
The Fogo process is named for the National Film Board’s (NFB) Challenge for Change’s (CFC) signature project on Fogo Island, Newfoundland, in the late 1960s, which helped to inspire the use of documentary video for social change. With fishing in decline and unemployment at 60%, Fogo Islanders, divided by ancestral and religious differences, had resigned themselves to government plans to relocate them away from their island. Once CFC was able to shift to video from film, video’s immediate playback capability enabled producers to consult with participants and re-shoot scenes as desired. The (then new) Portapaks made it easier to move from outport to outport, sharing “instant” feedback from residents in one place with those in another, animating community discussions to overcome barriers and discuss collective solutions. Through time and the video-making process, Islanders organized themselves and persuaded the federal government to help them remain on the island by supporting a fishing cooperative and marketing board.

The Fogo process, which was perhaps CFC’s greatest legacy, was the result of the producers being determined not to repeat the mistakes of CFC’s precursor, Tanya Bal- lantyne’s The Things I Cannot Change (TTICC), a fly-on-the-wall documentary about a family on welfare in Montreal that exposed the film’s participants to the ridicule of their neighbours after it was broadcast, despite Ballantyne’s intention to provide a sympathetic portrayal of the life of the poor. The family’s “humiliation” after the film’s broadcast inspired Colin Low and the CFC filmmakers to involve the Fogo Islanders in decisions about the documentaries being filmed, which is why I found Brenda Longfellow’s “revisionary reading” of TTICC to be one of this collection’s most fascinating chapters. Longfellow challenges dominant “myths” about TTICC’s reception and impact which, by implication, raises questions about the CFC’s legacy (and can be usefully contrasted with other assessments in the collection).

The book has five main sections, and the chapters cover everything from a pertinent selection of memos and short articles from the CFC newsletter and leading personnel, which provides insight into key concerns during its existence (and includes a 1972 memo from John Grierson with criticisms about “decentralizing the means of production”), in part one, to filmmaking in the “margins” in part two to contemporary incarnations in part five (e.g., Vijaya Mulay on Indian women moving beyond CFC limitations in their use of video is a good example of its legacy). The 21 chapters in parts two and three demonstrate the range and diversity of topics, filmmakers, and genres, including the CFC’s best – and least – known work, and also provide useful accounts in English of Société Nouvelle (SN), CFC’s francophone counterpart, to help overcome the “two solitudes” of Canadian culture (e.g., Scott MacKenzie’s chapter on Vidéographe and Jerry White’s chapter on Les filles du Roy). Fortunately, the NFB’s website provides the means to make most of these films available to students and readers,
filling out the texture and “structure of feeling” of these films, many of which retain their “raw power” today. For example, watching You Are on Indian Land after reading Alan Rosenthal’s 1980 interview with George Stoney about his 1969 film makes the combination an incredibly powerful teaching instrument as the subject matter comes “alive” on screen.

Part four provides good analytical and theoretical essays, including both previously published work by Janine Marchessault and Zoë Druick and new contributions, such as Ezra Winton’s and Jason Garrison’s pieces on distribution and alternative publics, which contrast CFC and the twenty-first-century “Cinema Politica” network with the mainstream model, arguing that smaller audiences are not a drawback when they are more engaged than conventional audiences. This emphasis on audiences is frequently overlooked in media (production) histories.

This collection is an excellent—indeed indispensable—addition to anyone teaching about documentary, alternative media, and Canadian and Québécois communication and cultural issues because it covers the most important—as well as lesser (and un) known—contributions of the CFC, 1967–1980. With its comprehensive bibliography of published works on the CFC and a complete filmography covering its “nearly 250 films,” this collection is well worth the price. Despite the experiment’s brevity (and the brevity of chapters is the collection’s single most frustrating aspect), its influence continues to be felt around the world. Equally important are the lessons that the CFC offers for those engaged in citizen journalism or social media activism, particularly with the CFC’s focus on trying to incorporate the subjects—or objects—of documentary (or journalism) into participating in the decisions over their own representation.

While the CFC project was definitely an improvement on the NFB’s “classic documentary” approach, we should be careful, as Marchessault reminds us, not to “over-idealize” the CFC project, even as, Druick writes, it “continues to emblematize the possibilities of a kind of filmmaking that is at once radical and public” (p. 337).

Reference
Ballantine, Tanya. (1967) [Film.] The things I cannot change (TTICC). National Film Board of Canada. URL: http://www.nfb.ca/film/things_i_cannot_change.

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