

Grierson Documentary Seminar '85

Broadening Perspectives

by Cameron Bailey

"Grierson is brutal." That pronouncement, from one drained participant midway through the week-long seminar, summed up the intensity that always seems to be generated every time film and video artists, critics and librarians gather together to rake through the latest crop of "documentaries". The participant I quote had attended before, and so *knew*, but by the end of the third day anyone could have said it. The 1987 Grierson Documentary Seminar came in the form of a week of hyper-stimulation — attacks, irritations, thrills, schmoozing, insults, retorts — all compounded by a debilitating lack of sleep.

"Although the Seminar honours the late John Grierson, the screenings and discussions go beyond the style and tradition he established," the program folder announces blandly. The truth is, Grierson wouldn't recognize a lot of

what went on during the week as any offspring of his. John Greyson's *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Queers*, or the Fernand Bélanger/Dagmar Gueissaz-Teufel collaboration, *Passiflora* (produced by Grierson's own National Film Board) took his dictum of 'helping Canadians to understand each other' to places it doesn't often go.

Organized by Nora Currie and programmed by Lisa Steele, Geoff Pevere and Thomas Waugh, this year's Seminar featured one of the most daring programmes of films and videos ever to appear at Grierson. Apart from the usual social documentaries, known by the both positive and pejorative term, "media social work," there was a wide range of formal strategies, and a new concern with issues of sexuality and race. Coincident with the move from Niagara-on-the-Lake to Toronto, this was the year Grierson came out. There were public screenings for the first time. (Although poorly attended, the idea is one that should certainly continue.) And there was a new, broader perspective: the range of formal experimentation, the presence of gay and black artists in more than token numbers, the non-Canadian



• Emile De Antonio



• Robert Frank



• Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julian



• Dagmar Gueissaz-Teufel and Fernand Bélanger

**ARTIST ON FIRE:
THE ART OF JOYCE WIELAND**

The intersection point where a maker of innovative, feminist documentaries and a feminist visionary artist meet. We hear voices, critical and personal. We swoon in a swirl of luscious images. Visual pleasure abounds. Reviewed in *Cinema Canada*, No. 143.

Canada, 1986. d. Kay Armatage. format 16mm. dist. CFMDC, Toronto. running time 54 min.

BRIGHT EYES

One of the most intelligent works about AIDS yet to be made. Commissioned by Britain's Channel 4, this tape probes to the roots of AIDS hysteria, making the sorts of elegant connections (between conceptions of disease and criminality, or light and truth, for example) that have you realizing things that should have been obvious all along. But this is no mere clever graduate paper: Marshall is committed to both analyzing and changing the ways we represent gays and homosexuality. In the process he pulls out all the rhetorical stops, using historical reenactment, direct-address, rehearsed interviews, anything that will further the cause of something so simple as cogent thought.

U.K., 1984. d. Stuart Marshall. format 3/4" video. dist. V/Tape, Toronto. running time 83 min.

Canadian Diamonds

Part tongue-in-cheek revisionist history, part filmic pastiche, *Canadian Diamonds* takes an ironic swipe at the way Canadian history is constructed - from within, and by our colonizers. Along the way we get some quick little in-jokes at the expense of everything from narrative theory to Peter C. Newman.

Strangely, a rock video interrupts the tape.

Canada, 1986. d. Gary Kibbins. format 3/4" video. dist. V/Tape, Toronto. running time 58 min.

**LA CIGOGNE
TECHNOLOGIQUE**

A textbook example of the failures of *cinéma direct*. Aubin chooses to approach the issue of reproductive technology by focussing, closely, on a handful of women who must decide how much they will do (and have done to them) in order to have a baby. The rich-

ness of the subject, the contexts, and backgrounds and related issues, we leave to tentative stabs during the discussion. For all the whos and hows that the film explores, it leaves you screaming "Why?"

Canada, 1987. d. Liette Aubin. format 16mm. dist. National Film Board. running time 46 min.

**DU POTLATCH,
L'ODEUR DE L'HUILE**

Nihilism gets itself into political trouble, fast. And nihilistic artists (what else do nihilists do?) are often worse. In Marie-Hélène Cousineau's *Du Potlatch*, what we seem to have are nihilistic artists. (We know they're nihilists because they paint their faces and burn art.) But these nihilists are burning art for a reason: it's an event to protest the position of the artists in Quebec. One can't help but wonder aloud how badly off they are if they can afford to burn their art. Once or twice the tape slips into the same sort of humourless didacticism the artists suffer from, but a critical intelligence rescues it. The real mistake was the choice of subject. Reviewed in *Cinema Canada*, No. 144.

Canada, 1986. d. Marie-Hélène Cousineau. format 3/4" video. dist. Le Vidéographe, Montreal. running time 30 min.

**EARNING SELF RESPECT:
WOMEN, WAR WORK
AND UNIONS IN B. C.**

A work in progress, so one can do little more than describe what it looks like right now. *Diamond* has interviewed several B.C. women who during World War II went to work in jobs traditionally held by men. Their pragmatism is startling: "I'd never seen a blueprint before, but of course I'd done a lot of sewing." Interspersed with the interviews are some re-creations of agitprop labour theatre, and, of course, newsreel footage, hilarious now in its sexist bombast.

Everything works but the agitprop, which, even if you know the style it's imitating, falls flat.

Canada, 1987. d. Sara Diamond. format 3/4" video. dist. Video Out, Vancouver. running time 30 min.

ENERGY AND HOW TO GET IT

Without falling into American stereotypes, let it be said that this was

the most aggressively ragged film of the Seminar. *Of course* it's a myth. Of course the bold, careless American (male) with a life force bigger than all Texas is an ideological construction. But this film does take risks without doubling back to worry over them, something the Canadian works seemed reluctant to do. No neurotic intellectual analysis here. Not a whiff of the intellectual at all, actually. The film, by the way, is about a prophet of fusion.

Canada/U.S., 1981. d. Robert Frank. format: 16mm. running time: 30 min.

LIFE DANCES ON

The downside of the Frank mystique. Rambling, shambling, pointless footage of Frank's son, and a friend, and "a bum I got to know on the street." Some pretty bloated, romantic notions of the life well-lived are at the root of all this, I suspect.

Canada/U.S., 1981. d. Robert Frank. format 16mm. running time: 30 min.

**HAVE YOU EVER HAD
A NUCLEAR NIGHTMARE?**

A low-budget seduction, contemplating images, women, protest, suffering, and nuclear destruction. Alternately hypnotic and bracing. Burgess' use of a bilingual voice-over, despite the difficulties it may cause for the unilingual viewer, is admirable.

Canada, 1986. d. Marilyn Burgess. format 3/4" video. dist. G.I.V. Inc., Montreal. running time 10 min.

L'HOMME RENVERSÉ

A remarkably honest '70s film, Dion's *L'Homme renversé* tackles issues of masculinity head-on. The blurred lines between documented "reality" and scripted drama lend an interesting ambiguity. What? It was made in 1987? Oh.

Canada, 1987. d. Yves Dion. format 16mm, video. dist. National Film Board. running time 97 min.

A MOFFIE CALLED SIMON

The incredibly prolific John Greyson addresses apartheid through the figure of Simon Nkoli, a gay political prisoner. This was another of the works at this year's Grierson smart enough not to be single-issue diatribes.

Canada, 1986. d. John Greyson. format 16mm, b&w. dist. CFMDC, Toronto. running time 15 min.

THE ADS EPIDEMIC

A rock video about AIDS hysteria, filtered through *Death in Venice*. It all makes perfect sense. What's more, it's funny.

Canada, 1987. d. John Greyson. format 3/4" video. dist. V/Tape, Toronto. running time 5 min.

**MOSCOW DOES NOT
BELIEVE IN QUEERS**

A case of diminishing rewards: Brilliant use of gay porn and consumer objects. Clever handling of the accent problem (and the lack of Moscow footage). Interesting appropriation of stock footage (Rock Hudson films, *Reds*, Eisenstein) to new, previously submerged readings. Less than successful connections made between the issues raised. *Very bad acting*. But a great title.

Canada, 1986. d. John Greyson. format 3/4" video. dist. V/Tape, Toronto. running time 27 min.

(especially British) work present, all took the documentary form out of the ghetto where it tends to reside as Canada's most-respected, forgotten, genre.

The hottest issues this year had to do with marginality and with the structure of the seminar itself. There were sometimes veiled suggestions that not everyone there "belonged" there, or that perhaps some participants were abusing their "privilege". Feminist debates were unusually subdued this year, and, as usual, all of the best discussions took place away from the Royal Ontario Museum theatre, at dinner or over drinks. What follows is a sketching of some of the significant issues at this year's Grierson; I've devoted more attention to the films and tapes.

COVETING MARGINALITY

This year, the position of 'other' was up for grabs.

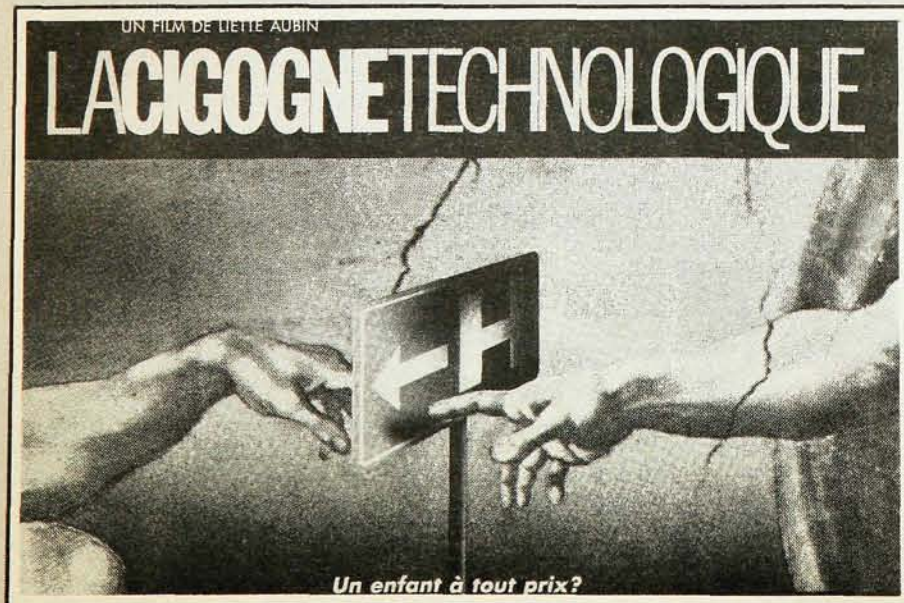
Documentary film and video makers in Canada, and perhaps generally, tend to be a pretty liberal bunch. You might even call most of them "left." And so a sort of comfortable complacency tends to become the norm eventually: "We're aware, committed cultural producers doing what we can. We know all about power relationships; we know all about the ideologies of various images. This year, that wasn't enough.

This year, the films and tapes that addressed gay issues were probably the most interesting works there. John Greyson's work, even when it's not fully thought out, is always provocative. Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes* showed that theoretical rigour and accessibility are perfectly compatible. (Marshall proved to be one of the most thoughtful voices during the discussions). *The Passion of Remembrance's* insistence, *Passiflora's* energetic anarchy, all threw the whole question of marginality up in the air. No longer could we make any assumptions, as straights, or gays, or anglophones or francophones, or blacks or whites or women or men as to whom is oppressed and who is oppressing. What was significant about the "gay" films and tapes is that they were *not* just "gay" works: they all showed the complexities of power relationships within and between different groups. No more simplistic "us" and "them."

**THE FIGHT AGAINST
INTELLECTUAL TERRORISM**

The discourses around film theory, when articulated not from the subject's desire for identification with other subjects, but from a conflicting desire to speak with the Father's tongue, to adopt the *parole* of dominant "schools" of thought, overdetermines the discussion, necessarily moves it into the realm of obfuscation, plunges it into the inevitable *mise-en-abyme*. Read: trade jargon can be confusing.

This year, as in other years, the academics and theorists went up against the "practical" film and video makers. The issue, really, is the level of discussion. Is Grierson to be a forum only for



discussing funding and distribution and "how did you get your subject to open up on camera like that?" or can it support more complex discussions? And are more complex discussions possible without throwing in the word "deconstruction"? The friction between the theorists and the non-theorists erupted this year in charges of "intellectual terrorism"; it was felt that the discussions were being conducted among a coterie, making those who wanted to ask "simple", not overly baroque questions too frightened to speak. Students and librarians were encouraged by the moderators (Varda Burstyn and Magnus Isacson) and other participants to have the courage to "speak up." Eventually student Alex MacKenzie stood up and told us that he was entirely capable of speaking without our prompting. It's probably an issue that will recur each year, because the critics and theorists insist that their comments are not confusing, that it is in fact terrorism to limit the discussion to the banal. And those who aren't theorists will rightly refuse to attend a Grierson seminar that comes with a reading list.

Grierson, of course, is an artificial community. For one week, people who would otherwise have very little contact bring their various forms of expertise to bear upon the state of the documentary in Canada. That they sometimes don't understand each other (or worse, don't care to) shouldn't have to result in the sort of stifled, polite discussions we endured towards the end of the week. Perhaps if the seminar were set up differently, with discussion groups on specific issues that participants could choose among, there might be less intellectual chafing.

The programming at the 1987 Grierson Seminar was bold, to say the least. There was't a single film or tape that was universally liked, which attested either to the wonderfully rabid intensity with which the participants guarded their positions, or to the equally wonderful eclecticism that they brought to the Seminar.

The organization, on the other hand, lacked. With over 70 participants, Burstyn and Isacson were forced to adhere to speakers' lists and time limits that made discussion pretty frustrating. And with discussions focussed around the works rather than around more general issues of documentary practice, a framework for debate was never established, where we could at least agree on what the issues were. The lack of simultaneous translation during the debates was surprising for an event with this much funding and planning time. It should't be surprising that language remains a raw wound in anglophone-francophone relations in this country, when one looks at how translation was wielded. Francophones had to request it before impromptu translation was provided.

But this was Grierson's first time in the big city, and it may have been a little bewildered. Wait till next year. ●

PAINTING LANDSCAPES OF THE TIMES: THE ART OF SUE COE

What do you do with acid-etched political art, rare enough in the hypertrophied New York art scene? Get the artist to *explain* it. Sue Coe does a good job in Klodawsky's film, telling us (through the device of a primary school art class) exactly what her paintings *mean*. And *Painting Landscapes* lets her get away with it: we scratch the surface and get more surface. (Reviewed in *Cinema Canada* no. 144.)

Canada, 1986. d. Helene Klodawsky. format 16mm. dist. Cinema Libre, Montreal. running time 26 min.

PASSIFLORA

One of the few films this year where you could feel no qualms about letting the superlatives fly. *Passiflora* has energy, wit, daring and a brilliant premise: what happens on the day that Michael Jackson and Pope John Paul II both visit Montreal. And this from the NFB! The film's sense of counter-spectacle (in the face of the spectacles presented by Jackson and the Pope) is celebratory: a full-drag 'anti-parade' makes its way down a major street in opposition to the Pope's motorcade. Offhanded narratives are inserted into the documentary recording of the pope's progress: gays, the working class, women, all go about their vaguely overwrought lives, seeming common in comparison with the spectacle of Jackson tour publicity weasels and J2P2 baseball hats.

As a none-too-surprising footnote: this film has been criminally underpromoted (suppressed?) by the NFB since its completion; it has yet to be versioned in English. This year's seminar concluded with a motion to push for versioning of the film.

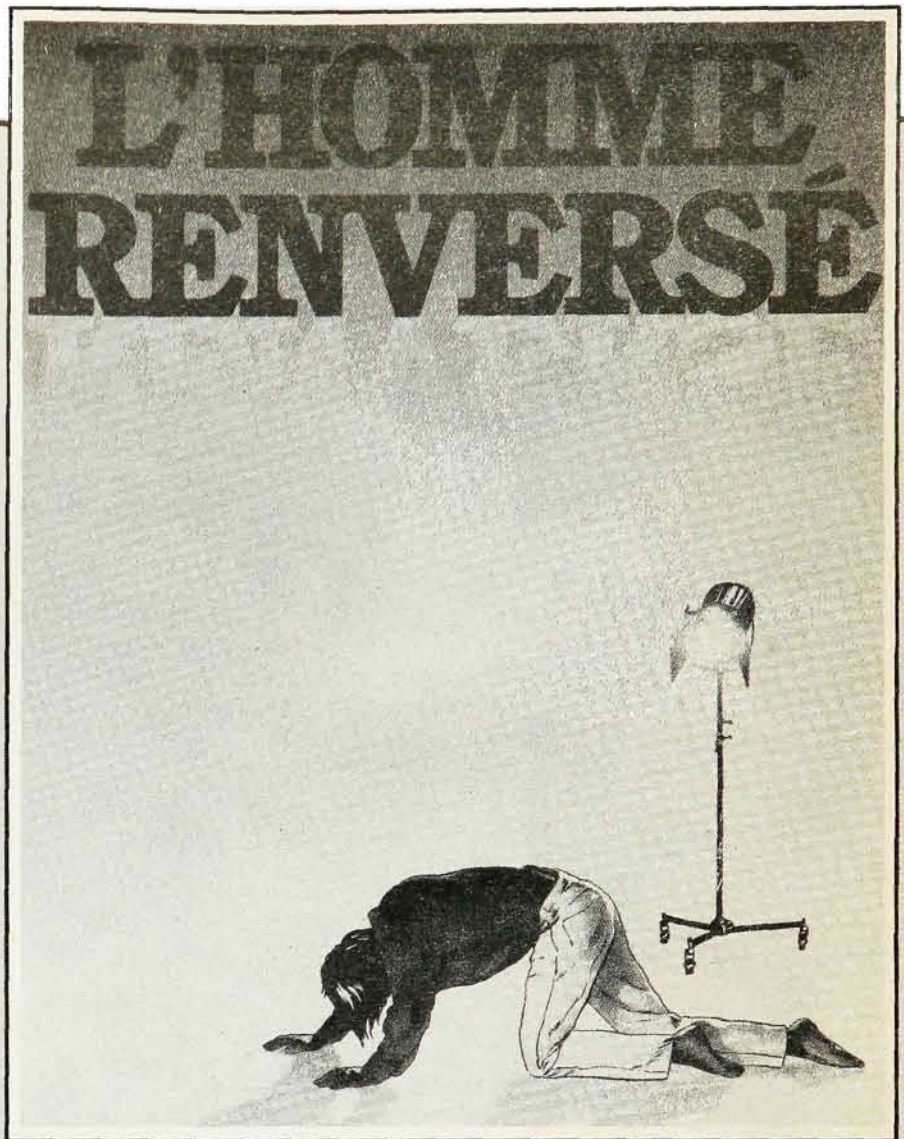
Canada, 1985. d. Fernand Bélanger and Dagmar Gueissaz-Teufel. format 35mm. dist. National Film Board. running time 85 min.

THE PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE

A feminist, gay-positive, black-powered film? Must be a first.

Not a documentary in any conventional sense of the term, *Passion* combines a narrative of inter-generational conflict in a black British family, with a dialogue on gendered politics conducted in a "psychic space", with treated images of anti-government demonstrations by resistance groups — blacks, gays, labour — the triple threats to Thatcher's rule.

Made by the Sankofa collective in London (and exhibiting both the strengths and weaknesses of collective filmmaking), *Passion* is one of the best examples of the sophistication of British 'marginal' work; it has moved past simple Tory-bashing, past simple black-power statements, to an examination of the pluralities within a community. But this is no humourless manifesto: perhaps one of the film's strongest messages is that you can be politicized and



still dress up and go out dancing.

U.K., 1986. d. Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien. format 16mm. dist. Sankofa Film and Video Collective. running time 80 min.

POINT OF ORDER

I suppose the justification for including an American anti-McCarthy film from 1964 in this year's seminar is the parallels one can draw with the recent Iran-Contra hearings. It's a pretty slight justification, but it seems to be the only one conceivable.

U.S.A., 1964. d. Emile de Antonio. format 16mm. dist. DEC Films, Toronto. running time 97 min.

RED STAR OVER THE WESTERN PRESS: ARCHIVE ALGERIA 1954-1962

Effected through the twin strategies of armchair interviews and treated file footage, *Red Star* ranges wild-eyed over the political terrain of the West and the East and the North and the South and the media and Third World Revolution and any other area it happens across.

You can call it the product of an exciting, committed pluralism. Or you can call it lazy and undisciplined. Whatever it is, its examination of media bias too often flies off on barely relevant tangents.

A ruthless editor (the tape is too long by half) and a more carefully thought-out approach might have made something of this. Maybe.

Reviewed in *Cinema Canada*, No. 145

Canada, 1987. d. Julian Samuel. format 3/4" video. dist. J. Samuel, Montreal. running time 86 min.

STORME: THE LADY OF THE JEWEL BOX

A warm, nostalgic portrait film that sidles up to its subject—a black lesbian male impersonator who worked the legendary Jewel Box Revue during the '50s and '60s — carefully and affectionately. Full of wonderful archival photographs and recordings, *Storme* is too short by half, and respectful to the point of being blank. Perhaps this is the curse of PBS funding.

U.S.A., 1987. d. Michelle Parkerson. format 16mm and 3/4" video. dist. Eye of the Storm Productions, Washington, D.C. running time 21 min.

TO HURT AND TO HEAL

A very honest, very earnest, committed documentary about babies born with birth defects and the medical technology used to keep them alive. So why don't I like it? Perhaps it's too comforting for my taste. Perhaps it's the smell of white middle-class concerns that leaves me cold. Perhaps it's the position of privilege given to the doctors (their testimony ends the film). Perhaps I am not its audience.

Canada, 1987. d. Laura Sky. format 16mm. dist. Skyworks, Toronto. running time 105 min. in two parts.

THE ZOO

We travel to the Bristol Zoo to discover that the real animals prowl the front of fence. Nothing we didn't know already, but enjoyable enough to watch.

Canada, 1987. d. Kevin McMahon. format 16mm. dist. V/Tape, Toronto. running time 31 min.