

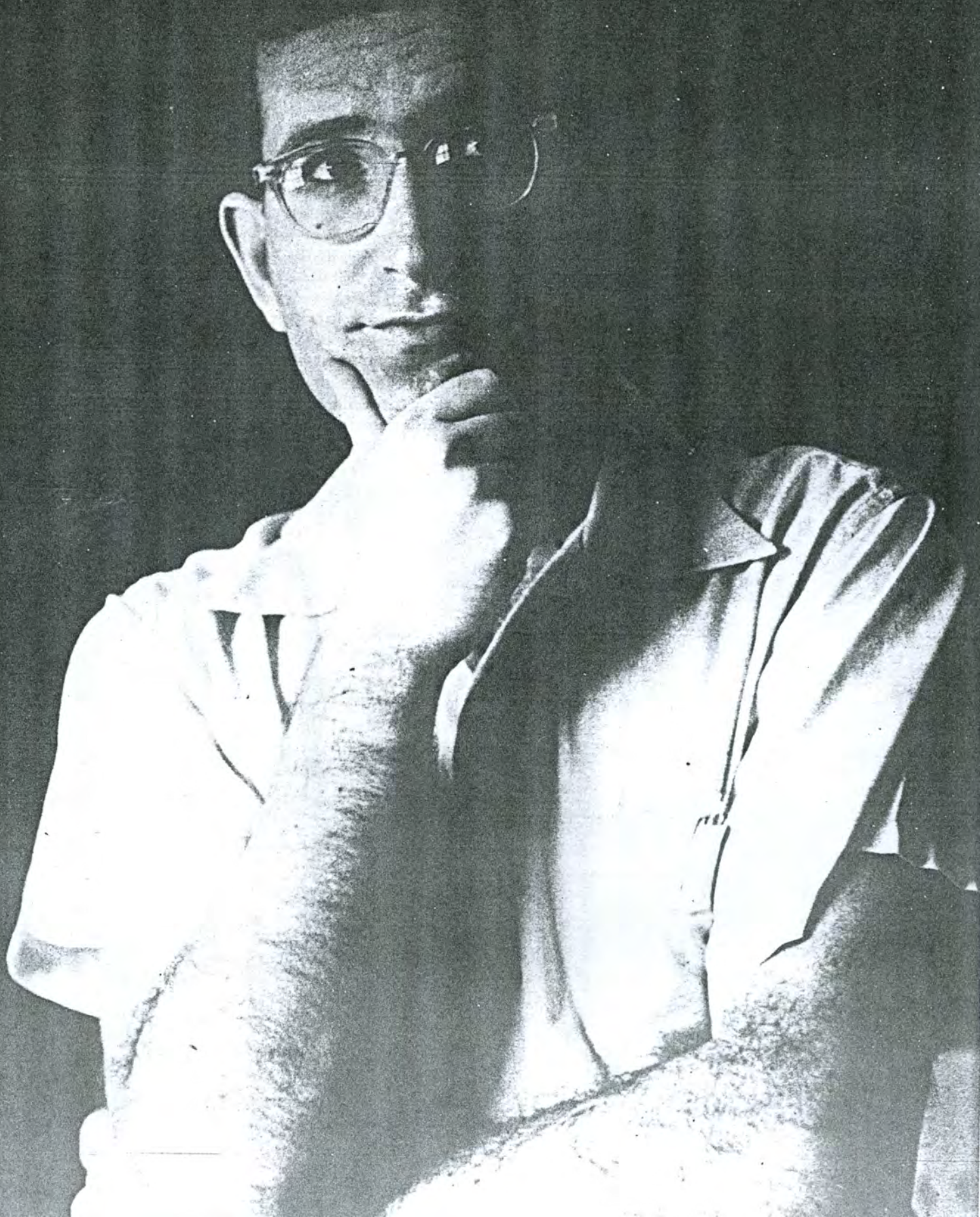
Colorless games  
sleep

*mediating*

# CHOMSKY

By Marc Glassman

A nearly three-hour documentary on an American academic and political activist has become one of the surprise successes of the current crop of Canadian films. **Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media** is a uniquely cinematic approach to the provocative ideas of MIT professor Noam Chomsky. The film is the product of five years of intensive research, analysis and filmmaking by Montreal-based cinéastes Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick.



HO IS NOAM CHOMSKY? Everyone, from the filmmakers in their press kit to Peter Gzowski on CBC Radio's *Morningside* inevitably quotes the same description of this controversial figure: "Judged in terms of power, range, novelty and influence of his thought, Noam Chomsky is arguably the most important intellectual alive." This quotation from the *New York Times Book Review* is challenged by Chomsky in the film in a characteristically ironic manner: "You've got to watch those things. The next sentence is, 'since that's the case, how can he write such terrible things about American foreign policy?' People never quote that part. But, in fact, if it wasn't for that second sentence, I would begin to think that I'm doing something wrong."

Both quotations are typical of the dualistic (and dual-istic!) approach that the media—and mainstream criticism—have towards Chomsky and his own "intellectual self-defence." Noam Chomsky is acknowledged by foes and friends alike as one of the most important linguistic theorists of contemporary times. His studies in linguistic and cognitive science led him to the conclusion that human beings possess an innate creative process whereby they can construct systems of language from an early age. This argument, first proposed by him in the mid-1950s, sparked the so-called Chomskyan revolution which has marked linguistic and semantic thought since that time.

In the mid-1960s, Chomsky delivered a paper entitled "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," in which he began to argue that he and other members of the intelligentsia should descend from their ivory towers and engage in the political debates which were ongoing at the time. Chomsky's first foray into political dissent occurred with his opposition to the war in Vietnam. It has continued with marked force and vigor over the ensuing quarter-of-a-century as he has confronted issues as far-ranging in impact as the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, the ongoing conflict in Palestine, and the United States government's complicity with its own corporate elites. Through lectures, articles and books, Chomsky has railed against the mendacity of the US foreign and domestic policy. In particular, he has focused his attention on the mass media and its collaboration in the framing of public opinion on these policies.

Although Chomsky has been vilified by critics ranging from famed conservative and gadfly William F. Buckley Jr. to novelist Tom Wolfe (*Bonfire of the Vanities*), his principled stance has won him many adherents. Independent of each other in the mid-1980s, Mark Achbar (then living in Toronto) and Peter Wintonick (in Montreal) first became interested

in the possibility of creating a cinematic study of Chomsky. The two met in 1987 while working on Peter Watkins' epic documentary, *The Journey*. "When that film was completed, Peter and I decided to generate a vehicle for Chomsky's ideas and the ideas that Chomsky might represent in terms of critical discourse," recounts Achbar. "We wanted to represent his intervention on the cultural-political level."

Chomsky is first and foremost an intellectual given to great and complicated thoughts about a number of different issues. His prime concerns are in the political and linguistic arenas, but he has increasingly turned his attention to mass media's "propaganda machine" in recent years. The filmmakers found by focusing on Chomsky's work in that field they could delineate his philosophy and make him more accessible to the public. Achbar describes the point at which he and Wintonick found their subject. "He (Chomsky) was starting to write *Necessary Illusions* and *Manufacturing Consent*. Because of our interest in media, these books seemed to be a window on the rest of his life. All his political analysis is refracted through the media and is a critique of media perceptions of world events." Achbar and Wintonick are not naive. Both have worked in film and television for nearly twenty years. Both are media activists who are dedicated to the promulgation of politically responsible, alternative perspectives on current events. They skillfully use the techniques of media construction of public opinion to transform Chomsky, the media anti-hero, into the film's hero.

A lengthy film about the ideas of a radical political activist who talks a lot poses unique problems. To solve them, the directors created a meta-structure. The film is essentially a lecture followed by a question-and-answer period. They disguise the formal structure by breaking up the film into bite-size sections ranging from Chomsky on the propaganda machine, to Chomsky on genocide in East Timor, to Chomsky debating issues related to freedom of speech. Members of the audience—who are naturally more interested in Chomsky's radical content than in the film's form—won't even realize that the meta-structure is in place. Within any one of the modules, the audience sees Chomsky lecturing and responding to questions on a given topic with illustrative examples from the media (television or the press) and staged and/or edited sequences by Achbar and Wintonick.

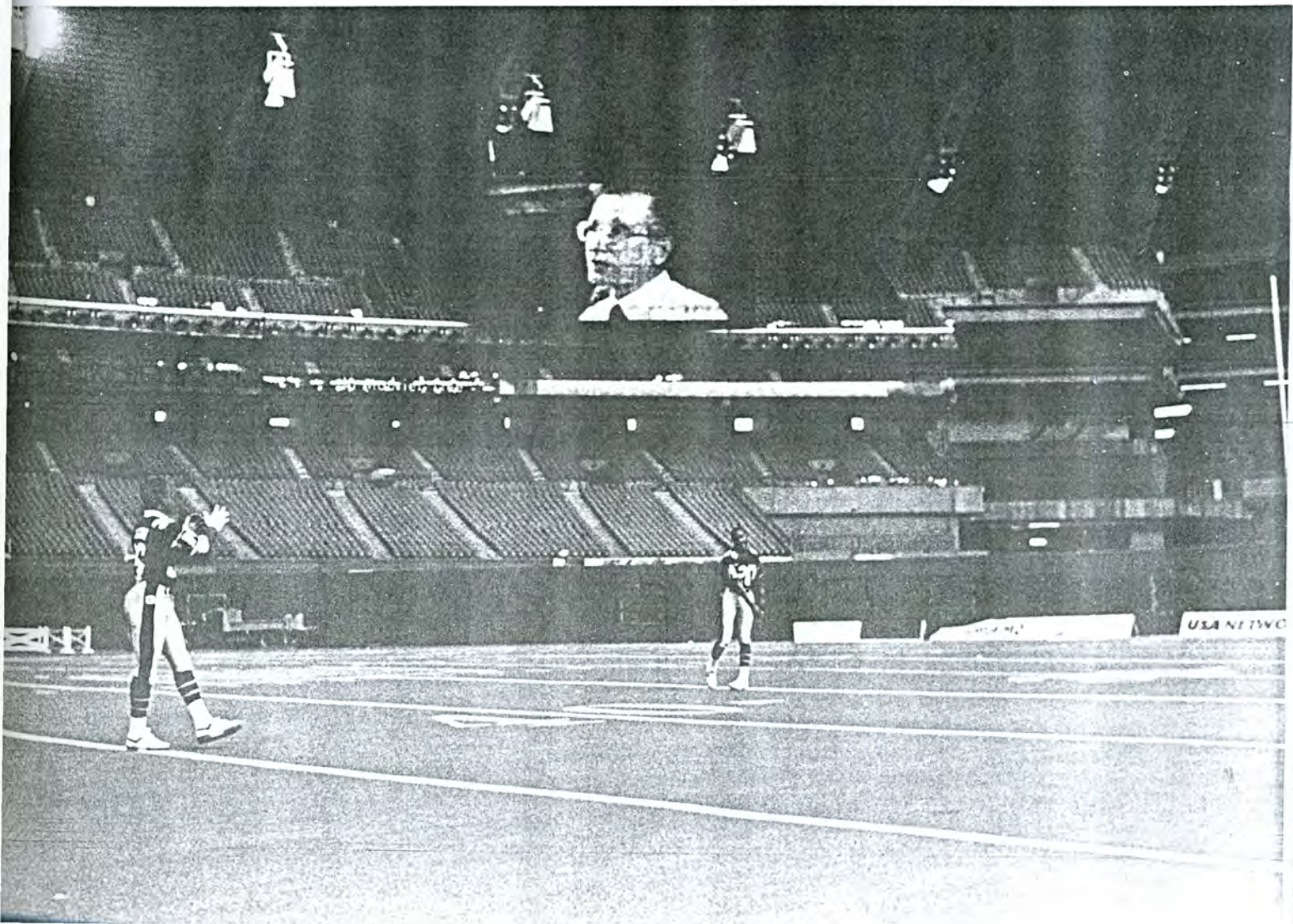
Part I of *Manufacturing Consent* concludes with a self-styled "case study" of Chomsky's methodology. The subject is the media's treatment of East Timor; it allows us an entrée into Achbar and Wintonick's methodology for constructing each section of the film. This module opens with Chomsky being interviewed by Wintonick. Chomsky observes that history rarely allows an exact comparison between two political events. In the late 1970s, however, horrific atrocities occurred simultaneously in Cambodia and East Timor. The film then cuts to archival footage of ABC News covering Pol Pot and the



Khmer Rouge devastating Cambodia. This sequence is shortly followed by Elaine Briere, a Vancouver photojournalist, describing East Timor in the early 1970s as a "safe, stimulating, nurturing environment." Following archival photos of a peaceful East Timor (a tiny nation in the South Pacific between Indonesia and Australia), the action abruptly speeds up with Chomsky commenting over war footage from 1975 when, after a brief civil war, Indonesia chose to invade the former Portuguese colony. The module then shifts to historic footage of Greg Shackleton, an Australian journalist, talking about how devastating the invasion had been for the East Timorese. It emerges that this would be Shackleton's last broadcast. He (along with six colleagues) was killed the next day. After footage of dead bodies in East Timor and an account of the ineffectiveness of the United Nations to mediate the situation, the camera returns to Chomsky. He states that by 1978 the situation in East Timor had reached genocidal proportions. He then makes the comparison to Cambodia where atrocities of a similar proportion had been carried out by the Khmer Rouge. The audience sees images of Time, Newsweek and Reader's Digest, all dealing with Cambodia. Achbar and Wintonick then stage a "demonstration" for the audience. From 1975 to 1979, the rolls of column inches in the New York Times on Cambodia and East Timor are set up side-by-side in a race on a well-lit hardwood floor. Cambodia wins hands down, 1175 column

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Chomsky on the video screen at Olympic Stadium, Montreal



inches, to 70 column inches for East Timor.

This case study shows not just the despair of what happened to the people of East Timor but how the propaganda machine of the United States operates. Coverage in the mainstream press dropped to virtually nothing after the Indonesian invasion. As the story continues, Karl Meyer of the *New York Times* and independent journalist Arnold Kohen recount their tale of how the *New York Times* eventually began to denounce the terrifying situation in East Timor. The filmmakers then cut back to Chomsky who points out that American culpability, through secret arms sales, in Indonesia's rape of East Timor was largely left unrecorded by the *New York Times*. Achbar and Wintonick stage a sequence in which they, as surgeons, cut and paste a *London Times* article demonstrating the U.S. involvement in East Timor. By the time their "surgery" is complete, the atrocities remain but US involvement has virtually disappeared. The filmmakers then cut back to Chomsky in one of his few emotional moments, in which he states: "These are not just academic exercises. We're not analyzing the media on Mars or in the eighteenth century or something like that. We're dealing with real human beings who are suffering and

critical of the United States, but also because his ideas are beyond the received notions expressed in the mass media. It is impossible for him to appear and state his arguments in the two-to-three minute format favoured by popular television. Achbar and Wintonick have found a way to deliver Chomsky's arguments in a manner that general audiences accustomed to popular media can absorb while conveying complex ideas.

Chomsky, himself, helps the filmmakers break up his arguments into smaller pieces. There is a remarkable consistency in what Chomsky says in books, lectures and interviews on any subject that he is concerned about. Rather than just relying on the consistency of one camera in one place as Chomsky delivers a brilliant five-to-ten minute lecture, the directors have the wit to realize that they can weave together "extracts from a lifelong performance." Achbar and Wintonick have performed a sleight of hand—the audience will feel entertained as well as intellectually stimulated. Chomsky is not funny, although he has a sardonic way of expressing himself on occasion. Reading Chomsky is not an amusing experience, although he is certainly enlightening. Through their editing techniques Achbar and Wintonick are

**"Judged in terms of power, range, novelty and influence of his thought, Noam Chomsky is arguably the most important intellectual alive. Since that's the case, how can he write such terrible things about American foreign policy?" *New York Times Book Review***



dying and being tortured and starving because of politics that we, as citizens of democratic societies, are directly involved in and are responsible for. The interests of power are served, not the needs of the suffering people, and not even the needs of the American people who would be horrified if they realized the blood that's dripping from their hands."

This process of Chomsky lecturing, interspersed with archival footage and staged

sequences, is repeated throughout *Manufacturing Consent*. Achbar and Wintonick create a collage of voices, a montage of images, so that each module works visually while allowing a lengthy argument to be developed properly. Chomsky rails against the notion of concision. He doesn't appear on ABC's *Nightline* or other mass media outlets, not only because he is

able to add quite a lot of wit to what is essentially a dry, serious political debate.

Achbar was nominated for a Gemini as a screenwriter on *The Canadian Conspiracy*, his witty look at Canadians in Hollywood. Wintonick is renowned as a skillful and resourceful editor (he was the supervising editor on Ron Mann's *Comic Book Confidential*). Together they have chosen to demonstrate Chomsky's theories by wild interventions and obvious montage techniques. Their appearance as surgeons in the East Timor section is an example of a technique that reminds one of the silent screen. They cut to a shot of Neptune after a producer at *Nightline* complains that Chomsky's opinions resemble something from that planet. During the debate between Chomsky and the Dutch Minister of Defence Fritz Bolkestein, the filmmakers intercut the verbal tussle with a boxing match. Chomsky scores points in a way that a fighter might. Even in the midst of the difficult intellectual and emotional moments, there is a leavening of humour through the editing process. The work of Achbar and Wintonick is reminiscent of the logic-by-association used by Buster Keaton and Mack Sennett. Their montage is constructed with virtuosity: indeed, the whole

film is brilliantly conceived and executed.

**Manufacturing Consent** is also loaded with ironies. The film is a propaganda piece made by two admirers who allow dissenting voices to appear (Buckley, Wolfe, Bolkestein) only to have these straw men blown away by the brilliance of Chomsky. The title appropriates a term—manufacturing consent—from a 1922 book by Walter Lippman (*Public Opinion*), which talked about galvanizing the public in a democratic state through propaganda. John Grierson, then a young student of mass communications in Scotland, obtained a research grant to go to the United States to investigate Lippman's ideas. Nearly twenty years later Grierson, who had by then coined the term "documentary," was asked by Prime Minister Mackenzie King to start up the National Film Board of Canada. Now, fifty years later, the NFB has co-produced a propaganda piece on someone who is profoundly opposed to using media as propaganda.

Throughout the film, criticism of Chomsky by members of the mainstream media focuses on the fact that neither he nor any of his colleagues can prove that an actual conspiracy against the dissemination of information exists. In response to the film, Peter Gzowski of CBC Radio and Craig MacInnis of the *Toronto Star*, among others, have questioned Chomsky's approach. Gzowski asked the directors about the so-called conspiracy theory, allowing the filmmakers to reiterate the point that Chomsky is engaging in institutional analysis, not promulgating a notion of an elite cabal directly controlling events. MacInnis, in his rather patronizing review of the film, makes fun of the filmmakers and Chomsky by suggesting that he couldn't publish his piece on *Manufacturing Consent* for several days because his dog had eaten his notes. The question, however, still remains: What does Chomsky and, by inference, what do the filmmakers think is the root cause of the selective creation of "newsworthy events" by the mass media? Chomsky does not answer the question directly. He simply wants people, in the words of the bumper sticker, to "question authority," his own included. "I'm not trying to convert but to inform. I don't want people to believe me any more than they should believe the party line I'm criticizing. In talks and in print, I try to stress what I think is true, that with a little willingness to explore and use one's mind, it is possible to discover a good deal about the social and political world that is generally hid-



Erin Mills Town Centre, Mississauga

den. I feel that I've achieved something if people are encouraged to take up this challenge and learn for themselves." Although this reply is admirable and adequate for the filmmakers and their audience, it should be noted that it does not directly address the question.

Another point of controversy in the ongoing discourse surrounding Chomsky is his steadfast defence of the freedom of speech. In a rather long and emotionally charged sequence in the film, the "Faurisson Affair" is presented and analyzed. Robert Faurisson is a French academic and Holocaust revisionist. When his opinions were being censored by the intellectual community in France, Chomsky came to his defence. An essay that he wrote defending Faurisson's right to his opinions was printed as an introduction to one of Faurisson's books. Mark Achbar, who is Jewish, filmed Faurisson in Paris. "It was not a pleasant day," he recalls. "You're confronted with your own ignorance. Faurisson is not a stupid

## Chomsky is engaging in institutional analysis, not promulgating a notion of an elite cabal directly controlling events.



Peter Wintonick and Mark Achbar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

person. In his own little realm, he's a Chomsky-like figure to his followers. In fact, in the kind of admiration that Guillaume, his publisher, had for him, I heard echoes of my own admiration for Chomsky, in the kind of words he used, about his encyclopedic knowledge and so on. It was very spooky."

Chomsky is not only Jewish, but the son of a man who wrote a book on the Hebrew language. In a biographical section in the film, he recalls his Hebraic roots in Philadelphia and New York during a period of radical intellectual dissent in the 1930s. This makes his defence of Faurisson and his condemnation of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians all the more piquant. Raised as a Zionist, Chomsky has had to question closely all of the principles he was taught in his own youth, rejecting some, and accepting those that still meet his own demanding criteria. Still, an admirer of the kibbutzim in Israel as an example of one of the rare political systems that has functioned well in a directly democratic tradition in the twentieth century, Chomsky has taken stands that run counter to his own familial roots. His emotional defence of Faurisson's right to free speech is as admirable as it is problematic. He overlooks

his own history and connection to the deaths of Jews in World War II by remaining an unswerving adherent to the underlying principle of untrammelled freedom to communicate.

Another fissure in Chomsky's cool, academic persona is the anecdote he recounts about a fat boy in the local schoolyard. Cajoled by a radio host, he recalls that he understood when he walked away from the boy being taunted that he had done something he should rightfully be ashamed of. He understood that from that point on he had to fight for the underdog. Chomsky maintains his boyhood convictions. The persona of the rigorous scientist, the cloak of being a cool and dispassionate analyzer of the media and of the worst excesses of the American political process, are camouflage. Behind them is still a 10-year-old kid who spent weekends helping his uncle at a newsstand in New York City while listening to Jewish intellec-

tual immigrants discuss what could be done to fight Hitler and to save the poor of the world. That childhood figure, revealed through this film, is endlessly appealing—although it is not the character Chomsky wants people to see. He finds it safer to be a scientist. It's fair to say that Noam Chomsky does not want to be treated as a hero. He doesn't want people to know about himself as a human being because he believes that his private life is not important.

It is an example of the excess—or vacuum—in contemporary thinking that we have to have heroes and villains. We tend to root for people and fight against other people in movies and television. If a three-hour film is going to work, there has to be a subtle emotional thread running through it. It is a mark of the brilliance of these filmmakers that they have created an emotional argument for their protagonist, despite his own wishes. We end up realizing that Chomsky is a hero who has, at great personal sacrifice, exposed truths about the globe's worst atrocities, and disclosed that the mass media are conduits for falsehoods, webs of lies and deceit. It is the final irony of this film that Wintonick and Achbar have manufactured our own consent for a figure who apparently does not want to be a hero.