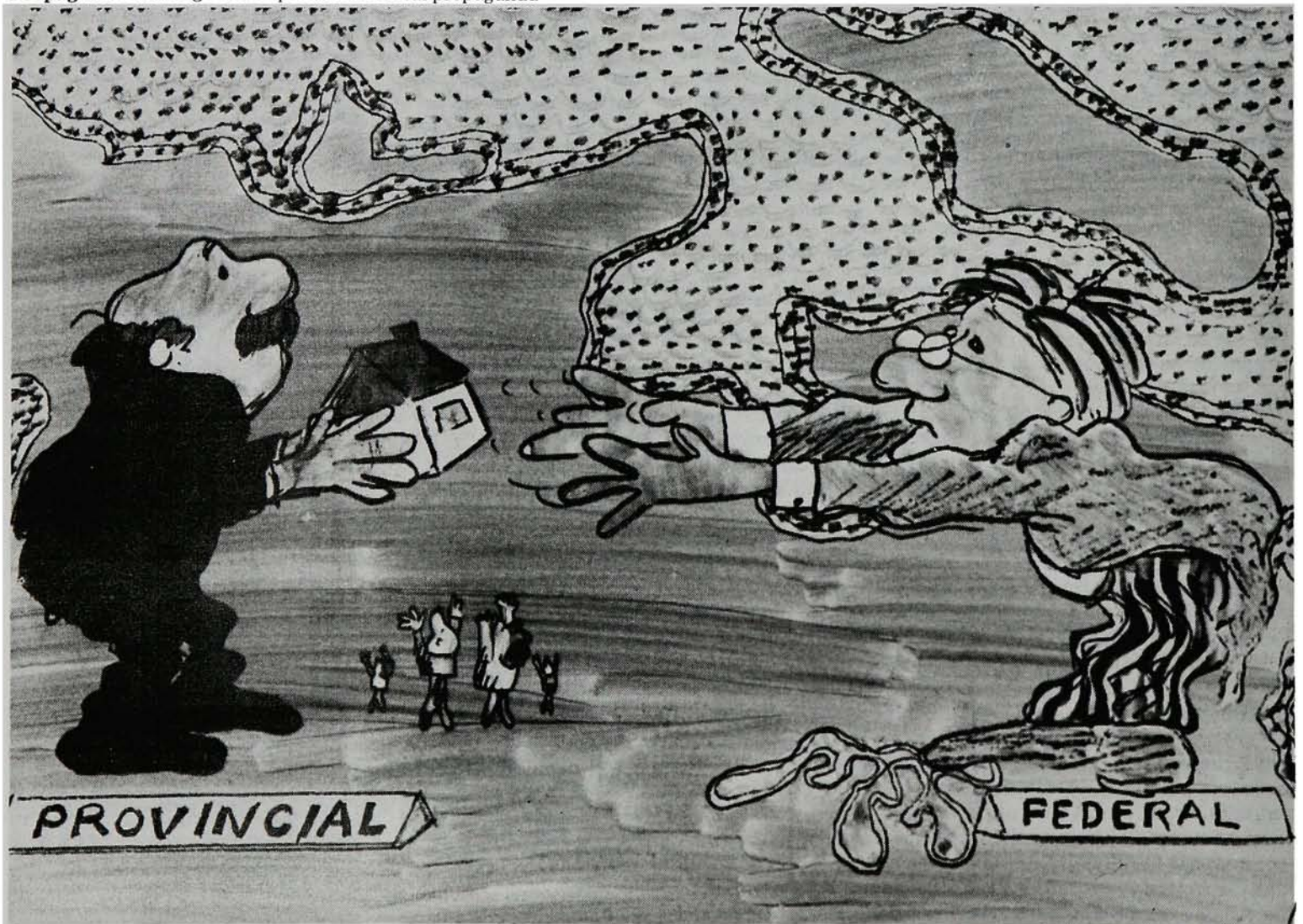


# three viewpoints on the grierson seminar

by Natalie Edwards, Ronald H. Blumer,  
and Gary Evans

The Grierson Seminars attract those film-makers who make documentaries, the films for which Canada is best known, and the buyers of those films, film librarians for the most part. Below are three differing points of view on the goings-on in Couchiching.

Propaganda Message: NFB-produced federal propaganda





# To Enter the World at a Different Level

by Natalie Edwards

The second annual Grierson Seminar was held at Lake Couchiching, at the YMCA Conference Centre, Geneva Park, near Orillia, Ontario, in the clear bright days between April 3 and 7, 1976.

Erik Barnouw, former Columbia University professor and now a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, opened the session with a speech on the purpose of communication, in which he spoke of the hidden effectiveness of fiction in propagandizing compared to the visibility of documentary persuasion. He made the point that TV fiction stories, and films, offer the public certain positive solutions to problems, mainly explicit and violent, whereas documentary work often raises questions that have yet to be answered. Fiction therefore seems to "make sense" while news and various information programs seem fragmented by comparison. \*

Paul Rotha and Basil Wright, as well as Allan King, helped chair the various talk sessions that followed the showing of each film.

At the end I asked chairman Wayne Cunningham what the Ontario Film Association had hoped to achieve.

"Increasing interest in documentary film," he replied.

"And do you think you were successful?" I asked.

He smiled. He certainly did. However, he added, "there were things (films) that Grierson wouldn't have allowed, but we hoped people would raise that issue, and in a round-about way, discover what a Griersonian film was. However, other discussions displaced it, more meaningful to the participants, and that is also one of Grierson's ideas."

The 27-year-old Ontario Federation of Film Councils became the Ontario Film Association in 1958. The people who planned and executed this smoothly run seminar gave not only an incredible amount of time and energy, but actually used their vacation time: Wayne Cunningham, John Crang, Chris Worsnop, Marie B. Deane and Bob Wylie. Grants from the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council helped to bring in the filmmakers, while the Ontario Film Association paid for everything else.

At the end of the seminar, Basil Wright, speaking of Grierson, described him as a "perpetually self-renewing person who would no doubt shock us, were he alive today and in this room, by telling us what a lot of nonsense we've been talking."

Now, while I'm no expert on Grierson, I always had the impression the man was exciting, adventuresome and innovative, if irascible. Because of this it was a disappointment to see so many old-fashioned documentaries with what I call the National-Geographic Approach: we look, we see, we comment.

Narrative voice-overs, descriptions, maps, and many views of something or someplace, do indeed educate us geographically and visually. But these methods have not taught us love and understanding. They provide a Zoo Approach. The most disgusting (to us) scenes have a novelty and satisfy voyeuristic curiosity: a dead body floating down the Ganges; a woman crazed with religious fervor, devouring

a live bird's head. In a sensitively illuminated context we not only could become compassionate but even be brought to imagine ourselves in the place of other people — seeing, for instance, the floating body as part of an acceptable way of life, understanding its presence, or witnessing the religious ecstasy as a marvellous release of inhibition and a connection with ancient rites in a sacred world; feeling, rather than solely observing, the meaning of what we see.

But how is this to be done? How can documentary film advance from the habit of factual and educational third-person observation and help us to enter the world at a different level; to see other lives and other ways of living with humility and love and true understanding? This is one of the things I hoped to find explored at the Grierson Seminar. To my mind, one bridge is the type of Imaginary Documentary best represented by a film like **Montreal Main**, in which real people extend the events of their own lives into a dramatic projection of various possibilities. But there was nothing of this type at the Seminar, although Kathleen Shannon's personal self-discovery trip **Goldwood**, at least let us enter another's life at a very close and personal level.

The Grierson Seminar attempts a great deal. In honoring Grierson and the documentary, it hopes to show the kind of film he made, and follow the precepts he set out. But one of these was for change, exploration and discovery. So in fact, as well as adhering to the past, the Seminar, to be true to Grierson, really must investigate the novel and the new, and if possible introduce attitudes and methods that are almost revolutionary.

Further, the Seminar hopes to increase interest in the documentary through expanded use of that form. Thus librarians, school board buyers, and those with a dollar to spend and a potential audience, are encouraged to attend and comment. They generally prefer material prepared, like texts, on the models of the past. However, people like me and some of the filmmakers and professors want to see what new forms can replace the old, and to discuss the use of the medium in a direct sense, the manipulation of thought and reaction through cutting, angles, composition, placement of material, point of view. Finally, certain concerned people also feel that just learning the facts is a dead end to bridging the gap between peoples and places. A method of involving the heart is sought.

Thus, among the 97 people present, there was a good deal of conflict about what could and what should be discussed. Sometimes groups clamored for a deeper discussion on copyright or on "film" quotations, sometimes on sales or distribution, sometimes on technique, and always, there were those who tried to dissuade the group from concentrating on content.

As for me, my longing to delve into the subject of integrity was lost from view. The basic unities that we must require in order to accept the material a documentary filmmaker offers us were never really discussed, let alone settled. □



# The Activist Film: Alive and Kicking

by Ronald H. Blumer

Film conferences tend to be ordeals of the mind, body, spirit, eyeballs, and that particular little spot between the ass and the base of the back where our tails would be, were it not for evolution. The second annual Grierson Seminar was no exception; a dedicated gathering of those rare birds actually interested in both seeing and making documentaries. The congregation meets each year at the Lake Geneva conference center, a Disneyland version of the wilderness with paved nature walks and trees with labels on them. The squirrels are real, though, and so are the movies, unreeling at a relentless pace from 8:45 in the morning until 11 at night. One comes away from such a barrage with nibbled fingers and mixed impressions.

One immediate conclusion is that we are a very talented country. Of the 30 or so films presented, many made under difficult conditions with shoestring budgets, a high proportion were excellent. There is, however, the sad feeling that here among the lakes and plastic flowers is the one and only time that many of these films are ever going to be seen in public. Filmmaker after filmmaker stood up in front of the audience to tell their tale of distribution woe. The main blight seems to be television – particularly CBC, which had rejected almost every good independently made film presented at the conference. Story after story was told of how some young filmmaker was ground up by the Byzantine monolith which nightly fills our airwaves with mediocrity. Coupled with similar stories coming from last year's conference, it is becoming obvious that Canadian television is terrible not because of a lack of talent, but because the institution is closed and hostile to talent; particularly if it comes in from outside the deadwood of Jarvis Street.

On the bright side of the screen are the film libraries, well represented at this conference. For independent filmmakers they offer one of the few alternate distribution networks by which the films produced can get to a larger public. The power of the Grierson Seminars is that they are not only a forum where filmmakers are brought together to lock antlers but where filmmakers are brought together with film users. And many potentially valuable lessons can be learned on both sides. For example, the word "useful" kept popping up. A critically indifferent film was considered by the librarians to have a certain audience appeal, or be useful in this or that context in conjunction with this or that film. Thus, for the filmmakers, the whole wonderful link between film and public was made manifest. Films are made, after all, to be seen, and it is the seeing that makes the films; many cinéastes descend from the clouds on the basis of that simple homily. The strength of the conference also tended to be its weakness. Filmmakers tend to be a

noisy, pushy, ego-bound lot and while over half of the 80 delegates were film librarians, they tended to be the silent half quietly alternating between frustration and anger. It seems like a simple problem of organization to bring these two groups together in an atmosphere conducive to pleasant and not-so-pleasant interchange. The grueling pace of the conference and the large, cold screening room seemed to mean that only the loudmouths got the spotlight, to the detriment of all.

The films shown, and there were many, presented a fascinating perspective of documentary film production, past and present. The documentary movement of the '30s was represented in the flesh by pioneers like Willard Van Dyke, Paul Rotha and Basil Wright. The films from that era present a world in which man is pitted against nature and filled with hope that technology is the key to future happi-

Chief Dan George in *Cold Journey*



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*Ronald H. Blumer is currently an instructor in cinema at Vanier College in Montreal. Prior to this he taught at Marianopolis College and was a teaching assistant at McGill University and Boston University. Concurrent with teaching, he has also been working on a series of films on aging.*



ness and prosperity. In one film, for example, we have scenes of happy natives in Siam washing their troubles away with DDT soap. The contemporary films presented an opposing view of a world only too aware of the limitations of technology. For this reason, many films of the mid-'70s appear at first glance to be very anti. Allan Goldstein's **A Matter of Choice** (Cinema Canada, no. 26) presents the case against nuclear energy, Martin Defalco's **Cold Journey** and Tony Ianuziolo's **Cree Hunters of Mistassini** (Cinema Canada, no. 24) strongly indict our destruction of the Indian's way of life in the name of progress, Blaine Allan's **There Goes the Neighbourhood** presents the case against unlimited urban expansion and Karl Shiftman's **Holy Ganges** praises the spiritual world of materially impoverished India. If blind faith in progress seems to characterize the documentaries of the '30s and '40s, a feeling of guilt seems to run through the films of the mid-'70s – a guilt at what we have done in the name of this progress. In Jerry Bruck's **I.F. Stone's Weekly**, the veteran newsman presents the American defeat in Vietnam as a victory for man over technology. In other films presented at the conference, we are asked to feel guilty about what has happened in Chile, what has happened to the native people, what we have done to minority groups or women, and how we have messed up the environment. In many ways, the guilt presented in these films is an impotent guilt – an easy way out, a confession so we can keep on doing more of the same. If this were the only message we get from a four-day sampling of present-day documentary film, we might as well forget about the mess

and leap into the soothing arms of *The Partridge Family*. All is not one long moan, however, and many of these same films try to connect the guilt they generate to some form of action. **A Matter of Choice** deliberately chooses against the use of experts, it is the mothers with babies in their arms who are taking on the power and mining companies. The message of the film strongly points to the fact that we have left things up to the "experts" for long enough and now it is the power and responsibility of ordinary people to do something about it. **Creating Space**, a film about a Toronto artists' co-op, provides a model for all those wishing to break down the alienation between business, work and everyday living. **There Goes the Neighbourhood** is a film specifically designed for citizen groups and shows how slum houses can be made livable at relatively low cost. **Cold Journey** and **Potlatch** (Cinema Canada no. 21) are not only about Indians, but are films used by Indians as organizing tools. Susan Schouten's **The Working Class on Film** (Cinema Canada no. 27) can be said to have summed up the conference. The film has as its thesis the idea that documentary started under Grierson as a way in which working people could have a respectable screen image of themselves. The movement has since evolved from a mirror to a hammer, a tool with which people can reshape their own lives. This activist film tradition is very strong in Canada, resulting in the production of many films with a purpose, beyond observation and beyond entertainment. The second Grierson Seminar clearly showed that this tradition is still with us – alive and kicking. □

## No Significant Attempt to Explore

by Gary Evans

*Propaganda is one of those words which when heard causes an almost Pavlovian reaction – more often than not, a negative response. To many, the word implies a situation where the individual is treated as one of the mass who is being preached to – or, more coarsely, brainwashed by a higher, remote and often antagonistic authority. Curiously, the word originated from a 17th century papal order, the congregatio de propaganda fide, whose members were sent on missions to recruit actively for the Catholic Church. As missionaries, it was their responsibility to win converts and to promote the faith.*

*In the first four decades of this century, propaganda was a device used by governments to promote the merits of each of their respective systems to win the hearts and minds of a besieged citizenry, especially in time of war or crisis. Thus in Britain during the First World War, the Ministry of Propaganda under Canadian press lord Max Aitkin (later Lord Beaverbrook) churned out information which was supposed to convince allies and neutrals that Axis information was incorrect if not downright dishonest, while the allied position was 'true'. This brought out the worst in all of the participants and following Lord North-*

*cliffe's ill-advised press campaigns against the Hun at the war's end, the 'negative manipulation' label became identified with propaganda.*

*By the Second World War, there were those who tried to rehabilitate the word by dividing propaganda literally into black and white. Good intentions notwithstanding, propaganda remained a necessary evil during the war, even though it was directed more for home consumption than for allies or neutrals. Following the war, with the dawn of the television age, propaganda acquired the open-ended definition it has today. Summed up recently by communications specialist Erik Barnouw, "Any communication is propaganda, as it has purpose, even though this tends to lead to meaninglessness because it is so broad." In reference to the documentary film versus the fiction film, he has added that while the non-fiction artist has a spoken premise and must be obvious in his aims, the fiction artist is connected to unspoken premises, and hence functions as more of a propagandist. The ultimate logic of this stretched definition is that as fiction artists do not pretend to be propagandists, they are in fact propagandists.*

Gary Evans



Had the title of this year's Grierson Film Seminar been anything other than "Propaganda and the Documentary Film" the five-day event might have been a little less disappointing. That is not to say that the conference was a failure; it was a splendid opportunity to view new non-fiction Canadian films, to meet the filmmakers and the many documentary film *aficionados*. The disappointment was that the seminar missed its purpose: to present and discuss films from their propaganda aspect as part of the wider evolution of the documentary film movement.

Given the etymology of the word propaganda and the open-ended meaning it has assumed, it became apparent from the first session of the Grierson Seminar that there was an acute problem in trying to select films which would apply rationally to that theme. There was no significant attempt to explore the historical and political evolution of the propaganda film. Instead, the organizers tried to invoke the spirit of John Grierson by showing **I Remember, I Remember**, a testimony by Grierson in his last years of what the movement he founded was supposedly about; it was in fact, an incomplete statement of the documentary philosophy. For his own peculiar reasons, Grierson neglected to emphasize the two-pronged principle of political inspiration and social animation which lay at the core of the documentary tradition. He chose instead to concentrate upon the (once secondary) artistic issues of patterns, form and beauty. This was followed by the films **Industrial Britain** and **Night Mail**, which had the effect of creating the impression that the documentary movement was a kind of final statement of the 19th century liberal humanist philosophy; its credo was that despite the natural alienating feature of modern labor, there was dignity in labor and in individual effort.

Documentary film was much more than this, especially when in Britain of the late '30s it dealt with real social problems such as inadequate housing and poor nutrition. Significantly, such films were made by breakaway film units which left the comfortable milieu of government sponsorship. The best of the documentary films were discomfiting to authorities, yet they demonstrated how alternatives and solutions were possible within the existing order. Such films were educational and inspiring. They underscored the importance of collective social action. The Second World War forced a new set of priorities and propaganda film tended to emphasize the importance of maintaining a united collective will to defeat fascism. Grierson transplanted the documentary idea to wartime Canada, where the propaganda films of the National Film Board promised that victory over fascism would signal the coming of a brave new world, one based upon internationalism and the end of national rivalries. Sadly, the dream was decades premature; Grierson left Canada in 1945 as the government was about to plunge into two decades of Cold War.

These historical references might have enabled the participants at the seminar to address themselves to some kind of context. Instead, documentary film pioneers Paul Rotha, Willard Van Dyke and Basil Wright were either silent or pessimistic about the possibilities of adopting the film medium to inspire change or to invoke social purpose. This was a terrible letdown to those who had seen the films of purpose these men had made earlier and crueler still to those filmmakers who are trying to carry the ideological torch of the Grierson documentary tradition.

Despite these less-appealing aspects of the seminar, there were present filmmakers whose films can be seen as direct evolutionary descendants from the best of the documentary tradition. Had their films been screened as a group and not



A Leonard Hutchinson wood-block print from *Years of Struggle*

interspersed among the 'artistic', intellectual, and travelogue *pot-pourri*, the whole seminar would have taken on an entirely different and probably more controversial character. These films deserve special merit for being examples of propaganda at its best. They were educational, rational, inspirational and political in the broadest sense of the word.

Ron Blumer's **Beyond Shelter** and Allan Goldstein's **A Matter of Choice** dealt with two areas of social concern, care for the elderly and the dangers implied in the proliferation of nuclear power plants. Both films presented their respective factual positions in a matter-of-fact tone. They excelled most when the people spoke to the issues in their simple and sometimes humorous way. These films convinced the viewer that there are many possibilities of non-institutional housing for the elderly and that there is a need to slow the rate of nuclear power development until more ecological factors are known and assessed. In Blaine Allan's **There Goes the Neighborhood**, a persuasive case was made for urban renovation, not urban demolition. The film is meant to be a primer to citizens' groups which wish to become involved in renovating their neighborhoods.

**Enemy Alien** by Jeannette Lerman and **Years of Struggle** by David Fulton and Gloria Montero fit into that aspect of documentary film which links education to politics. The first was an almost too softspoken history of the relocation of the Japanese community of Canada during the Second World War, placing this sorry aspect of Canadian history into the context of Canada's racist attitudes toward its Oriental population as a whole. The visual impact was heightened by the use of still photographs collected mainly from Japanese-Canadian photo albums. The film's political appeal is all the more relevant in light of many people's memories of personal helplessness which followed the government's recent suspension of civil liberties during the 1970 October crisis. **Years of Struggle** emphasized one man's concern for and record of the unemployed of Depression Canada. The art work of Leonard Hutchinson, printmaker, captured the despair and dignity of the working class as they struggled to weather the Depression. The film was flawed partially by its tendency to concentrate too much on biography and not enough on the social significance of the man's work.

There were two films on propaganda as propaganda. Susan Schouten's **The Working Class on Film** used a style of

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Gary Evans has written a history of government-sponsored film propaganda in Canada and Britain, **The War For Men's Minds**, to be published early in 1977.



presentation reminiscent of Canadian wartime propaganda of the '40s and was meant to inform filmmakers of the importance of keeping alive Grierson's idea of projecting a positive image of the working class on the screen. As a piece of political propaganda *par excellence*, it seized the Grierson philosophy, took a position distinctly to the left of the mainstream and dared to be controversial. (Unfortunately, it was the last film screened at the seminar.) Schouten learned from her years with Grierson that his philosophy can be welded to today's reality; the film avoided empty praise and emphasized that if organized labor engages in political action, significant reform is possible. Jerry Bruck Jr.'s **I.F. Stone's Weekly** was a piece of screen journalism which dealt with the anti-Vietnam War propaganda waged by the crusading journalist I.F. Stone. Like **The Selling of the Pentagon**, which also came at a time when the public had turned at last against the war in Vietnam, Bruck's film has been popular with a significant part of the North American public. They have identified the anti-establishment attitude of the subject and the filmmaker as their own. Aware of the historical limitations of his film, Bruck has commented on his own open-ended definition of propaganda, "Propaganda is what you don't like. Think about that a minute." Had Bruck's film surfaced five years before, it would have probably remained an unknown 'underground' propaganda film. Five years later it would have been seen as a quaint historical piece. His film is about propaganda that people did not like, i.e., the US government's attempt to sell the war and as such, it has met with popular success. Equally important, though, is the film's affirmation that in a liberal democracy there are unlimited possibilities for rational change. This is inspirational propaganda of the first order.

The Challenge For Change group at the National Film Board has found itself loved and hated alternately for their belief in social action. In **Temiskaming**, they have told a two-part story of the Temiskaming, Quebec, workers' victorious struggle to reopen the town's pulp mill and the depressing letdown of trying to run such an enterprise in the capitalist milieu. The film is both inspiring and troubling. The unanswered questions reflect the underlying contradictions of capitalist production. Alienation of labor will continue as long as the workers are not the sole proprietors of their own factories. The film will not be distributed by the CBC because that organization feels that the filmmakers were too sympathetic to the workers.

To conclude, had these films been presented as the core of the Grierson Seminar, there would have occurred a much more lively, if heated, event. As the purpose of propaganda is to force the taking of sides, the exercise might have been valuable for the participants. But this was only the second year of the seminar and the organizers are to be commended for their months of effort and preparation. In time, the wrinkles will be worked out. As for suggestions for future seminars: an urban centre is preferable so that local talent and participation are more available. Personal intimacy could be sacrificed for the stimulation which many active minds could provide – including the presence of more outside resources people familiar with the Canadian milieu. There could be different panels chosen each day to introduce the theme of the films and to comment upon them afterwards. Such panels might be composed of non-film people like librarians and teachers, who in many respects reflect the 'public' audience more accurately than do the filmmakers. Finally, the organizers should try operating several theatres simultaneously, in which films of specific types or *genres* could be screened. One cannot help but wonder how much good Canadian film was either overlooked or rejected this year because of considerations of time and space. □

*For a capsule comment and distribution information on each of the films shown at the Grierson Seminar, please refer to Capsules.*

*The Grierson Seminar is followed by the Ontario Film Association's Showcase of 16 mm films. This is a major market for distributors of 16 mm film.*

*The following letter was sent to the organizers of the two events by Jerry Bruck, director of I. F. Stone's Weekly, a filmmaker who has taken the distribution of his own films in hand.*

Last Monday, April 5, a group of about 10 of the filmmakers attending the Grierson Seminar met to discuss common problems relating to the distribution of our films. One of these involved restrictions imposed on us by the rules of the Ontario Film Association regarding our participation in the annual film showcase; I was asked to present our feelings to the OFA board through you.

First, we are grateful that we've been permitted to exhibit our films in Showcase for the first time this year. Second, we can't understand why we are not permitted to be on the premises when our films are screened.

As you explained the situation, limitations of space have forced the OFA to limit the numbers of participating distributors each year. Since our films were being screened this year in the confines of the Filmmakers' Showcase, and since we did not require additional screening facilities, booths, rooms, meals or accommodations, we simply wished permission to be present at Geneva Park in order to:

a) attempt to publicize the scheduled screenings of our films through handbills and seeking out key librarians;

b) meet key buyers, which we are not otherwise able to do owing to our limited financial resources;

c) get a sense of other films available to the schools and library market and a feeling for current tastes.

This would not be possible, if I understood you correctly, because of the opposition of commercial distributors, who make an important financial contribution to the annual showcase. All board members we talked to were extremely deferential to these distributors.

It may or may not prove possible for filmmakers without experience or contacts in the library market to achieve much in what I understand is the almost frenzied atmosphere prevailing at Showcase, but it seems to me only fair and reasonable that we be given a chance to participate. Independent filmmaking is precarious and marginal enough in Canada without our being barred from an important marketplace. The high commissions commercial distributors take for their work make it even more difficult for Canadian-made films to return their production costs, especially when commercial distribution provides no guarantee that a title will be effectively or efficiently marketed. Growing numbers of filmmakers in the US and Canada are turning to self-distribution, and we found it upsetting that we are not permitted to participate on an equal footing in Canada, as we are permitted to in all major events in the United States.

In view of the heavy government subsidies required to maintain even the current low level of independent production in Canada (as well as much of the work of the OFA), we feel that any efforts we choose to make to market our films directly – and hence to become at least in some measure self-sustaining – ought to be helped, rather than hindered.

Sincerely

**Jerry Bruck Jr.**  
Open Circle Cinema