Grierson Documentary Seminar '85

Broadening Perspectives

by Cameron Bailey

"Grierson is brutal."

That pronouncement, from one drained participant midway through the week-long seminar, summed up the intensity that always seems to be generated every time film and video artists, critics and librarians gather together to rake through the latest crop of "documentaries". The participant I quote had attended before, and so knew, but by the end of the third day anyone could have said it. The 1987 Grierson Documentary Seminar came in the form of a week of hyper-stimulation - attacks, irritations, thrills, schmoozing, insults, retorts - all compounded by a debilitating lack of sleep.

Although the Seminar honours the late John Grierson, the screenings and discussions go beyond the style and tradition he established, the program folder announces blandly. The truth is, Grierson wouldn't recognize a lot of what went on during the week as any offspring of his. John Greyson's Moscow Doesn't Believe in Queers, or the Fernand Belanger/Dagmar Guissaz-Teufel collaboration, Passiflora (produced by Grierson's own National Film Board) took his dictum of 'helping Canadians to understand each other' to places it doesn't often go.

Organized by Nora Currie and programmed by Lisa Steele, Geoff Pevere and Thomas Waugh, this year's Seminar featured one of the most daring programs of films and videos ever to appear at Grierson. Apart from the usual social documentaries, known by the both positive and pejorative term, "media social work," there was a wide range of formal strategies, and a new concern with issues of sexuality and race. Coincident with the move from Niagara-on-the-Lake to Toronto, this was the year Grierson came out. There were public screenings for the first time. (Although poorly attended, the idea is one that should certainly continue.) And there was a new, broader perspective: the range of formal experimentation, the presence of gay and black artists in more than token numbers, the non-Canadian...
ARTIST ON FIRE:
THE ART OF JOYCE WIELAND

The intersection point where a maker of innovative, feminist documentaries and a feminist visionary artist meet. We hear voices, critical and personal. We swoon in a swirl of lurid images. Visual pleasures abound. Reviewed in Cinema Canada, No. 143.


BRIGHT EYES

One of the most intelligent works about AIDS yet to be made. Commissioned by Britain's Channel 4, this tape probes to the roots of AIDS hysteria, making the sorts of elegant connections (between conceptions of disease and criminality, or light and truth, for example) that have you realizing things that should have been obvious all along. But this is no mere clever graduate paper: Marshall is committed to both analyzing and changing the ways we represent gays and homosexuality. In the process he pulls out all the rhetorical stops, using historical reenactment, direct-address, rehearsed interviews, anything that will further the cause of something so simple as cogent thought.


Canadian Diamonds

Part tongue-in-cheek revisionist history, part filmic pastiche. Canadian Diamonds takes an ironic swipe at the way Canadian history is constructed — from within, and by our colonizers. Along the way we get some quick little in-jokes at the expense of everything from narrative theory to Peter C. Newman. Strangely, a rock video interrupts the tape.


L'AGOGNE TECHNOLIGIQUE

A textbook example of the failures of the roots of technology is committed to both no mere clever graduate paper enganging further the cause of something so simple of humourless didacticism the artists suffer from, but a critical intelligence rescues it. The real mistake was the choice of subject. Reviewed in Cinema Canada, No. 144.


EARNING SELF RESPECT:
WOMEN, WAR WORK
AND UNIONS IN B.C.

A work in progress, so one can do little more than describe what it looks like. Hamilton has interviewed several B.C. women who during World War II went to work in jobs traditionally held by men. Their pragmatism is starting: "I'd never seen a blueprint before, but of course I'd done a lot of sewing.” Interspersed with the interviews are some re-creations of agitprop labour theatre, and, of course, newsreel footage, hilarious now in its sexist bombast. Everything works but the agitprop, which, even if you know the style it's imitating, falls flat.


ENERGY AND HOW TO GET IT

Without falling into American stereotypes, let it be said that this was the most aggressively rigged film of the Seminar. Of course it's a myth. Of course the bold, careless American (male) with a life force bigger than all the rest is an ideological construction. But this film does take risks without doubting back to worry over them, something the Canadian works seemed reluctant to do. No neurotic intellectual staff of the intellectual at all, actually. The film, by the way, is about a prophet of fusion.


LIFE DANCES ON

The downside of the Frank mystique. Rambling, shambling, pointless footage of Frank's son, and a friend, and "a bum I got to know on the street." Some pretty blasted, romantic notions of the life well-lived are at the root of this, I suspect.


HAVE YOU EVER HAD A NUCLEAR NIGHTMARE?

A how-to-budget selection, contemplating images, women, protest, suffering, and nuclear destruction. Alternately hypno- tric and bracing. Burgess' use of a bilingual voice-over, despite the difficulties it may cause for the unilingual viewer, is admirable.


L'HOMME RENVERSE

A remarkably honest 70s film. Dion's latest L'Homme renverse tackles issues of masculinity head-on. The blurred lines between documented “reality” and scripted drama lend an interesting ambiguity. What? It was made in 1987. Oh.


A MOFFIE CALLED SIMON

An incredibly prolific John Greyson addresses apartheid through the figure of Simon Nikoli, a gay political prisoner. This was another of the works at this year's Grierson smart enough not to be single-issue documentaries.


THE AIDS EPIDEMIC

A rock video about AIDS hysteria, filtered through Death in Venice. It all makes perfect sense. What's more, it's funny.


MOSCOW DOES NOT BELIEVE IN QUEERS

A case of diminishing rewards: Brilliant use of gay porn and consumer objects. Clever handling of the accent problem (and the lack of Moscow footage.) An interesting appropriation of stock footage (Rock Hudson films, Reds, Eisenstein) to new, previously submerged readings. Less than successful connections made between the issues raised. Very bad acting. But a great title.


THE FIGHT AGAINST INTELLIGENT TERRORISM

The discourses around film theory, when articulated not from the subject's desire for identification with other subjects, but from a conflicting desire to speak with the Father's tongue, to adopt the parole of dominant "schools" of thought, overdetermines the discussion, necessarily moves it into the realm of obfuscation, plunges it into the inevitability of mise-en-abyme. Read: trade jargon can be confusing.

This year, as in other years, the academics and theorists went up against the "practical" film and video makers. The issue, really, is the level of discussion. Is Grierson to be a forum only for (especially British) work present, all took the documentary film out of the ghetto where it tends to reside as Canada's most-respected, forgiven genre. The hottest issues that year had to do with marginality and with the structure of the seminar itself. There were sometimes veiled suggestions that not everyone there "belonged" there, that perhaps some participants were abusing their "privilege." Feminist debates were unusually subdued this year, and, as usual, all of the best discussions took place away from the Royal Ontario Museum theatre, at dinner or over drinks. What follows is a sketching of some of the significant issues at this year's Grierson; I've devoted more attention to the films and tapes.

COVETING MARGINALITY

This year, the position of "other" was up for grabs. Documentary film and video made in Canada, and perhaps generally, tend to be a pretty liberal bunch. You might even call most of them "left." And so a sort of comfortable complacency tends to develop. "We're all for women, we're aware, committed cultural producers doing what we can. We know all about power relationships; we know all the ideologies of various images. This year, the films and tapes that addressed gay issues were probably the most interesting works there. John Greyson's work, even when it's not always provocative, Stuart Marshall's Bright Eyes showed that theoretical rigour and accessibility are perfectly compatible. (Marshall proved to be one of the most thoughtful voices during the discussions.) The Passion of Remembrance's insistence, Passiflora's energetic anarchy, all threw the whole question of marginality up in the air. No longer could we make any assumptions, as straights, or gays, or anglophones or francophones or blacks or whites or men or women to whom is oppressed and who is oppressing. What was significant about the "gay" films and tapes is that they were not just "gay" works: they all showed the complexities of power relationships within and between different groups. No more simplistic "us" and "them."
Discussing funding and distribution and "how did you get your subject to open up on camera like that?" or can it sup-
port more complex discussions? And are more complex discussions possible without throwing in the word "decon-
struction"? The friction between the theorists and the non-theorists erupted this year in charges of "intellectual ter-
rorism"; it was felt that the discussions were being conducted among a coterie, making those who wanted to ask "sim-
ple", not overly baroque questions too heightened to speak. Students and libra-
rians were encouraged by the mod-
erators (Varda Burstin and Magnus Isacsson) and other participants to have
the courage to "speak up." Eventually
student Alex MacKenzie stood up and
told us that he was entirely capable of
speaking without our prompting. It's
probably an issue that will recur each 
year, because the critics and theorists insist that their comments are not con-
fusing, that it is in fact terrorism to limit the
discussion to the banal. And those
who aren't theorists will rightly refuse
to attend a Grierison seminar that comes 
with a reading list.

Grierison, of course, is an artificial
community. For one week, people who
would otherwise have very little contact bring their various forms of expertise to bear upon the state of the documentary in Canada. That they sometimes don't understand each other (or worse, don't
care to) shouldn't have to result in the sort of stilted, polite discussions we en-
dured towards the end of the week. Perhaps if the seminar were set up dif-
frently, with discussion groups on specif-
ic issues that participants could choose among, there might be less intellectual
chafing.

The programming at the 1987 Grier-
ison Seminar was bold, to say the least. There was a single film or tape that
was universally liked, which attested either to the wonderful rabid intensity with
which the participants guarded their positions, or to the equally wonderful
clecticism that they brought to the Seminar.

The organization, on the other hand,
lacked. With over 70 participants, Burstin and Isacsson were forced to adhere to speakers' lists and time limits that made discussion pretty frustrating. And with discussions focused around the works rather than around more gen-
eral issues of documentary practice, a framework for debate was never estab-
lished, where we could at least agree on
what the issues were. The lack of simul-
taneous translation during the debates was supposed to even out this.

Discussing how translation was
wielded. Francophones had to request it before impromptu translation was pro-
vided.

But this was Grierison's first time in
the big city, and it may have been a little
bewildered. Wait till next year.

**PAINTING LANDSCAPES OF THE TIMES:
THE ART OF SUE COE**

What do you do with acid-etched politi-
cal art, rare enough in the hyper-
trophied New York art scene? Get the
artist to explain it. Sue Coe does a good
job in Kladowsky's film, telling us
(through the device of a primary school
art class) exactly what her paintings
mean. And Painting Landscapes lets
her get away with it: we scratch the
surface and get more surface. (Reviewed in Cinematographe 144.)

**PASSIFLORA**

One of the few films this year where you
could feel no qualms about letting the
superlatives fly. Passiflora has energy,
wit, daring and a brilliant premise: what
happens on the day that Michael Jackson
and Pope John Paul II both visit Mon-
real. And this from the NFB! The film's
sense of counter-spectacle (in the face
of the spectacles presented by Jackson
and the Pope) is celebratory: a full-drag
'anti-parade' makes its way down a
major street in opposition to the Pope's
motorcade. Offhanded narratives are in-
serted into the documentary recording of
the pope's progress. gays, the work-
ning class, women, all go about their vag-
uely overwrought lives, seeming com-
mon in comparison with the spectacle
of Jackson tour publicity weasels and
J2P2 baseball hats. As a none-too-surprising footnote: this film has been
underpromoted (!?) by the NFB since
its completion; it has yet to be seen wanted
by the NFB, who has scheduled its screening in Canada. This year's
seminar concluded with a motion to push for ver-
sioning of the film. Perhaps this is the curse of
BBS funding.

**POINT OF ORDER**

I suppose the justification for including
an American anti-McCarthy film from
1964 in this year's seminar is the paral-
els one can draw with the recent Iran-
Contra hearings. It's a pretty slight jus-
tification, but it seems to be the only one
conceivable.

**THE PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE**

A feminist, gay-positive, black-powered film? Must be a first.
Not a documentary in any conven-
tional sense of the term, Passion com-
bines a narrative of inter-generational
conflict in a black British family, with
dialogue on gendered politics con-
ducted in a "psychic space", with
treated images of anti-government de-
monstrations by resistance groups
blacks, gays, labour -- the triple threats
to Thatcher's rule. Made by the Sankofs collective in
London (and exhibiting both the strengths and weaknesses of collective filmmaking), Passion is one of the best
examples of the sophistication of British
cinematic work; it has moved past sim-
ple Tory-bashing, past simple black-
power statements, to an examination of the pluralities within a community. But
this is no humdrum matter: perhaps one of the film's strongest mes-
sages is that you can be politicized and
still dress up and go out dancing.

U.K., 1986. d. Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Ju-
len. format 16mm. dist. Sankofs Film and Video
Collective. running time 85 min.

**STORME: THE LADY OF THE JEWEL BOX**

A warm, nostalgic portrait film that si-
dles up to its subject: a black lesbian
male impersonator who worked the
legendary Jewel Box Revue during the
50s and 60s -- carelessly and affection-
ately. Full of wonderful archival photo-
graphs and recordings, Storme is too
short by half, and respectable to the point
of being blank. Perhaps this is the curse of
BBS funding.

**TO HURT AND TO HEAL**

A very honest, very earnest, committed
documentary about babies born with
birth defects and the medical technolo-
y used to keep them alive. So why
don't I like it? Perhaps it's too comfort-
ing for my taste. Perhaps it's the smell of
white middle-class concerns that leaves
me cold. Perhaps it's the position of
privilege given to the doctors (their tes-
timony ends the film). Perhaps I am not
its audience.

**THE ZOO**

We travel to the Bristol Zoo to discover that the real animals prow the front of
ice. Nothing we didn't know already, but enjoyable enough to watch.

**TRAVEL**

dist. V Tape, Toronto. running time 51 min.

**THE WESTERN PRESS: ARCHIVE ALGERIA 1954-1962**

Effectively the twin strategies of
armchair interviews and treated file
footage, Red Star ranges wild-eyed over
the political terrain of the West and the
East and the North and the South and the
media and Third World Revolution and
any area it happens across. You can it
call produced of an exciting,
commodity pluralism. Or you can
call it lazy and undisciplined. Whatever
it is, its examination of media bias too
often flies off on barely relevant tang-
ents.

A ruthless editor (the tape is too long
by half) and a more carefully thought-
out approach might have made some-
thing of this. Maybe.

Reviewed in Cinematographe, No. 145.

video. dist. J Samuel, Montreal. running time 86 min.