

The Catherine Films



Rethinking Our National Cinema from an Amateur Perspective

BY LIZ CZACH

In 1999, a Toronto film collector and exhibitor sorted through a box of film that had been given to him a few years earlier. In the box were six rolls of pristine 16 mm Kodachrome reversal motion-picture film. They depicted the everyday domestic life of a wealthy Toronto family from the late 1930s through to the early 1950s. Although they were amateur productions, the reels stood out because of their technical prowess, excellent condition and value as a social document. The six, 400-foot reels were labelled with dates and locations providing some minimal clues to their origin. But like many amateur and home-movie footage that is found at flea markets and estate sales, the identity of the filmmaker and the family documented was unknown. Shortly following their rediscovery, the reels were edited together in roughly chronological order, dubbed *The Catherine Films*, and screened to the public in March 1999.

The Catherine Films are named after the young girl who appears in the films. Her name is evident on some of the film labels as well as on the inscription of a birthday cake. While knowing Catherine's first name rescued her from complete anonymity, the identity of the film's other subjects, as well as the filmmaker, remained a mystery. Not content to let a screening of these private home movies be made public without any attempt to find the film's participants, Toronto filmmaker and historian John Porter sought out to find Catherine. Through a brilliant effort of sleuthing that he recounts in his piece "Blow-Up: *The Catherine Films*" in *Lux: A Decade of Artists Film and Video*,¹ Porter found Catherine and identified the filmmaker as her father, James Dauphinee.

My desire to write about *The Catherine Films* is not to elevate James Dauphinee to the status of auteur or undiscovered genius but rather to celebrate the amateur. There is no doubt that *The Catherine Films* are technically accomplished films, and the silent, colour footage is consistent with the kind of material found in many amateur films—trips, holidays, vacations and special events. Like many home moviemakers, James Dauphinee's films begin roughly with the birth of his daughter Catherine and documents her growing up until she is in her mid-teens in the early 1950s.

The Catherine Films depict the events of childhood and family life. Catherine is shown riding her tricycle, roller-skating, playing on swings, etc. Trips are duly documented—rail trips to Banff, a trip to Quintland, Parliament Hill in Ottawa and vacations in Muskoka. Christmas holidays are recorded and requisite scenes of gift openings filmed. Special events are of interest, and we can glimpse Toronto bedecked in Union Jacks in celebration of the Royal visit in 1939. *The Catherine Films* provide a glimpse into a different era and are an important document of social history. But more than just a document of social history, *The Catherine Films* are an important document of film history.

The Catherine Films underscores the need to reconceptualize Canadian national cinema and rethink Canadian film history. The question is not whether *The Catherine Films* deserve a place within the list of "Forgotten Classics of Canadian Cinema," but rather raises the question of both how we define the classics, and how we canonize Canadian film. By placing a home movie, a decidedly amateur production, along side the other narrative feature films in this issue, *The Catherine Films* draws attention to how national cinema histories are primarily conceptualized as histories of narrative—and predominately art-house—cinema.

Canadian film history, like most national cinemas, is predominately written as a history of feature narrative films. In Canada, where narrative feature filmmaking was underdeveloped until the 1960s, it is imperative to look to other traditions of filmmaking practice as a crucial part of our film history. In this regard, the documentary film has played a vital part in the evolution of Canadian film, given the dominance of the NFB in the absence of a viable feature-film industry. Considering this, the story of Canadian film is told as the absence of indigenous feature filmmaking, the dominance of American Hollywood product and the relative success of the NFB.

When examining the era of pre-1960s Canadian film history, we continue to view it only in terms of fictional narrative feature production and documentary films. By doing this we are denying ourselves a broader film history. Absent from this history are marginal film practices such as educational, industrial and amateur films. As Christopher Gittings has pointed out in his recent book *Canadian National Cinema*, "Following the First World War, government sponsored documentaries promoting tourism and trade, as well as industrial shorts, comprised the vast majority of Canadian film production."² Understanding this, we need to rethink our cinema history to include a myriad of film-production forms. In a country where so little has been produced and so much lost, we need to save our cinematic heritage in whatever forms it can be found.

William O'Farrell of the National Archives of Canada has convincingly suggested that Canadian film history should be viewed in terms of the history of industrial film production rather than feature films. Until 1960, only 100 features were produced in Canada, with 100 in the following decade, and about 3,000 since 1970. Thus, prior to 1970, the impact of the industrial-film genre is critical to an understanding of Canadian cinema. A critical example of the importance and influence of industrial filmmaking in Canada is the career of Budge Crawley. Crawley started Crawley Films with his wife Judith in 1939 (the same year as the founding of the NFB), making industrial films for a large number of clients, including the NFB. He made forays into feature filmmaking as producer of Irwin Kershner's *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* (1964) and continued producing films into the 1970s, eventually earning an Oscar in 1976 for his feature documentary, *The Man Who Skied down Everest*.

However, Crawley began as an amateur. He was a member of the Amateur Cinema League and then moved onto professional productions. My claim is not that all amateur productions will necessarily lead to professional work nor do all amateur films show the talent of a Budge Crawley. But rather I am arguing that Canadian cinema history needs to reassess amateur productions. We should begin to recognize that much of

our cinema may be a cinema of amateurs. The question of distinguishing between professional and amateur has always plagued our cinema—how to compete with the production costs and values of big-budget Hollywood films? Are not our productions always being ridiculed as "amateurish"? Perhaps it's time to embrace the amateur—particularly in terms of our pre-1960s film heritage.

Amateur films are integral to film history. Unlike the nation-building exercises of the NFB and the multiple state agencies that have existed over the years from federal motion picture bureaus and development agencies right through to Telefilm, amateur film provides another form of Canadian cinema. Amateur films of the pre-1960s provide a necessary counterpoint to the unifying vision of a national film project or a legislated national cinema. As Patricia Zimmermann has pointed out, "amateur film can act as a local and regional witness. Amateur film's sites of inscription are in the small

archives in Maine, local historical societies, specialized collections (Prelinger Associates, Human Studies Film Archives) in countries without a tradition of commercial cinema such as Wales or Scotland, and in regional cinematheques."³ Canada is often viewed as lacking such a commercial cinema. Amateur film gives us access to people and places absent from other cinematic representations.

Micheline Morisset, archivist at the National Archives has persuasively argued for the need to preserve home movies. She writes: "Many will think how 'boring' but as a source of documentation about the daily life of individuals at a certain time and in a particular country, no documents are of greater value. They speak to us better than any book could ever do about the habits and the mores of a particular community at a point in time in a certain place, and all without any staging by a director or of the intervention of a producer concerned only with

making money. Better than any photograph, they reveal the way people looked, lived and acted. They bring information we would have to gather from many different sources and reconstitute a way of life, a manner of being and the true appearance of individuals caught in the course of sharing a few moments of their lives with us."⁴ While amateur film may not necessarily show us the true appearance of things, it offers a different view of our selves—our country and our national cinema. **TAKE ONE**

Notes:

1. John Porter, "Blow-Up: The Catherine Films," *Lux: A Decade of Artist's Film and Video*, edited by Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor (Toronto: Pleasure Dome and YYZ Books, 2000).
2. Christopher E. Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema: Ideology, Difference and Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 77.
3. Patricia Zimmermann, "Cinéma et démocratie," *Communications* 68, 1991, p. 283.
4. Micheline Morisset, "Home Movies," *The Archivist: Magazine of the National Archives of Canada* No. 108, 1995, pp. 28-9.

