

The programmers news and blues

Grierson Film Seminar 1982

by Seth Feldman

Several months ago when I agreed to programme the 1982 Grierson Film Seminar, it was suggested to me that I might be looking at as many as 200 films and videotapes as part of the selection process. Surely an exaggeration, I thought, naively signing on the dotted line. There can't be that many new documentaries made in Canada during these troubled times. And there was only a limited number of slots for non-Canadians.

I went about my business, setting up a list of eminently sensible priorities. Priority one, as it must be for any programmer, is the knockout discovery, the barely completed work that everyone will be talking about after the festival, seminar or screening series. Priority two is the recent film that everybody is talking about already - the obligatory inclusion. And then, in descending order, I would be looking for good films on timely topics, so-so films by especially talented filmmakers and even an interesting failure. To spice things up a bit, I would include some off-beat works.

When asked to choose a topic for this year's seminar, I decided upon Documentary Form. That would give me a chance to program a wide variety of works and yet come back to a pet concern: the evolving conventions of informational film and video.

To a large extent what I wanted determined who I wanted. The format of the Grierson Film Seminar stipulates that the 25 documentarians presenting their works stay the entire week to interact with each other and with an equal number of critics, teachers, students, archivists and other assorted moving-image types. Thus, if we were going to talk about Documentary Form for a week, I would want the discussion grounded by someone, preferably a filmmaker, who had a solid knowledge of film theory and style. The obvious choice seemed to be Bruce Elder, whose marvelously intelligent, wide-ranging criticism has made him a central figure in Canadian film writing. I asked Elder to present *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, a work banned in Ontario and recognized elsewhere as a watershed in the development of autobiographical film.

To complement Elder, I wanted someone who was a witness to and influence upon the long-term development of Canadian documentary. Again, the choice was straightforward. Allan King

has been a prime force in documentary in this country and abroad, and has shared his experiences with students of the genre. For the Grierson seminar, King has arranged, with the help of Stan Fox, a retrospective of the work of the Vancouver documentarians of the 1950s and '60s. These all but forgotten films represent an explosion of creativity that flourished and died in almost complete isolation.

Making my job still easier were suggestions from last year's programmer, Robert Daudelin of the Cinematheque québécoise. Daudelin pointed me in the direction of Klaus Wildenhahn, a German television documentarian whose works are just now being distributed outside Europe. Looking at Wildenhahn's work - courtesy of the endlessly generous Goethe Institute - my first impression was that of a Teutonic Pierre Perrault. *Enden Goes to the USA*, one of the films Wildenhahn will bring to Grierson, is a meticulous study of a German farmer whose real income comes from shift work at the local Volkswagen plant. Like Perrault, Wildenhahn finds his subjects' politics and lifestyles inexorably linked. And, like Perrault, he is able to extrapolate a panorama of political and historical truths from the daily lives of his subjects.

It was also through Daudelin that I

came upon Michel Moreau's *Les Traces d'un homme*. The film is something quite rare in contemporary documentary, the straightforward meditation of a highly literate essayist. Moreau witnesses the last days of the life of a cancer victim. In so doing, he attempts through a poetic text and deft editing to bear witness to death itself.

Moreau's film goes well with Jacques Godbout's two episodes in the life of Hubert Aquin. In the first of the episodes, Godbout intercuts testimony concerning Aquin's underground activities with Aquin's melodramatic performance in a grade Z spy film. In contrast, the second episode, Aquin's suicide, comes to us in a lengthy monologue. Yet this frighteningly dispassionate account of the event by Aquin's lover is also an assertion of the director's skill and taste in assembling his presentation.

Another one of Daudelin's suggestions was Georges Dufaux. A long-time National Film Board director and cinematographer, Dufaux has just released versioned prints of three films on China. Like Wildenhahn's work, the films are patient, observational studies. In the context of Canadian cinema they seemed almost pure embodiments of the traditional Quebecois documentary - *Les raquetteurs* and *A St-Henri* halfway around the world. Not only is there the

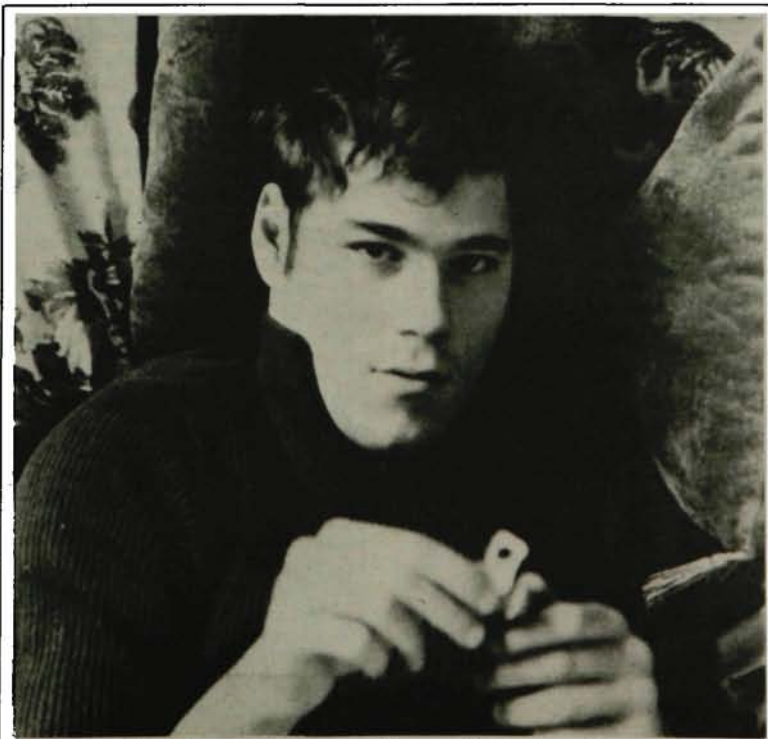
usual *cinéma vérité* sense of presence, but the films also produce a sense of universality, an appeal to the brotherhood of viewer and viewed. Is this endemic to the form of *cinéma vérité*? Are we all soul mates facing a ubiquitous camera crew?

The exact opposite tack was taken by Ted Remerowski, who has just completed a series of made-for-television China films. Touted by his boss as the next Donald Brittain, Remerowski does indeed seem to be working on Brittain's urbane, sardonic approach to his subject. China, as he sees it, is not simply a never-never land of mesmerized model workers. Along with Coca-Cola, one finds unemployment, juvenile delinquency and the embittered victims of the Cultural Revolution. The film on Shanghai opens with the bad old days of "no dogs and Chinamen allowed." It ends in a "foreigners only" nightclub.

Added to this German/French/English triologue will be a Spanish voice. Santiago Alvarez is approximately number three on the list of people I would most like to meet in this world. A founder of the Cuban cinema, Alvarez has spent the last 20 years redesigning the documentary to meet the changing needs of his revolutionary society. Although his work is seldom seen in North America (guess why), Alvarez has enjoyed major retrospectives most everywhere else. If Grierson can rectify the situation - particularly in English Canada - it will be doing a good day's work.

In a similar vein, Martha Rosler's experiments in video documentary are too little known in this country. Rosler, who teaches at New York University, comes from a background in photography, the plastic arts and performance pieces. Her videotapes are, among other things, essays on the medium's ability to convey the reality of its subjects. In *Vital Statistics of a Citizen Easily Obtained*, Rosler herself is the subject of a static camera that watches two anonymous technicians measure every conceivable dimension of her presence. *Losing* is a scripted interview with actors who are obviously too young to be the parents of a recently deceased teenage anorexic. What I'd like to talk about at Grierson is the tension Rosler creates between the obvious lie of the interview situation and the poignancy of the seemingly factual information being presented.

This same tension is one of the aspects of Robert Duda's film, *D.P.* Again, the actor, portraying the original subject in this case a Ukrainian displaced person - is far too young to be the man in question. Yet intercut through the actor's monologue are images that attempt to bridge (or prove the impossibility of bridging) the gap between the teller and



● Acts of grace in filming the family: *The Boy Who Turned Off*

Seth Feldman, past president of the Film Studies Association of Canada, teaches film at Western University.



● A labour of love: documenting the life and the music of Bix Beiderbecke (fourth from right) in *Bix*

the tale. A photograph of someone who appears to be the original D.P. ("displaced person") is placed on an animation stand, is marked up, is scribbled upon by a baby. The actor's image is subjected to superimposed graphics. The anger that spews forth from the monologue is illustrated in black and white silence by a woman practicing a martial arts exercise.

Like Rosler and Dudar, Nette Wilde's work will be useful for beginning a discussion of acting in documentary film. An actress herself, Wilde recently completed a videotape entitled *Right to Fight* around her own guerilla theatre performance, *Buy, Buy Vancouver*. Made during the recent West Coast real estate boom, *Right to Fight* deftly incorporates the actual villains and victims of a housing crisis into the original theatrical caricatures. The tape's energy and vivacity also makes a model for low-budget, regionally topical production.

The same may be said for Lynn Corcoran's *In Our Own Backyard*. Based at Media Study Buffalo, Corcoran spent two years following the fight of the Love Canal area residents to obtain some sort of compensation for the loss of their homes and health. As the residents become more proficient in their media manipulation, our sympathy is almost diverted to the harassed American bureaucrats who realize that they might well face the same fight at another 6,000 former dump sites. One reason that the tape's topic is especially relevant to those who gather at Niagara-on-the-Lake for the Grierson Seminar is that their drinking water is extracted just a bit downstream from the site of the events depicted. A better reason for the presentation, though, is Corcoran herself. More than a proficient and articulate documentarian, she is the producer of *The Frontier*, WNED's survey of new work in Southern Ontario and Western New York. As such, Corcoran sees as much Canadian film as anyone and sees it with a particularly keen eye.

Back to performance. Early on in the programming of Grierson, I turned to Sig Gerber, the new executive producer of "For the Record." ("For the Record" has been praised elsewhere as the last safe refuge for talented Canadian filmmakers. I will praise it here for its contributions to the topical documentary.) Gerber, in turn, introduced me to Alan Burke, producer of the best of last year's "For the Records." Don Shebib's *By Reason of Insanity*. Burke, like Gerber, came to "For the Record" from CBC's Current Affairs. It is their work in making use of that documentary background to reorient the series that is going to be coming out in the context of Burke's Grierson presentation.

More on performance. I've invited Anne Wheeler with *A War Story*. The film has had a rough reception, and, indeed, it has its faults. To my mind, the area of *A War Story*'s greatest potential interest - Wheeler's relationship to her father's memory - is not sufficiently developed. Nor can the grim realities of her father's experiences in a Japanese P.O.W. camp overcome the fact that her subject has been stolen from her by innumerable fictionalizations. This said, the film does more right than wrong. The acted sequences in the P.O.W. camp recreate an historical situation with a skill and economy rarely seen in English-Canadian period pieces. And the technique of using the recreated sequences intercut with "witnesses" is fundamentally sound (despite *Reds*).

Another labour of love is the film that is going to be the most attractive Canadian entry in this year's festivals in Montreal and Toronto: Brigitte Berman's *Bix*. Berman, a producer at CBC's "Take 30," put five years of her life and virtually everything she owned into this two-hour biography of jazz innovator Bix Beiderbecke. Beiderbecke, who burned himself out and died at the age of 28, would have appreciated the obsessive effort. Berman's thoroughness in collecting every audio-visual artifact

of her subject, and her enormously sensitive editing, makes it a quintessential professional performance.

Is *Bix* a priority one or priority two (as the Festival premiere will take place two months before Grierson)? I don't know. The 200 films and tapes rolled in as promised; my sense of critical judgement began to develop its own case of vertigo. I remembered that you can show you favourite films to your favourite person only to find him/her leaning over a paper bag when the lights come on.

What saved me is the enormous reservoir of talented people and their endless capacity for acts of grace. Take Larry Kurnarsky in his film, *The Boy Who Turned Off*. Kurnarsky documents the enormous pressures endured by his parents during the 20-year confinement of his autistic brother. In one scene, after one of his parents' innumerable fights, Kurnarsky's mother runs to her bedroom, the *cinéma vérité* crew hot on her heels. It is Kurnarsky himself who walks out from behind the camera to close the bedroom door, leaving the woman to her solitary suffering.

Or take Barry Greenwald and his film *Taxi!* The reticent genius who won a Palme d'Or for his student film, *Metamorphosis*, spent three years driving a taxi. The result is haunting night shots of unknown Toronto streets, marvelous testimony from drivers and passengers and just a touch of mandatory NFB information backgrounding (why, for heaven's sake, do we have to know exactly how many medallions there are in Toronto?). The result is a film strangely reminiscent of the best of Unit B, right down to the low-key jazz score.

Anne Cubitt's *Treaty 8 Country* (which I've discussed in an earlier Cinema Canada) and John Paskevitch and Michael Mirus' *Ted Baryluk's Grocery* (also previously reviewed) were similar examples of their makers' acute sensitivity to their subjects. And then there is the work of two men whose consistent

professionalism perhaps causes us to take them for granted. I've booked Bob Lang's *Childhood's End* and Bob Fresco's *Steady as She Goes*. The first film is a textbook example of how to gain access to a painful and difficult subject, in this case, teenage suicide. *Steady as She Goes*, in which Toronto pensioner George Fulfit builds the most complicated boat ever put into a bottle, is simply the most delightful work of the season.

I envy Fulfit's sense of achievement. Two weeks after my deadline for programming Grierson, too much of the schedule is still up in the air. I am also hoping to bring Kenneth Trodd, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) producer who has been in the forefront of the development of television docu-drama. Trodd will be bringing the work of Roland Joffe, whose films *The Spongers* and *United Kingdom* caused a good deal of stir at the recent Input conference. At that same conference, a young Danish documentarian named Ebbe Preisler attracted considerable attention with *Your Neighbour's Son*. Part interviews, part acted recreations, that film documented the training of torturers in Greece. He too is on the probable list.

Beyond the probables and the people who never return phone calls is a large pool of films which, depending upon a hundred variables, will or will not be there. The final schedule - as any idiot should have known and I know now - will be settled after the last participant has departed. Whatever that final schedule, though, I promise to feel I have cheated some of the unbelievably large number of bright, talented people who showed me their work. Next year. ●

The Grierson Film Seminar will take place November 7-13 at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Anyone interested may attend either on a residential or day-pass basis. For further information, contact Grierson Film Seminars, Ontario Film Association, P.O. Box 366, Station Q, Toronto, Ontario M4T 2M5.