Best of the fests

In September, I got a call to go to Yorkton, Sask., as a member of the preselection jury of five at the Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival. I’m very glad that I accepted. It was a wonderful experience at a Festival which, I would like to suggest, deserves more attention than it gets. Here are a few words on the award-winners.

Making Overtures
D. Larry Weinstein, p.c. Rhombus Media Inc., 28:00 mins.
Rhombus is a company that specializes in films about music, and which prides itself on the teamwork that goes into its productions. Making Overtures is a great example of what this kind of devotion can pull off. It’s about the community-based Northumberland Symphony Orchestra, with lots of emphasis on the “community.” The film is packed with good humor, affection, and commitment both for the people who make up the orchestra, and for the effort they put into their community with their talent. The film gives you a good feeling as a sampler of what it is celebrating. (Best Production of the Festival, Best Documentary Production under 30 minutes.)

The Study of an Apartment
P.D. Martin Rose, 3:30 mins.
This film provides a simple record of everyday events in a woman’s apartment, using cut-out animation on multiple levels of glass. It was made at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design. Rose has a fine sense of visual rhythm, and an eye for line, color, and design. (Best Animation Production)

Shorts

Le Film d’Ariane
D. Josée Beaudet, p.c. Parimage, 55:00 mins.
This documentary is made of images from the lifetime picture collection of the film’s central subject, Ariane. There are sections of home movies dating back further than you would think there were any home movies. There are stills from private collections and from magazines and catalogues, and who knows where else. The story which is exceptionally well unfolded through the editing of these pictures is not only that of Ariane, but also that of the role of women in Quebec over the last 60 years. It’s a sort of Rosie the Riveter with a hint of individual human focus. For English-speaking audiences there is some difficulty, especially with the French voice-over, but I was able to follow it quite well with my rusty classroom French. (Best Documentary Production Over 30 Minutes, Best Picture Editing.)

Sunspirit Saskatchewan
Here’s one of those eternally cheerful tourist films where everything is always sunny and smiling. Saskatchewan comes out looking like the greatest tourist attraction imaginable. The whole thing is so good-natured that you can’t take exception to the obvious hyperbole that is the film’s mainstay. It’s bright, it’s funny, and it’s quite enjoyable too. (Best Commercial/Promotional Production)

La Fuite
P.D. Robert Cornelier, 49:00 mins.
The story of this film forces us to consider the inhumanities that all countries perpetrate on the nationals of others in the name of patriotism. Two Germans caught in Canada by the outbreak of World War One, are arrested as prisoners of war and held in a prison camp without trial. The authenticity of the film is one of its chief assets. Costumes, settings, and characterizations are first-rate. The mixture of dialogue in French and German (with French subtitles) causes some problems for English-speaking audiences, of course. (Best Drama Production Over 30 Minutes)

The Magnificat
D. Barbara Wilis-Sweeze, p.c. Rhombus Media Inc., 50:00 mins.
Another fine production from the company which won the Best Production of the Festival award, The Magnificat documents the rehearsal time and performance of two very different musical approaches to J.S. Bach’s Magnificat in D. One group, featuring Tafelmusik and the Tudor Singers, prepares a traditional rendering of the piece, while the other, consisting of the Swingle Singers, a jazz combo featuring Moe Koffman, and vocalists Ann Mortifee and Bobby McFerrin, rehearses a jazz improvisational approach to the same music. The footage of the rehearsals is full of tension, anticipation and glee. The footage of the performance at the end of the film pays off magnificently. The two performance groups alternate before the same audience and prove that when good music and good musicians get together, musical preferences take a back seat to raw virtuosity. (Best Fine Arts Production).
Making a Difference
d. Louise Soilker, p. Reuben Nosbaum, 29:00 mins.

This is a great documentary on cardiology and the role of the pace-maker. What makes it so good is its focus on the central character, the filmmaker's son, Jonathan, who was born with a heart defect. Jonathan himself explains how his pace-maker works, takes us on a tour of the manufacturing plant, and describes what's happening as he has a cardiology check-up. Scientific subject made human by a nice kid. Can't lose. (Best Health/Medicine Production).

Dads And Kids
p.d. Christian Brynere, 28:00 mins.

Here's a film that tells the story of the single-parent family from the point of view of the sole-support father. In fact there are five case studies in the film. (Top-prize in my book goes to Dan, whose younger hits a couple of off-camera home-run's with his plastic baseball bat during one of his father's interview's.) Without any anti-feminism, the film succeeds in quietly insisting on masculine rights in family situations which are complicated by the sexist assumptions of the law. (Best In-Instructional/Educational Production).

Turn It Off
da. Allan Stein, p.c. Stein/McLean Productions Ltd., 4:00 mins.

Can't remember a thing about this film. (Best Music Video Production).

Elk Island
da. James Jeffrey, p.c. NFB, 24:00 mins.

Nothing fancy about the filmmaking here. Good documentary coverage of a good subject is still enough to win the prize, I'm glad to say. Elk Island is a wild-life sanctuary just a few minutes' travel from Edmonton. It is preserved one of the few remaining Canadian herds of elk. The film shows the careful behind-the-scenes work that goes into the maintaining of such a sanctuary by its Parks Canada managers. I don't grumble with acknowledging the excellence of this film. If I could have had a vote on the final jury, though, mine would have gone for the John Stoneman film, The Last Frontier. But I'll plead guilty to being partial to Stoneman's underwater documentaries, and keep my vote for another time. (Best Nature/Environment Production).

Rediscovery – The Eagle's Gift

The awards jury brought this film back into the running after the preselection jury had eliminated it as a finalist. It's a decision that puzzles me still. The film itself is a fine enough production, covering the operations of a wilderness youth camp in the Queen Charlotte Islands. At the camp young people, both native and non-native, learn about themselves as they discover some of the cultural history of the Haida. My puzzlement stems from the problem I have in seeing the film as one that will appeal to children, rather than to adults. My personal choice in this category would have been one of the excellent dramas such as Griff Makes A Date, or Rabbit Goes Fishing. (Best Production For Children, Queen City Junior Film Society Cash Award of $500).

Poison/ Bhopal

Ann Medina gives one of the CBC Journal's extended documentary reports on the direct aftermath of the Bhopal toxic gas leak. Her on-the-scene interviews with the wretched and suffering natives of the area, who literally cough away their lives as they are interviewed, offer the viewer a wrenching and unforgetable experience. It's an award-winner all the way. (Best Public Affairs Production).

On To The Polar Sea: A Yukon Adventure

A group of American professionals spend their vacation canoeing the white waters of the Yukon rivers. It's a rugged excursion. Not my idea of a vacation at all. John Walker has described the conditions to me, and given me by his first-hand account an even greater admiration for the cinematographic achievement of this film considering the impossible shooting conditions. Bad enough trying to look after a canoe in those waters, let alone a camera too. It's all here, from lyrical visual poetry to sheer visceral excitement. (Best Sport/Recreational Production, Best Cinematography/ Videography – [John Walker]).

Harvest of Despair
da. Zoltan Nowvisy, p. Mr. Z. Hrycenko, UBC, 55:00 mins.

There isn't a film in the Festival that has stayed with me more vividly than this one. The subject of the film is the “forced holocaust” in the Ukraine, created by the decree of Joseph Stalin as a way of bringing the Ukraine under the Soviet heel. Estimates of the deaths created in this manufactured famine range from seven to ten million. There are still survivors alive today to tell what they remember to the documentary camera. Much of the film is made up of documentary and newsreel footage of the actual events. Zawnyshyn’s mournful and melancholy choral music is a perfect complement to this overwhelming film. (Best Original Music Score [Zenoby Zawnyshyn], Special Jury Award, Antoinette [Nadie] Kryalsky Canadian Heritage Award of $500).

Red Rocket
p.d. Colin Sterry, 10:00 mins.

This is one of my very favorites. A film without words is such a rarity these days that an outstanding one like this one deserves to be celebrated. It's hardly important that the film is about the old PCC streetcars which Toronto is busily taking out of service. The film is excellent because of what every frame tells us about the sensitivity of the cinematographer; what every cut tells us about the skill of the editor; and what every juxtaposition tells us about the artistic vision of the filmmaker. All of these are the same person, and I wish his film many appreciative viewers, as it well deserves. (Best Sound Editing).

Pluie d’été

This is one of the French-language titles which largely escaped me because the dialogue was beyond the grasp of my feeble French. It was, though, a film that brought me several moments of pleasure with its wit of situation, characterisation and execution. I remember a middle-aged man putting in his rural garden wearing an incongruous walker. I remember the performance of this actor as being a delight of humor and pathos. And I remember the scene at the row boat – who wouldn’t when a young couple fling themselves into uninhibited love-making in front of the (Best Direction).

fifth estate:
A Journey Back

Broadway producer Jack Garfien together with his fifth estate host retraces the journey he and his family took from their home in Slovakia to the death camp of Auschwitz. In Canada he confronts the official from his home town who was responsible for the transportation of the Jews. The final image of the film is an indelible moment: Garfien rubs his shoe in the thin snow on the ground at Auschwitz, then stoops to pick up something. He then recognizes that he is holding a fragment of human bone. All the patience and restraint that he has shown throughout the documentary are lost in this moment as he gives way to a scream of sheer rage. Freeze frame. End of film. (Special Jury Award).

Street Kids
p.d. Peg Campbell, p.c. NFB, 28:00 mins.

I remember a spirited discussion about this film in the preadjudication screening room. It's about street kids, male and female – prostitutes. Some of the scenes are taken in a hostel where a few of the street kids try to get straight, not always succeeding. The film is tough and gritty in its subject matter, and in its presentation. It's filmed in black and white, and the processing is then pushed to give a grainy effect. Some of the sequences are optically modified too to make the movement jerky and dream-like. It was these visual effects which led to the discussion in the screening room. Some felt that their use in such a long film was overdone. (Special Jury Award).

Chris Worsnop •

The Grierson Seminar

Video productions at the Grierson Seminar were a mixed lot, most working on very low budgets, all staying within Canada for their subjects. A kind of grass-roots aesthetic dominates. Almost all the videomakers establish an intimacy and warm regard for the people they are filming, a feeling more suited to closer identification between artist and subject (unlike the Central American films which often took a North American into a foreign land). The trade-off, however, is a softening of critical attentions; though some, like Orientations and Show Business, retain a more open perspec- tive, all are celebrations of their subject. Since most are minority groups who suffer from negative or non-existent visual representation, the videos fill an important gap in our cultural network. And though the relative lack of critical analysis by the videomakers threatens sometimes to dissolve into simplistic imaging (a strategy which helps neither the artist nor the subject), the sensitive, artistic gap in the cultural network of the minority groups themselves. For this reason alone, all the videos shown were valuable.

Orientations:
Gay and Lesbian Asians

Fung made Orientations as a pioneer videomaker to counter the complete absence of video or film documentation on gay and lesbian Asians. As such, he describes it as an “educational tool”, and its straightforward style foregrounds the personal stories of the individuals whose interviews make up the bulk of the video. Fung admirably avoids whitewashing his subjects and presents them with contradictions intact to avoid distorting the minority he wishes to liberate. Orientations fits into the new conventional “minority positive image” structure. Individual interviews which move chronologically from childhood recollection to a moment of crisis (here, coming out) are intercut and culminate in a sequence of collective action. Often, this is a celebratory demonstration; in this case, Gay and Lesbian Pride Day in Toronto. Working within this structure, Fung’s care and thoughtful handling make his video a sound forerunner project for its subjects.

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Our Two Cents Worth


Our Two Cents Worth: a rough-cut from Halifax-based collective WAVES (Women in Video Explorations) uses the same structure as "Orientation" to discuss minority women's economic oppression. The collective's work is as rough as its generation; Fung's is smooth, but trades clarity for the freedom to experiment. Working on many feminist film/video collective principles (valorizing "unprofessionalism", highlighting process over product), the video is uneven but full of wonderful moments which make it a fascinating and promising work.

The Struggle For Choice


The Struggle For Choice raised some hackles at the Seminar for being a "boring" work-in-progress. While the video is visually unexciting and, in its rough form, unstructured and unaired, it was an important video for the Seminar as an example of video-as-historical-document. The depth of research, national scope (important figures from almost every province in the abortion debate in Canada are represented) and the obvious commitment of the videomakers makes the video an important historical text for the pro-choice movement.

Un Génocide culturel

L'Adoption d'enfants Amérindiens

(18 min.)

La Famine chez les Inuits


Issaason's two "pocket documentaries" were most interesting for the tensions they exposed between the demands of a subject for responsibility, complex, broad analysis and the demands of the fore of acute documentation. The depth of research, national scope (important figures from almost every province in the abortion debate in Canada are represented) and the obvious commitment of the videomakers makes the video an important historical text for the pro-choice movement.

On fait toutes du showbusiness (We're All In Showbusiness)


Giguère's production works much more subversively. Video Femmes actively seeks exposure on television (Show Business is their first sale to CBC/Germany). Evoking collage of interviews and performances of more than 12 women in the Quebec rock music industry, the film celebrates their toughness and energy. At the same time, it honestly shows the tremendous level of sexism the performers suffer from and sometimes "profit" from. Nanette Workman's ambiguous place in pop's curious form of punk-rock is an aspect of how sexism sells in popular culture. Some problems, like performance sound and Sylvie Tremblay's "poetic narration", but the technical strength and free-spirited energy of the production make it work. A hilarious interview with Diane Dufresne doesn't hurt either.

To Pick Is Not To Choose

by John Gavray, 45 min., 35mm, dist. Tobypad, Farm Labour Information Committee.

This documentary on the hardships of farmworkers in southern Ontario is another good example of the tension between a director's aesthetic ambitions and the demands of the sponsor, here, the TLLIC. Their wish for a conventional Grierson-style social action resource (a demand demonstrated by Greyson's clashes with the director's more radical aesthetic concerns, creating some interesting juxtapositions. Though the video moves informatively along, Greyson's moments - some symbolic and technical innovations, and use of irony (the best use of a John Denver song ever) - are the video's high points.

Still Sane


Still Sane was the most moving and demanding of the videos presented at the Seminar. Much of the power came from the subject, a sculpture by Persimmon Blackbridge and Sheila Gilhooly based on Gilhooly's three years spent in psychiatric institutions for being a lesbian - an experience which saw her admitted to drugs, sexual abuse, and shock treatment. Ingratta and Patrizio carefully structure the video, sensitively shooting a series of sculptures as Gilhooly reads a searing accompanying text; in the second part, Gilhooly and Blackbridge are interviewed, showing the humour and commitment that makes them, not victims, but survivors. Made for a mere $250, Still Sane is very sophisticated in its mix of text, sound, voice-over, fiction (the sculpture), actuality (Gilhooly's experience), and image - this video effectively uses the medium's capacity for texture. The formal complexity does not, however, overwhelm the subject but rather supports it with a subtlety that demonstrates great ethical and aesthetic balance.

Eye of the Mask:

Theatre Nicaragua


Eye of the Mask, one of the most ambitious and successful films of the Seminar, best balances a respectful and critical attitude toward its subject. A Canadian filmmaker of the group Nixtayolero (Dawn Star), the film depicts Bolt's attempt to appropriate Nicaragua's rebuilding, focussing on the aims of Alan Bolt's theatre: reclaim history, "kill off bad histories," create a new society. As it follows the theatre group Nixtayolero (Dawn Star), the film depicts Bolt's attempt to appropriate traditional forms into popular culture; though tentative, the film suggests the idea is fascinating and courageous in theory but problematic in practice. Doyle's formal play of fiction and documentary, ranging from an eight-minute long take theatre scene to a 30-minute rapid montage history of the revolution, reveals an engaged and intelligent approach to ethics in film.

When the Mountains Tremble

by Pamela Yates, 85 min., 16mm, dist. DEC Films, 1983.

The American trio of Pamela Yates, Peter Kino, and Tom Siegal have made a sprawling, hard-hitting, but inconsistent agit-prop look at American involvement in Guatemala. Mixing dramatic scenes with a variety of documentary styles - from video to talking heads to archival footage - the film is sophisticated and effectively makes its point on the military, economic, and cultural enclaves of the U.S. (United Fruit is the main trans-national culprit here). The film's fervent sincerity, however, overwhelms any sensitivity to complex tone or irony. Mountains dissolves into political hyperbole but presumably cures the foreign correspondent. Our distrust of the filmmakers undercuts their laudable motives.

As Women See It:

Bread and Dignity

by Martha Jose Alvarez, 16mm, dist. DEC Films, 1983.

Alvarez, the only native Central American filmmaker of the group, concentrates on the role of women in the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua. A fairly conventional political documentary on women in education and the military (where half the battle is combating machismo), the film gains its emotional power from its narrative framework. Bread and Dignity is a supposed film-letter, a continuation of the open letter sent 50 years earlier by Sandino, the father of the revolution, to the U.S. demanding political and cultural sovereignty. Unfortunately, producer Pierre Hoffmann, who engineered post-production in Germany, uses a BBC-accent voice-over which, according to Alvarez, changes the original tone of her more understated reading. Hoffmann, apparently coordinating a series of international features on women, kept the final print from Alvarez, who first saw her 1983 film three days before the Seminar.

Las Aradas

by Jana Lundman, 8 min., 16mm, dist. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 1984.

Las Aradas contrasts one-eight-minute tracking shot of a tranquil Canadian valley with a horrifying voice-over account of the massacre of up to 200,000 on the Honduran-US border. The short works because Lundman respects the distance between herself and her subject. In not trying to represent the event dramatically, she gives a dignified voice to the victims.

For Women of El Salvador,

Speaking

by Sara Halpern, 16mm.

Halpern's film, while more ambitious in terms of form, comes across as an underdeveloped semiotics assignment, combining a number of language systems - mine, dance, film, painting, English and Spanish voice-over - to tell the story of a woman whose tongue was cut out for asking after the whereabouts of her daughter in El Salvador. The idea is fascinating but its execution is simplistic; when Holly Near, in all her political correctness, blares over the final credits, the film's parody does a disservice to the subject.