

# The 1983 Grierson seminar

## Sparks of illumination

by Christopher Majka

In the darkening hours of a cold autumn evening, a group of some 60 people descend upon a small quiet town in southern Ontario. Who are they? A motorcycle gang come to create havoc? Religious zealots expecting a new Messiah? Astronomers come to witness a rare stellar event? All of the above and more, they are the participants of this year's Grierson Seminar in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The first nova witnessed by these stargazers was the screening of Allan King's extraordinary film *Who's in Charge*, a production cleverly designed to reproduce the anger and confusion of its participants in the viewers of the tape. The lights had hardly come up when the storm of controversy broke with vehement positions being taken by both admirers and detractors. The tone of aggressive questioning and defence set by the response to the film was to last for at least the next couple of days. People shouted, walked out in anger, wept and almost came to blows in the name of the documentary.

Another nucleus of controversy was focused around a video-tape by Norman Cohn entitled, *In my End is my Beginning*, a highly unrelenting look at the despair and emptiness of life in an old age home. The camera brought one unflinchingly close to this suffering – and some of the viewers flinched.

Divisions between groups of people opened and closed with the rapidity of fissures at the epicenter of an earthquake. Another such schism might be defined roughly as being between "the people who work for large organizations", and the "people who don't". Bernie Zuckerman of CBC's *The Journal* took flack from people who were opposed to the institutional, fast-paced, rapid turnover approach of this program which they felt condoned a superficial analysis of events. A great deal of discussion during the week centered on the responsibility of filmmakers and institutions for their material and the effects it may have on society at large, and therefore the role of filmmakers in instigating and helping social change. Many films including *Downside Adjustments* by Mary Janes Gomes and Emil Kolom-

par, *Rape Face to Face* by Nick Kendall, Keet Neville, et al., *I Can Hear Zimbabwe Calling*, by Ron and Ophera Hallis, and *Don't Call Me Stupid*, by Kit Hood and Linda Schuyler made eloquent statements in this regard. There was a concern voiced that filmmakers, as members of the media, have a responsibility to work for social change and against injustice wherever they may find it and, therefore, that our institutions of the media must become more responsible to the public at large and the video-film community in particular.

Films such as Colin Low's *Standing Alone*, and Jan-Marie Martell's *One of Many: Dr. Nhan* had cross-cultural themes and provoked discussions on the quality of the relationship between filmmaker and subject and the covenant of trust which has to be reached between them. The deep, honest, and incisive portrait that both of these films paint of a blood Indian and a Vietnamese boat-person respectively, testify to the filmmakers' trust and care of their subjects.

Another film predicated on a close personal relationship and trust was *Seventeen* directed and produced by Joel Demott and Jeff Kreines. Filmed over a period of a year in middle America by distinctly non-adolescent filmmakers, it shows the bitter, frustrating, and at times brutal youth of a group of 17-year-olds in their last year of high school, and is therefore a cross-cultural film in another sense.

Possibly the most significant figure at the seminar was that of Bob Connolly whose film and remarks (in his charming Australian accent) cut a swath across the gathering. His *First Contact* is a small masterpiece in the area of ethnographic film. It deals with the first contact between Australian gold prospectors of the 1930's and native people of the interior of New Guinea whose existence had not been heretofore even suspected. A combination of actual documentary footage, shot at the time of these first meetings, contemporary interviews with both parties who actually participated in the events, and an interpretive analysis which is even-handed and free of ideological posturing make this a truly significant film. It's as if we here in Canada were able to follow Champlain around and interview both him and the Indians he encountered.

In addition to Connolly's film, his comments and remarks served as a catalyst of another sort. He has produced some 30 documentaries and has worked both within and outside of the major film institutions in Australia. He

is an articulate champion of the independent filmmaker and has been centrally involved in the changes to the Australian film-scene over the last decade. He spoke eloquently about the great dissatisfaction that many Australian filmmakers felt with the film structures and institutions which were available to them. Their response was to organize across the industry and form a powerful and effective lobby which was able to significantly alter the financial and production structures within the country to make them more responsive to the needs of filmmakers. He attributed the "bloom" of Australian cinema largely to the talent that was released as a result of these changes. This relation of Australian experiences was very useful and inspiring to a group of Canadian filmmakers enmeshed in discussions of social responsibility and the accountability of institutions to audiences and to the film community.

Issues came up thick and fast like mushrooms after a night of rain. Two films at the seminar, *The Life and Times of Edwin Alonzo Boyd* by Barry Pearson and Les Rose and *Scrubbers* by Swedish actress and filmmaker Mai Zetterling, raised the question of the position of dramatic films which are based on documentary material. *Scrubbers*, a film set in a women's reform school in English, was seen by the director as coming out of a documentary tradition and addressing itself directly to social ills and their alimination. Does one compromise or enhance these goals through the dramatic use of a documentary format?

Issues of exile and emigration were eloquently addressed both by the previously mentioned *One of Many: Dr. Nhan* by Jan-Marie Martell and also by the moving and personal document *Journal Inachevé* by Marilu Mallet. The former looks at the needless suffering and frustration of a talented acupuncturist who comes from Vietnam to this country, sacrificing all her material possessions, only to find that her talents and abilities are not wanted by the society to which she has pledged herself. The latter is a personal examination of creating a life again for oneself by a Chilean refugee come to Quebec.

Other films were shown, other issues jumped onto center-stage, and other discussions wound their way into the night around the bar of the Prince of Wales Hotel. Much transpired, but to what end? Why Grierson? What role does this singular event play in the film culture of Canada? Does anyone care? Well, at least one participant I spoke

with felt that the Grierson experience was a significant and conclusive step: analysis and evaluation of one's film, by one's peers in a context that was conducive to critique, suggestions, and praise. Although no prizes, medals or ratings are awarded, the Grierson Seminar provides a forum for the serious examination of one's film, not by audiences or critics (this may happen elsewhere) but by one's filmmaking compatriots. I can't imagine a single participant who did not appreciate this consideration and who will not profit from it.

Moreover, the intense discussion and debate over ethical, moral, social, and political issues which dominated this year's seminar was something very valuable. These issues are touched upon in a variety of other situations, but seldom in such an extended a manner by a group of people.

There was discussion this year with respect to not letting the experience just dissolve into thin air and various groups went their respective ways promising to actively follow up some of the issues which emerged. The possibility of the seminar producing any concrete action, however, was diminished by the very intensive schedule which left virtually no unstructured time to formulate such directions. Mass movements take time to organize. This lack, in fact, is a serious consideration since a "think tank" situation such as Grierson could in a real fashion promote certain movements and changes in the film environment.

A second question pertains to how more people could come to share in this valuable experience. Several participants expressed concern about the location and cost proving a barrier to many people who might both profit from and contribute to its process. In my view there is merit in considering a variety of venues for Grierson to expose other parts of the country to its potential. However, in order to remain exciting and effective, the seminar must retain more or less its present size. Mass movements, after all, are not created by mass discussions – and a small intimate environment is crucial to the success of Grierson.

Although there was much that was noisy and confused at the seminar, one of the participants in the concluding session observed that this was a precise reflection of the process of acquiring knowledge and understanding – disordered, emotional, confusing, and sometimes contradictory but, at the end of it all, a small spark of illumination. My congratulations to Seth Feldman, Kathy Elder, and all the others. Bravo!