

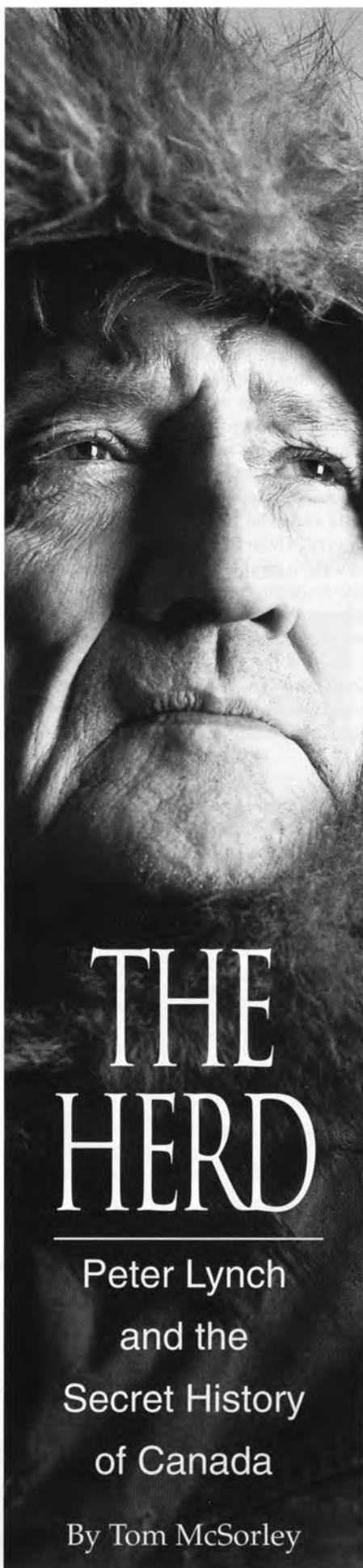


Photos courtesy of The National Film Board

A phonograph lies on the infinite northern tundra. Thousands of reindeer thunder across the horizon, silently directed by a solitary man who watches and listens. It is the 1930s. It is the Dominion of Canada. The man thinks, You don't lead the herd, the herd leads you. Soft tundra undulates under hard hooves. Fires burn on the snow. A reindeer is dismembered. The music dissolves. Where are we? What are we doing here? Where is here? Where are we headed? What have we seen?

All of these questions and many more are suggested by the extraordinary images in Peter Lynch's new film about a little-known fragment of Canada's history. Unlike most Canadians, it is a subject that clearly intrigues him and ignites his imagination. Indeed, no Canadian filmmaker since Donald Brittain has been so captivated by and effective at illuminating the obscure, often very weird and telling corners of Canada's past. For over five years the Toronto filmmaker has been beating the bushes in that huge, uncharted terrain of the Canadian collective unconscious, uncovering, even inventing,

A Canadian history that is both rich and strange. And nothing is quite as rich or as strange as what inspired his latest feature film, *The Herd*, the true story of an epic reindeer drive from Alaska to the Northwest Territories. Beyond the compelling narrative of the drive itself,



THE HERD

Peter Lynch
and the
Secret History
of Canada

By Tom McSorley

Lynch's second feature also offers a multilayered, ambitious examination of the idea of the North; the vertiginous and terrifying intersection of time and space; the limitations of empiricism and its shaping of Canadian documentary; the strange relationship between technology and nature in northern North America; and Canada's search for its history and, perhaps more significantly, for its mythic past.

Based on mountains of documentation and government files, *The Herd* is the story of a project worthy of Werner Herzog's opera fanatic, Fitzcarraldo (who probably would have taken the job if he hadn't gotten stranded in the jungles of Brazil hauling that damned boat up the mountain). Organized in 1929 by the Canadian government to import a herd of several thousand reindeer to help the starving Inuit of the Mackenzie Delta, the trek was led by Andrew Bahr, a 62-year-old Laplander commissioned to bring the reindeer from the Bering Sea across Alaska and into the Northwest Territories. A journey of 3,000 kilometres was expected to take one-and-a-half to two years—it took nearly six. Along the way there was all manner of bad weather, dissension in the ranks, starvation, reindeer gone missing, bureaucratic and scientific second-guessing from Ottawa, mental and physical exhaustion, threats from predators, and the watchful eye of a powerful U.S. entrepreneur who had money invested in the venture.

Constructed as a series of dramatic re-enactments combined skilfully with archival footage and often stunning cinematography, *The Herd* features performances by Doug Lennox, Colm Feore, Don McKellar, David Hemblen, Mark McKinney, Jim Allodi in its creative reconstitution of an unbelievable and absolutely true historical event. The film's narrative momentum is structured as a compendium of the various attitudes, interests and approaches to the project. There is the government-hired overseer, the self-aggrandizing and pedantic Dr. Porsild (Feore), who tells us that his maps, charts and artifacts give him scientific knowledge and mastery over the northern terrain. He intensely dislikes Andrew Bahr. There are two nebbish bureaucrats (McKellar and Allodi) in Ottawa who narrate the official history of the expedition, compiling extensive files and writing memos precisely apportioning blame for what went awry in the well-meaning but troubled government initiative. There is Carl Lomen (Hemblen), the Alaskan reindeer entrepreneur who sells the animals to Canada and who has a considerable financial stake in their safe delivery. There is the Alaskan undertaker George W. Mock, (McKinney), an erratic and impassioned 'northern eccentric' who wants to publicize the ill-fated trek by riding a dogsled from Kotzebue, Alaska, to the Chicago World's Fair in 1933. There are the tough and loyal Inuit brothers who assist Bahr along his odyssey. And, at the stoical epicentre of this tale, there is the taciturn drive leader and 'reindeer man,' Andrew Bahr (Doug Lennox), whose interior monologue (spoken by Graham Greene) narrates his perceptions of this incredible and interminable journey.

As with so many things in this country's cultural history, *The Herd* began with someone looking out into the vast landscape. While vacationing at a cottage near Gatineau, Que., co-writer Nicholas McKinney noticed a deer swimming across a lake. As others gathered to look, someone in the group mentioned an

article she had read in that quintessential Canuck journal, *The Beaver*, about the story of Andrew Bahr and his extraordinary reindeer drive. McKinney was fascinated and soon began to compile his own research files on this little-known tale of Canada's North. "It was just out of interest, really," says McKinney, "I had no plans to make it into a film, because I assumed it would cost too much and be ridiculously complicated to do. For about three years I just immersed myself in this astonishing tale in all its historical minutiae, and that was rewarding enough." It was while working on his CBC television series *Vacant Lot*, that McKinney met Peter Lynch and told him Bahr's story. Rightly figuring they had nothing to lose, Lynch (at that time still working with NFB producer Michael Allder on *Project Grizzly*) and McKinney decided to write a one-page treatment and submit it to Allder. Several development grants and research trips to the northern tundra later, *The Herd* was gradually transformed from a crazy idea for a film into a remarkable film about a crazy idea.

This is not unusual for Peter Lynch. His previous films, including the Genie Award-winning short *Arrowhead* (1993) and his internationally acclaimed first feature *Project Grizzly* (1996), are also remarkable films about ideas best described as offbeat, at times even lunatic. Although both are indisputably twisted slices of Canadian cultural anthropology, beneath their amusing surfaces are perceptive essays on the complex process of memory and history and its mysterious offspring, mythology. Indeed, both of Lynch's idiosyncratic protagonists are in pursuit of their own history and mythology. In *Arrowhead*, a short drama-cum-documentary, Ray Bud (Don McKellar) is our deadpan tour guide through his personal suburban Toronto history, imagining the long-buried histories of those—native tribes or mastodons—who once strode through the primeval swamps of Thorncliffe Park before him. In the documentary-

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cum-drama *Project Grizzly*, the loquacious Troy Hurtubise—a walking and incessantly talking embodiment and parody of technological determinism—wants above all to be remembered. As he says, “To leave something behind in life.” Significantly for Lynch, Hurtubise is acutely aware that dreams and visions that inhabit the Canadian landscape are not those of his descendants. Because or perhaps in spite of this, Troy wants to inscribe his name in Canada’s historical and mythological firmament; through Lynch’s film, he does just that.

As mere toddlers in historical terms, it seems we have no choice—as the noble nuttiness of both Ray and Troy demonstrate—but to imagine and invent a mythic past, or, at the very least, unearth what came before and try to suture our short history onto it. Call it ‘history by association,’ or a sincere and misguided Canuck adaptation of the aboriginal notion of ‘dreamtime.’ Whatever you call it, Peter Lynch understands that this need is ours and we must do with it what we can.

In a nation not known for dramatizing its history, the films of Peter Lynch are engaged in delivering to the Canadian screen what Pablo Neruda said must be the artist’s credo: “I am here to sing this history.” Lynch’s work attempts to penetrate the empirical evidence of our undernourished history to discover the mythological dimensions of Canadian life, whether in a drab suburban apartment tower, a donut shop in North Bay, or in a herd of reindeer being driven across the top of the hemisphere. That he both employs and parodies the conventions and philosophical underpinnings of the Canadian documentary to do so gives his work a peculiar and winning combination of sobriety and subversion. Docudrama, experimental documentary, nonfiction, metafiction, meta-documentary—however you describe it—*The Herd* is arguably closer to John Grierson’s definition of the documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality” than it is a deviation from it. For his part, Lynch observes that “I think the documentary form has always been just a point of entry for me. In traditional documentary practice, I think there’s been too much pussyfooting as to what’s

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Above:
Director Peter Lynch;
Below: Colm Feore

actually going on with the material. In order to get at another kind of truth, you have to activate the imagination. That can allow another dimension of truth to enter the process, perhaps even a mythic dimension.”

In preparing to enter the northern spaces rendered so effectively in *The Herd*, Lynch found inspiration from the Group of Seven’s artistic visions, as well as in examples of the North as it has been treated in international cinema. “I wanted to know what I’d be pushing against, in terms of how the North has been represented by other artists in other media; painters, musicians and filmmakers. I watched Akira Kurosawa’s *Dersu Uzala*, for example, and Howard Hawks’s *Red River* [for herds of obvious reasons], Orson Welles’s films and, because it is unavoidable, Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*. Of course, for me, in terms of its final shape, *The Herd* is a cinematic quest as well as an historical one. I love the tension between the historical event and its recounting.” As Lynch admits, even the landscape itself reoriented his “cinematic quest.” Being on the tundra “was like walking on a living, breathing organism,” Lynch observes, “and I had to confront in a new, intimidating way the most basic question for a filmmaker: where do I place the camera? The sense of scale challenges your notions of space and time. The place is overwhelming. I really think Canadian artists must orient themselves to the idea of the North and it’s a struggle. For me, it was liberating as a filmmaker to be given such an amazing, mythic landscape to work with, because *The Herd* is really more of a rumination, an expressionistic account rather than a strict historical chronicle.”

It is for this reason that Lynch and McKinney chose to have Andrew Bahr’s observations on events remain internal, as a series of interior monologues rather than declarations to those around him. “We tried dialogue, but what he said out loud did not resonate at the proper level, it just disappeared into the landscape and gave an A&E *Biography* tone to his character. We wanted a more mythic, mysterious Bahr who would function as the inner eye of the movie, so we chose the interior monologue.”



THE HERD

“You don’t lead
the herd, the herd
leads you.”

Andrew Bahr

The Herd: Peter Lynch has delivered a meditation on nothing less than the very underpinnings of how we create history in the infinite time and space of the North.

With *The Herd*, Peter Lynch’s continuing cinematic exploration of the secret, or at least buried, history of Canada acquires still more depth and mythological resonance. Beyond the genuinely inspired imagined and real histories of *Arrowhead*’s Ray Bud and the compulsive self-mythologizing of *Project Grizzly*’s Troy Hurtubise, Lynch has delivered a meditation on nothing less than the very epistemological underpinnings of how we create history in the infinite time and space of the North. How is it possible to stretch our memories, ideas and narratives of ourselves across a terrain where maps, borders, fences and plans seem to dissolve into the tundra? How do we film this space? How do we frame this landscape? Is this really Canada up here? If the history of this country is understood to be the intersection between technology and topography, then *The Herd* is an incisive, intelligent, utterly absorbing dramatic illumination of just

how tenuous such a history can be. In documenting the voyage of Andrew Bahr, Lynch has fashioned a remarkable set of frame lines through which to see Canada in all its odd and glorious cultural and historical flux, then and now.

Like the recent works of his contemporaries in Canadian nonfiction film, especially Peter Mettler and Kevin McMahon, Lynch’s new film is very much an exploration of the crisis of empiricism in our image-saturated, technocentric culture—now more than ever, seeing is not believing. Within the grandeur and sweep of its arresting imagery, then, this is ultimately a film about exposing the limitations of vision—personal, philosophical, cultural, cinematic. What *The Herd* reveals is what is not there and, more insistently, the impossibility and the sheer cinematic folly of attempting to capture and make visible what is. In this sense, like Mettler’s *Picture of Light*,

McMahon’s *The Falls* and *In The Reign of Twilight*, or going back even further to Pierre Perrault’s *La Bête lumineuse*, *The Herd* offers richly suggestive evidence of how this country’s documentary, or ‘nonfiction,’ filmmakers have jettisoned the empirical approach and now pursue a decidedly more transcendental cinematic path. While certainly influenced by that other Canadian film tradition, experimental cinema, this approach is perhaps also a sign of the aesthetic and philosophical maturation of our film culture generally and of the nonfiction film specifically.

In its own way of recognizing and affirming Andrew Bahr’s paradoxical mantra, “You don’t lead the herd, the herd leads you,” *The Herd* patiently and poetically reveals that the most critical task we now face is no longer merely to look, but to investigate how and why we open our eyes in the first place. ●