

introduction

objects of history

by peter morris



Grierson's influence was felt, not only in production, but in promotion and distribution, as he became the dominate force in Canadian films of the early forties

"If men do not make history, they tend increasingly to become utensils of history-makers as well as the mere objects of history."

— C. Wright Mills,
Power, Politics, People

This special edition of *Cinema Canada* has been prepared to complement and supplement the release of *Has Anybody Here Seen Canada?*, a survey of Canadian cinema from the founding of the National Film Board in 1939 to the beginnings of television.

Blaire Fraser characterized these years in Canada as "The Search for Identity" in his book of the same title. Canada, he said, had both new confidence and new doubts "about her true identity as a nation". From a different perspective, Donald Creighton argued the same point in *The Forked Road: Canada 1939-1957*. In these years, "Canada made a number of crucial decisions about its direction. It chose one fork of the road to the future; and the Canada we inhabit today is, for both good and ill, very largely the result of that decisive choice." For both authors the economic and cultural decisions related to (as Blaire Fraser put it) "the tremendous gravitational force across the nation's southern border... (that left Canada) at least half absorbed before anyone on either side of the border quite realized it." Fraser's metaphors of "gravitation" and "Continental osmosis" imply the workings of natural (and hence irresistible) forces. Creighton sees that "half absorption" as the result of conscious political choices: "The independence of Canada, economic, political, or cultural... had never worried either Louis St. Laurent or C.D. Howe."

The Canadian cinema also faced its forked roads. Choices existed and

decisions were made that affected the kind of film industry we have today. Indeed, it is difficult not to be struck by the parallels between events in the Forties and in the Seventies. It is all there: the struggles to establish a stable feature film industry, commercial film industry attacks on the NFB, government policies designed more to still stormy waters than to solve problems, independent theatres trying to beat down the chains. Is it true, as Budge Crawley recently claimed, that Canada "wasn't ready" to make features in the Forties? This argument implies that producing features requires a certain level of maturity that Canadians didn't have – though Americans, of course, did. Maynard Collins' article in this issue – and that by Pierre Véronneau on Quebec production – suggest that there were many more factors involved in the Forties than simple lack of maturity. The Liberal government chose one of those forked roads when it decided to back the Canadian Co-operation Project rather than follow the advice of its own Film Commissioner, Ross McLean, and work towards the establishment of a viable feature film industry. And, as Kirwan Cox points out, the exhibition side of the industry had its own impact on the face of Canadian cinema. It will surprise many to discover, for example, that Odeon at one time argued in favour of a quota – when its own self interest encouraged this approach.

On the other hand, it will surprise no one to learn that during this period the National Film Board quickly became the predominant force in Canadian film. And Canadian commercial producers were to argue that this dominance was itself part of the problem in developing a viable film industry. However valid their arguments may have been, the government chose yet another forked road when it decided to maintain the NFB despite both the Red Scare and the lobby to dissolve it. The interview with Arthur Irwin puts this period into context. Irwin also discusses the changes he introduced into the structure and operations of the Board – changes that were to have a lasting impact on the kind of organization the NFB became. In contrast to Irwin's 'organization man' approach stands John Grierson. Gary Evans neatly characterizes Grierson's politics as reflected in the films made

under his jurisdiction. Kirwan Cox's startling revelations of the FBI's hounding of John Grierson cast a whole new light on Grierson's post-Canada career. And Piers Handling puts the question of government film making in a wider context and raises the issue of political censorship and of the freedom of filmmakers working within a state institution. Grierson himself pointed to this issue in 1945 when he said: "Nothing can be expected from Governments beyond what I shall call the degree of general sanction. The degree of sanction by the party in power..."

The articles in this issue are far from the final word on this period. Not only does each raise issues that deserve further exploration but there are also whole areas of potential study not represented here. There is, for example, a real need for a re-evaluation of the films of the period, for a re-examination of the work of filmmakers whose contributions have been overshadowed by later developments. I am thinking here of such filmmakers as Don Mulholland, Bob Anderson, Evelyn Spice Cherry, Gudrun Bjerring Parker, Morten Parker and others. Production at the NFB following Grierson's departure and before the Unit B-Direct Cinema developments in the late Fifties is usually considered a rather boring interlude. Current investigations suggest this is far from true; that there was much of interest that relates to our developing understanding of the aesthetics of Canadian film and, indeed, to the origins of the Unit B-Direct Cinema style.

What is in these pages, then, is offered as a contribution to work that is continuing in many parts of the country and in the hopes that it will stimulate even more.

Peter Morris

"A slow sort of country," said the Queen. "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that."

Lewis Carroll,
Alice Through the Looking Glass



contributors

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