

street people

Daring to document the seamier side of things, Holly Dale and Janis Cole, two street kids, have grown up to confront and film the human side of social deviance. Their documentaries explore the faces and facets of queens, dykes, hookers, transvestites, murderers, rapists and psychopaths with an astonishing and empathic honesty.

by George Csaba Koller



photo: Ellen Tolmie

Holly Dale (left) and Janis Cole take a pause from production

"They're selling postcards of the hanging, they are painting the passports brown, the beauty parlor is filled with sailors, the circus is in town..."

Our fascination with *Desolation Row* does not stop with Bob Dylan's work. Aside from Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, there's always Patti Smith and Rimbaud. Norman Mailer wrote an entire book about the psychopath being the (anti) hero of the new culture, the deviant as a trend setter in our collective path of consciousness. Punk rock as a social phenomenon underscores this fascination.

The films of Holly Dale and Janis Cole so far all deal with some form of social deviance, with every queen, dyke and

hooker on the corner, and some psychopathic killers thrown in as icing on the cinematic cake. Sensationalist, you say? Yes, but raised to the level of art by the keen eyes and sympathetic hearts of these two young documentarians.

Their first two films deal with the seedy characters that inhabit Toronto's Yonge Street strip, more specifically its body rub parlors and its transvestite bars. Originally planned as a film on one particular transsexual, **Minimum Charge No Cover** begins with her/him sitting in the bathtub, exhibiting some very lovely and feminine breasts and a beautifully made up face. The soft voice almost purrs: "I think of myself as not being different than anybody else, except that I had to alter my body, a simple operation to reject something that wasn't right." What did she want to grow up to be when she was a little boy? A nurse...

If your game is an adult version of doctor and nurse and you're a middle aged businessman, you might go to any one

George Csaba Koller, former editor/publisher of Cinema Canada, is presently at work on a research project on Canadian experimental films. He hopes to write a book on the subject next year.

of a number of body rub parlors along Yonge Street. That's where **Cream Soda** was filmed, a very rough but sensitive documentary on the ladies you might pay to fulfill your fantasies. Holly and Janis did it while they were attending Sheridan College, so technically it is a student film, but its candor and explosive subject matter raise it far above most scholastic fare.

Their latest film, **Thin Line**, proves that they have graduated with honors. It is one of the most powerful documentaries I have ever seen, dealing with the inmates or patients of the maximum security mental hospital at Penetanguishene, Ontario. It took them six months to get the administrators to allow them to film, but during that time they managed to break the ice and approach these criminally insane men on a very human level. Since the basis of therapy at Penetang is exactly this kind of opening up, **Thin Line** exposes us to a confrontation with the human side of murderers, rapists, schizophrenics and psychopaths. An often frightening, enlightening, and deeply moving experience, definitely not for the faint of heart.

Who are these two young women, who are not afraid to be left alone with convicted killers and who can record their encounters with society's deviants with such skill and honesty? Barely in their mid-twenties, they both come from rough street backgrounds; Holly from Toronto's Parkdale district, while Janis' father ran a skid row hotel in Vancouver. "We grew up in environments that were full of unusual characters that you don't meet in a nice middle class, suburban type of living situation. We understood criminals, hoods, people who had sex hangups, street people." These similar formative experiences caused the creative chemistry which has bonded them together since school under the guidance of their mentor, personal filmmaker Rick Hancox.

Presently working on their fourth documentary, an Ontario Arts Council funded exploration of the problems of adolescence, Ms. Dale and Ms. Cole represent the best of the feminist movement's determination: to equal men in any chosen field. Their close collaboration is exhibited during the interview: their energies constantly criss-cross, they complete each other's thoughts and sentences. Holly's exuberance and brashness are offset by Janis' slightly reserved attitude: "After the first two films, we were going to break up. We were constantly getting into arguments. But since **Thin Line**, communication has been much better." Holly agrees: "We're growing with our films. We didn't start out wanting to make films together. It just happened.

"Most people make films to make a statement. We make films to discover a statement." They are conscious of the roots of the documentary as a genre, of the work of Grierson, Pennebaker, Leacock, and the other pioneers. They admire *cinéma vérité* but are closer in approach to direct cinema, which might have something to do with budgetary considerations. They received \$10,000 from the Canada Council to make **Thin Line**, ended up spending two more thousand of their own money. Hardly a budget to cover the expense of the immense amount of footage necessary for *cinéma vérité*. But very impressive, when you consider the technical excellence of the film, on par with NFB fare costing six to ten times as much.

Holly: "We had a very different idea of Penetang before we went there. Then we met the guys..." Janis: "That comes across." Holly: "...and we went through all kinds of emotional things. We didn't know how the public would react to it. **Thin Line** is so positive, that we're leaving ourselves open for criticism." So far it's been favorable. Robert Fulford called the Penetang film "astonishing," and went on to say that "their films are gripping because Holly and Janis are committed not only to their remarkable young careers but to the lives of their subjects."

These include a naked "masseuse" tying her G string while she explains how she performs "extras" for customers willing to pay the price, a trio of black female impersonators giving a rendition of a disco song, complete with garish make up and falsetto voices, and a long haired Penetang patient explaining his crime: "I stabbed the guy 42 times - in a way I was trying to kill myself. He was telling me all his problems, and they were all my problems." The language in all the films is brutally frank, which might bar their being shown on television. But it is the real language of the streets, and as Holly points out: "Reality is a lot more interesting than trying to write dramas about life."

Thin Line is brimming with cathartic moments. It's depiction of the drug therapies used at Penetang calls in to question more traditional methods of dealing with insanity. Instead of tranquillizing the patients, as most other mental hospitals do, Penetang gives them speed and alcohol to work through their problems. One technique is the isolation room, called The Capsule, where two inmates are locked up for two weeks at a time in an 8x10 foot space. Naked from the waist up they lie on mats and have one long continuous rap session. There's an open toilet and they sip their food through straws. They are observed and videotaped 24 hours a day. Some of the opening up under these conditions certainly is astonishing. Oh yes, they are also shot full of speed before they go in.

Those interested in the debate on the pros and cons of capital punishment should certainly see this film. It enables you to overcome your initial revulsion and begin to see these criminals as human beings - fucked up human beings, to be sure, but nevertheless members of our own species, parts of our collective consciousness. Most trace the origins of their criminality back to childhood, cruel, unloving parents, bad circumstances. The way they matter-of-factly relate committing murder, rape, beatings and knifings is horrifying, but at least there is an attempt to cure or rehabilitate them at Penetang, whereas in prisons their criminality is often reinforced. Do we have the right to put them to death for their sins? See **Thin Line** and decide for yourself.

In any case, we should be very grateful to Holly Dale and Janis Cole for taking the trouble to hold up these mirrors reflecting the often not very pretty but certainly very real facets of our human journey in the nineteen seventies. They are very committed to the art and craft of cinema, focusing on subjects with which they're intimately acquainted and having a very definite philosophy to get personally involved with the lifestyles depicted in their documentaries. They make films to fill the needs of their own search for truth. They're a truly dynamic duo with a good sense of humor about themselves and the predicament the world finds itself in six years before 1984.