

# Cream of the Co-ops



• The Wake

## by Don Terry

The Independent Film and Video Alliance (IFAVI), a national nonprofit organization serving 37 member groups, held its seventh annual general meeting and public showcase in Montreal on the last weekend in May. Any nonprofit producer, distributor, or exhibitor group who leaves full artistic control over all of the products they handle in the hands of the individual filmmaker could possibly join the Alliance. So included in this umbrella group can be found such diverse co-operatives as the Association coopérative de productions audio-visuelles (ACPAV), a long-established Montreal-based co-op that now produces quite conventional feature-length dramas; The Centre for Art Tapes in Halifax, which produces mainly experimental videos, or Idera, a Vancouver-based distributor of Third World social issue films.

The more typical member of the Alliance is a broad-based film co-operative which may have members working in everything from personal experimental films, drama, documentary, animation, super-8, industrial or art videos, or any hybrid of the above you'd care to consider and of any length. The Alliance meetings seemed to prove that it can work as an effective agency for such diverse needs, fulfilling its own two major objec-

tives: to provide a network linking the independents across the country — current membership includes groups from Vancouver to St. John's, with at least one member group from each province — and to present a common front to the rest of the community, particularly when facing government policy and the agencies which execute it.

Overall, the Alliance probably represents over 2,000 members involved in the area of independent film and video, most of which receive their funding from similar government sources. The annual general meeting becomes an important forum for discussion with these funding agencies, and this year was no exception, with panels devoted to such common problem areas as: developing an alternative exhibition circuit outside of the mainly inaccessible theatre chains controlled by the major exhibitors; dealing with film festivals, particularly concerning the questions of film markets and rental fees versus the positive exposure of such events; and developing an effective independent film lobby, one which would work directly with such agencies as the Canada Council, in a battle for more funding by direct interaction with the politicians and policymakers.

These workshops were attended by representatives from many of the involved funding agencies: the National Film Board, the CBC, the Department of Communications, the Canada Council, and Telefilm, as well as from other arts councils and involved political groups. The CBC and Telefilm representatives came under some heavy questioning

during a panel entitled 'Independent Production and the Agencies', since many members of the Alliance have difficulty accessing the financial support that these agencies might be able to provide. With the Canada Council Media Arts section's tight budget, and its mandate to generally support aesthetically groundbreaking works of shorter length and modest budget, many filmmakers working in areas such as experimental features or even shorter conventional dramas which demand higher budgets, find themselves in a virtual no-man's-land between the Canada Council and Telefilm. Telefilm's mandate leans to support of mainstream works, mostly feature-length, which have already found support in the private sector. A protest took place on the second day of the conference in front of Telefilm's office in Montreal to bring this dilemma to light, (see *Cinema Canada Update* No. 5) with the hope of forcing the government to find some way to bridge this gap between the agencies and facilitate the production of the more adventurous, home-grown feature-length films. The CBC was criticized not only for not providing enough support for non-conventional dramas and documentaries, but also for not providing air time for these all-Canadian productions even when they are produced.

Although the public showcase did prove that there is energy and imagination at work in the Canadian independent film world, the overall event sorely missed a more stringent selection process, one that might have stressed quality over quantity in regard to the films that were chosen. It also suffered from a

questionable desire to show films which have been made in previous calendar years and have also been shown at previous annual general meetings.

Selecting a group of the more interesting films to discuss, I noticed certain concerns common to postmodern filmmaking in general, especially the resurgence of narrative lines within an overall form that is still aware of a continuing need for inspection and deconstruction, both on a filmic and a narrative level. Also, a certain minimalist style of filmmaking pervades these works, obviously indebted to an awareness of the medium culled from the innovations of the European new wave and the North American structuralist filmmakers, and questioning further, notions of how much is needed to represent an idea, an emotion, or a story.

Chris Gallagher's feature-length experimental film *Undivided Attention*, (reviewed on p. 27) showed great innovation in both formal-perceptual explorations, and in terms of a nonlinear narrative collage. Another film which deals with similar concerns, is Martha Davis' *Elephant Dreams*, a work made up of five different linear stories told by five different storytellers, all including elements which connect to some part of an elephant's anatomy. The stories however are about anything but elephants and yet, by certain visual clues, and the recurring and often allusive and obtuse elephant images that appear interspersed within the stories, the total work seems to take on the feel of a film specifically about elephants.

For example, one of the storytellers sits with a giant anaconda coiled around him as he ironically tells a story about his dangerous adventures with anacondas in the jungle. Another storyteller, a teenage girl, stands by a tree as she tells a ghost-dream story about her grandfather caught in the tree. The anaconda looks like an elephant's trunk and the tree looks like an elephant's leg, both images that crop up intermittently throughout the film. Davis plays with the power of suggestion and our knowledge of filmic language to undermine a simple relationship with story and image, and to create a collage of simple pieces that add up to a complex and allusive whole. This postmodern film-text is a multi-voiced, disjunctive, deconstruction of narratives which doesn't presume a single reading but invites the viewer to construct his own collage from the puzzle presented.

In *The Wake*, by Caroline McClusky, we are presumably following a woman, maybe the filmmaker, on both a physical and spiritual journey away from a death and, at the end, maybe to her suicide. But nothing like this is ever clearly stated in the film, only alluded to by the sparse emptiness of a succession of single shot images of travelling, whether by row-boat, ferry, or on foot. But interestingly enough, in a film of travel over great distances denoted by changes in the landscape from shot to shot, it is virtually impossible to detect any true motion within the image. The landscapes are

Don Terry is an academic and independent filmmaker based in Montreal.



either too monotone, (a prairie field, the ocean), or too far away (a range of mountains in the distance), to denote any true change of place.

Because of this, there is a tendency in the images to a sense of a surreal and deathly stasis, akin to that found in Alex Colville's paintings. They are bereft of life and movement, even with human forms in the frame, and yet are portentously and magically real. Such a shot is one of an off-centered woman with her back to the camera, standing on the rail of a boat in the foreground, and looking off at a range of mountains in the background. Another is a shot of the back of a ferry, probably the same boat, with the clean whiteness of the boat juxtaposed against the blue sea and sky, all beautifully lit by a low sparkling sun. In the mid-background a man stands in dark colors, looking off into the distance. Is this the man of the wake, the one she is in mourning for, since he is the only man we see in the film? Are these merely enlarged photographs or are these images alive in the usual cinematic sense?

McClusky questions our usual sense of reality, motion, and time by these all-too-real images. If cinema's greatest claim is to reveal space in time, McClusky is proving that not only her

narrative, a story based on a collage of obtusely related static images, but also the images themselves will defy this basic maxim, and yet still be cinematic and progressive; that neither movement of space, nor of narrative, will take place within the shot, but in the montage that is the accumulation of the 'static' images.

The voice-over for the film is also somehow static and fragmentary, the woman's voice coming in short, clipped pieces which, like the images, create a contemplative and poetic pace. The ending, which might be read to represent a suicide jump over the tail of a ferry, is made up of a shot of the white wake of the ship fading to a white frame and then cut to a shot of bubbles in a churning water. The dual meaning of the word wake, a period of mourning after a death, or the telling stream of white water left after a ship has passed, points to the circular and therefore fundamentally static nature of the whole film. For if the woman is moving away from the wake for another death, she is moving to her death in another wake. On the soundtrack we hear 'the beginning... finally all the pieces falling into place...'. The water, the symbol for rebirth, suggests the circular nature of life, from birth to rebirth, or death to death, which, like the

images in the film, may appear as movement on one level, but is actually a position of stasis on another.

The strong metaphor for narrativity, a journey, is used in this work to allow for questions of progression in cinematic space and time, and in life's journey through time.

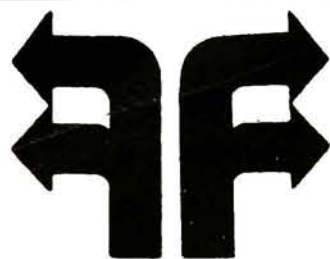
Wendy Tilby's **Table of Content** is an animation film which looks somewhat similar to Caroline Leaf's **The Street**. Created by the continuous brushing of paint on glass, the film literally paints an image of the many small and subtle relationships found in an unfamiliar restaurant, by a gentleman taking refuge from the rain... The story reminds one of a single page, 'slice of life' short story from the New Yorker school, and the form, so rich in texture and subtlety, seems perfectly suited to breathe life into the little ambiguous dramas which unfold with this table of contents.

Visually, **Linda Joy**, by Bill MacGillivray and Linda (Joy) Busby, is a black and white film made up of sections of Linda Busby speaking directly to the camera. Interspersed with this are long freeze-frames of her smiling face, and long sections of black. Linda Busby is talking about a period of remission she was in

during a lengthy battle with cancer, a monologue that is straightforward, honest, and joyful. Afterwards, we hear MacGillivray's beautifully written monologue about his response to her last days and to her death, for she died some time after this footage was shot.

This formally austere work is a contemplative and beautiful filmic poem about a friend's death and a filmmaker's response to it. Without being moralistic or sentimental, it deals with a profound and personal subject in a way that is not embarrassing or compromising. Its effects are as pure as spring water and as simple as the work itself: a sadness at Linda Joy's death, a happiness when faced with her beautiful life force, and a further happiness that a film could, using its darkness as well as its light, its silence as well as its text, give us this level of experience and insight.

Although these films were my personal favorites, there were many films of high production values which appeared at the showcase, dealing with both aesthetic and social issues. The Alliance screening proved that Canadian independent cinema has quality and depth, that it is a cinema that is certainly deserving of a more supportive attitude from government.



## The Richards, Melling Group

Insurance Brokers

*For The*

Entertainment Industry Since 1975

*Providing Insurance for:*

*Feature Films*

*Mini-Series*

*Commercials, Documentaries*

*TV Series*

*Video Productions*

*Industrial & Educational*

Producer's Errors & Omissions

**For Budget Estimates and Quotations Contact**

Montreal  
Ed Gathercole  
Joanne Gendron  
(514) 842-8921

Toronto  
John Flood  
(416) 869-1320

Vancouver  
Peter Manning  
(604) 683-6831