**'Spectators' as 'Actors:'
A Ritual Model for Film Exhibition in Ottawa**

by

Peter Lester, B.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

School of Canadian Studies

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Film Exhibition in Ottawa**

submitted by Peter Lester, Hon. B.A.

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the degree of Master of Arts**

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Abstract

This thesis examines two contemporary film-screening initiatives in the Ottawa region, the Centretown Movies Outdoor Film Festival and the Available Light Screening Collective, within James Carey's theoretical framework of a 'ritual' model of communication. While the dominant tradition of film exhibition in Canada can be seen as an information-heavy, transmission-based approach to communication, an alternative, non-theatrical historical tradition of film exhibition is examined that emphasizes instead non-commercial, community-oriented and participative elements. Additionally, a discussion of this historical tradition and its contemporary manifestations in the context of Jurgen Habermas' notion of the 'public sphere' is included. It is the intention of this thesis that the analysis will serve as a microcosm for larger cultural trends in Canada, and reveal an alternative, more communitarian approach to active public life.

Acknowledgments

Over the course of writing this thesis, I have had the pleasure of attending numerous screenings put on by both the Centretown Movies Outdoor Film Festival and the Available Light Screening Collective. I would first of all like to thank the members of both of these groups for their efforts in facilitating these screenings. But I would especially like to thank Ray Sullivan, Pam Foster and Zac Crane from the CMOFF and James Missen, Penny McCann and Phil Rose from Available Light for taking the time to talk to me about their respective organisations. Without their insight, this project would not have been possible.

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Introduction

“If together with the showing of the film we supply something that purveys the sense of existence – of being part of something bigger than ourselves. We create an event around the film based on participation – the aura of social encounter is promoted and maintained.”

-Gideon Bachman

Ottawa: July 13, 2002

The audience begins arriving around 8:00 in the evening, not knowing entirely what to expect. Portable chairs and blankets in hand, they set themselves up on the ground of a vacant lot in the heart of Centretown in downtown Ottawa. People casually chat with their neighbours, while children run around playing and a crew of volunteers set up equipment. This particular night, the Centretown Movies Outdoor Film Festival is screening Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. Many have come specifically to see the film. Many others have simply come for the experience. By 8:30, there are several hundred people in attendance, and there is an intense feeling of excitement and anticipation in the air. It is the tail end of the Ottawa Gay and Lesbian Pride festival, and local drag performer Pearl Harbour is scheduled to perform before the screening of the film. Unbeknownst to Pearl, or to the CMOFF organisers, seven other drag performers arrive at the last minute in full regalia. What results is an elaborate, spontaneous performance of popular songs from the film. The show is an incredible success. By the final number, the performers have managed to transform the performance space in front of the audience into an impromptu dance floor, populated by all segments of the audience, from 10 year old boys to 70 year old women. Much of the audience is on its feet singing along to the music. There is no longer any boundary between performer and spectator. The

crowd and the original performers are ecstatic, all completely overwhelmed by this unexpected burst of creative energy. And the film has not yet even begun to play.

At the symposium entitled “The Cinema of Tomorrow” held by the European Institute of Cinema in Karlsruhe Germany in November of 1996, Gideon Bachman delivered a paper in which he addresses the phenomenon of ‘going to the movies.’¹ As social beings, he explains, humans naturally seek out leisure activities that reinforce our need to feel we belong. Since its origins at the turn of the century, the cinema has provided audiences with a ‘social angle’ that comparable media such as television or even the early kinetoscope viewings simply could not provide. Quoting a study from the European Institute of Cinema, he cites research evidence that people choose what film to see predominantly on the basis of the situation in which it is presented, and less so on the basis of what film it is. He refers to a massive film festival held outdoors in a public square in Locarno Switzerland, where reportedly thousands of people come every night, regardless of what film is being shown. He notices, however, an increasing frustration with the manner in which film is being exhibited in recent years. The drastic increase in the presence of advertisements as well as in the frequency of available screenings, would suggest that film exhibition, especially in the multiplex theatre environment, has been increasingly on a path of convergence with the more individually oriented medium of television. Going to the movies has become less of a ‘social event,’ and has instead morphed into a form of cinema that is fast-paced, individualized, and ultimately consumption-oriented. As a solution to this trend, Bachman calls for a ‘new film going.’

¹ Gideon Bachman, “The Quest for Cultural Identity: Why do People Go to the Cinema?” a working paper for the symposium “The Cinema of Tomorrow,” Karlsruhe, Germany, November 19, 1996. The European Institute of Cinema. *Kinema*, Fall 1997.

It's a nebulous concept to be sure, but one that he feels can hopefully realise the potential that film exhibition and spectatorship possess. He relates:

We know that there has to be an event, something that home electronics, even with perfect technique can never supply. We know that there has to be a social dimension, again something you don't get in the living room. We know that sensuality is not just sitting back and passively taking in prepared emotions. We know that the evening cannot be limited to a film showing. We know that we must convey the sense of sharing and of actively joining a peer group, with the stress on 'actively.' We know the evening must live. That it must be something, finally that engages us, not something that makes us escape.²

In his Master's thesis dealing with the initial reception of the new medium of film by audiences in Ottawa, Charles Tepperman suggests that there is a gap in the historiography of Canadian film. This unwritten history, he relates, is that of film **reception** in Canada. The history of the development of an industry has been well documented, as has the history of the central film production institution in Canada – the National Film Board. However, while ample amounts of Canadian film criticism, and numerous comprehensive accounts of the industry have been written, the study of concepts associated with film spectatorship has been sorely underdeveloped. The common view suggests, as Tepperman relates, a “passive, vacant audience, a mass of anonymous viewers who are simply vessels to be filled, or children to be brainwashed.”³ It assumes little capacity for reciprocal behaviour on the part of the audience within the film-screening environment.

Two dominant approaches to the study of film in Canada have more or less emerged. One approach tends to be concerned with cinematic content, generally

² Bachman

³ Charles Tepperman. *The Perfect Order of a Canadian Crowd: Cinema in Ottawa, 1894-1896*. (Master's Thesis, Carleton University, 2000.) p.7.

stressing the meaning and subsequent impact of the images on screen and the viewer, under any number of theoretical frameworks. This approach might include a discussion of semiotics for instance. The focus is ultimately upon the effects and meanings that the images impart upon the viewer. Alternatively, scholarship less concerned with content has often emphasized instead the dynamics surrounding the structures of film production, distribution and exhibition. Under this approach, spectatorship is viewed merely in terms of demographics. Audiences are merely statistics in the machinery of the film industry. Neither of these approaches allow for a concept of spectatorship that entails anything more than the mere reception of information. There appears to be an implicit assumption that audiences are fundamentally passive entities whose sole function is to receive the produced images without question and without any interactive behaviour within the environment in which the film is shown. An audience is ultimately viewed as either a neutral entity that is to be swayed by persuasion, or as a commercial being to be won over.

The intent of this thesis is to examine the development of an historical model of film spectatorship in Canada and its contemporary manifestations that challenge this notion of passive spectatorship that appears to permeate most scholarship. In other words, a form of spectatorship that takes seriously the idea that audiences are active subjects in the process of exhibition, not merely passive observers. I will explore an historical tradition and two contemporary examples and ultimately probe the nature and implications of this form of active engagement. Two film screening initiatives in the Ottawa region, The Centretown Movies Outdoor Film Festival and the Available Light Screening Collective, although in many ways very different organizations, both actively

encourage a form of spectatorship that operates in opposition to the more socially entrenched concept of this term. A traditional theatrically performed cinematic event tends to enforce viewing habits such as silence, passivity and an essentially commercially based relationship between the viewer and his/her surroundings. However, at the CMOFF event described at the opening of this chapter, the viewers were in fact a part of the performance. They were participating in an event, rather than merely experiencing it. This trend continued throughout the film, as people sang along to the songs they knew, recited popular lines of dialogue, and even improvised their own. For many people, culture is increasingly becoming something that is merely experienced, rather than something in which people can actually participate and create. The audience reacted so positively to this event because for once they felt as if they were truly an integrated element, rather than a simple observer.

These two organizations and their historical predecessors foster screening environments that are ultimately conducive to audience interaction and participation. Discussion, for instance, is actively encouraged at these screenings both prior to and following the film. Relevant individuals such as directors may be on hand to facilitate organized question and answer periods, or discussion may occur in much more casual fashion. These groups strive to create an atmosphere in which the spectator enjoys a much more direct and reciprocal relationship with both the film and the environment itself. In this sense, the viewer is an active participant in the events of the screening, rather than merely an observer. This approach to exhibition should be seen as consistent with communication scholar James Carey's notion of a 'ritual' or 'communitarian' form of communication.

The aforementioned dominant forms of scholarship that tend to typify Canadian academic writing on film generally adhere to a model of communications that Carey would define as a 'transmission' model. This is a model that, simply put, focuses on the transmission and distribution of information across space with the intent of exerting control or influence. This model, he explains, has been the dominant focus in communications theory in the modern era. The ritual model, which he describes (and ultimately champions,) rather than focusing on the extension of information and its subsequent impact across geography, emphasizes instead the communal acts of interaction and the sharing of knowledge. It stresses the process and practice of the 'sacred ceremony' itself, rather than the form in which it is transmitted.⁴ The intent of this thesis therefore, is to show that the Centretown Movies Outdoor Film Festival and the Available Light Screening Collective strive to invest meaningful and constructive social and communal elements into the movie-going experience. In contrast to the passive form of spectatorship that is entrenched in traditional theatrical exhibition, these organisations encourage an engaged and active audience. This form of engaged action in turn represents an embodiment of the fundamental characteristics of a ritual model of communication, rather than those of a transmission model. The fundamental characteristics of which this thesis is therefore primarily concerned are the participative, social bonding and community building aspects of the ritual model. Granted, such elements can be found in more conventional theatrical experience, such as a casual discussion with a neighbour while waiting in line or the sharing of popcorn with a friend. However, these elements are not part of the design and intent of the experience, and are

⁴ James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. (Boston: Unwin, 1989) p.15-18.

ultimately trivial and superficial when compared to the more fundamentally participative elements that are actively scripted into the CMOFF or Available Light screenings.

Recognizing, interpreting and writing about manifestations of communitarian-based communication models is important according to Carey, for a number of reasons. Canadian communications scholar Harold Innis had a fear that strong biases towards transmission-based approaches to communication could have serious detrimental effects on society. By its very nature, a transmission approach is hierarchical in structure and emphasizes commercial, political or ideological control. Communitarian approaches, alternatively, through their emphasis on community, are generally more democratic and tend to stress more spiritual rather than material values. The two models can be seen in a form of dialectical struggle with one another. Says Heather Menzies in *Who's Brave New World*:

...in the context of digitizing new economy and information highway constructed to support it, the struggle can be seen as a battle over differing conceptions of communication – as commodity transmission or as community, culture and personal participation. Within that it's a struggle between the dominant bias of communication in the modern era, associated with market expansionism and its opposite associated with more spiritual value.⁵

In order for a greater balance to be achieved between the two models of communication, a conscious effort must be put forward by the public to adopt a more communitarian approach to communications. Writing about film exhibition from a ritual perspective should be seen as not merely a descriptive or analytical process, but also as a means of drawing attention to the importance of such a model and the possibilities it represents. Carey is of the strong conviction that discussion of these models can in effect serve as

⁵ Heather Menzies, *Who's Brave New World: The Information Highway and the New Economy* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1996.)p.145

blueprints for future initiatives. The models can actually ‘create’ rather than merely ‘describe.’ They are templates for action, not just contemplation.⁶ It is therefore a major intention of this thesis that a description and analysis of a participative non-theatrical film screening tradition in Canada, and more specifically in contemporary Ottawa, can serve both as a relevant piece of scholarly work, but also highlight a possibility for these types of screenings for the future, as well as related policy to support such cultural events. Similarly, it is the intention that the model of communication described and its subsequent implications for communities and social interaction be applied beyond the realm of film exhibition. Though the thesis itself is concerned primarily with film exhibition, there is no reason why the possibilities provided by the model and theories used could not be applied to other media forms, and it is hoped that the reader may consider these implicit possibilities. The film exhibition practices described in this thesis should be seen, in effect, as a microcosm. While the hegemonic force of Hollywood and major corporations increasingly dominate film production, distribution and exhibition, the initiatives of the CMOFF and Available Light should be seen as a resistance to this trend. This in turn has the potential to outline a process in which communities can challenge and provide an alternative to the cultural hegemony that is resulting from corporate capitalism, not only in film exhibition but in the cultural sector generally. To this end, I will elaborate on what I see as the implications of this engaged form of spectatorship in terms of Jurgen Habermas’ concept of a ‘public sphere,’ which he initially developed in his 1962 work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. The public sphere, for Habermas, was a distinct element of society in which the political and cultural affairs of the day could be openly discussed and debated. Under this

⁶ I am indebted to Heather Menzies for this phrase.

framework, I will discuss the CMOFF and Available Light as examples of this notion of a public sphere that contribute to a revitalized civil society.

Carey, Innis and others generally do not stress the victory of one form of communication over another as an ultimate goal. Rather, achieving a healthy balance between the two, (or more) biases is what should truly constitute a goal for society. Overemphasis on one model over another is generally what leads to problems. It is the intention of this thesis to focus on the dialectical tension between the two competing models of communication in film exhibition rather than to examine the two in isolation from each other. There is a danger in an oversimplified approach that sees the two models from a dichotomous perspective. An approach that emphasizes the dominance of one at the exclusion of the other fails to reveal the creative tension that results from the ongoing dialectical struggle between the two. As this dialectic is constantly in motion, achieving a healthy and creative balance between the two should be, according to Innis, a fundamental goal for society. In this sense, this thesis is obviously not implying the need for a complete overhaul of the corporate, capitalist system of film exhibition, in favour of a universal entrenchment of a participative model. The intent is merely to reveal that an alternative model does exist, and has for some time, and that by nurturing it through volunteer participation, through further governmental (or non-governmental) funding or merely through attending and participating at the screenings, a greater balance can be achieved between the two models. The benefits of these screenings go far beyond the individual elements of the event itself: rather, they are indicative of a more engaged civil society.

Perhaps noticeably absent from this thesis is the inclusion of film festivals – an absence that is deliberate for two reasons.⁷ The first is that the festival phenomenon is such a large subject and ultimately worthy of its own study. Furthermore, I have not included a discussion of film festivals because they do not meet a variety of criteria that seem to typify the initiatives I have chosen. Film festivals almost invariably occur in traditional movie theatres, and it has been my intention in this thesis to examine non-theatrical film exhibition. Since the introduction of the medium of film, in conventional movie theatres a certain form of spectatorship that favours passivity and silence would appear to have entrenched itself. This form of spectatorship would appear to be the norm in gallery settings as well, where experimental films are occasionally screened. The intention of this thesis is to focus on spaces that do not enforce this notion of spectatorship, and that in fact challenge it.

The temporal structure of film festivals is not the same as the case studies I have chosen either. Whereas the CMOFF and Available Light function on a regular basis – the CMOFF every Friday and Saturday during the summer, and Available Light generally once every month throughout the year, excluding the summer– film festivals generally tend to function on merely an annual basis. In terms of creating an on-going environment where community building and interaction can occur, I have determined that the regularity of the CMOFF and Available Light screenings is central to their respective intents and results. Film festivals, alternatively tend to condense a large number of films into a small period of time. The emphasis therefore is obviously with the films themselves (and the securing of any related distribution deals etc.,) and not so much the

⁷ The Centretown Movies Outdoor Film Festival admittedly calls itself a ‘festival,’ but in a more general sense of the term – not in the sense of an annual film festival, in which a large number of films are shown over a short period of time.

communal forms of interaction and participation that might surround the screenings. This is not to say that film festivals do not exhibit characteristics of a communal form of communication. (The Making Scenes Queer Film and Video Festival for example, now in its eleventh year in Ottawa is obviously very much concerned with concepts such as community building.) Film festivals, however, simply seem to occupy a separate space of their own in the realm of film exhibition. As the Canadian resident expert on film festivals Gerald Pratley has noted:

A film festival can be national or international, but it is always held in a place and on a scale quite different from any normal form of exhibition. When an organization is created and devoted solely to showing films for a certain purpose in a certain place, for only a short space of time, this is a film festival...but the event must be something quite different and apart from any regular system of exhibition. I want to make that clear.”⁸

It is also quite possible that many film festivals, especially the large international festivals such as Cannes, Venice and Toronto, have in effect become the ultimate embodiment of a transmission model of communications. These events have arguably become little more than large-scale advertising campaigns, able to target huge numbers of people without having to conquer large areas of space. Piers Handling himself, the director of the Toronto International Festival, has expressed concern for this increasingly dominant trend: “ten days of gorging on 300 films is not the way to reflect on what one has just seen – but is there any other way to see full range of extraordinary international work?”⁹ But this is a topic for another study...

I should also note that this thesis makes no attempts or claims to be comprehensive in terms of the form of film exhibition examined. Film has been used in a ‘ritualistic’ manner for years in such diverse venues as church basements, cottages etc.,

⁸ Gerald Pratley, “The Film Festivals”, *Pot Pourri*, The National Film Board of Canada, Fall 1976.

⁹ Piers Handling, “Fast Food Worries for a Fast Food World”, *The Globe and Mail*, September 6, 2001.

and by any number of social groups for interactive educational or activist purposes. Any attempt to comprehensively survey this tradition in Canada would be an impossible task. Instead I have attempted to focus on the major historical developments in Canada along this line of film exhibition and to focus specifically on two contemporary examples in the Ottawa region. I have selected Ottawa, firstly for logistical reasons, as it has been my home for the past two years and my first hand experiences with both the CMOFF and Available Light are what initially drew me to this topic. Secondly, although Ottawa has never been a dominant force in the production of film in Canada, as revealed in the following chapter, it does play a somewhat significant role in the history of film exhibition and reception in Canada.

This first part of this chapter, focusing on the early, formative years of the film industry in Canada draws heavily from, among other things, the groundbreaking works *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema 1895-1939* by Peter Morris and *Canadian Dreams and American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry* by Manjunath Pendakur. Examples of both models of communication can be perceived in the exhibition of film in Canada during the first years of the 20th century, but ultimately a bias towards the transmission model would appear to have entrenched itself. The chapter then shifts its focus to discuss the initiatives of the National Film Board of Canada, and by drawing from such works as Marjorie McKay's *History of the National Film Board of Canada*, David Jones' *Movies and Memoranda: An Interpretative History of the National Film Board of Canada* and Gary Evans' *In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949 – 1989*, the reaction of the state towards this perceived bias is revealed. Through a variety of initiatives such as the

rural film circuit, the creation of community based film-councils and the Challenge for Change program, we can see the development of a state-sponsored campaign to counteract the privately owned, heavily transmission based and commercially-rooted system of film exhibition that came to dominate. An integral source for this chapter is the NFB publication *Four Days in May*, which transcribes from an oral discussion the recollections of numerous female workers who were directly involved in these activities. Although the various initiatives discussed in this chapter have all been noted separately in previous scholarly work, they have yet to be identified as repeating a distinct tradition that operates in opposition to the dominant trend in film exhibition in Canada. It is the intention of this chapter to do just that - to present these initiatives as a continuous, unified tradition, rather than as isolated incidents.

The second chapter switches the focus from the past to the present. Many of the 'conventions' that developed within the non-theatrical tradition exposed in the first chapter are revealed as central to the activities of both the CMOFF and the Available Light Screening Collective. While the scopes of these two organizations are of decidedly different natures – the CMOFF focuses on large-scale outdoor screenings of popular films, while Available Light focuses on an intimate indoor atmosphere and the screening of experimental film and video – the form of spectatorship that the organizers encourage is very similar. This source material for this chapter is almost exclusively drawn from both my personal experiences at these screenings, and from a series of interviews with the key organizers from both organizations.¹⁰ As participation and interaction is paramount to a ritual model of communication, and as a central motif to this thesis is

¹⁰ These interviews were conducted in accordance with the policies of the Carleton University Ethics Committee, and with that Committee's full approval.

‘culture as conversation,’ these informal conversational interviews would appear quite thematically appropriate.

The third chapter attempts to place both the historical non-theatrical tradition, and especially its contemporary manifestations into a theoretical perspective, drawing especially from the work of James Carey and Harold Innis. Innis’ ideas of communication and society frequently centre on the dialectic of space-based empires vs. time-based empires, and the competing biases of written vs. oral cultures. These dialectics can be seen to have much in common with Carey’s notions of ritual and transmission based communications. Participative film exhibition in Canada can be seen to exhibit the qualities of time-based, oral communication in a ritual model. This is a form of communication that operates in opposition to the theatrically performed cinematic event, which generally embodies the opposite characteristics. An analysis along these lines serves to demonstrate the potential for communities to achieve a greater deal of direct involvement in their culture and the means in which they can interact in the world. And as Carey states, writing about communications is not merely descriptive, it can also be formative. It is hoped that the analysis herein can both provide an example of the ‘new film going’ that Gideon Bachman calls for, but to also provide a microcosmic model for the possibility of community culture in general.

A final concluding chapter pursues the implications of this analysis, and includes suggestions for public policy and for future research.

Chapter 1:

The Historical Tradition of Film Exhibition in Canada

The city of Ottawa holds a rather notable position in the history of film exhibition in Canada. One of the very first public presentations of a motion picture in Canada occurred at West End Park, July 21st 1896.¹ The same individuals who promoted this event, Andrew and George Holland, two Ottawa-based entrepreneurs, had opened the world's first Kinetoscope Parlour in New York City two years earlier, in April of 1894. As Charles Tepperman relates in his Master's thesis on early film exhibition in Ottawa, leisure activities at this period in history were largely centred around community-based and participatory associations such as church groups and amateur athletics. The principle under which these associations were unified was that of 'rational recreation' – the belief that leisure activities should be morally redeeming, and encourage good citizenship.² However a shift began occurring away from these community-based and participatory pastimes towards non-local, commercial entertainments. The thrust of his thesis is that audiences embraced this new medium of film, and having been exposed to numerous technological advances already, were not as 'uncomprehendingly astonished' as many historical accounts would imply.³

One such invention, the Kinetoscope, was as Peter Morris describes "the key invention in the development of true motion pictures."⁴ The Kinetoscope is similar to true motion pictures, although it is more of a 'peepshow' device that is experienced

¹ For many years, this was believed to have been the first public exhibition of film in Canada. It is now known that the first was actually in Montreal a month earlier.

² Charles Tepperman, *The Perfect Order of a Canadian Crowd: Cinema in Ottawa, 1894-1896*. (Master's Thesis, Carleton University, 2000.) p.19.

³ Tepperman,

⁴ Peter Morris, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895-1939*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978.) p.5

individually rather than collectively. When Thomas Edison ceded rights of sale to the newly formed Kinetoscope Company, the idea was to sell territorial rights of use, rather than operate Kinetoscope parlours themselves. The Holland Brothers became the eastern agents for the company and received the first 10 machines to operate.⁵ This is an interesting, early example of Canadian entrepreneurs receiving a lucrative contract from an American company - and the brothers made the most of it. When they opened the first parlour on Broadway in New York, it was a complete sensation and drew thousands of curious and excited patrons. Within that year, they brought the invention back to their hometown of Ottawa, where they were very well known for their entrepreneurial activities. In November of 1894, they opened the first Canadian Kinetoscope Parlour on the corner of Sparks and Elgin Streets. As mentioned previously, 'rational recreation' was the order of the day, and the two had to convince the public of the scientific or educational value of the invention to ensure its acceptance. The Kinetoscope, as Tepperman relates, occupied a place in between the educational/scientific and the commercial.⁶ The Kinetoscope proved to be very successful in Canada as well, if only for a brief span of time. The Holland brothers' success in promoting the Kinetoscope, at home and abroad, landed them sole and exclusive rights in Canada to Edison's Vitascope – the invention that they were to premier at West End Park in Ottawa.

West End Park was at the time the most westerly terminus of the Ottawa Electric Railway Company, and was designed with the intention of encouraging people to travel

⁵ Morris, 5-6. Edison did not actually invent the Kinetoscope itself, but it was developed in his laboratories by W.K.L. Dickson.

⁶ Tepperman, 51, 67

on the street railway.⁷ Family entertainment was a regular feature of the Park. It had a festival atmosphere, and when the Vitascope was introduced into the proceedings, it was still but one of the many attractions that the park had to offer. The screenings were incredibly successful – originally scheduled for only two weeks, the show was held back several times, with audiences reaching 1600 in the first week.⁸ The screenings were not as Morris explains “the same experience which it later became.”⁹ Belsaz the magician preceded the films with a magic show and musical accompaniment was provided by the Governor General’s Foot Guard Band. High-wire performances and other specialty acts frequently rounded out the evening. The films were, of course, very primitive, yet audiences nevertheless found them enthralling. As Morris relates: “The illusion of realistic movement itself created an extraordinary sense of audience participation, of actually experiencing the events on the screen.”¹⁰ Unlike the individualized experience generated by the Kinetoscope, these original Vitascope screenings were very much a group experience, as audiences were introduced to this new medium collectively, in an open-air festival-style atmosphere.

It did not take long for motion pictures to grab the public’s attention in Canada, as in the rest of the world. In urban centres, vaudeville theatres quickly became logical venues for their exhibition. But as Morris relates, it was the travelling road showmen who introduced this medium to new audiences not in close proximity to these theatres.¹¹ These early travelling film exhibitions were hardly well oiled machines. The films were

⁷ Morris, 2 – The West End Park was land once owned by the Holland family. Holland Avenue is the street that now runs where the park once was.

⁸ Morris, 2.

⁹ Morris, 2

¹⁰ Morris, 3

¹¹ Morris, 11

generally quite short, and audience members sat on chairs or whatever they could find. The projectors frequently broke down and were very noisy. John C. Green, aka Belsaz the Magician, who performed his tricks at the West End Park opening, became a typical example of these early showmen. Since an early age he had been travelling with various sideshows and circuses. Upon learning of the Holland brothers' success in bringing the Vitascope to Canada, Green managed to wrestle his way into the first screenings, performing both his magic and acting as narrator for the films. When the Ottawa show wound up, he purchased a projector and took his show on the road. Green served as operator, lecturer and of course magician for a two-hour performance that he toured through eastern Canada and the United States. He eventually settled into managing theatres once permanent movie theatres began to appear.¹²

Another early showman was John Albert Schuberg, whose travelling-cinema routes covered much of the west – from the prairies out to Vancouver. He too had long worked in circuses and other travelling shows, and so the progression to motion pictures was only logical. His big trick was to incorporate loud sound effects with the images to enhance their impact. Western audiences were initially extremely suspect of his grand promises, but once word got out, his events were drawing capacity crowds consistently. On route to Winnipeg in the fall of 1898 he and his wife worked their passage by putting together shows in small community halls along the CPR line. In Winnipeg they designed and had built a large black canvas tent to take on the road for their screenings – an idea that was much imitated.¹³ Schuberg was but one of many of these travelling showmen who toured throughout both Canada and the United States during these early, formative

¹² Morris 12-13

¹³ Morris, 14-17

years of the medium. Even the smallest towns and settlements were visited by these individuals, although the selection of films shown generally became smaller the more remote the location. Frederick Talbot, an Englishman writing during these times, describes the activities of a typical 'frontier showman:'

...the initiative of the showman knows no limits. He seeks to install himself in a small community where there is no competition. The experience invariably proves successful from the financial point of view, because in the outlying townships the cinematograph hall constitutes the sole centre of amusement for miles around. If there is no available empty building, the showman constructs a cheap wooden theatre. Often the frontier moving picture palace is only a shack built of logs, capable of seating 100 people or so, the price of admission ranging between 5 and 10 cents.¹⁴

Talbot also witnessed and recounts one such early 'frontier' film exhibition:

I encountered another quaint outburst of initiative at a far more inaccessible spot – the town of Hazelton around the Hudson Bay post at the head of navigation on the Skeena River in British Columbia. Prince Rupert, 186 miles away, was the nearest town and that post is 550 miles from Vancouver. A cinematograph showman arrived in Hazelton, which at the time boasted a handful of white men, and several Indians. The operator took over an excavation in the side of the hill overlooking the side of the town which had been made for storing various goods, but which at that time was empty. In this cramped, unventilated cellar he rigged his screen and lantern. On the wooden door he nailed a large sheet of paper on which was scrawled the name of the 'Theatre' and the program of films 'now being shown.'...The preparations demanded only a few hours. Boxes, barrels, and logs sufficed for seats, while a good many patrons sat or sprawled upon the floor. The little vault was packed to suffocation on the opening night.¹⁵

Eventually many of these showmen began to tire of a life on the road, and settled down to open permanent movie theatres. By 1906, many of these permanent theatres had opened in cities across Canada. Schuberg was the first to open a store-front theatre when

¹⁴ Frederick Talbot, *Moving Pictures, How They are Made and Worked*. (London: William Heineman, 1912) p.131.

¹⁵ Talbot, p.132-33.

he opened the Electric Theatre in Vancouver in October of 1902. The days of the travelling showman were all but over, and the permanent, store-front theatres were taking over. The store-front theatres in many ways resembled regular theatres, but as Morris relates “clearly betrayed their origins as former shops, undertaking parlours or penny arcades. The audience sat on uncomfortable kitchen chairs, sometimes borrowed from neighbouring businesses.”¹⁶ The first actual permanent movie theatre in Canada was built in Toronto in 1906 by John C. Griffin. Initially, theatres could be established relatively inexpensively as storefronts and amusement parlours could be easily converted.¹⁷ However, as Talbot relates, “the converted building was not entirely successful...the cinematograph theatre needed established houses in order to compete with the vaudeville and legitimate theatres.”¹⁸

Entrepreneurs were quick to realise the commercial potential and viability of this new medium, and an early course was set for the subsequent development of the film distribution and exhibition industries in Canada. In his work *Canadian Dreams and American Control*, Manjunath Pendakur identifies a certain central tension as the defining feature in the early developmental years of the Canadian film industry. He identifies the development of an indigenous, fragmented, competitive sector, operating at various times in the production, distribution and exhibition of films in Canada. This group is generally typified by its lack of centralization or vertical integration. He views this group in opposition to the foreign-owned centralized and vertically integrated monopoly of Hollywood, that consistently attempted to influence public policy. This is the dialectic,

¹⁶ Morris, 21

¹⁷ Ted Madger, *Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.)p.20.

¹⁸ Talbot, 134.

he claims, that historically has shaped the Canadian feature film industry and should reveal the future course that it might take.¹⁹ This tension is evident from the earliest days of theatrical film exhibition. Pendakur makes the important observation that Canadian exhibitors did not innovate their own technology or product, but were content to exploit the market with imported equipment and films.²⁰ By 1909, small theatrical film circuits had been organized across Canada. Schuberg for instance had been steadily building theatres throughout Manitoba and the central United States, and by 1914 he had, in partnership with W.P. DeWees obtained the franchise for First National Pictures in Western Canada and was the leading theatre chain operator in the west.²¹ Perhaps most notable, however, among these early theatrical chains were those run by Jules and Jay Allen. The Allen chain increasingly relied on Hollywood product rather than films from local filmmakers - an example Pendakur claims set the pattern for the 'dependency' that characterized the film industry's development.²² Shortly after their arrival in Canada in 1906, the Allens began opening storefront theatres throughout southern Ontario. The Allen theatrical chain grew quickly, and by 1915 was a national force. By 1920, with 45 theatres, it was the largest chain in Canada. The first economically successful Canadians in the film industry were not therefore, in the business of the production of film, but rather in its exhibition.²³ As Pendakur relates, much of their success in those days was due to their emphasis not so much on the films themselves (although they did secure a lucrative deal to distribute glossy American product,) but rather on high-quality

¹⁹ Manjunath Pendakur, *Canadian Dreams and American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990.) p.42.

²⁰ Pendakur, 46

²¹ Morris, 20

²² Pendakur, 51.

²³ Madger, 20.

theatres.²⁴ Apparently the rationale was that, as motion pictures were still regarded by many as crass and corrupting, by elevating the standards of the exhibition space, there was a greater chance of acceptance by the middle and upper classes. Large theatres with lavish architecture were obviously more desirable as well, as they drew much larger audiences. Within a little over a decade, film exhibition spaces had evolved from the initial small, storefront operations, to massive, lavish theatre houses. Some of the Allen theatres had capacity seating of upwards of 3000.²⁵

As the demand for films by the exhibitors quickly became overwhelming for the producers, the idea of film rental came into practice. As very few Canadian entrepreneurs could afford to enter film production, they instead created film exchanges. Acting as distributors, films were rented on a flat-rate basis to the exhibitors, although the product was almost uniformly foreign, and especially American. Many Canadian entrepreneurs started these exchanges, and some acquired American franchises to market in Canada. The American approach was to integrate the levels of production, distribution and exhibition, to maximize profits and control. When the Allens discovered the untapped market for the distribution of films in Canada and subsequently established a separate distribution company in 1908, they were in effect adopting this model, albeit without the actual production end, for which they still relied on American product.²⁶ This film exchange, or distribution business, the Allen Amusement Corporation supplied obviously their own theatres, but those of smaller storefront theatre owners as well. They acquired the rights to distribute Pathé and Independent Motion Pictures productions from

²⁴ Pendakur, 53.

²⁵ Pendakur, 56. The Allens actually expanded into the United States, and owned a theatre in Detroit that seated 3500 – the largest in the world at the time.

²⁶ Pendakur, 52.

the United States. By 1915 their distribution arm expanded nationally, and as Pendakur relates, their success was based on the exclusive franchises they had secured from the New York producers. During the war, British production decreased and so the reliance on American product increased even more. This benefited the Allens enormously, who had the exclusive franchise for Paramount films. The money they made from this went right back into their elaborate picture houses.²⁷

The key to understanding the development of the theatrical circuits was that profit making was always the driving force. If bigger, grander theatres would attract more audiences, then owners would build them. If glitzy commercial films were what audiences desired, then exhibitors would show American films, (assuming they could secure them.) The national origin or cultural content of the films they screened appeared to have mattered very little to Canadian exhibitors.²⁸ While initially, small-scale Canadian entrepreneurs attempted to raise capital at the local level, they would ultimately be pushed out by the big American economic forces. Big Canadian capitalists meanwhile, as Pendakur relates, were quite willing to support American-initiated ventures if a large profit was ensured.²⁹

Motion pictures were becoming increasingly popular in Canada, and as a result competition in distribution and exhibition was heating up. In the United States, the major producers were integrating vertically – essentially controlling the production, distribution and exhibition of their films - to maintain a dominant position in the market. Paramount, one of the largest of the American studios, had its eyes on the Allen chain – the largest in

²⁷ Pendakur, 53-56

²⁸ Madger, 25

²⁹ Pendakur, 45

Canada.³⁰ In 1916, when their distribution contract was up for renegotiation, the Allens apparently rejected Paramount's offer, and purportedly unwisely bragged about doing so to another theatre owner Nathan L. Nathanson. Nathanson in turn started the Regent Theatre Company (exhibition) and Regal Films Limited (distribution) and secured a number of smaller American distribution franchises. He bought out many of the smaller theatres owned by the former travelling showmen such as Schuberg. He eventually incorporated another company, Famous Players Canadian Corporation Limited as well. All of this was enough to convince Paramount's president Adolph Zukor to enter a partnership with Nathanson's group instead of the Allens. Nathanson was granted exclusive rights to exhibit Paramount Famous-Lasky pictures. As Pendakur explains, "the direct ownership of a theatre circuit by a leading American film production company further entrenched American films on Canadian screens.... Integration with major American companies lessened competition from rival producers, distributors and exhibitors in the Canadian film industry."³¹ The Allen brothers in response and under threat, aligned themselves with another vertically integrated American company, First National. But the Zukor-Nathanson group was simply too powerful by this point. A number of key developments occurred around this time that would lead to the outright domination of film exhibition in Canada by American forces.

First of all was the difference in funding that the Allens relied upon as opposed to that of Nathanson. The Allens tended to build their theatres with the aid of local capital, sold as shares, while Nathanson obviously had the backing of international capital, including even some big Canadian capitalist money, which was ultimately more

³⁰ Pendakur, 56

³¹ Pendakur, 59

powerful.³² The Allens' profits were dwindling, unable to keep up with Nathanson's Famous Players. By 1923 the Allens were forced to declare bankruptcy. Nathanson stepped in and acquired 20 of the largest Allen theatres, for what Morris has described as "an unbelievably low price."³³ The Allen film exchange business closed, and their franchises were acquired by Regal films, which was a subsidiary of Paramount. Pendakur views the Allens' collapse as indicative of the general weakness of the local merchant capital that they relied upon - mainly small-scale local investors - and the inability to withstand the onslaught of big, corporate capital, both indigenous and international.³⁴ Famous Players was now virtually in control of the Canadian market.

The second key development was within the partnership between Zukor and Nathanson itself. Originally an equal partnership, by 1930, the arrangement was to alter significantly. Zukor had been slowly accumulating shares of Nathanson's Famous Players stock, and by August 30 of that year he accounted for 93.8% of the Canadian company. Some stock was offered back to the Canadian public, ostensibly as Pendakur indicates to give an impression that the corporation was a Canadian controlled company, but actual control was retained by the Americans.³⁵ These developments should be seen as evidence of the conflict Pendakur describes between the indigenous competitive sector and the foreign-owned monopolistic sector. In 1928, 32 independents came together to form the Exhibitors Cooperative of Canada to improve their collective buying power, yet as Ted Madger explains, it was simply too vulnerable and ineffective against the force of

³² Pendakur, 60

³³ Morris, 92

³⁴ Pendakur, 62-63

³⁵ Pendakur, 60-61

the major distributors and the now American-based Famous Players.³⁶ Both the distributorships and the exhibitors seem to have fallen under American control almost simultaneously.

Film distribution in Canada, it would turn out, would fall under the dominance of Paramount as well, once the exhibition market was secured. Pendakur explains that there were ten distributors of considerable size operating in Canada by 1930 – all of which were American corporations or their subsidiaries. He can find no record of a Canadian-owned company independent of affiliation with a foreign producer between 1920 and 1930.³⁷ The ten distributors, Pendakur explains were unified under a trade association to operate as a legal cartel, the Foreign Department of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA – later reformed as The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) in 1945.) They all generally supplied films from their own parent companies, and very rarely did they invest in or acquire independently produced films made in Canada. Famous Players was by now so dominant in Canada, that the distributors had to deal with them. The cartel and Famous Players cooperated for their mutual benefit, at the expense of the remaining scattered Canadian independent exhibitors. The independents were frequently shut out, and only offered the films that Famous Players did not want and were forced to pay roughly 26% higher in rental costs.³⁸

The distribution and exhibition wings of the Canadian film industry were therefore almost completely American dominated by the 1930s. Numerous Canadian entrepreneurs demonstrated skill and enthusiasm and some genuine success during the first few decades of the medium's existence, yet a wholly Canadian presence in its own

³⁶ Madger, 35

³⁷ Pendakur, 67

³⁸ Pendakur, 68-73

industry never really entrenched itself. Entrepreneurs such as the Holland brothers were content to exploit foreign product for profits, and were successful in doing so. Canadian capitalists such as the Allens and Nathan L. Nathanson involved themselves with American producers and set up structures similar to the vertically aligned American companies. And as Pendakur observes, Canada's big capitalists would gladly involve themselves with leading American producers, such as Paramount, if it guaranteed high degrees of profit.³⁹ Eventually, entrepreneurial spirit alone would not be enough in the face of the integrated American companies, and initiatives such as that by the Allens would collapse. Canadian production, which is outside the scope of this thesis, would suffer a similar fate, as producers could not compete with American product. The Canadian government during these years demonstrated a generally *laissez-faire* attitude towards the three sectors of the industry: production, distribution and exhibition. It involved itself on a small scale in some documentary production, but generally did not initiate any form of intervention in the private feature film industry in terms of legislation or a quota system. As the years wore on however, it would develop other innovative ways of involving itself in the distribution and exhibition of motion pictures in Canada.

The Role of the State

The Canadian government has demonstrated a long-standing interest in the utility of the medium of film. By 1898 James Freer, a farmer from Brandon, Manitoba was sponsored by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company to tour Britain, screening his own films that promoted life on the prairies. His show included not only films, but also related lectures on such topics as agriculture, and the free land grants promised by the

³⁹ Pendakur, 45.

Government of Canada. The CPR would become increasingly involved in the use of film for promotional activities, and would eventually establish its own production company in Montreal in 1903.⁴⁰ As far back as 1914, various federal departments were involved in the production of film, and in 1917 the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau was established to assume these responsibilities. It was during these early years that we can see the first examples of innovative community-based use of the medium, through the initiatives of the Department of Agriculture. This department circulated its own films throughout rural areas, in non-traditional screening environments such as schools, barns and church houses, where viewers could engage not only with the films themselves, but with other members of the community and departmental representatives.⁴¹

One of the first major initiatives in Canada to address the imbalance caused by the bias towards privately owned theatrical film exhibition was the creation of the National Film Society (which would later become the Canada Film Institute) in 1935. As Yvette Hackett relates in her study on the early years of this organization, although the commercial movie circuit, primarily owned by the American controlled Famous Players, was well established, any form of non-theatrical distribution or exhibition of film outside of this privately owned circuit was non-existent in Canada and any educational employment of film was sporadic at best.⁴² Cineclubs and film societies were well established throughout Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, and the British Film Institute set the standard for non-profit film screening initiatives. In Canada, there was a lack of

⁴⁰ Morris, 30.

⁴¹ Charles Backhouse, *The Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau, 1917-1941*. (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1974.) p.7 -12.

⁴² Yvette Hackett, "The National Film Society of Canada: 1935-51: Its Origin and Development," in *Flashback: People and Institutions in Canadian Film History*. Gene Walz, ed. (Montreal: Mediatexte Publications, 1986.)136.

16mm films and equipment, and an imposed duty made it very expensive to import films from elsewhere. Noticing this unfortunate situation, Donald W. Buchanan and other like-minded film enthusiasts, after consulting with the British Film Institute, passed a resolution for the establishment of the National Film Society on April 2, 1935. The organization was later officially incorporated in August of that same year, with a mandate to “encourage and promote the study, appreciation and use of motion and sound pictures as educational and cultural factors in the Dominion of Canada and elsewhere.”⁴³ Since it was an ‘educational’ institution, the Department of National Revenue allowed some leniency with regards to the duty. The NFS was to become essentially a ‘national clearing house’ for information on educational films, servicing mainly provincial departments of education, universities, adult education groups as well as technical and cultural groups.⁴⁴ The next major development was, of course, the establishment of the National Film Board in 1939, with John Grierson as commissioner.

During the early years, Grierson arranged significant theatrical distribution for the Film Board’s films, namely the *Canada Carries On*, and the *World in Action* series. Through these theatrical circuits, the Film Board’s films were reaching hundreds of thousands of viewers monthly.⁴⁵ These films, made during the context of World War II however, were rather propagandistic - a term Grierson favoured himself. Perhaps just as pertinent as the films’ content and authoritarian tone, are the venues in which they were shown. They were shown in privately owned movie theatres and often preceded feature length narrative films. Therefore the circumstances surrounding these screenings allowed for no reciprocal behaviour on the audience’s part. These films were designed with the

⁴³ Cited in Hackett, 138.

⁴⁴ Hackett, 140.

⁴⁵ Marjorie McKay, *History of the National Film Board of Canada*, (unpublished, 1964,) p.33.

intention of imprinting a message, in this case informing and gathering support for the war effort, and the means of exhibition in turn reinforced and ensured this one-way transmission of information. However, as Marjorie McKay notes, Canada was still very sparsely populated with over half of the population still living in rural areas, most without local movie theatres. If these Canadians were to be reached, new methods of distribution would have to be developed.⁴⁶

At this point, Buchanan was now working for the Film Board. Drawing from an experiment in Scotland, and another from the extension department at the University of Alberta, he proposed a massive new program consisting of travelling projectionists to cover the areas of the country that could not be reached by the theatrical circuit that was already in place and to be funded by the War Time Information Board.⁴⁷ The early years of the National Film Board have been well documented and numerous works have been devoted to the subject.⁴⁸ However, the non-theatrical units frequently garner less attention than other NFB initiatives. They represent an example of an innovative, community-oriented system of film screenings, in which audience members were encouraged to interact and participate in the event itself, and where information was shared and discussed, rather than merely consumed. The films shown were generally different in each circuit. The theatrical circuit exhibited the propagandistic and authoritarian *Canada Carries On* and *World in Action* series, while the non-theatrical circuit tended towards, as Daphne Lilly Anstey, one of the early organizers of these

⁴⁶ McKay, 33.

⁴⁷ McKay, 34

⁴⁸ See McKay, History of the National Film Board of Canada, Joyce Nelson, *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking the Grierson Legend*. (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988.) and David Jones, *Movies and Memoranda: An Interpretive History of the National Film Board of Canada*. (Ottawa: Canada Film Institute, 1981.)

screenings, relates, “units dealing with various aspects of Canadian life: agriculture, industry, arts and crafts and the people.”⁴⁹ Helen Watson Gordon, another organizer remembers one of her earliest experiences on the project:

I left rural work in Winnipeg and came to the film board to work with Donald Buchanan. One day I presented a film in the town of Bright, Ontario and followed it with a discussion. The audience responded beautifully. And so it was in this area that we started the first film circuit, with the cooperation of the Ontario cooperatives and Guelph Agricultural College.⁵⁰

The format of the non-theatrical program was relatively simple and suited perfectly the Canadian geographic situation. It was a system that Hackett claims recalled the cinema vans used by the Empire Marketing Board in Britain during the 1930s.⁵¹ Each projectionist was provided with the proper equipment and a specific route with roughly 20 stops to be repeated monthly. As McKay details it, the arrival of the projectionist into these small communities was considered a major social event. Upon his arrival, the projectionist would be frequently greeted by cheers, and everyone would help carrying and setting up the equipment. “His visit was the biggest event of the month.”⁵² For many Canadians, these events provided an entirely new experience, as many had never even seen films before. Stories would circulate about people coming 40 miles by canoe, or of old men walking seven miles to attend.⁵³

Central to the rural non-theatrical program was the fact that the film itself was frequently but one facet of the whole event. For instance, if the theme of the evening was agriculturally based, then perhaps the Provincial agricultural representative might make

⁴⁹ Daphne Lilly Anstey, quoted in *Four Days in May*, The National Film Board of Canada.

⁵⁰ Helen Watson Gordon, quoted in *Four Days in May*.

⁵¹ Hackett, 148

⁵² McKay, 34.

⁵³ Jones, *Movies and Memoranda*, p.36.

an appearance. The same would go for a screening related to health or other issues.

Helen Watson Gordon remembers:

When our programmes were scheduled across Canada on the circuits, we would send out leaflets and study booklets which tied in with the programs in the community. And we did have discussions at the end of the film program of 60 minutes. We tied in with farm forums and citizens' forums whenever possible, and many projects resulted from joint community action programs. Credit unions, community centres, libraries and many other concrete projects were organized in the ensuing months. There was a tremendous tie-in with provincial governments on these projects, and many others.⁵⁴

This all served to make the evening much more than a simple passive information session. Perhaps nothing contributed more to this than the element of participation and discussion that was actively encouraged and fostered by the facilitators. Information regarding upcoming screenings was mailed to the communities well in advance, thus allowing participants to be more informed on the various topics and therefore more likely to participate in a discussion. McKay relates:

Leaving the hall was no easy matter. To the adults this film showing was as big an event as it was to the kids, many of whom came back in the evenings. Everyone stayed and talked about the film and the weather, the crops and the roads, until almost midnight.

...No Inducement had to be extended to these people to come out in bitter cold, in mud, in summer heat, ten or fifteen miles and often more. The chairs were hard, the halls were either too hot or too cold. Often the films were not the only attraction. In Northern Alberta, Damase Bouvier organized a talent contest along with his showing.⁵⁵

It should be evident that these screenings performed a valuable social function within these communities. The ability to not only draw audiences from all age groups, but to

⁵⁴ Helen Watson Gordon, quoted in *Four Days in May*.

⁵⁵ McKay, 35

also foster exchange between them is significant in itself. The films, it would appear, served as catalysts for larger debates and discussions on all matter of topics relevant to the community. But perhaps even more significant about the discussion and subsequent feedback from the people was its ultimate effect on future National Film Board productions and programs. Evelyn Cherry recalls:

...the business of the flowback from the people... at the time it was simply tremendous. Through our distribution system, we had the most splendid flow of enthusiasm, and ideas for films coming back from the people.... a great deal of the work of Helen Watson. We didn't sit in committees or consultations and decide what the films would be. Rather the film ideas came in, and then we sat and talked about how we could do it. "We'd say "Now how can we get this done in order to send film back to them." It was a very fine and splendid period in the history of the cinema in Canada.⁵⁶

And Helen Watson Gordon adds: "Yes I could name films that resulted as an idea from a film discussion or from a projectionist's monthly report."⁵⁷ This represents a truly integrative system in which the participatory elements of film exhibition ultimately affect future film production. Meaningful results were brought about by the sharing of ideas and concepts ultimately reflective of issues relevant to the respective communities. This model was extended to industrial and trade union circuits, and even a special circuit for the men overseas. These tended to follow in the participative format, as opposed to the pattern associated with the traditional theatrical circuits. By June of 1942, 47 travelling theatres reached an estimated 280,000 Canadians per year.⁵⁸ Initially, although it would appear that the Film Board's intention with the non-theatrical circuit was simply to expand its audience through a practical solution to a logistical problem, the results would appear to differ from what was perhaps originally intended. Perhaps due to the large

⁵⁶ Evelyn Cherry, quoted in *Four Days in May*.

⁵⁷ Helen Watson Gordon, quoted in *Four Days in May*.

⁵⁸ Jones, 37.

decentralization of control that inevitably results, the non-theatrical circuit quickly evolved into a much more community-oriented event, unlike the theatrically performed screening. The Film Board, however, appeared to adapt quickly to the desires of the rural constituents and through the efforts of the organizers and projectionists, helped to foster this atmosphere. It was a truly stunning achievement – within a matter of years a large, previously non-existent film-going constituency had been established, outside of the realm of theatrical exhibition. And it was a constituency familiar and comfortable with a new set of film-screening conventions such as group discussion and a certain degree of non-centrality of the film itself. (Rural cultures in Canada have a strong tradition of orality. Perhaps due to geographic isolation and less exposure to technological advancements, rural groups have tended to put greater emphasis on participative and discussion based social events.) The next major development would involve a substantial shift in terms of responsibility and control away from the Film Board, and into the hands of the communities themselves.

The end of the war was an uneasy time for the National Film Board. Many critics felt its purpose had been served, and that its resources would be better served elsewhere. Commercial production companies were growing increasingly jealous of the funds allotted to the NFB, and its monopoly over governmental film production. But with the war over, the Film Board's budget began to shrink. It was the desire of both the NFB and the communities themselves to maintain the non-theatrical circuit, but it was becoming increasingly expensive to do so. Towards the end of the war, volunteer projection services were developing within the communities, and the NFB had begun establishing

regional film libraries. The regional supervisor of distribution in Ontario, Vaughn Deacon, became convinced that community attendance could be dramatically increased (as high as it was already) if the people involved could contribute more to the program. In his view, McKay relates, the rural circuit operation was an artificial concept as long as the government provided everything.⁵⁹ His idea was to drastically increase the role that communities would play in putting on the screenings, and in the process drastically decrease the role of the Film Board. The program had an obvious fiscal advantage for the Board, but its origin was rooted in a desire for more public input and activity into community cultural activity.

The NFB initially loaned the communities the proper equipment, trained them how to operate it and provided them with the films. But the people themselves were responsible for advertising the screenings, transporting, setting up and operating the equipment and finally shipping the films on to the next town. Deacon's experiment was tried initially in Kent County in 1944. The idea paid off as numbers and participation increased significantly. This practice initiated the next major step in the direction of increased community planning. Communities were encouraged to form committees to oversee the showings. These committees would often liaise with those from other communities in the area, and would form film councils - the first of these was formed in 1945 in Kingston. Often these councils would link together and form film federations. The key here is that the film groups and councils were becoming increasingly autonomous from the Film Board. Former NFB projectionists and field representatives continued to serve as advisors in consultation with the councils, but they were fast becoming independent bodies. As Hackett relates, this movement was initially a

⁵⁹ McKay, 55

tremendous success. Attendance was rising and people were requesting more films and more responsibility. The movement towards film councils grew phenomenally quickly as well. Within a year there were 150 councils across the country, and operating in every province. This number had increased to 300 by 1951, and would increase to as high as 600 by 1958.⁶⁰ They were formed in every province and represented thousands of organizations. In conjunction with the councils, regional film libraries were also established in many communities from which both groups and individuals could borrow. McKay is quick to comment on the importance of volunteers to this movement, and they easily numbered in the thousands.⁶¹

The introduction of television to the mass North American market threatened serious effects on audience numbers for film screenings, both theatrical and non-theatrical. However, while box office receipts for traditional movie theatres did in fact decline in the 1950s from the introduction of television, it would appear that in Canada, while theatres were closing, non-theatrical community bookings and screenings had not decreased at all, and in fact were even increasing.⁶² This was a trend perhaps due in large part to the sense of community and degree of interaction that such events provide – elements that are simply not facilitated through at home television viewing. People, especially in the rural communities, had become accustomed to the interactive screenings, and were simply not receiving the same level of community discussion at home or in theatres.

⁶⁰ Hackett 150, statistics cited from C.W. Gray, *Movies for the People: The Story of the National Film Board of Canada's Unique Distribution System*. (Montreal: National Film Board, 1973.)p.63-64.

⁶¹ McKay, 102

⁶² Gary Evans, *In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada From 1949 to 1989*. (Toronto:University of Toronto Press, 1991.) p.7

A problem involving the group discussion sessions at these screenings began attracting more attention. Often, it appeared, the most vocal members were frequently taking over the discussion, and no effective participation by all members of the group was being realised.⁶³ A proposal was submitted for an academic study of how film use could be improved by refining the discussion method. Television was becoming increasingly widespread, and participation and discussion were seen as the necessary elements in order to maintain audience numbers. The results of the study, McKay relates, found that:

Under this programme, an informal atmosphere was created in the meeting by the chairman. The film was shown and the Chairman endeavoured to involve everyone in the discussion and to permit the audience members to talk to one another rather than to him. Those least likely to express an opinion were involved, those likely to take over the discussion were gently sidetracked and were convinced of the value of everyone taking part. The result was a friendly informal meeting with people talking to one another about the subject, and with all viewpoints being heard. Many people now came to the screening, not so much to see the film, but to take part in the discussion which followed.⁶⁴

The Film Board and the film councils realised that in order to maintain levels of involvement, it was essential to focus on those elements that made these screenings distinctive and were unattainable elsewhere.

The National Film Board would continue similar programs of non-theatrical community screenings over the subsequent decades, with varying degrees of success. 1963, for instance saw the development of self-contained 'cinema vans' for screenings, both indoor and outdoor in remote locations.⁶⁵ In 1977, the Cine-Route program involved mobile caravans across the nation presenting Film Board productions to summer

⁶³ McKay, 101.

⁶⁴ McKay, 102

⁶⁵ These vans were subsequently donated to African nations.

vacationers. The Cine-Route program exists even today, albeit in a much different fashion. Films are available through this program via Internet streaming. However, I would like to now turn towards what is perhaps the NFB's most blatant 'community-driven' initiative, that is the Challenge for Change and Société nouvelle programs of the 1960s and 1970s.

Process Over Product: Challenge For Change

The year 1967, Canada's centennial year, is often regarded as somewhat of a watershed in the nation's cultural history. It was a time of a certain national paradox. While a strong and popular federal government led to an increased sense of nationalism and national unity, there was also a growing widespread sense of enthusiasm in ideas such as regionalization and democratization within both the federal government and the populace itself. A new enthusiasm for the arts and the potential they represented was also becoming apparent. Movements such as Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille were taking bold new community-based initiatives; bringing theatre to rural communities and challenging and democratizing the dramaturgic process. 1967 also saw a major shift in the federal government's approach to film policy. On one hand, the decision towards establishing a funding body for feature length films began, resulting in the Canadian Film Development Corporation the following year. And on the other hand, the National Film Board began its radical new Challenge for Change program in English Canada, and the related Société nouvelle program in Quebec.

This program at its core sought to alter the traditional director to spectator relationship (or alternatively, as David Jones sees it, the relationship between the

government and the 'people')⁶⁶ by altering the filmmaking, and subsequently, film screening process. The phrase 'process over product' became the *de facto* motto for the Challenge for Change workers. Just as the members of Theatre Passe Muraille would enter small rural communities and involve the inhabitants in the development of plays based on locally relevant themes, so too did the National Film Board enter communities and involve the people in the filmmaking process. Since 'process' was the key, the production and subsequent exhibition of these films involving direct interaction with the subjects at all levels from shooting, to editing to screening, became what was important, and less so the finished product. The 'images' were to function as catalysts to establish a public arena to debate the concerns of the local community. Through eliminating themselves from the filmmaking process (or at least minimizing their involvement) the NFB sought to 'give a voice to those who needed it' and to assist communities organize and take some control.⁶⁷ Much of the impetus for this, aside from the desire for community interaction, as filmmaker Colin Low recalls, was the reaction against the 'glorification' of the individual filmmaker, which was increasingly becoming viewed as 'elitist.'⁶⁸ Many of these programs were explicitly politically oriented, while others dealt with more day-to-day issues, of interest to the community.

The stress that the NFB put on the term 'process' meant that the screenings of these films were not so much regarded as a separate, distinct 'event' so to speak, but rather as an integral part of the whole filmmaking system. This operates in opposition to the more traditionally held notion that a film is produced within one system, and then

⁶⁶ Jones, 159

⁶⁷ Scott Mackenzie, "Société Nouvelle: The Challenge for Change in the Alternative Public Sphere." In *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, Vol.5, 2, Fall 1996. p.69-74.

⁶⁸ Colin Low, paraphrased in Jones, 158.

later ‘consumed’ at a later point in time through another system. Through integrating the ‘people’ into the ‘process,’ the intention was to be non-exploitative and to strive for a greater amount of honesty.

Perhaps the most political Challenge for Change initiative, and the one that has garnered the most attention, was the Fogo Island Communication Experiment of 1967-68, undertaken by Colin Low. Traditionally with the National Film Board, sponsored films essentially served to convey the government’s message to the people. Under this new program, the films would function the opposite way: conveying the people’s ideas to the government.⁶⁹ Fogo Island was a community in serious economic decline, desperately resisting the Federal and Provincial governments’ attempts at relocation. Low shot many hours of film, dealing with all manner of issues relevant to the community, and involved the inhabitants in the process all the way through. The various documentaries were then screened in the various villages, with a professional social worker present to lead general discussions. The films were also shown in St. John’s to academics, who were filmed discussing the material. This footage was subsequently shown to the community. This form of media dialogue was continued throughout the province.⁷⁰ The finished films were shown to politicians and government administrators. Said Low of the project “we finally had fishermen talking to cabinet ministers.”⁷¹

The results of this project were dramatic. The people of Fogo subsequently organized a fishing Co-op and unemployment fell substantially. The government scrapped its relocation plan, and began providing assistance and encouragement to the community. The films are credited with breaking down much of the isolation that existed

⁶⁹ Jones, 159.

⁷⁰ Evans, 164.

⁷¹ Colin Low, quoted in Jones, 163

among the various communities and appear to have served a catalytic effect through encouraging inter-Island cooperation.⁷² It has reportedly served as an example for other projects around the world.

The Fogo Island project was perhaps the most high-profile Challenge for Change endeavour, but other similar, yet smaller programs were carried out that demonstrated the new possibilities that this approach to filmmaking and exhibition could offer. In March of 1973, a workshop was held in the twin mining communities of Wabush and Labrador City, where inhabitants were taught about various filmmaking technologies and encouraged to distinguish between 'product' and 'process.' Discussion sessions were held on a variety of topics, filmed by the participants, and then at the end of the day screened for the entire community. Organizer Wally Wason recalled:

Frank Fox conducted a session on 'Designing a Better Environment', which enabled the participants to once again take a look at their town on three interrelated levels of awareness. Group discussions followed, which were recorded in one way or another and replayed later.

....the more directed sessions provided opportunities for the participants to relate to each other on a different and some might say more 'serious' level. At any rate, several positive things happened during these periods. After Paul McLeod's presentation touching upon the significance of the Labrador Commission Hearings, which had come to town the previous week, there developed a free wheeling discussion on the quality of life in general in that strange north country. There was a particularly large turnout that morning and nearly everyone found an opening through which to express an opinion. Most encouraging of all perhaps was the acknowledgement that for the first time there had been a genuine dialogue between young people and adults in a public place. The morning's activities also provided an impetus for the kids to take Portapaks and interview a random sampling of adults throughout the town on the subject of recreation. Their videotape was first replayed late in the day, and then again the next evening.⁷³

⁷² Jones, 163 and Evans 164.

⁷³ Wally Wason in *Screen*, Media Study Program, The National Film Board of Canada, Vol. VII, 1.

What is relevant is that not only were these communities involved in a learning experience with access to new technologies, but also these events were truly beneficial for the community itself. Wason's observation that young people and adults were coming together appears to have been quite an accomplishment, according to a thank you letter from Daphne Sheppard, a member of the community.⁷⁴ Sheppard's letter also adds that the workshops made the people of Labrador City and Wabush realise that they should be "more united together," since they are both isolated and small communities. The only complaint she has is that she wished it were longer. Terry Ryan another organizer recalled:

Soon the identity of the workshop as a NFB project became the background. Instead it had become an occasion for the members of the community to encounter each other, to bring problems into the open, and to work towards a better understanding of each other. Little by little, the masks began to fall and we saw more and more into the reality that was Wabush.⁷⁵

Watson and the other organizers hesitate to make any great claims about the success of the venture, but do feel that it is safe to say that simply by the participant's enthusiasm for interacting and genuine interest in the material, that a discernible impact on the community was had.

In 1973, Brett Anderson, another NFB event organizer, conducted a program instigated and funded by the Media/Research division. It was a cross-country tour with the purpose of screening and reporting on audience reaction to the film *Coming Home* by Bill Reid. "We wanted audience reaction, and reaction we got," he recalled. "There's nothing like a family life film for assuring audience involvement. That's the first and

⁷⁴ Daphne Sheppard, in *Screen*, Vol. VII, 1.

⁷⁵ Terry Ryan in *Screen*, Vol. VII, 1.

most obvious thing after seeing and hearing Bill Reid's film."⁷⁶ 70 screenings were held across the country, and for the majority of them, community and professional workers and educators concerned with family life programs were invited to attend and lead discussions. On occasion, dinner was even served at the screening, which "provided further opportunity to exchange opinions and share reactions stimulated by the film."⁷⁷ Anderson recalled the common problem that occasionally results when audience members cannot bring themselves to participate or contribute to the discussion. Believing that this might have had to do with an inability to formulate opinions quickly enough, he found that by breaking the film up into its separate reels and showing them separately "almost without fail a spontaneous discussion developed after each reel."⁷⁸ By splitting the film up, he realised that audiences invariably became more involved and that the level of discussion rose dramatically. "Growth and development of discussion permits a growth corresponding to the development of the situations in the film."⁷⁹ Anderson also discovered that smaller groups frequently participated more than larger crowds. The film and the method of exhibition employed by Anderson and the NFB had immediate and discernible results:

Immediately after several of the screenings, people phoned the local NFB office trying to book the film for use in community and/or training sessions. Some people wanted to place an order for a print on the spot. Others not only got turned on by the immediate screening and discussion, but wanted to plan other sessions for colleagues or students. Several groups discussed ways in which they would like to see the film used in therapy work.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Brett Anderson in *Screen*, Vol. II, 2.

⁷⁷ Anderson in *Screen*, Vol. II, 2.

⁷⁸ Anderson in *Screen*, Vol. II, 2.

⁷⁹ Anderson in *Screen*, Vol. II, 2.

⁸⁰ Anderson in *Screen*, Vol. II, 2.

Other such projects were carried out in the coming years. Gary Toole in 1972 took a film entitled *Beyond Kicks* about drug culture on the road, much as Anderson did with *Coming Home*. The film was not an educational or didactic film per se, but rather left the issue open for discussion, which was precisely what the NFB wanted. The film was seen as a good catalyst for discussion, and was shown in colleges and community halls with counsellors, street workers and teachers.⁸¹ That same year, between November of 1972 and March of 1973, Dina Lieberman conducted a video project on breast cancer, with the aim of “opening the lines of communication between women, organizations, the medical profession, women about to undergo surgery and women already in the post-operative and rehabilitation stages.”⁸² This project very much stressed the issue of ‘process’ as well. Cancer patients were shot and interviewed and the footage was then screened for themselves as well as members of the medical profession, patients and various community groups. The consensus appears to have been that this information and this process would be useful not only in medical circles, but for community education in general.⁸³

In 1971 as a Société nouvelle initiative, Robert Forget opened Vidéographe in downtown Montreal. Vidéographe was a video production/distribution/exhibition studio that was both free and completely accessible to the public. By the end of its first year, it had received 400 proposals, 120 were accepted, 60 had been completed and over 20,000 had come to view them.⁸⁴ The project was taken over by the Quebec Ministry of

⁸¹ *Screen*, Supplement #1, 1973.

⁸² “Video Project on Breast Cancer”, *Screen*, Volume VII, 2.

⁸³ Dina Lieberman, *Screen*, Volume VII, 2.

⁸⁴ Jones, 166.

Communication in 1973, and survives to this day, although it is now funded through its membership of various arts councils.

For all of its successes, many criticisms have been made of the Challenge for Change and Société nouvelle programs. Many filmmakers within the National Film Board itself felt that the surge towards rapid democratizing of the medium led to a significant loss of control. They felt they were no longer artists, but merely ‘facilitators’ or ‘reactors.’ They felt a genuine loss of aesthetic value and cinematic quality had occurred, and their role now was merely as consultants.⁸⁵ Other critics felt that these projects were simply far too costly in comparison to the benefits they were supposedly creating. After attending an interactive screening of an NFB film, one newspaper editorial claimed “granted it did generate discussion, but there must be less expensive ways of facilitating that.”⁸⁶ More recently Janine Marchessault has criticized it on the grounds of technological determinism: “the a-historical conflation of new communication technologies with democratic participation.”⁸⁷ This argument is built upon by Scott Mackenzie, who claims the movement essentially failed as a means of social change because it was unable to move past the aesthetics of the medium:

Part of the problem here lies in the power that is culturally invested in the image. Community groups and filmmakers alike should have seen images as a starting point, to bring people together, to debate, and to engage in democratic action. Eventually the image should have fallen away, once the space that the group needed was secured. This, to a great extent did not happen: once the images were gone, so were the groups; there was no other infrastructure to maintain the ‘publicness’ of these alternative publics.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Jones, 167.

⁸⁶ *Mail-Star*, Nov. 1, 1972 reprinted in *Screen*, Supplement #1, 1973.

⁸⁷ Janine Marchessault, “Amateur Video and the Challenge for Change” in *Mirror Machine: Video and Identity*, Janine Marchessault ed., (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1995.)

⁸⁸ Mackenzie, 79.

Whatever the faults of the movement, Challenge for Change radically altered the ways in which film was produced and exhibited. Its emphasis on process rather than product meant that the medium was seen not as an end in itself, but rather a means to initiating social involvement and meaningful discussion.

This chapter has attempted to trace the history in Canada of an alternative sphere of film exhibition that has existed in various manifestations outside of the traditional theatrical environment. Through these various examples, we can see that film has been used for reasons beyond entertainment and financial gain. Instead, it has served as a catalyst for bringing communities together and to involve them directly in the cinematic event. Through the active attempts to generate participation, spectators have been able to redefine their relationship with the film-screening environment resulting in such interactive activities as group discussion. Many of the elements associated with these historical manifestations can be perceived in two current film screening initiatives in the Ottawa area; The Centretown Movies Outdoor Film Festival, and the Available Light Screening Collective. It is to these organizations that we now turn.

Chapter 2:

The Centretown Movies Outdoor Film Festival

“By the Community, For the Community”

As we have seen in a previous chapter, participative film screening initiatives are frequently established by the dedicated commitment of concerned members of the community. While governmental agencies frequently supply these volunteers with varying degrees of support, the main impetus sustaining them beyond the initial state-sponsored initiative is usually from members of the community. Donald Buchanan established the National Film Society in large part to counteract the increasing bias towards privately owned commercial cinema. The community-based rural circuits of the NFB during and following the World War II years began as a government initiative, but were soon taken over by the locally run film councils. The Challenge for Change program, while an NFB initiative, was by its very nature ultimately dependent on the role of the community. In keeping with this trend, the Ottawa based CMOFF has its genesis in a similar vein.

Downtown Ottawa, like many Canadian city centres, has witnessed a gradual decline over the years in what can be considered truly ‘public’ space. Likewise, with the rise of the multiplex theatre in predominantly suburban neighbourhoods, the past few decades have seen a rapid decrease in the number of downtown movie theatres. Both of these trends are relevant to the development of the CMOFF. The idea for the festival came from Centretown resident Pamela Foster. Foster was living near the corner of Frank and Bank streets in Ottawa, where there was a large vacant lot next to a large Staples Home Depot store. Curious about the history of the space, Foster made a few

inquiries and discovered that the lot was once the site of an old movie theatre, The Phoenix, which had burned down years ago. The more she inquired about this theatre, the more positive and enthusiastic the memories people would recall. It occurred to her that although it was a privately owned lot, it was an underused space that could be reclaimed for community purposes, and what better means to do so than to screen films on the large exposed white wall bordering the lot? “The Phoenix rising from the ashes was just too perfect!” she told me in an interview.¹ This event could serve to recuperate the community’s fond memories of film viewing at this space yet also function as a broader community-building initiative, using underutilized space. Foster’s original intentions involved other elements, such as the possibility of a community mural space. However, Staples Home Depot rejected the idea due to issues of its corporate image, even though as Foster relates, there are numerous studies that show that community art greatly cuts down the amount of graffiti in the neighbouring area. Meanwhile, Foster made enquiries as to the owner of the lot, and found it to be a local businessman who was not overly enthusiastic about the idea. It became evident that he was only interested in using the land as a revenue-generating base, rather than as a community space. By this point it was becoming clear that the Frank and Bank site would in all likelihood not work out for Foster’s intentions. But the idea had been born, and she had no intention of abandoning the project.

Foster was reasonably confident that the project could receive a grant from the Trillium Foundation. The Trillium Foundation is an agency of the Ontario Ministry of Culture established with a mandate to “work with others to make strategic investments to

¹ Pamela Foster, interview June 11, 2002.

build healthy, sustainable and caring communities in Ontario.”² They have a budget of roughly \$100 million a year, derived from proceeds from the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation. Three of the goals of the foundation are to contribute to community vitality, enhance volunteerism, and to make better use of community facilities or land – all of which Foster intended as core facets of the festival. However, in order to receive Trillium money, applicants must be a registered charitable organization or incorporated as a non-profit corporation with audited financial statements. Not meeting these criteria, Foster approached a variety of local organizations to come on board and in effect sponsor the festival. She was eventually referred to the Centretown Citizens Ottawa Corporation (CCOC), a non-profit housing corporation.

The CCOC, incorporated in 1974, is a community-based, tenant and member directed, non-profit housing organization whose mission is to create, maintain and promote housing for low and moderate-income people.³ It was created by the Centretown Citizens Community Association (CCCA) during a period in history when city planners in Ottawa (and across North America) were drawing up proposals to completely redevelop downtown and zone almost exclusively for office and residential high rises and highway interchanges.⁴ The CCOC was the CCCA’s answer to this proposed large-scale redevelopment. It was believed that the best way in which to protect the community and ensure that Centretown remained a place where families could still live affordably was simply to invest in a lot of real estate. The CCCA bought a large number of residential properties and needed to create a corporation, the CCOC, in order to manage them. The founders had three original goals; to provide affordable family

² Ontario Trillium Foundation, www.trilliumfoundation.org.

³ Centretown Citizens Ottawa Corporation, www.ccochoosing.org.

⁴ Ray Sullivan, interview June 19, 2002.

housing in Centretown; to make sure that Centretown would stay residential; and to give tenants control of their housing.⁵ The CCOC is now one of the largest non-profit housing corporations in the country, and owns property all over Ottawa, but the idea of preserving Centretown as a residential neighbourhood is still at its core.

While its primary interests are directly related to affordable housing, the larger project of community development is also at the core of the organization's activities, and as a result, when Foster approached with her idea for the festival they were interested immediately. What really sold the CCOC on the idea, as membership coordinator Ray Sullivan relates:

...was very much in this idea of taking...- 'underutilized' is putting it lightly- space that is negative to the neighbourhood, and turning it into something positive. Our preferred way of doing it is to put a nice shiny building on there and provide people with housing. But if that doesn't work, we're happy to put a community garden on the spot or a movie festival – we do all sorts of other things too.⁶

Sullivan and Foster worked on a proposal for a Trillium grant, with the assumption that the issue of an actual space would be resolved at a later date. The location of the event was fundamental to the overall idea of the project. The Frank and Bank site, which proved to be unattainable, had an historical element that Foster wished to tap into – the legacy of the old Phoenix Theatre. And it had a spatial quality that was important – an underused space in the heart of Centretown. From both Foster and Sullivan's point of view, the urban, downtown element was key. "We didn't want to do it in a park with trees and grass, although that would be fun too, but it doesn't have that extra element to it."⁷

⁵ www.ccohousing.org

⁶ Sullivan, interview

⁷ Sullivan, interview

The grant was approved in August of 2000, and the two quickly realised that such an event would certainly require the additional efforts of dedicated volunteers. And so advertisements went out in the *Centretown Buzz* and the *Express* for anyone interested in getting involved with organizing the festival.⁸ A meeting was held with a group of the new volunteers, and obviously the first priority was the identification of the land. David Gladstone, a prominent member of the Centretown community and member of the CMOFF steering committee, suggested the lot behind the Snyder Plaza on Bank Street between Laurier and Slater Street. This location, it would turn out was more ideally suited for the goals of the organisation than the original intended location. The plaza was smoothly paved, rather than gravel. It was bigger and could therefore hold more people. Also, being north of Laurier Street, it was a much less residential area, and so in terms of noise bylaws it allowed a little more flexibility. And, as it turns out, it was also the site of an old downtown Odeon theatre, which had to close down years ago as well, due to a gas explosion. Apparently the roof was blown right off of the theatre, creating an interesting early precedent for an open-air theatre. Ottawa, like most urban centres, has seen a rapid decrease in the number of downtown movie theatres. Therefore conducting the event on the site of a former downtown theatre has a very powerful symbolic resonance. Many of those theatres are remembered for the great atmosphere that they provided. As Sullivan explains “We can’t provide that same kind of atmosphere, but we provide the social angle.”⁹

The Snyder lot, it turns out was owned by Standard Life, the oldest insurance agency in Canada. Because it was owned by a corporation rather than a private

⁸ *The Centretown Buzz* is a locally run, free monthly publication in Centretown, and the *Xpress* is a free weekly publication for all of Ottawa.

⁹ Ray Sullivan, interview

individual, the festival organisers felt that there would be potentially more to be gained from donating land for a community-relations sort of activity. Foster and Sullivan put together a presentation for Standard Life with the hope of selling them on the idea. Standard Life originally also wished to use the land for revenue-generating purposes, but was eventually convinced of the merits of such an endeavour and agreed to provide the lot for the festival. So the personnel were in place and the funding and the space were now secured. All that remained was designing and running the festival itself.

Foster was aware of similar community-oriented film screening events throughout North America and got in contact with them for general advice on how to run such a thing.¹⁰ One particular site, the Outdoor Cinema Website is dedicated to encouraging regular outdoor film screenings in cities across the world. The Outdoor Cinema movement is currently a loose association of such festivals in the cities of Seattle, Boulder, Berkeley, Walla Walla, Springfield and Denver, and cites upcoming festivals as far away as Australia and Jordan. The site actively encourages visitors to start up outdoor cinemas in their own city and provides valuable information on how to do so, such as links to film distributors. Jon Hegeman, one of the original founders of the Seattle outdoor cinema, is currently putting together an Outdoor Cinema Kit, to be available free online. This kit is to include such things as a history and background of the movement, and information for others on how to successfully create one, and tips such as how to create cheap freestanding screens to eliminate the need of a vacant wall.¹¹ Says Hegeman:

¹⁰ These are some online links to some of these groups: Outdoor Cinema Website, www.outdoorcinema.com; Film Night in the Park, www.filmnight.org; The Son of Sam Dance Film Festival, members.aol.com/sosdance; Bryant Park Summer Film Festival, www.hbo.com/bryant

¹¹ www.outdoorcinema.com/pages/history

We want to share our experience, show folks the ropes, help them get started, and describe what worked and how things have evolved. People can pick and choose. I want to share the idea, let it run free, have people use their own energy, and go for it. I have found that each community has its own distinct personality and preferences.¹²

As Foster relates, the online connections provide just as much in terms of moral support as in actual technical support. Just knowing that similar activities are occurring successfully elsewhere can be a great boost to an organization's confidence.¹³ Technical advice however was certainly welcome. Equipment needs were a pressing issue for the Ottawa organisation, and the general consensus seems to have been that video projection was the simplest format to use. "That was basically the clear message that we got back from other festivals."¹⁴ The other festivals also assisted in the identification of the relevant distributors. (In this case, for the CMOFF the two are Criterion Pictures out of Toronto and Audio Cine Films out of Montreal, according to festival coordinator Zac Crane.)¹⁵ Initially, there was some discussion amongst the group whether to adopt a strictly grassroots, almost 'guerrilla' style, and to avoid such things as licensing permits. An example of this style of film exhibition can be found with the Son of Sam Dance Film Festival in Utah. Operating in reaction to the Sundance, Slamdance, and Slumdance festivals, which have 'taken over' Park City, Utah's main street, the SOS Dance Film Festival is an embodiment of this much more 'guerrilla-style' of film exhibition. Films are projected from a white 1984 Toyota van, which is fully equipped with a sound system and loud speakers. Screenings are not formally publicized and occur at random, at unannounced locations throughout the city, free of charge. Word of mouth is the only

¹² www.outdoorcinema.com/pages/history

¹³ Pamela Foster, interview

¹⁴ Pamela Foster, interview

¹⁵ Zac Crane, interview June 18, 2002.

form of communication regarding where and when screenings will be held. The films shown are exclusively high-quality, independent features.¹⁶ However, one of the main goals of the CMOFF was long-term sustainability, and an illegal, guerrilla-style was not particularly conducive to this, especially with major sponsors like Standard Life on board. So the decision was made to be as legitimate as possible, and to secure licensing rights for the films.

Achieving long-term sustainability is a major goal for the CMOFF. The initial Trillium grant does not continue through the years, and so efforts have to be made to ensure the organisation can continue, in anticipation of the funding running out. As well, initial volunteer enthusiasm has a tendency to fade away, and so continuous attempts have to be made to ensure adequate numbers are maintained. The Trillium grant allows for the hiring of one full time festival coordinator for the summer months, but when the grant runs out, alternative sources of funding will have to be sought. While equipment was rented, set-up and run by a private contractor in the inaugural season, the organisation purchased its own equipment, such as speakers, a mixing board, a screen and a projector and ran it themselves during the second season, creating a degree of permanence for subsequent years. This aspect of the organisation is particularly important for Sullivan, who hopes that it will eventually become its own body, and not require as much support from the CCOC, and to “develop an organisational structure,” so that if the original members leave for whatever reason, “the same vision will continue.”¹⁷

Aside from the downtown theatre tradition that the CMOFF is attempting to tap into, both Foster and Sullivan stress the influence of the drive-in tradition, that has all but

¹⁶ <http://members.aol.com/sosdance/>

¹⁷ Ray Sullivan, interview

disappeared in recent years, as a result of the rise of the multiplex theatre, and other phenomenon such as land purchases and suburb encroachment. Foster actually attributes some of the success in convincing Standard Life to become involved in the project to the fact that they themselves, not to mention their clients and the general public fondly remember "...drive-ins and going with their parents, and sleeping in the back of the car. That whole good time family feel that people have."¹⁸ Sullivan admits to linking up with both of these traditions, the downtown film experience and the drive-in during the early promotional stages of the festival:

In our first year, when speaking with the media and even doing our own promotions in the neighbourhood we used lines like that a lot. "If they close our theatres, we'll open our own," and "Remember how much fun it was to go to a drive-in, with that real party atmosphere? This is like a drive-in without the cars." And that is certainly an attraction for a lot of people. It fits into the urban-revitalization angle of things.¹⁹

These ideas are echoed by Hegelman of the Freemont Festival in Seattle:

It's something to do to that gets you out on a summer night. Drive-ins were the same way.....This is a resurgence of the whole summer drive-in scene, but it caters a little bit more to the urban format because you can do an outdoor cinema in a much smaller area and in a more multi-purpose sort of way. Architects and planners today are looking at multi-purpose urban spaces that can be used as a car park during the day and something else at night, to get as much mileage out of a space as they can. And people are beginning to look at bringing communities together in different ways.²⁰

The idea of revitalizing the downtown core is of obvious importance to both the CMOFF and the Freemont Festival as well. In Ottawa, the part of town on Bank Street, north of Laurier, while frantically busy during the day, becomes eerily quiet at night. Says Sullivan,

¹⁸ Pamela Foster, interview.

¹⁹ Ray Sullivan, interview

²⁰ Jon Hegeman, www.outdoorcinema.com

We were really proud of the fact that we were drawing a big crowd to that otherwise dead neighbourhood. Its good for the local businesses, who are normally not even open at that time... That's the kind of thing that we're open to, this idea of reclaiming community space and creating something that's for downtown residents to have and to run themselves.²¹

And Pamela Foster adds:

It was about having a community event, so people who lived downtown and may not have a backyard like in the suburbs. Making use of that, to get people out and onto the street, basically.²²

Ottawa in the summer is very much a festival city. The Blues, Jazz and Fringe Festivals are all major events, not to mention the numerous exhibitions and activities organised by the National Capital Commission and the Museums and Galleries. However, one crucial distinction that the CMOFF has from most of these events is its "pay as you can, or if you can" policy, and this is quite deliberate. Tickets to festivals are generally quite expensive, and even going out to the movies can cost over ten dollars for one person. It was never the intention of the CMOFF to be a profit-making organisation, and its admission structure reflects this. This trend is in keeping with CCOC's commitment to low-income housing. It allows individuals and families who might not normally be capable of meeting the high financial costs of cultural entertainment an opportunity to attend such an event. Says Foster:

... we had people who when it started raining packed up their sleeping bags, because that's what they sleep in. They can't get their bags wet, because that's what they have to sleep in. We see larger families sometimes, because you know it's a lot for a family to go to the movies, \$10 for 3 or 4 kids. So for people with large families and less disposable income, yes I'm positive [that the pay structure is important]²³

²¹ Ray Sullivan, interview

²² Pam Foster, interview

²³ Pamela Foster, interview

In the first season, the donations accumulated averaged out at about sixty-five cents per viewer - a nominal sum that would generally cover but a few of the related expenses, such as the licensing fees. While the organisers certainly would like to see this amount increase, it is never the intention of altering the payment structure. As Crane explains “at the end of the evening, its not like we’re in your face, hounding every person [for money] – we’re not doing that, that’s not our intention. Everyone is welcome.”²⁴ One of the stipulations in the arrangement with Standard Life is that the sale of food and beverages is not permitted on the premises. At other festivals and multiplexes, concession sales generally account for very large portions of the event’s overall revenue, and patrons are not permitted to bring food and beverages with them. Such is not the case with the CMOFF, as spectators are encouraged to bring their own snacks, and once again save money. Generally the large numbers that the screenings attract bode well for local businesses in the area as well.

The intention has always been, as Foster relates, “to recognize the diversity of Centretown, and to have a festival that would appeal to that diversity.”²⁵ Although it is open to anyone, the crowd is generally mostly drawn from residents of Centretown. “I think we have a lot of low-income families and high income as well, which reflects the make-up of the downtown. I don’t think we’re attracting people from the suburbs yet.”²⁶ The demographics vary from evening to evening, depending on the films, but generally there is a core group of regulars. Families with young children, groups of students, and middle age and older individuals, from all ethnic backgrounds typically make up an average crowd, with overall numbers varying from 100 to 700 people. Says Foster “the

²⁴ Zac Crane, interview

²⁵ Pamela Foster, interview

²⁶ Pamela Foster, interview

vision of it was to bring as many people as possible into the site, and to have a variety of different films. So we didn't want to pick a particular genre, because it would only appeal to a particular segment that's attracted to that one genre."²⁷ With the CMOFF, the focus has always been on community building and providing an inexpensive interactive social and cultural event. Accordingly, the decision was made to screen popular, crowd-pleasing movies that would ensure larger audiences. The art-house crowd is serviced by theatres such as the Bytowne, and the experimental crowd is serviced by groups such as Available Light. The intention with the CMOFF was not to create an elitist 'high-cultural' event, but rather to foster a casual film-screening environment, comfortable and accessible to everyone. As Foster explains, the intention was "to make it more of a festival, not a 'serious movie-watching' event, where people can feel free to heckle, and tell each other to shut-up – a real friendly kind of atmosphere."²⁸

To further develop this idea of a 'festival' atmosphere, the decision was made to add the 'twilight show' to the evening. As the feature film cannot commence until it is sufficiently dark outside, the twilight show serves as the preamble, commencing at around 8:30. These are generally interactive performances or presentations related thematically to the film. These shows draw from local community talent, and actively serve to engage the audience in the event. For instance, prior to a screening of *Raiders of the Lost Arc* in July of 2002, a reptile expert was brought in to showcase a collection of exotic snakes and spiders. While the facilitator delivered an informative talk, audience members were given the opportunity to handle the reptiles and to ask questions. Similarly, prior to a screening of *Star Wars*, a pseudo-jousting arena was set up, and

²⁷ Pamela Foster, interview

²⁸ Pamela Foster, interview

members of the audience were invited to engage in friendly duels with each other. These activities help to establish the friendly atmosphere for the evening, and help to ensure that people arrive early. Spectators are made to feel as actual participants in the event, rather than merely consumers of the event. Levels of participation vary depending on the event and the makeup of the crowd. The interactive pre-shows generally have very high levels of audience interaction. The coordinators attempt to put a lot of emphasis on audience interaction with the films themselves. Films such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, shown early on in the festival's first season, generally generate a great deal of participation. For films such as this, some spectators will come dressed up in costume, and dance or sing along with the films. But Sullivan is quick to note the importance particular films have in terms of generating this kind of participation: "If it's the kind of movie that lends itself to that kind of participation, then people can go with it, but if we're going to show *The Prince of Tides* or something, then people aren't going to dress up."²⁹ The tone of the festival allows for a different set of viewing conditions and conventions. Viewers are encouraged to shout out at the films, recite famous lines, sing along etc. Says Sullivan:

.... when it comes down to it, two people talking in a regular conversational tone in a regular theatre disturbs a whole lot of people, but outside it doesn't. And I think it's more fun if you can get that sort of thing going, and I encourage people to applaud and to shout out.³⁰

The coordinators do notice a certain amount of hesitation amongst the audience, which can in part be attributed to more conventional forms of film viewing assumed in a more traditional theatrical environment. This is a trend that they actively seek to reverse.

²⁹ Sullivan, interview

³⁰ Sullivan, interview

During the initial planning stages, it was suggested that the CMOFF exhibit local independent films as the feature attractions, thereby directly supporting local artists by providing a large venue with a substantial audience. It was felt by some of the membership however, that these films would unfortunately not have the sheer drawing power of already established films, and that typically they would be attracting the same, select crowd of people every week. The compromise that was struck appears to be an appropriate balance. Mainstream popular feature films are shown as the features, but are preceded by short films made by local independent filmmakers. In effect, the popular films draw the large audiences that independent features would not, and in doing so, the exposure given to the local filmmakers is much greater than if solely independent films were shown. Says local independent filmmaker Nikhil Adnani, whose short films have been shown at the festival:

I think its great, the whole concept of having a venue for independent film. I think that's what is so great about it and the fact that it is accessible to everyone in the city.³¹

Filmmakers are given access to larger audiences than many of them are used to, and in turn audiences are exposed to local artistic product of which they are in large part not familiar. Just as the twilight shows are configured to the theme of the film and the evening, so too are the short films, as much as is possible. As Sullivan explains, “for *Shrek*, we can't show a short film that has adult content. We have to make sure that they match up.”³²

In its second season, the CMOFF found itself directly supporting local filmmakers in another fashion as well. In May of 2002, the CMOFF held its first Short Film Festival

³¹ Nikhil Adnani, quoted in *Centretown Movies Promotional Video*, directed by Susan Ward.

³² Sullivan, interview

at Barrymore's Music Hall in Ottawa. This was an initiative that was fully conceived and executed by the group's volunteers, which in Foster's mind alone makes it a success. Barrymore's used to be the old Imperial Theatre, which was one of Centretown's original movie theatres, so the space itself had a certain relevance to the event. Like the festival itself, admission to this event was "pay-as-you-can," and surprisingly the average donation worked out to be in the neighbourhood of five dollars a person, which is substantially larger than the weekly festival average. A large number of shorts were screened, most of which found themselves onto the bill for the summer festival. Winners were chosen by a jury, and the filmmakers received cash prizes from the door. Exposure is one thing, but artists are always grateful for financial rewards, especially in a medium as expensive as film. Sullivan, Foster and Crane all admit that this event served an obvious promotional purpose for the CMOFF, but the support for the local filmmaking community it provided cannot be denied. Ideas for future projects include "Under the Bridge" – the screening of a film by a local filmmaker about homelessness under the bridge where the War Memorial stands – the area that the film itself addresses.

The CMOFF was also involved in an 'Oscar Gala' fundraising event earlier in the year, held at Johnny Farina's restaurant in Ottawa. Once again, promotion and fundraising was the ostensible goal of the evening, but the event served other purposes as well. Held at a popular local establishment, the event was a successful community event in its own right. People in attendance were given the chance to vote on the final film to be shown at the festival, a concept that the membership would like to expand upon in the future. Initial reaction from spectators was very strong and the requests and suggestions for films to screen came pouring in. The membership is currently attempting to devise a

system in which spectators can become more fully integrated into the film selection process. Currently the films are selected and voted on by the steering committee, (which is open to the community.) The goal is always to appeal to and reflect the diversity of the audience and of Centretown itself. A typical season generally consists of a wide variety of genres and styles, although the films are almost unanimously previously established 'popular' films. Standard Life, the owner of the lot is granted veto power in the arrangement should they object to a particular film.

The CMOFF is very non-hierarchical in its organizational structure. There are no formal positions within the steering committee, other than the festival coordinator and assistant festival coordinator, and save for these two positions every member is on a strictly volunteer basis. The committee makes the important decisions by consensus and the coordinator merely executes these decisions. Festival coordinator Zac Crane explains the process:

It's a festival that is created by the community of Centretown for the community. The way that the festival is structured is that it has a steering committee of about 12-15 people. All of these people on the board are volunteers, and they're the ones that started the festival. I'm also on the committee, but there's no one person that makes the decisions, and maybe that's different from other festivals. All of the decisions are made in a group consensus format.

...the other people on the steering committee, each one of these people have certain areas that they focus on. One person does media for instance.... there was another person who was trying to get sponsors. It's all volunteer, and on each event, again it's a volunteer process. It's basically whoever wants to volunteer. Nobody is saying, "You're doing this." You can't really say that because no one is getting paid.³³

The goal is to make the organisation as open to the public as possible. There is a constant need for volunteers, and individuals are actively encouraged to attend the steering

³³ Zac Crane, interview

committee meetings. As Crane states “everything is open, and information friendly – the idea is to open it up to the community, and let the community form and mould this festival – that’s the whole idea.”³⁴

The commitment to community involvement in the festival is reflected in its schedule as well. While Saturday nights are coordinated and organized by the steering committee, Friday nights are reserved for various community groups. These groups can be representative of any segment of the community – cultural, political, sexual, religious, ‘awareness’ groups etc. Crane explains: “an aspect of community representation is that most of these groups are under-represented. And that’s part of the idea.... it’s like giving a voice to that part of the community.”³⁵ These groups have complete control over the events of the evening – the CMOFF merely provides and runs the equipment. Interested groups are approached to sponsor an evening, and are responsible for selecting a film, organizing any additional speakers or performances and for advertising the event. While the Saturday night films are designed to appeal to a wide audience, the Friday night films are generally more specific to the particular community group sponsoring the event, and as a result, audience numbers are frequently not as high. Occasionally these groups wish to show films that they themselves have made or sponsored. For instance in August of 2002, the Independent Filmmakers Cooperative of Ottawa sponsored an evening, and arranged to screen local filmmaker, and alumnus of the organization Lee Demarbre’s *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*. The Canada Tibet Committee Ottawa Office chose to screen *A Song for Tibet*. Crane explains “we’re getting an opportunity to give back to the community, and as a member of the community [these groups] are getting an

³⁴ Zac Crane, interview

³⁵ Zac Crane, interview

opportunity to showcase something for their community in conjunction with our festival – be on our poster, our website.”³⁶ The only stipulation is that the Friday nights, like the rest of the festival, have to be completely open to the entire public, and not simply members of that specific community.

The CMOFF therefore should be seen as a community-oriented and initiated endeavour that uses the medium of film to bring people together for a meaningful cultural event. The next initiative to be examined, The Available Light Screening Collective, while perhaps upon an initial examination fundamentally different than the CMOFF, is in fact in many ways very similar.

The Available Light Screening Collective

Founded in 1995 with the support of Gallery 101 and SAW Video Co-op in Ottawa, the Available Light Screening Collective is committed to the presentation of experimental film, video and new media. It was originally formed as a Super-8 co-op, with the intention of gathering and distributing Super-8 equipment to filmmakers working with that particular medium. For the first few years it functioned primarily in this fashion – largely geared towards production and supplying equipment. Through Gallery 101 and the initiatives of Tim Dowlett, Phil Rose and Ethan McNamara, the first Super-8 film festival in Ottawa was organized and held. The turnout and enthusiasm for the project was enormous, and so a similar event was held the following year with similar results. SAW video took an interest in the group and came on board to help the small collective get off the ground, and provide a space for the equipment. As current member of the collective Penny McCann recalls “it was very ad hoc, and generated a lot of interest from

³⁶ Zac Crane, interview

the community. It was great and really sparked a lot of interest.”³⁷ However the demands of a small-scale, production-oriented collective simply became too onerous, and as current member and treasurer Phil Rose recalls “...people found that there wasn’t the kind of resources or coordination needed to do that effort of getting the equipment out to people. So it kind of morphed into more of a place where people could show their films.”³⁸ What happened was in 1997 a few of the members, namely Tim Dowlett, Laura Marks, Phil Rose and Penny McCann got together for a meeting to discuss turning Available Light into a exhibition collective and to apply to the Canada Council for an operating grant. Much of this decision had to do with the sheer difficulty of running a primarily production based organisation. But aside from the occasional event from the Canada Film Institute or the artist-run galleries, there was a perceived lack of regular screenings of experimental film and video in the Ottawa area, and this decision was in large part a reaction to this trend. Since the transition to a primarily exhibition-based agenda, the current mandate/goals of the collective are as follows:

- 1)To establish the regular exhibition of independent and experimental works not otherwise on view in Ottawa;
- 2)To provide a forum for discussion of new independent media;
- 3)To build curatorial skills in the Ottawa community;
- 4)To serve current audiences and to build new audiences for media art;
- 5)To pay artists and curators for their work;
- 6)To screen local artists with national and international artists;

³⁷ Penny McCann, interview June 6, 20002.

³⁸ Phil Rose, interview June 3, 2002.

7)To create thematic bridges between various time-based media and to revive interest in historical works by pairing them with new works.³⁹

Similar exhibition oriented organisations in Canada such as Pleasure Dome in Toronto and Guiding Light in Vancouver, provided important operating models.

The members of Available Light all stress its informal, non-incorporated structure. It is entirely volunteer-run, and programming is mostly funded through various project grants. Screenings are held generally one a month throughout the year, with a 2 month break during the summer. Although it has been housed in various locations over the years, currently the collective screens its programs at Club SAW located in SAW Gallery in Art's Court, Ottawa's municipal arts centre. Unlike the CMOFF who focus on popular, mass appeal films that target diverse sections of the community, Available Light attempts, as member James Missen relates, "to provide a community venue within Ottawa for the presentation of marginal film and video productions that normally wouldn't get the chance to screen anywhere in the capital region."⁴⁰ Membership fluctuates, but generally revolves around 6 or 7 individuals who all contribute to the organisation's various activities, and take turns curating programs. This curatorial development aspect of the organisation, as outlined in its mandate, is one of its main objectives. Says McCann: "...our focus in the last couple of years has been curatorial development. So we focus on curators, we bring in guest curators – but also, every member of the collective is encouraged to curate their own programs and develop their skills."⁴¹ By bringing in guest curators, McCann adds, "we can see how other people put shows together." In this sense, Available Light is equally committed to the creation of

³⁹ Available Light Screening Collective Promotional Handout, 2002.

⁴⁰ James Missen, interview May 28, 2002.

⁴¹ Penny McCann, interview

new Canadian media art curators as it is to the creation of an audience for experimental film and video in the Ottawa Region. James Missen views the two goals of audience building and curatorial development as interrelated when he describes the organization's intentions to: "develop not only locally based audiences who want to see this kind of work, but also to foster a community for curators and the makers of the work as well, so that in seeing work, people become more knowledgeable about what's going on with that, both throughout the province and the rest of the country."⁴² Available Light demonstrates a firm commitment to both national and local independent film as well: "We try to, where possible, feature the work of Ottawa-based film and video makers and incorporate it into programs, so that they're seen within the context of other provincial and national productions, so that they're not kept isolated according to the region in which they make their work."⁴³

Along these lines, one of the regular features of Available Light since the beginning was to hold open screenings in which members of the community were invited and encouraged to bring out their own material and the evening's line-up would be entirely composed of these works. From a financial perspective for an organisation operating solely through grants and a small, essentially token admission fee (generally a sliding scale between 3 and 5 dollars,) there are obvious benefits in holding such a program, as costs are minimal, and generally less preparation is required. But aside from the sheer logistical benefits of these screenings, they provide a much more valuable community-building function. As Phil Rose recalls "out of the open screenings people became interested in seeing what other people in the community were doing and started

⁴² James Missen, interview

⁴³ James Missen, interview

programming things and bringing things in from outside.” These are generally quite popular events, and the intention from the organizers’ point of view is to always foster a comfortable, relaxed and “freewheeling” atmosphere, where all sorts of works can be exhibited. Generally, due to time restraints submissions are limited to 10 minutes long, but a wide variety of formats are accepted (16mm, 8mm, Digital video, Beta Cam, VHS.) In the past the events have been wildly successful, as Rose recalls: “we had to call a stop at the end of the night because people kept coming in with material and it would get crazy.”⁴⁴ As McCann recalls from one particular evening “we saw a whole range of work – finished work by people we didn’t know were out there, which is good. Some people brought work that they just wanted screened, older work or brand new work. A couple brought works in progress.”⁴⁵ This open-format style program provides local filmmakers with not only an accessible venue to screen their work but ultimately an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with those in attendance. In reference to a particular evening Missen recalls:

The evening was quite eclectic, although strangely you could see various themes developing in certain works. ...the conversation that evening was particularly high. People, for example, didn’t mind talking while certain things were being shown, or saying comments to each other. Certain works that were shown were in progress, or shown in sections, so the artist was actually trying to get feedback from the audience in order to go off and complete the project.⁴⁶

The notions of dialogue and participation are very much at the core of the alternative film-viewing experience that Available Light is attempting to provide.

Discussion of the films following the screenings is, as Phil Rose relates:

⁴⁴ Phil Rose, interview

⁴⁵ Penny McCann, interview

⁴⁶ James Missen, interview

...something we're always trying to promote. It's never all that easy trying to moderate those sorts of discussions. A few people have grown into that role and they do it quite well. Again I think it's like the chance for people to come out and talk about films that they rarely have the opportunity to see – there's not really a lot of other venues for that kind of stuff.⁴⁷

Where possible, the group attempts to have the artists or curators in attendance, depending on the nature of the program. The programs tend to vary – occasionally one particular artist is featured, or perhaps films are arranged according to a particular theme. But whenever possible, attempts are made to ensure the relevant individuals are in attendance in order to discuss the work. Having these individuals in attendance helps to initiate a greater dialogue surrounding the films and provides, as Missen explains: “a platform to discuss more complex types of cinema than one would see at the average Multiplex screening, and to do so in a way that is kind of sophisticated.”⁴⁸ This does not mean that the group is striving for some kind of ‘artistic elitism’ however, that these sorts of films might suggest. Much to the contrary, as Missen explains:

That's one of the problems of the group of course is outreach and trying to expand the audience. Because at the end of the day, we don't really want it to be this kind of closed-off thing, that only 30 people we know are going – that's quite the opposite of what my intentions are at the very least. But hopefully through encouraging discussion and over the course of many screenings that the audience has been building and becoming more interested in seeing and discussing this kind of work.⁴⁹

Discussion directly related to the films and the filmmaker is actively encouraged at a typical Available Light screening. However, the level of discussion varies from evening to evening. Says Rose “There have been some evenings where the discussion seems to

⁴⁷ Phil Rose, interview

⁴⁸ James Missen, interview

⁴⁹ James Missen, interview

just kind of fall flat and then other times there are lengthy, lengthy discussions. It's always hard to tell what the dynamic is going to be. And that's the role of the moderator, to keep things going."⁵⁰ At some screenings, if perhaps the audience feels particularly engaged by the piece or perhaps they are encouraged by the presence of the filmmaker, then discussion will simply take off, and the demands on the moderator/facilitator are minimal. However, depending on the audience, the piece and various other factors, certain evenings can fail to generate significant amounts of discussion. As Rose explains, this is when the role of the moderator becomes important. Discussion is generally left up to either the artist in attendance or the curator or coordinator for that particular evening. Facilitating discussion, especially with a topic such as experimental film and video, is not a simple task, and as Missen explains certain individuals are more equipped to do so than others. But generally the membership agrees that if an audience is being unresponsive or simply does not want to participate, then they do not force it. Explains Missen: "I'm not in the business of pulling teeth."⁵¹ This is echoed by McCann: "If people don't want to ask questions, then bring it to a close. You don't want to embarrass the artist – some artists are better at dealing with audiences – they might step in and say something that might encourage a question."⁵² Spectators may be intimidated by the films or the presence of the filmmaker and as a result may be less inclined to contribute to a discussion immediately following the screening. But generally, this is not the case. Penny McCann recalls one evening she curated based on the work of filmmaker Jim McSwain, who was in attendance:

⁵⁰ Phil Rose, interview

⁵¹ James Missen, interview

⁵² Penny McCann, interview

...people just kept asking questions, and Jim was astonished. And they weren't dumb questions like "how much did it cost?" etc. They were good questions about the work, and that's what an artist wants to hear. I know that people who were there from other cities like Vancouver and Toronto were really surprised. It might be a small audience, but they can't seem to get enough of it, and obviously what that does at a basic level – it speaks against the more passive viewer relationship of the work.⁵³

Also as Missen explains, the flexible, informal nature of the evening allows for a more casual form of participation and discussion, in which people seem generally more at ease:

I find that usually one of the better venues for discussion is the fact that we have...yes it's a screening, but its also somewhat of an 'event' every time that we have a show. We serve pop and beer and wine and that sort of thing, and I do find that people who maybe are hesitant to speak in front of a group, or to ask a question that they would feel perhaps inappropriate – they leave it until after the screening, or during the break, and then they approach the artist or approach the curator on their own. Or even...I've had instances where people have asked for email addresses and followed up on that kind of level.⁵⁴

Whatever the format of discussion may be, the fact remains that it occurs and there is a sharing of ideas amongst the audience. Missen goes on to claim that: "I think the level of discussion is improving to the point where it's almost this modern version of a Victorian-era salon, or a Parisian salon at the turn of the century where people are able to sit around and talk about that kind of stuff."⁵⁵

The physical space itself has very much to do with fostering this casual, intimate atmosphere that is conducive to participation and discussion. Audiences have become accustomed to certain conventions of cinema viewing that generally do not allow for this sort of behaviour. Explains Missen: "I think generally of course, in our culture there's a very normalized kind of film viewing experience, even in terms of being inside versus

⁵³ Penny McCann, interview

⁵⁴ James Missen, interview

⁵⁵ James Missen, interview

being outside, or being at home watching it on a TV, versus being in a theatre.”⁵⁶ Club SAW is equal parts gallery and bar, which is fitting for the atmosphere Available Light is attempting to create. The gallery angle provides for the exhibition of the art forms, and the bar provides the social angle not traditionally associated with conventional exhibition. Phil Rose explains the dynamics of the club and what it provides in terms of atmosphere:

...there is no where to show this kind of film really. Galleries occasionally have programmes of video works, but it's the different environment – the club is really intimate and really casual. It's a nice space to hold it, because it does foster... people hang out at the bar and have a drink and talk about the films. It's small enough that you can have a group of 20 people and it's filled. Whereas if we had it at the National Library or the Bytowne, it would be lost and people would just disperse right away. At the club, it's better because people hang out there.⁵⁷

As the club is located in SAW gallery, the space ties the film screenings in to the various other cultural activities that occur there. Poetry readings, activist groups and all sorts of local, community driven groups use the premises and their proximity to one another inevitably leads to a dialogue and interaction between them.

Available Light demonstrates a strict commitment to paying CARFAC (Canadian Artists' Representation) fees, something McCann claims most festivals fail to do, “even the so called alternative exhibition practices out there.”⁵⁸ Many festivals actually require that artists pay in order to enter. She continues:

[In that sense] that puts us in the same vein as the artist run centre movement, as opposed to a gallery... Our paramount purpose, because we're focused on things like curation and artist's fees, is respect for the work – above everything. We encourage the curators to do writing, to give an artistic context to the work. This is stuff that just doesn't exist. It really doesn't exist anywhere, except within the artistic community. It's not about profit making.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ James Missen, interview

⁵⁷ Phil Rose, interview

⁵⁸ Penny McCann, interview

⁵⁹ Penny McCann, interview

Available Light is also committed to long term growth, development and expansion of its organization. Similarly, the group has noticeably progressed in numerous capacities since its inception in 1995. Audience numbers have been steadily increasing, or at least remaining stable. Some shows have drawn in excess of 70 people, which is substantial given both the subject matter and the size of the club. A typical evening might include 30-40 people in attendance. Pleasure Dome in Toronto, an older more accomplished, but similar organization generally draws approximately 70 people to a screening. Comparatively, Ottawa being a much smaller city, Available Light has much higher per capita ratio. There appears to be a core audience base with a genuine interest in experimental film and video that attends the screenings regularly, as well as the Café Ex screenings put on by the Canada Film Institute and the occasional screening done by the National Gallery. But new faces appear regularly. As for advertising, due to the small budget, large-scale advertising is simply not feasible, although the group does manage what it can. Word of mouth and email lists appear to be bringing people in, says McCann.

The group also would appear to be progressing in terms of the level of programming, explains James Missen:

I feel its becoming better and better with each particular member's show, because the way we operate is we kind of loosely take turns. We're running with a membership of 7 right now, we kind of take turns developing our own program ideas or we invite in guests from other parts of the province to come up with something. So I would say that each time a member does another show, it supersedes the goodness of the show that came before it. I even know that, because I've done two shows myself, and coordinated another one and now I've got two in development and they're much more nuanced. I've been able to see much more work from across the country, I know what I'm looking for, how to pace the show, that kind of thing, I'm getting better at contextualizing it for discussion

and all that sort of thing. And I'm not the only one, the other members of the group...it's just natural that that happens. As members leave, we instantly have new people who are interested in joining who are already on their way, who already know enough to take it from there.⁶⁰

The informal structure of Available Light therefore allows for an individual with a genuine interest in experimental film and video to potentially become a member and possibly even a curator of future screenings.

Available Light also would appear to be progressing in terms of raising its profile both within the city and within the province. The intention, explains Missen, is to make the name Available Light synonymous with experimental film and video in Ottawa, the way Pleasure Dome is in Toronto or Videographe in Montreal. "We're trying to expand a bit in that regard, without losing sight of the main goal, which is to keep nourishing the Ottawa scene."⁶¹ The organization's profile was raised significantly in 2000 when it hosted the Independent Film and Video Alliance⁶² conference, and held a screening entitled *Out of Control in Media City* at the Arts Court Theatre. It was, in a sense, the group's 'national debut' and was a grand success, attracting over 150 people, which is a large number for experimental film. Many of these micro-cinemas, such as Available Light function through informal networks with each other, on a national and even international basis. Available Light has recently completed assembly of a program, which is a collection of the work of Ottawa-based filmmakers from various organizations such as the Independent Filmmaker's Cooperative of Ottawa (IFCO) and SAW Video as well as people unattached to any organization. This program has been proposed to

⁶⁰ James Missen, interview

⁶¹ James Missen, interview

⁶² The IFVA is a national network of independent film, video and electronic media producers, distributors and exhibitors throughout Canada, dedicated to improving the means and access for independents. (<http://www.cam.org/~ifva/>)

Pleasure Dome, and the intention is to take it elsewhere as well. Says Phil Rose: “it would be really nice to take a program out to somewhere else and potentially have it travel to other centres in Ontario and maybe even outside too.”⁶³

On the surface, these two organizations might appear to have little in common. The CMOFF is a large-scale, outdoor film festival designed to appeal to a wide section of the community through the exhibition of established popular films and interactive performances. Available Light on the other hand operates on a small-scale, with a more specific audience in mind (although it welcomes a broad audience,) and exhibits experimental, avant-garde films. However the two are very similar in other respects. They are both purely community-driven, non-profit initiatives, and both require governmental subsidies and grants. They both display a firm commitment to exhibiting the works of locally based filmmakers and artists. Admission costs are kept to a bare minimum to ensure widespread accessibility. And both groups ultimately seek to engage their audiences and elicit varying degrees of participation and interaction. These elements all serve to situate these two organizations within the non-commercial cinematic sphere discussed in the previous chapter. The following chapter will attempt to explain the actual relevance of these various elements, from a theoretical perspective.

⁶³ Phil Rose, interview

Chapter 3:

The Blueprint for a Ritual Model of Communication in the Exhibition of Film

The previous chapters have described a cinematic tradition in Canada, both historical and contemporary, that represents an alternative to traditional, theatrically based film exhibition. My intention in this chapter is to explain the relevance of such a tradition by placing it within a theoretical context, drawing primarily on the writings of communications scholars James Carey and Harold Innis.

In her introduction to *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, Miriam Hansen discusses and identifies key trends in film scholarship over the past few decades. Since the 1970s, she identifies a key shift in focus away from a scholarship that treats film as an 'object' towards an approach that emphasizes instead the relationships between the film and the viewer. This new critical direction in film theory, she claims, has its roots in semiotics and psychoanalysis, and is mostly concerned with how cinema works to realign spectators' desire with dominant ideological positions. Yet even under this theoretical framework, she explains, the spectator assumes an ultimately passive and abstract role and merely acts as a blank canvas onto which messages are planted. The viewer is relegated to nothing more than a passive object of 'ideological conspiracy' and the resulting implication is that he/she has in effect been 'duped' in some way.¹

She relates another new discourse in the scholarly debate of film theory. Frustrated and dissatisfied with traditional scholarly work that stressed the importance of pioneer inventions and 'great works of film art,' film scholars have increasingly turned towards a new historiography that de-emphasizes and questions the primacy of the 'filmic

¹ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.) p.3-4.

object' of the traditional cinematic canon. Instead the attention is turned towards a view of the cinema as an economic and social institution. This scholarship is more interested in the industrial organization of film and developments in film practice and technology.² Both of these approaches however, view the spectator as merely a pawn in the larger systems at work: merely as a consumer – a member of a demographic. A spectator however is much more than the term implies: more than a term of cinematic discourse, primarily as a function of signifying structures in the 'new film theory' or as an 'empirical moviegoer' as merely part of a particular demographic, as in the new historiography.³

These two approaches to film scholarship, very different from each other in many respects, nevertheless adhere to the same basic model of communications. It is a model that is essentially concerned with the transmission and distribution of information to an essentially passive recipient. This model of communications, described by theorist James Carey as a 'transmission model,' has been the dominant focus of communications theory in the modern era. Under this model, messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and of people.⁴ It is very often a commercial form of communication as well. Information becomes commodified and packaged as a product to be delivered as quickly as possible. It is associated with markets, and the expansion of those markets through covering large distances and exerting influence over them, through communication media.⁵

² Hansen, 5.

³ Hansen, 5

⁴ James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. (Boston: Unwin, 1989.) p.15

⁵ Heather Menzies, *Whose Brave New World?: The Information Highway and the New Economy* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1996.) p.145

As an alternative, Carey puts forth, and ultimately champions, another model of communication. He describes this as a 'ritual', or 'communitarian' model of communication. Such a view, rather than focusing on the extension of information and its subsequent impact across geography, is linked more to communication as a social and cultural process. As such, the model privileges/emphasizes such terms as participation, association and fellowship. It emphasizes instead the communal acts of interaction and the sharing of knowledge. It stresses the process and practice of the 'sacred ceremony' itself, rather than the form through which it is transmitted.⁶ This model is less concerned with the extension of messages over space than with the general maintenance of society in time. Not, as Carey relates, "the act of imparting information, but the representation of shared beliefs."⁷ It emphasizes more spiritual rather than material or commercial values, and stresses the importance of communication as a cultural and social practice. The meaning, value and process of sharing information become the focus, not the means in which that information is transmitted.⁸ In Carey's own words:

If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.⁹

Communication in its most pure form is not manifested in the transmission of information, but rather in the "construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action."¹⁰

⁶ Carey, 15-18, Menzies, 147.

⁷ Carey, 15

⁸ Menzies, 147.

⁹ Carey, 18.

¹⁰ Carey, 18

In terms of technology and organisational logistics, the transmission model is often associated with large scale and capital-intensive media organisation. It favours competition and the centralization of control, with a bias towards fast, light, distance-spanning communications media. Alternatively, the ritual model is associated with much more decentralized social organisation. It also tends toward less costly, smaller scale units of technology. Dialogue and participation are key facets, as are reciprocity, accessibility and inclusiveness.¹¹ With a transmission model, persuasion and the related goals of attitude changes, behaviour modification and socialization through information transference are all typical. Conversely, a ritual approach sees communication as a process through which a shared culture is created, modified and transformed. The maintenance of society in time is the intent.¹²

The roots of Carey's ideas on communication can be found in some of the work of John Dewey, who was a fervent champion of a participative democratic public life. Dewey was of the opinion that since the industrial revolution, social relationships among citizens of modern nations had been drastically altered. A new 'Great Society' existed, in which associative relations had multiplied enormously – so much so that they were now vast and extremely impersonal. The 'public' as he saw it could not possibly identify and distinguish itself within this new context.¹³ The 'Great Society' had in effect 'eclipsed' the public. To get the public out of this eclipse, he called for the development of a 'Great Community' instead. This would be a self-conscious, modern public, and its development necessarily had to go hand in hand with the revitalization of the local

¹¹ Menzies, 147-148

¹² Carey, 42-43

¹³ Robert B. Westbrook. *John Dewey and American Democracy*. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992.) 307.

community.¹⁴ Dewey saw as the cornerstone of this revitalization the restoration of the public life of the local associations, which had been nearly destroyed by the forces of industrialization and unchecked capitalism. (Dewey was sceptical of capitalism's capacity to promote democratic values.)¹⁵ Only in these local, face-to-face associations could a community actively engage in a dialogue with each other – a dialogue that was critical to the formation and organisation of an informed public.¹⁶ Said Dewey: "Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighbourly community."¹⁷ These face-to-face scenarios allowed for the element of orality, upon which Dewey placed immense significance:

The connections of the ear with vital and out-going thought and emotion are immensely closer and more varied than those of the eye....Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator. Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth. There is no limit to the liberal expansion and confirmation of limited personal intellectual endowment which may proceed from the flow of social intelligence when that circulates by word of mouth from one to another in the communications of the local community.¹⁸

Dewey believed quite strongly in the idea of an active and vocal public that was informed and was capable of formulating and expressing opinions – a public not simply of observers and consumers, but of active participants. He perceived, however, a crisis in public life that was resulting from the absence of the key aspects that make up a true democratic social order. The roots of this problem, Dewey claimed, could be traced to the dominant models of communication that were at work in everyday life. Although he did not use the specific term, Dewey was in effect referring to a transmission model, and

¹⁴ Westbrook, 314.

¹⁵ Westbrook, 463.

¹⁶ Westbrook, 314

¹⁷ John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, (Chicago: Gateway, 1946.) p.368.

¹⁸ Dewey, p.371

a bias towards print media such as newspapers. This model and subsequent bias were in effect inhibiting the development of meaningful social relationships essential to the success of a democratic community life. The vital means and institutions of public life through which public opinion could be informed and through which democratic dialogue could exist were simply lacking, as a result of these communication biases.

Carey is in a sense echoing many of these sentiments when he calls for a greater emphasis on the 'ritual order.' He is of the opinion that this model has not been adequately explored as a viable alternative in communications thought, particularly in American scholarship. This, he figures, could be potentially a result of the weak, undeveloped notion of the term 'culture' in the United States and likely stems from the obsessive individualism and Puritanism that seems to permeate American thought. Within these traditions, he cites a general disdain for the significance of human activity that is not practical or work-oriented.¹⁹ As a result, the transmission view has been the dominant model.

Carey's analysis goes further. He argues that the ritual and transmission models are not merely 'models **of** communication' but more aptly, 'models **for** communication' as they actually serve to set in motion what we pretend they merely describe.²⁰ As such there are consequences to be understood in our society's over-use of the transmission model and under-reliance on ritual. One is a an obsession with information transmission and "the derivative representation of communication in complementary models of power and anxiety."²¹ By virtue of our communication traditions, we are in effect mediated into seeing society as a network of power and control. We see society as a market-economic

¹⁹ Carey, 20

²⁰ Carey, 32

²¹ Carey, 34

order as well, in terms of relations of property and commercial production. But, Carey explains, society is much more than this. It also encompasses a fundamental 'ritual order' that includes such elements as religious ideas, intellectual notions and the sharing of personal experiences, values and sentiments. He relates:

-...because we have looked at each new advance in communications technology as an opportunity for politics and economics, we have devoted it, almost exclusively to matters of government and trade. We have rarely seen these advances as opportunities to expand peoples' powers to learn and exchange ideas and experiences.²²

If change is to occur in our communication structures, Carey finds it essential that we recast our studies of communication to pay attention to this 'ritual order.' Not only will this further our understanding of all that this process entails, but it can provide a model that can be used in the reshaping our common culture.²³ We need to be thinking and writing in terms of a ritual model, if such a model is to come to widespread fruition. This sentiment is championed by Heather Menzies in *Whose Brave New World?: The Information Highway and the New Economy*:

...dominant biases can only be resisted if the structures (including pricing structures and social relations) are redesigned and renegotiated. This will only happen if people choose to embrace and uphold the other model of communication with its more spiritual cultural values.²⁴

When applied to cultural activities, the ritual model has a very real and meaningful purpose. Communities project their shared ideas, beliefs and customs in various material forms and group activities. These create what Carey would call an 'artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order' which in turn functions to provide not information, but

²² Carey, 34

²³ Carey, 34

²⁴ Menzies, 147

confirmation of an ongoing social process. The intent is not to persuade or alter opinions, but to represent an underlying order of things.²⁵

Harold Innis: Space and Time, Orality and the Written Word

Carey's implied dialectical struggle between competing models of communication is intimately related to the dialectics identified by Canadian communication scholar Harold Innis. Over the course of his writings, Innis distinguished between cultures that were 'biased' towards either oral forms of communication, or conversely, biased towards printed or written forms of communication. This oral/written binary is in turn intimately related with a space/time binary. Cultures inclined towards orality, generally stress permanence over time and a stationary position in geographic space. Alternatively, cultures inclined towards print media, which is light and easily transportable, are generally more inclined towards speed and expansion throughout geographic space. This type of media can be easily disseminated, thus allowing for influence over larger geographic areas. The influence, power and control over this space is therefore ensured by the inherent characteristics of the media employed. Less durable media forms are employed and the focus is generally towards the present and the future. Mass communication is extremely efficient, and these cultures view expansion and control as an ultimate goal. However, Innis warned of 'monopolies of knowledge' that can arise when sections of society come to control the dominant media forms, which results in a decidedly one-way flow of information. This leads to hierarchical power structures, and instability. Cultures with a print bias are forever in transit, shedding permanence in favour of expansion. An oral culture, conversely, is more inclined towards such

²⁵ Carey, 19

participative activities as dialogue and debate and is generally of a more democratic nature. They stress the common bonds of community and continuity over time. Media forms employed are generally much more durable, and difficult to transport.

These competing biases and cultural structures can therefore be seen to have numerous similarities with the models Carey identifies. A transmission model has a lot in common with Innis' concept of a space-based culture with a bias towards print media. Both are concerned with exerting control and influence over geography, and employ appropriate media types and communication structures that are conducive to this process. Time-based, oral cultures on the other hand, fall much more in line with the idea of a ritual or communitarian model. Spiritual and non-material pursuits are given preference over material pursuits and the maintenance of society over time is the focus. The flow of information through oral rather than written communication, allows for a much greater degree of participative communication, and therefore a more democratic and non-hierarchical structure. (This is of course not always the case. Many societies with strong elements of an oral culture, such as Nazi Germany, have exhibited strong authoritarian tendencies, and have not been democratic at all.) Just as Carey champions a ritual/communitarian approach to communication, Innis always stressed the importance of achieving a greater degree of oral and time-based cultural elements within modern society, to combat what he perceived as an over-reliance on, and even dependence upon a print and space-based culture. The de-emphasis on the importance of both continuity and participation in modern society needed to be offset by reducing and countering the bias of space – then getting a new lease on life in the 'electronic revolution,' (which was exemplary of space/print tendencies.) This could be done, he felt, by reinvesting in and

cultivating the more participative elements of art, ethics and politics. Or, as Carey explains: “by defusing the humanistic from the technological instead of offering a contradictory image of humanized technology.”²⁶ This also meant adjusting evaluations of the quality of life by employing a greater degree of qualitative, rather than quantitative checks. An understanding of these competing forces - orality, temporality and the elements of a ritual order on one hand, and spatiality, textuality and the transmission of information on the other - is crucial to an understanding of both the historical development and contemporary situation of film exhibition in Canada.

Communication Models and the Cinematic Traditions

The exhibition of film in Canada has been traditionally in the context of a transmission model of communication – a trend reflected in the dominant scholarship. However, the medium’s development along these lines was not exclusively so, nor was it deterministic. From the first chapter, we can see examples of innovative uses of the technology that were not for the sole purpose of transmitting information for the purpose of control of influence. The initial Vitascope screenings put on by the Holland brothers at Ottawa’s West End Park, for instance, although profitable in financial terms, primarily served a valid social and community function, more in line with a ritual model of communication. The event’s inclusion of a variety of elements and performances served to de-emphasize the prominence of the ‘filmic object’ (and its related effect on individual spectators) and to emphasize instead the communal nature of the event itself. The open-air festival environment of the event would likely have allowed for an element of interaction and a shared group experience of this new medium that could not have been

²⁶ Carey, 138.

realised as fully in a theatrical environment. The spatial layout of theatres alone makes group interaction more difficult than in an open-concept venue. Also, middle and upper class standards of theatrical spectatorship that stressed silence and passivity were beginning to entrench themselves. These standards were much more difficult to enforce in the outdoors.

The early travelling showmen carried on this tradition of a more socially-rooted form of film exhibition, taking the medium out to rural areas. Now this could certainly be interpreted as a transmission approach, in that space is being conquered with information dispersal, but the screenings themselves generally involved much more than a simple one-way transference of information. These too were social events, in which the film was but one aspect of the evening's program. The experience was a communal and participatory one, not merely commercial and exploitative. The 'variety format,' in which films were framed with any number of other performances, served other functions as well. As Hansen has noticed: "the alternation between films and non-filmic acts preserved a perceptual continuum between fictional space and theatre space."²⁷ This served to prevent any prolonged absorption into the fictional world of the film, thus allowing for a more 'alert' form of spectatorship as opposed to one of 'escapism.' The non-filmic elements - music, performances, lectures, etc.- all served to make the event distinctive from any other, lending it an immediacy and singularity of a 'one-time performance.' A typical theatrical screening of a film is more or less the same experience no matter what theatre in which it is shown. The distinctiveness of a variety format however, implies that "the meanings transacted [are] contingent upon local conditions and constellations, leaving reception at the mercy of relatively unpredictable, aleatory

²⁷ Hansen, 93.

processes.”²⁸ If the central intent of a transmission approach is to exert influence and control through the means of communication, this intention is obviously subverted by the variety format, in which audience reception is ultimately uniquely shaped and tinged by the local distinctiveness of the event. Instead, this format is more in line with the ritual order, as elements of the local culture and community manifest themselves and are represented.

However, as the travelling shows began to be replaced by storefront and eventually permanent movie theatres, the communitarian elements to the film-going experience began to diminish, and ultimately a more transmission-based model became the norm. Theatrical film spectatorship remained very much a ‘social activity’, but this had more to do with the process of dressing-up, going out and being seen, rather than the more authentic and central elements such as interaction, active participation and the sharing of ideas through discussion. The vertical integration and the business deals between producers, distributors and exhibitors discussed in Chapter 1, reveal that the commercial aspects of the medium increasingly dictated its subsequent development. As theatres became more standardized, and distributors and exhibitors began to tighten the control of what films were shown, the transmission model likewise became more entrenched. The absence of non-filmic elements to the screenings and the introduction/development of a more passive form of spectatorship, in which interaction was not encouraged, resulted in a greater homogeneity of cinematic reception. Discussion, interaction and the sharing of ideas all ultimately serve to challenge a monolithic reception of information. This movement away from these elements and towards a greater degree of passivity, Hansen relates, was part of a larger cultural trend

²⁸ Hansen, 93-94.

that was occurring throughout theatres, opera houses, concert halls and museums. Traditionally, audiences considered these events as ‘public gatherings,’ in which spectators were to function as both witnesses but also participants in the performance. The early years of the twentieth century however, saw a gradual implementation of what she calls the ‘rule of silence.’ This ultimately functioned, she relates, as a tool of class and ethnic segregation, imposed by the middle and upper classes:

...[it] not only imposed a middle-class standard of spectatorship; by suppressing a locally and regionally specific linguistic environment – foreign languages, accents, dialects – it contributed to the cultural homogenization of a mass audience.²⁹

Additionally she quotes Richard Sennett’s observation that “restraint of emotion in the theatre became a way for middle-class audiences to mark the line between themselves and the working class.”³⁰ The greater the homogeneity and control over an audience, the greater the amount of control that can be exerted over that audience’s reception of information. The ‘silencing’ of the crowd was a major step in the implementation of a transmission model of communication in film exhibition. Not all non-filmic elements were eliminated from theatrical film exhibition at the same time and for the same reasons, however. The presence of an on-stage film lecturer, for instance, actually experienced somewhat of a revival, around the time that other ‘lower-class’ non-filmic elements, including vaudevillian traditions such as the sing-along were being removed. The lecturer/narrator was seen as part of what Hansen terms ‘the middle-class discourse of uplift,’ and was positioned as an ‘educational’ aspect to the performance with the hope of

²⁹ Hansen, 95

³⁰ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Random House, 1978), p.206 quoted in Hansen, p.95.

giving an aura of legitimacy and respectability.³¹ Not coincidentally, narration represents a one-way flow of information and only serves to direct an audiences' particular reception, unlike the more truly interactive non-filmic activities such as the sing-along.

While the theatres were wholeheartedly embracing the transmission model, the National Film Board's non-theatrical circuit, discussed in Chapter 1, appears to have developed along the lines of the communitarian model. During its initial years, the NFB was primarily known for the *Canada Carries On* and the *World in Action Series* – WWII propaganda films that were distributed and shown theatrically. Though not necessarily overt commercial endeavours, due to their didactic nature as well as the environment in which they were shown, the exhibition of these films was largely in the transmission mould. They were created with a specific purpose – to imprint a specific viewpoint of the war and to encourage support for the campaign – and were screened largely in environments designed for one-way transferences of information, namely privately owned movie theatres.

However, while the theatrical circuits were servicing the urban demographic, as explained in Chapter 1, the NFB developed the non-theatrical units to service the rural segments of the population. And it is here that a ritual model of film exhibition can be perceived to re-emerge. The non-theatrical units have frequently been seen as merely another method of delivering the NFB's message of Canada to the people, consistent with its other initiatives. The NFB had a mandate to 'interpret Canada to Canadians,' and the non-theatrical circuit was certainly another means of going about this. However, this circuit represented much more than simply an extension of the Board's system of information transmission. Instead, I would argue, it represents a break from this system.

³¹ Hansen, 96.

The two systems are two separate coins, rather than two sides of one coin. In a sense then, the dialectical tension between two models of communication in film exhibition can be seen in microcosmic form within the NFB itself. Carey's notion of a transmission model can be seen at work in the persuasive, information-heavy theatrical screenings of the Board's films, primarily the *Canada Carries On* and *World in Action* series. Alternatively, the rural circuits are ultimately representative of a ritual model of communication, due to their emphasis on community-orientation, active participation and interaction.

In Canada, Heather Menzies has noted, manifestations of the communitarian model have traditionally been subsidized by public money and voluntary commitment.³² This trend becomes quite apparent with the development of the regional film councils during the post-war years. Staffed primarily by volunteers and financed largely by municipal governments and the NFB, the film council movement represents a tangible example of the ritual model in effect. The councils acted autonomously from the NFB, and therefore resisted centralizing forces typical of transmission-based communication. They were non-profit, so there was no commercial element present. But most importantly they represented local communities controlling a means of communication within a specific area. There was no conquering of space through information from an outside entity. Film screenings were arranged in the true communitarian spirit – for bringing communities together and sharing ideas and information through dialogue and participation.

The Challenge for Change program represents another clear initiative towards a more communitarian-based model of communication. As theatrical exhibition

³² Menzies, 148.

throughout the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s demonstrated no discernible move away from the transmission model, and the widespread introduction of television into the mass North American market represented an even more dramatic manifestation of this model, Challenge for Change represented a significant counter-weight to the dominant trends in cinematic communication. The emphasis on ‘process over product’ intricately linked the processes of production, distribution and exhibition, but in a much different fashion than the corporate vertical integration, which stemmed from a desire for control and financial profitability. The system of integration from the NFB’s point of view meant that the local participants were in effect claiming control over, or at least influencing all three aspects of the process. Local control, rather than control exerted from elsewhere, is of course a fundamental aspect of the communitarian model. The movement was in large part an interpretation of a federal policy that emerged out of a new commitment to the principles of cultural democratization and cultural regionalisation.³³ The NFB’s involvement in the various communities served as a major catalyst for community involvement and participation. On-going dialogue was always encouraged at all levels of the filmmaking and screening process, and diverse segments of the communities that wouldn’t normally associate with one another were brought together. Perhaps most importantly, Challenge for Change served to alter the direction in which information flowed through the NFB’s films. No longer was the government’s message simply being conveyed to the people through the medium, but rather the peoples’ ideas were coming together through community interaction and discussion, and subsequently being relayed to the government, other communities and the nation in general.

³³ David Jones, *Movies and Memoranda: An Interpretive History of the National Film Board of Canada*. (Ottawa: Canada Film Institute, 1981.) p.157.

As we have seen, the aspects of dialogue and active participation, central to a ritual model, as well as a time-based oral tradition, have historically been integral elements to the non-theatrical exhibition of film. These elements are likewise central to the initiatives of the CMOFF and the Available Light Screening Collective. While the forms of participation at these two events vary in their format – participative entertainment and community interaction at the CMOFF, cultural discussion, debate and socialization at Available Light – the form of communication is the same. The images from a film on the screen are extensions of Innis' concept of print-based media. Print-based media is generally light and portable and is often typical of space-conquering cultures, with an interest in information transmission. In traditional theatrical screenings, film is regarded as a commercial product: it is information to be consumed. The environments of the screenings established by the CMOFF and Available Light serve to cast the event into a communitarian model instead of a transmission model. Crucial to this transformation of a medium intended for transmission and conquering space into a catalyst for information sharing within a given space and time, are the elements of dialogue and participation. Through incorporating and actively encouraging these elements, these screenings are in effect subverting the primacy of the film's supposed intended message and subsequent reception by the spectator. Dialogue and discussion serve to alter the direction of information flow from a one-way transmission from the screen to the viewer, to a wider flow of information and ideas amongst a group, with the film acting as merely a catalyst for such a form of communication. The elements at the CMOFF such as sing-alongs and interactive performances allow the spectator a level of participation not permitted at traditional theatrical exhibitions, and lend the event a

uniqueness that disallows a singular, monolithic form of reception, which is typically the goal of a transmission model of communication.

Innis always stressed the links between orality and time-based cultures that emphasize continuity and permanence. This connection is echoed by Judith Stamps in *Unthinking Modernity*:

There is a relationship between oral communication and cultural remembrance – that a group is a community only when its members have a shared set of memories and that they share such memories only when they can maintain an on-going dialogue.³⁴

Maintaining continuity and cultural remembrance is central to a ritual model, and both the CMOFF and Available strive to achieve this, both in regards to the past and for the future. This is clearly observable at the CMOFF screenings. Members of the audience frequently engage those around them, the facilitators, as well as ‘Twilight Show’ performers in discussion about the evening. The majority of the volunteers who assist during the screenings emerge out of these discussions. Ray Sullivan makes very clear his goal of attaining long-term sustainability for the CMOFF. But achieving some cultural continuity with the past is also of key importance. Ray Sullivan, Pamela Foster, and Zac Crane all stress the organization’s deliberate attempts to reclaim the social elements and environment of the drive-in tradition that has all but faded away in recent years. Both vacant lots chosen for the screenings, the Frank and Bank Streets site and the Snider Plaza site, have direct historical relevance due to the former presence of downtown movie theatres (‘the Phoenix rising from the ashes’.)

³⁴ Judith Stamps, *Unthinking Modernity: Innis, McLuhan and the Frankfurt School*. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), p.11

The closing of downtown movie theatres is another phenomenon that is increasingly occurring, as suburban multiplexes are more able to fulfill the ultimate commercial (and ideological) goals of a transmission approach to communications. This deliberate association with historical trends and an emphasis on cultural continuity is not lost on the spectators either. On a survey handed out at a CMOFF screening asking for recommendations for the future, a respondent requested that the organization ‘play a film that was shown at the old Odeon theatre.’³⁵ Not only does the membership desire such historical associations, apparently so too does the audience.

Available Light very consciously attempts to maintain a level of historical cultural continuity as well. A section of its mandate deliberately spells this out: “To create thematic bridges between various time-based media and to revive interest in historical works by pairing them with new works.”³⁶ The phrase ‘time-based media’ could have come directly from Innis. We see here a deliberate attempt to encourage the screening and therefore remembrance of older work, and by ‘pairing’ them with new works, the organisation is encouraging its audiences to draw links and associations between the past and the present. The participatory nature of the event allows for the sharing and deliberation of these possible links. Curator James Missen also explains Available Light’s historical-continuity intentions when he describes the group’s behaviour and format along the lines of a modern day “salon or coffee house.” Historically, these sites were mostly participative environments in which cultural matters of the day (as well as political and economic) were discussed and debated openly. This is the sort of environment or institution in which ideas and information can be openly and

³⁵ Centretown Movies Outdoor Film Festival, audience survey, July 2002.

³⁶ Available Light Screening Collective Promotional Handout, 2002.

democratically shared and deliberated, of which Dewey, Innis and Carey lament the loss. Available Light is consciously attempting to reclaim an historical tradition of democratic cultural orality. This links the organisation's activities to the scholarly discourse surrounding the notion of the 'public sphere.'

Jurgen Habermas and the Public Sphere

The notion of a 'public sphere' was originally put forward by German theorist Jurgen Habermas in his 1962 publication *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Drawing from historical examples, Habermas traced the development of this new sphere of public life from what he sees as its origins in the 17th and 18th centuries. His idea of the public was as a fourth element of society, distinct from the state, the marketplace and the more intimate familial sphere.³⁷ He viewed it as a fundamentally historical category developing simultaneously with the formation of bourgeois society under liberal capitalism.³⁸ Hegel had previously written of three aspects of society; the state, the family and what he referred to as 'civil society,' – terms based around a dialectic of 'private' and 'public.' Habermas' notion of a 'public sphere' operates between the public and the private, and essentially challenged what Hansen refers to as Hegel's 'dualistic' approach towards the separation of the two.³⁹ The public sphere emerged initially from the cultural output of this developing bourgeois class, primarily in the form of writing. He states: "the public sphere in the political realm evolved from the

³⁷ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1989.

³⁸ Miriam Hansen, from the introduction to Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.) xxvi.

³⁹ Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 8.

public sphere in the world of letters; through which the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society.”⁴⁰ This output in effect:

...challenged the interpretive monopoly of church and state authorities. The institutions of this reading public (salons, coffee houses, book clubs, the press etc.) prepared the ground for a political public sphere, a forum of discursive interaction that was ostensibly open and accessible to all, where private citizens could discuss matters of public interest freely, rationally and as equals.”⁴¹

Habermas saw elements of communication such as free association, equal participation, delineation and polite argument as essential to rebuilding democracy. The *salons* especially were venues for this form of communication, where nobles, bourgeoisies and sons of watchmakers and shopkeepers could all freely associate and debate. “In the *salon* the mind was no longer in the service of a patron; ‘opinion’ became emancipated from the bonds of economic dependence.”⁴² Denis Diderot, the great enlightenment thinker, has noted the distinction between written and oral discourse, and stresses the importance of the latter in the *salon* environment.⁴³ In a very real way, the *salons* functioned as venues for an early form of communitarian communication.

Habermas admits that this original idea of a public with no distinction between class, authority and economic dependence was an ideal rather than a concept that was fully realised. However, as an idea it had become institutionalized and stated as an objective claim, so it is certainly consequential, even though it may not have been fully realised.⁴⁴ In 1962, at the time of the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas felt the public sphere was very much in a state of

⁴⁰ Habermas, 30-31.

⁴¹ Hansen in Kluge, p.xxvii.

⁴² Habermas, 33-34.

⁴³ Habermas, 34.

⁴⁴ Habermas, 36.

disintegration, citing such evidence as merely sporadic public participation in the political public sphere, the modern family adopting a role as culture-consumer, with little desire nor opportunity to debate and an increasing concentration and dependence by the media on advertising revenues.⁴⁵

In the current Canadian context, Habermas' concerns would appear to persist. In his recent work *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media*, David Taras puts forth the opinion that the system of mass media communications in Canada is currently in a state of profound crisis. Citing such major trends as rapid media convergence and the increasing concentration of media ownership (an example of Innis' concept of 'monopolies of knowledge,') he states:

The combined force of these changes is weakening the capacity of Canadians to communicate with each other and see their own reflection. It is damaging the democratic process, narrowing rather than broadening our perspectives on the world, and limiting our capacity to achieve great things together.⁴⁶

To a large extent, Taras claims, the mass media constitute a society's meeting ground, or in Habermas' terms, its 'public sphere.' Even though mostly privately owned, the mass media in Canada must bear a certain responsibility to the public. He cites a model of 'trusteeship' that stresses that in exchange for the extraordinary right of access associated with the mass media, the owners of these media organisations must address the needs of Canadians not just as consumers, but as **citizens** as well.⁴⁷ This is a trust, he feels, that has been fundamentally betrayed. The control exercised by the media moguls in Canada has become so extensive, that the participatory elements associated with active

⁴⁵ Habermas,

⁴⁶ David Taras. *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media*. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1999) p.2.

⁴⁷ Taras, 3.

citizenship have been slowly disappearing and individuals are increasingly targeted as merely consumers.

Taras then goes on to discuss two interpretations about the role of citizens in a democratic society and how public opinion is formed. The two opposing models that he describes are 'democracy without citizens,' and alternatively, 'citizens without democracy.'⁴⁸ 'Democracy without citizens' holds a rather elitist viewpoint that the majority of the populace are uninformed, unaware and frankly uninterested in public affairs in general. As a result, the 'important' issues of society are best left to be handled by the educated elite that is capable of comprehending the complex natures of these issues. Conversely, the 'citizens without democracy' standpoint argues just the opposite. Citizens are not passive and gullible entities, but rather informed, active thinkers capable of making rational choices. However, the 'elitist power-bloc' that controls the government and the mass media prevents citizens from receiving the information they require. Information is altered, filtered and slanted to serve this elite's agenda. By Taras' own admission, the truth is multi-layered and multi-faceted, and in one form or another, both of these models are at work in contemporary Canada.⁴⁹

In terms of film exhibition, the movie-going public appears quite content to continue shelling out exorbitant amounts of money for glossy Hollywood product, without actually considering the possibility of a viable alternative. Hollywood's presence in the marketplace is essentially a hegemonic one. By exerting its influence and control for so many years, the Hollywood model and related format of film exhibition, has become normalized, so that the viewing public accepts it as the standard and natural form

⁴⁸ Taras, 30-48.

⁴⁹ Taras, 30.

of exhibition. This situation might suggest that the 'democracy without citizens' model is ultimately more applicable to the Canadian situation, at least in the realm of film exhibition. However, the presence of the non-theatrical, participative cinematic tradition in Canada described in the two preceding chapters, would suggest a model of citizenship that is more in line with the 'citizens without democracy.' As Taras explains, under this framework, citizens are experienced, critical and savvy media watchers, unlike the passive and susceptible entities described by the 'democracy without citizens' framework. They are not merely helpless victims of hegemonic power, and they are capable of resisting that which does not appear to ring true.⁵⁰

Returning to Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was not translated into English until 1989, and only then did most English-speaking scholars take notice. Recently, scholars such as Miriam Hansen, Janine Marchessault and Scott Mackenzie have been applying his theories to film spectatorship, drawing also from the work of Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *Public Sphere and Experience*, originally published in 1971, but also just recently translated into English. Mackenzie for instance examines the Société Nouvelle initiative in Quebec within the context of Habermas' concept of the public sphere. He identifies a public space as an arena where voices from the margins can engage in debate "in a way that is not sanctified by the dominant institutions of culture."⁵¹ The Société nouvelle attempted to create such an alternative sphere, but in many ways, he claims, it failed to do so adequately. Cinema itself, he explains, cannot solve social problems. However what the medium can offer the viewer and the public is a chance to imagine an altered notion of public life. This possibility of

⁵⁰ Taras, 43.

⁵¹ Scott Mackenzie, "Société Nouvelle: The Challenge for Change in the Alternative Public Sphere" (*Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, Volume 5, 2, Fall 1996.) p.69.

‘social imagining,’ he continues, is not merely determined by the images on screen, but “also by the potential communities that can arise around the images and the contexts in which these images are seen.”⁵² *Société nouvelle*, in his view, briefly managed to achieve ‘a new discursive space’ within the public sphere for Quebec audiences. The screening environment fostered by this initiative in effect created a site where culture was not merely ‘represented,’ but actually “questioned, created, recreated and demythologized.” “The tensions,” he explains, “of representation made it possible for film to become a site where the meaning of intuitive yet fuzzy concepts such as culture and class could be negotiated by image makers and audiences alike.”⁵³ The problem with the *Société Nouvelle* program, for Mackenzie however, was that the images should have been seen only as a catalyst to bring people together for political debate and discussion. The films themselves, he felt should have served really only as a temporary measure to develop this notion of an alternative sphere, and should have eventually been removed altogether, once these activist communities had been formed. Instead, once the funding for the program ended, so too did the films, and ultimately the audiences subsequently disappeared as well. The problem was an ‘over investment’ in the power of the image itself, he explains, and an ‘under investment’ in the audiences around it, to bring about social and political transformation. “The attempt to formulate a public sphere around images should have been a catalyst to develop further notions of community. But this did not occur.”⁵⁴ Janine Marchessault shares a similar viewpoint with regards to *Challenge for Change*, and especially its initiatives with video. An over-investment in the perceived potential of the medium itself resulted, she feels, in a failure to actually achieve the real

⁵² Mackenzie, 78.

⁵³ Mackenzie, 78.

⁵⁴ Mackenzie, 80.

goals of the program, which were in essence to enhance democratic participation and achieve actual social and political change.⁵⁵

Such criticisms may be valid if the goals of the program are to enact actual political change, as they were with the Challenge for Change and Société Nouvelle initiatives. However, these criticisms should not apply to initiatives such as the CMOFF and Available Light, since political change is not the intent. These organizations have at their roots the larger goals of community building, of reclaiming and making innovative use of non-theatrical space, and ultimately challenging the corporate dominance of culture by reclaiming it as a social and participative experience rather than a merely commercial one. If these then are the goals of the organisations, then so far they have ultimately been successful in achieving them. Since political change is not necessarily an intent of the CMOFF and Available Light, Mackenzie's criticism of Société Nouvelle should not apply.

These two groups do in effect offer a viable 'public sphere' alternative in Habermas' terms. They represent a reinvestment of the open and participative elements of cultural communication that he found so crucial to a democratic society. Habermas felt that concert, theatre and museum settings "institutionalized the lay judgement on art," and that "discussion became the medium through which people appropriated art."⁵⁶ This translates into the CMOFF and Available Light screenings. Whereas theatrical or gallery screenings tend to control how a film is to be received, these screenings allow for a greater degree of diverse receptions. The one problem that arises however, and more so for the CMOFF, is the use of mass appeal, 'industrialized' cultural products – namely

⁵⁵ Janine Marchessault, "Amateur Video and the Challenge for Change", in *Mirror Machine: Video and Identity*, Janine Marchessault, ed. (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1995.) p.23.

⁵⁶ Habermas, 40.

Hollywood films. For Habermas, the industrial dissemination of cultural products is structurally and inherently incompatible with the possibility of public discourse.⁵⁷ In a capitalist society, he felt, art was removed from its more traditional associations with more 'sacred' contexts, and could ultimately be commodified. In this sense, his ideas are similar to those of Theodor Adorno, the great critic of the commodification of culture, who felt that cultural products designed for mass consumption are commodities through and through, regardless of context.⁵⁸ This is not necessarily completely valid. As Kenneth Boulding has remarked, a commodity is not an arrangement of matter, it is rather a relation between an arrangement and a mental image.⁵⁹ It is an element of a transmission approach to communication, where one party is benefiting from the transfer and subsequent consumption of information or of a product. A screening of a Hollywood-produced film at an average multiplex theatre is ultimately a process of commodification because the circumstances under which the transference of information is conducted make it so. The film is packaged as a commodity to be consumed by the audience for commercial (and possibly ideological) benefit. The commodity value of a particular film is also heavily rooted in its temporality – a first run film is inevitably more valuable a commodity than an older film. However, in a screening environment such as the CMOFF, the context is more than commercial. The participative elements of the screening allow for a circular flow of information both amongst the audience themselves, and even as a reciprocal flow back towards the film, perhaps in the form of the recitation of dialogue or merely singing along. By screening older films, the sense of commodity value is further decreased. There is admittedly some element of ideological transmission,

⁵⁷ Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, p.8

⁵⁸ Hansen in *Babel and Babylon*, 11.

⁵⁹ Kenneth E. Boulding, *History as Dialectics and Development*. (New York: The Free Press, 1970.) p.77.

in terms of the semiotics within the film, but this can be undermined by the discussion, criticism and debate that inevitably accompany the screenings. The structure of these screenings challenge Adorno's notion that industrially produced cultural artefacts are necessarily commodities through and through.

Walter Benjamin, in his famous piece "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", addresses this issue as well. Although he does not specifically use the term 'commodity,' he does consider the effects of transmission of film and audience reception. As increases in technology allowed for the mass distribution of artistic works, Benjamin noted: "the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental."⁶⁰ Individual reactions, he felt are generally predetermined by the mass audience response, and this was nowhere more pronounced than in film.⁶¹ Film provided an entertaining distraction and "distraction as provided by art, presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception.... reception in a state of distraction, which is increasingly noticeable in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise."⁶² This essentially amounts to a critique of film exhibition as purely the transmission of information. Benjamin is well aware of the persuasive power of this medium, and under the exhibition practices he describes, "the public is an examiner but an absent minded one."⁶³ His analysis may be quite correct from a transmission standpoint. But he is obviously referring to a scenario in which spectators play a passive role. However, while

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, p.855.

⁶¹ Benjamin, p.863.

⁶² Benjamin, p.868.

⁶³ Benjamin, p.868.

certainly valid in a conventional theatrical screening experience, his critique does not necessarily apply to the participative, non-theatrical model exemplified by the CMOFF and Available Light. Spectators at these screenings are not merely ‘absent-minded examiners,’ but rather active participants in the screening, and their respective reactions are uniquely shaped depending on the circumstances, not merely determined by the ‘mass audience response’ of which he speaks.

The Importance of Space

When Innis spoke of space, he was referring to actual geographic territory that could either be conquered by a print-biased culture, or that could be maintained over time by more orally inclined cultures. Maintaining a shared public space over time is crucial for a society’s sense of continuity and is essential in cultivating a lasting culture. When these public spaces begin disappearing, achieving these goals becomes all the more difficult. As we have seen, the conquering of geographic space is a central intent to a transmission approach to communication. The CMOFF and Available Light are little concerned with conquering space, but instead place a greater emphasis on maintaining the specific environment of their respective, static geographic spaces. However, these organisations also function as public spaces in Habermas’ notion of the term. His idea of the public sphere is rooted in a sense of space that is more socially based than geographically. Citing his notion of the public sphere as a segment of society not controlled by governments or corporate interests, where conversation can occur freely, Taras adds that it is also “the place where ideas are formulated and debated.” He continues: “If the public space is closed off to people with unpopular views or ideas or to

important information, then a society risks becoming rigid and atrophied, losing its turbulent and vital energy.”⁶⁴ This concept of a public sphere, where ideas are presented and debated democratically is fundamentally at odds with a transmission approach to communications. The spaces fostered by the CMOFF and Available function both as geographical public spaces, but also as public spheres similar to that of which Habermas speaks.

The atmosphere created within these actual physical spaces greatly affects how the process of communication is subsequently conducted. Likewise, the environments established at more traditional theatrical screenings, and especially those of the multiplex theatres are specifically designed to be conducive to the sort of communication that is desired – a one-way transmission of commodities. The physical space of the multiplex theatre environment directly reflects its intentions. The spectator is immediately bombarded by advertising from all angles. The corporate synergy described by Naomi Klein in *No Logo*, is very obviously at work.⁶⁵ Due to both vertical and horizontal integration, corporations advertise all manner of products from video games to breakfast cereals – no longer merely upcoming films. Fast food chains and video arcades supposedly add to the ‘event’ status of ‘going to the movies,’ but any interactive behaviour by patrons is on a purely commercial level. No meaningful social group or community-oriented behaviour is encouraged. This atmosphere is strikingly similar to that described by French theorist Jean Baudrillard as “the ecstasy of communication.”⁶⁶ In this state, he relates, “all secrets, spaces and scenes are abolished in a single dimension

⁶⁴ Taras, 4.

⁶⁵ Naomi Klein, *No Logo*. (Toronto: Random House, 2000) p.143-164.

⁶⁶ Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*, (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Publishers, 1987.)126-133.”

of information.”⁶⁷ Advertising invades and permeates everything and public space subsequently disappears. It is a ‘pornography’ of information and communication, and monopolizes public life in its exhibition space. This saturation of space with advertising purposely disallows any reciprocity of information transmission – it is of a decidedly one way, commercial orientation. (Even many of the films themselves have become nothing more than big budget product placement vessels.) Spectatorship in this environment has been deliberately moulded into an ultimately passive role, in which the intent is to render the subject susceptible to influence and persuasion. As distributors and producers generally take the majority of the box office profits, exhibitors frequently make the majority of their profits from concessions sales. The only legitimate interaction that is encouraged is on a purely commercial level. The importance of a screening as a ‘social event’ is ultimately diminished by the frequent number of screenings available – convenience for the patron is seen as a financially rewarding endeavour. Baudrillard speaks of a cultural space that is so saturated with information, especially in the form of advertising, that despite the greater degree of freedom of speech supposedly brought on by media and technological advancement, we are actually less free than before, in terms of being able to put forth any notions of individual thought or action:

Speech is free perhaps, but I am less free than before. I no longer succeed in knowing what I want, the space is so saturated, the pressure so great from all who want to make themselves heard.⁶⁸

He makes reference to not knowing what it is that he wants. This is reflected in the media and advertising blitzes within these screening environments. The sensory bombardment is so strong that spectators are encouraged towards impulse purchases,

⁶⁷ Baudrillard, 129

⁶⁸ Baudrillard, 132.

regardless of whether they truly need or even want what is being sold. A sense of personal identity is ultimately lost in this environment. Says Beaudrillard:

.... he[/she] can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself[/herself], can no longer produce himself[/herself] as a mirror. He[/she] is only a pure screen, or switching centre for all the networks of influence.⁶⁹

The ‘rule of silence’ described by Hansen that was established by both exhibitors and middle and upper class patrons who wished to distance themselves from the lower classes, is perpetuated in this environment. There is an unwritten code of film spectatorship – a normalized form of behaviour that stresses passive behaviour and extremely limited forms of participation and interaction. This ultimately serves to make the viewer more susceptible to influence through information transmission, and much less likely to contribute reciprocally.

The spaces fostered by the CMOFF and Available Light differ drastically from this standard set by the multiplexes. The most obvious difference is the almost complete lack of corporate presence. (The CMOFF does have a few corporate sponsors, namely Standard Life who provides use of the land.) Financial gain is simply not a major motivating factor in the day-to-day operations of either group. The CMOFF’s use of underutilized space in the downtown core represents a form of reclaiming public space for community purposes. The organization is able to carve out a space amidst the public saturation by the media, where true freedom of speech and expression can exist, and cultural dialogue can function untainted by the antagonistic atmosphere created by advertising. The ‘rule of silence’ is deliberately broken – dialogue and discussion is not only allowed, but actively pursued. But as mentioned in Chapter 2, organizers of both the

⁶⁹ Beaudrillard, 133.

CMOFF and Available Light occasionally encounter the reluctance of audiences to break out of this normalized behaviour. They have been so accustomed to a standard form of spectatorship, that when encountered with something that challenges the accepted notion of how to behave at a film screening, they are reluctant at first to embrace it. Increased exposure to this more inclusive form of spectatorship will only serve to diminish this trend towards passivity over time, thus highlighting the need for these organisations to continue, and for others to develop. The casual nature of the respective environments – the open-air, easily accessible downtown lot of the CMOFF, or the casual, intimate comfort of Club SAW – only serve to make spectators more at ease in their surroundings, and therefore much more likely to contribute or interact. Audiences for both events are encouraged to come early, and to stay afterwards to discuss the evening and interact with other members of the community, or the directors themselves. This functions in stark opposition to the multiplex atmosphere in which audiences are encouraged to vacate the premises immediately following the conclusion of the film. These spaces are ultimately reflective of the public sphere described by Habermas. They function both as public spaces, rooted in geography, but also as ‘spheres of publicity,’ where through dialogue, interactivity and participation, a more inclusive form of community culture can be shared and cultivated. These spaces provide for the form of community association that Dewey, Innis and Carey feel are essential for a greater participative, democratic life.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to argue that there exists within Canada an historical tradition and a small but vibrant contemporary manifestation of a model of film exhibition that operates in opposition to the dominant form of exhibition that has entrenched itself over the past century. This alternative model stresses elements of spectatorship such as participation and interaction within the film-screening event, usually in a non-theatrical venue. I have attempted to show that this tradition is consistent with the model of communications that James Carey describes as a 'ritual' or 'communitarian' model.

The value of such a study to the field of film and communications studies in Canada, I believe, is that it focuses not only on the direct effects that this medium can have on spectators, but just as importantly the ways in which the medium can be reciprocally used by the communities of spectators themselves. The film-screening environment can in effect serve to foster a symbiotic relationship rather than merely a venue for a one-way transmission of information, in which the spectator assumes an ultimately passive role of consumption. An event such as the screening of *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* allows spectators an opportunity to actively engage in the performance aspects of the evening. In this way they function equally as conveyors of information as they do receptors of information. It is a much more participatory form of communication. Screenings at both Available Light and the CMOFF allow for both formal and casual discussion. Through this, the information contained in the film is not merely transmitted and received. Rather it is debated, questioned and probed. The sharing of ideas subsequently allows for a multitude of interpretations, rather than a

single monolithic interpretation, which is generally the intention of a transmission approach to communication.

While the focus of this paper has been directly concerned with film exhibition and spectatorship, it is my intention that it can also be seen as a microcosm for larger cultural trends. The Centretown Movies Outdoor Film Festival and the Available Light Screening Collective consciously strive to present a challenge to the cultural hegemony that is felt not only within the film industry, but also in the artistic and entertainment sectors in general. They are representative of communities coming together and using a specific medium for meaningful purposes, such as cultural discourse, community building, or even low-cost and accessible leisure entertainment (which is just as valid or important for large segments of the population.) These initiatives ultimately put humanity and social bonding as priorities ahead of economics. This is a model that is becoming increasingly relevant in an age when advances in technology that are quickly being labelled as 'conducive to democracy,' frequently are not so. As Heather Menzies has noted:

...the pattern that is emerging in the corporate economy threatens to stifle a knowledge (or leisure) society of meaningful pluralistic participation – the society so enthusiastically envisaged by advocates of the Internet. Freedom is becoming at best push-button multiple choice, except for a carriage-class few.¹

As multiplex theatres continue to grow and offer ostensibly a greater degree of choice, the truth becomes all the more apparent. They are not, in effect, offering more choice, but rather only more of the same thing. As David Taras has noted:

¹ Heather Menzies, *Whose Brave New World?: The Information Highway and the New Economy* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1996.) p.144-145.

The future may indeed be spectacular in terms of new technology, but it may also be bleak in terms of the choices that are being made available to Canadians as citizens rather than as consumers.²

It is through the innovative practices of organisations such as the CMOFF and Available Light that a true alternative in film exhibition exists, and that individuals can truly function as active citizens rather than as merely consumers. These screenings, offer a chance for truly democratic practice, even if it is cultural and not necessarily overtly political. However, the participatory elements inherent in these screenings serve to link them to more politically motivated initiatives such as Challenge for Change. Although the motives of the CMOFF and Available Light may be different to those of Challenge for Change and other more politically motivated initiatives, they all strive to reinvest a form of public participation and active citizenship. They allow for individuals to actively participate in a public event, rather than merely observe or experience it. While films themselves may not necessarily change society, the situation surrounding their subsequent exhibition and reception does have the potential to bring about change. These screening environments, in effect, serve as venues for Habermas' concept of a 'public sphere,' in which open dialogue can occur and issues of public interest can be freely debated, free of governmental or corporate control. This is all the more relevant in an era when truly public space is becoming less and less available. Says Taras:

My worry is that public spaces, while appearing to be more open and democratic, are being choked by powerful commercial forces and monolithic trends.³

² David Taras. *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media*. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1999.) p.23

³ Taras, 23.

It has been noted that these organizations, and others like them, depend to a large extent on governmental funding. This has long been the case in Canada, and it is hopeful that this funding will continue to be provided. Historically, community volunteers have always been present to step up and initiate and coordinate these initiatives. However, many of the earlier NFB projects were cancelled due to budgetary cutbacks – a threat that is always a possibility. Funding for the arts and subsidies for community culture have traditionally been processed through separate bodies in Canada – a trend that would appear to be increasingly redefined.⁴ This is a trend in funding policy in Canada that should certainly be continued: the ability to perceive the potential within the arts for community building activities, and likewise the ability to perceive within community-oriented activities the immense potential for furthering the arts. Public venues such as Available Light and the CMOFF contain within them enormous potential for the exhibition of state-sponsored art, which is beneficial both the artist, and (assumedly) the public. It is therefore a recommendation of this thesis that policy researchers might find it beneficial to pursue this concept of a wider understanding of cultural/artistic funding that includes endeavours related to community development.

It has been mentioned that Carey's models are just as much templates for communication rather than mere descriptions of communication. It has also been stated in this thesis that the field of film spectatorship, especially in Canada, is a rather undeveloped field. It is my sincere intention that this thesis will perhaps initiate some interest for future scholarly research in line with both a ritual approach to communications as well as the field of film exhibition and spectatorship in Canada.

⁴ Janine Marchessault. "Amateur Video and the Challenge for Change" in *Mirror Machine: Video and Identity*, Janine Marchessault ed., (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1995.) p.23.

Labour groups and social justice movements, for instance, have caught on to the possibilities that innovative uses of the medium provide. Research along these lines might reveal much about current manifestations of communitarian communication as well as Habermas' public sphere, with the intention of social and political change.

Central to a 'sociological/anthropological understanding of a 'ritualized event' is the notion and subsequent role of 'spectatorship.' Spectatorship is itself a form of participation in a ritual event. Carey's use of the term 'ritual' is of course not quite in the same vein, but the role of participation is obviously the focus. Humans are social beings, and after a point can only handle so much information. Ultimately what people desire are social relationships, interaction with others and a greater role as participants in society rather than mere observers. We desire to be citizens **as well** as consumers, not **merely** consumers. Through a communitarian form of film exhibition we are capable of fulfilling these fundamental desires.

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