

George Stoney

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VTR St-Jacques (réal. Bonnie Sherr Klein ; prod. George C. Stoney, 1969)
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George Stoney arrived at the National Film Board of Canada in 1968 to oversee the Challenge for Change programme as its executive producer. U.S. born with a background in journalism, educational film and documentary, Stoney arrived with a strong commitment to socially engaged filmmaking. His impact on the ethical dimensions of the NFB's programme was immediate and proved long-lasting; his interest in film and video as tools for organizing communities continues, as does his influence on new generations of documentary filmmakers. The Library of Congress added All My Babies, his landmark 1953 film about African American midwifery in the American south, to the National Film Registry in 2002.

Roots in the National Film Board

Bonnie Klein was the person who suggested to the NFB that they might consider me to head the Challenge for Change programme [following John Kemeny's departure], but I had had a long

association with the NFB before that. Nicholas Reid, an American who had worked at the NFB for four years, brought me into film in 1946. He had been greatly influenced by Grierson. I said, "I don't know anything about film, I'm a journalist." He said, "Fine, we will bring people down from the NFB to work with you." So we had a number of people come down and join us in Athens, Georgia and we used to see those early NFB films — so that was, in effect, my film school. In early 1948, I spent a month at the NFB travelling around the rural circuits and getting to know people at the NFB. They had seen films I had made. Bonnie's recommendation was crucial, but I did have a background at the NFB including an acquaintance with Colin Low.

My sponsored films in the United States benefited from my knowledge of what was happening in Canada and benefited greatly from the fact that NFB films were seen widely in the U.S. at the time, something that is tragically lost now. The Canadian government was using NFB films as a primary means of building a good relationship with people in the US and building a relationship of understanding about Canadian culture. They had distribution offices, schools were using NFB films — there was very wide distribution and there was a real status to NFB films at the time.

I had made films about most of the subjects that were on board for Challenge for Change. I had gotten into film as a maker of sponsored film for agencies — I did not know what an independent film was. I was always a gun for hire. But I had my own agenda and so I soon learned to use the assignments I got as a way of saying what I wanted to say. And I did not necessarily see that as a contradiction. Most of the time I was making films that were then going to be used for a particular purpose. Experimenting with film and the methods for using it were all a part of my job. I learned that from the people who came down from the NFB in the late forties to work with us in Athens who of course had been inspired by Grierson. So when I came to the board in 1968 I was, in effect, bringing an enthusiasm for the old Grierson-ian approach that was the foundation for Challenge for Change and which so many people at the NFB had forgotten in the process.

Challenge For Change

When I was invited to come up [to Canada], Challenge for Change had already been in action for over a year. They had already made that compilation film, *Challenge for Change* (Bill Reid, 1968), and in it, these guys in suits and ties were saying some pretty revolutionary things. There was always the potential for the programme to become a victim of bureaucracy, but it was always part of our job to keep that

from happening. Société nouvelle had its own division — the only time we got together was to go to Ottawa to meet with the Interdepartmental Committee. At that time there was a very clear division between the French and the English. The conflict was in the air and as an American I was bewildered by it; I did not understand what was happening, but I very soon found out.

The tension was very strong. But remember, it simply echoed what was in the street. You remember what happened between 1968 and 1970 — things were really hot. There were deaths — it was a minor social revolution. And I knew nothing about that. The NFB was moved from Ottawa to Montreal in part to do something about that, but the division was very clear. I remember being so startled at going into the cafeteria, meeting someone from the French side that I knew and speaking freely, but if another Frenchman [sic] arrived the conversation would change immediately, and if a third arrived it was “Shhh...” like kids in a high school with clubs. I do not know that the staff were conscious of their behaviour. I came in with all the naivety of thinking, “This is so silly. Let’s just have mixed crews and that will solve everything.” [laughs]

I realized that people on the French side thought that I was a patsy and I would not know the rules. When I first got here I was invited to a film the French unit had made about a community in the French part of Montreal called Little Burgundy — *La p'tite Bourgogne* (Maurice Bulbulian, 1968) — and my first thought was, “Gee, what a wonderful film. We should make an English version of that.” And they were opposed, but I asked, “Why not? Challenge for Change can get a film on the cheap.” Then they really thought they had me set up. Challenge for Change was paid for by eight government departments, each of which put in \$100,000 which was matched by \$100,000 from the free vote of the NFB — so there was a budget of \$1.6 million. The French unit was getting one-third of the budget but they felt they should have half. They said, “We’ve always been repressed, we haven’t had our share throughout history...” and I said, “Bullshit.” They have less than a third of the population, they were geographically together so there were no travel expenses like the rest of the programme. “You should get only twenty-five percent,” I said, and you could tell no one had ever spoken to the French department like that before. “It’s twenty-five percent or nothing.” So after a brief argument their budget allocation stuck at thirty-three percent. [laughs] Being an outsider gave me certain advantages which I took. I could be the American who did not have to understand and could break some rules. I think it helped sometimes. On the other hand, I had a lot to learn. Fortunately, I had Dorothy Hénaut and Colin Low — who were insiders — who would help me.

Regionalization at the NFB

The NFB had had regional libraries and regional representatives for a very long time. When I first came up in 1948, I met a lot of those field people. My biggest supporters for Challenge for Change were those veteran field people who were hungry for the times when they were out there with the films under their arms showing them to people and getting immediate responses. Between 1948 and when I returned in 1968, there had been a big shift in the NFB — the shift towards getting on television, getting into theatres, making feature films. And now the definition of the NFB was something different from making good films for good purposes to show in 16mm. “No! The NFB was 35mm in the theatres!” They had forgotten the original mandate. But not these old field people. They welcomed Challenge for Change because that was the reason they got into the NFB in the first place. And they were glad it was being recognized. The pattern for distribution was there, but I emphasized it and said it was an important thing to do.

That is not to say there was a clear mandate for Challenge for Change. It evolved. It was not something that got written up, and it was a bewilderment to many people at the NFB — it was anathema to some of the people. But I never felt that there was an opposition to what we were trying to do. “You do your thing, I’ll do my thing.” I found that we could get some of the best people at the NFB to work with us provided it did not interfere with their work schedules. *You Are On Indian Land* (Mort Ranson, 1969) is a beautiful example. Tony Lanzelo, who shot it, just volunteered right off the bat — he saw that there was something to be done. No one shied away from the assignments.

Video and Challenge for Change

I had used video when I was teaching at Stanford simply as a device to help students realize the difference between stage and screen. But it was so persnickety that when I got to the NFB and found that they had ordered all these videos, I was appalled. When Bonnie and Dorothy started using video in the St-Jacques district for *VTR St-Jacques* (Bonnie Klein, 1969), I approved it as a project only if they would make a proper film about it because I wanted something to show. That was the reason *VTR St-Jacques* was made. *Citizen’s Medicine* (Bonnie Klein, 1970) may have even come first, and the idea of having people do it themselves was something I came to accept only slowly.

I had been troubled during my career in filmmaking by constantly finding myself making films I felt people should have been making for themselves, school teachers who knew more about the subject than I did, even though I knew about exposures and f-stops, etc. In a film called *All My Babies* (1953), I used a midwife as a narrator because she could show us how to do it, and the next step was having people do it themselves. I came to that only slowly, and that vision was Dorothy's and Bonnie's and the others who were working on that type of project. And it was only after I went back and looked at the Fogo process and saw how Colin Low was doing it even before video that I saw the advantages.

Canadian-ness and Challenge for Change

The administrators in Canada seemed to understand what we wanted to do and seemed to want us to do it. Maybe it is just Canadian, I do not know. Was Challenge for Change uniquely Canadian? Is it a model that cannot be used in other places? In general, Challenge for Change was based on the assumption that the contending forces want to find some common meeting ground. In the United States, we want to confront first, conciliation is considered a sign of weakness. I think that in general it is a programme that only works when both sides want to conciliate and there is an intermediary that both sides trust and who does not have its own agenda. That is probably where we felt we did not do as well as we could in some instances, because the people working for Challenge for Change did have a strong social agenda which they could not relinquish. I think when Peter Katadotis came along with some of the community organizers they wanted it to be a confrontational thing. And I think for that reason a lot of their projects did not work.

I always had absolutely positive experiences with Canadian civil servants. A good example is from the time we were shooting my film *God Help the Man Who Would Part With His Land* (1971). I remember sitting around one Sunday morning and a tax collector came down and said, "What the hell are you doing here? If you succeed in making this [area] Indian land, a lot of money will disappear from the tax revenues. It's going to be hard on this county. You're using government money to do this and you're getting paid — it's not as though you're volunteering." I said, "Well, would you mind coming on camera and talking about this?" And he did! It was that kind of openness that I found all the time, which I do not find in the United States.

I had only a few opportunities to apply a Challenge for Change approach in the United States. One of them was with the Office of Vocational Education and Training of the Health Education and

Welfare Department in Washington. It had just been taken over by a woman who was a friend of a friend and she was disturbed that some of their programmes were not doing very well. She felt that the officials should listen to the people who were experienced in the field. She had seen some Challenge for Change films so she hired me [and a partner] to do that. We signed a contract to make these “video memos” as we called them, working on three-quarter inch video. As soon as the contract was signed, we had to go out and get this material. But we found that the woman who hired us had the power to issue the contract but did not have the power to get us accepted into any of the regional offices. The regional offices felt this was a fancy way for Washington to send out spies! We did, however, shoot our video memos and it was very good stuff — calm, not confrontational. The people were illustrating some of the problems when you have very strict rules that rule-out some of the clients you should be helping. We demonstrated that. She saw it and liked it very much — but she could never get those videos shown at any of the regional offices. They felt it was a criticism of their work, so forty-thousand dollars of federal money was wasted. And that is not an uncommon experience I have had in trying to apply the Challenge for Change model in the United States.

Against the Observational Documentary

I think the observational film works well for certain things, but it can be very misleading. It is a valid technique, but when it becomes a philosophy, it is problematic. You saw its positive aspects in *God Help the Man Who Would Part with His Land*. But I have never really been sure what my own philosophy is. [laughs] It was certainly consistent with my experience in filmmaking. I always knew that I was not going to Hollywood, I was not going to have my name on the marquee — you dream every once in a while, of course you do — but realistically I knew that was not where my interest was. I got into filmmaking as a journalist and as a social activist I suppose — I did not know I was as a social activist but that is the definition now. I did not get into it as a would-be feature filmmaker and that makes a difference in one’s approach. And it took me a very long time to appreciate what Grierson did in honouring the art of film as well as the social purpose of film. That is something that Grierson did very well — you see it in Basil Wright’s *Song of Ceylon* (1934). Wright was sent out to the island of Ceylon to promote the tea trade and brought back something very different. Grierson recognized it as a work of art and used it as that. You could not find two people with more contrary ideas of the social purpose of film than Grierson and Flaherty, but Grierson recognized Flaherty’s genius as an artist, a cameraman, and hired him for that reason. Grierson always recognized those things and the NFB did too, and to this day I show films from those

days to my classes that still thrill them. Like *Paul Tomkowicz: Street-railway Switchman* (Roman Kroitor, 1954) from *Faces in Canada* — designed for the theatres — the artistry in that film and the humanity in that film were all of a piece. And I can feel that in my students right now — that beautiful feature length film that Cynthia Scott made called *Strangers in Good Company* (1990), for example. Again, a high level of filmmaking and artistry, a wonderful feeling of humanity, all of that together — you find in the best work from the NFB.

The Legacy of Challenge for Change

I do not think that film, video, or any other medium can produce change on its own. I think it is merely an instrument for producing change. People produce change. And I think the greatest misunderstanding about Challenge for Change has come about because people think that the mechanism is the answer rather than the use of the mechanism. It depends on how it is applied. Whether it is used in a positive or negative way, whether it is used at the proper time, whether the projector is cut off when it is time to talk. The idea of Challenge for Change was to use the medium as a way of getting people to talk. If you look at the end of *VTR St-Jacques* it says it very clearly, “It’s just an instrument”. The important thing is to get people to talk together.

One of the very sad things about the influence of Challenge for Change was that the instrument was misinterpreted. People said, “Ah, if people get videos they can make social change.” Rather than saying video has to be used for social change. Many people got money from social agencies and grant agencies to do that, as though just buying the equipment solves problems. But it does not, and people all over the world were misled by this. UNESCO got hold of the idea and it was written up all over the place. It is a real tragedy. I found this out when I went to London in 1985 — I was asked to go over there by a group of people who had been using video and they had just had their grants caught off by the London County Council. No more money for video. Well, I looked into it and I found out that the reason was they had promised all sorts of things that this instrument was going to do, and instead they had used the equipment to make programmes that they hoped would be broadcast on the BBC. They really were not using it for the social purposes they claimed — they were claiming too much, and you could see that happening over and over again.

Another thing: filmmakers too often forget the immediate impact that release of their film can have on the people they have exposed on the screen. A case in point is *The Things I Cannot Change* (Tanya Ballantyne, 1967), a beautiful film made by a very sensitive filmmaker.

It was made and released just before I arrived at the NFB. The family learned that they were on national TV only when a neighbor called. The exposure was so negative that they moved out of their neighborhood to avoid the derision of people in the street. I wrote a letter of apology and, more important, wrote a piece in the Challenge for Change newsletter saying this will never happen again. Had the family not only been forewarned about the broadcast but helped to understand the worthy purpose of the film and how their appearance was helping other poor people I think they might have had a different — perhaps an even positive — response. As a filmmaker in the southern US, knowing that my films would be seen first in the communities where they were shot, I had learned both how to prepare people in advance for the experience of seeing themselves on the screen and being seen by their neighbors.

As a filmmaker I seldom think of myself as an independant artist with a purely personal vision. So I do not mind when others use my work in ways I have not originally conceived of. I love to shape my work to produce an effect in the viewing room, like most filmmakers. But if a social activist wants to select some part of it to get people thinking about the basic problem and then turn off the projector before my carefully designed sequence is done I am just as happy so long as viewers are moved to action.

Now I am not saying that films for social action cannot, at the same time, be works of art. Having the combination is what Grierson understood and advocated. *Wiff* (Robert Nichol, 1968) is a beautiful film. I saw it soften the hearts of statisticians at the Department of Agriculture who were thinking of clearing farmers off unproductive land in purely numerical terms. And I saw it being used by one of NFB's field representatives to help save his own father from being removed from his farm. Grierson understood how this works and helped his troops at the Board to understand it. We were simply rediscovering it with Challenge for Change.

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[Emren Meroglu is also a graduate of the MA Film Studies at Concordia University. His interests include the cinemas of the Middle East, particularly the history of Turkish cinema.]

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project began. His research interests include documentary film, film style, popular music, and sound studies; his recent publications include a chapter in 24 Frames: The Cinema of Canada (ed. Jerry White, Wallflower Press).]

Filmography — George Stoney

God Help the Man Who Would Part with His Land (George Stoney, 1971)

Produced by: Colin Low, Tom Daly

"I Don't Think It's Meant for Us ..." (Kathleen Shannon, 1971)

Produced by: George C. Stoney, Colin Low

Nell and Fred (Richard Todd, 1971)

Produced by: George C. Stoney

These Are My People ... (Michael Mitchell, Willie Dunn, Barbara Wilson, Roy Daniels, 1969)

Produced by: George C. Stoney

Up Against the System (Terence Macartney-Filgate, 1969)

Produced by: George C. Stoney

VTR St-Jacques (Bonnie Sherr Klein, 1969)

Produced by: George C. Stoney