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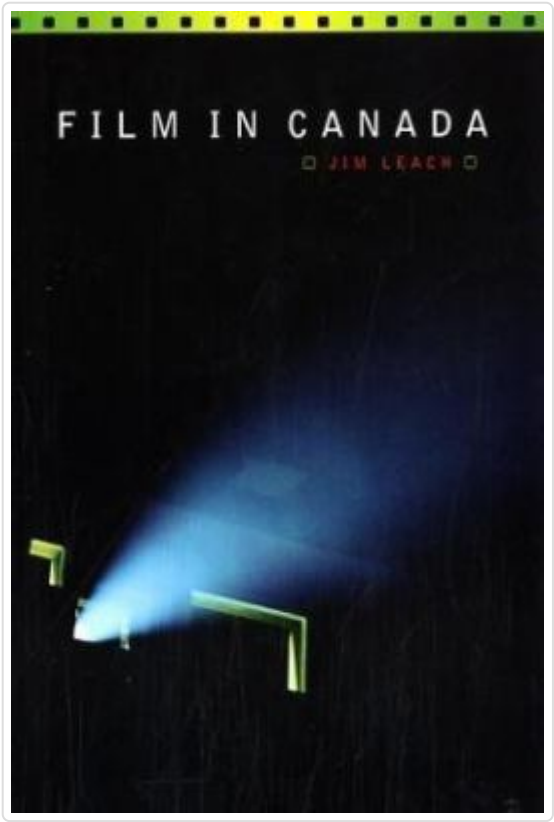

Books

Film in Canada

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Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2006

Author	Leach, Jim
Place of publication	Don Mills
Publisher	Oxford University Press
Publication Date	2006
ISBN	9780195419511
Subjects	Motion Pictures
Language	English
Publication ID	726342
Publisher address	Great Clarendon St, Oxford, OX2 6DB, United Kingdom.

Less publication information

CHAPTER 1

Realism and Its Discontents

> The Canadian psyche seems better suited to information programming than to drama, partly because of the documentary traditions established in this country by John Grierson.
>
> —Martin Knelman (1987: 103–4)

> Realism is at the root of the Canadian psyche.
>
> —Katherine Monk (2001: 10)

Alongside the absent audience, the other most salient characteristic of Canadian cinema is, according to most accounts, its roots in documentary realism. For many commentators, such as Knelman and Monk, this predilection derives from a specifically Canadian mindset that produces a distinct national identity. By such accounts, the realist bent did not originate with the NFB but rather provided a fertile ground in which John Grierson's project could flourish.

As we shall see in later chapters, the dominance of realism in Canadian cinema has been much exaggerated, but the persistence of this notion has played an important part in shaping how films have been interpreted and how questions about the national cinema have been posed. It is intricately entangled with the problem of the absent audience, since we might well ask why, if Canadians are such realists, they do not respond more enthusiastically to Canadian realist cinema. There is even the possibility that the perceived propensity towards realism accounts for this resistance: too many people regard Canadian films as 'depressing downbeat little pictures that nobody wants to see in our country or anywhere else' (Tadros, 1976: 37).[1]

I do not want to underestimate the importance of the realist tradition. In this chapter, I will argue that realist filmmaking in Canada is not the product of a naive belief that film can provide an objective view of reality. Rather, we shall see that this tradition, especially as it develops from the 1950s onward, becomes increasingly aware of the difficulty of adequately representing the real. The films are not straightforwardly realistic but investigations into the possibilities and limits of realism. Inevitably, the concerns at the core of this tradition have become even more urgent—to the point of throwing it into crisis—in the age of computer simulations and so-called reality television.

The National-Realist Project

The federal government established the National Film Board in 1939, acting on the advice of Grierson, who became its first commissioner. It was Grierson who first applied the term 'documentary' to cinema in 1927 and who famously defined it as 'the creative treatment of actuality' (Hardy, 1966: 13). He had already used state sponsorship in Britain to create a documentary film unit, working first for the Empire Marketing Board and then for the General Post Office. His goal was to intervene in well-established discourses of national identity and modify them in more progressive directions, balancing public relations with social change; in Canada the ties to the state were even more direct, but the myths of national identity were much less secure.

The NFB's mandate, as it was later defined in the Film Act of 1950, was 'to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations' (Morris, 1984: 283), and it had thus to foster a sense of an 'imagined community' essential to the survival of the nation. Grierson thought that documentary could provide evidence of shared interests among Canadians in different regions who had no direct contact with each other. I will thus refer to his vision as 'national-realist', on an analogy with the idea of the 'national-popular' developed at roughly the same time by the Italian political theorist Antonio

Gramsci (see Chapter 5). In many ways, their ideas and political goals were divergent (Gramsci was a Marxist; Grierson's generally socialist views were less clearly defined) and they could not have been aware of each other's work. Yet both advocated new forms of popular culture that would address the needs of the 'people' as citizens, rather than as consumers, by making them aware of the actual conditions that shaped their lives.

The NFB did not bring documentary filmmaking to Canada, nor was it the beginning of state-sponsored production. It replaced the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau, established in 1918 as the world's first government film unit. What Grierson brought with him was a new sense of social purpose, which was reinforced by the outbreak of World War II shortly after his arrival. Drawing on his work in Britain, Grierson produced films in which images, often taken from stock footage, provided the evidence to support the information and arguments in the commentary, scripted in advance and delivered by an authoritative 'voice-of-God' commentator.[2]

In the years after Grierson's departure in 1945, many filmmakers began to feel that this approach was not suited to the less urgent and, in some ways, more complex problems of a peacetime nation. As the Board sought to adjust to changing social and cultural conditions, new documentary forms emerged, but the national-realist project persisted. However, this project was always an unstable one, and the tensions and contradictions manifested themselves more visibly as a result of formal and technical developments as well as increasing pressures on the concept of national identity. The effects of these changes can be illustrated, fortuitously, by two NFB documentaries about the same family made 20 years apart.

Alexis Tremblay Habitant: The Story of a Farmer in Quebec (Jane Marsh, 1943) is a 37-minute documentary that distinguishes itself from the NFB's wartime style by its leisurely depiction of a year in the life of a farming family on the north shore of the St Lawrence River. Filmed in colour (also unusual for documentaries at this time), the images provide a record of rural life in Quebec in which the seasonal cycle is interwoven with the Church calendar. The voice-of-God commentary stresses the importance of tradition but also insinuates a few brief references to the benefits of modern agricultural methods—which, however, remain unseen.

Thus, a tension develops between the visual evidence of a life grounded in tradition and the verbal allusions to the NFB's 'progressive' outlook that often came into conflict with the dominant conservative ideology in Quebec politics at this time (see Leach, 1990–1). This imbalance points to the pressures generated by the film's effort to show that progress does not pose a threat to traditional values. In the context of the NFB's mandate, it also seeks to demonstrate what the family shares with rural families elsewhere in Canada, despite cultural and linguistic differences. The commentary tries to hold these elements together but, since the voice-of-God is male and speaks English, it essentially drowns out the voices of the film's French-speaking subjects—and that of its female director.

However, the voice of Alexis Tremblay was finally heard to great effect in *Pour la suite du monde* (Pierre Perrault and Michel Brault, 1963). The family had in the meantime moved to the Ile-aux-Coudres in the St Lawrence, where Perrault met them while making a series of radio documentaries on the island.[3] For the film, he persuaded a

group of the inhabitants, led by Alexis's son Léopold, to revive the traditional practice of trapping beluga whales, which had once been the mainstay of the local economy. The film documents the placement of poles in the offshore waters, following the traces of the earlier traps, and the eventual capture of one whale, which Léopold and Alexis take to an aquarium in New York.

Apart from some captions at the beginning that acknowledge the filmmakers' intervention, there is no commentary, and the soundtrack consists of 'a network of interweaving voices defining life values through the energy of their speech' (Harcourt, 1984: 131). Alexis Tremblay's is not the only voice heard, but his creative use of a distinctively Québécois French (that had to be subtitled in France) made him into a key, but controversial, icon for the separatist movement.[4] While the film was widely interpreted as a celebration of the deep roots of Quebec culture, the rural setting and Alexis's insistence on respect for the 'ancestors' raised questions about the relevance of its vision for a modern urban society.[5]

The title of *Pour le suite du monde* emphasizes the idea of succession or continuity, an idea completely lost in the abbreviated English-language version, with an added commentary, called *Moontrap*. For Perrault, the film embodied a national identity rooted in 'our *acharnation*—our "stubbornation," that staggering word invented by Alexis Tremblay' (Lévesque, 1968: 126). The speech of the islanders, coupled with Brault's close-ups of their weather-beaten faces and striking long shots of the poles reflected in the water, created the complex sense of a national feeling grounded in lived experience.

The differences between *Alexis Tremblay Habitant* and *Pour la suite du monde* can be attributed to the gap between Canadian and Québécois cultural perspectives, but they are also the product of developments in the idea of documentary realism in the intervening years. In its refusal to guide the spectator's response through an authoritative, pre-scripted commentary, *Pour la suite du monde* belongs to a movement that began at the NFB in the 1950s and was usually referred to in Quebec as *le direct*. The corresponding English term was 'direct cinema', but this became very much entangled with the term 'cinéma-vérité'. Both designate films that make use of new lightweight equipment to create a more intimate and immediate relationship with the subjects and that investigate a situation rather than follow a preconceived script.

The two terms were often used to make a crucial distinction between films that simply claim to represent an unmanipulated reality and those that (like *Pour la suite du monde*) acknowledge the intervention of the filmmakers in that reality. Unfortunately, they were not defined consistently by filmmakers in different national traditions (see Feldman, 2003: 31–2). For the sake of convenience, I will refer to these films as direct cinema, because this term was widely used in Canada and was also applied to the fiction films that emerged from this tradition in the 1960s.

The possibilities of direct cinema were first explored in Canada by NFB filmmakers within Unit B, set up during a major reorganization in 1948, and *l'équipe française*, an emerging group of francophone filmmakers. A key early film from Unit B was *Corral* (Colin Low, 1954), in which the filmmakers, under the leadership of producer Tom Daly, dispensed with the intended commentary so that its lyrical shots of a rancher rounding up wild horses were accompanied only by a solo guitar.[6] For the

Board's francophone filmmakers, the equivalent breakthrough film was *Les Raquetteurs* (Gilles Groulx and Michel Brault, 1958), a short and often humorous film documenting a snowshoers' convention in Sherbrooke.

The direct cinema documentaries not only rejected the authoritarian structures of the Griersonian tradition but also responded to emerging concerns about the ideological implications of realism. In an influential article, David Clandfield argued that *l'équipe française* reinvigorated documentary filmmaking through 'the "impassioned" involvement of the filmmaker in his pro-filmic material, the social "milieu"', while the Unit B filmmakers adopted a less innovative strategy of 'dispassionate empiricism' (1984: 113). As might be expected, the Quebec filmmakers were more politically explicit in their project, but the Unit B films, while certainly less involved with their subjects, also often implicated the spectator by drawing attention to the processes by which their images of reality were constructed.

Unit B consolidated its approach in a series of films made for the CBC television series *Candid Eye* (1958–9). The first film shot for this series was *The Days Before Christmas* (Terence Macartney-Filgate, 1958), in which several filmmakers spread out through Montreal in the pre-Christmas season. It presents a series of observations of everyday life with a sparse and unassuming commentary delivered by one of the filmmakers (Stanley Jackson). As Seth Feldman has pointed out, the style is 'candid', not just in its claim to reveal reality but also in its acknowledgement of the technology that makes this revelation possible. Feldman argues that the film's final revelation is that there is no 'ultimate direction here, no single metaphor' and that the meaning of Christmas is 'nothing other than all the things we can see and hear at that time of year and all the ways we can see and hear them.' The process of editing a film from the varied material shot in the course of a few days demonstrates only that 'the more we edit them, the more disparate they become' (2003: 44).

A few years later, an even larger army of filmmakers set out to document the life of a working-class section of Montreal in *À Saint-Henri, le 5 septembre* (Hubert Aquin, 1962). The aim was to inject a more political engagement with Quebec culture into the work of the *l'équipe française*. The film's producer, Fernand Dansereau, later disowned its methods on the grounds that they still 'involved an *outsider's* observations, despite the makers' good intentions' (Morris, 1984: 2). However, this judgement is already incorporated into the film itself through its self-reflexive commentary, written by Jacques Godbout, which raises the issue of the relationship of the filmmakers to the people they are filming and finally admits that 'Saint-Henri has still not yielded its secret.'

The 'failure' of these two films to uncover an underlying and unifying reality points to the ways in which direct cinema raises questions about the national-realist project, to which it was still ostensibly committed. For the Unit B filmmakers, the changes in documentary form reflected a more tentative sense of the nation, as a mosaic of different groups whose identities are shaped by many, often contradictory, factors. The Quebec experience involved a stronger sense of the nation, but it is clearly an exaggeration to suggest, as Feldman once did, that '*Les Raquetteurs* and the films like it . . . brought forth in their straightforward iconography perceptions emblematic of the new national identity' (Clandfield, 1984: 112). While the iconography in these

films may support the nationalist cause, the loss of the voice of authority opens the films to more diverse interpretations. It becomes increasingly clear that national myths are constructions and that documentary, Grierson's tool for nation-building, can also be used to expose the complexity that the myths conceal as well as the fictions that we often take for reality.

Too Real? *A Married Couple* and *Les Ordres*

Realism came under heavy attack in the 1960s. Drawing on the ideas of German dramatist Bertolt Brecht and French political philosopher Louis Althusser, a new generation of critics argued that most forms of realism function as a vehicle for the dominant ideology and thus as an obstacle to social change. This argument was taken up in Britain by a group of film theorists associated with the journal *Screen*, who developed the notion of 'the classic realist text', a broad category that encompassed Hollywood features and most documentaries. According to this argument, a realist film 'denies its own status as articulation' and offers the spectator 'a point of view from which everything becomes obvious' (MacCabe, 1974: 9, 16). Needed instead are films that expose the contradictions in the social order by drawing 'the viewer's attention to his or her relation to the screen in order to make him or her "realise" the social relations that are being portrayed' (MacCabe, 1976: 25).

This argument against realism turned Grierson's position against itself: if the realist image was a means of showing the way things are, it thereby served the interests of those opposed to social change. In any case, according to this argument, the conventional NFB documentaries did not simply represent reality but showed a selective version, thereby transforming public service into public relations. The NFB itself responded to this kind of thinking in 1967 by introducing a new program called Challenge for Change.

Ironically, this program grew out of a film called *The Things I Cannot Change* (Tanya Ballantyne, 1966), a documentary intended to expose the conditions of poverty in which many Canadians lived. Using direct cinema techniques with no commentary, the film depicts the everyday life of a Montreal family; but the publicity it generated when shown on CBC television had less to do with the topic of poverty than with its exploitation of the family.[7] The Challenge for Change program sought to avoid this problem by putting 'the means of communications into the hands of people' and thus, as the official mandate stated, 'to prepare Canadians for social change' (Morris, 1984: 60–1). Its greatest success came with a series of films made in 1968 by Colin Low with the inhabitants of Fogo Island, Newfoundland.[8]

Although the program began in 1967, it only received official government support in 1969, at which time it was expanded to include a French-language counterpart under the title 'Société nouvelle'. However, the idea of social change in Quebec was almost synonymous with the independence movement, a situation that posed major problems for a federally funded institution like the NFB. The program did make possible the feminist films of the *En tant que femmes* series (1973–4), produced by Anne

Claire Poirier; but the limits of its definition of 'change' became apparent in the treatment of Denys Arcand's *On est au coton* (1970), a feature-length documentary on the textile industry in Quebec.

This film was not part of the series and was conceived, at least in part, to expose how the NFB sought to manage rather than promote change. The NFB banned it for several years after the Canadian Textile Institute objected to its depiction of unhealthy working conditions, union-busting tactics used by owners in the past, and the impact of unemployment caused by the closure of mills the companies deemed unprofitable. Since the workers were francophone and most of the owners were anglophone, separatists pursuing social change on their own terms adopted the film, and illicit video copies found larger audiences than the film would have attracted without the ban.[9] The title is a colloquial French expression meaning 'we're fed up', and the film captured the widespread discontent of many young people at this time, although it was later criticized for its focus on workers who were apparently resigned to their fate.

The Challenge for Change program continued until 1980, but it lost much of its impetus in its later years and was 'allowed to quietly wither away' (Morris, 1984: 61). However, the NFB continued to contribute to the questioning of the documentary myth of objectivity, especially in films in which the filmmaker becomes an on-screen participant. These include the diary films of Michael Rubbo, an Australian-born filmmaker who developed an ironic and probing screen persona in films such as *Waiting for Fidel* (1974), in which he travels to Cuba but fails to meet Castro, and *Daisy: The Story of a Facelift* (1983), in which he takes off from a colleague's plastic surgery to explore the social implications of physical appearance.[10] Similarly, Jean Chabot's *Voyage en Amérique avec un cheval emprunté* (1987) sends the filmmaker on a journey that becomes a meditation on Quebec's '*américanité*', while Alanis Obomsawin also often appears in her own films about First Nations people (see Chapter 10).[11] All these filmmakers, and others pursuing similar strategies, had to deal with objections from those—like CBC television programmers—who claimed that their films were not sufficiently balanced and objective.

The ideological debate over realism came to the fore in the critical response to two controversial but apparently quite different films, Allan King's *A Married Couple* (1969) and Michel Brault's *Les Ordres* (1974). While King's film placed pressure on the public gaze of the documentary tradition by applying it to the intimate spaces of domestic life, Brault addressed the public events of the October Crisis of 1970 but used fictional strategies to bring out the personal experience of the many innocent people who were arrested. These two films were far from the only—or the first—to blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction, but the controversies they generated posed the questions in an acute form. Both films provoked new terms to describe their strategies, 'actuality drama' in King's case and 'documented fiction' in Brault's (Kael, 1974: 135; Marsolais, 1975: 12).

King had already run into trouble with *Warrendale* (1966), a documentary on the unconventional methods used in a home for disturbed children, which was intended for television but refused by the CBC, ostensibly because of the language used by the children.[12] The use of hand-held cameras and wide-angle lenses to get close to the

children in highly emotional situations proved as controversial as—and strangely analogous to—the home's therapy of hugging troubled inmates until they became calm. For his next film, King advertised for a couple whose marriage was in crisis and who would be willing to be filmed in their home over a period of several weeks. He eventually settled on Antoinette and Billy Edwards, a middle-class couple living in a Toronto suburb, and shot 70 hours of footage before editing it into a feature film for theatrical release.

The debate over the film often turned on the question of how the presence of the filmmakers affected the couple's behaviour. Critics tended to assume that King's aim was to film the couple going about their everyday lives as they would if the camera were not there. Cameraman Richard Leiterman indeed described the 'invisible barrier' created by the 'ground rule that we would have no communication with them, nor would they communicate anything to us' (Rosenthal, 1970: 23). On the other hand, the presence of the camera obviously precipitated many of the situations: the couple quarrel about how they will spend the money they are going to receive for making the film, and, at one point, Antoinette defends herself for not using the car as planned by saying that 'Allan was here until 10:45.' King himself insists that 'people, at least in the films I've done in cinéma-vérité style, are always aware of the camera because that's the reason they get involved in the first place' (Stone, 2003: 34).

A 'Brechtian' filmmaker (like Jean-Luc Godard) might have drawn explicit attention to the actual 'reality' of the situation, perhaps by showing the couple signing the contract that preceded the filming.[13] Yet the presence of the camera is implicitly acknowledged, and part of the experience of the film is an awareness of the role it has played in influencing the behaviour we witness. King's use of this consciousness represents a highly sophisticated exploration of the fictional element in documentary and the theatrical element in everyday life. His approach belongs to the kind of cinéma-vérité practised by the French anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch, who argued that the truth (*vérité*) that emerges is specifically cinematic, 'a new truth . . . which has nothing to do with normal reality' but is the product of the camera's presence as 'an incredible stimulant for the observed as well as the observer' (Yakir, 1978: 7–8).

The film opens with Billy and Antoinette showing out (unseen) friends whose visit has obviously been something of a strain. We are thus immediately conscious of penetrating behind their public images. As Billy begins to undress and the camera follows them to the bedroom, they argue about things that they do not have and that (presumably) they plan to buy with the money they will get for allowing King to film them. The film thus draws attention to the suppression of its apparatus and to our situation as voyeurs viewing behaviour that is ambiguously coded as 'real' or 'performed'.

The evident ways in which the couple perform for the camera led some critics to contest the film's realist credentials. Pauline Kael objected to the 'elaborate games of role-playing' and complained that 'we don't know enough about the Edwardses' forms of faking or about King's methods of selection.' She pointed out that the couple had 'previous connections with acting' and felt their attempts to improvise became 'a parody of Method acting' (1974: 136–7). On the other hand, Philip Strick thought that

'Billy and Antoinette play their part beautifully' and that 'their exchanges flow with the ease and logic of any scripted marital drama' (1970: 219).

As Strick suggests, the film often evokes fictional models, such as the squabbling couples in television sitcoms or the marital struggles in the plays of August Strindberg and, to take a more contemporary example, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). King admitted that the material was not edited in chronological order and explained that 'all I do is take episodes and put them into a dramatic structure that works for me' (Rosenthal, 1970: 14). In his review, Ron Blumer agreed that 'the film, as a whole, is as tight as any pre-scripted work' and argued that it gains its power because 'cinema's little-explored ability to transmit whole chunks of reality is thrown in as an extra bonus' (1971: 472).

What Strick calls the productive 'ambiguity of Allan King's method' (1970: 220) is apparent not only in the film's temporal structure but also in its *mise en scène*. When Billy enters the bathroom, we see a framed reproduction of a Rembrandt painting, usually known as 'The Jewish Bride' but also as 'The Married Couple', and when Antoinette discusses her problems with a friend in a café, a storefront full of mannequins is visible in the background. Such moments function much as they would in a fiction film, as symbolic commentary on the couple's life, but we remain uncertain about the extent to which these juxtapositions are coincidental or arranged by the filmmakers.

The film thus hovers between claims to documentary authenticity and fictional artifice. King insisted that 'what is going on isn't really acting', but he recognized that 'they were making things up—and therefore it's not real' (Stone, 2003: 33). While he acknowledged that the Billy and Antoinette seen in the film are not the same as in 'actual real life', he also pointed out that 'we all, at all times, and to varying degrees perform, or perform as if we were different people' (Rosenthal, 1970: 15, 13). As Robert Fulford put it, the film is 'not a voyeur's delight, but a new way of exploring reality' (1974: 34), and this new way depends on accepting that elements of fiction, theatricality, and artifice are part of reality.

Although—or perhaps because—it acknowledges that Billy and Antoinette are performers, the film led one reviewer to write that, 'time and time again, one finds oneself wincing and looking away from the screen because what is coming from it is obviously too real' (Blumer, 1971: 471). The same reviewer also felt that *Les Ordres* was 'haunting like no other political film partly because it's so close to home and partly because it's so understatedly real' (Blumer, 1975: 77). In both cases, the effect of the 'real' was created by a process of distillation: whereas this process occurred during post-production in *A Married Couple*, Brault shifted it to pre-production, during which he interviewed many people who were imprisoned under the War Measures Act, imposed after members of the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) kidnapped a British diplomat and a Quebec cabinet minister.

He then condensed their stories into a few exemplary cases, and the characters thus created are played by actors who introduce themselves and their characters when they first appear. This acknowledgement of the production process is a 'distancing' device in the Brechtian tradition, and Gilles Marsolais called the film 'a perfect application of

the theories of Brecht to the cinema' (1975: 13). Other critics—sympathetic and otherwise—stressed the emotional power of the film. Thus Robin Wood objected that, after the actors introduce themselves, 'Brechtian distance is abandoned in favor of the encouragement of straightforward identification with nice people and "correct" liberal-humanist emotions' (1975: 28). Robert Fulford, on the other hand, admired the film because 'Brault's direction is so involving, and his use of the actors so skilful, that our identification is complete' (1984: 3).

For some critics, the extreme situations depicted in the film had more in common with the nightmare visions of Franz Kafka than with Brecht's political theatre or any form of realism. André Leroux thought that Brault creates 'an unreal universe where everything is simultaneously logical and illogical, tangible and intangible, precise and imprecise' (1975: 120). The film begins with an argument in which a mother annoys her daughter by demanding that she come straight home from school, and the subsequent events thus become a monstrous fulfillment of this fear of the outside world.

This emphasis on the personal experience of the victims led to accusations that Brault ignored the political issues and reduced the October Crisis to a human problem, a criticism often directed at classic narrative cinema. Fulford felt that this approach gave the film 'a kind of universal dimension by forcibly readjusting the audience's views not only of the Montreal political prisoners it depicts but of *all* prisoners in *all* jails' (1984: 3). René Lévesque, then leader of the Parti Québécois, also praised the film as 'a very beautiful and poignant illustration of the how', but he noted that 'what is missing . . . is the why. And also, of course, the who' (1975: 124). For Pierre Vallières, who had been a leading member of the FLQ, this was a crucial omission, and he argued that the film even misrepresented the 'how' by not showing that 'the immense majority of the people arrested on 16 October were Québécois who were politicized and committed' (1974: 19–20).

The charge that the film lacked political analysis could also be laid from a very different ideological perspective, as it was by Nat Shuster, who also asked why the film ignores 'the causes for these arrests' but thought 'there is something quite ludicrous in attempting to turn this comic-opera police-state escapade into a cause calling for a revolutionary response' (1975: 24). This uncompassionate reading implies that the film covertly supports the FLQ position, but a more balanced assessment came from Robert Fulford, who argued that the omissions work 'to make us want to know a great deal more about this crucial event in our history' (Fulford, 1984: 4).

The film is, in any case, not completely silent about who was responsible. It begins with a caption quoting an earlier affirmation of civil rights by Pierre Trudeau, the Prime Minister who invoked the War Measures Act, and a later caption identifies Jean Drapeau, the Mayor of Montreal, as the authority who determined that there was a need to 'protect society against the seditious plot and apprehended insurrection'. As the film goes on to demonstrate, the 'orders' from the political establishment become a screen behind which the police and army can hide. Just before one of the prisoners is released, a policeman tells him that 'terrorists' should not think that they can 'go pushing decent people around', but what the film shows is that, as Michel

Brûlé put it, 'ordinary people were accused of fomenting a plot against society, but . . . on the contrary there was a plot against these people' (1974: 15).[14]

One of the most important, but much questioned, aspects of the film's style was the insertion of colour sequences into what is predominantly a black-and-white film. Some reviewers found this effect 'rather arbitrary' or 'a nuisance and a puzzlement' (Fulford, 1984: 4; Shuster, 1975: 24). According to Bill Marshall, it was adopted because 'money was not available for a complete colour feature' (2001: 40), but, if this was the case, it is another example, among many in Canadian cinema, of an economic exigency being adapted to aesthetic purpose. It works as a distancing device (since it calls attention to the medium) but, simultaneously, it functions as an intensifier of the emotional impact.

When one of the arrested men describes his first experience of prison, he comments on the colours that got on his nerves. At this point, the film turns from black-and-white into colour. Several others also comment on the colours in the prison and, when one of the women is released, the colour drains from the image as she walks away. Even during the central sequences in the prison, all shots of the world outside are in black-and-white, except when one prisoner is taken in custody to attend his father's funeral. The use of colour thus implies that the crisis created a sense of heightened reality—and, as the prison sequences show, communal awareness—among the victims. After their release, the whiteness of the snow suggests that mundane reality has been reinstated and that nothing has been achieved, with the Québécois people being left bewildered and resentful.

The critical debates that erupted around *Les Ordres* and *A Married Couple* reveal an uncertainty about the aesthetic and ideological implications of realism. Brault challenged his audience with what Marsolais called a 'layered structure' that establishes 'subtle dialectical relations between the real and its representation, the present and the past, commentary and witness' (1975: 12–13). Both films sought to deepen and renew the realist tradition by scrambling the distinctions on which the arguments for and against realism depended.

Faking It: The Canadian Mockumentary

The debate over realism during the 1970s, and especially the ethical concerns regarding films like *A Married Couple*, may seem rather quaint in the age of so-called reality television. Cameras have become such a presence in contemporary culture that Denys Arcand could plausibly follow the rise and fall of a supermodel in his *Stardom* (2000) using only images (supposedly) taken from newsreels, television shows, and home movies. This was a fiction film satirizing celebrity culture, but popular television series have now turned the lives of ordinary people into a form of entertainment that makes King's documentaries seem quite discreet. As parodied in Michel Poulette's *Louis 19, le roi des ondes* (see Chapter 11), the public gaze of documentary regularly crosses into areas once regarded as private.

Digital technology also makes possible the creation of reality effects that have no existence in actuality. Whereas the documentary tradition always defined itself in opposition to a cinema of illusion, we now live in a culture in which, according to Jean Baudrillard, 'illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.' What Baudrillard is claiming is that the technological ability to reproduce reality has become so powerful that, instead of experiencing the real as something that resists our efforts to represent it, the real has become 'not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced*' (1983: 38, 146). In this 'postmodern' world, the loss of a secure sense of reality erodes many cultural distinctions, including that between documentary and fiction, but it also inspires desperate efforts to reinstate the real, including religious and other kinds of fundamentalism.

In contemporary films and television programs, the characteristics of direct cinema, such as hand-held cameras, jump cuts, and grainy images, have become familiar devices in fictional as well as documentary contexts, contributing to what Timothy Luke calls 'the proliferation of second-hand authenticity' in media texts (1991: 6–7). Such works simulate the truth claims of traditional documentary and, in doing so, threaten to undermine the impact of those documentaries that still seek to provide evidence about actuality. One manifestation of this state of affairs is the emergence of a genre often known as the mockumentary or mock-documentary.

There have been many such films, in Canada and elsewhere, and this is not the place to go into a detailed history of the genre.[15] In some cases, they still make documentary truth claims, as in the films of Michael Moore, which develop the idea of the filmmaker as on-screen provocateur that Rubbo had pioneered at the NFB.[16] More commonly, the mockumentary is a disguised fiction film, but they all play with the uncertain status of realism in contemporary culture, while the extent to which they collude with or critique this culture varies considerably. Two recent Canadian examples suggest that digital video is the contemporary equivalent of the new equipment that enabled the earlier direct cinema films. They also follow to a logical conclusion the blurring of the distinction between fiction and reality in those films.

Both *La Moitié gauche du frigo* (Philippe Falardeau, 2000) and *FUBAR* (Michael Dowse, 2002) begin with credits that attribute the films to the fictional directors who appear in them, although the latter is preceded by a disclaimer from Odeon Films explaining that it is a fiction and apologizing to people who appeared in it thinking it was a documentary. It is characteristic of the genre that it is impossible to tell whether this caption expresses the genuine concern of the distributors about possible legal action or is just part of the mockery. In both films, a filmmaker sets out to document the everyday lives of his subjects: in *La Moitié gauche du frigo*, Stéphane (Stéphane Demers) makes a film about Christophe (Paul Ahmarani), his unemployed roommate, as he searches for a job in Montreal; in *FUBAR*, Farrel (Gordon Skilling) enlists the collaboration of Dean (Paul J. Spence) and Terry (Dave Lawrence) to explore 'headbanger' culture in Calgary.

Although both (fictional) filmmakers have serious ambitions, their efforts correspond to a trend that has developed out of the use of hand-held cameras to 'reject professionalism for a more general amateurism which is seen as being more truthful

or "authentic"' (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 39). In these films, however, this claim to authenticity is itself called into question.

Stéphane's film seems to be more truthful before he attracts funding from Radio-Canada (which did, in fact, back Falardeau's film) and hires a crew. Yet his status as an observer is ambiguous from the beginning. He provokes confrontations to bring out Christophe's plight as a qualified engineer who cannot find a job in Quebec, where companies are laying off employees despite making huge profits. At one point, an anglophone executive tells him that he is 'a poor Michael Moore', and his efforts do not help Christophe, who tires of being followed around. He complains that he feels like the character in *Louis 19 le roi des ondes*, who becomes the star of a reality television show, and he eventually moves to Vancouver, where, according to the final captions, he is currently working as a music teacher in a high school—and it is now Stéphane who is unemployed.

The allusion to *Louis 19* is a reminder of the closeness of the film to the broad comedies that proved very popular in Quebec in the 1990s. *FUBAR*, whose title is an acronym for 'Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition', is even more tied to the popular comic tradition, since it grew out of characters developed by the lead actors in improvised stage routines. The distinction between the comic and the documentary is, in any case, very blurred since one of the funniest sequences involves actual 'headbangers' who (apparently) thought the documentary was genuine. While the opening of the film seems to be completely complicit with the aimless and hedonistic lives of its subjects, it gains momentum and becomes more complicated when Terry is diagnosed with testicular cancer and the director dies in a swimming accident. The 'real' intervenes in a potentially traumatic way, even if these developments are fictional and quickly drawn into the general mock-serious tone.

Both films include sequences in which the filmmakers follow their subjects away from the city. When Christophe drives 1,000 kilometres to apply for a job only to be told he is not qualified, he pokes fun at the clichés associated with Canada's 'wide open spaces'. Dean and Terry decide to spend the last weekend before Terry's operation in the country, where they drink a lot of beer and persuade their director to take his ill-fated plunge. Even the natural environment, a major factor in Canada's cultural traditions (see Chapter 3), no longer seems to function as a meaningful cultural symbol—or even as the last refuge of the real for the urban citizens of the new global economy.

This erosion of a sense of the real, often seen as a symptom of postmodern culture, poses a major challenge in these films not only to the national-realist project but also to the documentary mode itself. However, this challenge is less a negation of the Canadian realist tradition than a development from within it, and one that suggests the possibility of new and unpredictable collaborations between documentary and fiction.