The 1984 Grierson Seminar

Systems in collapse

by Lois Siegel
The scene is Brockville, Ontario, a quiet, almost dormitory town, with a church on every corner. The most exotic element within miles is the name of a Chinese restaurant on Main Street: The New Wave. But the town itself sleeps on... Brockville was also the location for The Grierson Documentary Film Seminar this year, a six-day “event.”

The title of this year’s seminar, ironically, is very suitable on many levels (probably on more levels than programmers ever intended): Systems in Collapse.

Focus concentrated on institutions in the process of self-destruction. To take one example—the nuclear family ridden with divorce—the film Joint Custody: The New Kind of Family by American filmmaker Josephine Dean examines the painful task of dividing up the element within miles is the name of a Victorian exchange complete with Grade 3 insults. A Canadian filmmaker took a punch at an American filmmaker. Luckily, the American ducked just in time. No blood shed... and the seminar continued on a somewhat calmer scale as everyone suddenly came to their senses.

This particular seminar regressed to the Grade 2 level. As participants were joyfully discussing one of the few light moments of banter after viewing a rather entertaining film, someone in the audience suddenly posed an “ethical responsibility” question to the filmmaker: “I hear you are making a film for Litton Systems in the midst of collapse. As partakers, onlookers became part of the making. One felt embarrassed for these innocent filmmakers who had come to the seminar to discuss their work in a critical manner while the less adamant simply withdrew into silence. Behold the male ego.

One started to see filmmakers carrying around dictionaries, looking up words like: a) the passive experience of a visual language, b) the audience, and c) the intervention of political authorities. This mixture of sounds, images, words creates a new texture.

The work is a Fiction, using Documentary Film elements in a rather unusual fashion: for example, in a question/answer format, a series of individuals are asked to name themselves when they have heard you are making a film for Litton Systems in the midst of collapse. The fake stock answers are interrupted by the sound of a very silly buzzer, similar to that used on the TV quiz show. The viewer laughs. The story ripples through the screen.

This section of the film is not unlike More than a film Falling from Ladders. Ransen, asked to document life in Sweden, set up a series of images whereby Swedes rattled off a series of questions from a book called “The Canadian American Film” which ended up on the screen. The Canadian American Film is a doorway during a shot... this is the film Abortion: Stories from North and South by Gail Singer. With such trivial comments, an extremely important sub-ject—the struggle for women’s right to choose their own destinies— seems to be vaporized from reality into realms of the absurd.

The Melies method

As the week wore on, it also became very evident that another system was definitely in the state of collapse: the Documentary Film itself. But why was this happening? Peter Greenaway seemed to have an answer.

In the 12th Century, he explained, the favorite past-time was embroidery. It was a type of cinema... 300 women would work on little patches of imagery.

In 1948 whole families went to the cinema on an average of about twice a week. But these numbers are drastically falling off now. In a period of about 15 years, theatre viewing in England, for example, has fallen from 250 million to 16 million people.

Television and video are the new trend and the director of the filmmaker, as we have known the filmmaker in the past, is drastically changing.

According to Greenaway, filmmaking today is where painting was 15 years ago. The multi-form experiments of Robert Rauschenberg during “The Age of Risk” produced exciting and innovative combinations in film.

What we need now, he said, is a new visual language, a sophisticated approach to the verbal and pictorial relations in film.

Movie-making, Greenaway argued, essentially developed from two traditions: Lumiere’s Arrival of a Train at Gare St. Lalia was the real point of view, and that of Méliés, the magician who explored film as fantasy.

Peter Greenaway sees the Méliés approach behind the magician style. He seems fascinated with Melliès’ insistence that most filmmakers will have to decide whether they want to make money or do what they want: only the lucky ones will be able to do both. Greenaway himself seems to be one of the luckier ones.

Having started as a painter, then an experimental filmmaker, Greenaway’s first commercial feature The Draughtsmen’s Contract (1983) has begun to cultivate an audience.

More than a film Beyond the Hollywood tradition of the story, he says. The narrative form based on the novel has to find new outlets.

Greenaway, who has worked for years as a film director for C.O.I. Film Division (Central Office of Information), creating every type of documentary, obviously became fed up with the traditional approach to “the work.”

As a result, he has made a series of films which mock the common documentary style. He seems fascinated with how things are cast, how people can create new perspectives and, I might add, this film is a perfect example of why we make direct statements about the state of filmmaking today.

At the end of The Falls, Anhiiur FALL vanstates that he is about to terminate his relationship with the viewer after having raped him of his...
the workers make 21 demands on the Polish government. Some of the most important items were the right to an independent trade union, a right to罢工, and the release of political prisoners. The government expected a one-day settlement; the process took place.

With the proceedings successfully completed, the camera focuses on the workers smiling, faced people. Solidarity supporters didn’t want to change the present system or create private enterprise, we are told, just they were tired of living in a country where everything was.

The film,ensored by the Polish government, was seen by 20 million people because it was shown without credits. The film is "Reserved" on the marquee, but everyone knew this was the Workers’ film.

These films made their causes evident, and the screenings and events were presented in a straightforward fashion. The question being posed at the seminar was whether new, more innovative techniques would make them more interesting and convincing.

Le Dernier Glacier: The Last Glacier

This film combines documentary and fiction in an unusual way, using actors and real Indians as actors or background characters. The purpose is to relate the process of closing-down the Schefferville, Quebec, mines.

The film works on many levels. Actors are interspersed with television news footage which assumes a ghost-like quality. A split-screen technique, to avoid the usual boredom of talking heads, is used to illustrate the events occurring simultaneously.

At one point a boxed image of a train interior is surrounded by the exterior scenery. The camera mixes the two, as poetic as information. Because of the fiction and documentary combination, it moves on a more personal level.

While newscasts talk about numbers,

Le Dernier Glacier moves inside these numbers’ lives – they become real people, real couples, with real problems in a real situation. As cinema, it is not a mere romantic story teller. Those at the seminar might be called the filmmakers’ audience, but it is also a documentary audience.

“Everyone knows that a mine which opens also has to close,” Jacques Leduc explained. “The economy is always in motion.”

Leduc insisted that there is a need for this kind of “fiction-documentary,” because it is hard to film people’s private lives. You can film a family, a Social Democrats, in a social situation, but to become involved with what is hidden to the public is almost impossible if those filmed don’t want you to see it. This film, he concluded, has a very real situation.

The viewer was led to believe that what he was seeing was real because of the documentary techniques of filming Sluizer used. Although some actors introduced themselves as actors in the middle of the film, the viewer was still led to believe that the other sequences, which seem more real, were. Sluizer, who was taking place as they were being seen. The experiment was, indeed, an interesting one.

This film by Sluizer is not a conventional documentary either, because it extends beyond the usual limitations of journalistic reportage. Instead of a quick in-and-out sketch of the tragedy of war, Sluizer utilized information about what Greenaway tags “The Hemingway Complex.”

Sluizer shows instead that war is much more than just a battle. Filmaking in three different periods, Sluizer paints a very different picture from that of Don North’s 1982 Report from Beirut, which is sponsored by the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. North himself, having completed the film, tried to get his employers to show it. When he suddenly realized that they were going to distort his original intentions.

Sluizer’s film, on the other hand, maintains just the story of history or just one more rehash of yet another war. Here, the film closely examines the lives of two Palestinian families.

The film opens at Christmas 1974, with the PLO and Israel fighting over Beirut, Christmas songs, the images of peace. One family is interviewed about their hopes and aspirations; their current occupations are detailed. Life seems promising.

To 1977, the Civil War. Cutting back from death and destruction to insights of the earlier days, the dreams have been destroyed. These people knew that they were doing a job that was important in the lives of the family are doing now seems clearer.

Finally the film ends in 1982 with an appeal for the right to return for one last look. We realize what monstrous turmoil prevails among people who participate in wars for ideas, for financial gain, power or religion.

Somewhere Between Jalostitlan and Encarnación by Phil Hoffman formed a type of personal diary. Interpersing his story with his research, in experimental form, an encounter with death on the road in Mexico.

Besides films to support a cause or journalistic pieces to satisfy the media’s hunger for information, another category of films at the seminar might be called “teaching films.” These films personally investigated life as it is or was.

Summer of the Lavouche by Graden McCrea and Linda Rasmussen was a lyrical documentary portrait of a Northern Indian family, and I Think Of You by Roger Frappier and Jacques Leduc was a re-creation of the facts about an architectural plan for a company by a group of uneducated inhabitants.

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This film, presented by Esme Dick of the American Flaherty Seminar, re-enacts scenes of the way the Eskimos use the land.

The camera shows clearly, without fancy manipulations, how Nanook kills polar bears face-to-face or builds an igloo. The visual text inserted between the scenes, however, will be seen: entire family, complete with dog, exits, one after another, from an enclosed kayak, one never imagined so many people could fit into.

The long takes allow us to think about what we are watching, while the script at times becomes a form of poetry with the camera moving in slow motion. Everything is slowing down, with mixing gentle words and winter.

In Nanook’s world, everything becomes a meaningful experience – just for survival. The film teaches about being self-reliant, and another story has been told.

The Grierson Documentary Seminar seminar suggests that the documentary form can no longer contain what documentary can become.

Yet struggling with new ways to approach documentary as a form of art, the filmmaker shouldn’t forget the basic visual rules where all these ideas developed: however a giant stride forward is required, to reconsider the old forms of documentary and to explore new forms.