



*"The Clinton Special"*

# Grierson Seminar

## Creative Interpretations of Reality

"When two businessmen get together, they talk about art," so the old saying goes; "And when two artists get together they talk about money." Up to now, most gatherings of filmmakers in Canada, both official and unofficial, have been painfully concerned with where the next crust of Kodacolor is going to come from. The first Grierson Seminar sponsored by the Ontario Film Association was exceptional in that it brought together both filmmakers and film users in a non-commercial way and allowed both groups to question, not only how documentary films are made in Canada, but almost more importantly, how they are being used. How important is technique and craftsmanship? Does *Challenge for Change* really change anything; or political documentaries, or television? This talk, and an enormous quantity of translucent sprocketed stuff, filled up a gruelling three days and nights in normally peaceful Geneva Park north of Toronto earlier this month. The only generalization that can come out of this orgy of viewing and self-criticism, is that Grierson's 35 year old war baby, the documentary, is still alive, well and kicking, in the cultural heartland of Canada.

For one thing, the range of filmmakers present was astonishing and sometimes a bit hard to take. Everyone from old timers like Basil Wright who were producing

films when the very word documentary was being invented, through television luminaries, to the shakiest and most headache-producing of independents. The affair was moderated by Allan King, not exactly a stranger to the field himself. One of the more remarkable films to come out of the many presented was one called *Clinton Special* made by a young writer, Michael Ondaatje in conjunction with the Theatre Passe Muraille Company. The film tells the story of a city theatre company which moved to the country for a summer to research and eventually present publicly a series of sketches, pantomimes and musical numbers based on the life and times of the people they experienced around them. They talked to their neighbours, worked in their barns and on their fields, snooped into their photo albums, listened to their stories and then assimilated what they saw and heard down to the last twang to be distilled and re-presented as theatre, "The Farm Show" in the old auction barn. "Why should they watch kings and queens prancing around on the stage," says the director of the theatre company, "why not present them with the comedy, tragedy and drama of their everyday lives?" The result was not only great theatre, ("The only standin' ovation I done ever seen in the auction barn," remarks an oldtimer wryly) but also great cinema, a cinema that weaves quietly and smoothly in and out of the lives of the people, the countryside and the experience of the actors. And for the Brechtian, "levels of reality" freaks, an added bonus in which you witness theatre forming itself out of the clay of experience. When *The Farm Show* appeared on CBC television many people found it puzzling and out of context. It was particularly irksome to learn that CBC had turned down Ondaatje's film before destroying the experience with their own canned version of the play.

Another movie which struck many at the Grierson Conference as exceptional was made as a cooperative effort by Ross Redfern, Rick Ashley and Emil Kolompar over a period of several years. Called *Bleeker Street*, the film shows a group of tenants' losing battle against a consortium of Toronto real estate developers. Like many independent films shown at the conference this film was made by a group of persons driven to produce a film on an issue that was affecting them personally. These films offered a freshness and rawness of experience frequently missing from the smoothly sanded factory products. Even the National Film Board presented its slightly unshaven face with some pretty shaggy *Challenge for Change* video films and Mike Rubbo's strange personal soul searching in foreign lands. (*Waiting for Fidel*.)

The only aspect of contemporary Canadian documentary not represented at this conference was, strangely enough, one which is seen by most Canadians – television documentary. Beryl Fox and Doug Leiterman brought a seven year old film, *One More River* about racism in the American south, and it served as a poignant reminder of what television documentary could be at its probing best. Clearly what Canadian television is *not* today and this is all the more maddening when filmmaker after filmmaker at this conference described their treatment in the hands of those Toronto bureaucrats who decide what you are and are not going to see. Even the National Film Board has difficulty squeezing any of its well greased product through the tube. If this conference showed anything, it demonstrated that there is a lot of powerful, dramatic and meaningful filmmaking going on in this country that is being kept from the Canadian public by station managers not prepared to take risks.

I was a student of John Grierson when he taught at McGill several years ago and I asked him what he thought about television. He told me that he and other members of the documentary movement looked forward to the

coming of television as a most ideal way of getting documentary to the public. Furthermore, "because of the very nature of television, and its necessary and direct contact with actuality, we always regarded television as the child of documentary." He then shook his head sadly and added, "What a pity our child has turned out to be a mongoloid idiot."

—Ronald Blumer

### The Grierson Seminar

Bringing together a number of film makers and a critical audience to look at documentary films for dialogue and discussion was bound to create some interesting exchanges. And they were interesting. The framework was provided by the excellent moderation of Allan King, who remained unruffled, objective and perceptive throughout; and the regimentation, not welcome but necessary, was provided by the Ontario Film Association's Wayne Cunningham. Both of these gentlemen performed their tasks exceptionally well, and credit for the success of the seminar should go for a large part to their efforts.

The film makers provided the catalytic agents for the exchanges, a wide variety of documentary films, that were alternately well received, applauded, shot down, provocative, bland, stimulating, boring and exciting. Which was which, in most cases, is a matter of opinion. The audience reactions were mostly surprising: one film would provoke a great deal of discussion, while another would pass on in silence. The reactions had little to do with the type or style of film. Some got things moving and some didn't. The most popular films (I had an applause meter hidden in my back pocket) were Mike Rubbo's *Waiting for Fidel* and Clay Borris's *One Hand Clapping*. Rubbo's film had interesting characters (including Joey Smallwood) Cuban and Canadian politics, and an undercurrent of humour and insightfulness that held it all together. *One Hand Clapping* is a film with a rare intimacy, it is about a deaf mute girl (Clay's sister) and her family. Both films created a mood of shared enjoyment in the audience.

The National Film Board screened a wide variety of films. In addition to *Waiting for Fidel* there was *Still A Woman* (a film on breast cancer) made by Dina Lieberman, a challenge for change film on the *New Alchemists*, Robin Spry's *Action*, Sandy Wilson's *He's Not The Walking Kind*, and the documentary film on Grierson, *Grierson*. The board films illustrated the scope and range of documentary films produced by the N.F.B. and all of them were well received. The only film to provoke an almost total negative reaction was Judy Steed's *Hearts in Harmony*, but the type of discussion that followed was what formed the substance of the seminar. Film makers need interaction and questioning, to consider the implications of their work. If the seminar had any problem it was bringing up questions and leaving them hanging there, when one had the feeling of wanting to go into an issue in more depth.

It might be a good idea for the next seminar to present the questions raised in this one. This would establish a focus for the seminar and establish some continuity from year to year. The participants in the seminar could write to the ONTARIO FILM ASSOCIATION and give their views. However, for the first time around the event was a worthwhile provocative experience. Film makers were given the opportunity to evaluate and assess their films in terms of the audience, the audience had the opportunity to explore and question film makers about their films. And all of us benefitted from the articulateness and perceptiveness of Basil Wright, Roger Blais, and Patrick Watson. The sponsors of the seminar deserve our thanks for their perseverance in making it happen.

— Peter Bryant