

AID FOR WHOSE BENEFIT

This documentary on El Salvador, recently seen on CBC's *Man Alive*, is designed for television audiences, says producer Mary Armstrong and "for use by non-governmental agencies in their attempts to encourage Canadians to take notice of our role in the Third World."

Broadcaster Roy Bonisteel gives some pertinent background, stating that \$8 million in aid for El Salvador from this country was cut off, but now this bilateral aid has been resumed.

John Graham, of the Dept. of External Affairs, speaks from his desk, and gives two reasons for the resumption:

- (1) the democratic election, a fair election vetted by Canadians and,
- (2) the decline in human rights abuses.

The other side of the coin is Brian Murphy, representing a non-government agency working with partner agencies in El Salvador, talking of repressive government policies, with human rights lawyer Karen Parker, saying the situation has changed – but not necessarily for the better. She says sharply that "everyone is looking for bodies", and now government troops attack villages and kill civilians and say, "That is war; civilians get killed..."

The faces of the population, imposed over images of the countryside, paint a horrifically moving verbal picture. A woman, anonymous for fear of reprisal from the armed forces, talks of bombs every day, of everyone being afraid, and of travelling to get food that the army will not let them take back to their villages. She says simply, "Children and old people suffer – people are hungry and starving."

Because of the bombing of the civilian population, half a million people are refugees in their own country. At a camp managed by the Catholic Church, Audrey Nemsil, a nun from Calgary, speaks emotionally about people being brought in trucks "like animals or produce."

Apparently with the advice of Ameri-

MINI REVIEWS

by Pat Thompson

can advisors, the El Salvadorian army has launched a new offensive – it distributes food each week, along with doses of psychological warnings and pamphlets dropped from 'planes. People are given food in return for fighting alongside the army. To improve its image, the armed forces provides clowns and a brass band with the handouts, and there's a pinata for the children, "brought by the clowns" says a little girl, "and the armed forces" adds a soldier and instructs her to shout it loudly for the cameras.

After seven years of civil war, one million peasants are displaced, and unemployment is about 60 per cent of the so-called "active economic population". Workers and peasants joined together in a Federation of Unions after the devaluation of the currency and a 100 per cent increase in the price of goods. The Federation is in opposition to the government and its members fear assassination.

The documentary notes that El Salvador is receiving more aid per capita from the U.S. than any other country in the world, but it has made no difference to illiteracy or disease. The \$8 million in aid from Canada is not going to have much effect, it is political and moral support to the government of El Salvador – but the American government is going to make the decisions. A priest, who appears throughout the film, states that the real failure of the Duarte government is that it has not been able to bring peace to the country.

The best summary is at the end of the film when a group of peasants say – and a voice-over translates their simple statements – "Any money from the United States goes to the president who spends it on the war...why don't they invest this money in US, the peasants, so that we can grow more food?...we want peace, we want to work."

A straightforward reporting of both sides, with a number of 'talking heads'

who feel strongly one way or the other, interspersed with comments from workers and peasants, with voice-over translation. A low-key, heartfelt look at a drawn-out civil war in a small country where the worker and peasant population suffer disastrously for a doctrine they do not fully comprehend or, indeed, desire.

p./d. Mary Armstrong, assoc.p. David Pollock, cam. Rene Pauck, ed. Howard Goldberg, narr. Roy Bonisteel, 27 mins. Col. Cinefort Inc., 3603 Saint-Laurent, Montréal. (514) 289-9477.

SEASONS ON THE WATER

A fiction film directed to families and, in particular, to children in order to give them an idea of how other Canadians relate to their work.

Billy sits on a rock gazing out over the ocean at Petty Harbour, Newfoundland. His sister Heather says they must be the only children in this fishing village not to have been on the sea, and it's because of something that happened a long time ago. Their father has his own boat, and mother works in the office of the fish plant.

Billy and his pals, with Heather tagging along, go off to get cod tongues and discuss what they will write about their holidays when back at school. Heather says her piece will describe going out in a boat with her father, and one lad remarks, "It's not fiction, you know!" So Heather makes a bet that she *will* go out on the sea, and works on a plan. She wants her father to come to her school and talk about his fishing and she, of course, will require firsthand knowledge! Father says a firm No, and persists when his wife tries to persuade him, saying, "It's been 10 years..."

There's a social gathering at their

house, with a fiddler and singing, and Billy sneaks some liquor out to his friends, but father catches him. In a stilted conversation, the husband says to his wife, "Why do I feel I have to discourage my children from this life?"

Father and son sit in the fishing boat at night – there, long gazes at each other plus meaningful pauses. Father rows off and Billy says, after (another) long pause, "I don't want to fish, Dad." At the end, Heather hangs around the dock wearing a lifejacket as her father approaches his boat. More measured looks, Billy hovers nearby, and one assumes that Heather gets her way...

What kindly things can be said about this naive little film? Writer Sharon Smith won a Moonsail Award for the script at the second Atlantic Festival Atlantique, and one wonders why. The dialogue for children isn't bad, but the adults come across as extremely stilted and uncomfortable. And the combination of snail's pace direction, and lots of looks and pauses, induces a soporific state only about 10 minutes into the story.

And the plot points are not too clear – the "something" that happened a long time ago, which prevents the father from taking his children out on the water, seems to be the fact that he was once lost in the fog and was scared. It probably was terrifying, but the limp presentation makes it seem ho-hum. And then there's the tiny effort to drag in feminism in that (maybe) Heather has inherited her father's love of the sea and may take over, but here again it is weakly suggested.

It's good to see short films of working lives in other parts of the country, and shot on actual locations, but they need to be sharper than this one, and better scripted.

exec.p. Mary Armstrong, Barry Cowling, p. Mary Armstrong, Shelagh Mackenzie, Sharon Smith, d. John Doyle, sc. Sharon Smith, cam. Rodney Gibbons, ed. Derek Norman, l.p. Jane Gibson (Heather), Adam McGrath (Billy), Cathy Jones (Joan), Rick Boland (Mark), 26 mins. Col. Cinefort Inc., Montreal/National Film Board.

Pat Thompson •

We probably share a general idea about what can be included under the rubric "Video Art": abstracts, non-linear narratives, semiological analyses, social documentaries, video-performance, video-installation, etc. But let's leave the question of "What" for the time being, and take a look at some of the recent evolutions in "Where".

Artist-run centres (a.k.a. parallel galleries) have been the mainstay of video exhibition since artists started using the medium a quarter of a century ago. These centres developed as exhibition venues for non-commodity art of all kinds. They arose out of a need for alternatives to the industry venues: museums and commercial galleries on the one hand, television and theatres on the

other. The premise was: art is part of our living culture, and should not be dominated by market-driven considerations.

However, video's presence in the galleries has begun to wane, just at a time when 'increased exposure' has become the order of the day. After years of maintaining and surviving in these arenas of cultural discourse, producers are beginning to show signs of discontent with the limited, sometimes minuscule, audiences, and the centres themselves are finding it difficult to make a commitment to ongoing, comprehensive screening series.

VIDEO TALES

by Geoffrey Shea

This condition is exacerbated by the re-emergence of conservative value systems, and artists are feeling understandably defensive about 'ivory tower' innuendos. Arts councils, for example, are putting more and more emphasis on the profile their supported projects can achieve, as they adopt the same definition of success as the demographically oriented mainstream media. From this perceived position of weakness artists are formulating several responses.

One is to adopt an 'anti-them' conception of 'us,' rallying the community in an attempt to reestablish or surpass funding

levels of years gone by. (One hard-working example is the nascent Artist's Union.) Another is to begin legitimizing oneself in 'their' terms. Like Jean Cocteau accepting a membership in the bourgeois *Academie française*, this is often done under the guise of parody, critical analysis or subversion.

An expanding audience is feasible and desirable. The artist desires to 'create' an ideal viewer; to provide the public not with what it does want (cf. television), but with what it should want (cf. video art). So efforts to increase the audience for video art are laudable, if intention, context and meaning can still be transmitted. Creating a cultural hype around the work is not enough, and if alternative film and video makers could generate the same kind of interest as mainstream

theatre, I think they would be severely disappointed.

Public Access and the Video-Wall Project

These questions of audience, hype and context can be examined in the example of Public Access's current 'Video-Wall' project. Public Access is a collective of Toronto-based visual artists and writers. They are currently commissioning artists to create works for a wall of video monitors which is the newest advertising gimmick at Mississauga's Square One shopping mall. Sixteen artists will create works which employ the technical potential of this 36-monitor matrix and which will address the specific site audience: suburban shoppers. For four months, four artists will each have about four minutes per hour to convey their message to an unsuspecting crowd. Each month the roster of artists will change.

This innovative corporate/artistic venture has a few disadvantages though. The advertising company (Wall Network, Inc.) is confronted with a definition of 'artist' which is different than what they had in mind (more political, more confrontational, less purely aesthetic); and the artists have only a brief opportunity to engage the anonymous audience. (I always feel uncomfortable with the notion of 'the masses,' a concept which permeates the adverti-

sing/shopping mall context of this project.) As a contrast, what if PUBLIC ACCESS could exhibit one artist per month indefinitely, or if an artist could produce an ongoing series? The net effect might be much greater. (Godard noted that he was welcome to produce a one-hour television program almost anywhere, but if he wished to show 60 one-minute programs over the course of a year, he wouldn't be allowed to because the potential for impact would be too great.)

As part of the cognoscenti, I look forward to seeing what the artists involved come up with, both in terms of addressing the context and utilizing the technology. The works will be displayed at Square One during the late summer and fall.

Another attempt to reach more people with art video is the less sensational, although potentially far-reaching, overtures artists and centres have been making towards the 1/2-inch, consumer video distribution network. Through direct-to-consumer sales and video rental outlets, special Interest Programs (from art to cooking) can be distributed to relevant viewers without the restrictions inherent in 'broadcast' economics.

A few forward-thinking video stores in Toronto have already taken the initiative of stocking artists' productions. ReVue Video now carries titles by Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Chris Lowry and Edward Mowbray; Abelard Book Shop recently acquired a series of artists' works by United Media Arts Studies and

is looking for additional titles to add to their selection. These and other independently sponsored ventures are the result of 'private sector' initiatives and give some hope to artists interested in diversifying their support base (to the delight of the increasingly conservative arts councils).

Another interesting foray into 1/2-inch distribution is Art Metropole's recent release of 15 titles by video artists. These tapes, by renowned Canadian artists such as General Idea, Ardele Lister and David Askevold are available for purchase for \$65. Aficionados can now consider starting their own video art collections and impoverished art school libraries can finally afford to maintain collections.

A third notable entrant into the 1/2-inch 'market' is the video-magazine: compilations for the broader, consumer audience. I am personally involved with one such publication called *Diderot*, an encyclopedia of contemporary culture.

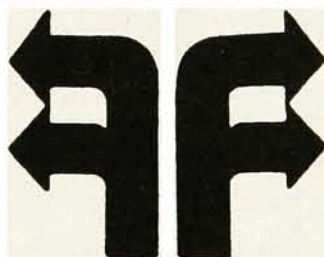
While progress in these areas is slow, they continue to offer at least as much potential for artists as the existing television networks which beckon from far off on the horizon. But in the meantime, it is still the artist-run centres and closed-circuit exhibitions which provide the principal outlets for video art. Videographe (Montreal), Video Out (Vancouver), Video Pool (Winnipeg), and Video Femmes (Quebec) all regularly distribute a selection of artists' tapes. V/Tape (Toronto) is the notable exception in

that it is non-selective in the tapes it represents. It is actually less of an active distributor and more of an information service about artists and independent activity in video. Any producer can (and most do) deposit tapes which are then cross-referenced on a database and included in V/Tape's Catalogue of Catalogues (complete with photos, descriptions, ordering information, etc.). The Catalogue also includes most of the other video centres' catalogues, indicating a degree of collaboration that is uncommon in the often competitive arena of distribution.

Everyone is watching the innovative advances in distribution which artists are undertaking. But producers continue to rely on V/Tape and the other centres for the bulk of their distribution. Without letting arts councils and broadcasters off the hook, it remains important for producers to continue the practice which years ago led to the creation of artist-run centres, i.e., multi-faceted self determination as a cultural and economic strategy.

NOTE - For more information about any of these outlets or videotapes, contact:

1. Public Access - 272 Richmond St. E., Toronto (416) 860-0701
2. Revue Video - 1280 Bay Street, Toronto (416) 922-5647
3. Abelard Book Shop (a.k.a. Video Noir) - 519 Queen St. W., Toronto (416) 366-0021
4. Art Metropole - 217 Richmond St. W., Toronto 416 977-1685
5. V/Tape - 183 Bathurst St., Toronto (416) 863-9897



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