



The Quebec contingent: Michel Moreau, Josée Beaudet and Paul Tana

GRIERSON '86

by Magnus Isacsson

At the Grierson seminar there are no cocktail parties, no press conferences and no awards. Instead, there are some rules: No films are shown unless the director is able to be present for most of the week; all participants attend all screenings together; discussions take up as much time as screenings.

The result is always the same. Discussions started over one film are fuelled by others, continue, and are transformed. The participants have time to get to know each other and understand each other's arguments. Inevitably, as the week progresses, certain affinities and disagreements crystallize, for better or worse.

This year's seminar was no exception. Guided, prodded, and entertained by this year's moderator, journalist and filmmaker Boyce Richardson, some 70 participants spent an intense week (Nov. 16-21) in the honeymoon setting of Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. to where the seminar has returned after two lean years of exile in the more pedestrian

Magnus Isacsson is an independent filmmaker and TV producer based in Montreal.

environment of Brockville, Ont.

Programmer Gary Evans, himself a Grierson expert, had chosen two Grierson films for the opening night – a first for the seminar which is now in its twelfth year. The first was "the old man's" famous but seldom seen *Drifters*, about the herring fishery in Britain. The second: *Conquest*, a practically unknown compilation film about the conquest of the American west, made with outtakes from Hollywood action movies.

Both these films exhibit great confidence in the power of men and machinery in the exploitation of natural resources. But they also illustrate the extent to which Grierson's notion of the documentary as educational propaganda lacks any clear social or political orientation. While *Drifters* is a fundamentally progressive film with its great respect for the toil and skills of working people, *Conquest* is crudely imperialist and shows a complete lack of understanding of what the coming of the white man meant to the native peoples of North America.

Bringing these museum pieces out to open this year's seminar was not just a nostalgic gesture. In fact, they served as perfect stage-setters for what Evans termed "the flower garden of this year's

documentary film crop." And the bouquet he had chosen had two characteristics: a) it was varied, combining all sizes and colours and b) there was, in spite of the variety, a clear emphasis on the mainstream high-budget documentary acceptable to the TV networks.

CBC-NFB heavyweights

This emphasis on the "mainstream" documentary certainly served to underline one very important trend which deserves recognition: the considerable weight (if not number) of the documentaries produced by independent filmmakers in collaboration with both the English and French networks of the CBC. There are major documentary undertakings which are not typical "current affairs specials" of the aseptic "objective" journalism type, but rather films which present some of the freshness and personal/political perspective and texture of the best documentary tradition.

Of course, a Donald Brittain CBC-NFB co-production is nothing new, but the final chapter of the Champions trilogy (*The Final Battle: The Champions Part III*) provided an opportunity to discuss some of the differences between this type of documentary and the

regular network fare. Moderator Boyce Richardson summed it up in saying:

"You sense that there is a *person* behind the narration in this film, and you don't feel that you *have to believe* what's being said. It does not *impose* a point of view, like a TV narration does. In that sense, it leaves you the freedom to think for yourself and judge for yourself."

Another example of a fruitful collaboration between the CBC and the NFB which won the unanimous approval of the seminar participants was *Final Offer*, directed by Sturla Gunnarson. This deep-access story of the 1984 contract negotiations between the United Auto Workers and General Motors returns to what one participant referred to as the "raw, grainy and rough" *cinéma vérité* techniques of the early '60s. While it has a narration, it is not designed to deliver the whole truth in the usual CBC manner, but rather to stitch together pieces of jargon-filled action which would otherwise have been incomprehensible to the viewer.

While the film is *vérité* in style, Gunnarson's comments made it clear that a successful documentary often needs to make use of key concepts of the fiction film, such as dramatic structure and casting. "Casting is just as important in do-

cumentary as in fiction," he said. And anybody who has seen Bob White play the lead part in **Final Offer** would be hard put to disagree.

It was pointed out, however, that films like this one and **The Final Battle** (clearly another casting success: with Mulroney and Turner it would have been flatter than a pancake...) which view history through the action of leaders tend to obscure the grassroots social dynamics which often play a crucial role in determining the outcome of any major confrontation.

And there is of course another problem. Donald Brittain, introduced as a "national treasure" by the programmer (Brittain had a good time with that one...) may not have any problem getting his films shown on TV, but most professionally made independent documentaries on political issues are either shunted off to some obscure broadcasting hour by the networks, or – more often – turned down. There were several examples at the seminar of films which clearly deserve TV exposure but which run against the grain of the networks' fear of ideas. One was the excellent and irreverent **Nuclear Follies**, directed by B.C. filmmaker Michael Chechik. It counterposes archival footage celebrating the splitting of the atom as the salvation of humankind to sequences of comedy theatre and ironic songs from the anti-nuke movement. Another example: **Smile and Dial**, directed by Jim Hamm, which investigates the fraudulent and/or exploitative techniques used by various professional fundraisers on behalf of well-known charities. Typically neither the charities themselves nor the TV networks wanted to touch the film with a 10-foot pole. Hear no evil, see no evil... To them, it seems, (public) ignorance is bliss.

Quebec documentary "nouvelle manière"

While the English-language heavyweights focused on the role of leaders, Quebec's input at the seminar stuck to what has always been the mainstay of French-language documentary in this

country: le monde ordinaire (ordinary people.) Three films from Quebec provided some of the week's highlights, although only one of them was actually versioned in English.

Josée Beaudet's **Le Film d'Ariane** is a history of Quebec women from 1925 to 1980, meticulously constructed with the voices of many women (one of them scripted) and amateur film footage. It gives an extraordinary sense of the commonality of women's experience in Quebec, and at the same time provides what one participant called "an iconography of Quebec society over 50 years."

Paul Tana's **Caffè Italia** is a look at the often absurd contradictions of being an immigrant in Quebec which impressed the seminar with its excellent integration of documentary and dramatised sequences.

Michel Moreau's **Le Million tout-puissant** (literally The All-powerful Million) plunges right to the heart of the values of our materialistic society through a look at the "greatness and misery" of the winners of the Quebec lottery jackpot. The film is gentle and humorous, but underneath the polished surface it deals a devastating blow to the belief that money is happiness.

While the subject-matter of these films is solidly anchored in the Quebec tradition, there is also something new about them. These are not NFB films, like the ones Grierson seminar participants have been used to seeing over the years. They were all made by independents, for the French network of the CBC, with money from Telefilm Canada and la Société Générale du Cinéma du Québec.

Does this represent a new wave of some kind, or at least a new way of making documentaries in Quebec? Questioned on this point, the filmmakers seemed rather sceptical, pointing out that this mode of financing with its obligatory TV approval has many contradictions and no guarantees for future projects. Veteran documentarian Michel Moreau says he will undoubtedly turn to the NFB for some of his coming films, and Josée Beaudet has just been named

A Student's View

The concern over where cinema is, and where it is heading in the future is common to almost all forms of cinema in Canada. When I travelled to this year's Grierson Seminar on Documentary Cinema, I fully expected to hear a discussion of this. Unfortunately, the bulk of the week's discussion was reduced to ego-stroking, with an unsuitable amount of time devoted to genuine criticism. The state of documentary cinema seemed to be an unmentionable issue, and when mentioned, it was received with some hostility.

While the program was quite conservative in its choice of works, there were some pieces which did challenge the "standards" of present documentary cinema, and I do not mean to imply that programmer Garry Evans should be held responsible for the shortcomings of this year's seminar. The real stumbling block was the conflict of the egos of a number of the participants. Without a doubt, the most common phrase of the week was "I loved your film...". While moral support is always nice to receive, it hardly provides a good basis for a critical assessment of one's work.

Being a student, I in particular felt that my views were being given short shrift by professionals, who assumed that their experience placed them above learning anything from me. I realise that as a new filmmaker I have much to learn, but it is my hope that in 10, 20 years, I will still have the same questions. In this age of rapid advancement, no one should shut themselves off from new ideas. Experience is very important, but it should never be used as an excuse to preserve archaic practices.

Perhaps some of my displeasure over the course of the week stems from the fact that I am an avant-garde filmmaker, and therefore feel a greater need to involve a modernist, or post-modernist aesthetic in my work. These concepts, while perhaps

unsuitable for all documentary work, can enhance its effect in some situations. However, the general attitude among the seminar's participants was to reject any positive modernist/post-modernist influence.

In particular, many filmmakers had a great deal of difficulty understanding the mode of expression used in the film **Mediashun**, made by some of my colleagues. This film, which deals with the media representation of the U.S./Nicaraguan conflict, also requires the viewer to question the authority of the text itself. To the people present, such a style of delivery defeated the purpose of the film (which they assumed to be pro-Sandinista propaganda). They could not accept the idea that the answer to propaganda is not to provide counter-propaganda, but instead to provide information, and to force the viewer to consider the concept of truth on his/her own.

If documentary is to survive as a viable form of information dissemination, it must continue to search for new forms of expression. In my opinion, these new forms must take into consideration the concept of self-assessment. This does not mean that the old forms of documentary cinema must be rejected, but it does mean that they must be analysed, and perhaps modernized. If documentary cinema does not continue to experiment, and adapt, it will cease to be a relevant form of cinema, and will be rejected by the public. Perhaps the best place to further the modes of documentary cinema is at seminars, such as the Grierson, but if this year's egotism prevails in future sessions, the prospects for advancement look poor.

Dave Douglas •

Dave Douglas is a fourth year student of film studies at Queen's University.



• Donald Brittain and Magnus Isacsson shoot the breeze



• One sleeps, the other doesn't: Sturla Gunnarson and Gary Evans



• Vera Frenkel

photo: Magnus Isacson

other words, we no longer trust our own perceptions, our own feelings. Frenkel's objective is to intervene in the way people see the world through a subversion of the conventional assumptions about truth and credibility, in order to create scepticism. She says: "It should become second nature for us to ask questions about these issues (of truth and credibility) in the cynical age we live in."

The social protest film

The most neglected type of production at this year's Grierson was one which traditionally has a high profile at the event: the social protest film linked to some kind of grassroots movement. This does not reflect a change in actual documentary filmmaking in Canada, but rather the preferences of the programmer who chose not to invite such films as Martin Duckworth's *Return to Dresden* or Fernand Bélanger's and Dagmar de Gueissaz's *Passiflora*.

In addition to the already mentioned *Nuclear Follies* by Michael Chechik, this kind of film was represented by Anand Patwardhan's *Bombay Our City*, also the only Third World film at the event. Many participants found the film, which shows Bombay slum dwellers struggling against eviction, both shocking and moving. Some said this view of conditions in a Third World metropolis put some of our own First World concerns in perspective for them. However, this film goes much beyond the tear-jerking voyeuristic view of poverty which unfortunately makes up most of the coverage of these kinds of issues in the media. In showing



• Lisa Steele

photo: Magnus Isacson

us not only the misery and despair, but also the resilience and will to struggle of the Bombay slum dwellers, this film profoundly challenges the "famine-victim-waiting-for-Western-helping-hand" image we have of people in Africa and Asia.

Anand Patwardhan's descriptions of the difficult conditions under which this film was made also served to remind the gathering that the struggling documentary which has to confront government repression because of its social message is not a thing of the past.

If the social protest film was neglected during the weeklong discussions, so were the material conditions confronting documentarians in the Reagan-Mulroney era. Only on the last day of the seminar was it pointed out that the discussions "had seemed to obscure the real conditions of documentary work in this country" (Lisa Steele) and "strange-

ly neglected the fact that this is an embattled tradition" (Vera Frenkel). This of course had to do with the selection of film (and therefore filmmakers), but Boston director Ben Achtenberg underlined another factor that had surely been at work: "It's great to be able to come here for a week and just celebrate the good work that is actually done in documentary film and video, instead of just having to grapple with the problem of staying alive from one week to the next, which is after all what we do the other 51 weeks of the year."

More than a celebration, however, the Grierson seminar remains the most serious forum for in-depth discussion on documentary work in this country. The Ontario Film Association deserves much credit for sponsoring this nationally important event, and so does the group of hard-working volunteers who actually make the thing happen.

On the last day of the seminar, some potentially important suggestions were made about the possibility of transforming the seminar into a truly bilingual event, organized jointly by Quebec and English-Canadian bodies. This is certainly an excellent perspective in the medium term. However, the organizational and financial obstacles to such a change should not be underestimated. The Grierson formula is a proven one, and the event is crucial to what "the old man" would have called the "documentary film movement" in this country. Any tampering with the format and funding structure of the seminar should be done in a way which doesn't jeopardize its survival in the present context of budgetary restrictions.

NORTHERN IRELAND: AT THE EDGE OF THE UNION

Time: 60 min. d. Paul Hamann. Distribution: British Broadcasting Corporation. Format: 16mm. 1985.

Set in war-torn Londonderry, the film reveals the perspective of two young political men on opposite sides of the conflict without the customary mediation of the television reporter.

NUCLEAR FOLLIES

Time: 40 min. d. Michael Chechik. Distribution: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. Format: 16mm. 1985. Budget: \$14,500. Shooting ratio: 7 to 1.

The nuclear issue has been addressed earnestly by a host of documentary filmmakers in recent years. Michael Chechik has decided to use irony and humour to make the usual points about the issue.

?O, ZOO! (THE MAKING OF A FICTION FILM)

Time: 23 min. d. Philip Hoffman. Distribution: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. Format: 16mm. 1986. Budget: \$4,600. Shooting ratio: 3 to 1.

Philip Hoffman uses the pretext of shooting a documentary on the set of Peter Greenaway's new film, *Zed and Two Noughts* to pursue his investigation of the medium.

POET: IRVING LAYTON OBSERVED

Time: 59 min. d. Donald Winkler. Distribution: National Film Board. Format: 16mm. 1986. Budget: \$300,000. Shooting ratio: 16 to 1.

Donald Winkler's documentary reveals an artist who is more than a performer. The act of poetic creativity is anything but flashes of inspiration; it is working, then reworking complex language and nuance.

RACE AGAINST PRIME TIME

Time: 59 min. d. David Shulman. Distribution: New Decade Productions, N.Y.C. Format: 3/4" Video.

The question of how television stations and networks choose stories for the news is the subject of this compelling documentary from the United States.

RANCH: THE ALAN WOOD RANCH PROJECT

Time: 28 min. p/w/ed. Steven DeNure and Christopher Lowry. Distribution: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. Format: 16mm. 1985. Budget: \$90,000. Shooting ratio: 5 to 1.

British artist Alan Wood chose Alberta to build his massive environmental art piece dedicated to colour in the landscape and North America's Myth of the West.

SMILE AND DIAL

Time: 25 min. d. Jim Hamm. Distribution: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. Format: 16mm. 1986. Budget: \$35,000. Shooting ratio: 8 to 1.

Using docudrama to expose the crookedness of fundraising schemes for charitable organizations, *Smile and Dial* takes the viewer beyond the usual observation of the nuisance value of telephone solicitations.

SOME CALL IT BAD LUCK

Time: 47 min. d. Lisa Steele. Distribution: V-Tape. Format: Video. 1982. Budget: \$13,000. Shooting ratio: 3 to 1.

The drama creates the claustrophobia and raw actuality of a relentless police interrogation.

SPADINA

Time: 56 min. d. David Troster. Distribution: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. Format: 16mm. 1984. Budget: \$75,000. Shooting ratio: 15 to 1.

This historical portrait of the Jewish community of Toronto is also a tableau of the immigrant experience in Canada.

STOP THE WORLD

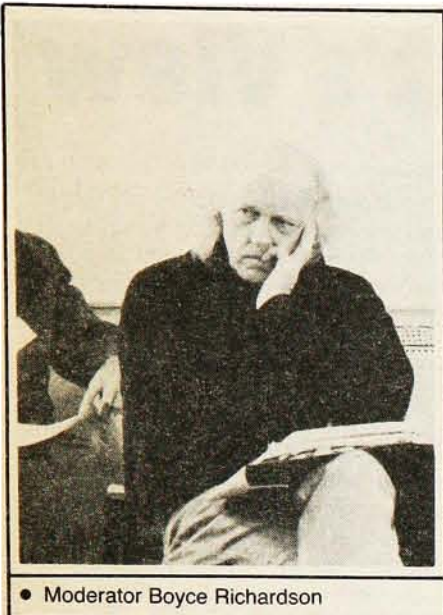
Time: 50 min. d. Doug Bailey. Distribution: Isachsen Films. Format: 16mm. 1985. Budget: \$100,000. Shooting ratio: 12 to 1.

A group of six construction workers sets off for the great Canadian adventure, work in the far North. What begins propitiously becomes a battle of bleak choices: proximity without friendship or boredom and isolation.

TEN CENTS A DANCE/PARALLAX

Time: 30 min. d. Midi Onodera. Distribution: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. Format: 16mm. 1985. Budget: \$19,000. Shooting ratio: 1 to 1.

The split screen serves as self-conscious reflection of the adage that documentary is a window on the world. Midi Onodera asserts the principle that drama as documentary is as valid a hypothesis as drama. Her triptych describes the alienation of each person on each screen as he/she meanders aimlessly in a desert of sexual *ennui*.



• Moderator Boyce Richardson

photo: Magnus Isacsson

the discussion following the screening, Hamann pointed out that the real problem was that "for the first time in 16 years of coverage of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, a republican leader was allowed to speak freely and explain his views without being interrupted by all kinds of aggressive questions or a narration about IRA bomb victims." His conclusion: "It will be a long time before that can be done again."

When time came for a major CTV special on Soviet disinformation, James Dubro's *Agents of Deception*, the reaction was one of disbelief. It was the only screening at the seminar not followed by at least some polite applause. To steal a phrase from a film on the Arctic also screened during the week: "The silence was deafening." In the ensuing discussion, the film was described as sensationalist, dishonest and McCarthyist. This was not because the participants had any doubts that the Soviet Union uses various methods of disinformation, but because of the journalistic sleights-of-hand used to tar the western peace movement with the Evil Empire Brush. The worst problem with Dubro's tape was, according to several speakers, that it is not an isolated case. In fact the techniques it uses are rampant on North American TV networks, especially the private ones, although not often in such an extreme manner.

Some of the issues raised by Dubro's program were addressed in a most effective way by another video directed by David Shulman of New York City. *Race Against Prime Time* is a critical examination of the TV coverage of the 1980 "race riot" in Miami. It is a



• Anand Padwardhan

photo: Magnus Isacsson

painstaking piece of work, four years in the making, which goes far beyond the obvious point that network news reports are superficial and sensationalist. It demonstrates that they promote racial stereotypes, thereby fuelling racism. For example, Shulman shows how network coverage focused on black vandalism against white-owned businesses, while neglecting white vigilante attacks on blacks. The news operations selected spokespeople of the black community according to their own wishful perceptions instead of interviewing the actual leaders, thereby influencing the events which editors claim news coverage only mirrors. Finally, news reports presented the riots as purely racial, leaving out all the factors actually uniting black and white poor people. Only after the riots was there some coverage of the conditions prevailing in Miami's black community.

Promoting scepticism

While the inclusion of current affairs journalism and vanguard video art both go back a few years at the Grierson seminar, it seems the first of the two has an easier time finding a place there. This may be natural enough if you consider the similarity of techniques used by documentary film and TV journalism. But it is not really justified if you look at the problem through the prism of that old Griersonian definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality." This year's screening of works by Lisa Steele and Vera Frenkel made it quite clear that it is time to discard some of the prejudice 'traditional' documentarians harbour vis-à-vis experimental video.

Much of the discussion about documentary film and even journalism revolves around notions of truth and authenticity, the legitimacy of combining documentary and dramatic techniques, the notions of 'credibility' 'objectivity' and 'balance' promoted (in their own biased fashion) by the TV networks. And one of the most interesting aspects of this year's Grierson event was that it became clear the probing and exploration of these issues, so essential to documentary film, may be far more advanced in the field of the experimental video.

In *Some Call it Bad Luck* Lisa Steele challenges notions of truth, experience and evidence through a harrowing portrayal of a young woman under police interrogation - played by herself. Participants praised her performance, essentially agreeing with the *Globe and Mail* that Steele "could teach Meryl Streep

TV journalism examined

The outstanding journalistic TV documentary of the week was Paul Hamann's BBC program *Northern Ireland: At the Edge of the Union*, which caused an uproar in Britain and only got on the air after the BBC's journalists staged their first-ever strike against censorship. BBC management had initially found the program lacked balance, an amazing conclusion given that it simply consists of two interwoven portraits of one republican and one Protestant leader. In

AGENTS OF DECEPTION

Time: 56 min. p./sc. James Dubro. Research/co-writer: Rob Roy. Distribution: CTV. Format: Video (Betacam). 1986. Budget: \$350,000 plus. Shooting ratio: 15 to 1.

The Soviet Union spends about three billion dollars a year on disinformation, i.e., on efforts to mislead and disinform public opinion outside the U.S.S.R. This piece of investigative journalism by James Dubro looks at one side of the ugly face of contemporary propaganda politics.

ARCTIC BAY: A COMMUNITY AND THE CIRCUIT COURT

Time: 28 min. d. Margit Nance for Simon Fraser University. Distribution: Magic Lantern. Format: Video. 1985 Budget: \$34,000. Shooting ratio: 20 to 1.

As one of the first documentaries of an actual court case in Canada, *Arctic Bay* is the story of a sentencing hearing where a young Inuit male has been convicted of raping a 14-year-old girl in their Arctic community.

BOMBAY: OUR CITY (HAMARA SHEHAR)

Time: 82 min. d. Anand Padwardhan. Distribution: DEC Films. Format: 16mm, 1985 Budget: \$80,000. Shooting ratio: 10 to 1.

Bombay's slum dwellers tell a story of injustice and harassment by city authorities intent on urban 'beautification'. They begin to organize in the face of constant eviction and the indifference of those who hold power. The impact of *Bombay: Our City* was such that no Indian television station would show it, despite critical press acclaim.

CAFFÈ ITALIA MONTRÉAL

Time: 82 min. d. Paul Tana. Distribution: Cinema Libre. Format: 16mm. 1985 Budget: \$340,000. Shooting ratio: 8 to 1. English subtitles.

This portrait of the Italian community of Montreal focuses on the immigrant experience in the Francophone sea of Quebec.

LE FILM D'ARIANE

Time: 80 min. d. Josée Beaudet. Distribution: Parlimage. Format: 16mm. 1985 Budget: \$190,000. Shooting ratio: 5 to 1.

Using hundreds of hours of "home movies", shot over a lifetime, Josée Beaudet has reconstructed the life history of a middleclass French-Canadian woman, Ariane, now 75 years old.

FINAL BATTLE

Time: 90 min. d. Donald Brittain. Distribution: CBC/NFB. Format: 16mm. 1986 Budget: \$350,000. Shooting ratio: mostly compilation.

Complex political events and the personalities of Levesque and Trudeau were made accessible and fascinating as politics is revealed for its gamesmanship.

FINAL OFFER: BOB WHITE AND THE CANADIAN AUTOWORKERS FIGHT FOR INDEPENDENCE

Time: 79 min. d. Sturla Gunnarsson. Distribution: National Film Board. Format: 16mm. 1985.

The breakaway of the Canadian autoworkers from its American parent in 1984 marked a turning point in contemporary labour history. *Final Offer* is a stunning example of what Grierson would call documentary's function of showing the drama of the ordinary. (1986 - Prix d'Italia winner)

HERE TODAY... WHERE TOMORROW

Time: 26 min. d. Marilyn A. Belec. Distributor: L & M Media Marketing Services, Toronto. Format: 16mm. 1985 Budget: \$125,000. Shooting ratio: 7 to 1.

This film, made for the Ontario Women's Directorate, is aimed directly at teenage audiences, especially females struggling with gender roles.

LOST ART: A CARGO CULT ROMANCE

Time: 28 min. d. Vera Frenkel. Distribution: V-Tape. Format: Video. 1986 Budget: \$10,000 - \$15,000.

Vera Frenkel continues to pursue the relationship of television to truth, perception and the way we relate to both those elements in this experimental documentary about an unusual artistic event, the re-creation (or recreation) of a penitentiary toilet bowl with wings.

THE MENGELE FILE

Time: 26 min. d. Bernie Zukerman. Distribution: The Journal, CBC. Format: Video. 1986. Budget: \$80,000. Shooting ratio: 1 to 25.

Journalist Terence McKenna has uncovered the bizarre tale of perhaps the most ineffective 'pursuit' of a Nazi war criminal since the war.

LE MILLION TOUT-PUISSANT

Time: 92 min. d. Michel Moreau. Distribution: Films du Crépuscule. Format: 16mm. 1985 Budget: \$319,000. Shooting ratio: 7 to 1 French original.

Quebec's monstrous money game, the lottery, is the subject of this documentary-punctuated-by-drama.