

## Open letter to Mr. François Macerola

Dear Mr. Macerola:

Thank you for your response of January 8 to my letter of November 10th. In that letter, I raised the general issue of the National Film Board of Canada's traditional refusal to make films for and about gay and lesbian Canadians. In particular, I questioned the lack of an English version for the new French-language film *Passiflora*, which is otherwise a fine remedial step in the right direction. With regard to your response, it is gratifying that the NFB leadership acknowledges "the Film Board's failure to fulfill its mandate towards the gay and lesbian communities." Yet since no commitment towards rectifying the situation is indicated in your letter, I am taking the liberty of pursuing the matter through an open letter in order to facilitate a community discussion of these crucial issues.

Concerning the general issue of the NFB's mandate to gay and lesbian Canadians, I appreciate your sending me the *Format* database printout of 'all' Canadian audio-visual materials touching on the subject of homosexuality. You should pass on the suggestion that the printout is in serious need of updating since a good many titles are missing. Thank you also for the listing of four items distributed by the Board: the first of these *New Romance* is now mercifully withdrawn, the second, *Michael A Gay Son*, is now used to the point of saturation despite being out-of-date, the third *La Quarantaine* is a French-language feature with an incidental gay character, and the fourth, I am delighted to learn, *Lorri* is a Pacific Region 1985 production profiling a lesbian ex-alcoholic. A few other titles of implicit relevance should be added to this listing (*Some American Feminists*, which includes a discussion of lesbian feminism within its survey; *Firewords/Les Terribles vivantes*, which includes lesbian culture within a literary focus; and of course *Passiflora*, plus (before

too long I hope) the project you mention from Studio D on "the heterosexual institution and the history of lesbianism." In any case, I am sure you will agree that this meagre inventory substantiates our urgent need for an adequate representation from the Board. This need is most cryingly felt in the area of English and French documentary pertaining to gay men, since NFB women directors have predictably shown themselves less reluctant to respond to their homosexual constituency than their male counterparts.

I am glad to be informed that "no one has deliberately obstructed the production of films for this minority group." However I am not reassured by your conjecture that "good ideas on the subject have simply not emerged." This of course is the crux of the matter: the silencing of minorities through omission and institutional inertia is perhaps the most insidious kind of censorship because no one can point to "deliberate obstruction." Over the years NFB filmmakers have come to understand this problem and remedied it through affirmative action with regard to almost every Canadian minority or disenfranchised group - whether determined by gender, class, race, age, language, religion, handicap or ethnic or regional identity - every group in fact *except* homosexuals. If NFB male filmmakers have avoided coming up with "good ideas on the subject," then it is the institution's responsibility to initiate affirmative action. Gay Canadian taxpayers are no longer willing to accept this silence.

With this in mind, I offer the following proposals for redressing this grave historical oversight, which I am taking the liberty of distributing to the gay media and within the film community, as well as to the heads of regional production of the NFB:

1) Immediate meetings between representatives of the gay community and yourself together with the heads of English and French production here in Montreal, and similar meetings with heads of production at the various regional production centres across the country. The idea would be to discuss a prioritized list of "good ideas on the subject" for consideration by producers and directors, as well as to confirm the

NFB's clear commitment to action on this issue. I suggest the heads of 'male production' only because this seems to be the area of serious inattention, but of course the heads of the French and English women's studios would also be welcome along with any other filmmakers who are interested.

2) The immediate picking up of several key independent works for distribution through the NFB circuit on film and video. This would be along the lines of the present policy whereby independent works are now circulated at no cost to Canadians by the NFB. This would be a useful short-term gesture of good faith which could satisfy immediate needs while any new productions are in the pipeline.

3) In the meantime, the immediate publication of a booklet in French and English to inform the public of independent audio-visual resources available in the country. The updated *Format* database could be used as a starting point and the format could imitate the excellent Studio D booklet *Beyond The Image: A Guide to Films About Women and Change*. The item would be distributed in all NFB outlets as well as to educational and gay/lesbian community organizations.

Finally, I would like to clear up certain misunderstandings about *Passiflora*. I suggested this film to you as appropriate for an Anglophone gay and lesbian audience because of its witty, eloquent solidarity with minorities excluded from the enforced unanimity of the mass media. The director of the New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival Peter Lowy, has disavowed to me the opinion that you attributed to him, namely that *Passiflora* "was not relevant to the event and would not be of interest to gays and lesbians." Mr. Lowy and I are dismayed that this erroneous quotation could be used to block the career of this excellent film, and I believe that he is undertaking to express this directly to you. In the meantime, I would like to insist that there are a number of festivals and other venues both in English Canada and abroad that are potential users of an English version of *Passiflora*. I am aware of one such event forthcoming in Winnipeg. With

regard to ordinary use within the NFB English-language educational / community circuit, I find it very hard to believe that the Board has determined that no demand exists for a film which its English constituency is not yet aware of. I for one had to teach using the original French version in my course on the arts in Canada at Concordia last week, to the great detriment of the pedagogical effect of the class.

(The question of which French-language films are being versioned to present the face of Quebec to English Canada is of course also relevant but beyond the scope of our exchange. However, let me mention that we have also recently used Denys Arcand's *Le Confort et l'indifférence* in an English-language course at Concordia, as we plan to do annually for the indefinite future. The logic behind the NFB's decision not to version a major prize-winning work by a major artist on the most important Canadian political event of the decade - the Referendum - is beyond comprehension, and bespeaks at best incompetence and at worst covert censorship.)

I am looking forward to hearing from the National Film Board on these matters and in particular on the above proposals.

**Thomas Waugh**,  
Associate Professor, Cinema  
Concordia University

### Macerola's reply

Dear Mr. Waugh,

This is in response to your letter of February 15th. I am bringing your ideas and suggestions for films pertaining to gay men to the attention of both Program Branch Directors, Peter Katadotis and Georges Dufaux, whose responsibility it is to develop film projects. I am sure you will hear from them in due time.

With regard to your comments on *FORMAT*, and specifically to the "in-

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#### IDEAS FOR DOCUMENTARIES FOR / ABOUT GAYS

- 1) The impact of AIDS within the gay community. A belated NFB response to an epidemic that has claimed the lives of 339 Canadian gay men.
- 2) The history of the gay civil rights struggle. Contrasting focus on two provinces with sexual orientation clauses in their rights charters, Quebec (1976) and Ontario (1986), with spotlight on 15-year struggle in the latter.
- 3) History of *The Body Politic*. This national gay newspaper, having recently suspended publication after 15 years of famous battles with the courts and the police, as a symbol of historical evolution of gay/lesbian communities.
- 4) Gay and lesbian parents / teenagers / senior citizens / couples / ghettos.
- 5) Gays and lesbians and freedom of speech: the current struggle around Customs censorship and obscenity legislation.
- 6) A Canadian *Before Stonewall*: archival compilation of life before the '70s.
- 7) A Canadian *Harvey Milk*: a documentary narrative about a local leader and/or electoral politics.
- 8) Public sex and the police. Entrapment of gay men in public toilets has led to hundreds of arrests and unnecessary personal tragedies.
- 9) A male *Firewords / Terribles Vivantes*.

#### A FEW SUGGESTED INDEPENDENT WORKS FOR NFB ACQUISITION AND CIRCULATION

- 1) *Still Sane*, Brenda Ingratta & Lidia Patriasz. Video. Women in Focus, Vancouver. A lesbian's autobiographical account of psychiatric victimization. Video.
- 2) *Orientation*, Richard Fund. Video, V-Tapes, DEC, Toronto. Portraits of lesbian and gay Asian-Canadians.
- 3) *Heroes*, Sara Halprin. Film CFMDC, Toronto. Three women making heroic life decisions, including a lesbian.
- 4) *No Sad Songs*, Nick Sheehan. Feature film, CFMDC, Toronto. AIDS.
- 5) *Luc ou la part des choses*, Michel Audy. Feature film. Ministère de l'éducation, Québec.
- 6) *Track Two*, Harry Sutherland, et al. Feature film, DEC, Toronto. The Toronto gay community standing up to the 1981 police crackdown.
- 7) *Ten Cents a Dance* (Parallax). Film. Midi Onodera, The Funnel, Toronto. Satiric sketches about sexual encounters.
- 8) *David Roche Talks to You About Love*, Jeremy Podeswa. Film, CFMDC, Toronto. Talk and sketches about (gay) relationships.

T.W. •