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ARTS & POLITICS
By Ruth Dean

Mooney's 'Ministry Of Culture'

Michael Mooney's long-heralded expose about the Washington cultural establishment has finally been published. It turns out to be a lampoon, with a few strategically aimed harpoons — hardly the sort of book that Joseph D. Duffey, Livingston L. Biddle Jr. or Joan Mondale would have commissioned to mark the 15th anniversary of the federal Arts and Humanities endowments.

Unless, that is, these cultural-political heavyweights don't mind seeing themselves described in the Orwellian accents Mooney uses as a device in "The Ministry of Culture" to suggest that the federal arts bureaucracy is not far from being, or becoming, its "1984" prototype.

"A not very serious book about serious things" is how Duffey reacted to the volume, whose full title is "The Ministry of Culture: Connections Among Art, Money and Politics." As chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and of the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities, Duffey is mentioned most frequently in the 400 pages of the book (published by Wyndham, \$14.95).

Biddle, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, had just returned last week from a trip to China and said he hadn't yet read the book, which contains five chapters about the NEA. It was the day after election, and Biddle seemed more concerned about issuing statements as to how he "looked forward to working with the Reagan administration." Biddle's appointment expires a year from now.

Coming as it does on the heels of the Democratic election defeat, "The Ministry of Culture" is timely in its warning about the pitfalls of big government. Mooney, the Washington editor for Harper's magazine and author of several historical novels, has written a perceptive and provocative critique of the Carter-Mondale administration's treatment of the arts, and of First Amendment issues.

It is a somewhat chilling treatise, albeit with a fanciful premise. This premise encompasses the NEA and the NEH, with their state affiliates; the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Public Broadcasting Service; the International Communication Agency; the National Science Foundation; the Smithsonian, and the private corporations and foundations to which they are linked through grants and matching funds. And it supposes that somehow these cultural agencies have become part of an interlocking directorate whose powers of secret manipulation have earned it the name Mooney gives it: "The Ministry of Culture."

The idea for the book sprang from Mooney's attendance at quarterly meetings of the Arts and Humanities councils. His frustrations in trying to get satisfactory answers to the most basic reporter's questions inspired him to translate these experiences into the book as the "doublethink" manipulations of George Orwell's Ministry of Truth in "1984."

As a departure point in the book, Mooney recalls when the restless spirit of a young nation called the



Mitch Rosenthal

Michael Mooney: Orwellian tones for the Washington cultural establishment.

settler and his family westward to seek adventure and individual fulfillment. He asks, where are those hopes of yesteryear? — certainly not bundled up in the adventure-stifling "secret" meetings of what he calls "the White House Ministry of Culture."

That's the author's Orwellian phrase for the Federal Council on the Arts. The previously moribund council was revived in 1978 by Joan Mondale, wife of the vice president, after President Carter named her his administration's arts spokesperson and the council's honorary chairperson.

The book's interlocking directorate idea is based on a series of "memorandums of misunderstanding" that the endowments drew up under Federal Council aegis with government departments that have cultural components — the idea being to get the most out of the federal art dollar. Taking exception to this characterization, Duffey said last week, "We were only trying to avoid duplication. If anything we [the Federal Council] are diverse."

But Mooney questions whether these memorandums didn't cause the endowments to exceed their mandates, as in the agreement with the International Communication Agency, by getting the NEA and NEH "into the international spy business." His line of logic here is that the ICA was a merger of the old United States Information Service and the State Department's former bureau of cultural affairs, which in essence was a form of foreign intelligence gathering.

The Federal Council's compilation of a cultural directory to assist in identifying federal cultural components becomes, in Mooney's colorful language, "an active, well-coordinated, national cultural policy . . . involving more than 300 alphabet agencies and costing more than \$20 billion a year." So states the dust-jacket blurb. There's quite an art to making bureaucracy sound like an adventure yarn, and Mooney brings it off marvelously, with precise fact and devastating wit.

Duffey thinks Mooney "overdid" the book's emphasis on bureaucratic secrecy. But to this reporter, who was asked to leave the same meetings with Mooney, he does not exaggerate. It may be thanks to Mooney's persistence that Duffey only recently opened up portions of the Humanities Council meetings.

In case after case, Mooney cites how secrecy has led to unfair evaluation of a grant applicant. Or suppression of an individual's right of free expression, such as the Smithsonian's cancellation of a scheduled lecture by controversial author Erica Jong, later rescheduled after a successful American Civil Liberties Union suit. Or suppression of infor-

mation the public has a right to know, as in the case of the Progressive Magazine article about the non-existence of a hydrogen bomb secret.

A paragraph in the book summarizes how he feels about undue secrecy. "By 1980," he writes, "all the coordinated agencies of the White House Ministry of Culture — and all the other agencies of government as well — claimed that secrecy was a necessity to the orderly conduct of government. By making continuous claims for secret government, the New Order demonstrated how little respect it had for the decent opinion of mankind."

The book, which is laced with frequently hilarious anecdote and characterization, took three years of arduous investigative journalism and persistent Freedom of Information requests. It is the second book published in the last 18 months to be critical of the cultural establishment, at a time when both endowments wanted to celebrate their 15th anniversary without dragging any skeletons out of the closet. The earlier book, "Twigs for an Eagle's Nest," is a memoir by Michael Straight of his years as deputy NEA chairman.

Reaction to "The Ministry of Culture" from the chairmen of the arts and humanities endowments dwelt on the book's "several inaccuracies."

Duffey challenged the book's dust-jacket blurb about the "300 alphabet agencies with the \$20 billion a year budget" and wonders how Mooney arrived at these figures, since "\$20 billion may be the total budget of all the agencies."

Nor does Duffey think the Orwellian analogy "works. There's too much diversity. And we [the Federal Council] have so little staff — only about six at most. I don't think his thesis stands up to careful investigation. I think he's the victim of his publisher's hype."

However, giving the book its due, Duffey said he thinks "it should provide an occasion for discussion."

Biddle said neither he nor his music staff director, Ezra Laderman, was pleased with Mooney's characterization of the NEA music panel being "solely chosen by the music director." The panel choices, he explained, came from "a broader base" — that is, suggestions from people in the field, and from National Arts Council members, with Biddle exercising the right of final review.

Told that the book described the NEA as having an almost paranoid preoccupation with panel secrecy, Biddle countered that he draws a distinction between policy panels, "which I have always advocated being open" and peer review panels, which he believes should be closed "to protect the privacy of the grants applicant."

MOVIES
By Pat Dowell

The Independent Pulse

Something new is happening in independent filmmaking. For the first time, filmmakers working outside the commercial movie industry are getting a significant opportunity to show their work in theaters. And part of the reason is because the filmmakers themselves are finding new ways to work together in solving their common problems, particularly distribution.

Here in Washington, the feature-length documentary "The War at Home" opened at the Inner Circle last week, and it will be followed by a film about the culture of Brittany, Wales and Ireland, "Celtic Trilogy." Two more independently made and distributed films, the drama "Alambriستا!" and the documentary "The Trials of Alger Hiss," are also scheduled to open here before the end of the year.

"The War at Home" and "Alambriستا!" are both being released through First Run Features, a company formed last March by filmmakers. It's not the first cooperative venture by independents, but it is one of the few that has zeroed in on theaters rather than the educational and non-theatrical market.

Barry Alexander Brown, co-director of "The War at Home," which was one of First Run's four original films in March, was in Washington last week for the opening of his movie. "The idea behind the company," he says, "is to create a very effective but inexpensive way of distributing films."

First Run does that by operating, according to Brown, "somewhere between a booking company and a distributing company." The difference between the two is that First Run does not provide prints and promotional materials, which are the financial responsibility of the filmmaker, but does actively seek continuous bookings all over the country.

The advantage of this arrangement is that the financial risk is spread around, ensuring First Run's solvency and thus continued efforts on behalf of all their films (they have now released 10 features). "Without the enormous overhead of distribution," Brown says, "First Run can afford not to shelve a film if it does badly somewhere — we can try it elsewhere."

In practical terms, that translates into a greater personal commitment from directors like Brown. He spent almost two weeks here doing the kind of hand-tailored public relations that replaces the expensive advertising campaign of a Hollywood release with the labor-intensive techniques of grass-roots organizing. That means lots of screenings, not only for the press but for publicity among community groups and schools. And it means paying more attention to the city's small papers than would be the case for the visiting director or star who only has a day here.

It's hard work that requires lots of enthusiasm, but right now that's exactly the attitude one finds among independent filmmakers like Brown. And they're attracting allies every day, like Fran Spielman, who joined New Front as a consultant instead of retiring, because she liked what they were doing and thinks they have a future.

Spielman is a veteran of such prestigious non-Hollywood distribution organizations as Cinema 5 and New Yorker Films, which have brought many foreign films to



Independent filmmaker Barry Alexander Brown

American screens. She's a consultant to First Run, using her extensive experience and contact with theater owners to put these independent films in theaters across the country.

She thinks the biggest obstacle is the resistance of theater owners who have never booked a documentary or a non-Hollywood drama afraid to take the risk. "I'm wearing them down," she says. As of yet none of First Run's releases has made back its cost in theaters, but Spielman says it's too early to expect that, since their first year of operation.

First Run is just one aspect of a currently optimistic climate for independent filmmakers. Last September, 250 people attended the second annual Independent Film Market in New York, where filmmakers, distributors and theater programmers congregated for days of seminars and a workshop which over 40 feature films were shown.

The market is one of the services provided by the Independent Film Project, a support group that also acts as a clearinghouse for information and a liaison with foreign film festivals. Joy Peret, the project's co-ordinator, is on her way to the London Film Festival next week with a package of new American films. She thinks that it

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