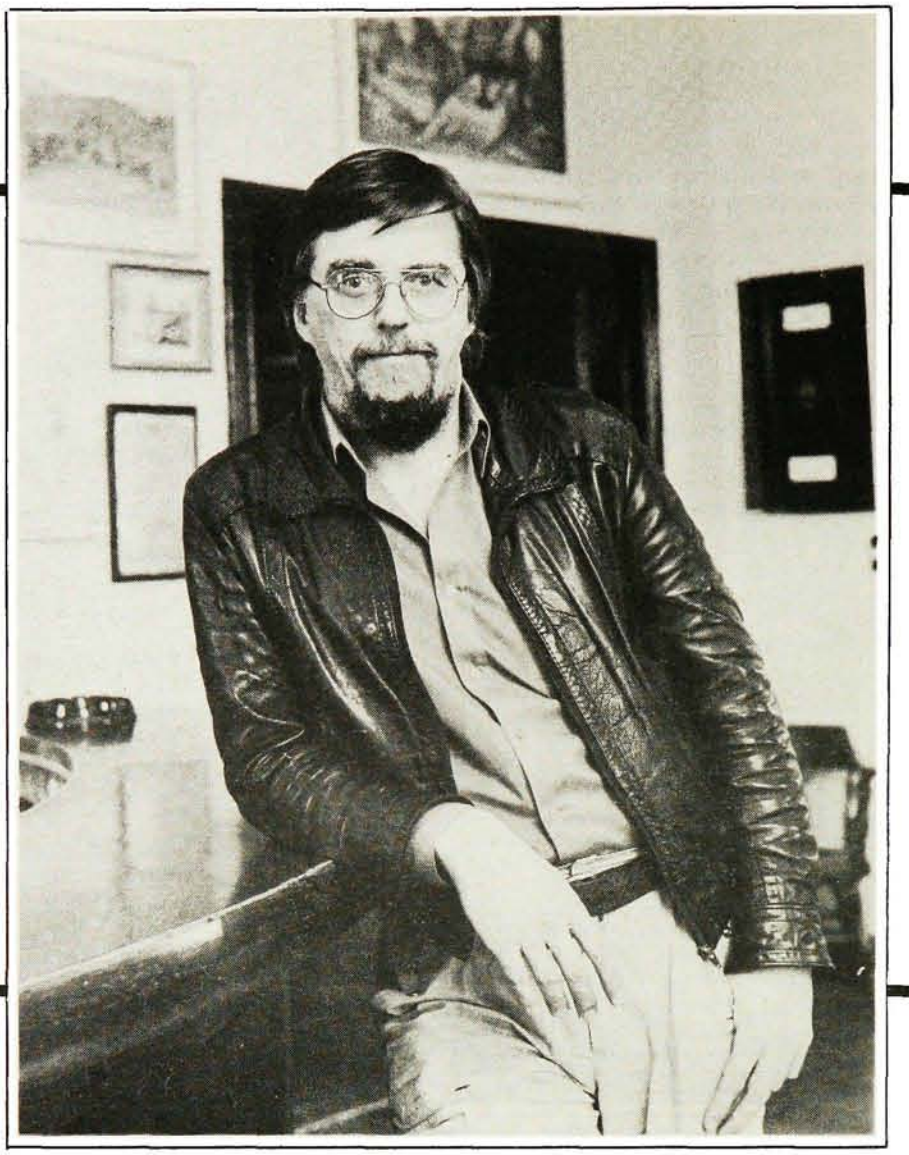
Warring on TV



A conversation with Gwynne Dyer

by Frank Faulk

In 1979, Michael Bryans, a junior researcher for the National Film Board, heard a radio program entitled "Good-bye War." Inspired by the program, Bryans arranged to meet with the show's creator — Gwynne Dyer. Shortly after the two met, they submitted a proposal to the National Film Board, outlining a series that would eventually take the form of a seven-part television documentary called **War**. *The show would take a penetrating look at one of civilization's oldest practices — the waging of war. As a military historian, and former reserve officer in the Canadian, British and American navies, Dyer was the perfect choice to host the show as well as be the series' prime writer.*

The **War** *series was first run on the CBC in October-November, 1983, and met with critical acclaim. The show's tremendous success resulted in a new series* The Defence of Canada *that premiered on CBC March 2. In the following interview, Dyer discusses the series on war and defence and provides a fascinating account of the problems and obstacles in the art of making documentaries.*

Frank Faulk is studying media at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute.

Cinema Canada: *Your principal experience has been with the print media. What are the difficulties you've encountered in writing for film?*

Gwynne Dyer: First of all, I didn't know anything about writing for films, which was kind of a handicap. The habit here at the Board has been to make films one off. You know, a feature or documentary or whatever; so it was 10 years at least since anybody had tried to do a series here — and there's no institutional memory of how to do it. In the **War** series you've got seven films, and they've all got to join up in the end. So, it took off in about six different directions, me not knowing what to do and nobody else realizing how much control was needed. And about half way through, when it was clear we were producing an imminent disaster, finally we started pulling it all together. But it could have been done more efficiently, I think. And the other thing is, pictures are dominant on television; you can't say anything that contradicts the pictures — even subliminally. And secondly, you've got even less time to say anything than you do on radio. You're getting about, I guess, two thousand words of script in an hour's film — I mean you'll have another three or four thousand words of sync of other people talking, but you've got two thousand words to steer the whole thing. That's discipline!

Cinema Canada: *It sounds like there was no iron-hand guiding the project?*

Gwynne Dyer: Well, there wasn't until my less than iron hand was placed at the helm rather late in the day, and that was a large problem. If you're working directly with each of the directors on a script and even on the filming, then you're also in the position of being the one who decides what goes where. You might be taking film away from director A because it will do better in director B's film. That makes for a rather complicated set of relationships for each of these people.

Cinema Canada: *How much did your own ideas shape the final script? You had all these other people working with you and adding their ideas — was there conflict?*

Gwynne Dyer: There was not so much conflict — well, actually there was conflict with one or two people who believe that war is inevitable, that it's in our genes or, in one case, in male genes, and therefore there is nothing you can do about it. So I had a great deal of difficulty working with the opposite point of view. But I would say that, on the whole, that by the end of the three years, we all had somewhat different perspectives from what we'd begun with. I mean, if you get a bunch of reasonably intelligent people who are working 12,14,16 hours a day for a period of, let's say, 18 or 20 months, you're bound to get a kind of collective re-thinking going on. It happens in a hundred scattered conversations between various people over a period of time. So, in terms of the final script, I don't know how much of it was me — I mean the actual words are mostly me. But there is a woman called Barbara Sears who did some of the script on three of the episodes. And Tina Viljoen did a good deal of the writing on two others which she also directed. In fact, I worked with her on the new series we just completed, **Defence of Canada**. And now we no longer pretend that one of us is the writer and the other is the director — we both do both. But dealing beyond that, in terms of the ideas behind the words I think there was an evolution in all of us to a more or less common perspective.

Cinema Canada: *Did your own ideas about the subject of war undergo any radical changes?*

Gwynne Dyer: You know, it was 10 years or more since I had been in any sense an academic. And I had a whole lot of ideas in my head which I thought I knew a lot about, on the subject of war and the military. I wandered off and became a journalist and saw a lot of actual war — it's bound to change your views and opinions a bit. I can't say how radically my ideas changed, but the connections that I ended up making were not connections I'd made previously.

Cinema Canada: *I understand that the* **War** *series was the first time you appeared before a camera. You appeared very comfortable considering you had no prior experience.*

Gwynne Dyer: There are about eight other people staring at you, plus all the passers by, you know. So you try to be as normal as you can in a totally unnatural situation. Basically, I just assumed I was talking to friends, or not exactly friends, because obviously you don't lecture friends. I mean, it was certainly in my mind that I would try not to talk down to people, because I think that's death — it's goddamn arrogant to do that!

Cinema Canada: *In terms of time and money, what were some of the problems in writing stand-ups to unedited film?*

Gwynne Dyer: The result of doing that is that, of course, you'll be shooting 10 or 12 times as much film as is needed. You can't wait until the end to do all the stand-ups. You go out and shoot in the Soviet Union four or five different films for various segments and then you do stand-ups for various films there. And this is before a cut — before the films are edited. So you're guessing how it will fit in. And, very often, the stand-ups won't fit in — they're not saying exactly the right thing by the time you've got the film cut. But you can't go back on location. So we got very good at doing things that we call "modular stand-ups"; that is to say, they sort of started here and went to there. But they could start a little bit later, or end a bit earlier, or drop a bit out of the middle. That depended on whether or not the words that we'd locked ourselves into by shooting a stand-up actually were the words that would get you from A to C in the film when you drop the stand-up into slot B. Some of them you just throw away in the end. I reckon we threw away a third of what we did.

Cinema Canada: *The soldiers you spoke with were very candid. Did your own military background facilitate those talks?*

Gwynne Dyer: I suppose it did. We did talk about that a bit, because it was quite striking how much access we were given, and how much confidence was offered. In terms of getting through the door, my credentials helped a lot. It helped that I could draw upon my own military background to understand what was going on. Soldiers didn't have to explain basic things to me. Since they didn't have to do a kindergarten explanation of proceedings for me, we could get on with more serious things. I think that the other thing is simply that I respect them. I did have a kind of bottom line in the series which is, that it mustn't dump on soldiers. I did hope that soldiers would like it in the end — which they did. And I had to have that kind of approach simply because I, on the whole, do like soldiers. They're fairly honest people...it's sort of a by-product of the profession. If you like people and it's visible to them that you do, they do tend to trust you more.

Cinema Canada: *Given that you achieved this high level of trust with the soldiers that you spoke to, did you have a problem with taking what they said to you and using their words to make your own ironic statement about war?*

Gwynne Dyer: Well...it's a question in any kind of journalism that one is up against all the time. To get people to talk to you, you convince them that you are a trustworthy person. The way you use what they tell you may appear offensive to them. Usually, if you're a practising journalist, in the end you say, "Well, tough." And there's all sorts of rationalizations — "You ought to have known better, etc." I don't actually like these rationalizations. If people are going to give you their confidence and speak openly to you, you owe them the duty of at least letting them know roughly what you have in mind. Well, that's fine in theory. In practice, I can't say I always do that.

But soldiers are not naive about their job; they do know what it implies. And it is not as offensive to them as you might think it is to have it said in so many words. They have their own rationalizations for what they do. When we were working on the episode "Any Son Will Do," in the **War** series, which dealt with the brutality of boot camp, I got to know a lot of the different soldiers. Civilians will look at that episode and say 'Dyer better never go into a bar where there's Marines again.' But I think I'd probably be willing to sit in a room full of Marines and watch that film with them. Maybe I'd sit near the door, but they know that that's what they are. The thing is that they're proud of it. They reckon it's a worthwhile thing to be, and they're being accurately portrayed in the film.

Cinema Canada: *After the* ***War*** *series was shown, was there any back-lash from the military?*

Gwynne Dyer: Never from the military. The abusive mail was all from civilians...people who ideologically hate what you're saying. About half of it was concerned with the episode on Israel. There are three or four subjects that you can write on that you know you'll get mail. Israel is one. And it's basically from people who have a certain fixed rationale for the world which justifies all of their views. And if you don't share their rationale they'll write you letters about it — generally in green ink.

Cinema Canada: *The series first began on radio and then enjoyed immense success on television. Now it has come out in book form. Are you happy with the book?*

Gwynne Dyer: I am quite pleased with it actually, though it tended to get done in hotel rooms late at night. Yeah...I'm pleased with it. In the series, as I said, you get about 2000 words of script to film. You can't say (except very allusively) what you mean a lot of the time on film. And so it was a great relief in a way to put it in a book and to be able to say it all.

Cinema Canada: *The new series* ***Defence of Canada*** *deals entirely with Canada. Why did the* **War** *series, which was a Canadian production, have so little Canadian content?*

Gwynne Dyer: In fact, that was quite interesting. We got very little cooperation from the department of National Defence here when we were doing the **War** series. They just didn't want to know. So we got cooperation from the Americans and the Russians and the Israelis and the Germans instead, and shot it almost all there. The consequence of doing the **War** series was that we suddenly became *persona* very very much *grata* at National Defence in Ottawa. Patrick Watson told me, when the series was running, that Jean-Jacques Blais (at that time defence minister) immediatly instituted an inquiry as to why there was so little Canadian content in the series.

The answer was that we'd asked and asked and asked and they'd say no. So when we went back to do **Defence of Canada**, we got total *carte blanche* for operations in the armed forces here. ●

Up yours!

Elvis Gratton co-director Pierre Falardeau on Quebec, filmmaking and media culture

by Neil Wilson

Several months ago, as Pierre Falardeau and Julien Poulin's handmade feature ***Elvis Gratton — Le King des kings*** *was having a successful theatrical run, a letter to the* Le Devoir *editor challenged Quebec intellectuals to accept that Elvis Gratton was the archetypal figure whose existence made a Quebec national cinema impossible. Ironically* ***Elvis Gratton****'s creators themselves emerged from the libertarian strain in Quebec filmmaking that goes back to Gilles Groulx and the other nationalist feature filmmakers of the mid-'60s.*

Falardeau, born in Montreal in 1946, studied ethnology and began making documentaries in 1970 with ***Continuons le combat****, an ethnological study of wrestling. In 1973* ***Les Canadiens sont là****, produced by the Canada Council, looked at a group exposition of Canadian painting at the Paris Museum of Modern Art. In 1975* ***Le Magra*** *documented the training of cadets at Quebec's Police Academy.* ***A Force de courage*** *(1976) followed agricultural workers in post-colonial Algeria and played at festivals from Finland to Italy. His 1978 documentary feature,* ***Pea Soup*** *traced Quebec's gentle cultural genocide. The first* ***Elvis Gratton*** *short, (30 mins, produced by ACPAV) was made in 1981.*

In the following brief interview, Falardeau casts a bleak eye over the present cultural scene and the return to power of Robert Bourassa's Liberals.

Neil Wilson is a Montreal freelance writer and broadcaster.

Cinema Canada: *What are your views on cultural sovereignty in the light of the debacle over Bill 109, Quebec's Cinema Law?*

Pierre Falardeau: Quite frankly, cultural sovereignty is a stupid concept. Quebec premier Robert Bourassa was talking about cultural sovereignty back in 1975. I thought it was crazy for Quebec then and now suddenly Mulroney's using the term. It was stupid then, it's stupid now. Culture is a whole. From an anthropological point of view, within culture you have economy, religion, art, politics, everything. It's a whole life and now they're saying they want to preserve one small part — art. OK, we'll give the U.S. the economy and the rest, but we'll keep art. Can you imagine? Culture is the whole life of a people, your work, your buildings, your streets.

In the history of the world there have been hundreds of cultures, very different from one another. It's not a question of one being better than another. The richness is, in fact, in the differences. In our time there's an obvious levelling. Cultures everywhere are being threatened by American culture. Pretty soon everywhere in the world people will be eating hot dogs and the only history will be the history of Mickey Mouse.

So what's the difference between Quebec and Texas? There's the same types of houses, same suburbs, same shopping centres, same Pizza Huts, same MacDonalds, same Zellers. How do you expect to preserve a few stupidities like novels or cinema? It's idiotic. Culture is much more. It's as much our cuisine as the architecture of our buildings.

Cinema Canada: *So, how do you do it? How do you, as a filmmaker, propose that we protect our culture?*

Pierre Falardeau: Ah, well...it takes a will, a political will, and not just that of