

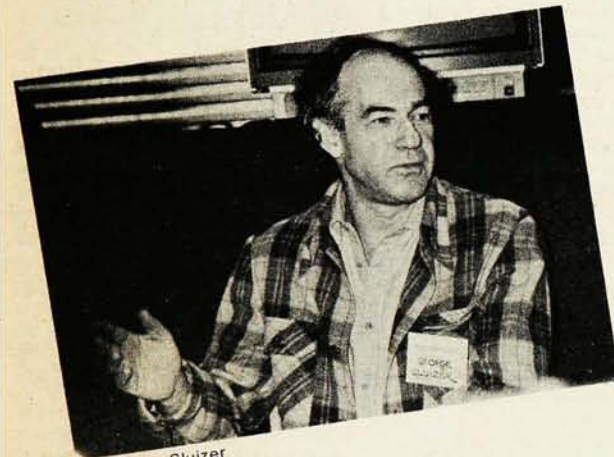
● Roger Frappier



● Neal Livingston



● Gail Singer



● George Sluizer

The 1984 Grierson Seminar

Systems in collapse

by Lois Siegel



● Jacques Leduc



● Don North



● Alanis Obomsawin

Great Depression. We watched as two debtors – the corporation Dome Petroleum and the country Mexico – faced default on their loan payments. Billions of dollars were discussed in nonchalant fashion by men who obviously hold the power that shapes our lives, and, like little pawns in the hands of often less than expert chessmen, one realized that the little men will be the ones to pay for their mistakes.

Nevertheless, these were not the only systems in the midst of collapse.

At last year's seminar during a not-so-Victorian verbal 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 year the seminar regressed to the Grade 2 level. As participants were enjoyably 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 of Canada" (Litton manufactures inertial guidance systems for Cruise missiles).

The filmmaker, explaining that it was just a Sales and Marketing film for the aerospace industry, then added in retort to his attacker: "I hear you've been accused of sodomy."

And so the seminar took a dive back to the primary school level. But it didn't stop there.

Certain filmmakers had apparently been invited whose films were to be displayed only as poor examples of filmmaking. One felt embarrassed for these innocent filmmakers who had come to the seminar to discuss their work in a civilized manner. Has impoliteness become stylish?

Also, one bizarrely found oneself in the middle of an Oxford Debating Club battle, as two of the participants, antagonist/moderator Bart Testa and British filmmaker Peter Greenaway, monopolized the "discussions," challenging each other with high-level theory. Rather than partakers, onlookers became viewers, witnessing series of statements that condensed to the "common filmmaker," while the less adamant simply withdrew into silence. Behold the male ego, ergo.

One started to see filmmakers carrying around dictionaries, looking up words like impecunious, arcane, abrogate... Film studies had usurped filmmaking. Where were the good ole days of "let's just talk about film in an informal manner"?

Instead we bounced from a film about British Columbia politics, *Little Mountain* by Debbie McGee, a behind-the-scene, documentary on the 1983 campaign run by the NDP in a Vancouver riding, to the midst of the Vietnam war with Don North's *Soldiering On*, part of the 26 episode made-for-TV series, the *Ten Thousand Day War*. This film revealed the immature, inexperienced U.S. Army "men," averaging 19 years of age, who battled an unseen enemy by smoking up using the barrel of a gun as a pipe, and massacred thousands in small villages to alleviate boredom and fear or satisfy the body-count required by their officers upon whom they often turned in mutiny. We watched an army in the process of collapse.

At one point theoretical investigation even intruded into the reasons why the filmmaker had appeared for one second

in a doorway during a shot... this in the film *Abortion: Stories from North and South* by Gail Singer. With such trivial comments, an extremely important subject – the struggle for women's right to choose their own destinies – seemed to be vaporized from reality into realms of the absurd.

The Méliès 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 images.

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 about 250 million to 16 million people.

Television and video are the new trends, and the role 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 of images.

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

Movie-making, Greenaway argued, essentially developed from two traditions: Lumière's *Arrival of a Train at Ciotat Station* with its realistic point of view, and that of Méliès, the magician who explored film as fantasy.

Greenaway sees the Méliès approach as being the most important today. He states that experimental work will become more popular and that the audience will eventually come to the imaginative filmmaker. We are already seeing some proof of this in the films of George Lucas or Steven Spielberg – or even in the music video.

Greenaway insists 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 Draughtsman's Contract* (1983) has begun to cultivate an audience.

More can be done beyond the Hollywood tradition of the story, he says. The narrative form based on the novel has to find new outlets.

Greenaway, who worked for years as a film editor for C.O.I. Film Division (Central Office of Information), cutting every type of documentary, obviously became fed up with the traditional approach to "the truth."

As a result, he has made a series of films which mock the common documentary style. He seems fascinated with how things are catalogued and how one can create metaphors by combining disparate ideas. His film *The Falls* demonstrates the impossibility of the documentary's traditional approach.

The Falls rambles on for 185 minutes (over three hours) with a barrage of verbal and visual information that would take a computer to decipher as no human

could possibly do it.

The film is a delightful collection of 92 clever and imaginative little movies, juxtaposed one after another. In the standard BBC tradition, an authoritative voice compels the viewer to believe what he is being told. But the film is total mockery.

This epic form of encyclopedia, which examines a series of make-believe characters, follows a long list of people whose names begin with the letters F-a-l-l.

We listen, or try to listen, attentively as we are introduced to individuals, such as Calles Fallope or Obsian Fallicut, who is described as a middle-aged female man.

Each character has somehow experienced a Violent Unknown Event labeled VUE. Information abounds about these VUEs, all somehow related to something to do with birds. One victim is allergic to the color red, as a book of red pages is offered as evidence. Dogs are taught to fly, unrecognizable images flash upon the screen, a character called Musicus sings to the camera, a plane drives in small circles until it runs out of gas, a film dedicated to wet dreams is entitled *Water*. Everything is tongue-in-cheek, and the audience becomes the new Victim of this, heretofore, Unknown Event.

As in the works of Latin American writer Jorge Luis Borges, the people are all invented, as are the facts. Characters speak obscure languages. Statements are sometimes repeated, snatches of repetitious music punctuate authority. This mixture of sounds, images, words creates a new texture.

The work is a Fiction, using Documentary style. It uses documentary elements in a rather unusual fashion; for example, in a question/answer format, a series of individuals are asked to name as many birds as they can when the buzzer sounds. The fake statisticians are interrupted by the sound of a very silly buzzer, similar to that used on game shows. The viewer laughs as comedy ripples through one scene after another.

This section of the film is not unlike Mort Ransen's 1969 NFB film *Falling from Ladders*. Ransen, asked to document life in Sweden, set up a series of images whereby Swedes rattled off a series of facts about the country quoted from the Statistical Year Book as they directly faced the camera. Their accounts were a melange of mechanical facts ranging from marriages and divorces to the number of people who fall from ladders each year.

This assemblage of people in *The Falls* forces one to wonder about what people do with their lives. Everything is reduced to a useless process. The film works on many levels at once, and this is its value, for it is more than just an exercise in being clever.

Its length is obviously deliberate. The filmmaker wants to see how long you can take this barrage of information, but it is a definite visual treat, if you can keep up with it.

Greenaway seems to be saying that the filmmaker is forced to keep reinventing ways to approach the viewer; we are actually experiencing allegories which make direct statements about the state of filmmaking today.

At the end of *The Falls*, Anthior Fallwaste states that he is about to terminate his relationship with birds; a clue, perhaps, that the filmmaker is now about to terminate his relationship with the viewer after having raped him of his



● Peter Greenaway

The scene is Brockville, Ontario, a quiet, almost dormant little 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 very suitable on many levels (probably on more levels than programmer Bart Testa had intended), was 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 parenting responsibilities between a father and mother: one week the kids are with Daddy, the next they are shuttled into the car to be deposited with Mommy. Mommy's week, Daddy's week. And the kids bounce back and forth happily ever after.

Another example was *Prisoners of Debt: Inside The Global Banking Crisis* by Peter Raymont and Robert Collison for the National Film Board. This film takes us into the offices of Bank of Montreal chairman William Mulholland, but only as voyeurs, mystified by the complex international banking system during the worst crisis since The

Lois Siegel's most recent documentary film is the baseball short *Bad News Bananas*.



● Tomas Pobog-Malinowski

"sanity". After 3 1/2 hours of viewing, all that can be heard is a deep sigh of relief: "We made it through," people mumble in a self-congratulatory manner.

Nevertheless doubt soon descends; one suddenly realizes that one has been "had." What is this relationship between picture and text that bothers us so much?

The question remains: who is our audience? Can filmmaker really have an effect on the viewer? Essentially, what are we doing and why?

Approaches to documentary

Some of the films at the seminar were made for causes, hoping to instigate change: *Democracy on Trial: The Morgentaler Affair* by Paul Cowan of the NFB dramatized the events in the current battle to legalize abortion. *Incident at Restigouche* by Alanis Obomsawin investigated a brutal siege by police of land under Indian control at Restigouche, Quebec, in 1981. The Micmac Indians were raided because they refused to relinquish their ancestral salmon fishing waters.

Under the Table by Luis Osvaldo Garcia is a lyrical film on the frustrating dilemma of illegal aliens in Canada, and *Herbicide Trials* by Neal Livingston defended the urgent cause of residents in Cape Breton terrified that their land would be sprayed by deadly herbicides. The population is no longer ignorant as to the more than negative health effects of such actions; this is the age of accountability.

Another series of films presented by Polish filmmaker Tomasz Pobog-Malinowski introduced the viewers to a type of film not often seen in North America, films that did not emphasize form or style as much as they did emotions.

Polish television is strictly controlled and serves primarily as a propaganda outlet, while in the theatres, a 20-minute documentary film is sandwiched between the newsreel and main feature. If censorship is always a problem the filmmakers get around this block by using symbols, creating a type of understanding with the audience. The viewer knows, for example, that if the film features animals, it is actually upon people that the filmmaker intended to focus, like Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Because the use of metaphor is constant, as a result the language of film becomes richer.

Life on the Shelf features a series of Polish films held back by the censor until the arrival of Solidarity. One, entitled *Mind of a Factory Guard*, follows an inspector with a compulsion to inspect. He checks bags at the factory gate, congratulating himself on the good and necessary job he is doing. Even during his off-hours, on his own time, he checks the Sunday fishermen who might not have permits.

Ironically, though, a very comical sequence reveals that this same obsessed police-type can't even make his dog obey. He persistently commands the dog to "come here" or "roll over", but the dog runs away.

A most intensive film was *Workers 80*, an exposé about the negotiations between government and the striking Gdansk shipyard workers led by Lech Walesa.

Tension mounts because everyone knows that the militia could attack the strikers at any moment. The film crew is given such a tiny space they can't move their camera, shooting in a very small room during the bargaining sessions.

This film follows the procedures as

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 strike and the release of political prisoners. The government expected a one-day settlement; the process took one week.

From the indoor "court," the filmmakers cut to the exhausted workers in the yard who still seem to have a few traces of hope on their faces. We view them gently in close-up: as they listen to the proceedings being broadcast into the yard, as they stretch their hands through the fence to receive leaflets about what has just happened in the negotiations - news that will dramatically affect their lives.

With the proceedings successfully completed, the camera focuses on the worker's smiling, proud faces. Solidarity supporters didn't want to change the present system or create private enterprise, we are told, they just were tired of living in a country where everything was a lie.

The film, censored by the Polish government, was seen by 20 million people because it was shown without its real title. The theatres put "Cinema Reserved" on the marquee, but everyone knew this was the *Workers 80* film.

These films made their causes evident, and the information and arguments 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) by Roger Frappier and Jacques Leduc combines documentary and fiction in an unusual way, using actors and real Indians as actors or background characters in collage fashion 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, challenges the viewer to watch several events occurring simultaneously.

At one point a boxed image of a train interior is surrounded by the exterior northern landscape. The film becomes poetic as well as informational. 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 very real situation. If the filmmakers had made a more conventional documentary, the real problems of Schefferville's inhabitants might have been concealed.

"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's hard to film people's private lives. You can film them at the shopping centre or 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 was one of the difficulties of the film *Prisoners of Debt*: the bank president essentially told the filmmakers what they could and couldn't shoot, what meetings they could attend and what aspect of his life he would let them peer

into.

What is important, said Leduc, is how you shoot something, not what you shoot.

Another interesting in-depth approach to documentary was provided by the films of Dutch filmmaker George Sluizer. Internationally known, Sluizer, who also produced the Brazilian part of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*, had a varied approach to documentary.

His films range from a sensitively poetic *andante* movement entitled *The Raft* to an experiment with actors re-creating documentary situations in a film entitled *Tepito Si*.

In *The Raft* his continual use of close-ups and gentle handling of his subjects on the back waters of eastern Brazil lent a feeling of intimacy with the people. A family of natives, isolated from the cosmopolitan world, travel from a small village, Teresina, down the Parnaiba River on a self-constructed raft during a yearly excursion to the market where they sell the few animals they have for the exact value of their worth.

It is ironic that they don't travel for profit for the three weeks, often risking their lives. Instead their journeys are inspired by tradition. Their ancestors made this same trip solely for the value of experience.

Sluizer did not provoke his subjects to talk when they did not want to talk. He did not play the role of the intrusive journalist looking, as North put it, for "buttons to push," or to instigate a response. Aggression was not his style: he decided to observe their lives as they went about their usual processes.

Tepito Si, another Sluizer film, was, surprisingly, a completely scripted "documentary," a re-creation of the facts about an architectural plan for a community by a group of uneducated inhabitants of a poor section of Mexico.

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, usually filmed with a hand-held camera, were taking place as they were being seen. The experiment was, indeed, an interesting one.

Adios Beirut 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 or mere action titillation, Sluizer avoids what Greenaway tags "The Hemingway Complex."

Sluizer shows instead that war is much more than just hell. Filming during three different time periods, Sluizer paints a very different picture from that of Don North's 1982 *Report from Beirut*, a merely one-sided propaganda piece sponsored by The American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. North himself, having completed the film, tried to buy it back from his employers because he suddenly realized how they were going to distort his original intentions. Sluizer's film, on the other hand, more than just a piece of history or just one more morsel of information about the war, closely examines the lives of two Palestinian families.

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

Then to 1977, the Civil War. Cutting back from death and destruction to inserts of the earlier days, the dreams have been destroyed. What these people have experienced and what the still-living members of the family are doing now seems clearer.

Finally, the film ends in 1982 with an ageing Palestinian mother, given a visa to return for one last look. We realize what nonsensical turmoil prevails among people who participate in wars for ideas, for financial gain, power or retribution.

Somewhere Between Jalostitlan and Encarnation by Phil Hoffman formed a type of personal diary. Interspersing text with vignettes, he related, 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 Loucheux by Gradon McCrea and Linda Rasmussen was a lyrical documentary portrait of a Northern Indian family, and *I Think of You Often* by Scott Barrie exposed the naivete of a soldier as he entered the First World War. Barrie used old stock footage which he manipulated in the optical printer to account the brutality of war through the use of letters.

Obviously, we have come a long way from the documentary filmmaker as mere romantic storyteller. Those at the Grierson Documentary Seminar were fortunate to see a 1977 update of Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, originally distributed in 1922.

This film, presented by Esme Dick of the American Flaherty Seminar, re-enacts scenes of the way the Eskimos used to live in the North.

The camera shows clearly, without fancy manipulations, how Nanook kills polar bears face-to-face or builds an igloo. The visual text inserted between scenes describes exactly what 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 one small boat.

The long takes allow us to think about what we are watching, while the script at times becomes a form of poetics with the images of drifting snow 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 seemed to be saying that the documentary form can no longer contain what documentary has become.

Yet struggling with new ways to approach information, the filmmaker shouldn't forget the traditional forms where all these ideas developed: however a giant stride forward is required, to reconsider the old forms and transform them into something new, sophisticated and exciting.

Documentary forms, at present, represent a System in Collapse. Perhaps with the rapidly developing technologies filmmakers will be stimulated - or forced - to move in different directions. In the words of Susan Sontag:

"As we make images and consume them, we need still more images; and still more... cameras are the antidote and the disease, a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete." (*On Photography*)