEO PRODUCTION:** *Christopher Pratt - His Art and his Poetry* (Charlotte O'Dea, Avalon Cable, St. John's)

### CERTIFICATES

**BEST DOCUMENTARY FILM:** *Miller Brittain* (Kent Martin)  
**BEST EDUCATIONAL FILM:** *Patterning* (Marie Wadden, CBC-Newfoundland)  
**BEST EXPERIMENTAL FILM:** *Transitions* (Barbara Sternberg)  
**BEST DOCUMENTARY/NEWS JOURNALISM (VIDEO):** *In the Name of Jesus* (CBC - Newfoundland)  
**BEST EXPERIMENTAL VIDEO:** *The Grave Quakes* (Brian Saunders, Peter Wood, James Casey, Chris White, Cathi Beattie, produced for Cable 5, Moncton)  
**BEST VARIETY/ENTERTAINMENT:** *Dicky Goes to School* (Wayne Guzwell, CBC - Newfoundland)

### HONORABLE MENTIONS

**FOR SOUND EDITING:** *River of Light* (Walter Delorey, Cape Breton)  
**FOR MOST PROMISING FILMMAKERS:** Charles MacLellan and Eric Bagnell, for *Peter Paul*  
**FOR USE OF MUSIC:** *Miller Brittain* (Kent Martin)  
**FOR VIDEO:** *Où c'est que je m'en va asteur* (Betty Arseneault, Nicole Lejeune, Michelle Paulin for *Femmes en focus*, Bathurst)  
**FOR VIDEO:** *Disconnection* (Michael Coyle, produced by Video Theatre, Halifax)

**SPECIAL JURY AWARD FOR WIT:** *Rock and Girl* (Arthur Makosinski, Fredericton)

### COMMERCIALS

**BEST COMMERCIAL:** Trayton Adair Productions  
**HONORABLE MENTIONS:** Caledon Advertising  
Bruce Law and Associates, Halifax

tell a packed house of Atlantic filmmakers what the future held for them from the perspective of these various organizations but, as the best-laid plans will, this one went astray. Right from the moderator's opening remarks the panel was sabotaged by Tom Burger, who was sitting as representative from the Fish or Cut Bait Collective. He had specific grievances against the CBC and NFB who had apparently refused to support his collective in its efforts to produce films about the working man. Whenever one of their agents spoke, he denounced them for "the fascization (sic) of art." And he had general grievances against the other filmmakers, whom he accused of being "security cleared." His intent seemed to be to swing the discussion away from the future of the film industry in Atlantic Canada. He was partly successful. Few officials were able to withstand his heckling and the topic withered on the vine. By the time vigilantes in the audience had convinced Burger that it was in his best of interests to shut up for a while, it was too late to proceed with a nice, orderly chat. Their blood lust aroused by the fray, the audience began to attack the panel for the various, perceived failings of its various institu-

tions. Half of the independents wanted to know where was the CBC (or NFB, or pay-TV) when you needed it. They felt they weren't getting enough official support. The other half of the independents were disdainful of official support. They said they wouldn't take a grant if you paid them. It was all very eloquent but left the guests with little to say in response, so they didn't respond. The only concrete, helpful suggestions that emerged were from the pay-TV people, who promised boom times were a-coming for the Canadian independent filmmaker. They quoted CRTC regulations which state that 45 per cent of gross subscribers' revenues must be spent of Canadian production. It's a crapshoot, they said, but if pay-TV takes off, then so will the independents. Findlay MacDonald, head of the regional Star Channel, went so far as to say that the future of pay-TV was dependent on the future of the independent producer. "We have more money now than has ever been spent," he promised.

The forum, and the festival, ended shortly thereafter. Together they had established the identity of the Atlantic film industry.

It is a fighter. And it's hungry. ●

## Coming together

The evening the awards were presented, a hundred people sat down for dinner together and realized that they constituted an Atlantic film industry. Never before had the filmmakers from the four Atlantic provinces come together to celebrate their filmmaking and to measure their growth and strength.

The progress since the 1976 Atlantic Film Week - the last occasion I had of screening a number of Atlantic films - is remarkable. Then, it looked as if the National Film Board regional office in Halifax would come to dominate filmmaking in the region. The film co-operatives were willing but their films were weak, and only three independent production companies were at work. In Newfoundland, Memorial University had cornered the market on educational films and videos dealing with social intervention.

Judging from the recent output, it is clear that the National Film Board's regionalization strategy has worked well in Atlantic Canada. Although the best over-all entry and best film, *Miller Brittain*, was an NFB production, the number of fine independent productions was important. The Atlantic Filmmakers Co-op and the New Brunswick Filmmakers Co-operative both entered accomplished films (*Transitions* and *Peter Paul*, respectively) and private production companies seemed to flourish, making sponsored films, documentaries and working in conjunction with the CBC/Radio-Canada and the NFB. Even rugged independents like Walter Delorey and Neal Livingston found it possible to live at the end of the world on Cape Breton Island and produce personal films of high technical caliber. But more on the films a bit later.

What was not often said during the festival, but which bears comment in this day of policy change, is that the NFB has helped make an industry possible without dominating it. The NFB has trained and encouraged talent, looking

the other way as independents come in the night to use editing tables and photocopyers. It has given generously of its experience, and has sent the occasional filmmaker to Montreal to learn a skill or complete a film. While taking credit for those films it has produced from day one, it has assisted numerous other films over which the independent filmmaker maintained control.

The Board, with its production offices in Halifax (English) and Moncton (French) and its outpost in Charlottetown is an easy target, and the brunt of several criticisms. Indeed, many of its own productions lack imagination and even focus. But when its insertion in a community causes the community to become alive with activity, and when that activity comes of age, then the National Film Board is most certainly fulfilling a vital function, and one which truly corresponds to its original mandate of fostering films by Canadians, for Canadians.

Some of the best films - including Kent Martin's *Miller Brittain* which won five awards - were films about artists. Martin had already shown considerable feeling for documentary form with *Moses Coady* in 1976, and his mastery has grown. Working from a script written by NFB regional head Barry Cowling, the film reconstructs the life and death of the Saint John, N.B. painter whose art was immense, difficult and often tortured. The artful script, the use of Brittain's paintings and the strong marriage of the camerawork and editing made the film an easy winner in the film category. A more pedestrian work, *Christopher Pratt - His Art and his Poetry*, was made by Charlotte O'Dea and produced by Avalon Cable in St. John's, winning best video production.

From Halifax, Doomsday Studios produced *Sarah Jackson* by Ramona Macdonald. In the film, artist Jackson explains her interest in working with new

# FESTIVALS

materials, and experimenting, and doesn't mind if things don't turn out as expected: a very different sort of artist from the moody, obsessive Miller Britain. The film's strength is its insistence on the work of the artist rather than on her person, and the virtue of the film is that, at ten minutes, it runs just as long as it should. MacDonald picked up the editing award for *Sarah Jackson*.

Finally, the CBC produced *Lindée Climo*, the portrait of a young painter living on Prince Edward Island. Once a bona fide sheep breeder, Climo covers canvases, doors and government walls with fantastic, lyric animals, probing her own feeling for nature and producing popular art of the finest sort. Had filmmaker Janet P. Smith been more selective in her use of interview material, in which Climo often repeats herself, the film would have been better.

This "soft" use of documentary seemed typical. There was little realization that documentary films can also serve as an arm with which to drive home a point of view, creating controversy and arousing people. Few films dealt with social criticism. *This Business of Living*, ostensibly about the circumstances of a small fishing family, turned into a dialogue between the filmmaker and the fisherman and was singularly uninformative about its subject. *Ocean Meets the Sky* documented the Long Island to Bermuda race of the big yachts but had no particular point of view; one wonders whether it had been sponsored by the race officials, or simply filmed as entertainment. It could have worked as brilliant satire; in one scene the captains, crews and wives from Long Island gather in a Bermuda garden party to celebrate the arrival of their million-dollar yachts... But the satirical opportunity was missed, and the film will be easily forgotten. An NFB production, *Gulf Stream*, had similar problems. Unclearly focused, mixing dull animated sequences with some of the most riveting camera work seen at the festival, the documentary failed to address its subject clearly.

*Diary for a Place in Time*, also produced by the NFB, was an excursion by John Brett to the Queen Charlotte Islands in B.C. to film the Haida totems and tell

their story. The tale had already been told by B.C. filmmakers, and Brett's film, once the Board had shown off its rough edges, fell too easily into a standard NFB mold. Gone was the refreshing inquisitiveness of his *Two Brothers*, a rough but more interesting film.

In an attempt to promote discussion, *Offshore Oil: Are We Ready?* addressed the problems of offshore drilling in the North Sea, and measured the impact of the activity on communities in Norway and Scotland. Experts gave their opinions, and situations similar to those in the Atlantic provinces were explored. Co-produced by the NFB and Memorial University, the film was adequate but not as provocative as one might have wished. The use of the North Sea situation seemed to distance the discussion, and the lack of any inclusion of material from the Atlantic region was a remarkable omission.

The one documentary which dealt brilliantly with its subject - and which did indeed provoke and disturb - was Phil Comeau's *J'avions 375 ans*. Comeau used the anniversary (and the re-enactment) of the arrival of the French on the shores of what is now Nova Scotia to deal with the situation of the Acadians today, who make up 10% of the province. The documentary was well-controlled, and the interviews - beautifully edited - were intercut with contemporary Acadian music whose rock'n'roll rhythms alone are vigorous enough to sustain a people. The film rigorously avoided any use of Acadian folklore to present an unexpectedly modern view of Acadians, and their aspirations. The lack of attention given the film during the festival may have been more a function of the Acadian situation than a reflection of the quality of the film. The film stands as yet another justification of the NFB's Moncton production office.

Similarly, the video production *Où c'est que j'm'en va asteur* made by Femmes en Focus of Bathurst, N.B., presented an aggressive and provocative use of documentary, otherwise missing in the general selection. It won a special mention for its producers.

It was a genuine pleasure to view *Transitions*, an experimental film made by Barbara Sternberg at the Atlan-

tic Co-op. The film ran away with awards for Best Script, Best Sound, Best experimental Film and made Sternberg one of the most promising filmmakers on hand. This multi-layer film was intelligently conceived, and painstakingly executed. Sternberg describes it as a "film about transitions: the times and spaces in between, between asleep and awake; between here and there; between being and non-being. Transitory motion, disconnectedness, repetitions, layers of image and sound over a central image of a woman in bed..." That's a large order, and to realize it successfully is a major coup.

*Transitions* is an AFCCOOP film, made by a filmmaker who cut her teeth on video and Super 8. *Peter Paul* is a first film, made out of the New Brunswick Filmmakers Co-operative with assistance from the NFB, produced, written and directed by Charles MacLellan. A Maliseet Indian remembers the time when his tribe lived more easily, before the Whites did away with their way of life. Using archival photos, intercut with Peter Paul cutting bark in the forest for a birch-bark canoe, the film is perfectly balanced and tells a modest story of enormous proportions. It is a considerable achievement for MacLellan. These films and others indicate that the co-ops are producing finished films with high technical standards. Although the rough edges are still obvious on other co-op films, they gain in originality what they may lose in terms of production values. *You Laugh Like a Duck*, a co-production between AFCCOOP and the Winnipeg Film Group, assisted by both the Atlantic and Prairie offices of the NFB, had no real structure beyond a series of short interviews with kids strung end to end, but some of the material was exceedingly fresh and entertaining. Given more time and continued support, the co-ops should be able to harness the imagination evident among many of the young filmmakers.

There is less to be said for the commercial houses working in the Atlantic region. They were seriously hindered by the lack of a "sponsored film" category in the festival. Promotional films like *Taste of History*, made for Corby Distilleries, could hardly be judged as a documentary, though it filled the requirements of a sponsored film adequately. As for the military recruiting films like *Navy* and *A Young Man's Challenge*, they were exceedingly bad. Perhaps the military should remove their advisors from the production of such films, and let the filmmakers have a free hand.

A recurrent problem with many of the films was length; they were simply allowed to go on too long, reducing an initial effectiveness. *River of Light* by Walter Delorey was a case in point. A nature film with fantastic camera work and imaginative sound, the 28-minute film would have run better at half the length. Similarly, *La poutine râpée*, which should have been a short, funny look at the making of potato dumplings in Moncton, turned into a seemingly endless hour-long documentary. While Delorey worked on his own and put seven years into the making of *River of Light*, and should perhaps be indulged, it is more difficult to forgive Radio-Canada which produced *Poutine* and should have better guided the film's director.

Another severe problem was drama. Only two films were entered in the dramatic category, *Jenny Koo Koo* by Ken Stetson and *South Pacific 1942* by



• Spaces between being and non-being in Barbara Sternberg's *Transitions*

Paul Donovan. The jury chose to award neither, though it seemed clear that Donovan had control of his material while Stetson's film should not have got into production without several more rewrites. Interestingly, many Atlantic filmmakers seem a bit squeamish about Donovan's films; as if it were not alright to make entertaining feature films there. Seen in the light of recent production in Montreal and Toronto, Paul Donovan's first two features, *South Pacific* and *Siege*, place him among the more talented and original filmmakers working in Canada. *Siege* should make him one of the more successful filmmakers as well. One can only hope that he stays put in Halifax and continues to work on projects of his own. His kind of originality in features is a hopeful sign, and other Atlantic filmmakers should take heart.

If the Atlantic film community was able to come together in October, most of the thanks must go to Mike Riggio who, last year, realized that the region was ripe for its own festival and organized the Atlantic Film and Video Festival for the first time. It was a gamble, and oftentimes a thankless job, taking on the responsibility of organizing a festival in a region where distances are great and communities are isolated. The festival this year, directed by Andrea Shaw and assisted by Harold Rennie and Shelagh MacKenzie of the National Film Board, proved that Riggio had been right. Where little existed six years ago, a community has come alive, delivering some excellent productions and promising still more.

Connie Tadros •

• Growing mastery: Kent Martin walked away with five awards

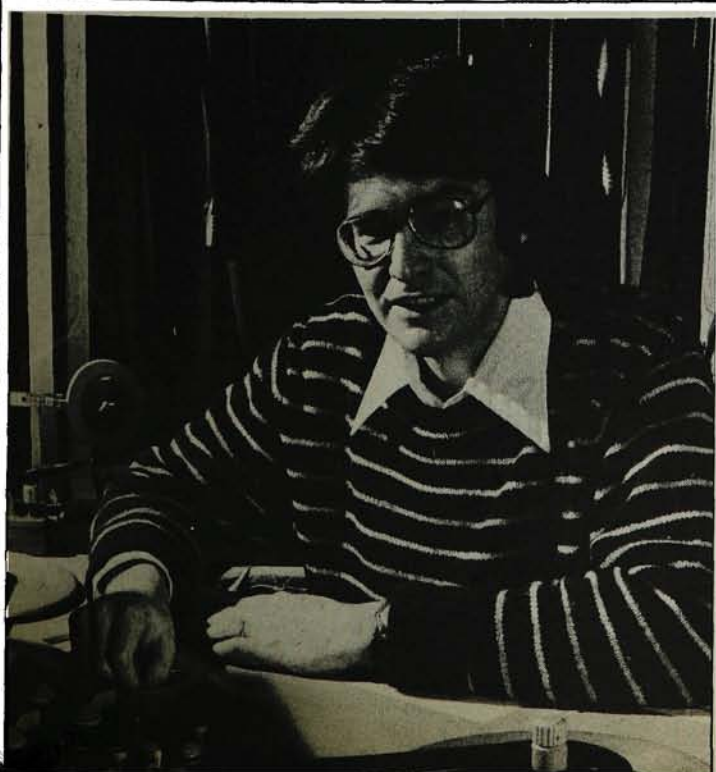


photo: Camera Art

# The case of Picture Plant

by Fran Gallagher-Shuebrook

Among private Atlantic film entities, the Atlantic Filmmakers' Co-op has clearly held its own place for the past nine years as an alternative to the sponsored necessities of both commercial and government service production (see box). At the Co-op, despite limited production funds, individuals are given the opportunity to develop their independent filmmaking skills, while retaining full artistic autonomy over their work. Being a co-operative, the main demand made on members in return for this privileged work-environment is that they carry their own weight: i.e., pay their yearly dues (at present \$75); cooperate with other members in facilitating their work (no salaries are paid on co-op shoots); and share the skills acquired in the process.

By and large, this co-operative way of life has proven effective, bringing members through an average production of two or three short films, and spawning activity in the wider film community, where Co-op and ex-Co-op members have surfaced in not-so-surprising numbers. AFCCOOP member Pat Kipping has become Nova Scotia's first film and sound archivist; former member Barrie Burley co-manages Video Theatre in Halifax (a community-access video production and distribution centre). As well, Ramona MacDonald, owner and

executive producer of Doomsday Studios, developed her filmmaking and business skills as a long-time AFCCOOP member. Doomsday continues to draw on the resources of Co-op filmmakers for much of their more "distributable product," as well as for skilled production personnel.

A significant number of Co-op technicians manage to freelance their services to the commercial studios, as well as to the National Film Board and CBC; but the local pie is so small that they also find themselves waiting on the inevitable tables, and driving the inevitable taxis, in order to support their survival habit.

In terms of feature filmmaking, the most unique and culturally-important film presence to have sprung from the Co-op system is Picture Plant Productions, incorporated in 1979 by Bill MacGillivray, Lionel Simmons, and Gordon Parsons. The company was formed in response to the urgings of a filmic vision which could no longer be accommodated by AFCCOOP production funds.

Aside from the Donovan brothers at Surfacing (who are making feature films which reflect their reading of the theatrical marketplace), Picture Plant is the first resident feature film company to set up in Halifax since Canadian Bioscope closed its Barrington St. doors to run off to the First World War. What immediately separated Picture Plant from the pack of other producers in the city, was the partners' expressed intention to remain true to their cultural vision at all costs.

MacGillivray (who makes his living as an art teacher); Simmons (who makes his as a freelance cinematographer); and Parsons (who owns and operates Wormwood's Dog and Monkey Repertory Cinema) went into business together in order to secure completion money for their first feature, *Aerial View*. This project had one foot in, and one foot out of the Co-op, in that it made use of Co-op facilities and unsalaried crews; but then it grew beyond the resources of the Co-op in mid-production, moving into a relatively "high" low-budget range (out of a context in which production grants had rarely exceeded \$1500). This 59-minute drama, about the clash of values between a man's goals and the lifestyle in which he finds himself, was brought in for a mere \$20,000.

In the end, Picture Plant combined Co-op resources with NFB private sector assistance, as well as donated services from a plethora of individual sources (the credits at the end of *Aerial View* read like the longest litany in the Catholic calendar).

*Aerial View* was met with enthusiasm by most critics, other filmmakers, and audiences in general wherever it was screened. All seemed to be refreshed by this example of a Canadian feature made in an authentic manner, in the face of recent and prolonged abuses under the capital cost allowance.

Peter Harcourt called it a "mini-masterpiece" of "quiet tone" which is "original, sensitive, beautifully-crafted, and totally

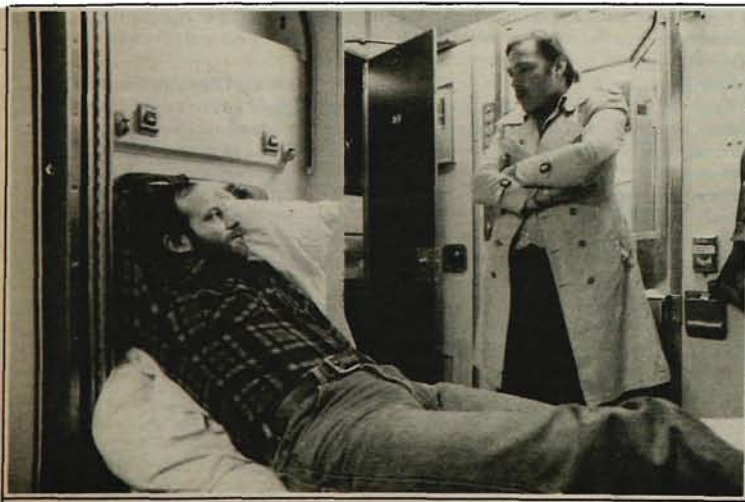
Canadian." Jean-Pierre Lefebvre claimed that *Aerial View* is a film of "simplicity and sincerity" which "has more to say and says it better than the big 'money movies' of Toronto and Montreal."

As a first feature, it also had its understandable share of criticism (for certain of its dialogue, and some of its acting; but, as Duart Snow pointed out in *The Ottawa Journal*, "these quibbles are quite overshadowed by the film's cinematic originality and precision... It risks and wins more than any half-dozen big budget movies one can think of - and that, surely, is what art is all about."

Jennifer Henderson called Lionel Simmons' cinematography "imaginative and skillful, transforming the local and ordinary to new and surprising proportions." Another local critic, Mary Jolli-more, lauded Simmons' camerawork as revealing information "in an ingenious and original manner" ... (the film) presents "real people and their problems in probable situations."

*Aerial View* won a Certificate of Merit at the '79 Chicago Film Festival; and, on the basis of its excellent first showing, the Canada Council awarded Picture Plant a \$40,000 film grant toward their second project, *Stations*, which began shooting in the Fall of '81. By that time, Picture Plant had become a knowledgeable corporate entity (albeit an artistic one), with the sophistication to secure Canadian Film Development Corp. up-front equity investment (the first project to do so in the Atlantic Region). It also

Fran Gallagher-Shuebrook is past-coordinator of the Atlantic Filmmakers Co-op.



● Searching for the typical Canadian...



● Mike Jones and Joel Sapp in *Stations*

photo: Chuck Clark

issued units for public sale, and developed contracts with pay-TV and other markets both in Canada and abroad. Picture Plant's methods of combining public and private monies with myriad donated services offer a successful model for other low-budget independents, who are likewise facing prohibitively tight financial situations.

Although Picture Plant still hasn't gleaned any profits from the two projects, there are signs of financial stability in recent sales of *Aerial View* to Britain's Channel 4, as well as to the Atlantic regional pay-TV Star Channel.

*Stations* carries forward the theme of a man's clash with the values surrounding him. The main character is a prize-winning investigative journalist Tom Murphy, who takes his on-air probing too far in the case of an old friend, with whom he had once been in the Brotherhood. Unable to face public exposure of his failures, the friend commits suicide. The journalist is sent on a trumped-up assignment to find and interview the typical Canadian on a train trip across the country. Of course, Tom finds himself looking for himself in the process.

In artistic terms, this current film promises to be even more finely-attuned to its authentic impulse than was *Aerial View*. In the second-cut stage at the moment, *Stations* appears to be more tightly acted; and the dialogue rings true to every situation the characters encounter.

The filmmakers have given themselves an added challenge in setting *Stations* in a nationwide context. The action takes place largely on the train travelling from Vancouver to St. John's, and Canadian audiences will get to look at themselves as well as the characters along the way. Lionel Simmons' camera takes as fresh and rich a view of the Canadian landscape and its people as any you're likely to see anywhere.

One of the intriguing things to follow when *Stations* is released early in 1983 will be the viewer's debate over who is and who is not an "actor" among the film's characters. Although the principal cast was pulled from a pool of experienced Atlantic Region actors (Mike Jones, Joel Sapp, Rick Boland, Maisie Rillie), a great many more characters were "picked-up" as the production moved across from Vancouver to St. John's. MacGillivray operates largely on instinct, and chooses his cast more on the basis of their personal presence and chemical possibilities than on any professional credits they may have acquired.

Likewise, Picture Plant's crews are assembled on a similarly "chemical" basis. As an outgrowth of the producers' co-op experience, they choose to work with friends whose abilities they trust, and whose social and artistic sensibilities are compatible with their own. Trusting their combined intuitions, and their ability to guide their personnel for the sake of the film, collaborators MacGillivray and Simmons have been consistently fortunate in bringing together an efficient, yet easy-going ensemble, who work with dedication equal to their own. This easy tone can be accounted for more specifically by MacGillivray's approach as a director. He has a calm, articulate manner, and treats his cast and crew with respect, looking to evoke the qualities necessary to the film's progress. As director, he considers himself a channel through which the film's ideas are filtered, and he feels responsible for protecting the integrity of the film, as well as the welfare of all personnel. For their part, the actors and



● Mike Jones clashing with the values surrounding him

crew trust MacGillivray and Simmons, and seem to feel that working with them is an honour.

In discussing the process by which they make films, MacGillivray, as scriptwriter, explains that specific ideas and feelings come to him in a series of sounds and images, for which the narrative must become a structure on which to hang these elements.

Because these thoughts and feelings are "personal" to him (in the best sense of the word), they communicate personal statements to others who can understand them, and respond in the basis of a shared humanity. For MacGillivray, the film is a "precipitant," whose images and sounds precipitate certain

reactions in other human beings.

MacGillivray claims that Picture Plant's films are not "aimed at Canada" as such. Rather, they are seeking a much wider audience. When they do reach this audience, it is because MacGillivray and Simmons have such a clearness of vision, and integrity of depiction, that both *Aerial View* and *Stations* are rife with the basic cultural threads common to all of humankind.

When questioned about why the company chooses to work in Halifax, rather than in one of the country's film "centres", MacGillivray says Picture Plant finds it necessary to remain outside the "slipstream of competition" found in those centres. Such pressure can

make it possible to hold on to the purity of the original idea. The Picture Plant partners all have their roots in the Maritimes, and they decry the centralist myth that, if it's made in the "regions," it can't be taken seriously. Since incorporation, they have rigorously defended their creative and co-operative working process; though they would like to be able to make a living making film here.

Over the several years of working together, Picture Plant has sustained ideals, values, and attitudes, formed at the Co-op, that have carried them through all their artistic and business dealings. Their idealism has been infectious in the community, as evident in the creation of a new professional producers' association.

Picture Plant was the driving force behind the organization of the Atlantic Independent Film and Video Association, which was incorporated last summer in order to "promote and represent the best interests of the independent film and video production industry with respect to public policy on the development and regulation of the industry in the Atlantic Region." Within this broad mandate, the association intends to work on the further development of the "art and craft" of independent production, as well as to protect the professional interests of industry personnel.

The corporate membership, so far, includes most of the producers involved in the other six companies mentioned (see box), and the associate members' ranks are filled out with a cross-section of film and video freelance producers, craftspeople, and technicians.

Projections are that the organization will expand in the next little while to incorporate members from the other Atlantic provinces. Long-time observers of the Halifax film/video scene have commented on the remarkable achievement inherent in the formation of AIFVA from such a disparate group of individuals.

It's still too early to tell what impact the Producers' Association will have on government media policy, or on the film/video industry, but there's no question of its potential for having an impact on individual level. It has created a support structure for long-isolated producers, enabling them to work together on policies and practices of common interest.

The existence of AIFVA is yet another feather in Picture Plant's cap. The artistic integrity of their films, and the constructive impulse to form this association for the enrichment of the local industry, are both informed by the same cultural ideals developed in their early days.

Picture Plant's approach to its work is sober, clear, and uncompromising, and it means to be taken seriously. Fortunately for all of us, the work is being taken more and more seriously these days, with the above-mentioned sales of *Aerial View* to Channel 4 and Star Channel, and with the potential of selling both films to universal and regional pay-TV and their "splinter" markets.

How these films have come to be made in Halifax still seems nothing short of a miracle. Historically and certainly with the exception of our beloved *Evangeline*, Canadian features with any kind of cultural significance have tended to be made "somewhere else." MacGillivray, Simmons, and Parsons have defied the odds since 1979, and their prospects (both artistically and financially) appear to be better than ever. Keep an eye out for *Stations* in the new year; and, of course, keep the Faith. ●

## Making movies in a one-lab town

Films have been produced in Nova Scotia for almost as long as films have been produced anywhere in North America. From the long-lost indigenous drama, *Evangeline* (released by Canadian Bioscope in 1914), to the recently-completed, unabashedly exploitative feature, *Siege*, by Surfacing Productions, filmmaking activity in the province has been of a surprising variety, and of an even more surprising volume. Numerous companies were hired by the provincial government in the 'teens and '20s to produce agricultural training and general education films; and Nova Scotia locations were often used by a visiting industry for entertainment features requiring breathtaking land or sea scapes.

Unique in those days was the Canadian Bioscope Company, incorporated in Halifax in 1912 by H.H.B. Holland and H.T. Oliver, which was the first feature film production company to set up permanent residence in Halifax. Canadian Bioscope shot the ambitious three-reeler, *Evangeline*, in the summer of 1913, and released it to an admiring public the following year. Canadian and American critics praised it as a "work of art": a "good picture" which was "well-acted," with a "strict adherence to historical detail." It was apparently "intensely dramatic, appealing, and moving."

Canadian Bioscope's other work,

unfortunately, seems to have fallen farther and farther away from the ideal of indigenous cultural drama established by *Evangeline*, but its commitment to making feature films in a seeming outpost was nonetheless commendable. The outbreak of World War I put an end to Canadian Bioscope: "personnel dispersed, the company went out of business, and the films were auctioned off..." (From Peter Morris' *Embattled Shadows: A History of the Canadian Cinema*.)

From that time until 1945, when Margaret Perry established a one-woman production unit within the Nova Scotia Communications and Information Centre, there was no indigenous filmmaking activity whatsoever in the province. At present, there still exists the provincial government in-house film service (NSCIS); and, since 1973, there has also been the National Film Board Atlantic Region Studio. Aside from these government film institutions, there are currently at least seven private production companies resident in the Halifax Metro Area (ABS Productions; Skerrett Communications; Domsday Studios; Les Krizsan; Nimbus Films; Surfacing Productions; and Picture Plant). The only services available locally are one film lab (Eastern), which process only one type of stock (VNF), and one sound studio (ABS).

Photo: Chuck Clark

## The disturbing dialectic of Anne-Claire Poirier

by Francine Prévost

Anne-Claire Poirier's films are disturbing – and *La Quarantaine* is no exception. Always different, her films have never been what the public expected. At a time when the National Film Board was the midst of *cinéma direct*, Anne-Claire Poirier made a fiction film, *La fin des étés* (1964), styling herself after her favorite filmmakers – Agnès Varda, François Truffaut and Alain Resnais – for whom cinema also meant fiction. A few years later, when her peers were engrossed in social or political problems, Anne-Claire spoke for subjectivity, the feminine "I" in her first feature, *De mère en fille* (1968). And in the early '70s, while the team of the "En tant que femme" series were articulating women, Anne-Claire made *Les Filles du Roy* (1973), a long poem dedicated to the rehabilitation of "our faded heroines, women stripped of all dimension in our history books." Anne-Claire Poirier's cinematic work has always stood outside expectations and trends.

Her films surprise – either expressing



● Speaking for the subjectivity of the feminine "I"

● The "En tant que femmes" team: Jeanne Morazin, Hélène Girard, Anne-Claire's mother, Anne-Claire Poirier and Marthe Blackburn



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too much or too little. Often criticized for her filmic handling of real problems, Anne-Claire has neither wanted to present problems nor give easy answers. Whether it is the question of abortion she is addressing as in *Le temps de l'avant* (1975) or rape as in *Mourir à tue-tête* (1979), the important thing to her has been to remain in touch with her own feelings, offering us her perceptions with all their excesses and shortcomings, though without insisting that her perception be the only right one.

To be able to provide some understanding of her latest film, – it is not enough to compare *La Quarantaine* to *Mourir à tue-tête*. *La Quarantaine* appears 20 years after Anne-Claire took her first steps as a filmmaker, when she worked as an editor on Clément Perron's film *Jour après jour*. She has grown since. Yet is it not the fact she is a woman that keeps the public from considering her work as a whole? When Monique Mercure as "la grosse Louise" asks the spectator whether women in their forties are at their peak and, if so, what does their success consist of, it is really a question Anne-Claire is asking herself. For she is not all that sure that women's work is at a peak. And yet, Poirier, who began at the Board in 1960, and made her first short film *30 Minutes, Mister Plummer* in 1962, is one of the

pioneers of Quebec cinema – just like Pierre Patry, Gilles Groulx and others. So there is no reason why we should ignore the vital concerns that have given shape to her cinematic creation.

The relationship between art and reality early on became an important question in Poirier's work. Anne-Claire's beginnings at the NFB coincided with the candid eye movement at the Board; a movement that clashed with her passionate interest in the theatre, an art form less conducive to illusion than the cinema. Anne-Claire was never taken in by the distance the camera creates between reality and truth. She was always aware that the truth captured by the camera is never that of reality but that of artistic creation. At the beginning of her career as filmmaker, the documentary *30 Minutes, Mister Plummer* and the fiction film *La fin des étés* gave in to the division of genres. But since *De mère en fille* she has developed a cinematic style where the mixing of genres destroys the illusion of reality and allows a felt truth to flow through the eye of the camera.

The films of Anne-Claire Poirier do not have a marked linear structure. They are edited so as to create tension; a tension that forces the spectator to engage with what he sees on the screen. Be it *De mère en fille*, *Les Filles du Roy* or *Mourir à tue-tête*, each work is like a mosaic where separate pieces of different tones harmonize to create contrasts of different intensity. *Cinéma direct*, fiction, illusion, criss-cross and intermingle creating rupture and depth, lack and excess. Added to the mix of visual styles is an equally complex soundtrack with interviews, voice over, monologue and dialogue between characters. Poetic and mundane, they jostle together, leaving the spectator perplexed.

Anne-Claire Poirier's films are not linear: *La Quarantaine* is no less dialectical than her other films, although the dialectic may be working in a different way. The many flashbacks, the rapid cutting of action-packed scenes (like all games and songs) alternating with the slow pace of deliberative scenes (like the reading of letters, or "la grosse Louise" hesitating before she discovers the dead Tarzan); the abundance of close-ups, the always mobile camera, create a pace that troubles.

As a matter of fact Poirier's films do not tell what we call "a good story" – with her films it is always what we least expect. If she is fond of a non-narrative cinematic style, it is because this style fits her own vision best. Anecdotes are not what inspire her: they are the pretext she uses to set free what she has to say. The rape in *Mourir à tue-tête* was a reason to speak about rape in general. Poirier asked herself how it is possible that a man who is capable of having a love relationship with a woman, can also have a hate relationship that destroys the woman and leaves him triumphant. The perspective widens upon reflection: rape becomes all sexual appropriation and domination of woman's body by patriarchal society. In *La Quarantaine* a similar thing happens. It is not a matter of telling personal stories but to expose, albeit subjectively, fundamental problems faced by people in the middle of their lives. From reflections on the family, love, faithfulness, homosexuality, the central question remains how the adult relates to his childhood. Are we not still the children we were, and is adulthood not a fiction of our imagination? Anger, aggression, tenderness, the need to love and be

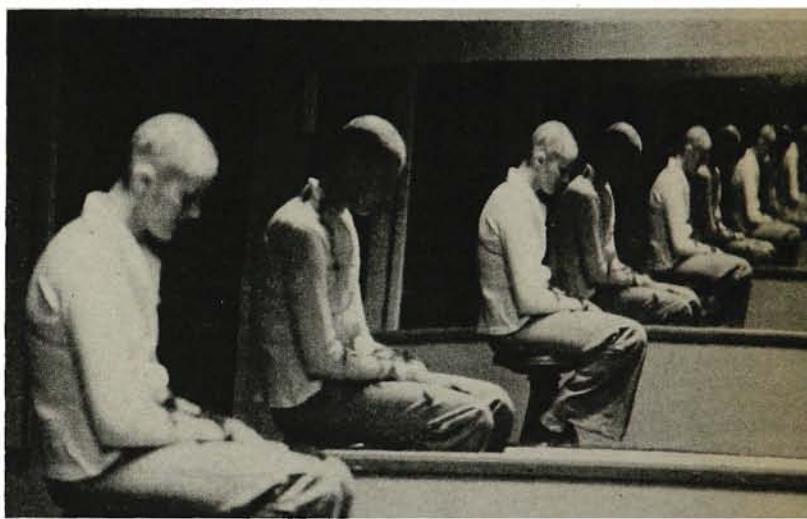
loved – are they different feelings when we feel them as adults?

The themes Poirier deals with never turn into dissertations. No matter what one might say about her didacticism, it always remains close to her emotions. Whether it is the long dialogue between the two women in *Le temps de l'avant* or the imaginary trial in *Mourir à tue-tête*, it is always through emotion that thought materializes and this emotion emerges through the body. The body is not a theme in Poirier's films; it is living, palpable matter. Anne-Claire's interest in the theatre not only allowed her to distance herself from a cinematic style that pretends to portray reality, but it inspired her, right from the start, with the desire to explore the presence and movement of bodies before the eye of the camera. When she filmed Christopher Plummer in the role of Macbeth at Stratford in 1962, she wanted to show "the hallucinating transformation that the 33-year-old actor undergoes when, in a period of three hours, he changes from triumphant youth to the most tragic agony." Be it the metamorphosis of Christopher Plummer or the "receptacle" body of Liette Desjardins in *De mère en fille* or the mummified body of Danielle Ouimet in *Les Filles du Roy* or again the raped bodies in *Mourir à tue-tête*, their presence is always something that feels extreme to the spectator.

Of all her work it is in *La Quarantaine* that Poirier's fascination with the body is most evident. The cinema has accustomed us to restrained emotion, to discreet bodies, or to decidedly erotic or aggressive ones; therefore the public feels uneasy with the body that cries and laughs if the camera accentuates its presence with close-ups. Yet this is what Poirier does in *La Quarantaine*, even more consciously, and more provocatively so than in all her other films. Bodies touch, hug, and cling out of the usual context of love scenes, with a kind of provocation that brings to mind the innocence of a child. These bodies are fully dressed, but they reveal a new kind of nudity, a less expected one. They expose themselves to us, without shame, wide-open, mouths laughing and crying with gestures of abandonment. Nothing is held back; they hang on to one another, dancing, whirling, alone, in groups, man and woman, man and man, woman and woman, outside the traditional couple. The rule of acting that imposes restraint on the actor since the camera amplifies every gesture is not respected here at all. Poirier has defied it, tempted as she was to invent a new gestural expression, a new kind of indecency. The characters in *La Quarantaine* seem to be above all bodies, bodies that move about before the eye of the camera, in a restricted space that brings to mind the space of the theatre.

In all of her films, aside from her two short ones where the presence of men was important, Poirier has given body and speech above all to women. The male characters were always discreet – or outright negative like the rapist in *Mourir à tue-tête*. In her latest film the space of the male does not rival that of women. In *La Quarantaine* this side-by-side presence of men and women that do not form couples is the result of an evolution, a gaining of consciousness that Anne-Claire undergoes parallel to her search for a new form and aesthetic.

Her beginnings as a filmmaker at the NFB took place in a world almost exclusively reserved to men. Her films *30 Minutes, Mister Plummer* and *La fin*



● Scenes from *Mourir à tue-tête*: Extremism in the eye of the spectator

*des étés* were attempts to prove that she, too, could learn the profession of filmmaker. However, when she became pregnant she saw her chances for success diminish. She realized that fatherhood did not change the professional life of any man, but that motherhood, on the other hand, could jeopardize her future at the Board. Luckily, she used her new experience as the springboard for *De mère en fille*, the first feature made by a woman in Quebec. A few years before the blossoming of the feminist movement in Quebec, Poirier expressed herself in her films with a

feminine "I" that some women then called "a narcissistic outburst." Admittedly her words did not have a very strong political or sociological dimension, but were the expression of a category of women caught trying to combine motherhood with a professional career.

That film did achieve a certain success when it was shown on TV in the fall of 1968, in spite of the fact that it was recommended for adult viewing. This first work of Anne-Claire's, where she expressed herself as woman, was followed by two others within the framework of the "En tant que femme" series.



● No happy days when the gang gets together in *La Quarantaine*

## Anne-Claire Poirier's *La Quarantaine*

The trauma of mid-life has won star billing in a number of motion pictures, and with widely-varying results; Paul Mazursky, for example, virtually smart-assed the subject to death in his recent *Tempest*. Glib sarcasm is not part of Anne-Claire Poirier's arsenal in *La Quarantaine* (The Forties), and neither is the gentle, almost sitcom-flavoured humour of Alan Alda's *The Four Seasons*, to which her new film bears a stronger sentimental resemblance. But that absence of 'comic relief' is not a saving grace. This National Film Board produced chronicle of the reunion of ten childhood friends after a thirty-year separation is slow-paced and sad and structurally peculiar: despite its intimate setting and stylistic modesty, the whole movie plays like overblown theatre.

*La Quarantaine's* big draw is its cast, as illustrious a group as you'd care to see in one picture, and featuring some of Quebec's leading theatrical lights. But the actors are operating within the confines of an uninspired screenplay, where character composites almost seem drawn out of a hat.

What happens when a 46-year-old lawyer (Roger Blay) decides to assemble the members of his adolescent gang for a one-night get-together? He finds them older, somewhat mellower, and almost painfully representative of a social cross-section. We've got an actress (Luce Guilbeault), a psychiatrist (Pierre Thériault), a happily-married mother of five (Louise Remy), a civil servant (Pierre Gobeil), a bittersweet divorcée (Patricia Nolin), and a somewhat weary mistress of a married man (Michele Rossignol). The lawyer's old girlfriend (Monique Mercure) has become a journalist, as vociferous and passionate as ever, and a quiet, almost pretty, male member of the pack (Benoit Girard) has both blossomed into an architect and come out of the closet. The only dissonant notes are sounded by the absence of an alcoholic doctor now practicing in Cambodia (Aubert Pallas-

ciol, and by a successful businessman nicknamed "Tarzan" (Jacques Godin), who cannot reconcile himself to this momentary trip back into happier memories. "La Gang" meets on the steps of a church in its home town, and then sequesters itself in a country cabin for a night of reminiscences and revelations.

The staginess of the film isn't helped by its rhythm, which pushes the group from one set piece to another—singing old songs, playing old games, and watching home movies. And everything's delivered at fever pitch, as though the troupe is playing to the very back row. There's no real dramatic penetration of the characters, probably due to that theatrical distancing; through the haze of Michel Brault's nostalgically amber images, we're watching these people without getting inside their skins. That works against the basic premise of a picture like *La Quarantaine*, and effectively does it in.

Middle age and the crisis of reflection that comes with it remain provocative, emotional topics, despite their mistreatment at the hands of lesser filmmakers. Anne-Claire Poirier has demonstrated a penchant for taking cinematic risks, and for a degree of melodrama, both attested to by the controversial and uneven *Mourir à tue-tête*. She's moved back onto more traditional ground here, and taken only the melodrama with her: *La Quarantaine* ends with a badly-handled suicide that just leaves you feeling uncomfortable. It's a cleaner but less ambitious package than her essay on rape, and that's only partly due to the subject matter. If she'd carried some of that daring into her exploration of character and situation here, she would have made a markedly better movie.

Anne Reiter ●

**LA QUARANTAINE** d. Anne-Claire Poirier sc. Marthe Blackburn, Poirier d.o.p. Michel Brault unit man. Michel Dandavino cont. Monique Champagne a.d. Mireille Goulet asst. cam. Serge Lafortune 2nd asst. cam. Michel Motard sd. Richard Besse boom Esther Auger gaffer Guy Rémillard key grip Jean Trudeau art d. Denis Boucher props Charles Bernier cost. Huguette Gagne make-up Brigitte McCaughy exec. p. Laurence Paré p. Jacques Vallé mus. Joel Bienvenue ed. André Corriveau l.p. Roger Blay, Monique Mercure, Jacques Godin, Patricia Nolin, Pierre Thériault, Luce Guilbeault, Benoit Girard, Aubert Pallascio, Michele Rossignol, Louise Remy, Pierre Gobeil p.c. National Film Board of Canada, colour 16mm, running time 100 min.

Now, Anne-Claire was no longer alone with her questions; a group of women surrounded her and worked with her. They too wanted to become filmmakers. For them, women's liberation will come from "a radical reform of attitudes and mentalities, from the overthrowing of a sexist régime and all other régimes founded on violence and domination." While never a militant feminist, Anne-Claire will always be conscious of the need to speak as a woman and not to deny her womanhood in her art.

With *La Quarantaine* Poirier has reached another stage in her reflections on male/female relations. How do they each assess their lives? Have men of power like Tarzan (Jacques Godin) achieved something? Tarzan says to Louise: "I have lived in a world of crazies. I was afraid that I would not succeed... when I look at myself in the mirror I see nobody." A few hours later he kills himself. The women live in a world of crazies as well but their strength is greater than that of men. This observation reappears like a leitmotiv in all of Poirier's work—with the exception of *Mourir à tue-tête* and there she was criticized for not showing women a way out of the rape situation that led her character to suicide.

Anne-Claire's commitment to life, awareness and emotion is possibly what disturbs us most in *La Quarantaine*. Tarzan's despair does not quite reach us because the whole film is centered around a woman, brought to life by Monique Mercure, who will not allow destructive forces to survive. She is not affected by Tarzan; she is there to comfort him. She is too wholly positive, with neither weaknesses nor failings—even though she states her regret at always having dispensed comfort, yet never having received it. Tarzan's grief

touches her like a mother who is used to comforting, but not like a person who has known the battle between life and death from experience. When Tarzan says to King: "You are capable of playing at pretending" the words find an echo in the spectator's own feelings. But not for a moment does one feel that Poirier is touched by Tarzan's statement. Wanting to show that the adult is still the child he was, and by choosing a happy, alive, sensitive woman as the central character, Anne-Claire Poirier has stepped into the trap of the happy-childhood myth. The possibility that childhood could have consisted of suffering is totally left out. Yet it is impossible to have nothing but happy memories; why then this insistence to show only that, when Tarzan's suicide opens a new perspective? We get the impression that Louise has been tricked and so have we, as spectators invited by her to this party. Tarzan is right when he says that the whole party is fake. Something very important has been hidden from us.

It is the other, the *not said*, that is present throughout the film and misleads us. What we suspect of the daily life of these characters is not developed enough to make us believe in the party, their joy at seeing one another again, or Tarzan's suicide. But maybe we expect too much of a story when we watch *La Quarantaine*, feeling that something precise has been left out. And perhaps Anne-Claire Poirier's only mistake was to abandon herself to the pleasure she took in those bodies, in the game of moving in and out of past and present, from childhood to adulthood. It is a party for the camera; no doubt about that. And that is why it is the play of bodies in motion that pleases and amazes the most.

● Poirier makes a commitment to life and emotion





# CALIFORNIA DREAMING

## The Teaching of Motion Picture Production

by Robert Miller

Film is often referred to as *the* art form of the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, cinema has become the focus of intense academic investigation in institutions of higher learning throughout the world. An American Film Institute survey indicates that over 1067 colleges and universities across North America offer programs in film studies: production, history, criticism, writing, animation, business, etc.<sup>1</sup> Yet, cinema is still very much a newcomer to the realm of academe vis-à-vis established disciplines such as English literature or philosophy.

Film differs both qualitatively and quantitatively from the more traditional venues of scholarly inquiry. So it is not particularly surprising to discover that questions of pedagogical strategies, accreditation criteria and curriculum development are topical issues confronting most faculties concerned with the study of media on a theoretical and/or practical level. From the perspective of motion picture production a number of basic pedagogical assumptions come to mind immediately:

- 1) How does the process of filmmaking interface with broader humanistic/liberal arts concerns?
- 2) Can media production courses be integrated into the university curriculum or are they best placed under the umbrella of a professional training school?
- 3) Should film be taught from the perspective of personal artistic expression as opposed to an approach reflecting audience needs along with the practical exigencies of business or industry?

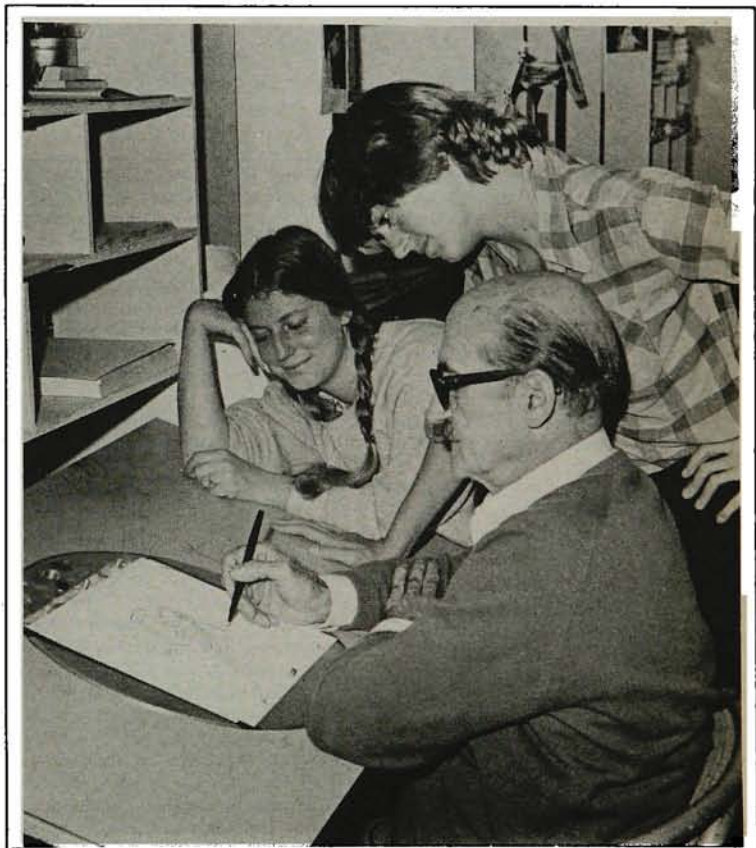
Robert Miller is a filmmaker and assistant professor at Concordia University's department of Communication Studies.

Certainly there is no panacea. Perhaps it is not even a question of selecting one strategy over another, but of integrating all three perspectives into a single coherent instructional design. The nominal point of attack, however, must be an evaluation of the strengths of film programs as they exist today, co-ordinated with an extrapolation to a "best of all worlds" situation. To this end, it was decided to examine the cinema programs offered by three major American schools: the University of Southern California, the California Institute of the Arts and the American Film Institute.

These programs were selected because they embody three distinctively different approaches to the study of film as a medium of communication. The U.S.C. Division of Cinema/Television is of interest since it is one of the oldest, most successful motion picture departments in the United States, yet has managed to develop within the confines of a traditional university environment. Thus it has had to balance questions of professionalism with much broader requisites of providing a well-rounded undergraduate education. To cite the Division's bulletin,

*the overall purpose of the curriculum is to educate students in the responsibilities of filmmakers towards themselves and society, in the creative and technical complexities of the medium, and in its history and influence upon our culture. Cinema and television is considered an art, a craft and an industry.*<sup>2</sup>

Experimentation and the evolution of unique aesthetics is the point of view embraced by the California Institute of the Arts. Emphasis is placed squarely on



• "A commitment to the avant-garde": Cal Arts' Jules Engel

personal expression – the cultivation of "curiosity and risk, rather than caution and repetition."<sup>3</sup> The perspective can best be described as painterly with students being encouraged to push beyond the ordinary, embracing the full range of artistic possibilities inherent in any audio-visual medium be it film or video. Finally, the American Film Institute is representative of a conservatory approach to the training of filmmakers. The focus is clearly that of clarifying essential principles of film language, fostering critical skills, and transmitting professional standards of discipline and craftsmanship in all major production areas. Each of these programs offers a functioning model for the investigation of cinema as a medium of public communication.

**U.S.C. Division of Cinema/Television**  
The University of Southern California boasts one of the oldest film departments in the United States. It offers a veritable supermarket of courses spanning such diverse areas as production management, historical/critical studies, creative cinema and television, informational film/TV, directing, writing, cinematography, film and video editing, production design, graphic film/video, business, and sound recording. In all, the division lists over 150 courses in its calendar leading to six possible degree options: B.A., M.A., M.F.A., M.S.F., Ed., Ph.D.

Still, on the undergraduate level, priority is placed on the value of a broad liberal arts education. Majors spend two full years completing general education



● Making a statement about life and Kierkegaard

requirements before they even begin their cinema studies. And then, once in the program, the concept of communicating ideas effectively takes precedence over any promise of professional technical training. Dr. Russel McGregor, Co-Chairman of the Department, is adamant in this regard.

*We harbor very little guilt about sending a student out into the world with a particular occupational speciality. We're convinced they will be better insurance salesmen or whatever because they've had a good liberal arts education. Actually, Cinema is a lot more practical than other liberal arts majors because there is a lot of thinking and problem-solving involved. There is even a practical application of the principles of physics and psychology.*<sup>4</sup>

But, perhaps, the most important learning comes on the level of personal dedication. To successfully complete the undergraduate cycle – indeed to survive it – demands creativity, dedication and the ability to function in group situations. These are the kinds of skills that will stand a student in good stead regardless of his or her final career orientation.

On the graduate level the program becomes necessarily more craft-oriented. Technique, however, is taught as a means to an end – a mode of translating content from the written script to the screen. It is important for the filmmaker to master the various crafts involved with production but not to the exclusion of personal creativity. U.S.C.'s approach to technology is purposefully generalist. Again, Dr. McGregor:

*There is great value in knowing the entire production process. In the Eastern European schools the model is that of specialization. If you enter to learn sound you deal with recording techniques and that's all. You never touch a camera or a light or a moviola. We feel this narrow view is limiting. We believe it is important for someone who is going to deal with filmic ideas to have a first-hand knowledge of what creative sound,*

*editing and cinematography can bring to a motion picture.*

The U.S.C. premise, then, is that an individual wishing to express his world vision should be a complete filmmaker, not just a technician. That is, he or she should be conversant with the entire production process as an integral aspect of film language. Constant criticism and feedback is the matrix which renders the broad-spectrum methodology functional. Both faculty and students interfere with the creative act by challenging the filmmaker to justify every decision at each stage of a project's development. The school itself becomes the critical mass which any practitioner of a public art form must push against. This can lead to many bruised egos but, as Dr. McGregor points out,

*Our experience has been that the bright jewel-like personal films we see from other schools are not very illuminating. They tend to present rather banal statements because nobody ever challenges the artist on either a technical or an aesthetic level. Our approach may well foster a slick, commercial look which could offend people who are all for anti-fascist personal films that make a statement about life and Kierkegaard. But we think the experience is richer if the environment is highly critical from the original conception to the final festivalization of the picture.*<sup>5</sup>

Given such a perspective, it is understandable why U.S.C. has established its reputation within the area of the dramatic narrative. This is not meant to denigrate genres such as documentary or experimental. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the plethora of creative experiences offered by drama but not typically available in other forms.

A radically different regimen is espoused by Cal Arts, which was founded on "a commitment to the avant-garde."

**California Institute of the Arts**  
Cal Arts is the first degree-granting institution in the United States entirely de-

voted to the study of visual and performing arts. Initial impetus for the institute grew out of Walt Disney's experiences during the production of *Fantasia*. Disney brought together many artists from diverse fields only to discover they had very little knowledge of each other's discipline. They could not communicate efficiently because they did not speak the same visual language. Disney's concept was one of cross-pollination – an environment where the modern arts could be explored under a single roof permitting students to share a common learning experience. The end result was Cal Arts.

The institute presently comprises five distinct schools: Art, Dance, Theatre, Music and Film/Video. Within the Film/Video section there are three further areas of specialization. The Character Animation department is designed to train students in cell animation very much in the Disney tradition. Film Graphics focuses on a more free-form experimental style of animation and is less concerned with illustrative or narrative elements while the Live Action division deals with real-time cinematography or video.

Each division has its own individual style of training. The Character Animation program is highly structured, being designed to transmit a full range of professional cartoon-animation skills. Over a span of four years, students progress through distinct stages designed in consultation with the Disney Studios. Essentially, these stages are:

- 1) Life drawing, basic drawing, caricature, and color and design;
- 2) Form in motion incorporated with the use of dialogue, sound effects and music;
- 3) Full cell animation techniques; and,
- 4) Development of story content and characterization, study of mime, traditions of theatrical comic performance and graphic satire.

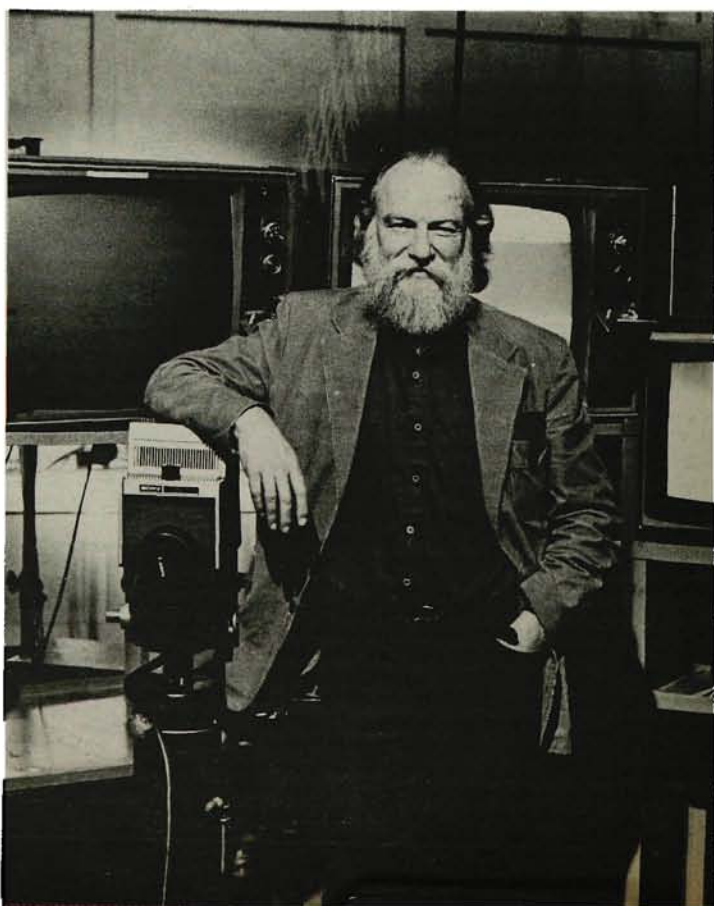
Film Graphics offers a much more free-form environment in terms of both the art work and the way it is taught. There is instruction in all animation techniques but most work is undertaken in the form of independent projects. The actual sequencing of course work is planned individually in consultation with a teacher-mentor in order to accommodate specialized student needs as closely as possible. Finally, live action begins with a year program centering on hardware and the various methods of structuring motion pictures. Beyond that it is possible to branch out in other forms such as documentary, writing, drama, video synthesis, film history, directing, etc.

Is there a unique Cal Arts point of view? Ed Emshwiller, Dean of the School of Film and Video, has this observation:

*We have a very diverse faculty and, if you sat in on our meetings, you would find that we are virtually a debating society on the nature of film. What we provide is a wide range of options for a student to experience, a broad spectrum of ideas from which they can freely choose. We don't push a line demanding students do ground-breaking avant-garde work or become extremely skilled craftsmen in the traditional narrative/feature sense. We try to provide a very experienced faculty in all areas and this is one of the things we take great pride in. So we offer an environment which will open the minds of students to filmic possibilities. Then, no matter what area they go into, they will have a rich selection of memories to inform their work.*<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the '60s generation, students of the '80s appear to be intensely career-oriented. This concern should also be reflected in the curriculum of any media school. Certainly, U.S.C. has been quite successful in placing gra-

● "We don't push a line," says Cal Arts Film Dean Ed Emshwiller



duates in the film industry. Names like George Lucas, Randall Klieber, John Milius, Robert Zemeckis, Ben Burt and Walter Murch come to mind immediately. Yet, as Russ McGregor pointed out, any student with unique personal vision and a thorough technical grounding is well equipped to establish himself professionally. Cal Arts' reputation is particularly strong in the area of animation and, according to Ed Emshwiller, graduates seem to have little difficulty finding jobs.

Character animation students often get jobs before they even complete their degrees. They literally go directly into the studios. In Film Graphics, many students end up in special effects. Something like ten Cal Arts people were involved with Star Wars, for example. And students often form their own little production companies. I think what this school does offer (in terms of career preparation) is a non-standard approach to things. Consequently, while our students may not be as technically proficient as graduates from other schools, they are accustomed to thinking in terms of alternative approaches, which brings notice to them.<sup>9</sup>

Neither U.S.C. nor Cal Arts would characterize itself or, indeed, want to be considered as a trade school. The American Film Institute's Center for Advanced Film Studies, on the other hand, perceives itself as a conservatory having been established in 1967 to bring "together leading artists of the film industry, outstanding educators, and young men and women who wish to pursue this 20th-century art as their life's work."<sup>10</sup>

## A.F.I. Center for Advanced Film Studies

Situated in Los Angeles, the Center offers a highly professional curriculum in five areas of specialization: directing, producing, cinematography, screenwriting and production design. Financing for the Institute, which is the closest approximation of a national film school in the United States, comes from major motion picture companies, television networks, foundations, private donors and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Film Studies Center was designed to fulfill specific goals outlined in a special report prepared by the Stanford Research Institute of Pasadena, California. The report indicated a pressing need for professional training to bridge the gap between existing academic systems and industrial requirements. To this end, the Film Studies Center was charged with a seven-point mandate to:

- 1) advance knowledge of filmmaking technology and equipment;
- 2) promote an understanding of film language in terms of cinematic principles and techniques;
- 3) provide experience in all major aspects of motion picture production;
- 4) familiarize students with related artistic subjects such as art, music, drama, etc.;
- 5) foster artistic judgment and skill in execution;
- 6) achieve high standards of artistic discipline and professional competence; and,
- 7) present an opportunity to exercise skills under professional conditions.<sup>11</sup>

These are a challenging set of goals but they virtually define the parameters of a well-rounded education in film production.

Studies are spread over a two-year period. The first-year Curriculum Program presents a highly structured investigation into the art of narrative filmmaking. Fellows are required to produce three video dramas while attending seminars and courses directly related to their fields of specialization. Projects are screened in the Directing Workshop and analyzed in terms of such things as story structure, casting, dialogue, lighting, camera position, editing, etc. Talented students are then invited to the second-year Conservatory Program, during which time they must complete at least one major project on a budget of \$15,000. At this time, intensive tutorials supercede structured course work as faculty and professionals guide Fellows through each phase of production. Upon recommendation of the faculty, an M.F.A. degree is conferred upon candidates having successfully completed the Conservatory Program.

Antonio Vellani, Director of the Center for Advanced Film Studies, preferred to describe the A.F.I. process in terms of three essential experiences: observation, association and practice.

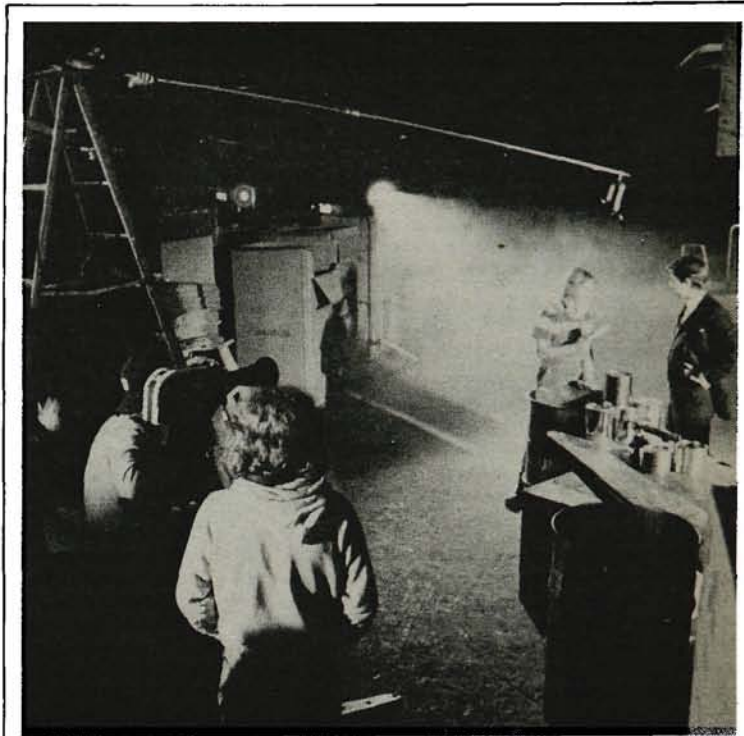
*By observation we mean the ability to look at a work on the screen and to understand its architecture from the point of view of a maker and not a viewer. Last year, for example, Dan Petrie conducted the Film Analysis course and analyzed every single shot in the film Sybil, which he did for television. The second level is association. We have an extraordinarily extensive seminar series conducted by professionals from Fellini to Truffaut to Rouben Mamoulian to Spielberg in which they share the experience of their craft. So, the students form associations with proven professionals. The third level is practice and this is where Fellows validate the experiences assimilated through observation and association.<sup>12</sup>*

A.F.I. students tend to be mature and all bring with them some previous experience with film or a related art form. They are firmly committed to cinema and are selected because they have demonstrated an intense desire to communicate their ideas through film. Thus the Center's primary concern is to crystallize the essential syntax and grammar of film language in relationship to the dramatic narrative.

*As hard as it might be, it is important to understand that we are in the business of communication with people and the audience is what counts. So you must be able to speak to the audience with clarity. The language has to be clear. Curiously enough we talk about syntax and grammar because a film school, like any other school, must often take an artistic experience and reduce it to scientific terms. So here we talk about rules and all of a sudden the student says, "My God, there is a formula!" At that time we tell them there are no rules. There will be a time when the language becomes so familiar that you will be able to break all the rules. Only at that time will the artist's instincts - his subconscious - come through and transcend the technology.<sup>13</sup>*

## Conclusions

It is possible, despite their divergent pedagogical viewpoints, to identify a number of interesting common perspectives within the programs of U.S.C., Cal. Arts and A.F.I. Most importantly, all



● The artist's subconscious instincts transcend technology

schools have understood film must be taught as a language system complete with its own history, culture, grammar and syntax. Second, all share a belief that critical insight is an essential element of the learning process. The ability to analyze what works or does not work in a motion picture furnishes a base of theoretical knowledge upon which a filmmaker can draw when structuring his own projects. A third common point was an awareness of the need to achieve a reasonable degree of professionalism in terms of facilities and technical instruction. There was a general sense of obligation to provide the minimum craft skills necessary to facilitate entry into the film industry. Finally, all three schools placed the highest priority on ideas and have gone to great lengths in structuring their curriculum so as to generate a learning environment which fosters personal creativity. These would seem to be the essential underpinnings of any program concerned with production be it in film, video, sound or any other medium of public communication. For a final comment, let us return to Antonio Vellani of the American Film Institute.

*In my opinion, the creative individual has two things to deal with, the desire to create and the fear of failure. These must be present and in balance. Fear of failure is the one thing which will sharpen your sense of taste and will push you to learn more. If you have no fear of failure but a lot of energy to produce, you will make junk. If the fear of failure is too high, then the energy to produce will be very low and the individual will become over-critical of himself. It will squash an idea which has the sparkle of originality before it ever appears.<sup>14</sup>*

Our responsibility as media educators, therefore, is double-edged. We must not only consolidate and transmit a body of knowledge but we must also encourage the expression of original ideas and themes which will connect with an audience on both an emotional and intellectual level.

<sup>1</sup> Dennis R. Bohnenkamp and Sam L. Grose, Jr., eds., *The A.F.I. Guide to College Courses in Film and Television*, (Princeton, N.J., A Peterson's Guides Publication, 1978). More specifically, the survey indicates American schools offer 4161 film courses, 3679 television courses and 1388 courses combining both media. Degree programs are available through 307 institutions. In Canada the indications are that 31 colleges or universities are involved with film or television in some form or other. These figures should be taken as approximations since less than 50 per cent of the subjects polled actually responded to the A.F.I. questionnaire.

<sup>2</sup> University of Southern California, *Bulletin of the School of Performing Arts, 1981-83*, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Fitzpatrick, "President's Statement," in *California Institute of the Arts Academic Calendar, 1981-82*, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. E. Russel McGregor, Co-Chairman of the U.S.C. Division of Cinema/Television, personal interview, L.A., July 17, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> California Institute of the Arts, *Admissions Bulletin, 1978-79*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ed Emshwiller, Dean of the School of Film and Video, California Institute of the Arts, personal interview, Valencia, CA, July 29, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, President of the United States, speech presented upon the signing of the National Arts and Humanities Act, Washington, D.C., September 29, 1965.

<sup>11</sup> American Film Institute, "Exhibit no. 1: Background and Educational Philosophy of the American Film Institute Center for Advanced Film Institute," p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Antonio Vellani, Director of the American Film Institute's Center for Advanced Film Studies, personal interview, Los Angeles, July 23, 1981.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*