

THE FATE OF DOCUMENTARY IN A TV AGE

A response to Gary Evans

by Magnus Isacsson

It's been said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Well, I certainly don't doubt that Gary Evans' intentions were the best. However, his survey of "the documentary in a TV age" (*Cinema Canada* No. 119) unfortunately demonstrates such confusion and such a passive attitude towards the key issues facing filmmakers at this juncture that it's likely to do more harm than good.

At this point in time, socially and politically concerned documentary film is being subjected to a large-scale boycott by both French and English networks of the CBC, as cutbacks and political pressures impose severe limitations on filmmakers. In such a context scholarly observations and journalistic surveys are insufficient. We need to clearly define the issues and determine how to best fight trends that threaten our strong documentary tradition. What's at

Magnus Isacsson is an independent television producer and filmmaker in Montreal.

stake here is the right of documentary filmmakers to work freely on the topics they judge to be the most important, without political interference or censorship, and their right to have their films shown to a national audience.

The CBC boycott

The fact that many of the best NFB or independently produced documentaries made in this country are routinely refused by CBC and Radio-Canada is a major scandal which the general public is hardly aware of.

Only the films rejected by the English network in the last few years would easily provide material for a major high-quality film festival. Not surprisingly, many of these films deal with some of the burning issues of our times that the CBC touches only with a ten-foot pole.

Racism is one case in point. One recently rejected film is *Incident at Restigouche*, Abenaki Indian filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin's indictment of the Quebec Police Force's brutal repression against a Micmac band in a dispute over fishing rights. *The Globe and Mail* called it a "fascinating documentary" which "counters racism" and "redresses imbalance." *The Montreal Gazette* called it "hard-hitting, intense and dis-

turbing." Enthusiastic audiences at screenings across the country asked when it would be on TV. But the CBC rejected the film, saying it was "old news" which had already been covered by the network's news operation at the time.

Another film dealing with racial discrimination recently rejected by the CBC is *Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community*, a film about the life of West Indians in a public housing area in Toronto.

Also much too hot for the CBC's taste is abortion. The network even rejected an NFB film it had itself put money into: *The Morgentaler Affair* directed by Paul Cowan. The film was supposed to be the opening shot in a series called "Democracy on Trial," but when the film was finished the abortion controversy was racing again. The CBC then deprived its audience of the benefits of an extremely topical film about Morgentaler's past fight with the Quebec government. Was the network afraid of reminding its viewers the doctor had repeatedly been acquitted by Quebec juries? Whatever its fears, it was certainly a cowardly decision.

Another victim of the CBC's determination to avoid rocking the boat on this issue was Gail Singer's documentary

Abortion: Stories from North and South. It's a film which examines some of the reasons why women in six very different countries often have no other choice than abortion. It has received three different awards since it was released — but the CBC won't have it.

Singer's film is, of course, not the only one produced by the NFB's women's studio to be rejected by the CBC. Two other recent examples are *Dream of a Free Country: A Message From Nicaraguan Women*, and *Behind the Veil*, a film about nuns which shows how patriarchal power has attempted to obliterate the contribution of women in the Catholic Church.

Studio D also contributed the wonderful exception which confirmed the rule. After being rejected several times, *If You Love This Planet* (whose director Terri Nash pleaded guilty to a bias against nuclear war) was finally broadcast on *The Journal*... but only after it won an Oscar. The CBC revealed its own pretensions by introducing it with a marvelous disclaimer which in essence warned the audience that this was not a balanced film; it took sides. The network thus let us know this was an exception from its usual attitude towards its audience which could best be described as "let them eat pablum."



photos: NFB

• Gail Singer's *Abortion: Stories From North & South*

Lest the abovementioned examples lead you to think that it's only feminist and otherwise overtly political films that are rejected by the CBC, consider the case of one of our internationally recognized documentary filmmakers, Mike Rubbo. While his films have won numerous awards and been shown on television all over the world, the CBC has rejected most of them and kept the others well out of prime-time.

Radio-Canada: No better

The French network of the CBC has an equally dismal record, although the consequences are alleviated somewhat by the fact that Radio-Quebec, that province's educational TV, is considerably more openminded. (Radio-Canada has the bulk of its audience in Quebec.) One film recently rejected by the network was *Le Dernier Glacier*, Jacques Leduc's and Roger Frappier's docudrama about the closing of Shefferville by Iron Ore of Canada whose president at the time was Brian Mulroney. Critics called the film "gripping," "moving" and "disturbing" – Alan Bergala of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, writing in Montreal's respected daily *Le Devoir* even called it "the best cinematographic production in Quebec last year."

Other excellent documentaries rejected by Radio-Canada over the last few years include Tahani Rached's *Beirut: Not Enough Death to Go Around*, Dagmar de Gueissaz's *Madame Vous Avez Rien*, about the unpaid labour of farm wives, and Maurice Bulbulian's *Our Land, Our Truth, (Debout sur nos terres)* about the dissident Inuit of northern Quebec.

In fact, fifteen films by NFB director Bulbulian have been submitted to Radio-Canada over the years: only one has been accepted. Bulbulian, whose films deal with the downtrodden majorities of the Third World and the minorities victimized by our own soci-

ety, states that his objective as a filmmaker is to develop one theme:

This theme is diversity as a source of creation. I want to bear witness, in film after film after film, to the struggle against the cultural conformity which is burying individuality everywhere in the world in concrete, Diet Pepsi and \$U.S. It is said that our civilization is going through a crisis of values. But we do not sufficiently recognize the islands of marginal and alternative values which exist everywhere, and speak another language than that of the dominating forces...

Apparently, our publicly funded television network cannot sacrifice a few hours of sitcoms or sports to broadcast the work of a filmmaker who is determined to show the basic humanness and resourcefulness of those who are victims of the present world order. Instead, they will presumably continue to be shown as helpless objects of pity. Bulbulian is an example of the truthfulness of his own analysis, at least in terms of TV distribution: along with many others, he has seen his films buried under massive amounts of Diet Pepsi ads and slick sitcoms.

Documentary or TV journalism?

Nobody would hesitate to call the abovementioned films "documentaries." When we discuss the fate of documentary in a TV age, those are the kinds of films we should be concerned with: films that raise the key issues confronting humankind in general and the people of our society in particular. But Gary Evans muddles the whole discussion by failing to make a distinction between these films and TV journalism.

As his best example of how documentaries are changing, he chose the update/remake of the NFB's *The Things I Cannot Change* for the CBC's *The Journal, My Children Are Going To Be Something*.

But far from illustrating how documentary has changed, the remake only serves as a sort of Trojan horse, allowing TV journalism to enter Evans' discussion of documentary film without so much as firing a shot. He makes no distinction between this rather unusual film, made for TV by the NFB (although the CBC retained ultimate editorial control) and the rest of the several hundred current affairs TV reports *The Journal* produces every year.

Having fallen into the trap of considering all these as "documentaries," Evans would naturally be led to accept *The Journal's* contention that it's the biggest producer of documentaries in the country. But all this is totally confusing. The TV network formula style and the journalistic objectives make these current affairs reports a very different kettle of fish from the documentary film we should be concerned with.

In spite of the proliferation of hybrid forms of production combining different techniques (film, video) as well as approaches (advocacy journalism) which make it difficult to establish any precise definitions, we have to be able to make some fundamental distinctions if we are to discuss what's going on in the field of documentary. And we



• Dagmar de Gueissaz's *Madame, vous avez rien*

should not respond to this dilemma by throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Telefilm head Peter Pearson, in fact, admits he has no workable definition of documentary to propose, and encourages anybody who has one to send it along post-haste. But what's wrong with the old ones?

Grierson, who was the first to use the term, defined documentary as "a creative treatment of actuality." If you take "creative" for what it really means – as something personal, innovative, original, challenging – there's nothing wrong with the definition. It should also be read in the context of Grierson's idea that film should be used "as a hammer," "as a pulpit..."

Another useful definition is that documentary is a "documented point of view." That takes care of the old objectivity fetish. It is now a well-established notion within the documentary tradition that "objectivity" doesn't exist, and that some kind of point-of-view structures any and every treatment of social issues. Whether this point of view is implicit or explicit is another matter, and that's where the confusion arises.

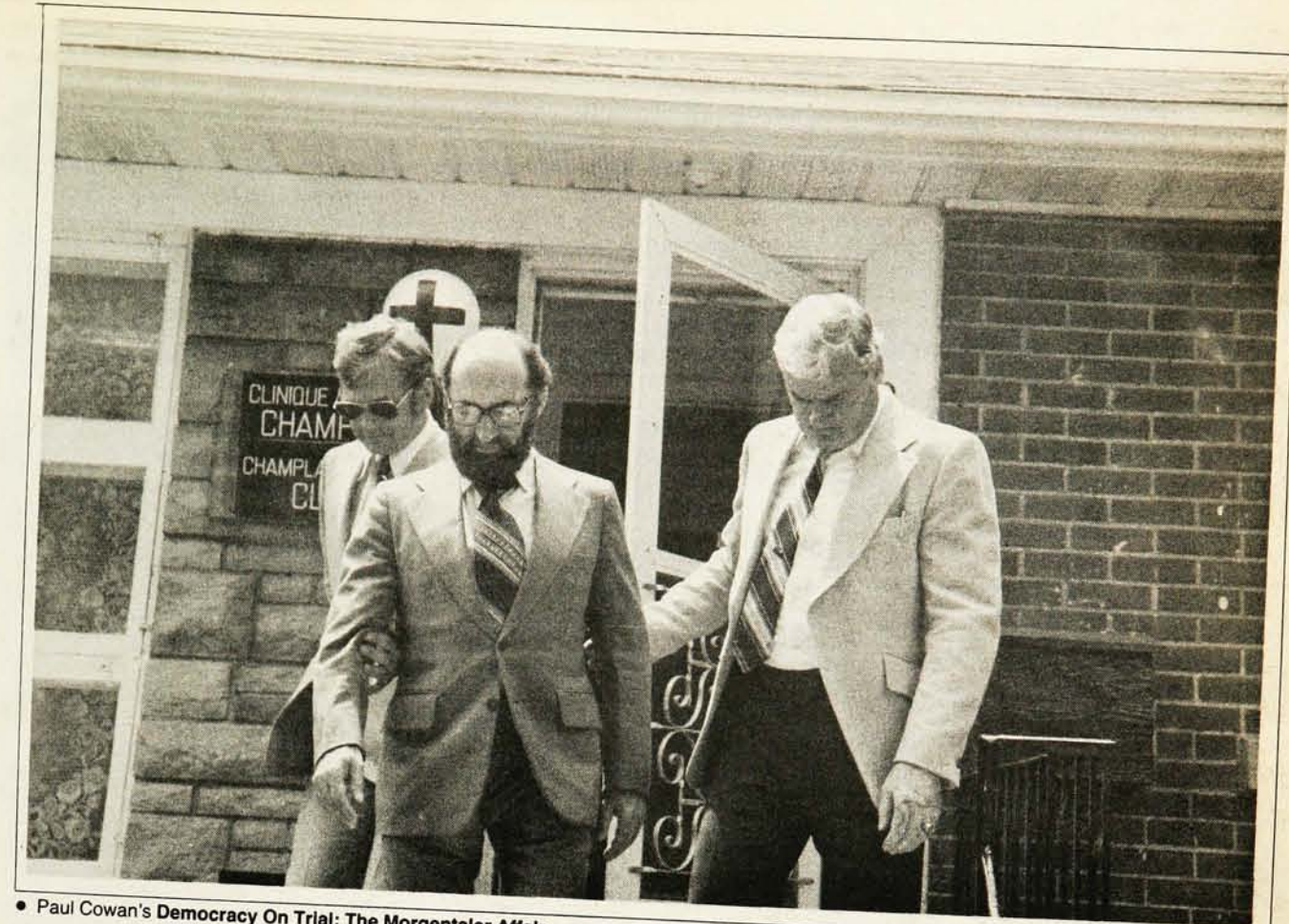
While these definitions are useful, we will certainly not resolve the present debate with semantic distinctions. Instead, we have to recognize that there are now many different categories of productions that draw on the documentary heritage as well as journalism to varying degrees, and that it would be useful to reflect this in the terminology we use: "current affairs report," "made-for-TV documentary," "documentary film," etc.

This being said, any serious discussion of the fate of documentary in a TV age has to focus on those films which have a vision or a message, which are not afraid to take a stand. Faced with such issues as the threat of nuclear annihilation, starvation in the Third World, the destruction of our environment, the glaring inequalities in our society, we desperately need those kinds of films. No amount of "balanced" information will replace the work of concerned filmmakers who are prepared to approach these issues as caring and committed individuals. We can, therefore, not afford to believe those who reassure us that all is well with documentary because television produces more and more of it.

"The ruthless demands of television"

Having accepted TV journalism as "documentary," Gary Evans goes on to swallow the biggest network mystification lock, stock and barrel: the idea that "television's ruthless criteria demand compression, simplification, omission and speedy production."

For sure, the TV networks all appear to have more or less the same "style," be they American or Canadian. They generally speaking produce the same kind of fast-paced, middle-of-the-road, inoffensive public affairs programs. But this style is far from being just the wrapping; it has everything to do with the actual content. Current affairs TV is generally heavy on narration. It tells you what you see, how to interpret it, and – at least implicitly – what to think about it. It relies heavily on officials and experts, decision-makers and spokespeople. Whenever ordinary people get to speak,



• Paul Cowan's *Democracy On Trial: The Morgentaler Affair*



• Alanis Obomsawin's *Incident At Restigouche*

they are usually edited down to fragments. While authority figures are treated with great respect whether they deserve it or not (except in some good investigative reports) people without power or "expertise" are not granted much credibility. Whenever social criticism is expressed, it's well within "reasonable" limits.

In this manner, the TV networks demonstrate a pervasive bias of their own, in spite of their claims to "fairness" and "balance." In fact, it's a pro-establishment, male, white, middle-age and able-bodied bias. It is all the more dis-

turbing since it's not an honest up-front bias like that of the independent filmmaker, but one draped in the cloak of "information."

The mechanisms which ensure that this bias continues to prevail are a combination of selective hiring and promotion, editorial control and guidelines, and, last but not least, the self-censorship exercised by all those who work for the networks and want to keep their jobs.

It is in this context we have to see the CBC's frequent rejection of NFB or independent documentary films. The

CBC, in fact, seems to assume that its own journalistic standards and objectives should somehow apply to outside productions as well. But this is a ludicrous position that amounts to a refusal of any kind of originality or serious social debate. This is the kind of reasoning which led to *If You Love This Planet* being rejected as "one-sided" or Alanis Obomsawin's film about Restigouche being qualified as "old news..." To assume that a film by a native filmmaker about another injustice perpetrated against her people can be judged by the criteria of the CBC news-operation, is

photos: L'Aviron newspaper, Campbellton, NB

utterly insulting. The question here is not one of news-coverage. And the day it's "old news" to see films made by native filmmakers on the CBC, we will have made a giant step forward.

As one last example of the kind of atmosphere that prevails consider the story of Martin Duckworth's fine film about the survivors of the Hiroshima bomb, *No More Hibakusha*. This one-hour film (which has won three major awards in Leipzig, Tokyo and Krakow) was repeatedly turned down by both English and French networks of the CBC. Since there were indications they considered it too slow-moving (and to facilitate school distribution), the NFB produced a half-hour version of the film. This one too was first turned down, only to be later accepted by the French network's *Le Point*.

Was all this an authentic expression of the "ruthless demands of television?" Well, I myself had the pleasure of seeing *No More Hibakusha* in its full, one-hour version, on public television, in prime-time... in Sweden. The following day, the leading morning daily *Dagens Nyheter* concluded its rave review: "Show this film again on the anniversary of the Hiroshima bomb!"

It's an incredible expression of the gutlessness and narrowmindedness of Canadian TV management that a film made by one of our own filmmakers about a crucial world issue cannot be shown in its original version on our public television network.

Thus, the "ruthless demands of television" are not of a technical nature. Having worked with both film and video as

a television producer for several years, I am certainly not unaware of the differences between film and video as material support, or the big silver screen versus the little box in the living-room as a form of distribution. But when we talk about the restraints which so ruthlessly prevent our TV networks from going into depth, taking on difficult issues, or presenting controversial points of view, they are not at all technical. Those constraints are social, political and ideological, firmly rooted in a pervasive form of bureaucratic conservatism. This is the real reason so many excellent documentary films are never shown on TV.

Narrowmindedness is spreading

One of the most disturbing developments in the documentary field right now is that the atmosphere of self-censorship characteristic of television is beginning to spread outside the TV networks and is starting to infect NFB as well as independent producers, increasingly fearful that their productions will not be shown on TV, more and more are inclined to make concessions. There are already attempts by the NFB and independents to produce films so much like a regular TV current affairs program that they are sure to pass the TV blockade and get on the air. But to grasp the implications of this, consider the example of the *War* series made by the NFB. The last part in the series just squeezed through by the skin of its teeth, as CBC management again found it wasn't quite in line with its thinking. It would be extremely naive to think that this kind

of situation will not influence producers and severely limit the range of ideas they are prepared to see put forth in future productions. In fact, I have heard producers both at the NFB and elsewhere express doubt about the whole documentary genre. "The networks don't buy them any more... let's think of something else..."

Gary Evans provides some useful information on the change which has opened Telefilm Canada's broadcast fund to documentaries. He rightly points out that "the fund is there to help realize productions that meet the standards which television imposes," and asks whether this will not restrict innovation in documentary because of television's rigorous insistence on formula. Good question!

But let's not have any illusions. What this means is that those TV bureaucrats who formerly exercised editorial control only over their own productions now have graduated into a position where they will exercise a considerable degree of control over what films will be able to obtain funding from Telefilm Canada. Given their past records, this is definitely bad news. A quick telephone survey of a few Quebec producers and directors tells me the level of concern and frustration is already high. Says director Sophie Bionette:

"Even the areas of freedom which so far existed outside the control of the networks is being eaten up through this new kind of 'interlocking control' where you can hardly get money to do anything without hav-

ing a commitment from a broadcaster."

In this manner, the issue of television distribution is beginning to have some very serious implications. This is one more reason why it's so urgent to fight to change the policies of the TV networks. Over the years, there have been some isolated victories which showed that it can pay to fight back. For example, Robin Spry's film about the October Crisis only got on the air after the director and his supporters organized a country-wide string of press-screenings generating enough public demand to force the hand of the CBC. Since then, the women's studio has shown that it's possible to get through the blockade with films that attract such attention that it becomes an embarrassment for TV management not to air them.

Unfortunately, the NFB itself seems to be prevented by a misplaced sense of *noblesse oblige* from taking up a public campaign on this issue. (Or is it just fear?) Given that, there is no other solution than the one found by independent filmmakers in Australia, who through lobbying and a public campaign succeeded in making the Australian Broadcasting Corporation change its policies and start showcasing documentary films.

While there are many other important things to discuss concerning the state of documentary in a TV age, this one has to be our priority because what's at stake here is the whole climate affecting the production of documentary in this country.

LEE FILTERS

LEE FILTERS CANADA LIMITED

Colour Correction Media

Colour Effects Media

Diffusion Media

Polyester Photographic Filters

Resin Camera Filters

431 Alden Road • Unit 11 • Markham • Ontario L3R 3L4 • (416) 475-5869