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# Keeping Good Company

by Lois Siegel

From a guy eating his shoes, to piglets sucking garlic milk, this year's Grierson Seminar proves again that variety is the spice of life.



The Grierson Seminar — a unique opportunity for film people to get together: here, Belgian director Boris Lehman with Grierson Committee President, Liz Avison. Photo: Lois Siegel

It is rare and unusual that filmmakers in any country find a way to meet each other en masse, view each other's work and maintain an open, critical perspective with an overall positive intent.

Canadian filmmakers have this opportunity.

The Sixth Grierson Film Seminar — programmed by Robert Daudelin, director of the Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montreal — took place November 11-16 at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. There, 80 filmmakers from across the country, several Americans and one Belgian cinéaste discussed, argued and criticized one another's films.

The participants were housed at the Prince of Wales Hotel — a rather plush setting in contrast to the image of the "hardnosed" documentary filmmaker,

who seldom eats three meals a day. There was also a certain irony in screening *A Wife's Tale*, by Joyce Rock, Martin Duckworth and Sophie Bissonnette, about the wives of the steel workers who supported the strike in Sudbury, then sitting down to the hotel's full-course meal — knowing that those wives had lived on baloney sandwiches for months during the strike. But one tried to be objective — from 9 a.m. often until 2 a.m. After each series of screenings, the film directors themselves were barraged with questions in an informal but lively atmosphere.

It soon became apparent that the more you put into the seminar, the more you got out of it.

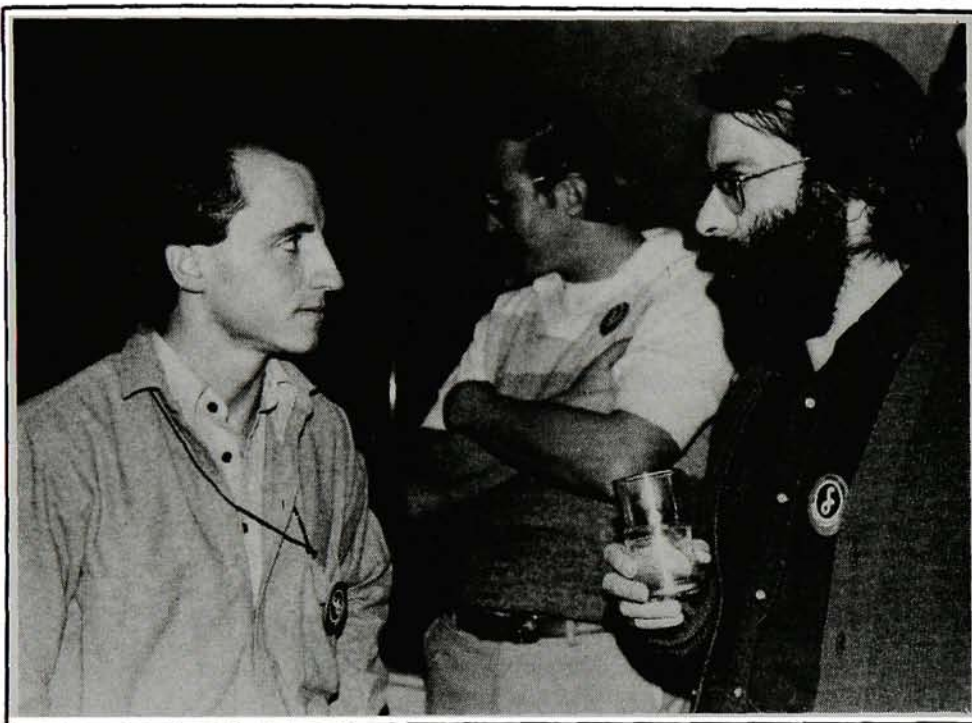
Some films were applauded, others were attacked. Most often it was the films

made in the traditional National Film Board style which were challenged because of their predictability: this is what happened, this is what it looks like, this is what you should think about it... But the seminar also featured a variety of *cinéma vérité* styles, so, there was something for everyone.

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Lois Siegel teaches film production at Concordia University and John Abbott College in Montreal. She has just completed *Extreme Close-Up* — a documentary about multi-handicapped blind people, which was screened at this year's Grierson Seminar — and is presently finishing her first feature film, *A 20th-Century Chocolate Cake*.





Some serious shop talk for filmmakers Frank Cole (left), Al Razutis (center), and programmer of The Grierson this year, Robert Daudelin (right). Photo: Lois Siegel

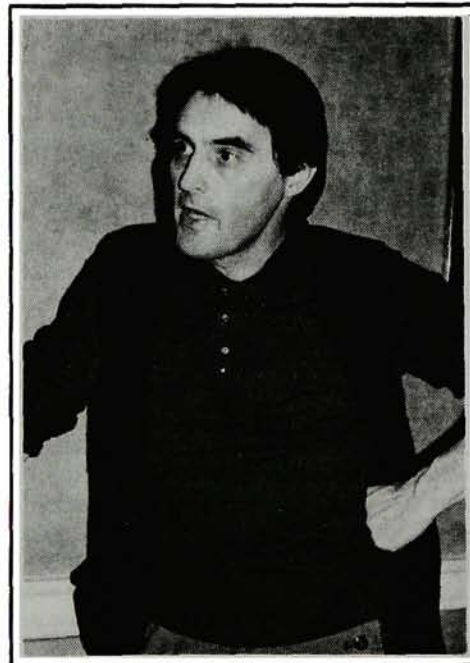
Besides the usual, straightforward presentations which adequately covered their subjects, Daudelin selected some films that transcended the conservative shells in which most films or filmmakers tend to wrap themselves.

Boris Lehman, a Belgian filmmaker, presented **Magnum Begynasium Bruxellense**, (also recently presented at the 9th Festival International du Nouveau Cinéma in Montreal), a film both difficult and intriguing. Lehman often uses film as a therapeutic medium. He teaches the mentally-disturbed to work with Super 8, and they also assist him on his own film crews composed of non-professionals.

**Béguinage** is a diary of the inhabitants of a poor section of Brussels threatened by demolition and renovation. We view a day's activities as the camera moves through a series of vignettes to reveal the intricacies of what, at first glance, seem like ordinary, perhaps even dull lives, but which slowly unveil little fascinations. The pace of the film is slow — deliberate. Creeping dollies on city dwellings in black and white allow the viewer to closely examine what is presented. People pass in front of the camera as it studies them. Then, suddenly, the pace is broken by static inserts of walls in rich color, with the addition of guitar notes — dispersed and random. The film seems to be a painting in black and white, with only the details in color. Philippe Boesmans, the music composer, created what is known as "series" music for **Béguinage**. Lehman

took the music and cut it into sequences to fit his images — sometimes notes are repeated or multiplied, depending on his needs.

**Béguinage** is a documentary which mixes real time with film time. In real time an individual will grind coffee without ellipses; we see all this, but then Lehman introduces film time. An old man assembles some sort of construction, piece-by-piece. We watch him fitting the parts together. Slowly we discover that he is completing a merry-go-round, complete



Director of **Mother Tongue**, Derek May.

with horses which move up and down. Suddenly the work comes alive with the addition of color. Small details are given life as shades, which at first seemed drab, assume the soft tones of blue or pink as the merry-go-round begins to turn. As the image changes to color, a strange, broken touch of music occurs simultaneously, altering the feeling of the scene, and forcing the viewer to reconsider what he has just thought to be true.

Lehman's work often reminds one of Fredrick Wiseman's films because he doesn't use narration or any other didactic approach. Subtly, though, he does make comments about his society. For example, a committee of the unemployed gives figures during a press conference. At the end of the year, 80,000 new university graduates will hit the job market. This scene is followed by innocent children's drawings on a fence.

An elderly lady recites a poem: "We go too fast..We live on earth like marionettes." This scene is followed by a man who is being awkwardly fitted with a white, obviously fake, Santa Claus beard and hair. Another sequence presents an elderly man, saying, "Here's my home. I am a collector — a little of everything...I never have mice in the house. In every corner there's a postcard of a cat." His home is full of life-sized mannequins, dolls, records, and such: "I'd like to get married soon so that things would get dusted and arranged."

One senses that precise decisions have been made in **Béguinage**, that the filmmaker is not just running film stock through his camera, but is indeed *creating*.

**Mother Tongue** by Derek May (NFB) was refreshing because of its unpredictable montage. It was supposed to concern itself with the problem of languages, but was actually much more complex than that. In it, the filmmaker turns the camera on his own family to explore how a French Québécois actress, married to a filmmaker from England, lives together with their two young children. Often accused of being self-indulgent, May counters attacks by explaining, "I want to know myself before I make films about other people. I don't feel comfortable filming other people's lives."

In **Mother Tongue** the viewer witnesses the everyday activities in the May household. The mother cooks dinner, the children play games imitating each other's sounds, the father watches the news in English, the mother leaves her cooking to switch the TV news station to a French-speaking broadcast. One day the son, Max May, comes home from his French school stating that he no longer likes his



name because it drastically differs from those of his friends. He wants to be called Jean Bédard. The son later tells his companions that he'd rather see his mother performing the role of the Bionic Woman than some of the more serious, dramatic roles she plays. As the parents question each other about their roots, and the family's daily routine goes on, there is both humour and sincerity. In the end, the film speaks for itself.

On the lighter side, Californian filmmaker Les Blank showed up with a series of films (T-shirts and posters) which promoted the filmmaker's love for cooking — and cooking's love for being filmed.

**Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe** had everyone in the aisles laughing. Herzog fills a pair of old shoes with garlic, tomatoes and other delights, then, as part of an agreement, cooks and eats them. What type of documentary is this? One isn't sure, but the process is entertaining. And a few perceptive comments do seep through. "Our civilization doesn't have adequate visual images," a voice-over states, as we see the usual, TV, commercial garbage projected in living colour — and life, as a result, seems all the more absurd.

**Garlic is as Good as 10 Mothers** soon followed, to the pleasure of viewers with a taste for garlic. The film celebrates the herb's many uses: feed it to mother pigs, then the little pigs will suck at them for a real treat. "Little pigs love garlic milk," the film exclaims; Californians of all shapes and sizes profess their love of the stuff, bowls full of it are crushed to the beat of lively Spanish music...Finally, one is sure that the film itself reeks of garlic.

**Debbie**, a first film by Bohdan Montasewich (a recent graduate of Ryerson), is a sensitive study of a young mentally-retarded girl who is beginning to lead her own life. She works in a restaurant and has her own apartment. Fortunately, Montasewich doesn't encumber the film with didactic narration. Instead, he lets Debbie speak for herself. She tells us what she can do within her limitations; how she does these things well and derives pleasure from them. Unlike many films about the handicapped, that lead one to pity, the "star" in this film repeatedly says, "I'd love to do that for you," in a way that no one doubts her sincerity.

Frank Cole is a rather unusual filmmaker because all his work focuses on death. **A Documentary**, from his series "Death Works," is a stark black and white film which features Cole's grandfather reliving his last moments with the dying grandmother — a physically wasted skeleton to whom he professes his love. Presented through live action and still

photographs, this short film explores the feelings of the aged. "I like young people, but younger people don't like me because I'm old, you see," says the grandfather confined to an institution for the aged. "I'm here for life I guess — life imprisonment."

**Chronique de la vie quotidienne** by Jacques Leduc (NFB) proved to be the epic series of the seminar. Leduc presented eight films produced between the years 1974-77 totalling 270 minutes. And the projection proved to be a treat instead of a treatment. Leduc films his research. His subjects are not set up to say certain things at the proper moment;

rather, they live their lives on film. Consequently, their ordinary daily lives reflect a sense of quality and vitality.

**Lundi, une chaumière, un coeur (Happiness Is...)** crosscuts the construction of a home in the suburbs of Montreal, with an automobile show and a dating agency service. Three different stories are told in piecemeal. The film jumps from one episode to another, slowly unfolding the ironic whole. A father cradles a kid in each arm as a mother negotiates the idiosyncracies of home decorating. Cupboard knobs in the new house are traded for a linen closet. The house purchasers complain about items missing from the

# THE MAGIC SHOW

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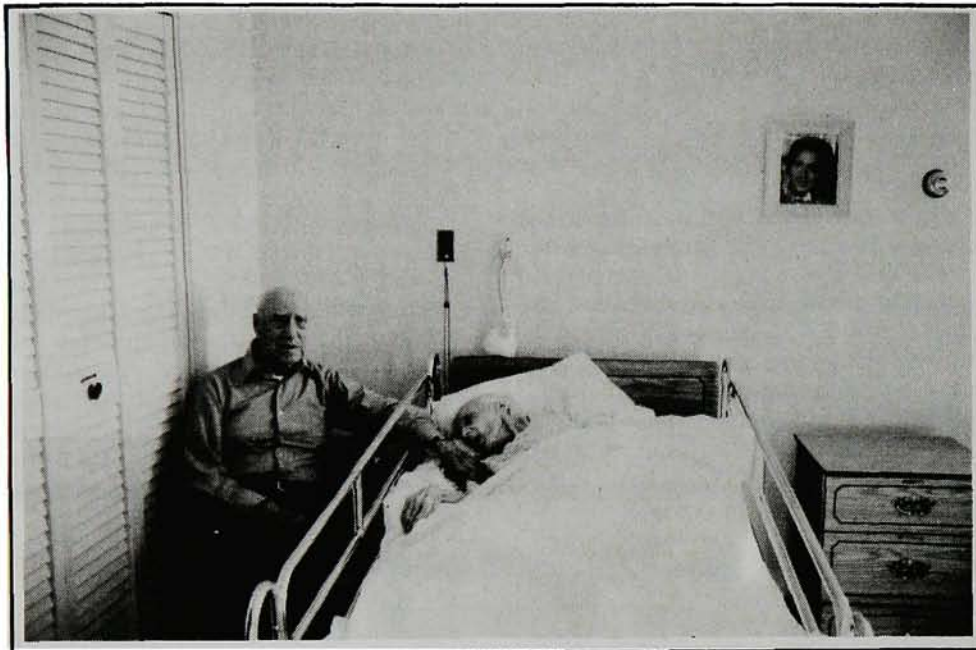
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A testimony to love and loyalty — Frank Cole's moving film, **A Documentary**.

Photo: Frank Cole

advertising brochure. The contractor argues that "man can't always trust folders"...

Then we visit the Institute Humaniste, (dating service) where you can buy a real human being for \$325. Here, the seller warns the anxious customer that if she can't meet the \$200 down payment she might miss her chance to encounter the proper mate.

The recipe for happiness always seems to include items one cannot really afford.

Another form of documentary provoked a noticeable reaction. Following the example set by Frank Vitale's **Montreal Main** and Bozo Moyle's **The Rubber Gun** was Bruce Glawson's **Michael, A Gay Son**. This half-hour docu-drama used actors to document a real situation. The acting, however, was so good that most of the audience thought the film was a standard documentary. **Michael** centers around a homosexual who faces his family with the "facts" about his life. But the film does not limit itself to the subject of homosexuality. Everyone can relate to it because it shows the processes of parental repression towards children.

Moving in another direction was Don Winkler's **Travel Log** (NFB), which was definitely more experimental in nature. Using photographs, Winkler explores the strange feelings one experiences when travelling. The traveler is exposed to new sights and new sounds. As a result, a seemingly close relationship can easily fall apart in an unfamiliar setting. Isolated images of roadside restaurants, signs, detours and motel rooms indicate a bar-

renness accented only by the introspective voice-over of a woman reading excerpts from her diary. **Travel Log** documents a woman's persistent search for a place to stay.

Al Razutis, a B.C. filmmaker, presented **A Message from Our Sponsor**, which intercut TV commercials with excerpts from blatantly pornographic films. As explicit blow-jobs popped onto the screen, between the toothy smiles of young girls professing the values of super mouth washes, the film librarians in the audience grew silent. (The film must certainly be banned in Ontario.) Razutis' film said what people have been thinking, and what advertisers have been subliminally promoting for years — that is, if you improve people's sexual potential, they will buy anything you have to sell.

It is important not to ignore films which inform. **The Rites of Spring** by Michael Chechik (B.C.) considers the problem of slaughtering seals — particularly baby seals in the presence of their mothers. The film prompts the viewer to question the powers of government. Why has the CBC broadcast films favouring the killing of seals? Why has Chechik's film not been purchased by the CBC? Seals are killed not for food but for the making of beautiful coats and products like cosmetics. The film challenges human sensibility, and questions why people do the things they do.

Through the use of photographs, **For Twenty Cents A Day** by Jim Monro (B.C.) documents the depression years in B.C. Monro's presentation was explicit and informative.

**The Last Days of Living** by Malca Gilson (NFB) comes face-to-face with patients at the Palliative Care Unit of the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. For an hour the viewer listens intently to individuals who know they are going to die, who know there is no hope, as they relate their feelings, both bitter and brave, about life and their imminent deaths.

A mother who has cancer is visited by her three small children on Mother's Day. She knows she has lost touch with them — that their father has taken her place — and that all she can do is smile and face the facts of life, as harsh as they might be. Her husband has told her, "Other people don't want to hear about your problems. They have problems of their own."

**Boys will be Men** by Don Rennick (NFB) documents, often through the use of a hidden camera, young adolescents from a poor neighbourhood bragging of their illegal exploits on the streets of Montreal. They rob, they steal, they destroy. Several nine to eleven-year-olds explain how they love to go downtown to Eaton's to rip-off anything they can get. One realizes that stealing is their favorite sport. It's fun. With enthusiasm, they even offered to rip-off a house for the film crew — for the sake of the movie... Their request was denied.

**North China Factor** (NFB) by Tony Ianzelo and Boyce Richardson came under strong attack when certain "experienced" filmmakers at the seminar professed a greater knowledge of China than they said the film offered them. But for those of us who were less familiar with China, the film introduced the People's Republic in a somewhat shocking framework — shocking perhaps, because we Westerners tend to expect others to think as we do. Every movement in China seems to come under someone's watchful eye. Why, even babies are placed in a straight, conforming position during their naps. "Socialism is Good" is sung at a wedding celebration, as well as, "Two tigers running fast" chanted to the tune of "Frère Jacques" — which stimulated laughter because the audience wondered how a French tune could be popular in the Far East. The idea of such community thinking is foreign and disturbing to a capitalistic world. Finally, all that is certain, is that the Chinese version of utopia remains a puzzle to the Western mentality.

The Grierson Seminar should not be ignored. It creates an opportunity for filmmakers to openly exchange ideas and show films that might not otherwise be shown under similar circumstances.

If nature abhors a vacuum, so should the creative artist.