PLANTING PICTURES
an appreciation of the films of
William D. MacGILLIVRAY

by Peter Harcourt

L

inda Joy was a young woman whose love of life shone from her like a beacon. With radiant eyes and glinting teeth, the energy of her person animated every expression that crossed her face. Her beauty and vitality informed every gesture. I didn't know her personally, but I know her now, at least her hands and face, as an image preserved for us within a film.

Linda Joy is a film put together by the Maritime filmmaker, Bill MacGillivray, in 1985. I say "put together" because Linda Joy is a film that was begun by Linda herself. As co-ordinator of the Atlantic Filmmakers' Co-operative in Halifax (AFCOOP), she knew many filmmakers, including MacGillivray. A few years ago, while still a young woman, she developed breast cancer. She refused the obvious treatment as she tried to refuse the disease. She refused a mastectomy. The film that she wanted to make would have documented the battles she fought with the medical profession; and at the time she conceived the film, it would also have documented her triumph over her disease.

This project was not to be. Within months of what appeared to be a successful operation in Toronto, removing the lumps but not the breast, the cancer returned in a galloping form and within six weeks she was dead.

Prior to this relapse, however, she had visited her friends at the Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers' Co-operative (NIFCO) to discuss with them her script about her struggle. Evidently, they said much the same thing as MacGillivray had said: just tell your own story! So one day, that is what she did. With Mike Jones on camera, Linda told her story in a series of single takes. Shortly after that, she fell ill and died.

While there was some talk amongst Linda's friends about using these "interview" takes as part of a larger film, utilizing stills from the past and perhaps filming some other incidents, it was Bill MacGillivray who decided not to do this. He wanted to take the footage, select what was most meaningful and, by reworking it on an optical printer, discover a structure that would be both a tribute to Linda and provide a satisfactory experience.

Through doing so, MacGillivray produced an exceptional film. Linda Joy is a masterpiece of minimalist filmmaking. By utilizing only these outtakes from Linda's life, all interspersed with slow fades to black, MacGillivray has devised a beautiful and vital construction that tells the story of a woman's fight with death. The only additions consist of a few black & white freeze-frames which appear as Linda moves towards death; and then, over black leader, MacGillivray's sensitive account of his last visit to her in hospital.

He speaks about his intense friendship for her - virtually his love; and yet he knows now that there is nothing he can do. This spoken story - Bill's story - links Linda's story in a way to her social surround and counterbalances her visual exuberance with his own subdued speech. The opening image of Linda Joy is a freeze-frame of Linda's smiling face, with her hands thrust before it in the form of a trough. Her hands not only form the "V" sign appropriate for a woman but they also register the moment before the clap that will serve as head-sync for the film.

After her hands snap together to establish the sync, MacGillivray lets her tell her stories; and after he has told his story about her death, he brings her back to life for a moment. We see Linda, once again in colour, proudly displaying the scar on her breast which is the mark of her fight against mechanical surgery and the affirmation of her own vitality.

Whether or not a full mastectomy might have prolonged her life, MacGillivray doesn't tell us. In terms of the film, however, it doesn't matter. Linda Joy was a woman, ebulliently full of life, who contracted cancer and who then took a stand against what the medical profession automatically proposed for her as she took a stand against her disease. Linda Joy is a film that embodies a record of that struggle. In its social reference, it is a documentary - indeed, cinema verite'. In the aura of its construction - through its step-printing, deliberate changes of mood, authority of rhythm, and through the delicate balance it achieves between image and sound - it is transformed into a minimalist fiction film. Linda Joy is no

Peter Harcourt teaches film and Canadian studies at Carleton University in Ottawa.

Peter Harcourt teaches film and Canadian studies at Carleton University in Ottawa.
more. Linda Joy survives as the depiction of a struggle—a struggle universalized by the way it has been presented. In its quiet way, Linda Joy is a perfect film.

It is only a coincidence that Linda Joy bears a small stylistic resemblance to the first film that MacGillivray ever made—7:30 A.M. (1972). His diploma film for the London School of Film Technique (now the London International Film School). 7:30 A.M. is a simple exercise both in the handling of actors and in mise-en-scene.

A man enters a bathroom, shower, dries himself, trims his beard, deodorizes one armpit, shaves at the other but leaves it dry, and exits from the room. Meanwhile, we see in the margins of the frame a woman also come in, sit on the toilet, have a pee, and exit from the room. There is not so much as an exchange of glances between them, and, while the film does contain cuts, there is a strong feeling of an extended sequence—shot within this 10-minute film.

Shot in 35 mm, black-and-white, 7:30 A.M. already declares some of MacGillivray’s preoccupations. He is an assured stylist, perhaps the limitation of his early work—MacGillivray’s universe was, initially, very much centred on the male.

If these homocentric preoccupations were shifted somewhat by the experience of making Linda Joy, they have been thoroughly overturned by the process of creating Life Classes—Bill MacGillivray’s latest feature fiction (1987). This film tells the story of Mary Cameron, a young woman from Cape Breton, who moves from her “hinterland” on the island to her “metropolis” on the mainland—which is to say, to Halifax. In the course of this journey, she moves as well from adolescence to adulthood, from a paint-by-numbers hobby to professional sketching, from social and sexual dependency to personal independence and self-realization.

While highly formal in its overall cinematic style and slowly paced as befits the seasonal rhythms of the Maritimes, Life Classes is the most accessible cinematic narrative that MacGillivray has so far devised. It tells an important story, a timely story, with the strong sense of place that has always characterized the work of Bill MacGillivray. Furthermore, judging from both the critical and the popular response to the film at this year’s Festival of Festivals in Toronto, Life Classes should be the film that gains for MacGillivray the theatrical recognition he deserves.

Within the current climate of academic film theory, with its dependency on French theoretical paradigms and with their claim to political radicalism, the films of Bill MacGillivray might not readily be considered either political or radical. Yet in a real way, in a way that is essential to the regional struggles within Canada, his films are both political and radical. They all spring from MacGillivray’s regional roots. While they don’t fit the academic models of radical political thinking, his films embody the political struggle of the regions against the centre and of the personalized cinematic utterance against the homogenized language of the cinematic machine of the movie business, as one says—a business that generally either bypasses or co-opts the Canadian reality.

For instance, when MacGillivray returned to Canada after his training in Great Britain, he got involved in a regional movement that supported by the Canada Council, resulted in the founding of a series of film co-operatives across Canada. Along with Lionel Simons, MacGillivray’s co-worker and cinematographer, and Gordon Parsons, often MacGillivray’s producer, MacGillivray was directly involved in the founding of the Atlantic Filmmakers’ Cooperative (AFCOOP) in Halifax, out of which, after Aerial View, his first film in Canada, he founded Picture Plant.

Aerial View (1979), a 60-minute documental, and Stations (1984), a full-scale feature film, constitute MacGillivray’s dramatic work prior to Life Classes. He has made other films, of course, largely sponsored films—like the film about the Author of These Words (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called Newfoundland at War, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on the life work of Paul Harbuck, of TV Ontario’s Station III. What Aerial View, Stations, and Life Classes show is that MacGillivray’s work can best be understood.

What are the elements that characterize this work, that make it political and that make it Canadian? To begin with, it is regional. To make such a statement is inevitably to endorse the realistic dimension of cinema as well as to underline one of the confusions within the Canadian political scene, as opposed to those other films, of course, largely sponsored films—like the film about the Author of These Words (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called Newfoundland at War, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on the life work of Paul Harbuck, of TV Ontario’s Station III. What Aerial View, Stations, and Life Classes show is that MacGillivray’s work can best be understood.

What are the elements that characterize this work, that make it political and that make it Canadian? To begin with, it is regional. To make such a statement is inevitably to endorse the realistic dimension of cinema as well as to underline one of the confusions within the Canadian political scene, as opposed to those other films, of course, largely sponsored films—like the film about the Author of These Words (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called Newfoundland at War, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on the life work of Paul Harbuck, of TV Ontario’s Station III. What Aerial View, Stations, and Life Classes show is that MacGillivray’s work can best be understood.

What are the elements that characterize this work, that make it political and that make it Canadian? To begin with, it is regional. To make such a statement is inevitably to endorse the realistic dimension of cinema as well as to underline one of the confusions within the Canadian political scene, as opposed to those other films, of course, largely sponsored films—like the film about the Author of These Words (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called Newfoundland at War, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on the life work of Paul Harbuck, of TV Ontario’s Station III. What Aerial View, Stations, and Life Classes show is that MacGillivray’s work can best be understood.

What are the elements that characterize this work, that make it political and that make it Canadian? To begin with, it is regional. To make such a statement is inevitably to endorse the realistic dimension of cinema as well as to underline one of the confusions within the Canadian political scene, as opposed to those other films, of course, largely sponsored films—like the film about the Author of These Words (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called Newfoundland at War, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on the life work of Paul Harbuck, of TV Ontario’s Station III. What Aerial View, Stations, and Life Classes show is that MacGillivray’s work can best be understood.

What are the elements that characterize this work, that make it political and that make it Canadian? To begin with, it is regional. To make such a statement is inevitably to endorse the realistic dimension of cinema as well as to underline one of the confusions within the Canadian political scene, as opposed to those other films, of course, largely sponsored films—like the film about the Author of These Words (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called Newfoundland at War, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on the life work of Paul Harbuck, of TV Ontario’s Station III. What Aerial View, Stations, and Life Classes show is that MacGillivray’s work can best be understood.

What are the elements that characterize this work, that make it political and that make it Canadian? To begin with, it is regional. To make such a statement is inevitably to endorse the realistic dimension of cinema as well as to underline one of the confusions within the Canadian political scene, as opposed to those other films, of course, largely sponsored films—like the film about the Author of These Words (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called Newfoundland at War, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on the life work of Paul Harbuck, of TV Ontario’s Station III. What Aerial View, Stations, and Life Classes show is that MacGillivray’s work can best be understood.

What are the elements that characterize this work, that make it political and that make it Canadian? To begin with, it is regional. To make such a statement is inevitably to endorse the realistic dimension of cinema as well as to underline one of the confusions within the Canadian political scene, as opposed to those other films, of course, largely sponsored films—like the film about the Author of These Words (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called Newfoundland at War, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on the life work of Paul Harbuck, of TV Ontario’s Station III. What Aerial View, Stations, and Life Classes show is that MacGillivray’s work can best be understood.

What are the elements that characterize this work, that make it political and that make it Canadian? To begin with, it is regional. To make such a statement is inevitably to endorse the realistic dimension of cinema as well as to underline one of the confusions within the Canadian political scene, as opposed to those other films, of course, largely sponsored films—like the film about the Author of These Words (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called Newfoundland at War, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on the life work of Paul Harbuck, of TV Ontario’s Station III. What Aerial View, Stations, and Life Classes show is that MacGillivray’s work can best be understood.
a satellite dish by a cable television signal from New York!
If, for a central Canadian, to visit the Maritimes is to visit the past, watching these films might seem like going back in time. This continuity between the past and present is what troubles the political surface of MacGillivray's work. It scarcely fits any of the currently progressive paradigms. Yet this feeling of regional identity — whether from old-fashioned Halifax or new-fashioned Edmonton — is central to the sense that Canadians have of themselves as Canadians.

Furthermore, within the Canadian struggle for cultural autonomy, arguably it is 'progressive' to encourage regional voices to be heard, as it is to encourage a knowledge of our past. 2

Along with this presence of regional landscapes, however, there is also in all three fiction films the sense of a journey. In each of these films there are which are both psychological and geographical — a journey into the self which is at the same time an actual journey within the specific spaces of Canada.

Furthermore, while MacGillivray works within narrative, until Life Classes, there was no privileged sense of a present tense in his films. In Linda Joy, for instance, Linda is 'alive' in the last shot after we have heard an account of her death. So too, in Aerial View and Stations: while the films both have structurally a beginning, a middle and an end, this structure does not correspond to the narrative time of the film. It is not just that there are flash-backs or flash-forwards the films' narrative strategies cannot be explained in this way. Both Aerial View and Stations refuse any sense of an unfolding present tense.

Connected to these strategies of temporal dislocation is a frequently imposed disjunction between image and sound. MacGillivray plays with the standard textbook practice of overlap editing — introducing the audio before the visual. While the present scene is still on the screen; cutting away to a new scene while the present sound continues. In MacGillivray's hands, however, this practice is so extended that different bits of narrative information are presented simultaneously on the screen. This strategy also becomes part of the great richness of these films: the films refuse to emphasize the climactic moments within their own drama. In both Aerial View and Stations, as to a certain extent in Linda Joy, the films cut away to another scene just as the climactic moments are about to occur.

Finally — and this is stylistically perhaps the most interesting aspect of MacGillivray's work — there is in all these films a self-reflexive concern both systems of representation. In Aerial View, there is an 8mm film within the 16mm format: in Stations and in Life Classes, there are recurring television images within the filmic space of the screen. It is as if MacGillivray wants to critique his own representational practice, his need to use cinema both to explore the self and to search for a present by recording the past.

Aerial View opens with a scene of Geoff and his son Sammy watching a home movie together. This Super-8 film shows Geoff, his friend Tom (Mike Jones), and Mary, Geoff's wife-to-be and Sammy's mother, all throwing about a kind of frisbee together. They are also making a movie of themselves. Except that the film we are watching is not really the film they are making, since we see the characters on the screen filming one another.

As to why we do not see the film in this way, that is MacGillivray's work a constant play between what is present and what has passed — in fact, often a destabilization of the present in relation to the past.

Once we have seen this film, we could speculate that, in terms of narrative time — the chronology required for the story — this scene must occur very near the end. Yet it opens the film - in media res, in the classical sense; yet also in a way that distances and disrupts the conventional spectator/spectacle relationship expected within film. We can respond to the human emotions represented in Bill MacGillivray's films, but we have to work on the place of the events within chronological time.

The film also opens with a declaration of a triple absence: missing is Tom — as we shall learn, an important guru figure in Geoff's life as an architectural student — and Mummy. We might assume from the scene with the two of them is equally intricately designed.

We see overhead shots of some maps and charts - real-estate charts we might assume. Then an aerial shot of a Nova Scotia coastline, over which the title appears, Aerial View. On the soundtrack we hear what we might assume is the sound of a helicopter; except that this is a shot of the film, we are examining the coastline from the point-of-view of a motorboat. Only then do we register that the shot of the super of the first shot are really the sounds belonging to the next shot — the sounds of the boat.

For this 'professional' scene, no faces are visible. But voices are heard. In the image, we are moving past a freighter, grounded on the rocks some months before. "Someone inside a boat," observes Geoff, "I think she is," replies Geoff.

"Is it not 'was.'" As in Linda Joy, there is in MacGillivray's work a constant play between what is present and what has passed — in fact, often a destabilization of the present in relation to the past.

In the second scene, however, is equally intricately designed.

The film also opens with a declaration of a triple absence: missing is Tom — as we shall learn, an important guru figure in Geoff's life as an architectural student — and Mummy. We might assume from the scene with the two of them is equally intricately designed.

We see overhead shots of some maps and charts - real-estate charts we might assume. Then an aerial shot of a Nova Scotia coastline, over which the title appears, Aerial View. On the soundtrack we hear what we might assume is the sound of a helicopter; except that this is a shot of the film, we are examining the coastline from the point-of-view of a motorboat. Only then do we register that the shot of the super of the first shot are really the sounds belonging to the next shot — the sounds of the boat.

For this 'professional' scene, no faces are visible. But voices are heard. In the image, we are moving past a freighter, grounded on the rocks some months before. "Someone inside a boat," observes Geoff, "I think she is," replies Geoff.

"Is it not 'was.'" As in Linda Joy, there is in MacGillivray's work a constant play between what is present and what has passed — in fact, often a destabilization of the present in relation to the past.
he explains at one time to a classroom of students. In fact, this classroom scene allows Geoff to present his manifesto—a manifesto that might not be that far removed from the manifesto of Bill MacGillivray. We have to build something that is of some use to people, not just something that will close deals, create cash flow, and allow a lot of rich people to make yet more money and which will keep the politics of civic exploitation in place. As Geoff talks about building his own house in the country with his own hands, about discovering skills within the process of that building which he never knew he had, about the beautiful view that he has from his window, one young girl cackles when he says that he doesn’t have a television, and one boy who had been reading some kind of merchandising magazine throughout Geoff’s discussion, finally asks the determining question: “How much money do you guys make?” Geoff has no answer. Fortunately, at the moment, a loudspeaker in the classroom, which, Geoff assures us, the loudspeaker system asks him to move his car. He accepts this command as an excuse to leave the classroom. While the image stays on the class, on the embrazado teacher, we hear the car drive away from the school.

Because of its mixture of the old and the new, Halifax is rich in architectural signifiers. In Aerial View, MacGillivray used in the city as Antonioni used Milan in La Notte or the EUR section of Rome in L’Eclisse.

A couple of sequences in this film are particularly reminiscent of Antonioni. There is one moment towards the beginning of the film when Geoff and his partner Ross are off to close some important architectural deal. As they go up in an elevator in the Maritime Centre, one of the new bank-based highrises that have been erected in the south end of town, we can see the spire of St. Mary’s church being dwarfed and then lost in the rocky shore of the mouth of the harbour. By the time you reach the end of the lift, you have references to the fact that what the audience is watching is a film. It’s easy to take people into a garden in the movies because their defenses are down, and they’ll accept just about anything if you put them in the right frame of mind. Whereas, if you remind them that they have been through this process, then they’re more likely to find offense with it or to have questions. They’re more likely to enter in some kind of real discussion which is ultimately healthier.

Aerial View favours the idealism of a young male architect. It also critiques this way of thinking. Geoff’s determination to be true to his own principles isolates him from his friends, alienates him from his wife, and leaves him alone in the country with the responsibility of looking after Sammy. By refusing the commercial world, he is also refusing what many people would call the real world.

On another level, the film becomes a sort of journey. It’s a journey to be true to his own principles, but it’s also a journey to be true to himself. As he looks out through the mist at another section of the sea.

Cinema Canada: In Stations, you have Robert Frank saying, “Stories are boring.” Is that your own view?

Bill MacGillivray: In a sense it is. Although I should explain that Robert’s lines, like so many in Stations, were ad-libbed. But I agree. Structured stories or stories that are telling you what to think are boring because they don’t leave you any room to move. They don’t give you any chance to discover for yourself what you might want to think. And in Stations, that’s what the whole thing is about. We were trying to find a way of telling the story that would allow a person in the audience to interpret more freely than if we had been very specific.

Cinema Canada: So it was an open-ended process?

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah, sort of controllable. We tried to develop ways of having ideas shared instead of told. So we would alude to certain things and then leave them, and then maybe come back to them, and she doesn’t seem to care a lot about Sammy—it’s her voice that articulates the critique which we can infer from other aspects.

This voice begins during a luncheon meeting with a friend in the new fashionable Chateau Halifax restaurant that looks over the city. But we can hear it over a number of scenes in the film, again defying any sense of chronological order, as at one time, the luncheon with her friend becomes a discussion with her, friends, including Geoff. While her character is unsympathetically presented in the film, Mary’s voice describes quite sympathetically the total self-involvement that we see in Geoff.

Cinema Canada: What is it about life films in many ways. It tells a simple story, an old-fashioned story, a story of idealism and defeat. In this way it might be related to Linda Joy that tells a similar kind of story. Yet in both films, as in Stations and as in another way in Life Classes, it is the structure that universalizes the particular situation, as the particularities of the specific locations give warmth and a sense of reality to the whole.

At a number of key points in the film, MacGillivray returns to the Super 8 footage, as if in moments of self-reflection, as if part of Geoff’s awareness of what he has lost. So for the end of the film, he returns to his aerial view.

We see Geoff’s partner, Ross, in a four-seater, single-engine private plane. He is surveying the terrain of the coast, oblivious to the fact that he is building, as he is the second sequence of the film. In fact, this might be the second sequence of the film! Ross would appear to be looking down on Geoff’s house and the new bank-based highrise, as in the second sequence of the film. And the problem there is because of our institutionalized thought, nobody is particularly interested in hearing what I have to say.

Cinema Canada: Critics say that your films deal with recognizably Canadian themes. It would seem to suggest that there are a lot of us out there talking to ourselves about the same things.

Bill MacGillivray: Absolutely. I believe that really strongly. We are all more basically the same than we are different. No matter how different we appear, we all suffer the same things in one form or another.

Cinema Canada: You admire the work of Jean Pierre Lebel. What is it about his films that appeals to you?

Bill MacGillivray: Well, I haven’t seen all of Jean’s work, but I think Les Fleurs sauvages is a very good film. And if the film’s I’ve seen, I go to a lot of films but I feel strongly about certain films that I’ve seen. What I like about Jean Pierre’s work is its extreme simplicity and the subtlety of it, and the quietude of it. The other thing I like about his work is his view of the world. It’s an unashamedly subjective view of the world, it’s a non-cynical view of the world, it’s a loving view of the world, and those views are not popular these days.

Cinema Canada: Is it because you share a similar view that you are sometimes criticized for sentimentality?

Bill MacGillivray: I think people are afraid to look certain truths in the eye and deal with them. They would rather just push them aside and delude themselves. I don’t think sentimentality is all that... very much so.

Cinema Canada: Do you have an audience in mind when you’re making a film?
Although a very different film, Stations is organized in much the same way. There is the same extended overlapping structure and meaning in Aerial View, the people that we see way their meaning has been changed in the process of their own construction. The central character in this film is called Tom Murphy, and this Tom too is played by Mike Jones. A onetime seminary student, he has espoused a secular life and become a television reporter, very much against the wishes of his father. But the real project he wants to undertake for television involves a present tense. If Super 8 footage was part of both the structure and meaning in Aerial View, nagging Geoff about his past and about his loss of both Tom and Mary, in Stations, television monitors play a similar role. While the video images refer to the past, they also serve to question the value of their own acquisition and the way their meaning has been changed in the process of their own construction.

The scene of Harry's death is typical of the achievement of this film and is indicative of the way in which MacGillivray thinks cinema. During the television interview with Harry that had occurred earlier in the film, Harry had tried to explain his grief. He no longer felt part of something greater than himself, he explained. He was no longer part of a larger whole. "I wasn't Father any more. I had to introduce myself as me." Losing his vocation was not for him just like a break-up of a marriage. "It was like ending a life," as he said.

Later, while Tom is editing this footage, we might notice that Harry's reference to death has been eliminated from Tom's assembly while other bits of information we didn't see in the interview sequence have been added. "Reality" is being manipulated for the sake of a good television show. Then the phone rings. Tom freezes the video image of Harry's distraught face; and we learn that Harry, indeed, has killed himself.

The exploitative side of image-making is further emphasized in this film by an encounter that Tom has with a drunken man who angrily resents Tom's superior position to all the people he is interviewing. He considers the whole process patronizing. "The big ones want to look at the little ones," he screams out on TV. Yet as Tom manages to placate him and coaxes him to let himself be filmed, he too declares problems with his father: "I gotta a message for my dad," he says to the camera. "I made a mistake."

Along with all the video footage in Stations, as in Aerial View, Stations also contains some home movie, 16 mm footage. This footage shows Tom — more correctly, Mike Jones — as a young man at the seminary, taking his vows, proselytizing himself on the ground as required indication of his humility, greeting his father, sharing his pride in his holy life with his family and friends.

This footage was actually shot by Mike Jones' father and is "authentic" footage of Mike's own term at a seminary in his youth. For Stations, however, as for Linda Joy, MacGillivray has re-worked this footage, making it ghostly through step-printing, making it unreal — as if a scarcely-recalled memory. However, since the 'Tom' in this older footage is recognizable Mike Jones, this seminar footage bears an eerie, almost too-close relationship to the real. As in Aerial View, this crisscrossing between the actual and the fictional contests the representational practice endemic to film and the way we tend to validate the fictional with references to the real. In Stations, however, both at the opening and at several points throughout the film, this 'home movie' footage serves to underline the loss that can feel when such communal dedication is surrendered; and it serves to remind Tom both of the greater grief that such a surrender caused for his friend Harry and of the alienation from his father that Tom has felt ever since.

Again, in what at first glance seems an old-fashioned way, Stations is very much about the search for a father. Yet, while a reconciliation with Tom's real father is central to the plot of the film, it doesn't have that much to do with the story of the film as the film unfolds.

The story of the film seems more to consist of the many little anecdotes that all the people in the train share with Tom as he interviews them for this 'human interest' film that he has been asked to make for a commercial station in Vancouver. Most of these anecdotes also involve a searching, as I have said — a searching for work, a searching for a place that might become home (or, as in the case of the immigrant travellers, a place that has become home), a searching for the relationship of self to the vast land over which they speed in their Via Rail train. In this way, all are concerned with a search for the meaning of their lives.

Some of these characters were written into the film. Some were found on the train. Some were a mixture of both — people who were found but who were then asked to talk about specific things. Brenda, the young woman with whom Tom attempts to have a fling, is particularly tough in talking about, from her point of view, both her pampered past and privileged present. Bernard, a porter in the train, is a political radical who wants to change the world, not just reflect its surfaces for some 'human interest' television show.

Most compelling are the comments made by Robert Frank, the well-known American photographer and offset filmmaker who now has a home in Cape Breton. "Stories are boring," he begins by saying — a comment that might well relate to MacGillivray's refusal to create strong narratives for his films. Frank then talks with Tom about catching trains and missing them, about the elements in life
that either make it dependable or which allow it to be exciting. But like all the other characters in this film, she talks about a sense of home – something which, with all his travelling, Robert Frank has never had.

"So here we are: where you get on the boat," he says to Tom, who has left his 'human interest' film in Halifax and is now on his way to Newfoundland. With the idiomatic skills now of a true Maritime native, MacGillivray has taken the Newfoundlander's speech to heart. First came Linda Joy – a film that has already been discussed – and now Life Classes. MacGillivray's most accessible theatrical narrative to date. Although its organization is less intricate than the films that have preceded it, its concerns remain the same. It too records a journey – a search for a meaningful role within the landscape of the Maritimes; it too is concerned within its own context; and it too continues its own process of cinematic representation.

After the title sequence – itself (as we shall see) an important frame for the film – the first shot of the story shows us a reflection in the water of a green pickup truck parked in the rain, white, television screen, "Linda Joy", dish, beer and – especially – an idiom. It’s a plea for an answer, for Tom. He is soon joined, therefore – both the scenes on the train and the scenes at Tom's home on the West Coast with Holly, his wife, and Mark – a boy. They are having a tea party. She has neither a temporal nor a causal relationship to one another as the film unfolds in time. We can infer these relationships, of course – but after we have seen the film. In the films of Bill MacGillivray, at least until Life Classes, conventional narrative is always downplayed. What happens to the characters is always less important than what happens between them.

The end of Stations involves an abrupt change of style. If all the narrative and temporal dislocations both parallel and underline the dislocations of the characters, then – not only the severe disorientation of Harry and in another way of Tom, but also of all the characters travelling across Canada in the train – the film ends securely in the present tense. It is a film in which the present moment is all important. He is reunited with his family and reconciled with his father. After all the stylistic formality and self-questioning of the process of image production, the characters are more in the style of cinéma-vérité.

With Mike Jones' real father present on the screen and with MacGillivray's real father singing a loving song, this collage into the present tense is a point of personal and perhaps a weakness in the film, arguably an oversimplification of the issues that have been raised. At the same time, in a way that is consonant with MacGillivray's cinéma vérité style, this ending does resolve, both in style and in theme, the problem set by the film.

With Tom, his father, and his son being depicted by the tower of his character in Sign, Hill by Tom's wife, Holly, Stations very much celebrates the unification of the male dynasty by the close of this film. At the same time, in the scenes that involve her, Holly is stronger than the script of Aerial View. She is given more independence of spirit. She has her own work, and in some key scenes, she conveys a sense of what she has had to endure in her marriage to Tom – a man equally as self-preoccupied as Geoff was in Aerial View. Like Mary in this, however, she too doesn’t seem to be too close to their son. At this stage of his career, MacGillivray's films enact the interests of a very male-centred world.

However, teased a little about this matter both by his admirers and by his detractors, MacGillivray has taken their criticisms to heart. First came Linda Joy – a film that has already been discussed – and now Life Classes. MacGillivray's most accessible theatrical narrative to date. Although its organization is less intricate than the films that have preceded it, its concerns remain the same. It too records a journey – a search for a meaningful role within the landscape of the Maritimes; it too is concerned within its own context; and it too continues its own process of cinematic representation.

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah, me. If I'm here, there must be at least 100,000 like me, probably a million, maybe even two or three million like me. I don't know. If I make a film that's true to myself, then I'm going to reach ultimately, if I can, those people. The trouble is trying to convince the bureaucrats that there's a market out there. The bureaucrats who run our cultural agencies presume so much about their audiences. There's a censorship through presumption in our country. I think one of the problems with the CBC and with Telefilm is that quite often the decisions are being made by people with small minds, limited vision, who are looking for the quick fix, and who are looking for what they perceive as the needs of the masses without ever making actual direct references to the masses to find out what they want. The history of our media culture and the history of our cinemas is the history of people making decisions in isolation. And I don't care what Peter Pearson says, there's a whole mass of people out there who want to see the kind of films that we make, and we won't let the independents make them. When we make our small-budget, you know $500,000-600,000 features, there is no need to spend millions of dollars to tell stories. Resistance is felt when we feel the kind of work that we're trying to do, is the resistance of people who are in love with something other than cinema. They're in love with deals or dealmaking, perhaps, and their tiny, small, little minds are impeding the progress of Canadian cinema. I've been working with people who are working outside of the system, who are doing their own thing, and they've probably got a quarter of a million dollars but then they would have had $250,000 worth of control. Fortunately, the CBC and I do not see eye-to-eye about what drama is. There would have been compromises all the way down the road. Now I can honestly say that Life Classes is very much what I wanted it to be. There are some scenes I had to remove because of length and some I had to remove because I wasn't satisfied with them and I couldn't repair them. But, in total, the sense that I get when I look at the film is the sense that I wanted to get and that, to me, makes it very successful. But I don't think that would have been the case if CBC had owned a piece of it. Nobody told me what to do in that film and that's the way I like it.

November 1987 – Cinema Canada/19
scandal about having a baby. Actually, she is following in the footsteps of her mother. Her mother had run off before her—apparently with another man. Humiliating her father in a way that he has never recovered from, has never wanted to recover from. "She always wanted to change things,"—as her father explains, talking about her mother. "She made a fool of me. I've been living it down ever since."

Two years pass. Mary has her baby—a little girl whom she calls Marie. She now lives in a room in a house run by a black woman, Mrs. Miller—herself an exile from the old black community of Africville that was destroyed by a land development project in the mid-60s.

Unable to find more than temporary work in shops, in order to support her child Mary offers herself as a nude model to the local art college. It is at this point, as Mary begins to take control of her life, that the film too begins to find its narrative centre.

Life Classes has a far more linear structure than any previous film by Bill MacGillivray. The image/sound relationships are far less disjunctive, and the temporal dislocations are only really evident within the framing sequence of the film. While this simplified construction may represent MacGillivray's bid for a larger theatrical audience, the narrative linearity is also appropriate for the story of this film.

Both Geoff in Aerial View and Tom in Stations evolved, of course, over time; but they also evolved through memory. While Mary also delves into memory at one point in the film, seeking out the art of her past in her personal life we see her evolving moment by moment within society as she gains possession of herself through time.

From her contacts at the art college, through her friendship with a young artist, and through her exposure to what is mockingly offered in the film as the pretentious discourse of both art history and of modern art, Mary begins to feel that she too can be an artist. She learns to assert her will.

At this point in the film, when Life Classes begins to alternate between scenes of Mary being sketched and scenes of Mary sketching, the film gains both in intensity of feeling and in authority of style. In the films of Bill MacGillivray, given the self-preoccupation of his protagonists, it is arguable that the characters often respond more to the spaces around them than they do to one another. In Life Classes, this stylistic characteristic may explain somewhat the slow pace and the uncertain narrative direction of the opening scenes in this film. In any case, by this point in the film, when the passivity of being sketched begins to alternate with the activity of sketching, the film acquires an increasingly compelling rhythm. Even what we might have felt was the somewhat mannered acting during the opening scenes of this film ceases to be a problem. While still in a space not of their own choosing, nevertheless they are beginning to respond to their own desires. We get the sense of Mary, the passive object, alternating with another Mary who is beginning to take charge.

All the scenes in the art college are masterful in their execution yet simple in their design. Some are highly lyrical—the first one when the sound from a classical string quartet accompanies the camera dollying round the room, showing Mary striking different poses, trying to be at ease within this process of the production of art. And if, in her nakedness, she looks a little uneasy in this sequence, something in her must have enjoyed it. Later, when she returns home, she playfully reenacts these poses with her daughter.

The last sketching scene, however, is the most masterful. We see Mary lying on her platform—as always, looking vulnerable in her nakedness, even somewhat abused. Meanwhile, the camera circles around the entire class, while a combination of music and murmuring from the soundtrack works on our emotions. At the same time, we also see that each student views Mary not only from a different point-of-view but also in a different way.

This is MacGillivray at his finest—the film artist showing representational art in the making, recreating within his own work some of the attitudes and subjectivities inherent in the production of all art. The climactic centre of this film also involves a reference to the production of art, except that this time, it is video. An American video artist wants to combine naked bodies singing out confessional tunes with clothed musicians who play back to them in a way that spurs them on. This video production is being broadcast live for a cable channel in New York, and each performer in it is to receive 200 American dollars.

This scene, too, is masterful in its execution, but this scene isn’t simple! As we see the naked men and women singing away, exploring, as instructed, some personal grief, each wearing headphones that unite them with their individual musicians, each clutching the $200 as well as the microphone in their hands (which refers, if you like, both to commerce and technology), and each sealed off from one another by condom-like cylinders hanging from the ceiling, we are assaulted by a complex range of emotions and ideas.

First of all, we have the suggestion of art as exploitation, of art as playing upon other people’s vulnerability (as all films do); secondly, there is a sense that local culture is vulnerable to the attractions of American money; and thirdly, the condom-like cylinders employed to isolate the performers from one another in this scene provide a strangely distorted echo of the condom not employed at the opening of this story, which nevertheless also isolated the “performers” from each other!

Furthermore, the suggestion that Direct Broadcast Satellite technology might threaten the very existence of local culture is further emphasized by the fact that this New York signal is picked up by Earl’s dish in Cape Breton so that all of Mary’s friends and family witness both her performance and her confession. Like her mother before her, she too has “run after the family jewels,” as she puts it: she too has been lured by the attractions of sex. The fact that Mary’s one-woman show which she eventually prepares for the college consists of a series of drawings of Earl in the nude both establishes a gender balance for all the nudity in this film and provides for Mary, personally, a kind of loving revenge.

The last scene in this film implies another gap of a couple of years. Marie is noticeably older. Mary is clearing away the brush that blocks her view of the ocean from the country cottage that her grandmother had willed to her when she died. Since her father and daughter are present in the background (we see Marie taking some hot chocolate to her grandmother), as in Stations there is the sense of a family at least partially reunited. Except that in this case, the man is refused.

When Earl approaches, offering his help, also struggling to ask Mary to marry him, she turns away. His satellite dish has been confiscated, forcing him to work for other people—a situation that he hates. But if Earl’s story ends thus in a double defeat, Mary’s story finishes with a prolonged stare at the camera of asserted independence. Supposedly, she has found herself.

I say “supposedly,” because one woman show does not an income give; and because the film is framed by a ghostly sequence that is quite unsettling in its implications. These opening and closing moments further emphasize the disturbing implications elsewhere hinted at in this film of the totally merchandising nature of our television culture within the increasingly commercial values of our entire world.

The film both opens and closes in a shopping mall in which everyone is moving in slow-motion, as in a dream. Perhaps it is more like a nightmare. We see a young woman playing the violin, but her sound is scarcely recognizable. Meanwhile, the camera pans past an Im-
perial Bank of Commerce outlet over to a television shop which is in the process of being liquidated. Everything is on sale. Is this another suggestion that, in such a marketing environment, in which banks never fail but shops often do, local culture cannot be heard?

We also see Mary's face on a multiplicity of television screens in this shop, on television sets that are all on sale. Or is it Jacinta's face? Once again, we have the sense of the interdependence of the fictional and the actual. Whether Mary, the character or Jacinta the actress, however, she is talking about the role she has created in a film that she has just made—a film called Life Classes!

Then Mary/Jacinta talks about parallels between her real life and her fictional role in the film. She even wonders what happened to her child.

We might wonder as well. Although Life Classes tells a story that moves in a linear fashion towards a narrative closure, a lot of emotional and psychological elements are left unresolved. Furthermore, this lack of resolution is arguably emphasized by two narrative moments that seem somewhat bracketed off from the dramatic momentum of the rest of the film. One might seem like an implausibility—a bracketing out, the other like a sentimentality—a bracketing in.

"My child is my mother returning. Her mother, my daughter the same..."

So sings the song, in both Gaelic and English, that runs throughout this film. And yet, in a film that so celebrates the concept of generational continuity, it must seem implausible that, when Mary returns to Cape Breton to visit her grandmother before she dies, she fails to bring her daughter with her. I can imagine practical reasons which may have dictated this decision (the child might not have been available), but psychologically, it seems oddly inconsistent nevertheless.

If, then, for whatever reasons, Marie is bracketed out from this sequence, so Mary's visit to the cottage after Nan's death feels bracketed in. Certainly, the scene is very moving as Mary roams around the cottage looking for traces of her mother's past, hearing ghostly sounds and echoes that create the sense of memory coming into consciousness; and yet, this scene exists slightly to one side of the active dramatic relationships at this moment in the film. Even Earl seems to feel this dramatic awkwardness. He decides to go outside, leaving Mary alone with the remnants of her past.

If, again arguably, these two narrative decisions might seem like errors of judgement, they are at the same time part of the fullness of the emotion of the film—part of the feeling of privacy about the story being told. Like the framing sequence, they suggest a charge of personal emotion somewhat in excess of the psychological implications of the story.

While the opening scenes of Life Classes involve problems of class and economics, the political implications of which are emphasized by the references to Africville, by the end of the film these problems are largely personal in their resolution. In this way, the ending of Life Classes is similar to the ending of Stations in which the social and the political elements are also collapsed into the personal.

In Life Classes, however, this collapse is more complicated. If the ending is affirmative on the level of character, on the level of politics, it is fragile and frightening. Consider once again the sequence that frames the film. Consider its implications not just for Mary/Jacinta but for MacGillivray as well.

As an independent filmmaker who wants to continue to work in the Maritimes, Bill MacGillivray recognizes that economic forces which are controlled by others will determine what he will be allowed to do within the world of film. In this way, if the final words of Life Classes allow Mary/Jacinta to wonder about the future of Mary, we might in turn wonder about the future of Bill MacGillivray. Is this another suggestion that, in such a marketing environment, in which banks never fail but shops often do, local government is not willing to put real cultural dollars into real cultural venues and events, then we can expect that that's where it's going to be. So the only way to fight that, is, I feel, with a kind of guerrilla tactic of working on your own and generating your own projects, your own ideas, not with a market in mind, but, always making sure that the film is marketable relative to the budget.

And that's what I've always done. I have always had trouble with institutionalized thought. I don't care if the perpetration of the thought or who originated the thought. I'm really angered by the whole notion that we have our culture dictated to us by an institutionalized thought process which is the government's view of what we should be thinking about ourselves. And whether it's the CBC or whether it's Telefilm or whether it's any of those other cultural agencies—yes, you know, they're all full of really nice people and God bless them—but nonetheless they are supporting the idea that there is an institutionalized thought that we should follow. Often more than not we are dealing with people in these cultural agencies who are probably thinking a little less than we are about these issues. When you run up against these people to get your work done, you realize that these are the people who control the way we think to a very large degree. And it's very subtle and it's very insidious and nobody is consciously sitting down and saying, "Today the Atlantic region will think this way." Nonetheless, through due process, as they execute their mandates as dictated by so and so and whoever, it all happens. I see it everyday that I work on my films and try to get them made and then try and get them out into the greater world.

NOTES
1. An earlier version of this article appeared in CinemaAction, No. 5 (May 1986).
2. This concern with the past, with in this case establishing continuity between an English speaking present and an effaced Armenian inheritance, is one of the central preoccupations of another young, distinguished Canadian filmmaker—Atom Egoyan. Especially in Family Viewing, every element in the film's design connotes this need for establishing relationships with the past. Even the boy's name, Van, can be read as a preposition of inheritance. [See Cinema Canada No. 1+5 (October 1987), pp.14-19.]
3. I happen to know that the film was not conceived in this way. Nevertheless, this device becomes part of the film's final structure.
4. This point was clarified for me by critic Geoff Perve.
5. I want to emphasize that this interpretation is completely the result of my own speculation. It is in no sense informed by anything that MacGillivray himself has said.

them. I mean it's not their fault, but because they are part of that Greater structure, they have so many pulls and tugs at them. They feel that they have to generate a certain amount of revenue from advertising. But advertisers feel that the only thing Canadians watch is American programming so they won't support Canadian. Thus the CBC is in the position of having to show a lot of American programs. It's problematic. If the government is not willing to put real cultural dollars into real cultural venues and events, then we can expect that that's where it's going to be. So the only way to fight that, is, I feel, with a kind of guerrilla tactic of working on your own and generating your own projects, your own ideas, not with a market in mind, but, always making sure that the film is marketable relative to the budget. And that's what I've always done. I have always had trouble with institutionalized thought. I don't care if the perpetration of the thought or who originated the thought. I'm really angered by the whole notion that we have our culture dictated to us by an institutionalized thought process which is the government's view of what we should be thinking about ourselves. And whether it's the CBC or whether it's Telefilm or whether it's any of those other cultural agencies—yes, you know, they're all full of really nice people and God bless them—but nonetheless they are supporting the idea that there is an institutionalized thought that we should follow. Often more than not we are dealing with people in these cultural agencies who are probably thinking a little less than we are about these issues. When you run up against these people to get your work done, you realize that these are the people who control the way we think to a very large degree. And it's very subtle and it's very insidious and nobody is consciously sitting down and saying, "Today the Atlantic region will think this way." Nonetheless, through due process, as they execute their mandates as dictated by so and so and whoever, it all happens. I see it everyday that I work on my films and try to get them made and then try and get them out into the greater world.

Cinema Canada: You seem to get a lot of your energy from swimming against the stream.

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah. If I have one romantic vision of myself I think that's it. I delight in the battles. I really enjoy the battles, they are the meat for me. You meet such incredibly... I think 'stupid' is the word I'd have to use... people in your struggles to get your work done, and they're very nosy, you can't get across somebody whether it's in private industry or a bureaucrat, who is excitable. Someone who's seen the possibilities and will say, 'This is fantastic, let's do it'... when you come across that person it's such a relief and such a joyous moment, that it's really worthwhile.