

PLANTING PICTURES

an appreciation of the films of

William D. MacGILLIVRAY

by Peter Harcourt

Linda Joy was a young woman whose love of life shone from her like a beacon. With radiant eyes and glistening teeth, the energy of her person animated every expression that crossed her face. Her beauty and vitality informed every gesture. I didn't know her personally, but I know her now, at least her hands and face, as an image preserved for us within a film.

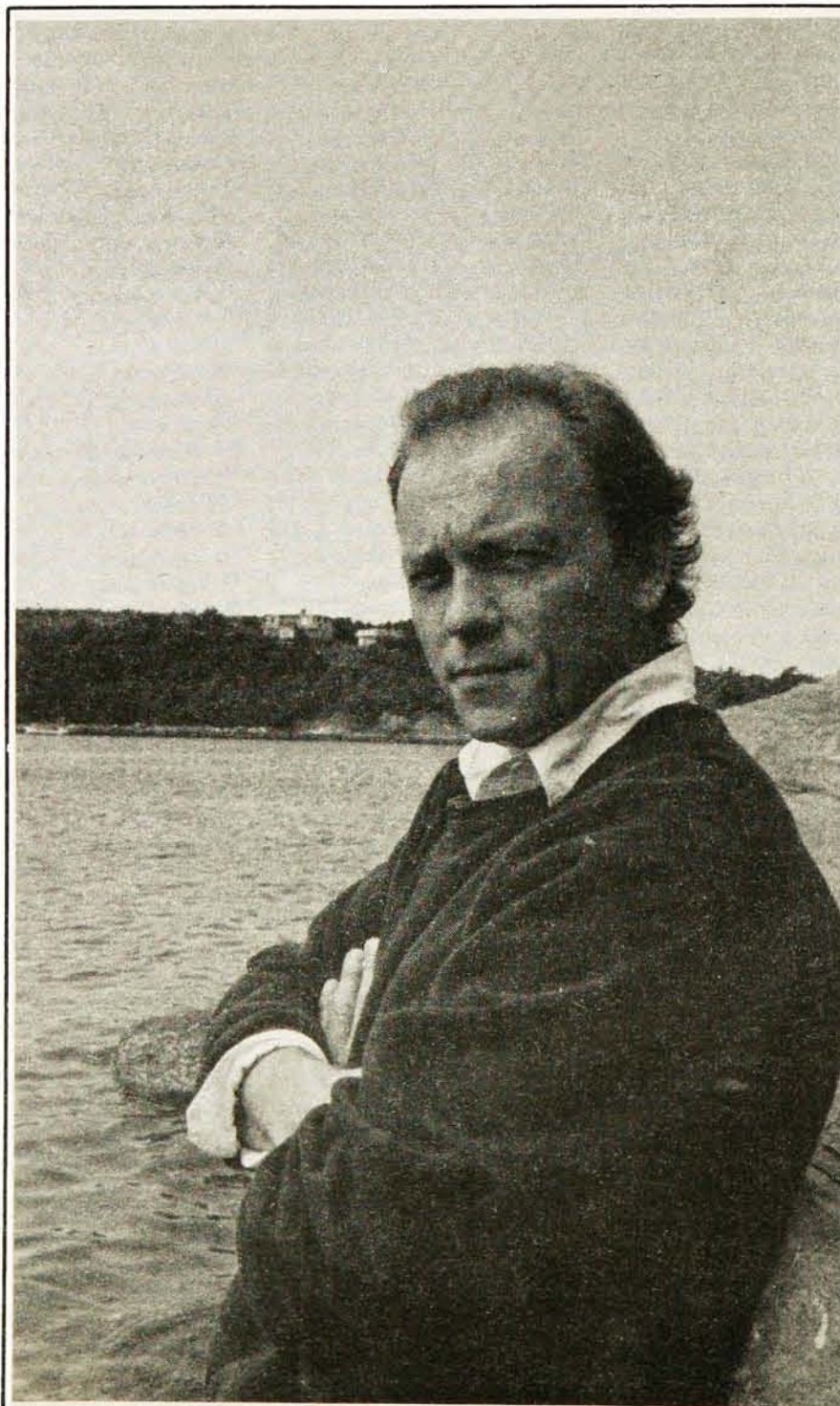
Linda Joy is a film put together by the Maritime filmmaker, Bill MacGillivray, in 1985. I say "put together" because **Linda Joy** is a film that was begun by Linda herself. As co-ordinator of the Atlantic Filmmakers' Co-operative in Halifax (AFCOOP), she knew many filmmakers, including MacGillivray. A few years ago, while still a young woman, she developed breast cancer. She refused the obvious treatment as she tried to refuse the disease. She refused a mastectomy. The film that she wanted to make would have documented the battles she fought with the medical profession; and at the time she conceived the film, it would also have documented her triumph over her disease.

This project was not to be. Within months of what appeared to be a successful operation in Toronto, removing the lumps but not the breast, the cancer returned in a galloping form and within six weeks she was dead.

Prior to this relapse, however, she had visited her friends at the Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers' Co-operative (NIFCO) to discuss with them her script about her struggle. Evidently, they said much the same thing as MacGillivray had said: just tell your own story! So one day, that is what she did. With Mike Jones on camera, Linda told her story in a series of single takes. Shortly after that, she fell ill and died.

While there was some talk amongst Linda's friends about using these "interview" takes as part of a larger film, utilizing stills from the past and perhaps filming some other incidents, it was Bill MacGillivray who decided not to do this. He wanted to take the footage, select what was most meaningful and, by reworking

Peter Harcourt teaches film and Canadian studies at Carleton University in Ottawa.



it on an optical printer, discover a structure that would be both a tribute to Linda and provide a satisfactory experience.

Through doing so, MacGillivray produced an exceptional film. **Linda Joy** is a masterpiece of minimalist filmmaking. By utilizing only these outtakes from Linda's life, all interspersed with slow fades to black, MacGillivray has devised a beautiful and vital construction that tells the story of a woman's fight with death. The only additions consist of a few black-&-white freeze-frames which appear as Linda moves towards death; and then, over black leader, MacGillivray's sensitive account of his last visit to her in hospital.

He speaks about his intense friendship for her – virtually his love; and yet he knows now that there is nothing he can do. This spoken story – Bill's story – links Linda's story in a way to her social surround and counterbalances her visual exuberance with his own subdued speech.

The opening image of **Linda Joy** is a freeze-frame of Linda's smiling face, with her hands thrust before it in the form of a trough. Her hands not only form the "v" sign appropriate for a woman but they also register the moment before the clap that will serve as head-sync for the film.

After her hands snap together to establish the sync, MacGillivray lets her tell her stories; and after he has told *his* story about her death, he brings her back to life for a moment. We see Linda, once again in colour, proudly displaying the scar on her breast which is the mark of her fight against mechanical surgery and the affirmation of her own vitality.

Whether or not a full mastectomy might have prolonged her life, MacGillivray doesn't tell us. In terms of the film, however, it doesn't matter. Linda Joy was a woman, ebulliently full of life, who contracted cancer and who then took a stand against what the medical profession automatically proposed for her as she took a stand against her disease. **Linda Joy** is a film that embodies a record of that struggle. In its social referents, it is a documentary – indeed, *cinéma vérité*. In the authority of its construction – through its step-printing, deliberate changes of mood, authority of rhythm, and through the delicate balance it achieves between image and sound – it is transformed into a minimalist fiction film. Linda Joy is no

more. **Linda Joy** survives as the depiction of a struggle – a struggle universalized by the way that it has been presented. In its quiet way, **Linda Joy** is a 'perfect' film.

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Is it only a coincidence that **Linda Joy** bears a small stylistic resemblance to the first film that MacGillivray ever made – **7:30 A.M.** (1972)? His diploma film for the London School of Film Technique (now the London International Film School), **7:30 A.M.** is a simple exercise both in the handling of actors and in *mise-en-scène*.

A man enters a bathroom, showers, dries himself, trims his beard, deodorizes one armpit, sniffs at the other but leaves it dry, and exits from the room. Meanwhile, we see in the margins of the frame a woman also come in, sit on the toilet, have a pee, and exit from the room. There is not so much as an exchange of glances between them, and while the film does contain cuts, there is a strong feeling of an extended sequence – shot within this 10-minute film.

Shot in 35 mm, black-&-white, **7:30 A.M.** already declares some of MacGillivray's preoccupations. He is an assured stylist as a creator of images; he is at ease in working with actors; and he is capable of achieving maximum effect with minimal means. Furthermore – perhaps the limitation of his early work – MacGillivray's universe was, initially, very much centred on the male.

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If these homocentric preoccupations were shifted somewhat by the experience of making **Linda Joy**, they have been thoroughly overturned by the process of creating **Life Classes** – Bill MacGillivray's latest fiction feature (1987). This film tells the story of Mary Cameron, a young woman from Cape Breton, who moves from her "hinterland" on the island to her "metropole" on the mainland – which is to say, to Halifax. In the course of this journey, she moves as well from adolescence to adulthood, from a paint-by-numbers hobby to professional sketching, from social and sexual dependency to personal independence and self-realization.

While highly formal in its overall cinematic style and slowly paced as befits the seasonal rhythms of the Maritimes, **Life Classes** is the most accessible cinematic narrative that MacGillivray has so far devised. It tells an important story, a timely story, with the strong sense of place that has always characterized the work of Bill MacGillivray. Furthermore, judging from both the critical and the popular response to the film at this year's Festival of Festivals in Toronto, **Life Classes** should be the film that gains for MacGillivray the theatrical recognition he deserves.

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Within the current climate of academic film theory, with its dependency on French theoretical paradigms and with their claim to political radicalism, the films of Bill MacGillivray might not readily be considered either political or radical. Yet in a real way, in a way that is essential to the regional struggles within Canada, his films are both political and radical. They all spring from MacGillivray's regional roots. While they don't fit the academic models of radical political thinking, his films embody the political struggle of the regions against the centre and of the personalized cinematic utterance against the homogenized language of the cinematic machine: of the movie business, as one says – a business that generally either bypasses or co-opts the Canadian reality.

For instance, when MacGillivray returned to Canada after his training in Great Britain, he got involved in a regional movement that, supported by the Canada Council, resulted in the founding of a series of film co-operatives across Canada. Along with Lionel Simmons, MacGillivray's co-worker and cinematographer, and Gordon Parsons, often MacGillivray's producer, MacGillivray was directly involved in the founding of the Atlantic Filmmakers' Co-operative (AFCOOP) in Halifax, out of which, after **Aerial View**, his first film in Canada, he founded Picture Plant, his own production company.

Aerial View (1979), a 60-minute *moyen-métrage*, and **Stations** (1984), a full-scale feature film, constitute MacGillivray's dramatic work prior to **Life Classes**. He has made other films, of course, largely sponsored films – like the finely nuanced **The Author of These Words** (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called **Newfoundland at War**, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on Alistair McLeod. But it is through **Aerial View**, **Stations**, and **Life Classes** that his dramatic work can best be understood.

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What are the elements that characterize this work, that make it political and that make it Canadian?

To begin with, it is regional. To make such a statement is inevitably to endorse the 'realist' dimension of cinema as well as to underline one of the confusions within the Canadian political situation.

Aerial View, **Stations**, and **Life Classes** are all rich in local landscape, in the sense of a particular region with its unique sense of scale. In **Aerial View**, it is the specific space of Halifax and its ambient coves; in **Stations**, it is the stretch and breadth of Canada as seen from a train; in **Life Classes**, it is the productive relationship that exists between the countryside of Cape Breton and the city streets of Halifax – a relationship that, during the film's most exciting, climactic moment, is mediated through

INTER-VIEW

by Colin Henderson

Cinema Canada: *Where did you get the idea for Life Classes?*

Bill MacGillivray: I wanted to do a film about a female character. I went to art school and lived the life of somebody who goes to life-drawing classes two nights a week. I've always been fascinated by the human form and the whole idea of taking three-dimensional form and putting it in two-dimensional spaces. I've been an art teacher for many years and I have certain ideas about those kinds of things. But my continuing dialogue with myself has to do with loss of culture, exchanges of culture and how we give up our culture as we assume another culture. I think the whole film is really a kind of allegorical reference to that notion.

Cinema Canada: *Does the change that Mary goes through in Life Classes reflect a similar change in your work?*

Bill MacGillivray: Mary, the protagonist of **Life Classes**, paints-by-numbers in a naive sort of way. My films have always been calculated. They've never been naive. So I think the paint-by-numbers thing in **Life Classes** represents a kind of unquestioning acceptance of what's around you. It doesn't really matter what transition she went through, whether it was from paint-by-numbers to actual representational drawing. The point is that she came out of her past, in which she was a consumer of other people's ideas, and she became a producer of her own ideas. That's what's important.

Cinema Canada: *Were you pleased by the response that Life Classes received at the Festival of Festivals?*

Bill MacGillivray: Obviously. You like to see your work succeed. With **Life Classes**, I set out to do a specific thing and that was to deal with the issues that I feel are important in a way that a broader audience would appreciate. So it was very gratifying to know that you have done what you set out to do.

Cinema Canada: *You said at one point that Life Classes was a bit too conventional for your taste. Considering the response you've received from people who've seen the film, do you still feel that way?*

Bill MacGillivray: I think so. It's a very safe film in many ways. I think it does what we set out to do in that it tells a story in simple terms, and at the same time, it deals with some of the issues that I feel need dealing with. But for my taste, it's really too safe. **Life Classes** really is no big quantum leap in style. On the surface, it's just a little melodramatic story about a woman who gets pregnant, has a

Colin Henderson is a freelance journalist working in Nova Scotia.

baby, and moves away. But hidden in that story are messages that I feel are important for us to consider. One of those is, "do we simply accept the dream as it's portrayed to us, or do we become active in the dream-making, in the reading of the dream."

Cinema Canada: *Did you disagree with any of the criticisms of the film that you heard at the Festival?*

Bill MacGillivray: A lot of people felt that the beginning was slow. Some people saw that as a negative thing and some people saw that as the way the film was meant to be. What we were trying to do is show 30 years of this woman's life in a Cape Breton village, 30 years of boredom. The thing that I find interesting is that the people who complain about this languid beginning are the same people who congratulate me on the culmination and the ending – and I don't think you can have one without the other. I think you have to come from somewhere to get somewhere.

Cinema Canada: *What was the public reaction like? Did it give you any new insight?*

Bill MacGillivray: It was more successful than I thought it would be. What that may do for me is give a certain latitude to try harder to do some of the things that I've maybe pulled back from in the past. I'm not one to do emotions. My films have always been sort of cool and there are some fairly emotional scenes in the film. I felt tentative when I was doing them, and yet seeing the response and understanding the way the audience appreciated the emotions they were going through, it makes me think that maybe I should go further. But for me there is always a very fine line between being suggestive and being fascist in your manipulation of the audience. I wouldn't want to go too far over the line.

Cinema Canada: *Life Classes is really a film within a film. In Aerial View and Stations you have the same kind of direct references to the process of making the film – what is it you're trying to do?*

Bill MacGillivray: In **Life Classes** I wanted people to be made aware that at any given moment they were not actually watching a kind of semi-real state which is what American films, or western culture films, try to have us believe. Like it's a dream, but it's a dream that you believe completely while you're there, and I don't like that idea. I think it's a kind of fascist way of going about representing ideas and I would prefer people to be aware as much as possible that "I am watching a film. I may be in a movie theatre but I can't lose contact with that notion. This is a kind of dialogue that I am party to. If I'm a rational human being, I must not allow myself to simply accept and then later on reflect. I should be a part of the dialogue as it's happen-

a satellite dish by a cable television signal from New York!

If, for a central Canadian, to visit the Maritimes is to visit the past, watching these films might seem like going back in time. This continuity between the past and present is what troubles the political surface of MacGillivray's work. It scarcely fits any of the currently progressive paradigms. Yet this feeling of regional identity – whether from old-fashioned Halifax or new-fashioned Edmonton – is central to the sense that Canadians have of themselves as Canadians. Furthermore, within the Canadian struggle for cultural autonomy, arguably it is 'progressive' to encourage regional voices to be heard, as it is to encourage a knowledge of our past.²

Along with this presence of regional landscapes, however, there is also in all three fiction films the sense of a journey. In each of these films there are actual journeys which are both psychological and geographical – a journey into the self which is at the same time an actual journey within the specific spaces of Canada.

Furthermore, while MacGillivray works within narrative, until *Life Classes*, there was no privileged sense of a present tense in his films. In *Linda Joy*, for instance, Linda is 'alive' in the last shot after we have heard an account of her death. So too, in *Aerial View* and *Stations*: while the films both have structurally a beginning, a middle, and an end, this structure does not correspond to the narrative time of the film. It is not just that there are flash-backs or flash-forwards: the films' narrative strategies cannot be explained in this way. Both *Aerial View* and *Stations* refuse any sense of an unfolding present tense.

Coupled to these strategies of temporal dislocation is a frequently imposed disjunction between image and sound. MacGillivray plays with the standard textbook practice of overlap editing – introducing the sound for a new scene while the present scene is still on the screen; cutting away to a new scene while the present sound continues. In MacGillivray's hands, however, this practice is so extended that different bits of narrative information are presented simultaneously on the screen. This strategy also becomes part of the great reticence of these films: the films refuse to emphasize the climactic moments within their own drama. In both *Aerial View* and *Stations*, as to a certain extent in *Linda Joy*, the films cut away to another scene just as the climactic moments are about to occur.

Finally – and this is stylistically perhaps the most interesting aspect of MacGillivray's work – there is in all these films a self-reflexive concern with systems of representation. In *Aerial View*, there is an 8mm film within the 16mm format; in *Stations* and in *Life Classes*, there are recurring television images within the filmic space of the screen. It is as if MacGillivray wants to critique his own representational practice, his need



• Linda Joy in *Linda Joy*

to use cinema both to explore the self and to search for a present by recording the past.

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Aerial View opens with a scene of Geoff and his son Sammy watching a home movie together. This Super-8 film shows Geoff, his friend Tom (Mike Jones), and Mary, Geoff's wife-to-be and Sammy's mother, all throwing about a kind of frisbee together. They are also making a movie of themselves. Except that the film we are watching is not really the film they are making, since we see the characters on the screen filming one another.

As if to emphasize this confusion of the filmic with the real, MacGillivray cuts to a 16mm version of this Super-8 movie; so that for a moment, the secondary text becomes the primary text

within the film. As he cuts back and forth from the 16mm version of this home movie (which gives it a sense of the present tense) to the Super-8 version (which confirms it in the past), we might notice that the sound of the projector is deliberately audible on the soundtrack, while the film itself is ghostly in its silence. The apparatus of illusion-making is foregrounded in this way, while the illusion itself keeps changing status within the discourse of the film.

Meanwhile, something like a conventional story is being told. As they watch the footage, father and son, Sammy asks: "Where is Tom now, Daddy?" "I don't really know," replies Geoff. "Mummy looks happy," says Sammy. "I think she is," replies Geoff.

"Is" not "was." As in *Linda Joy*, there is in MacGillivray's work a constant play between what is present and what has passed – in fact, often a destabilization of the present in relation to the past.

Once we have seen this film, we could speculate that, in terms of narrative time – the chronology required for the story – this scene must occur very near the end. Yet it opens the film – *in media res*, in the classical sense; yet also in a way that distances and disrupts the conventional spectator/spectacle relationship expected within film. We can respond to the human emotions represented in Bill MacGillivray's films, but we have to work on the place of the events within chronological time.

The film also opens with a declaration of a triple absence: missing is Tom – as we shall learn, an important guru figure in Geoff's life as an architectural student; and missing (we might assume from the scene with the two of them) is both Mummy and (we must assume from Sammy's question) Mummy's happiness. If this film is *about* something, it represents an investigation into the reason for these absences and into their eventual cost.

After this first scene (the domestic), we get another less personal scene (the professional). This second scene, however, is equally intricately designed.

We see overhead shots of some maps and charts – real-estate charts we might assume. Then an aerial shot of a Nova Scotia coastline, over which the title appears, *Aerial View*. On the soundtrack we hear what we might assume is the chopper sound of a helicopter; except that in the next shot, we are examining the coastline from the point-of-view of a motorboat. Only then might we register that the chopper sounds of the first shot are really the sounds belonging to the next shot – the sounds of the boat.

For this 'professional' scene, no faces are visible. But voices are heard. In the image, we are moving past a freighter, grounded on the rocks some months before. "Someone made a good buck there though," one of the voices says. And then a few moments later: "A great place for kids to grow up." We get a strong sense in this scene of property being sold.

It would be tedious (and unnecessary) to go through the film with this degree of detail. It is enough to say that every scene is choreographed with the same attention to the signification potential of the very syntax of filmmaking.

This is not just 'illusionist' practice or cinematic "naturalism," giving us the space and scale of specific locations within Nova Scotia. It is that – because it does give us this space and scale; at the same time, with every change of scene, it challenges the way that we relate sound to image and present to past.

On a more thematic level: Geoff is a young architect who, perhaps, through the influence of Tom, has been made more idealistic than he might have been about the politics of architecture, about the *purpose* of architecture. At the opening of the story (which is not the opening of the film), Geoff is enjoying an assured success in his profession. He is not, however, very interested in this success. He is more interested in local housing, "using local materials and local skills," as

• Bill MacGillivray and Claudia Duckworth in *Aerial View* (1979)



he explains at one time to a classroom of students.

In fact, this classroom scene allows Geoff to present his manifesto – a manifesto that might not be that far removed from the manifesto of Bill MacGillivray. We have to build something that is of some use to people, not just something that will close deals, create cash flow, and allow a lot of rich people to make yet more money and which will keep the politics of civic exploitation in place. As Geoff talks about building his own house in the country with his own hands, about discovering skills within the process of that building which he never knew he had, about the beautiful view that he has from his window, one young girl cackles when he says that he doesn't have a television, and one boy, who had been reading some kind of merchandising magazine throughout Geoff's discussion, finally asks the determining question: "How much money do you guys make?" Geoff has no answer. Fortunately, at the moment of this question, the loudspeaker system asks him to move his car. He accepts this command as an excuse to leave the classroom. While the image stays on the class, on the embarrassed teacher, we hear the car drive away from the school.

Because of its mixture of the old and the new, Halifax is rich in architectural signifiers. In *Aerial View*, MacGillivray uses the city as Antonioni used Milan in *La Notte* or the EUR section of Rome in *L'Eclisse*.

A couple of sequences in this film are particularly reminiscent of Antonioni. There is one moment towards the beginning of the film when Geoff and his partner Ross are off to close some important architectural deal. As they go up in an elevator in the Maritime Centre, one of the new bank-based highrises that have been erected in the south end of town, through the window in the elevator we can see the spire of St. Matthew's Anglican church being dwarfed and then lost as the elevator rises above it. Later, towards the end of the film, after Geoff has retired to the country and has lost both his wife and his job, Tom comes to visit, accompanied by a hitchhiker. "We met on the road and we're friends for life," says Tom, with his Newfoundlander's friendliness, when they arrive.

A marvellous scene follows – like 7:30 A.M. was intended to be, a sequence shot – in which the hitchhiker plays a harmonica and Tom and Geoff drink a bottle of Screech, talk about Mary, and share the primordial Newfy 'knock-knock' joke together.

It is the scene that follows, however, which is truly worthy of Antonioni. We see the three of them wandering about the rocky shore the morning after their evening together. As so often in the Maritimes, the space is thick with fog. Tom and Geoff wander out onto the deck of the marooned freighter that we had seen at the opening of the film. Then Tom offers his confession. "The older I get," says Tom, "the more I realize that you gotta tow the line... You gotta play

your part." Tom has joined the system. Through a friend of his father, he has become a civil servant. He has a nine-to-five job, pension benefits, the lot. He has bought in and sold out.

In close-up now, their faces wet with mist, Tom and Geoff exchange silent glances together. Then, for the end of the scene, MacGillivray cuts away to a long-shot of the two of them on the wreck, each posed at opposite ends of the deck, facing away from one another, each looking out through the mist at another section of the sea.

If *Aerial View* favours the idealism of a young male architect, it also critiques this way of thinking. Geoff's determination to be true to his own principles isolates him from his friends, alienates him from his wife, and leaves him alone in the country with the responsibility of looking after Sammy. By refusing the commercial world, he is also refusing what many people would call the real world.

The critique of Geoff's position is most strongly voiced by Mary, his wife. While arguably she is dramatically disfavoured by the film – she is constantly smoking, she doesn't like Geoff's Newfy friends, she doesn't want to move to the country, she wants to have more money, and she doesn't seem to care a lot about Sammy – it is her voice that articulates the critique which we can infer from other aspects of the film.

This voice begins during a luncheon meeting with a friend in the new fashionable Chateau Halifax restaurant that looks over the city. But we can hear it over a number of scenes in the film, again defying any sense of chronological order, as at one time, the luncheon with her friend becomes a discussion with her friends, including Geoff.³ While her character is unsympathetically presented in the film, Mary's voice describes quite sympathetically the total self-involvement that we see in Geoff.

Aerial View is a simple film in many ways. It tells a simple story, an old-fashioned story, a story of idealism and of defeat. In this way it might be related to *Linda Joy* that tells a similar kind of story. Yet in both films, as in *Stations* and as in another way in *Life Classes*, it is the structure that universalizes the particular situation, as the particularities of the specific locations give warmth and a sense of reality to the whole.

At a number of key points in the film, MacGillivray returns to the Super 8 footage, as if in moments of self-reflection, as if part of Geoff's awareness of what he has lost. So for the end of the film, he returns to his aerial view.

We see Geoff's partner, Ross, in a four-seater, single-engine private plane. He is surveying the terrain of the coast, obviously looking for sites on which to build, as in the second sequence of the film. In fact, this might be the second sequence of the film! Ross would appear to be looking down on Geoff's house. But finally, he grows impatient. "Come on," he says to his pilot, "Let's get outta here. This is costing me money."

As the voice of commerce ends the

ing." So to help people remember that, I have references to the fact that what the audience is watching is a film. It's easy to take people down the garden path in the movies because their defenses are down, and they'll accept just about anything if you put them in the right frame of mind. Whereas, if you remind them that they're part of this process, then they're more likely to find offense with it or to have questions. They're more likely to enter in some kind of real discussion which is ultimately healthier.

Cinema Canada: *In Stations, you have Robert Frank saying, "Stories are boring." Is that your own view?*

Bill MacGillivray: In a sense it is, although I should explain that Robert's lines, like so many in *Stations*, were ad-libbed. But I agree. Structured stories or stories that are telling you what to think are boring because they don't leave you any room to move. They don't give you any chance to discover for yourself what you might want to think. And in *Stations*, that's what the whole thing is about. We were trying to find a way of telling the story that would allow a person in the audience to interpret more freely than if we had been very specific.

Cinema Canada: *So it was an open-ended process?*

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah, sort of constructive playing with filmic elements to try to develop ways of having ideas shared instead of told. So we would allude to certain things and then leave them, and then maybe come back to them later, after you had had time to reflect on them, maybe subconsciously. Then, when we came back to it 20 minutes later, it might strike you. "Oh yeah, I remember that." Now that you have new associations, you can put that in a newer context with new meaning and then you drag all that to the next scene. And so there's a sort of gradual build-up of unrelated information that slowly starts to fall into place and make sense. By the time you reach the end of the film you have a kind of picture made up of separate parts rather than an absolute construct that has no room to move.

Cinema Canada: *Very non-linear.*

Bill MacGillivray: Well the joke in *Stations* was that we went on a single line from Vancouver to St. John's by rail, but the story goes all over the place.

Cinema Canada: *The endings to your films are always equivocal and unresolved. None of your characters ever wins big.*

Bill MacGillivray: No, "win big" is an American notion. "Win medium" is a Canadian notion, and "win small" is an Atlantic notion. So my films deal with winning small.

Cinema Canada: *Little victories?*

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah, little victories for little people, doing little things, for little reasons, for little reward... But

that's O.K. The struggle of a woman from Cape Breton and her bid to find self-identity and self-actualization and all those kinds of things, is important. She didn't go to the YMCA and take a class in it. She did it by dint of her own energies and her own convictions and her own need to find herself. Quite often it takes a death or some kind of trauma to make you start questioning yourself, and once you start questioning sometimes you wish you hadn't, but nonetheless you continue. And then you begin to have this dialogue, and I think she, perhaps, had been having this dialogue before she knew it. Gradually it became obvious to her that there were things she had to deal with. The birth of her child and the death of her grandmother were catalysts to help her talk to herself, so she began to talk to herself through her drawing.

Cinema Canada: *Do you talk to yourself through your films?*

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah, I think I do. The problem there is because of our institutionalized thought, nobody is particularly interested in hearing what I have to say.

Cinema Canada: *Critics say that your films deal with recognizably Canadian themes. It would seem to suggest that there are a lot of us out there talking to ourselves about the same things.*

Bill MacGillivray: Absolutely. I believe that really strongly. We are all more basically the same than we are different. No matter how different we appear, we all suffer the same things in one form or another.

Cinema Canada: *You admire the work of Jean Pierre Lefebvre. What is it about his films that appeals to you?*

Bill MacGillivray: Well, I haven't seen all of Jean Pierre's work, but I think *Les Fleurs sauvages* is one of the most perfect films I've ever seen. I don't go to a lot of films but I feel strongly about certain films that I've seen. What I like about Jean Pierre's work is its extreme simplicity and the subtlety of it, and the quietude of it. The other thing I like about his work is his view of the world. It's an unfashionable view of the world, it's a non-cynical view of the world, it's a loving view of the world, and those views are not popular these days.

Cinema Canada: *Is it because you share a similar view that you are sometimes criticized for sentimentality?*

Bill MacGillivray: I think people are afraid to look certain truths in the eye and deal with them. They would rather just push them aside and belittle them. I don't think my films are sentimental at all. I think what they are is quietly reflective, and people are embarrassed by that... very much so.

Cinema Canada: *Do you have an audience in mind when you're making a film?*

film, MacGillivray freezes the frame on this final aerial view of the location for his film, having moved in on the image as the sound moved away. Then the credits roll.

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Although a very different film, *Stations* is organized in much the same way. There is the same extended overlapping between image and sound and the same refusal to privilege a present tense. If Super 8 footage was part of both the structure and meaning in *Aerial View*, nagging Geoff about his past and about his loss of both Tom and Mary, in *Stations*, television monitors play a similar role. While the video images refer to the past, they also serve to question the value of their own acquisition and the way their meaning has been changed in the process of their own construction.

The central character in this film is called Tom Murphy, and this Tom too is played by Mike Jones. A onetime seminary student, he has espoused a secular life and become a television reporter, very much against the wishes of his father. But the real project he wants to undertake for television involves a personalised documentary that would explore the disorientation felt by some of his former colleagues at the seminary who have lost their calling, especially of Harry who has been his friend for many years and who left the seminary at the same time as Tom. Harry's disorientation is far greater than Tom's. Harry has found no alternate position in life – not even a job, certainly not a woman. Tom, on the other hand, seems to have fallen into his job, has found a wife and has started a family.

Essentially, *Stations* is about disorientation. The people that we see travelling across the surface of the land by Via Rail are mostly migrants, leaving

one section of Canada for another – looking for work, looking for meaning. There is a Québécois who has been working at the lumber camps of British Columbia and who wants Tom to ask him why he does that. There is Brenda from Vancouver who is on her way to Toronto, hoping to find work. There are also other passengers, some from other countries, who are now travelling across the enormous space of Canada, returning to some little place they call their own.

Since the travellers who are searching for work are also searching for meaning, they are in this way like Harry who, since he left the seminary, has found no reason for doing anything and who has nothing to believe in.

The inner meaninglessness of Tom's own secular life is brought home to him when he receives news that Harry has committed suicide, a suicide that may have been precipitated by Tom's insistent questioning of him for his television show.

The scene of Harry's death is typical of the achievement of this film and is indicative of the way in which MacGillivray thinks cinema.

During the television interview with Harry that had occurred earlier in the film, Harry had tried to explain his grief. He no longer felt part of something greater than himself, he explained. He was no longer part of a larger whole. "I wasn't Father any more. I had to introduce myself as me." Losing his vocation was not for him just like a break-up of a marriage. "It was like ending a life," as he said.

Later, while Tom is editing this footage, we might notice that Harry's reference to death has been eliminated from Tom's assembly while other bits of information we didn't see in the interview sequence have been added. "Reality" is being manipulated for the sake of a good television show. Then the phone rings. Tom freezes the video image of Harry's

distraught face; and we learn that Harry, indeed, has killed himself.

The exploitative side of image-making is further emphasized in this film by an encounter that Tom has with a drunken man who angrily resents Tom's superior position to all the people he is interviewing. He considers the whole process patronizing. "The big ones want to look at the little ones," he screams out about TV. Yet as Tom manages to placate him and coaxes him to let himself be filmed, he too declares problems with his father. "I gotta message for my dad," he says to the camera. "I made a mistake."

Along with all the video footage in *Stations*, as in *Aerial View*, *Stations* also contains some home-movie, 16 mm footage. This footage shows Tom – more correctly, Mike Jones – as a young man at the seminary, taking his vows, prostrating himself on the ground as required indication of his humility, greeting his father, sharing his pride in his holy life with his family and friends.

This footage was actually shot by Mike Jones' father and is "authentic" footage of Mike's own term at a seminary in his youth. For *Stations*, however, as for *Linda Joy*, MacGillivray has re-worked this footage, making it ghostly through step-printing, making it unreal – as if a scarcely-recalled memory. However, since the 'Tom' in this older footage is recognizably Mike Jones, this seminar footage bears an eerie, almost too-close relationship to the real. As in *Aerial View*, this crisscrossing between the 'actual' and the 'fictional' contests the representational practice endemic to film and the way we tend to validate the fictional with references to the real.

In *Stations*, however, both at the opening and at several points throughout the film, this 'home-movie' footage serves to underline the loss that can be felt when such communal dedication is surrendered; and it serves to remind Tom both of the greater grief that such a surrender caused for his friend Harry

and of the alienation from his father that Tom has felt ever since.

Again, in what at first glance seems an old-fashioned way, *Stations* is very much about the search for a father. Yet, while a reconciliation with Tom's real father is central to the *plot* of the film, it doesn't have that much to do with the *story* of the film as the film unfolds.

The story of the film seems more to consist of the many little anecdotes that all the people in the train share with Tom as he interviews them for this 'human interest' film that he has been asked to make for a commercial station in Vancouver. Most of these anecdotes also involve a searching, as I have said – a searching for work, a searching for a place that might become home (or, as in the case of the immigrant travellers, a place that has become home), a searching for the relationship of self to the vast land over which they speed in their Via Rail train. In this way, all are concerned with a search for the meaning of their lives.

Some of these characters were scripted into the film. Some were found on the train. Some were a mixture of both – people who were found but who were then asked to talk about specific things. Brenda, the young woman with whom Tom attempts to have a fling, is particularly tough in talking about, from her point of view, both his pampered past and privileged present. Bernard, a porter in the train, is a political radical who wants to change the world, not just reflect its surfaces for some 'human interest' television show.

Most compelling are the comments made by Robert Frank, the well-known American photographer and offbeat filmmaker who now has a home in Cape Breton. "Stories are boring," he begins by saying – a comment that might well relate to MacGillivray's refusal to create strong narratives for his films. Frank then talks with Tom about catching trains and missing them, about the elements in life

• Mike Jones in *Stations*

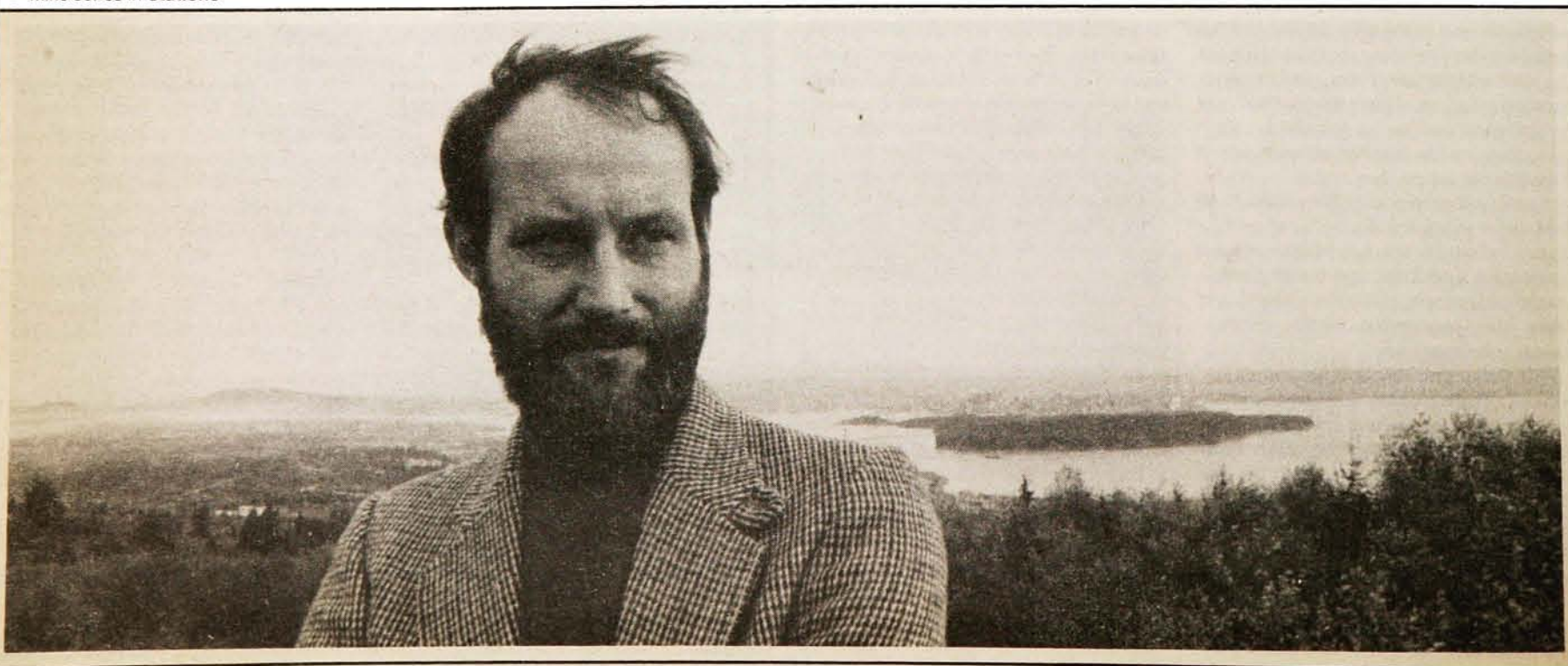


photo: Chuck Clark

that either make it dependable or which allow it to be exciting. But like all the other characters in this film, he talks about a sense of home – something which, with all his travelling, Robert Frank has never had.

"So home is when you get on the boat," he says to Tom, who has left his 'human interest' film in Halifax and is now on his way to Newfoundland. With the idiomatic skills now of a true Maritimer, Frank can recognize that Tom is coming home "from away."

If *Stations* is more engaging through its number of little stories than through any dynamic plot, more through its sense of random encounters than through any compulsive narrative thrust, so these stories take place within the space of Canada but outside of time. The "present tense" of the film does not fully declare itself until two-thirds of the way through the film. The scenes that we witness, therefore – both the scenes on the train and the scenes at Tom's home on the West Coast with Holly, his wife, and Mark, his son – have neither a temporal nor a causal relationship to one another as the film unfolds in time. We can infer these relationships, of course – but after we have seen the film. In the films of Bill MacGillivray, at least until *Life Classes*, conventional narrative is always downplayed. What happens to the characters is always less important than what happens between them.

The end of *Stations* involves an abrupt change of style. If all the narrative and temporal dislocations both parallel and underline the dislocations of the characters – not only the severe disorientation of Harry and in another way of Tom, but also of all the characters travelling across Canada in the train – the film ends securely in the present tense with Tom back in Newfoundland. He is reunited with his family and reconciled with his father. And after all the stylistic formality and self-questioning nature of the process of image production, the last scenes are more in the style of *cinéma-vérité*.

With Mike Jones' real father present on the screen and with MacGillivray's real father singing a lovely song, this collapse into the merely representational and personal is arguably a weakness in the film, arguably an oversimplification of the issues that have been raised. At the same time, in a way that is consonant with MacGillivray's cinematic thinking, this ending does resolve, both in style and in theme, the problem set by the film.

With Tom, his father, and his son being photographed by the tower on Signal Hill by Tom's wife, Holly, *Stations* very much celebrates the unification of the male dynasty by the close of this film. At the same time, in the scenes that involve her, Holly is stronger than Mary in *Aerial View*. She is granted more independence of spirit. She has her own work, and in some key scenes, she conveys a sense of what she has had to endure in her marriage to Tom – a man equally as self-preoccupied as Geoff was

in *Aerial View*. Like Mary in this, however, she too doesn't seem to be too close to their son. At this stage of his career, MacGillivray's films enact the interests of a very male-centred world.

However, teased a little about this matter both by his admirers and his detractors, MacGillivray has taken these criticisms to heart. First came *Linda Joy* – a film that has already been discussed – and now *Life Classes*, MacGillivray's most accessible theatrical narrative to date. Although its organization is less intricate than the films that have preceded it, its concerns remain the same. It too records a journey – a search for a meaningful role within the landscape of the Maritimes; it too is concerned with generational continuity; and it too critiques its own process of cinematic representation.

* * *

After the title sequence – itself (as we shall see) an important frame for the film – the first shot of the story shows us a reflection in the water of a green pickup truck transporting a huge, white, television satellite dish. It belongs to Earl (Leon Dubinsky), once the local bootlegger but who is now about to set himself up in a bootlegging business of another kind.

His is a man's world in this underdeveloped, backwoods society in Cape Breton. He and his mates never seem to work. They hang about with their girlfriends, drink beer, and – especially after Earl gets his dish installed – watch television.

There isn't much sense of a journey here. Earl's world is a poacher's world in which he and his friends live out their lives in a state of amiable stagnation. It might remind us of the social ambience of the Ottawa Valley created so forcefully so many years ago by Joan Finnigan and Peter Pearson in *The Best Damned Fiddler from Calabogie to Kaladar* (1968).

Mary Cameron (Jacinta Cormier) is also part of this world. She lives alone with her father and with her maternal grandmother – with her "Nan," as she calls her. Since finishing high school, she has been working for her father at the local drugstore. To amuse herself, she paints Maritime landscapes from paint-by-numbers kits.

As the film opens, Mary too is stagnating. But she is a woman, and she has been made pregnant by Earl. She has to make decisions. When she confronts Earl with her situation, she throws a package of condoms at him which she had picked up at the drugstore. If he had sealed himself off with a condom (this moment could imply), the two of them might have gone on stagnating together in this region of Cape Breton, as people do when they have no real sense of a dynamic future. As it is, she has to act.

Since she doesn't want to marry Earl, she moves to Halifax to disperse the

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah, me. If I'm here, there must be at least 100,000 like me, probably a million, maybe even two or three million like me who have the same basic sensibility that I have. If I make a film that's true to myself, then I'm going to reach ultimately, if I can, those people. The trouble is trying to convince the bureaucrats that there's a market out there. The bureaucrats who run our cultural agencies presume so much about their audiences. There's a censorship through presumption in our country. I think one of the problems with the CBC and with Telefilm is that quite often the decisions are being made by people with small minds, limited vision, who are looking for the quick fix, and who are looking for what they perceive to be the needs of the masses without ever making actual direct references to the masses to find out what they want. The history of our media culture and the history of our cinema is the history of people making decisions in isolation. And I don't care what Peter Pearson says, there's a whole mass of people out there who want to see the kind of films that we, and by we I mean the independents, are making when we make our small-budget, you know \$500,000-600,000 features. There is no need to spend millions of dollars to tell stories. The resistance that we feel to the kind of work that we're trying to do, is the resistance of people who are in love with something other than cinema. They're in love with deals or dealmaking, perhaps, and their tiny, small, little minds are impeding the progress of Canadian cinema. I've been making films for 10 years, or more, through the boom years and the bust years. Even when there was no money around, I still made films. The small independents who love cinema and love being able to express the things that we feel are important – we will still be making films long after Telefilm is gone, long after CBC is gone, because there's more to making films than dollars and cents. There has to be passion, and most of us who are making these kinds of films are passionate about what we do and we'll do it whether they help us or not. Hopefully they'll help us because it's in their own best interests and it's in the interest of the country. But if they don't, we'll continue.

Cinema Canada: Is that what you mean when you say that the real cinema in Canada is a hidden cinema?

Bill MacGillivray: I think there's not much doubt about that. The real cinema of Canada, which is the cinema of the independents, the cinema that grows out of need rather than out of dollars, is the cinema that Canadians never see. The CBC, in its infinite wisdom, has all sorts of reasons why it can't show that cinema. They make token attempts every now and then with a show like *Canadian Reflections*, which is the only venue where you're going to hear the independent voice in Canada. But basically the structures and strictures of our media society are such that the independent

voice is not allowed to be heard. The real cinema of Canada is a hidden cinema. Canadians don't see it. The unfortunate thing, of course, is that they then assume that there is no cinema in Canada. In the last two or three years there have been some Canadian films that have gained some fame, and perhaps now people will start to look more towards their own country for more cinema. Maybe it's simply a function of our youth and a function of having to crawl out from underneath the blanket of mass media from south of the border. As it stands now, there are so many really good films that have been in Canada over the last 20 years and maybe only two per cent of the population are aware of them. Hopefully that will change.

Cinema Canada: You've always worked with very limited budgets – is that going to change?

Bill MacGillivray: It would terrify me to make a large film because I think the battles to maintain control would be greater than the battles to get your ideas out. And I think that's an unfortunate imbalance, but it seems to be that that's what happens. Although they always say, "you know, why don't you go for a million dollars and then you'd have real control," but I don't think it's so much control as power and the two are different. I'm not particularly interested in power, but control, yes.

Cinema Canada: You mean that you'd have to sacrifice your independence to work on a big-budget commercial production?

Bill MacGillivray: Every dollar somebody puts into your film gives them a dollar's worth of control over the content. There was a point when the CBC was dickering with the idea of maybe investing in *Life Classes* which would probably have meant a quarter of a million dollars but then they would have had \$250,000 worth of control. Unfortunately, the CBC and I do not see eye-to-eye about what drama is. There would have been compromises all the way down the road. Now I can honestly say that *Life Classes* is very much what I wanted it to be. There are some scenes I had to remove because of length and some I had to remove because I wasn't satisfied with them and I couldn't repair them, but, in total, the sense that I get when I look at the film is the sense that I wanted to get and that, to me, makes it very successful. But I doubt if that would have been the case if CBC had owned a piece of it. Nobody told me what to do in that film and that's the way I like it.

Cinema Canada: Doesn't the CBC trust your judgment?

Bill MacGillivray: It's not a lack of trust. They can't help themselves because they are part of the institutional thought. They don't mean to be that way. If you took those individual people you wouldn't necessarily want to put them up in front of a brick wall and shoot

scandal about having a baby. Actually, she is following in the footsteps of her mother. Her mother had run off before her – apparently with another man, humiliating her father in a way that he has never recovered from, has never wanted to recover from. “She always wanted to change things,” – as her father explains, talking about her mother. “She made a fool of me. I’ve been living it down ever since.”

Two years pass. Mary has her baby – a little girl whom she calls Marie. She now lives in a room in a house run by a black woman, Mrs. Miller – herself an exile from the old black community of Africville that was destroyed by a land development project in the mid-’60s.

Unable to find more than temporary work in shops, in order to support her child Mary offers herself as a nude model to the local art college. It is at this point, as Mary begins to take control of her life, that the film too begins to find its narrative centre.

Life Classes has a far more linear structure than any previous film by Bill MacGillivray. The image/sound relationships are far less disjunctive, and the temporal dislocations are only really evident within the framing sequence of the film. While this simplified construction may represent MacGillivray’s bid for a larger theatrical audience, the narrative linearity is also appropriate for the story of this film.

Both Geoff in **Aerial View** and Tom in **Stations** evolved, of course, over time; but they also evolved through memory. While Mary also delves into memory at one point in the film, seeking out the artifacts that might remind her of her past, in her personal life we see her evolving moment by moment within society as she gains possession of herself through time.

From her contacts at the art college, through her friendship with a young artist, and through her exposure to what is mockingly offered in the film as the pretentious discourse both of art history and of modern art, Mary begins to feel that she too can be an artist. She learns to assert her will.

At this point in the film, when **Life Classes** begins to alternate between scenes of Mary being sketched and scenes of Mary sketching, the film gains both in intensity of feeling and in authority of style. In the films of Bill MacGillivray, given the self-preoccupation of his protagonists, it is arguable that the characters often respond more to the spaces around them than they do to one another. In **Life Classes**, this stylistic characteristic may explain somewhat the slow pace and the uncertain narrative direction of the opening scenes in this film. In any case, by this point in the film, when the passivity of being sketched begins to alternate with the activity of sketching, the film acquires an increasingly compelling rhythm. Even what we might have felt was the somewhat mannered acting during the opening scenes of this film ceases to be a problem. While still in a space not of



• Jacinta Cormier as Mary Cameron in **Life Classes**

photo: David Middleton

their own choosing, nevertheless they are beginning to respond to their own desires. We get the sense of Mary, the passive object, alternating with another Mary who is beginning to take charge.

All the scenes in the art college are masterful in their execution yet simple in their design. Some are highly lyrical – like the first one when the sound from a classical string quartet accompanies the camera dollying round the room, showing Mary striking different poses, trying to be at ease within this process of the production of art. And if, in her nakedness, she looks a little uneasy in this sequence, something in her must have enjoyed it. Later, when she returns home, she playfully reenacts these poses with her daughter.

The last sketching scene, however, is the most masterful. We see Mary lying on her platform – as always, looking vulnerable in her nakedness, even somewhat abused. Meanwhile, the camera circles around the entire class, while a combination of music and murmurings from the soundtrack work on our emotions. At the same time, we also see that each student views Mary not only from a different point-of-view but also in a different way.

This is MacGillivray at his finest – the film artist showing representational art in the making, recreating within his own work some of the attitudes and subjectivities inherent in the production of all art.

The climactic centre of this film also involves a reference to the production of art, except that this time, it is video. An American video artist wants to combine naked bodies singing out confessional tunes with clothed musicians who play back to them in a way that spurs them on. This video production is being

broadcast live for a cable channel in New York, and each performer in it is to receive 200 American dollars.

This scene, too, is masterful in its execution, but this scene isn’t simple! As we see the naked men and women singing away, exploring, as instructed, some personal grief, each wearing headphones that unite them with their individual musicians, each clutching the S200 as well as the microphone in their hands (which refers, if you like, both to commerce and technology), and each sealed off from one another by condom-like cylinders hanging from the ceiling, we are assaulted by a complex range of emotions and ideas.

First of all, we have the suggestion of art as exploitation, of art as playing upon other people’s vulnerability (as all films do); secondly, there is a sense that local culture is vulnerable to the attractions of American money; and thirdly, the condom-like cylinders employed to isolate the performers from one another in this scene provide a strangely distorted echo of the condom *not* employed at the opening of this story, which nevertheless also isolated the “performers” from each another!

Furthermore, the suggestion that Direct Broadcast Satellite technology might threaten the very existence of local culture⁴ is further emphasized by the fact that this New York signal is picked up by Earl’s dish in Cape Breton so that all of Mary’s friends and family witness both her performance and her confession. Like her mother before her, she too has “run after the family jewels,” as she puts it: she too has been lured by the attractions of sex. The fact that Mary’s one-woman show which she eventually prepares for the college consists of a series of drawings of Earl in the

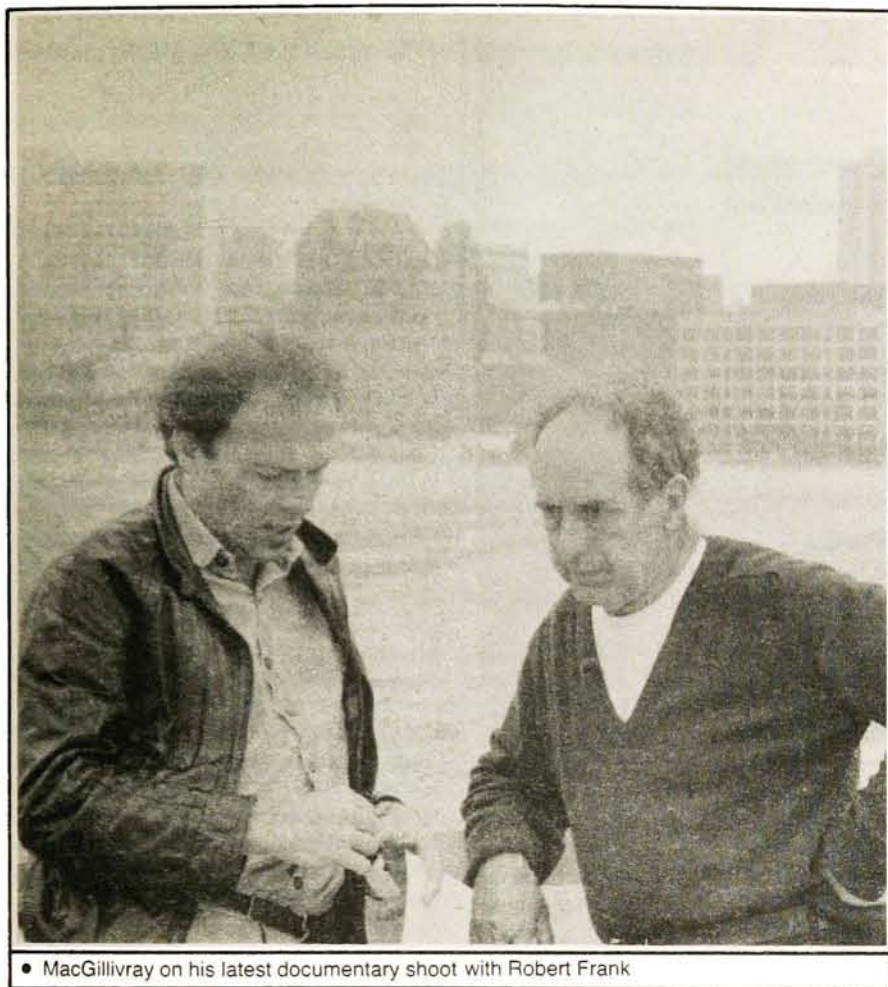
nude both establishes a gender balance for all the nudity in this film and provides for Mary, personally, a kind of loving revenge.

The last scene in this film implies another gap of a couple of years. Marie is noticeably older. Mary is clearing away the brush that blocks her view of the ocean from the country cottage that her grandmother had willed to her when she died. Since her father and daughter are present in the background (we see Marie taking some hot chocolate to her grandfather), as in **Stations** there is the sense of a family at least partially reunited. Except that in this case, the man is refused.

When Earl approaches, offering his help, also struggling to ask Mary to marry him, she turns away. His satellite dish has been confiscated, forcing him to work for other people – a situation that he hates. But if Earl’s story ends thus in a double defeat, Mary’s story finishes with a prolonged stare at the camera of asserted independence. Supposedly, she has found herself.

I say “supposedly,” because one one-woman show does not an income give; and because the film is framed by a ghostly sequence that is quite unsettling in its implications. These opening and closing moments further emphasize the disturbing implications elsewhere hinted at in this film of the totally merchandising nature of our television culture within the increasingly commercial values of our entire world.

The film both opens and closes in a shopping mall in which everyone is moving in slow-motion, as in a dream. Perhaps it is more like a nightmare. We see a young woman playing the violin, but her sound is scarcely recognizable. Meanwhile, the camera pans past an Im-



• MacGillivray on his latest documentary shoot with Robert Frank

Photo: David Craig

perial Bank of Commerce outlet over to a television shop which is in the process of being liquidated. Everything is on sale. Is this another suggestion that, in such a marketing environment, in which banks never fail but shops often do, local culture cannot be heard?

We also see Mary's face on a multiplicity of television screens in this shop, on television sets that are all on sale. Or is it Jacinta's face? Once again, we have the sense of the interdependence of the fictional and the actual. Whether Mary the character or Jacinta the actress, however, she is talking about the role she has played in a film that she has just made — a film called *Life Classes*! Then Mary/Jacinta talks about parallels between her real life and her fictional role in the film. She even wonders what happened to Mary?

We might wonder as well. Although *Life Classes* tells a story that moves in a linear fashion towards a narrative closure, a lot of emotional and psychological elements are left unresolved. Furthermore, this lack of resolution is arguably emphasized by two narrative moments that seem somewhat bracketed off from the dramatic momentum of the rest of the film. One might seem like an implausibility—a bracketing out; the other like a sentimentality—a bracketing in.

"My child is my mother returning,
Her mother, my daughter the same..."
So sings the song, in both Gaelic and English, that runs throughout this film. And yet, in a film that so celebrates the concept of generational continuity, it must seem implausible that, when Mary returns to Cape Breton to visit her grandmother before she dies, she fails to bring her daughter with her. I can imagine practical reasons which may have

dictated this decision (the child might not have been available); but psychologically, it seems oddly inconsistent nevertheless.

If, then, for whatever reasons, Marie is bracketed out from this sequence, so Mary's visit to the cottage after Nan's death feels bracketed in. Certainly, the scene is very moving as Mary roams around the cottage looking for traces of her mother's past, hearing ghostly sounds and echoes that create the sense of memory coming into consciousness; and yet, this scene exists slightly to one side of the active dramatic relationships at this moment in the film. Even Earl seems to feel this dramatic awkwardness. He decides to go outside, leaving Mary alone with the remnants of her past.

If, again arguably, these two narrative decisions might seem like errors of judgement, they are at the same time part of the fullness of the emotion of the film — part of the feeling of privacy about the story being told. Like the framing sequence, they suggest a charge of personal emotion somewhat in excess of the psychological implications of the story.

While the opening scenes of *Life Classes* involve problems of class and economics, the political implications of which are emphasized by the references to Africville, by the end of the film these problems are largely personal in their resolution. In this way, the ending of *Life Classes* is similar to the ending of *Stations* in which the social and the political elements are also collapsed into the personal.

In *Life Classes*, however, this collapse is more complicated. If the ending is affirmative on the level of character,

on the level of politics, it is fragile and frightening.

Consider once again the sequence that frames the film. Consider its implications not just for Mary/Jacinta but for MacGillivray as well.

As an independent filmmaker who wants to continue to work in the Maritimes, Bill MacGillivray recognizes that economic forces which are controlled from elsewhere will determine what he will be allowed to do within the world of film. In this way, if the final words of *Life Classes* allow Mary/Jacinta to wonder about the future of Mary, we might in turn wonder about the future of Bill MacGillivray.

Will *Life Classes* be "sold" to television and so be seen by millions? Or will it be like the young girl playing the violin in the mall and be scarcely attended to? If we listen carefully, we might notice that the Gaelic tune that she too is playing gains acoustic predominance only after the closing moments of the film.

An intrusion of personal anxiety on the part of the filmmaker into a dramatic fiction feature of this sort is certainly unconventional and may seem eccentric. Nevertheless, it is a most intimate way with which to end this film.⁵

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While still a modest achievement in terms of quantity, the films of Bill MacGillivray represent an enormous achievement in terms of quality. Living in a country that has a federal policy that still encourages the most exploitative of filmic enterprises — producing for the most part stuff to be placed between the ads on commercial television — we cannot help but admire films that employ local materials and local skills, that plant pictures in the mind of how we live.

We cannot help but admire the films of William D. MacGillivray. •

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this article appeared in *CineAction* No. 5 (May 1986)
2. This concern with the past, with in this case establishing continuity between an English-speaking present and an effaced Armenian inheritance, is one of the central preoccupations of another young, distinguished Canadian filmmaker—Atom Egoyan. Especially in *Family Viewing*, every element in the film's design connotes this need for establishing relationships with the past. Even the boy's name, Van, can be read as a preposition of inheritance. [See *Cinema Canada* No. 145 (October 1987), pp. 14-19.]
3. I happen to know that the film was not conceived in this way. Nevertheless, this device becomes part of the film's final structure.
4. This point was clarified for me by critic Geoff Pevere.
5. I want to emphasize that this interpretation is completely the result of my own speculation. It is in no sense informed by anything that MacGillivray himself has said.

them. I mean it's not their fault, but because they are part of that greater structure, they have so many pulls and tugs at them. They feel that they have to generate a certain amount of revenue from advertising. But advertisers feel that the only thing Canadians watch is American programming so they won't support Canadian. Thus the CBC is in the position of having to show a lot of American programs. It's the price you pay. If the government is not willing to put real cultural dollars into real cultural venues and events, then we can expect that that's the way it's going to be. So the only way to fight that, is, I feel, with a kind of guerrilla tactic of working on your own and generating your own projects, your own ideas, not with a market in mind, *per se*, but always making sure that the film is marketable relative to the budget. And that's what I've always done. I have always had trouble with institutionalized thought. I don't care who is the perpetrator of the thought or who originated the thought. I'm really angered by the whole notion that we have our culture dictated to us by an institutionalized thought process which is the government's view of what we should be thinking about ourselves. And whether it's the CBC or whether it's Telefilm or whether it's any of those other cultural agencies — you know they're all full of really nice people and God bless them — but nonetheless they are supporting the idea that there is an institutionalized thought that we should follow. More often than not, we are dealing with people in these cultural agencies who are probably thinking a little less than we are about these issues. When you run up against these people to get your work done, you realize that these are the people who control the way we think to a very large degree. And it's very subtle and it's very insidious and nobody is consciously sitting down and saying, "Today the Atlantic region will think this way." Nonetheless, through due process, as they execute their mandates as dictated by so and so and whoever, it all happens. I see it everyday that I work on my films and try to get them made and then try and get them out into the greater world.

Cinema Canada: You seem to get a lot of your energy from swimming against the stream.

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah. If I have one romantic vision of myself I think that's it. I delight in the battles. I really enjoy the battles, they are the meat for me. You meet such incredibly... I think 'stupid' is the word I'd have to use... people in your struggles to get your work done, and then every now and then you come across somebody whether it's in private industry or a bureaucrat, who is excitable. Someone who's seen the possibilities and will say, "This is fantastic, let's do it." And when you come across that person it's such a relief and such a joyous moment, that it's really worthwhile. •