

## Notes on an open wound

by Lois Siegel

In the light of the demise of documentary in Canada - cf. Applebert's intention to kill The National Film Board of Canada as we know it today - it was rather strange to be attending the recent Grierson Film Seminar on Nov. 7-12, 1982.

Programmed by Seth Feldman, it provided one of the best varieties of form in film I have seen at Grierson seminars. It was also a good eye-opener as to how narrow-minded some filmmakers have become, as it seems to me that the limitations of documentary form have greatly broadened in the last 10 years.

In the purest sense, as voiced by Klaus Wildenhahn from Germany, documentary films should not be tampered with. The sound should be *cinéma vérité*, and no effects or inauthentic ambient tracks should be added. The picture should not be enhanced or altered by the use of lights: light should be natural. Black and white film stock is preferred because color is too complex, but if color is used it should be approached like black and white film and shot in a monotone fashion. And in the pure sense of documentary, he is absolutely right.

But, at Grierson we were barraged with a vast array of styles, forms, and aberrations. Some filmmakers manipulate fact and fiction every chance they get, and let the buyer beware: the audience (largely filmmakers) didn't always detect this meddling. When they

did, they were furious.

Is meddling always a punishable crime, one asks?

*Ted Baryluk's Grocery* by John Paskevich and Mike Mirus included a document of photos about the life of a grocery store and the man who ran it. The voice-over narration was created from notes made during discussions with the grocer. Filmmaker Paskevich spoke the text because the grocer died before the film was completed. The viewer does not really suffer from this substitution. Here a choice was made by the filmmaker and under such circumstances choices have to be made.

Barry Greenwald was accused of re-creating scenes in *Taxi* which he himself had experienced as a taxi driver. He used voice-over to amplify these scenes. Should his knowledge of this mysterious world have been suppressed when he made the film? Should the filmmaker remain quiet when shooting an "objective" film? I don't think a filmmaker can always be that objective. His mere presence in a situation is an alteration factor, though someone like Wildenhahn tries to limit his intrusion by sitting down with the camera in a corner, watching; being very quiet and working slowly.

Anne Wheeler's *A War Story* caused less contention, even though it too re-created scenes from reality, in this case a P.O.W. camp where her father was imprisoned during World War Two. But it seemed that the subject matter was so emotionally powerful it was enough to pacify even the most ardent audiences.

*The Art of Wordly Wisdom* outraged the audience in another way. The film, an autobiographical work by Bruce

Elder, seemed to turn off traditional documentarists because of its experimental nature. Elder's film included one masturbation scene in living close up, which attracted all the attention. Why do personal images disturb us so when projected at 24 f.p.s.? Are we that uncomfortable with someone choosing to show his bodily parts and intimate actions? Where does the objective mind separate from self-reflection? From Elder's film and his collage use of photographs and Super 8 film clips we learn that memory is most probably not a chronological animal. Also, Elder's film was made during a period of sickness: "Without sickness we do not know that we exist," he says. "A footprint on the stone becomes the stone itself."

*D.P.* by Peter Dudar was also experimental in nature, but the filmmaker was greeted with less animosity than Elder. Perhaps that was because Elder had already had a few verbal battles with other participants during previous discussion sessions, and he had obviously set himself up for attack.

To paint an impressionistic panorama of the atmosphere of the seminar, one might cite the following play-by-play: Jacques Godbout states that often the "experimental" definition occurs after the work has been created. Elder heatedly counters with: "Sir, do you think that James Joyce didn't know what he was doing?" Elder is later labeled "the James Joyce of Filmmaking." Such is life.

Another aspect of confrontation was that of the aggressive female filmmaker, in the form of Martha Rosler (USA).

Rosler was the perfect example of a filmmaker more interesting than her films. She set herself up with her opening statement, "I am an artist." The fuel was thus fed to the fire, and the antagonists jumped in. During the question/answer period following her screening, a brilliant performance took place as she strode back and forth, inches from her attackers like a panther in heat. This seemed to be manipulation beyond the screen and into the real world or has crudeness become fashionable?

The only example of overt engineering was that of Cuban filmmaker Santiago Alvarez. An excellent lesson in propaganda, Alvarez's films heed Grierson's recognition that "the newsreel is (indeed) one of the most powerful and important means by which a country makes itself known across borders" (letter to W.D. Euler, Minister of Trade and Commerce).

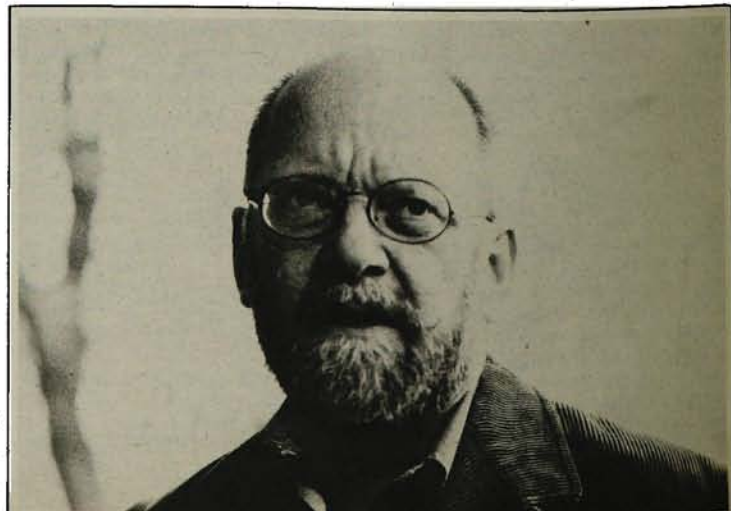
Alvarez used every convincing method possible: popular music, quick-flashing images, soft focus, gentle voices, shocking imagery, juxtaposition of pictures to promote a desired idea and a written text inserted periodically to reinforce this idea. With the sensuality of a "bathroom tissue" commercial and the aggression of a pointed gun, Alvarez brought his message home.

The idea of propaganda was introduced on the first night of the seminar when we watched Dziga Vertov's first sound film *Enthusiasm*. Frequent low-angle shots lent a sense of dynamism and power to the images of people at work. Silhouettes, clouds and steam permeated the screen. The behavior of almost all the individuals filmed was mechanical, except for a few less obedient moments framing men

Documentarist Lois Siegel is doing post-production on her first feature film, *A 20th Century Chocolate Cake*.



● Bruce Elder, the James Joyce of film



● Klaus Wildenhahn: for purity in the documentary

Photos: Lois Siegel

# DOCUMENTARIES

drinking vodka on the street.

It became evident that despite a director's desire, for instance, to print an honest picture of China, the task is most difficult to do. In George Dufaux's *On the Way* and in Ted Remerowski's *The Iron Rice Bowl*, the people still come out looking like mechanical dolls. The rather stiff responses by the Chinese force the viewer to be conscious of the camera, and so we know that there must be a group of Chinese there telling the film crew what they can and cannot do. The films work as teasers though, and we anxiously wait for those in-between moments which might tell us more about the Chinese who define unemployment in Remerowski's film as waiting for work, and eyestrain exercises are interpreted by a narrator as designed to relieve the strain of learning one of the world's most difficult languages.

Besides Elder's autobiographical film, other filmmakers introduced themselves on the screen. Michel Moreau's *Les traces d'un homme* included a sequence where Moreau appears seated in a studio setting, relating his own feelings about his father's death. The film opens with images of children, lending a sense of fragility. Moreau reinforces this sensuality by relating his own memories of his father and experience of his death. The final section of the film presents another old man who knows he is soon to die. We see this man combing his few remaining strands of hair in a mirror. The human being never loses a sense of the self.

In Moreau's film the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (the indifference of the victim to his own torture) and scenes of graveyards add a cold feeling to our experience. Graveyards, like the old man's discussion with the funeral house representative about the procedures of his own demise, objectify the world.

Larry Kurnarsky is another filmmaker who appears in his film *The Boy Who Turned Off*. But unlike the manipulative intrusion of the filmmaker in *Best Boy*, Kurnarsky seems sensitive to the feelings of his mother as, at one point, he closes a door, shutting out the camera, to allow her the privacy of her world.

In Jacques Godbout's *Two Episodes From the Life of Hubert Aquin*, fact becomes fiction and fiction becomes fact. Hubert Aquin's life was so bizarre that some of the filmmakers present thought that the entire film was a figment of the imagination. And, indeed, Godbout's film is shot like a mystery film. Aquin, a Quebec writer who committed suicide, had written a spy flick and was one of its principal actors. Godbout intercuts stock footage from this thriller film with straight-forward documentary material. At times the two mesh, as one supposes they did in Aquin's mind.

Allan King's *Skid Row* (1956) provided a look into the history of Canadian documentary. The filmmaker as voyeur gave a realistic picture of what Martha Rosler labeled society's view of "trash" - those without money or power. If filmmaking can be considered the desire to distance or exoticise, we are all voyeurs, and film allows us to enter worlds we would never see under ordinary circumstances.

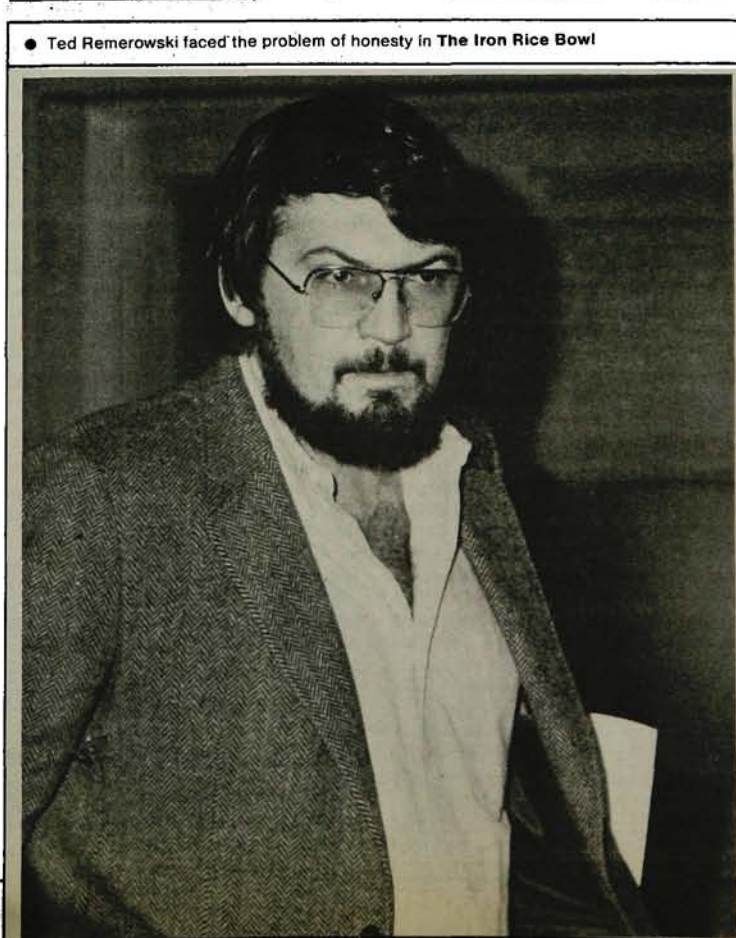
The Grierson Seminar posed many questions. The answers it gave were not clear cut, but it became evident after one week of watching films and arguing about the filmmakers' intentions that the director himself seemed to be intruding on the scene much more fre-



● Robert Gray waits as Michel Moreau defends a personal point of view



● Nettie Wild and Cuba's Santiago Alvarez at the Grierson seminar: masterly propaganda



● Ted Remerowski faced the problem of honesty in *The Iron Rice Bowl*

quently. The filmmaker indicated a strong need to be present - either by the way he manipulated a scene or blatantly trespassed onto the screen himself. Without shame or self-consciousness, the filmmaker was there, often telling the story of a personal experience with himself or a mother or father or brother...

One film not shown at Grierson but soon to be released by the NFB is *The Way It Is* by Beverly Shaffer, about divorce. The film is presented like a documentary: the camera crew is seen setting up, the director is seen asking a little girl to take her place in front of the camera, silence is called for, shooting begins. The girl relates an emotional recollection of her parents' divorce. We see fights she has with her mother, tearful misunderstandings she has with her estranged father. The film is presented entirely as a documentary, and the viewer fully believes this until he sees the end credits listing characters and actors. Everyone in the cast is an actor. Is this not the goal of good drama, to fully engage the audience in believing what it is seeing is totally real? The lines between fiction and fact have become very thin.

"Consider the use of tragedy as beneficial over shallow optimism," Wildenhahn explains. "We should construct tragedies. The artist confronts a situation in order to bring certain things out."

One disturbing factor about the Grierson Seminar was that there was not much talk about Applebert, a report that will seriously affect all filmmakers as well as viewers.

I would think especially that "documentary" filmmakers would have shown a stronger social consciousness, in informing themselves about political decisions affecting the film "industry." Ten-15 minutes were spent during the last formal discussion period of the Seminar in consideration of the matter, and even so, very few filmmakers became involved in the argument as to whether the study was valid.

The Applebert report emphasizes mass entertainment and competition in the North American market. But broadcast TV has become a disaster. No one really knows what reaches the masses - except huge numbers. The Ford Foundation in the U.S., for example, sponsored a program called *Omnibus*, aired at network prime time: 7 p.m. Ten to 12 million people saw it; this was insufficient because other networks had 20 million viewers. This is a "sick statistic."

U.S. cable has the same problem and so it is dominated by porn and sports. Video cassettes could be the answer, but in Europe been taken over by pirates. As a film reaches a theatre, a truck pulls up to the back-door and Reel I is handed out, then Reel 2 and 3: same as the record industry.

Video disc could be promising. People can see what they want, when they want, at a reasonable cost - like books - but the disc is not used for that. Instead it's used for advertising the Sears Roebuck catalogue.

As documentary filmmaker Richard Leacock recently said at a film workshop in Montreal, "It's not easy to make documentaries in the United States. We don't have a National Film Board. You probably won't have one for long either."

In Canada the filmmaker still has a choice as to the style and approach of his film, for a while.

And the documentary isn't dead. Little minds might wish it so, but indications from the front reveal that it is not.