

atrocities. An informal story-book-style narrative is formed through Carmen's experiences and memories as relived through her photo album. The interlocking of these visual elements with Hugh Marsh's evocative ethnic rhythms and sounds of El Salvador form their own distinct set of emotional dynamics.

In her directorial debut, Camelia Frieberg has demonstrated the restraint of a mature filmmaker by focusing on one individual's personal truth set against a vast subject matter. Do not expect the slapstick and glitz of Oliver Stone's *El Salvador*. Though low-tech in execution, the strength of the film lies in the universal truth of an individual's struggle to overcome tyranny and oppression. The film presents itself as an intimate collaboration between filmmaker and subject, where sincerity and empathy are essential ingredients in the film. At times this honesty is almost too earnest, even for a documentary.

Crossing the River serves as an important historical document for both El Salvador and Canada. The world is backlogged with so many stories like Carmen's, that need to be told. In a world where individual rights are rapidly shrinking, personal documents relating dislocation by larger historical circumstances are of vital importance. These insights affect Canada's cultural identity as well as how we view ourselves as a nation, they provide the world with a contrasting picture to the historical propaganda as perpetuated by regimes as in El Salvador.

Some viewers who have seen the central interview with Carmen (which requires a lot of concentration due to her accent and might benefit by the addition of subtitles) comment that they feel disconcerted by Carmen's composure, she does not display the anger which one might expect from someone who has undergone the kind of life-crushing blows she has. With the exception of some minor facial twitches, the close-up reveals a remarkably soft and compassionate face. People like Carmen, who have been so profoundly affected by horrendous exposures have been known to keep it to themselves. It is as if they want to save humanity from the fear and embarrassment of something so unthinkable possibly happening again.

Some of Carmen's stories, however, do give insight into her struggle to readjust after her trauma. Carmen talks about how difficult it was to learn English at school in Toronto because, although her body was at school, her mind was back in El Salvador. She said she would easily fall asleep in the day but that at night she could not sleep. Carmen said she dreamt of being with her family, her brother and husband but when she woke up, she was sad because it was only a dream. *Crossing the River* shows that Carmen will always have to live with the reality of her painful memories yet her commitment and conviction for her people is not a story only of



Carmen A. tries to bury her horrors

suffering but of renewal.

The issues Carmen faces and the challenges in the film present us with a powerful message. One image that comes to mind is that of a National Guard policeman. Carmen tells of her empathy for him. She says she knows the truth of how his wife and children feel. Carmen, like the wisdom of the solidarity of the Committee of Mothers and Families, embraces the enemy who are instruments of her people's destiny. Frieberg says that "*Crossing the River* is finally an optimistic film. It is fueled by the courage and strength of a woman who has suffered immensely and yet refuses to resign herself to despair, choosing instead to break the silence that terror breeds."

Crossing the River will be premiered at this year's Festival of Festivals in Toronto.

Peter Lynch •

CROSSING THE RIVER p./d./sc. Camelia Frieberg d.o.p. Adrienne Mitchell ed. Maureen Judge sd. ed. Peter Vinet mus. comp. Hugh Marsh mus. perf. Bruce Cockburn, John Goldsmith still photo Daniel Gautreau research coord. Ruth Mandel post. prod. asst. Naomi Boxer asst. ed. Alexandra Gill, Judy Cade l.p. Carmen A. Colour, 16mm, 28 min.

Richard Kerr's Last Days of Contrition

In these days when Meech Lake, nuclear submarines and free-trade form so much of our national debate, a film dealing with the current political environment in the United States is particularly appropriate. Richard Kerr's latest film is not a typical documentary; in fact, it is, structurally, an avant-garde work. Yet its great success lies in

the coherence that is achieved between the film's structural concerns and its strict basis in realistically derived footage. Kerr has taken particularly revealing moments from a trip that he shot while down in the States and crafted a work that deals with the awe and terror that he felt during that sojourn.

The sights and signs that one sees and hears in this film have been distilled by Kerr to represent those exact elements that form a portrait of the contemporary U.S.A. The film is bisected and book-ended by a brilliant 360-degree pan shot of the Badlands of the Dakotas. One sees the bleak vistas, the black hills and its cacti, while on the sound track a repetitive voice speaks through a megaphone about the burying of the dead after the "Next War." This fear of War, of the Bomb, permeates the film, giving it urgency and drama.

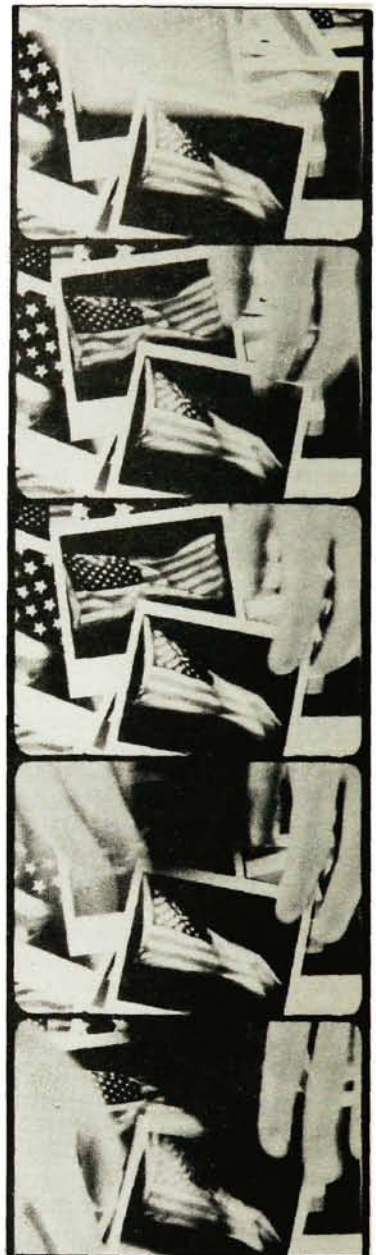
As a title, "Last Days of Contrition" refers both to the final Passion of Christ and to the specific meaning of the word "contrition," which is to be "completely penitent; crushed in spirit by a sense of sin." Here the sin can be read to be the militarization that has supplanted the democratic spirit in much of the United States.

The automobile trip that constitutes the narrative element of *Contrition* stops for specific views of the United States. On the whole, the viewer is presented with a rather forbiddingly postmodern landscape constituting a black version of *On the Road*. Like Kerouac, Kerr has the clear insights that an outsider (a Canadian!) can bring to a land that he loves, but which is not truly his.

So what do we get to see on our sad trip through the vistas of Reagan-dominated America? A touring bus with its insides eaten out by rust, resembling an Apocalyptic vehicle; a sign on farm land that reads: The Land of Opportunity? STARVED. ON MY OWN LAND BY MY OWN GOVERNMENT; the Santa Fe Train with hobos riding on top of a car; an exposed grotto with the Virgin Mary holding the Infant Jesus beneath a Cross; an abandoned Drive-in Movie. In contrast to this imagery, there is a wonderful sequence shot in Buffalo's old War Memorial Stadium—the scene of Robert Redford's *The Natural*—with the Buffalo Bisons, a minor league baseball team, posing for a group shot.

This visual design of America is also contrasted by a series of voices that express great concern for the state of America in the 1980s. One voice argues that the U.S. is in trouble if "We'd rather wave the Flag than the Constitution." Another (Lenny Bruce?) compares the military to sociopaths. Another voice warns, "If the dream of democracy cannot survive in America, it cannot survive the 20th century." Still another states, "We do not need troops to say that we have lost our vision."

Richard Kerr has created a film of tremendous care and integrity. Throughout, we hear the anxious sounds of electronic printers pouring out paper interspersed with the drone of fighter



Last Days of Contrition

planes and the sharp shrieking call of buzzards. Photos of Jackie Robinson and the U.S. flag are presented with the same clarity and purpose as are shots of gnarled cacti and tanks being transported on trains.

Last Days of Contrition is a cry from the heart from a Canadian who loves what American democracy and popular culture have stood for in the past. Richard Kerr has made a film that poses the question: can the U.S.A. abandon its principles and renounce democracy? If so, can the world survive?

Marc Glassman •

LAST DAYS OF CONTRITION p./d./sc./ed./d.o.p. Richard Kerr sd. Patrick Butler l.p. Kim Nedoborski, Dick Gregory Funding Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, Saskatchewan Film Pool, NFB. University of Regina. B&W, 16mm, 35min dist. CFMDC.