

# The 1985 Grierson Seminar



• 11th Grierson esprit de corps



photos: Lois Siegel

• Quebec and Ontario students who received scholarships to attend this year's Grierson; front, l. to r.: Andrew Mech, Wendy Hallam (Sheridan); Tracey Kennedy (York); Anna Firs (Confederation); Donna Cappuccitti (Wilfrid Laurier); Giovanni Sampogna (Ryerson); back: Bill Beattie (OCA); Michael Zryd (U. of T.); Robert Skene (Confederation); Tony Ruffolo (Sheridan); Patricia Kearns (Concordia); Lillemor Bianchi (Ryerson); and Michael Sloboda (U. Windsor)

## Remembering Old What's His Name

Most 10 years had passed since I had last taken a week off from academia to attend the Grierson Documentary Seminar. At its second in that very cold April of 1976 shores of Lake Couchiching, the was still staggering under the of its Griersonian heritage. The had been in his grave for only four several films about or by Grierson were programmed; two of the hoary henchmen from the Wright and Paul Rotha, were the seminar leaders; and a

Vaugh teaches film studies at a University in Montreal.

number of Grierson's eager young students from McGill - Gary Evans, Susan Schouten, and Ron Blumer - still basking in his aura, were keeping his spirit alive.

Since then the seminar has evolved into one of the central institutions of Canadian cinema, with an influence far outstripping its modest proportions. It has become the set-piece of our national artform, the documentary, an artform that is still renewing itself, despite years of Genies and Elders and Ottawa commissars and the CBC, at the moral and cultural heart of Canadian film. This renewal has become all the more important since the unpublicized demise last year of Peterborough's Canadian Images Festival - yet another vital Canadian cultural institution down the tubes.

1985 was a good year for the Grierson, and significantly the programme was put together by Sue Ditta, erstwhile presiding genius of the late Canadian Images. The clearest evidence she offered of the renewal of Canadian documentary during the '80s was the strong presence of video work, which this year added up to over a third of the titles programmed. The transfusion of the documentary vision into the video medium, on-the-go since the NFB's experimental community video programme in the late '60s, has now come of age in a full range of works of incontrovertible confidence and maturity.

At one end of the scale, there are the small-scale document-style (as opposed to documentary) projects that video has been handling perfectly for years. Take, for example, *Still Sane*, a low-

budget tape by Vancouver's Brenda Ingratta and Lidia Patriasz that started out as a document of ceramic works inspired by the testimony of a woman who underwent three years of institutionalization and shock - and drug-therapy because of her lesbianism, and survived to tell the tale; the tape went on to acquire its own autonomy as a hybrid, first-person artwork whose emotional impact on seminar participants was unrivalled. *Our Two Cents Worth*, a rough first work by the new Halifax women's collective, "Wave," had the same punch, but delivered with twinkling down-east understatement.

At the opposite end of the scale is the encyclopedic *Struggle For Choice*, a work-in-progress by Nancy Nicol, of which we were only able to glimpse two hours. The finished tape



Christian Bruyère



Magnus Isaacson



Nicole Giguère

• Donald Fowler of the Ontario censor board, as neither seen, heard nor spoken to by Michael Zyrd, John Greyson and Tom Waugh



chronicle of the abortionist pro-choice movement in Canada since its birth in the late '60s and a regional survey of its current achievement and political context. Individual histories provide texture and colour: an Acadian nurse remembers, for instance, how during her training in the late '40s the medico-religious establishment had punished an unmarried mother by forcing her not only to give up her child for adoption but also to breastfeed it first. At the same time the tape is a bright patchwork of regional realities: at one moment, three immigrant women from Toronto talk in richly accented English about inner-city abortion access; at another a Cape Breton woman recounts a sleighride through a blizzard towards distant hospital facilities during a miscarriage; the scene shifts to a Montreal apartment lined with brightly painted theatre backdrops where a couple sings a reprise of the hit tune of a pro-choice theatre-piece from the early '70s. Taking all of this in is to experience firsthand not only the history of a vigorous grass-roots political movement scanning the entire country, but also a vivid mosaic of cultural diversity. It seems that the national epic of the last years of the century will be in the first-person feminine plural, and on video.

Despite the creeping industrialization of the video medium and climbing prices, video is still a relatively low-cost resource for independents like the "Wave" collective wanting to work cheap and close to the pulse of the streets. At the same time, it is an elegant yet flexible means for outfits like Quebec City's Vidéo Femmes, a production and distribution collective that's been around for a decade and made an indelible mark on Quebec women's culture. From this group, Nicole Giguère presented *On fait toutes du showbusiness*, (*We're All In Showbusiness*), a dazzling hour-long survey of Quebec women rock performers which will be Vidéo Femmes' first breakthrough onto the broadcast airwaves. An unexpected bonus here for some Anglo participants was the discovery of rock *diva* Diane Dufresne, draped in a dramatic black veil.

Another sign of documentary renewal is the increasing absorption of energy and ideas from the artistic avant-garde which censorship, Central America and Cruise missiles have prodded towards a new social consciousness and a new appreciation of documentary after the inertia of the seventies. Young film and videomakers like Judith Doyle or John Greyson, both Toronto artists known for their work in other media, have entered documentary with a fresh feeling for a slightly tired vocation. Doyle's film on Nicaraguan popular theatre, *Eye Of The Mask*, shows an original eye for the textures of the cultural environment and a flair for incorporating popular performance into her perspective. Greyson's tape, *To Pick Is Not To Choose*, an organizing tool commissioned by the Ontario Farmworkers' union, is full of witty collage effects that have characterized his "art" videos and performances: Tommy Hunter meets pesticides and the Leamington Giant Tomato.

Discussions about technical and aesthetic choices were predictably among the sharpest at the seminar (rivalled

only by those about money). Many of these focused on sound, which still seems all too often to be a poor relative of the image. On the technical level, Vancouverite Peg Campbell became notorious for constantly prodding artists about recording quality. Artistically, much criticism concentrated on lazy, superfluous, condescending or otherwise misguided choices for voice-overs, music and commentaries. Artists too often responded, that yes, such weaknesses were there, but were the fault of 1) the educational-film market, 2) the philistine sponsor, 3) broadcast standards, or 4) inadequate budget. Such hindsight self-criticism usually lacked conviction. As television news continues to scar our eardrums, documentarists are going to have to exercise increasing creative discipline in the area of sound.

A decade ago, I remember, feminism was still a controversial presence at Grierson. Now, although this year's Sue Ditta is reportedly the first woman to have done the programming, women's political and cultural aspirations seem to be taken for granted in the documentary community (unlike, say, in the feature-film network where the fraternity behind everything from *90 Days to Bedroom Eyes* is in a permanent 1965 Beach Boys fantasy). In the majority at the seminar, women artists have been taking increasingly bold risks towards enabling their subjects' self-representation: prominent in this category were Brenda Longfellow's *Breaking Out* and Sophie Bissonnette's *Quel numéro?/ What number?*, treatments of women's issues within the home and workplace respectively. But there's no trend towards ghettoization either — women participants were showing impressive authority in what are not conventionally considered women's territories, from Central American solidarity (Janis Lundman's *Las Aradas*) to Native issues (Helena Ladd's *Home Of The Brave*) to psychiatric reform (Jacqueline Levitin's *Not Crazy Like You Think*).

One result may be that men's films also are beginning to deal with sexual politics and to offer new role models for men: Christian Bruyère's *Dads and Kids*, a Vancouver encounter with single fathers and their families, and Richard Fung's tape, *Orientations: Gay and Lesbian Asians*, were representative of this new trend. Whether the shifting patterns of visibility and power will ensure artistic opportunities or industry clout for current women students (who outnumbered their male counterparts at the seminar) remains to be seen.

The consensus at the seminar was remarkable — and this was both good and bad. It's important to recharge one's batteries with a little *esprit de corps*, but there could have been more challenges to artists to justify and explain, real debate. In fact, the only incident that recalled previous years' fisticuffs was the unexpected dinner-visit of a Mr. Donald Fowler, of the Ontario Film Review Board, the institution regarded by many Canadian film and videomakers as one of the worst enemies of Canadian cultural expression. Several participants had invested years of energy and resources in the fight against political censorship in Ontario, had had equipment stolen and works mutilated

by this goon squad that has become an international laughingstock for harassing even such feminist films as *Not A Love Story*, *Rien qu'un jeu* and *Born In Flames*. The programmer herself became one of the Canadian cinema's few real martyr-heroines through her conviction, a few years ago, for violating the Ontario Theatres Act by showing an experimental film denouncing pornographic imagery in advertising. The censor's presence was an insult also to the film librarians who are the backbone of the Ontario Film Association, the Grierson's sponsors, and who have led the battle against censorship by community "majorities" over the years. In 1978, for example, OFA president Christine Boulby and fellow librarian Richard Moses struggled doggedly in 1978 to show *The Naked Civil Servant* in the suburban libraries of Mississauga and Oakville (Oakville got to see this prizewinning British TV bio-pic about a gay writer; Mississauga didn't).

But some dinner company cannot be stomach. A toast was made to the end of censorship in Ontario, a photographic document of the visit was taken (see photo), and plans were set for reviving last spring's Days of Resistance policy of asking censors and police to leave screenings. Further confrontation was avoided, however, as news of the plan was leaked before the evening film and the fox slipped out of the chicken coop into the night.

Censorship in other forms was also on the agenda. Magnus Isaacson, an ex-director for Radio-Canada news, showed two excellent documentaries on Native and Inuit issues that he'd seen through to airtime. The discussion focused on systemic censorship and self-censorship within the media establishment (the standard is choppy and fast; research time is nil; and compromise is tempting) and the possibilities for valid social documentary within that framework. The grim footnote is that Isaacson, despite his partial success at subverting the system, (*Un génocide culturel - L'adoption d'enfants Amérindiens* is far sharper than anything I've ever seen on *The Journal*) has now abandoned the network for independent documentary.

Americans present at the seminar - Peter Kinoy (producer of *When The Mountains Tremble*, the award-winning film on Guatemala) and Helena Ladd - compared notes on working with PBS and left Canadian producers somewhat envious despite the far-from-perfect situation at PBS. At least U.S. artists still have an access to public airwaves that the CBC stubbornly refuses. All the same, funds for independent social documentary are drying up on both sides of the border: Telefilm Canada's decision to cut off documentary from its largesse - an attack on the most prestigious tradition of the Canadian cinema - was a matter of urgent concern for all present, yet another case of economic censorship in a heavily state-financed cultural scene.

The NFB was also up for scrutiny. Crippled by Tory cutbacks, the grand old godmother has been dishing out her own kind of bad medicine: independents were especially alarmed at the current retrenchment of the NFB's Programme to Assist Private Sector Filmmakers. At the same time, heads were shaking at the Board's profligate

budgets: the seminar opener, Terri Nash's and Bonnie Klein's *Speaking Our Peace*, is said by *mauvaises langues* to have the highest ratio in world documentary history, and Peg Campbell's West Coast *Street Kids*, a 21-minute montage of stills, rang in at \$120,000. All the same, these two films, focusing respectively on women in the peace movement, and juvenile prostitution, are worthy, moving examples of the solid-but-not-too-risky Board tradition that will have a deservedly broad impact on the community and educational circuit. A third NFB representative at the Seminar, Tahani Rached's *Haiti: Quebec*, about the Haitian immigrant community in Montreal, is from the French studio and is good company to the other two. Ultimately no one present would begrudge these four first-rate women directors their respectable budgets while Telefilm Canada is still shovelling out far more to the second-rate Hollywood imitators of the boys' club. In any case, the three films demonstrate that the Board is still upholding its tattered Grierson mantle, but that the artistic and moral initiative has long since passed over into the independent camp.

Budget anxiety is, of course, endemic in the Canadian arts, and some of this anxiety was directed to the survival of the seminar itself. Financed one-third by Telefilm Canada, one-third by the Ontario Arts Council, and one-third by private funding and registration, the seminar's future seems clouded by a perennial lack of understanding on the part of funders. Although its subsidy is peanuts compared to routine festival budgets, the seminar is hard to fit into the funding bureaucracy. Its scale is obstinately small (if the seminar's so successful, shouldn't it be self-financing with 1,000 participants instead of 60?). Its focus is resolutely domestic (there are usually 15 Canadian media-makers in attendance, up to five U.S. and international counterparts - including this year Nicaraguan filmmaker Maria José Alvarez - but not a single Warren Beattie gala on the agenda!). And its format is as effective as it is unique (a monastic retreat in a hot-spot like Brockville, Ontario, where artists, librarians, students, critics, and teachers can pursue intensive discussions over five days without having to stay on the surface or start at zero with each new work). The concept works brilliantly: the discussions of the new hybrid experimentation with documentary *mise-en-scène*, for example, or of the challenge of audience development and cross-over, were very productive indeed.

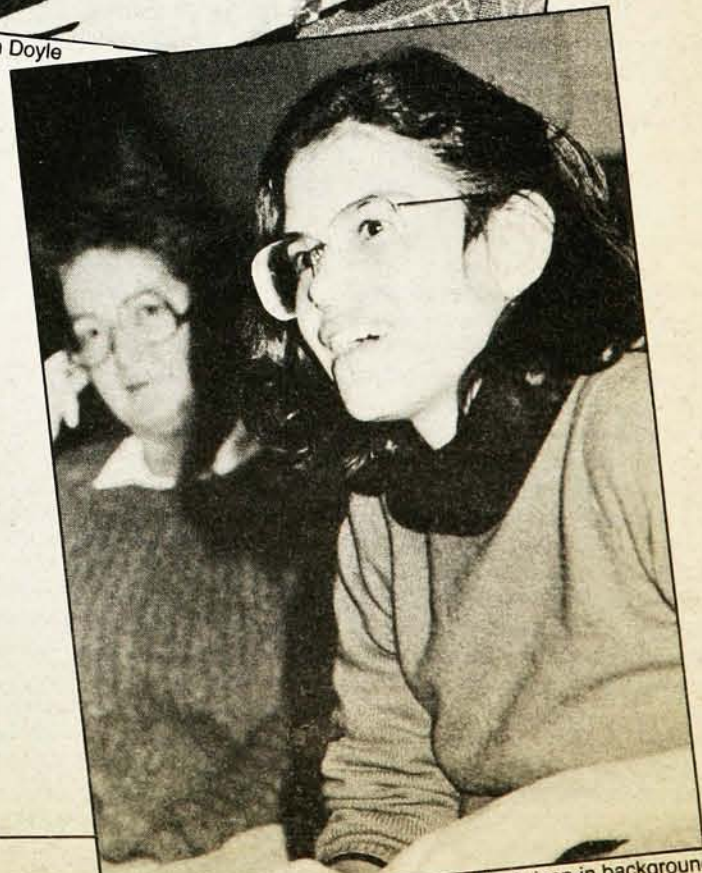
When it came time for evaluations, criticisms seemed drowned out by the lavish praise conferred upon the organizers. One valid suggestion for future seminars was the inclusion of a historical component. As it happened, no one got around to mentioning Grierson this year, and that may be symptomatic: I got the feeling that many of the under-30-year-olds present had never seen the basic stuff of the Canadian and world documentary tradition, not only from 40 and 30 years ago, but even from 20 and 10. It's one thing to lay a legend to rest - it's another thing not to remember the hard lessons coming out of the practice and the legacy of old What's-His-Name they named the seminar after.



Brenda Longfellow



Judith Doyle



Avison in background