

Fernand Bélanger & Dagmar Gueissaz Teufel's  
**Passiflora**

**F**ernand Bélanger and Dagmar Gueissaz-Teufel's new NFB French-language feature *Passiflora*, makes the official CBC record of the Pope's Montreal visit seem like a cup of warm milk. *Passiflora*'s name refers to the passion-flower, a tropical plant with tranquilizing and anaesthetic properties whose parts were believed to resemble the crown of thorns, nails and other instruments of Christ's passion. A truly dazzling, kinetic work, *Passiflora* uses documentary footage, fiction, graffiti, song and animation, of both Michael Jackson's and the Pope's simultaneous visits to Montreal to present a mordant critique of both the prevalence and selectivity of the media.

The film is structured chronologically, beginning with the Pope's arrival in Montreal and ending after his departure with a helicopter shot of a wrecking crew demolishing the altar where he's just finished giving mass. In between, the directors intercut media coverage of the Pope with fictional episodes in the lives of gays, women undergoing abortions, battered women, and other marginals deemed not to exist for the duration of the visiting celebrities sojourn.

The Pope's visit and that of Michael Jackson actually took place several days apart. In *Passiflora*, however, in order to better compare the effect that their presence, and the way that presence was reported by the media, had on the city, the events take place within 24 hours of each other.

For the time they were in Montreal, both stars monopolized the media: the film shows the hundreds of journalists who jammed both events trying to get coverage. *Passiflora* also depicts how the police, the military and various figures of authority (such as Jackson's manager and his press relations people) directed the event, telling the press what they could cover, when and from what angle. Stars, press and public are all shown as manipulated into creating an event, playing a part, and helping to shape the way other people perceive it.

Gueissaz-Teufel and Bélanger poke irreverent fun at cultural icons. At the beginning of the movie, an anarchist emblem unwinds into an animated snake. This biblical symbol of the source of eternal damnation then proceeds to joyously dance through *Passiflora*, flouting the immaculate image of rectitude that Christ's earthly representative presents. In another scene, two men sitting on a table at a gay dance begin to kiss while stern images of the Pope are broadcast from a TV between their bodies. This kind of ribald, almost bawdy humour, contributes to a critique that is as funny as it is caustic.

Perhaps because of copyright laws,

Jackson plays a minimal role in the film. The footage of the technology involved in his show and that of the masses waiting outside the Olympic Stadium to see him, is only used to point out how similar such a 'profane' spectacle is to the supposedly sacred one.

On the other hand, the Pope is omnipresent, his image used as a recurring motif that links the several, mostly unconnected, fictional episodes.

*Passiflora* also contrasts the city as officialdom presented it to the world and as the filmmakers see it. Anti-cruise demonstrations, the 'danse des tapettes' (a gay dance that used the Pope's visit as a theme), a transvestite and a battered woman walking the street at night trying to get help — all are juxtaposed with the controlled festivities surrounding Jackson and the Pope. For example, near the end of the film a strip-joint had been made to cover up its facade so as not to offend. His Holiness when he passed by (and, needless to say, so that it wouldn't be picked up by the cameras broadcasting the parade around the world).

Partly because of quick editing and partly because the direction is often inspired, *Passiflora* has a hallucinatory, anarchic rhythm that sometimes borders on the surreal. In one scene the same gay couple are once more shown kissing, this time before an ugly new federal building. Two adolescents are tap-dancing in the background. A man in a three-piece suit comes up to one of the gay men and asks him if he realizes that he's kissing another man. When the gay man responds positively, the man in the suit can't get over it. He keeps asking passersby: "Did you see that! They were kissing each other!" The man finally goes up to the tap-dancers who respectfully stop dancing, listen, smile, and then resume tapping.

If anarchy is one of the film's qualities, it also creates problems. Scenes shift from the Pope saying mass, to two

men relieving themselves in front of the stadium, to a woman berating a young man protesting the Pope. These juxtapositions undoubtedly contribute to creating this varied, textured, portrait of officially unacknowledged lives. However, the various narrative threads often get frayed in the process.

Gueissaz-Teufel and Bélanger use sound innovatively. While original sound is used for the fictional episodes, they've experimented with a fictive dubbing in their documentary footage, challenging notions of "objectivity" and "realism" as applied to the documentary. The filmmakers have also tried mixing different tones and volumes in order to manipulate space. Though this sometimes makes the dialogue unintelligible, for the most part it enriches the film, imbuing it with greater depth.

*Passiflora* may not be entirely successful, but parts of it are simply brilliant. In concept and form, it's much more daring than any other Québécois film I've seen recently. I have a feeling that *Passiflora* will continue to be talked about long after the awards being given to some other films have turned to dust.

José Arroyo •

**PASSIFLORA** d. Fernand Bélanger and Dagmar Gueissaz-Teufel **participating filmmakers** Bernard Gosselin, Jacques Leduc, Yves Dion, François Beauchemin, Ester Auger, Diane Carrière, Yves Angrignon, François Aubry, Jacques Avoine, Pierre Bernier, Pascale Bilodeau, Séraphin Bouchard, Serge Bouthillier, Claude Brasseur, Michael Cleary, Norma Denys, Susan Gourley, François Gosselin, Pierre Landry, Guy Lamontagne, Normand Lecuyer, Raymond Marcoux, Jean-Guy Normandin, Guy Rémillard, Yves Roy, John W. Sawyer, Gilles Tremblay, François Vincelette, Suzanne Walsh, and the Lab friends, **admin.** Jacqueline Rivest, Laurence Paré, Joanne Carrière, Gaétan Martel, Carol Smith **tech.coord.** Edouard Davidovici **mix.** Hans Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll **sd.ed.** Christian Marcotte **film concept** Maurice Bulbulian **p.** Jacques Vallée **p.c.** National Film Board. Col., 35mm, Dolby sound **running time:** 90 mins.

Michel Moreau's  
**Le Million tout-puissant**

**M**ichel Moreau's entertaining documentary, *Le Million Tout-Puissant*, ask the questions all lottery-ticket buyers dream about: Does winning a million turn dreams into reality? What does it mean to become an overnight millionaire? Are loto-millionaires happier? What do they become? What are their fears, if any?

Using a direct cinema style, Moreau interviews three million-dollar winners of the lottery. The first, a suburban housewife, addresses the director in a self-assured manner. She makes it clear she was always a happy person. And her life hasn't changed much, except, of course, that instead of the normal one vacation per year, she can now have up to six; and instead of the one family car, her family now owns five — one for each member.

A two-time winner of the million lottery in nine months, Pierre Cassault offers a different insight. After recovering from severe depression following his second win, he realized his dream of becoming a businessman. Unlike Mrs. Laxton, the housewife, he is modest with his vacations, and instead preferred to open a gourmet restaurant.

On the other hand, the third winner, Mr. Brault, became a victim of forces beyond his control. He was laid off from his job because his boss could no longer tolerate his bragging and shenanigans. We only see Brault in photos, as he preferred not to be interviewed. His parents, however, were eager to speak to the director. They let us know that although their life hasn't changed all that much, they now have many new friends and an endless list of consumer goods. One of their new acquisitions include a CB radio, with which the Brault parents can talk to each other all-day long.

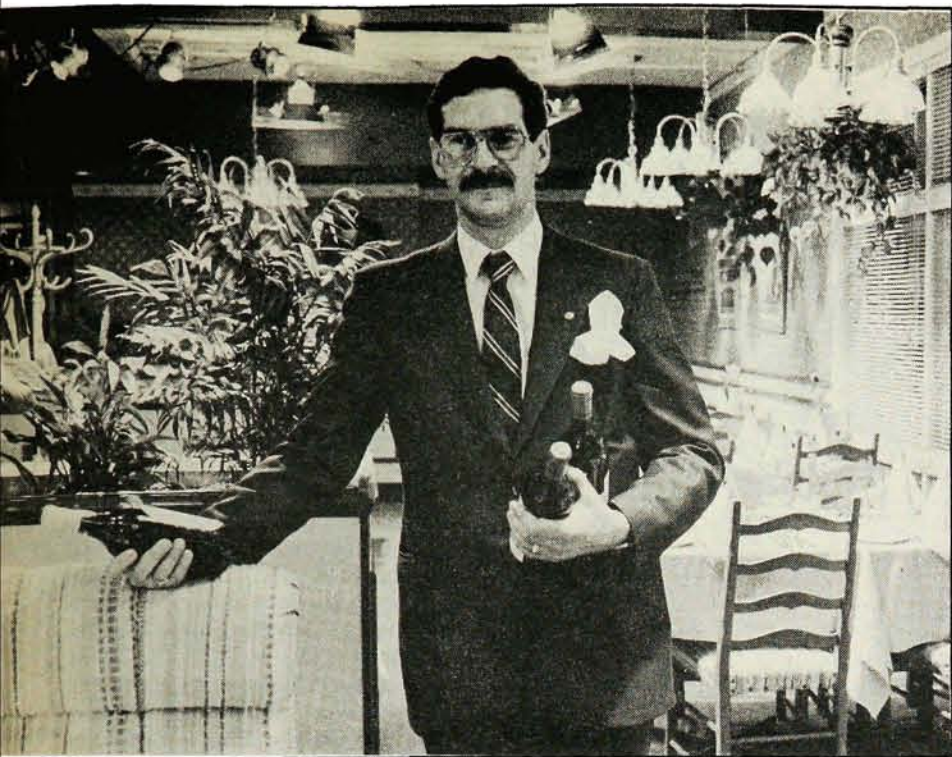
In this film, Moreau ingeniously explores the psycho-social phenomena of Quebec lotteries. Intercut with the interviews are the characters of Jeremy, an imaginary loto-millionaire, and his friend Paolo, a balloon vender. The narrative of Jeremy and Paolo is a humorous, philosophical discourse on the pros and cons of becoming an instant millionaire. In the midst of all this, Jean-Guy Moreau, Quebec's renowned storyteller, gives a brilliant performance in a diversity of roles.

The film opens with Jean-Guy Moreau as a secret agent, a cross between James Bond and Inspector Clouseau, attired in matching red and white checkered hat, gloves, tie and briefcase. His assignment? To investigate Quebec's mammoth lotteries.

Casting Jean-Guy Moreau in the role of agent serves a dual purpose. First, it moves the film forward by means of a conventional narrative. Secondly, through the documentary technique of



• *Passiflora*: a vision of the image civilization's detritus



• Pierre Casault, just a simple millionaire twice over

voice-over, the agent reports his investigations in a factual, journalistic style which allow the film to reveal to the audience the mechanisms of the Quebec lotteries.

With Jeremy, the imaginary loto-millionaire, and his friend Paolo (played by Gilbert Sicotte and Pierre Curzi), we delve further into the dreams and fears that attend becoming an instant millionaire. Michel Moreau uses this dramatization of documentary elements to highlight the paranoia – and megalomania – of people with money. After Jeremy's anxieties of being rich have been allayed, we find him and Paolo in Bacchanalian decadence in a Roman bath complete with champagne, food and servants. Yet Jeremy still asks Paolo if he is truly his friend or is it only because of the money.

The Jeremy and Paolo scenes take place against an original music score by Maxime Dubois, a young graduate of the Conservatoire de Musique de Québec, whose subtle, carnival-like melody is pleasing to the ear and appropriate to the film's theme, the fantasies and wishful dreams of the make-believe world.

Meanwhile, our secret agent, among

other findings, reports that in Quebec, \$800 million worth of loto tickets are sold each year, and that 92% of the population buys loto tickets on a regular basis.

Even if the film is partially funded by the Quebec government lottery corporation, Michel Moreau presents an even-handed view of money fever. At the end of the film, using the Brechtian device of having Jean-Guy Moreau impersonate Gilles Vigneault, Felix Leclerc and Montreal mayor Jean Drapeau in a sing-song commentary, the magical values we place on the almighty dollar are exposed.

**Le Million tout-puissant** concludes with a case-study of a Newfoundland man who won a million and then died within the year. By including this documentary footage, Moreau penetrates the difference between fact and daydreams.

Thoroughly amusing yet thoughtful, **Le Million** leaves the viewer with the serious thought that people need myths as a means... of living vicariously.

Nicolina Sindici •

Pierre Falardeau & Julien Poulin's

## Elvis Gratton – Le King des kings

Generally panned by the Quebec media and, of course, ignored by the rest of Canada, **Elvis Gratton – Le King des kings** is, for that reason, all the more a brilliant feature-length parody on Quebec and Canadian culture by that extremely talented duo, Pierre Falardeau and Julien Poulin.

A garage-owner in a suburb south of Montreal, Robert Gratton (played to hysterical perfection by Julien Poulin) decides to enter an Elvis Presley-look-alike contest. He wins – plus a trip south to the Island of Santa Banana. And off he goes with his wife Linda (played with wit and charm by Denise Mercier)

and his Expo baseball tapes. Santa Banana is your average, only slightly exaggerated banana republic crawling with military observers. Upon his return, burnt to a crisp, Gratton serves up a truly Canadian Christmas party complete with German beer-garden, barbecue, and live band on a raft wearing Hawaiian shirts and grass skirts. (Canada is, after all, a multicultural country.) Needless to say Gratton is a practicing Catholic and wants his garage decorated with a first-rate Christmas manger – (you know, Jesus, Mary, Joseph and some cows). Elvis Gratton is no run-of-the-mill Québécois, and his Nativity pageant won't be ordinary either: the Holy Family, including the infant Jesus and the Wise Men, all have Elvis Presley faces. The laughter from the audience was so loud at this revelation that the theatre-manager rushed in fearing a riot.

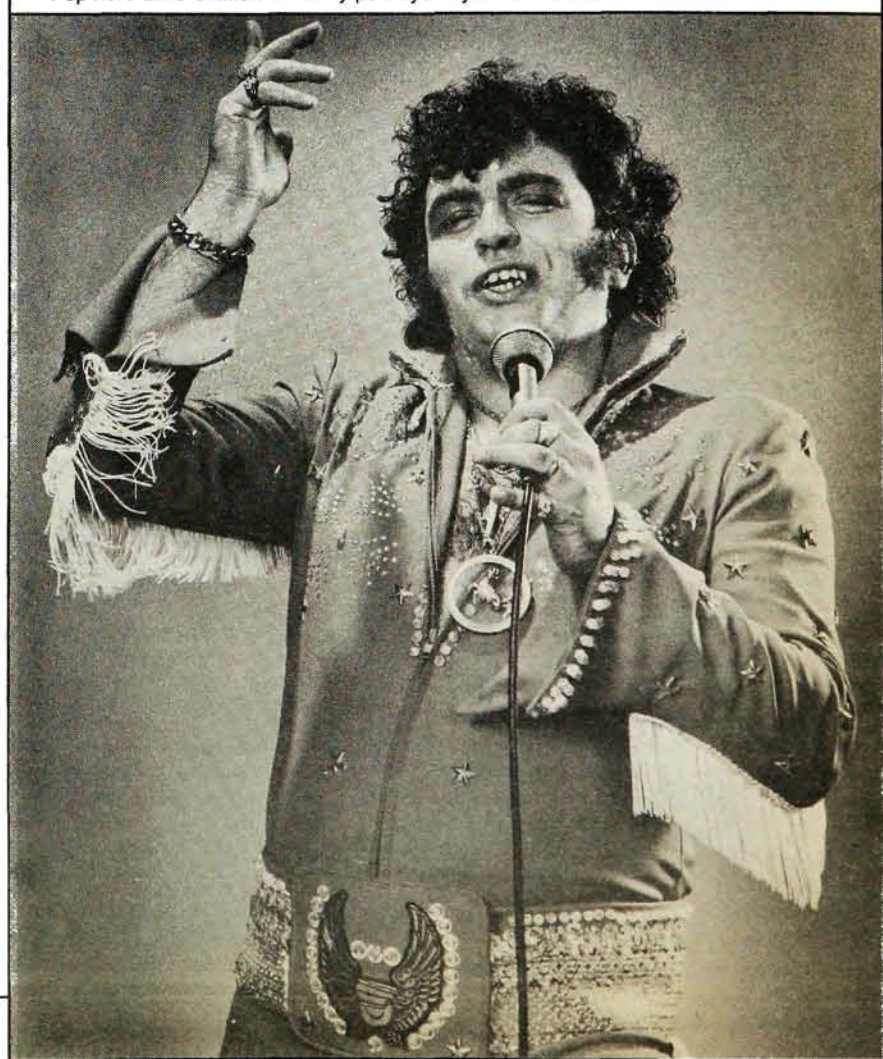
Most critics picked up on the flawed construction of the film. Falardeau makes no excuses for this, nor does he try to hide it. He simply took pieces of tape and spliced the two previously-made 30-minute segments together for an instant feature. "What do you expect" asks Falardeau, "with a less than half-a-million dollars and a shooting schedule of 22 days?"

The first segment of **Elvis Gratton – Le King des kings** entitled simply **Elvis Gratton** won the Grand Prize at the 1982 Lille Festival in France and Best Short-Feature at the Festivals of Festivals in Toronto the same year. Falardeau wanted to make a feature, but with cash-flow problems had to think shoestring-creative. The solution? Shoot the final segment (the swimming pool segment and Nativity scene) and add it to the first two portions. The result? A first-rate, flawed, but subversive stroke of high comedy.

Neil Wilson •

**Elvis Gratton – Le King des Kings** d./sc. Elvis Falardeau, Elvis Poulin p. Elvis Payeur eds. Elvis Falardeau, Elvis Poulin sd.eds. Elvis Falardeau, Elvis Poulin, Elvis Leroux p.man. Elvis Payeur, Elvis Richard d.o.p. Elvis Dostie art d. Elvis Lord, Elvis Laplante sd. Elvis Beauchemin, Elvis Auger 1st ad. Elvis Pothier, Elvis W. Benoit 2nd ad. Elvis Didelot asst.cam. Elvis Jobin boom Elvis Charron, Elvis Chartrand cont. Elvis Régent, Elvis Lachapelle cont.trainee Elvis Fayas propsmen Elvis Huysmans, Elvis Forest, Elvis Ducas, Elvis Lavoie, Elvis Baril, Elvis Chaput, Elvis Singher. Set dec.trainees Elvis Corbo, Elvis Gosselin, Elvis Méthé make-up Elvis Trépanier, Elvis Migneault asst.make-up Elvis Lapierre cost.des. Elvis Prigent, Elvis Sauriol, Elvis Laplante dressers Elvis Guernon, Elvis Harel, Elvis Carter key grips Elvis Paquet, Elvis Chrétien, Elvis Berrie grips Elvis Amyot, Elvis Courteau, Elvis Guillard, Elvis Hassib, Elvis Mayot best boy Elvis Lépine gaffers Elvis Arsenau, Elvis Lafleur stills Elvis Valiquet, Elvis Boucher, Elvis Charlebois p.coord. Elvis Hilaréguy, Elvis Castellino p.admin. Elvis Maltais, Elvis Darveau p.acct. Elvis Lizé-Pothier unit man. Claude Cartier asst.unit man. Elvis Martineau, Elvis Vincent p.assts. Elvis Décarie, Elvis Boulianne, Elvis Guillard, Elvis Pellerin labs & studios Bellevue Pathé Québec (1972) Inc., Negbec Inc., Dusson Synkro mixers Elvis Charron, Elvis Blondeau titles Elvis Eykel, Elvis Laroche opticals Film Opticals (Québec) Ltée songs "Teddy Bear" (Glady's music), Aaron King: "Love me tender" (Elvis Presley music), Aaron King: "Memphis Tennessee" (arc music), Aaron King: "Clawdy Miss Clawdy" (arc music), Aaron King: "That's the touch of a king", "Let's go on move", composed by Aaron King: mus. Elvis Picotte, Elvis Plouffe, Elvis Lavigne, Elvis Ménard voice Monique King sd.studio Jean Sauvageau, tnx. L'Office National du Film du Canada, Le Conseil Québécois des Arts du Canada, L'Administration de l'Aéroport Mirabel, L'Administration de Doanes Canada, Le Salon de Coiffure "Interbeauté", Les Fourrures Grizzly, Le Club des Raquettes, La Discothèque Célébrités, CKAC, CJMS, Carl Valiquet, Le Collège Jean-de-la-Mennais, La Fanfare "La Brigade de Terrebonne", Foyer Universel Inc., Les Vins Angrès p.c. L'Association Coopérative de Productions Audio-Visuelles. With the financial participation of: La Société Générale du Cinéma du Québec, Téléfilm Canada, La Société Radio-Québec, La Société Radio-Canada, Bellevue Pathé Québec (1972) Inc., Provilfims Inc., I.p. Bob Gratton, Elvis Poulin, Linda Gratton, Elvis Mercier, Elvis Dufour, Elvis Falardeau, Elvis Fortin, Elvis Girard, the Elvis Beaudoin brothers-in-law, Elvis Regimbald, Elvis Blais, Elvis Houle, Elvis Burette, Elvis Bédard et Elvis Smith, Elvis Allaire, Elvis Simard, Elvis Lalumière, Elvis Auclair, Elvis Tremblay, Elvis McDuff, Elvis Wong, Elvis Lai, Elvis Tord, Elvis Pothier, Elvis Pouplot, Elvis Defruscia, Elvis Poitras, Elvis Duburre, Elvis Gadri Dualo, Elvis Marcellin, Messrs. Elvis Rodriguez, father and son, Elvis Barbe, Elvis Fortin, Elvis Bédard, Elvis Voizard, Elvis Alvaro, Elvis Bouchard, Elvis Morin, Elvis Lapointe, Elvis Chen, Elvis Rathbone, Elvis Venne, Elvis Boyer, Elvis Legault, Elvis O'Hara, Elvis Régnier.

• Pop hero Elvis Gratton brilliantly portrayed by Julien Poulin





• *Fragile Harvest's* worrying march of mass production

Robert Lang's  
**Fragile Harvest**

"Nature and human nature have been in partnership for 18,000 years. Now we're going it alone," says narrator David Suzuki in this compelling documentary about modern agricultural practices which have increased the vulnerability of food crops and the genetic strains on which they are based. The focus of the film is on the wholesale elimination of plant species to suit the needs of agribusiness. Multi-national corporations are taking over the seed business: breeding, marketing and engineering seeds that are tailored to respond to the chemicals these same corporations peddle around the world.

The result is that crops are no longer an indigenous part of the local climate and conditions, widely diverse enough genetically to withstand variations in the threats from insect predators, rainfall patterns, and soil conditions. Instead, monoculturing prevails. Miles and miles of land are planted to a single crop from seeds genetically engineered to be entirely uniform. While this practice may yield a uniform product, such as tomatoes that all ripen at the same time, have a tougher skin to withstand shipping, and a uniform size for packing, such crops can be entirely wiped out at one stroke by a new predator or a change in climate - factors that a widely diversified crop without withstand.

Obviously, agribusiness is less con-

cerned with feeding a hungry world than with controlling world-wide agricultural practice for its own profit. "The pesticide developers are now the plant breeders," and the entire food chain is rapidly becoming "an assembly line." In recent years, there have been over one thousand seed company takeovers by the multinationals, which are also buying up strains in Turkey, China and Peru to increase plant resistance in the lab.

*Fragile Harvest* is a highly informative look at the crucial issues surrounding the future of the world's food supply. Shot in Peru, Turkey, North America, and Ethiopia, the film makes us vividly aware that "the vast treasury of diverse genes" built up over the millennia in the plant world is rapidly being robbed and destroyed. Companies like Shell, Dupont and Monsanto market practices that not only deplete the gene pool, but also replace farmers with machinery - forcing people into the cities where there are often no jobs to be had. By making clear the complex interconnections among business, politics, and food supply, *Fragile Harvest* contributes to the growing radicalization around the question of world famine.

A particular irony in the film is located in its sections dealing with Ethiopia. By now, there are few North Americans unaware of the plight of the Ethiopian people suffering from the drought that has devastated their food supplies. What is less well-known is the fact that Ethiopia is one of the world's richest storehouses of plant diversity. Crops such as wheat, barley, flax, onion, bananas and coffee originated and developed there over thousands of years and then spread around the world. The famine relief that has been sent to Ethiopia from different countries returns home the very crops that were

developed by Ethiopian farmers long ago.

In an interconnected world, it is no longer possible to ignore the repercussions and reverberations of practices and events removed from our immediate concern. *Fragile Harvest* continually underlines these interconnections, especially through excellent interviews with people like Dr. Erna Bennett, Dr. Charles Rich, Dr. Melaku Worede, Lynn Grace and Pat Moony - each of whom adds another insight to our growing understanding of this complex issue.

Visually, there are many extraordinary moments in *Fragile Harvest*, especially shots of gigantic tractors and harvestors creeping across massive fields like ominous steel locusts. I also liked a section incorporating ads and billboards used in Third World countries to hard-sell by the chemical corporations. As well, there is a witty sequence shot at a board meeting of a food company planning to introduce Veggie Snacks - "an upscale opportunity to enjoy vegetables."

Producer/director Bob Lang has done a fine job on this film, which aired Feb. 5 on CBC-TV's *The Nature of Things*. His commitment to food and agricultural issues, present in many of his previous documentaries, has here culminated in a highly informative, compelling, and even frightening work that coincides with growing public concern and interest in world food issues. *Fragile Harvest* will certainly find ready audiences across Canada and North America.

Joyce Nelson •

**FRAGILE HARVEST** p./d. Robert Lang assoc.p./sc.dev. Jy Chipezak sc. Amanda McConnell ed. Michael Bennett narr. David Suzuki. Col. 16mm, running time: 60 minutes, 1986 dist. Kensington Communications Inc., 490 Adelaide St. W., Suite 304, Toronto, ON, M5V 1T4, (416) 362-9822

**OCTOBER STRANGER**

The schoolteacher comes on the bus from Toronto to Sioux Lookout and on to the Indian reserve for three weeks one summer. Her poetry class is a mixture of teens, an older woman, and John, a young man who wants to be a writer. There's a mutual attraction between John and the teacher - she's in the process of getting a divorce and he says it's the same with his girl Ida.

The three weeks pass too quickly for the pair; the teacher leaves and John misses her. He lives with his father and they go hunting together. The father preserves the old customs and rituals and, before skinning a moose carcass, he says an Indian prayer. When his son points out that they are Christians, the father says it doesn't hurt to keep up the customs - just in case.

After John gets a letter from the teacher in Toronto, he leaves his father. Finally, he's in the city and with the teacher. A voice-over recites, "I don't know this October Stranger/each dawn groping for an alarm clock/selecting a blue polyester suit/that used to belong to an Indian/from the back forests of Northern Ontario."

Loosely based on the 1976 poem by Ojibwa writer George Kenny *October Stranger* is a pleasant, reflective, obviously heartfelt look at an Indian who, as the poem says "writes his stories and poems as if Chaucer himself was kicking him along, never letting him rest, this Indian dedicated to becoming published." Beautifully shot by Mark Irwin at the Lac Seul Reserve in Northern Ontario, leisurely paced, and well-handled by director Alan Collins, the only small jarring note is the music, a mish-mash of rock, folk songs, and some Indian chanting *Award for Best Short subject, 1985 American Indian Film Festival, San Francisco.*

p. Christopher Lowry, d. Alan Collins, cam. Mark Irwin, sc. Denis LaCroix, Clint Bomphray, lp. Ronald Jones, Rene Highway, Ron Cook, Doris Linklater, Graham Greene. Running time: 28 mins. Col., 16mm/videotape. Availability: Ralph Ellis Enterprises, 1231 Yonge St., Ste. 300, Toronto M4T 2T8 (416) 924-2186.

**MITZY**

A cute and frisky cat named Mitzy frolics in the backyard, and has a few mild adventures. Permeated with a fey, wispy charm, this tiny little animated fragment by a former Sheridan College student shows promise.

d./animator: Jenny Ferenczi, 16mm/3/4 inch video, Col., 2-1/2 mins., Availability: J.J. Ferenczi Design, Music 2000, 787 Lawrence Ave. W. Toronto M6A 1C2 (416) 781-0716.

SCAN LINES

by Joyce Nelson

Two minutes

MINI - REVIEWS

by Pat Thompson



• Here Today's lead Ingrid Veninger

HERE TODAY...WHERE TOMORROW?

Winner of the competition announced by the Ontario Women's Directorate on International Women's Day in 1984, Galacom Media's **Here Today... Where Tomorrow?** is an unforced, undeniably nice approach to planning a career at the high school stage, and mainly addressed to girls. Within a docudrama format, Jill (Ingrid Veninger) struggles with science and math which seem abstract to her as well as to her friends... "but I'm not going to be a scientist" and "Grade 13 calculus will be a disaster!"

There are some group set-ups of discussions among male and female teenagers which strike this reviewer as excessively cautious, right-wing, and downright goody-goody. But there's no use denying it's a cold, hard world, and career planning comes early in life. It's to be hoped it doesn't take the fun out of being young and eager, hopeful and bubbly.

The positive and upbeat air is wafted along at a good pace. The

theme song starts with, "No-one seems to understand your hopes and fears" and ends, "You've got to try a little harder." In between the kids generally appear to speak their own pieces, and talk about guilt, mother-power and stark horror, "You don't want to be one of those kids washed up at 40!" At the end, Jill's friend spurs her on, "It's only a couple of years - how bad can it be..."

The full house at the premiere at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto loved the film - though one suspects the audience was packed with students eager to see themselves on-screen, plus a fair sprinkling of parents and interested government people. However, the film puts across its points with clarity and, within its aims and parameters, is done with a certain charm and competency. It will no doubt have a strong appeal to its target audience.

p./d. Marilyn A. Belec, sc. Belec/Robert Fyfe, cam. Philip Earnshaw, mus. Andrew Thompson, l.p. Ingrid Veninger, Cree Summer Francks, Jayne Eastwood, Lizanne Hanks, Rachel Crawford, Gina Wilkinson, Jessica Booker, Wanda Cannon. **Running time:** 26 mins. **Col., 16mm/videotape.** **Availability:** Ontario Women's Directorate (416) 965-1537.

The two-minute TV clip opens with a long shot of the spacecraft climbing steadily up into the sky, its booster rockets billowing massive trails of white smoke behind it. On the audio-track, Mission Control and Shuttle Commander Scobee are exchanging data about APU's (auxiliary power units), velocity, altitude. Cut to a telephoto closeup on the right side of the space shuttle Challenger, and the words from Mission Control, "Challenger, go with throttle up." "Roger, go with throttle up," confirms Scobee. Cut to a wider view of the shuttle, which suddenly bursts into a huge, fiery, gold-and-white cloud with two strange Y-shaped tendrils shooting off and down across the blue sky. Forty seconds of silence as the TV camera pans with the exploding debris.

On Tuesday, Jan. 28, this two-minute TV clip dominated the airwaves of North America. Although the only TV network covering the Challenger launch live was Ted Turner's Atlanta-based Cable News Network, within six minutes of the disaster CBS, ABC and NBC - shortly followed in Canada by CTV first, then CBC - broke into their regular programming and stayed with live coverage for five hours straight: playing and replaying and playing again this eerie, two-minute videoclip.

*Time* magazine called it "a nightmarish image destined to linger in the nation's shared consciousness." Senior writer Lance Morrow stated: "Over and over, the bright extinction played on the television screen, almost ghoulishly repeated until it had sunk into collective memory. And there it will abide, abetted by the weird metaphysics of videotape, which permits the endless repetition of a brute finality." CBC's *The Journal* called this two-minute videoclip an "apocalyptic image." Writing for *The Toronto Star*, Joe Erdelyi referred to the need to "wake up to the reality of what the screen portrays with such cold artistic beauty."

It is perhaps this last point - the "cold artistic beauty" of the TV imagery - that most deserves comment, and contemplation.

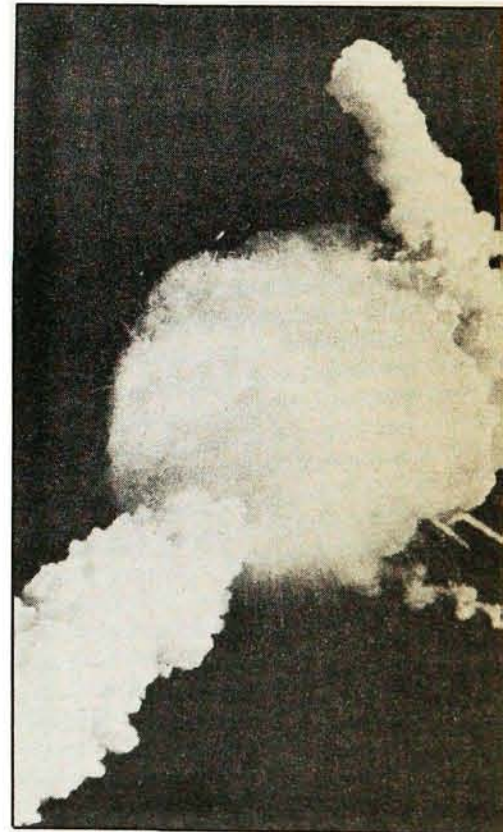
Unlike many people, the only TV coverage of the Shuttle disaster that I watched was that provided by CBC's *The National/The Journal* at 10:00 that evening. There, the two-minute videoclip was replayed at least four times. What immediately struck me while watching the clip, was the strange, uncanny, aesthetic beauty of the imagery - like some perfectly shot sequence of fireworks in summer. Maybe because of the smooth, even panning of the camera as it followed the exploding parts across the sky. Maybe because of the forty seconds of silence beneath the sequence that highlighted the spectacular quality of the visuals. Maybe because I've watched too much TV.

As Joe Erdelyi observed, this two-minute clip did convey to me a "cold artistic beauty" devoid of any emotion save

for a kind of technological awe. Not an awe of technology, but rather a machine-like awe for the performance - even the spectacular failure - of another machine, and the success of camera-eye witnessing it.

It was only when I heard another human voice actually expressing the cold, emotionless void I had momentarily fallen into that I was able to snap out of a technological fascination with the imagery. Johnson Space Center commentator in Houston, Steve Nesbitt, had paused for those forty seconds of silence while the television screen filled with exploding pyrotechnics. When he resumed his narration, it was to say, in a voice completely devoid of emotion: "Flight controllers are looking very carefully at the situation. Obviously, a major malfunction."

The shock of Nesbitt's utterly technological response snapped me back to the land of the living and the dying. But up to that point, the obliteration



tion of the seven crew-members had momentarily faded from my consciousness, completely overshadowed by the cold, artistic beauty of the TV images.

I suspect that my own response might not be atypical, that many people watching their TV screens experienced this void of technological fascination, this reduction of their human response before the TV spectacle of awesome explosion. In this sense, *The Journal* was right: it was, and is, an apocalyptic image.

While others claim that it's the visuals of this two-minute clip that'll remain embedded in their minds, for me it's that efficient, emotionless, technological voice of Mission Control clamly understating: "Obviously, a major malfunction."