

Canadian Documentary Feature Films

Appearance before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage Review of the Canadian Feature Film Industry

Presented by

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Introduction

I want to thank the members of the Committee for the invitation to participate in their discussions on the Canadian feature film industry. My name is Claude Joli-Cœur, and I am the Government Film Commissioner and Chairperson of the National Film Board.

As Canada's public producer and distributor of audiovisual works, the National Film Board is especially concerned with the issues surrounding the future of the Canadian feature film industry. The NFB is not directly involved in funding this industry, which is the first issue that the Committee is examining. But the NFB does fund the production and distribution of its own works, of which a great many are documentary feature films. The NFB collaborates with artists and artisans from every part of the country and is a recognized force for creativity and innovation in the international audiovisual industry.

My presentation today will therefore deal more specifically with the current realities and issues facing the documentary feature film industry. I will discuss the following three issues:

- the NFB's role in the Canadian feature film industry;
- the production of documentary feature films by the NFB; and

- the accessibility of documentary feature films to the Canadian public.

These issues are central to the NFB's mandate and have a direct impact on all documentary feature productions in Canada. But first, I would like to describe the NFB's mandate in more detail.

The mandate of the National Film Board (NFB)

Ever since its founding in 1939, the NFB has played a major role in producing and distributing audiovisual works that show the wealth and diversity of Canadian society. The NFB is a cultural agency within the portfolio of the Department of Canadian Heritage, and our mandate, as set out in the *National Film Act*, is to “to produce and distribute and to promote the production and distribution of films designed to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations.”

The NFB's ten production studios, located across the country, contribute to the vitality of audiovisual creation throughout Canada. Over the 75 years since its founding, the NFB has become the benchmark for innovative filmmaking in Canada and one of the most highly regarded Canadian film brand on the international scene. NFB films have won over 5,000 awards, including five Palme d'Or awards at Cannes; 73 NFB films have been nominated for Oscars, and 12 have come home from Hollywood as winners of the famous golden statuette.

The NFB's role is to produce works dealing with issues that would otherwise not be addressed in Canadian films. The NFB enables Canadian artists and artisans to create works that reflect a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives on Canadian society and to experiment with new narrative and audiovisual forms.

The works that the NFB has produced over the years now constitute one of the largest and most important audiovisual collections in the world: over 13 000 moving pictures, 500 000 still

images, and a substantial sound archive. Dating back to the 1940s, this collection represents a priceless heritage for all Canadians and for the world community. It bears witness to our collective history. Hence one important role that the NFB now plays is to preserve this collection and make it accessible for the public and for future generations.

The NFB's role in the Canadian feature film industry

The NFB has in a sense been the cradle of the Canadian film industry. We have had a major impact on its development from the end of the Second World War to the present day and have played a fundamental role in the emergence of a Canadian filmmaking tradition.

After moving its head office from Ottawa to Montreal in 1956, the NFB began attracting talent from all over the country and contributed to the birth of a genuine film industry in Canada. By opening French-language studios that produced films such as Claude Jutra's *Mon oncle Antoine*, the NFB helped give birth to fiction cinema in Quebec. The NFB also played a decisive role in the emergence of feature-length fiction films in English Canada, producing such classics as *Drylanders* by Don Haldane and *Nobody Waved Good-bye* by Don Owen. Starting in 1965, the NFB's studios produced as many documentary feature films as they did fiction feature films and animated short films.

By the late 1970s, the Canadian fiction feature film industry had grown strong enough and was receiving enough support from Telefilm Canada and provincial film agencies that the NFB started producing fewer fiction features and began concentrating again on the documentary features that had always been the core of its identity.

Documentary features have thus become the key pillar of the NFB's English and French production programs. Since its founding, the NFB has done more than any other Canadian

institution to create a distinctive Canadian documentary tradition and to promote documentary art and artisans—so much so that some have even argued that the documentary should be officially recognized as Canada’s national art form.

The NFB today focuses its production efforts on documentaries, *auteur* animated films, and on interactive works designed for new media. At our studios across the country, we produce documentary features that reflect a wide range of Canadian realities, perspectives and experiences. We tell the stories of people and communities whose voices are often under-represented on the commercial media landscape. We also fulfil a mandate to experiment with new technologies and different storytelling forms and approaches. Our studios and artists provide a creative environment that is totally dedicated to this kind of social and creative exploration. The NFB’s contribution in this regard creates considerable social and cultural value, both at home and abroad.

The production of documentary feature films by the NFB

As you know, our industry is undergoing major change. Traditional media now co-exist with digital media; the variety of distribution platforms is growing constantly; and the various genres and technologies are evolving rapidly ... in short, the entire audiovisual universe is being transformed.

In the documentary feature film industry, the number of players has decreased, because of convergence of production companies, fragmentation of audiences, and erosion of the revenues of traditional media outlets and their migration to digital platforms. In response to these seismic changes, the business model for the production of documentary feature films has had to make

some adjustments, both in Canada and abroad. In this context, the NFB's commitment to the documentary feature genre is more important than ever. The NFB provides a space where the documentary feature form can continue to develop as a vibrant form of audiovisual expression.

Over the past five years, the NFB has produced or co-produced a total of 72 feature films, representing a total investment of nearly \$31 million. Here are some facts and figures about these films.

- 30 of these films, with a total value of \$19.8 million, were produced entirely by the NFB.
- The 42 other films were co-produced by the NFB with partners from the private sector.
- The \$11 million that the NFB invested in these co-productions generated a total value of \$43 million.
- In monetary terms, the NFB's overall impact on Canada's feature film industry over the past 5 years will total \$63 million.
- Many of these films have achieved notable success both in Canada and abroad; examples include *Amina*, *Stories We Tell*, *Trick or Treaty*, *My Prairie Home*, *Danny* and *La marche à suivre*.

Co-production is one of the strategies that the NFB has adopted to pursue its mandate and to promote audiovisual production in Canada. By acting as co-producer, the NFB enables private-sector producers to take commercial and artistic risks that they could not take otherwise. With the NFB as their partner, they can pool financial and artistic resources to carry out projects that otherwise would never see the light of day. The NFB plays this role as a source of financial leverage in many Canadian productions. We thus contribute to creativity both in production financing and in artistic quality and innovation, thereby adding value to Canadian documentary feature film productions.

The accessibility of documentary feature films to the Canadian public

The big challenge for the NFB is the same as for Canada's feature film industry as a whole: to get our movies seen. And for them to be seen, they have to be easily accessible. In this sense, the emergence of new technologies has provided both unprecedented opportunities and numerous challenges. These technologies have profoundly altered feature film viewing habits by dramatically increasing both the variety of delivery channels and the volume of new content available from all over the world.

For the NFB, facilitating access to the audiovisual works that we produce is a top priority. The digital shift has given us the opportunity to renew our commitment to our audience and win the hearts of the Canadian public once more by giving them new, improved access to our productions. In 2009, we launched our online Screening Room at NFB.ca, and since then, it has received over 30 million views. When views of our productions on our partners' platforms are included, the total since 2009 is 60 million. I should also note that over 11 million of these views took place on CAMPUS, our online platform for the Canadian educational and institutional market.

Thanks to our online distribution platform, Canada and the world can now watch about 3000 NFB films for free, at home and on mobile devices. A large part of our priceless collection is now accessible to Canadians on the platform of their choice, wherever and whenever they like.

The NFB will soon be launching a redesigned version of its viewing platform. Our feature film offerings will be enhanced with Canadian independent fiction films and with independent documentary films from throughout the world. Our objective is to offer 3500 films, 98% of them Canadian-made. We want to position ourselves as the best destination for Canadian *auteur* documentaries and Canadian independent films and achieve a critical mass of users that lets us

offer a quality alternative to content publishers such as Netflix and YouTube. Through this online showcase, we want to give Canadian film lovers access to a diverse offering of feature films with the NFB's seal of quality, while engaging more closely with our audiences.

Conclusion

The NFB faces many challenges today, just like the Canadian documentary feature industry as a whole. Success for all of us will depend on our ability to innovate and adapt. Like many institutions, the NFB has changed its ways of doing things in order to adjust to new technologies, new viewing habits and the increasingly globalized competition in the film industry.

It was in this context that I recently began to oversee an organizational transformation at the NFB, with the goals of consolidating our financial capabilities, maintaining our leadership in creation and innovation, and strengthening our primary strategic role as a public producer.

To advance the Canadian feature film industry, we must encourage and support the visibility and accessibility of Canadian feature films, both fiction and documentary. Canadian feature films are more than just entertainment; they are the means by which Canadians can look at themselves and express their culture and their identity. And for this Canadian art form to continue to flourish and to touch people both at home and abroad, it is just as essential to provide efficient funding for Canadian feature films as it is to ensure that these works are readily accessible to the public. Lastly, we must also make room for emerging artists, so that Canadian filmmaking talent can continue to make us dream and show us the world.

Appendix

Summary statistics on NFB feature films completed from 2009-2010 to 2013-2014

Year	NFB Productions		NFB Co-productions			Total		
	Number	Total Cost ¹	Number ⁴	NFB share ²	Total budget ³	Number	NFB share	Total budget
2009-2010	5	2 376 883	9	2 178 848	8 334 303	14	4 555 731	10 711 186
2010-2011	3	1 085 061	11	3 407 249	9 466 503	14	4 492 310	10 551 564
2011-2012	6	5 442 281	7	1 834 357	9 052 232	13	7 276 638	14 494 513
2012-2013	5	4 187 120	8	2 042 414	10 111 190	13	6 229 534	14 298 310
2013-2014	11	6 636 777	7	1 690 454	6 452 904	18	8 327 231	13 089 681
	30	19 728 122	42	11 153 322	43 417 132	72	30 881 444	63 145 254

Over the past 5 years, the NFB has produced or co-produced a total of 72 feature-length films. Out of this total, 30, with a total budget of \$19.8 million, were produced by the NFB alone, with no backing from any partners. The 42 others were co-produced with the private sector; the total budget for these films was \$43.4 million, of which the NFB's share totalled \$11.2 million.

Notes:

¹Total cost is the total cost of production. These costs are divided across several fiscal years.

²NFB share is the amount in the co-production contract. The NFB's total costs are approximately 20% higher. The additional costs consist mainly of producers' fees and overhead.

³Total budget is the budget in the co-production contract.

⁴Includes 1 animated feature and 2 fiction features; includes 6 international co-productions