Bruce Glawson's

**Michael, A Gay Son**

My mother was embarrassed
My father was upset.

They wanted me committed
Or taken to a vet.

The eye of the beholder
Is where perversion lies.

“I need a Drink of Water,” by Jade and Baraparilla, from their album of that name.

**Michael, A Gay Son** is an award-winning documentary on the subject of coming-out. It is the second film of director/cameraman Bruce Glawson, an independent Toronto filmmaker. (His first film, *Contact*, was a documentary on autistic children.)

Michael offers documentary filmmakers in Canada several points to ponder: it is highly successful, reaching its intended wide public audience, providing a useful tool for counsellors and educators, and also receiving positive response from other filmmakers and critics who have selected it for a number of awards at festivals. The film takes chances, has some technical problems which would have been entirely unacceptable to its producers had it been an NFB or CBC production, happily transcends these problems, and stands as an example of what independent film in this country might do, if it were to free itself from institutional expectations.

Essentially the film is the story of Michael, a young gay man, who decides to come out to his family. Michael introduces himself to the camera, talks about what being gay means to him, is shown walking with his lover, taking part in a support group of lesbians and gay men who share their experiences of coming out to their families, taking pictures of children at a crafts table, printing those pictures, taking part in a group session with his parents, sister, brother and a therapist, again with his lover skipping stones at the beach, playing tennis, talking about his feelings, picnicking with gay and lesbian friends. The film is simple, clear, low-keyed. The point is the difficulty Michael has communicating with his parents: for he is a gentle person who likes being gay, it is a positive choice for him. But his parents don’t approve of his choice to live out what he feels himself to be, and they don’t accept his right to do that. The point is also that Michael gets consider-

able and essential support from his gay and lesbian community, as well as from his straight sister.

Structurally and in emotional impact, the two key scenes of the film are the support-group discussion and the family-therapy session. The risk the film takes is to juxtapose the use of non-actors portraying themselves in a spontaneous but controlled situation with the support group, with actors portraying Michael’s family in an improvised dramatic setup (the family session). Does it work? I think the strong cooperation between the actors and non-actors, and thoughtful direction, the amalgamates work.

The technical problem is a shift in the camera style, from very wobbling handheld in the support group, to formal tripod work in the family session. I found the single shifting medium of the film for different reasons each time. The first time the formality of the defense of open frankness; the second time the use of actors and distance from the material. The second, I found, the wobbly camera in the support group distracting.

Bruce Glawson’s motive in using some actors was to extend the parameters of the documentary material while avoiding violation of privacy and the manipulation of a real family, a motive increasingly accepted among new documentarians.

My own experience and that of my friends and acquaintances tells me that the portrayal of Michael’s family reflects deep truths about the way families, which are apparently liberal and loving, can react to the announcement that a child’s sexual orientation is ‘gay’. Not always with gaiety, or joy, but always with compassion or tolerance.

I was recently present among a group of counsellors for a youth centre where the topic of discussion was counselling about sexual orientation. One courageous young woman announced that she was afraid of her own feelings about homosexuality, afraid she might be one and I know that’s the most oppressed group there is.” There are many oppressed groups, none more oppressed than those who hide their own identity.

Michael performs a valuable function in challenging assumptions about who we all are and what roles we play, in film and in life.

**Barbara Halpern Martineau**

**SHORTS**

Derek May’s

**Off the Wall**

You may remember the experimental art for the late '60s — the kind of film that was shot with a camera hand-held. It seemed, by someone suffering from Parkinson’s disease: Derek May’s *Off the Wall* is a far cry from that; the photography is smooth-surfaced and hard-edged, but it does have something in common with those earlier essays. Perhaps it is that the film, a documentary on the Toronto art scene, is so self-consciously artful.

The camera is a lazy observer; it lingers on skylines and streets vacantly into corners. Like the eyes of a guest on an obligatory visit, it wanders while the artists talk. May narrates: his voice-over ripe with the innate intransigence of precisely articulate British. The script circles slowly and shifts unexpectedly.

The film opens in an Ontario College of Art drawing class for first-year students. “Where will all these future artists go?” May asks in hazy tones. Will they make money? They will, he concludes: “the banks are waiting to be decorated.”

The film presents the prospective artiste, the idea of decorating anything especially a bank, is horrifying. During the last decade this horror has swamped conceptual art, art that cannot be owned. This experimentation has caused a heated debate, raising the question: is art if it doesn’t result in an artifact that can be owned?

Arnold Edmondson, president of the Council of Business and the Arts in Canada, presents the ontario side with eloquent hyperbole, describing a conceptual art exhibit in which “a woman would squat in the middle of a room and pee into a bucket.” It’s a con job, he says. (The camera pans the skyline beyond the window and returns to Arnold who is holding forth on the pleasures of owning art.) For him art is very definitely an artrifice — something that will hang on his wall and contribute to his identity.

At the other extreme is artist Billy the Kid who contrapts’ devices of the sort that burn candles to hurt garbage cans at water balloons and which self-destruct in the process. May’s knives likes.

“What if it doesn’t work?” he asks. “It doesn’t matter,” says Billy, for him, the concept and the construction are the art.

We meet Mendeelson Joe who paints rather likeable little primitives and sings a song about his girlfriend who hovers about doing artsy things for the camera.

David Buchan shuffles across a stage waving a toy pistol, “Killing time in Red Leather.” A wardrobe artist who expresses himself through clothing, Buchan advocates “Style without function, form without content. art for art’s sake.”

We also encounter Jack Pollack whose lectures to oching gray matrons are conveniently illustrated by the paintings for sale in his own gallery.

Now these people, and the others in the film, are not nearly as vacuous as May shows them to be. There is a remarkable diversity in this art scene. Some of these are talented and thoughtful people, others are at least Toronto eccentrics, but May has somehow succeeded in putting them all under glass.

People move meaningfully through meaningless locations and pass pregnant, even the toughest warehouse is faintly luminous, reminiscent of a Renaissance painting. And always the voice-over returns to cut a little deeper into one side or the other.

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