

Cathy Ord's
Dear John

You have seen this film before – almost. A young, strawberryblonde female in leather jacket and high heels trots anxiously along a maze of industrial back alleys, obviously searching for somewhere to hide. She is being stalked by a silent, rodent-like man dressed as a soldier. Tension mounts. Then, defeated by her pumps and a high brick wall, the woman is trapped by the fatigued figure. He savours the fear on his victim's attractive face before raising a sub-machine-gun in aim. But the weapon is plastic, and the fired shots are only vocal imitations. The homicidal maniac laughs in childish delight. The victim gives him a look of utter disgust and walks away. Roll credits.

These are the opening moments of *Dear John*, a first feature written and directed by Cathy Ord. From this disorienting beginning, the film's viewers are implicated and drawn into its constantly shifting levels of fiction. In exploring ideas of personal, social, (and filmic) truth, the filmmaker plays the conventionally "realistic" visual style of *Dear John* against a narrative preoccupation with appearance and identity.

This is certainly well ski-doo'd snow in the area of Canadian cinema. English-language features in this country – from *Goin' Down the Road to I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* – have displayed an obvious predilection for tales of the nonconformist struggling to find a place within the false values and alienating structures of modern society. The less successful of such works usually comes to occupy artistic and intellectual space found somewhere between a particularly ambitious *Afterschool Special* and an especially sanctimonious issue of *Plain Truth*.

Mercifully, *Dear John* spares audiences this brand of cheesy pathos and simplistic morality. Ord's film seems so committed to examining problematic characters and situations without elaboration that it sometimes allows itself to become unlikeable. This is remarkable in an early commercial effort, and *Dear John* for all its flaws and inconsistencies – is to be congratulated for its reluctance to pander, and to simplify complex issues.

Dear John follows a motley ensemble of characters through a short, miserable period of their common lives, and only begins to resemble a conventional plot headed for narrative closure some thirty minutes before ending; needless to say, some may find it difficult. The film holds the more valiant viewer by exciting curiosity. *Dear John* is the story of individuals who have jettisoned their pasts and assumed the most convenient identities that the cold city has to offer, always at the expense of the emotional self. Janet (Valerie Buhagiar) exists on a hamsterwheel of discount blow-jobs, kleptomania, junk food, and roachy rooms until



Valerie Buhagiar and Stan Lake with all eyes on the mirror in *Dear John*

encountering a feisty transvestite hooker known as Rocket (Stan Lake). Suited up for life battle in a platinum fall and Le Chateau's entire winter collection – worn all at once – Rocket gives the surly newcomer a lecture on cramping her working style: "I'm runnin' a business, not a hobby... I can't run home to Mummy when things get bad."

Of course, this is wretched dialogue, made all the more unconvincing when delivered by a hammy actor in his most overdone *Ida-Lupino-goes-to-hell* tones. Likewise, Janet's relentless tough chick attitude tends to grate. But in the context of the work as a whole, these layers of fiction begin to form a recognizable geography – the formations of social behaviour in the paralytic self-consciousness of our times. In this manner, *Dear John* comes to engage in an indirect reflexivity, acknowledging the impact of consumer culture and media images on our sense of being in the 1980s. Janet and Rocket have displaced memory with incomplete personas, constructed with the Darwinian logic demanded by their environment. Intentionally or not, the failure of these social scripts and roles creates the impression that Ord's characters exist in the purgatory that is modernity's "B-movie."

Lest such a reading of *Dear John* be construed as an apology for the work's inadequacies, there is certainly ample evidence for this narrative strategy. Images of masked and altered identity permeate the film, especially in its treatment of sexuality. Janet is initially disturbed by the androgyny of Rocket and his companion in ladies' wear, Sid. Their carefree appropriation of "sleazy babe" apparel and cosmetics obviously seems unnatural to her hypocritical ideas of gender propriety. Taken to a gay bar, she is equally repelled by Jane, the cross-dressed lesbian who exhibits "quite a bit of Tarzan, as well." Even as Janet begins to detect the cracks of humanity beneath the pancake foundation of her friends, her bourgeois sensibilities want to recover Rocket for conventional, G. Q. concepts of masculinity. Upon refusing her birthday gift of a stylish suit, Rocket tells Janet that she disappoints him. "Couldn't we pretend something else, just for tonight?" Janet begs. The scene closes on their slow, bittersweet dance – she in a virginal strapless, he without makeup – together in yet another form of disguise.

Dear John's pessimistic moments are made palatable by the script's subversive humour. Ord clearly takes pleasure in crossing the thin line between stock characterization and outright

parody. Near the start of the film, for example, Connie – The Loquacious Diner Waitress With A Heart Of Gold – is introduced. Lending cardigans and dispensing perky advice *ad nauseam*, Connie threatens to induce diabetic coma. In a much later scene, however, Janet comes upon Connie playing cards with two trucker women – "Oh yes," confides the waitress, "those two have been trying to pick me up for years." Connie becomes an integral part of the film's resolution.

Likewise, absurdity is used to disrupt complacent viewing of *Dear John*. When an especially tragic character meets his end, the funeral is attended by his male hooker friends in full mourning drag. The deceased's elderly father kisses a sobbing Rocket, clearly under the impression that his late son's girlfriend is beneath the black lace veil.

All this knowing irony and cool distance would rapidly become tiresome if it were not balanced by *Dear John's* acceptance of its character's contradictions. The most surprising, radical element within the work is the relationship that develops between its most diverse inhabitants. Janet and Rocket do not complete their journey of self-knowledge in the space of the film, never quite locating a sense of true identity. Their common question becomes how to be oneself when one has little idea of who one is? Janet longs for the security of suburbia and its plastic slip-covered domesticity. Rocket fantasizes an endlessly glamorous tango along the Seine in the arms of "monsieur droit." The sudden transformation of those desires comes unexpectedly, in a tentative and imperfect moment in which their shared game of emotional hide-and-seek takes both to the same place, as equals. If the film contains a single unique and perversely convincing moment, it is found here.

Dear John's finale makes explicit its socio-political concerns. Allegorically-speaking, we witness the implosion of patriarchy and the emergence of a whole new kind of Adam and Eve – whoopee! Narratively satisfying, this ending seems a little forced and out of proportion after the peculiar delicacy of *Dear John's* finest observations. Nonetheless, if Cathy Ord is able to maintain her uncompromising spirit and refine her vision, she will certainly be a Canadian filmmaker to watch. And auteurs don't even have to worry about the formation of identity – someone else does it for them.

Lisa Godfrey •

DEAR JOHN p./d./sc./ed. Cathy Ord d.o.p. Doug Koch art dir. Allan Fellows makeup Lynn Matthews wardrobe Melinda Foresters sd. ed. Robert Vollum mus. Gary Martin 1st a. d. Camelia Frieberg 2nd a. d. Robert Simpson stills Joanne Hovey craft services Avant Gout grip Jake Fry gaffer David Owen prod. asst. Malcolm Tweety l.p. Valerie Buhagiar, Stan Lake, Thomas Rickert, Daniel Macivor, David Macdea, Evelyn Kaye, William Beddo. Funding Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, OFDC, Telefilm. Colour, 35mm, 120 min. dist. Norstar

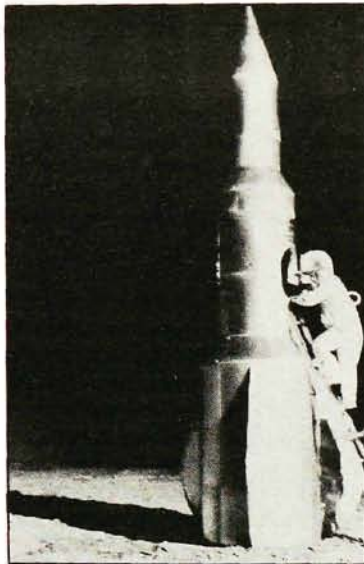
Colin Brunton's
**The Mysterious
Moon Men
of Canada**

Halfway through Colin Brunton's mock-documentary, *The Mysterious Moon Men of Canada*, the film's anaemic protagonist, Brownie McFadden, abruptly and unspectacularly loses his virginity to a much older woman. The incident is just one of a number of narrative cul-de-sacs that appear like warps in the fabric of a one-joke premise stretched too thin for the film's barely half-hour running time. A serious critique of *Moon Men* would be like reviewing a high school science fair – a real spoilsport undertaking, unappreciative of the fun the filmmakers no doubt had cooking it up, and hardly rewarding to the critic for all of that. Still, Brunton and co-writer John Pearson have given *Moon Men* the vague shape of satire, and an occasionally earnest tone that begs, just one time, that the *Moon Men* be taken seriously.

As played by Gerry Quigley, Brownie McFadden is the sort of ineffectual youth that can be found in the self-consciously bohemian center of any Canadian city. Working in a production house directing industrial and education films, McFadden comes across evidence that two Canadians landed on the moon in a homemade rocket in the late '50s and, true to self-effacing Canadian character, hadn't told the world. Fueled with rec-room romanticism, Brownie takes off in a company van to kill two birds with one film, shattering the myth of Canada's dull-witted inferiority and making his own reputation in the process. True to the self-governing laws of Canadian mediocrity, he fails quietly and pathetically.

While hardly a lightning rod for a generation's anxieties, *Moon Men* has been filled by Brunton with the kind of cheap cultural artifacts calculated to elicit a snicker from any native Canadian under thirty. *Moon Men's* production banner, "Great Lakes Films", brings to mind the torpid government-funded educational films that made us ecologically aware in geography classes, while Brownie's Sagan-esque prologue calls to mind their public television equivalents. Designating Wasaga Beach as the moonshot's launch site is a tongue-in-cheek shot of mystique for that well-paved stretch of Southern Ontario cottage country; the mere mention of its name is meant, no doubt, to elicit the same mild thrill of recognition as seeing undisguised chunks of Toronto in Cronenberg films.

Brownie's van is shadowed throughout the film by another Canadian icon-gag, a blind cyclist making his way across the length of the country. This bit of business could have turned into very black satire, but Brunton handles it



The Mysterious Moon Men of Canada

with the same distracted sleight-of-hand as every other humorous notion in the film, and the gag drops from view, leaving the option open for screening at the CBC and any other place that takes its Marathon of Hope seriously.

Brunton is just as absentminded in his handling of ethnic stereotypes. A Portuguese landlady is outfitted like a gypsy, seems incomprehensible to Brownie, but handles a personal computer with intimidating ease. A black couple who witnessed the moon-shot answer Brownie's inquiries with tent revival homilies and "Amen's". Brownie drives away buzzing with excitement at forbidden barriers crossed: "I was enjoying youth and valuable experience. I had rebelled against my boss. I had talked to a black couple."

This statement serves notice for the callow, suburban "white boy" aesthetic that guides *Moon Men*, and while Brunton may have hoped to transcend it with such a blatant definition of its ambitions and insecure ethnocentricity, the line lands with the thud of an inadvertent confession. In this light, Brownie's deflowering seems little more than an unconscious nod to the coming-of-age comedies produced by the same "white boy" aesthetic. This goes some way in explaining why *Moon Men's* gags assemble around the film's narrative like afterthoughts, and even more why Brunton, his cast and crew should have spent so much effort on a comedy that just isn't very funny.

Rick McGinnis •

THE MYSTERIOUS MOON MEN OF CANADA p. Colin Brunton, Bruce McDonald d. Colin Brunton sc. Colin Brunton, based on the short story of the same name by David McFadden d. o. p. Gerald Packer art d. Mara Ravens rocket Norman Comeau ed. Bruce McDonald mus. Shadowy Men on a Shadowy Planet, The Gun Club p. asst. Larry Hudson sd. mix Daniel Pellerin titles Metamedia l. p. Jerry Quigley, Clarence and Lynn Haynes, Larry Hudson, Ron Cook, Ellen Dean, Marsh Phillips Funding Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, LIFT. Colour 16mm, 27 min. dist. Film Clips.

Lori Spring's
Inside / Out

The Canadian short film has long had a tradition of providing a number of distinguished directors their first opportunities in creating highly evocative and personal pieces of narrative. Some of the most acclaimed Canadian film directors working today first attracted public attention for their initial half-hour productions. Into this ongoing milieu, Lori Spring makes her directorial debut with *Inside/Out*, a psychological portrait of a woman which at times is both a confession and a cathartic exercise for its maker.

At first glance, one can almost oversee the film as a melancholic foray into urban angst, washing our senses with a gloomy existential philosophy. But on closer look, one can see that Spring has fashioned a very stylish picture with remarkable attention given to small but precise details throughout the film. If there is a feeling of *deja vu* with respect to certain elements in *Inside/Out*, the director nevertheless displays a number of impressive strokes in what is her first film work.

The 27-minute film draws us quickly into the world of Joanna, a bright, successful writer who decides at the outset to force herself into seclusion within her apartment. Reasons are never made particularly clear, only that she is "exhausted with the effort of trying to look as if I feel all right." As Spring has drawn Joanna, the heroine's outer veneer is a tough one to crack and we are ultimately left wanting to know more about her. Certainly the carefully etched details of her life have not been left out. She has everything anyone could ask for: brains; beauty; health (she works out diligently); temperament; talent and taste (a great-looking apartment). Yet she is inevitably unhappy, a forlorn temptress who admits that she has "no idea of what I'm afraid of."

To pass her time in isolation, she writes out her diary; is visited by a grocery boy who seems attracted to her; takes video images of a lonely woman across the street; and when these fail to move her, invites a few friends to dinner where she plays a videotape she's been creating. In this pivotal scene, Joanna's guests shift uncomfortably in their seats while watching, what is in essence, their host's painful- drawn-out self-analysis on video. Spring seems to be almost parodying herself as if paralleling our own experience of watching *Inside/Out* with those of Joanna's guests in the film.

Spring has cleverly staged the scene in one long wide shot and in doing so has brilliantly captured the dissonant melancholy of her alter ego. It is here, in this one brief moment, that Joanna suddenly appears as Spring may have wanted her to be – sympathetic and vulnerable. When her guests fail to realize that it is her soul Joanna has lain down for them to see, it becomes readily clear why and how Joanna and the rest of the world have been pushed away from one another. It is a fleeting moment of affinity in *Inside/Out*, and one can only try to imagine a similar kind of objectivity the film may have employed throughout its tenure.

But these are small quibbles. There are greater rewards reaped elsewhere in the film. Spring's use of video imagery (Joanna is a hopeful filmmaker) is quite inspired as it reflects the fractured and discordant sense of Joanna's mind. There are a number of evocative moments when we come close to realizing a sense of the alienation surrounding Joanna's heart and the rest of her world.

Emma Richler is effective as Joanna, and she makes the most of each small moment afforded her by the script. Jackie Burroughs appears briefly but memorably as Mrs. Ambrose, the lonely woman who foreshadows Joanna's own existence. Less successful are the supporting characters who are not as adept at fashioning a comfortable presence before the camera. Nevertheless, their flaws are given short shift in the wake of Steven Deme's beautiful cinemato-



Emma Richler, as Joanna, on the set of *Inside/Out* with director Lori Spring

graphy and John Tucker's illuminating score. For it is in the visual and aural contributions of these two gentlemen that Spring has found her most successful collaboration. However, with this impressive film debut, one can only look forward to the next work of this talented director.

Moze Mossanen •

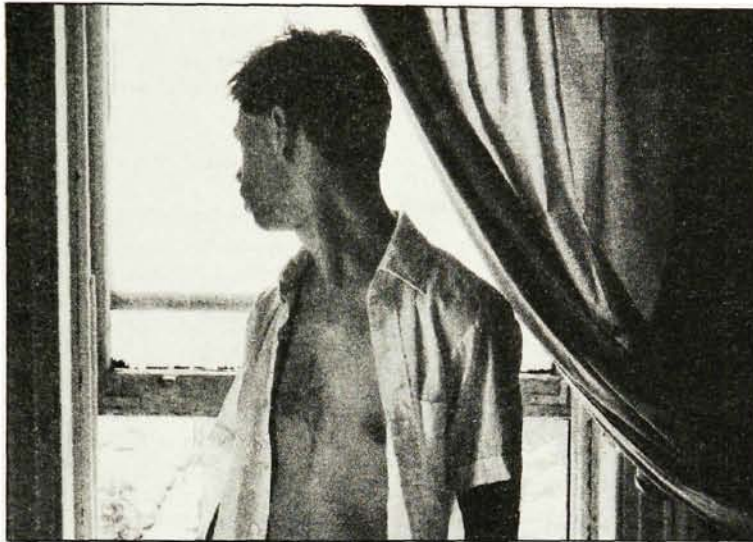
INSIDE/OUT p./d./sc./ed. Lori Spring. From a short story by Lori Spring and Alan Zweig d.o.p. Steven Deme art dir./makeup/ward. Donna Mehalko, Virginia Rankin sd. ed. Steve Munro mus. John Tucker, The Rhythm Twins 1st a.d. Alan Zweig 2nd a.d. Jolynn Sommerville cont. Annette Manguard 1st asst. cam. Frank Polyak 2nd. asst. cam. Marcus Elliot video Nick Shefter stills photo David Rasmus craft services Marilee Pinto grip Dennis Kane gaffer Ted Fanyeck ass. ed. Michael Werth, Scott Munro consulting ed. Sally Patterson 2nd unit 1st asst. cam. Charlotte Dishar 2nd unit asst. cam. Andrew Potter prod. asst. Randy Zimmer, Mark Fawcett, Graeme Lynch prod. consultant Alexandra Raiffe sd. mix Daniel Pellerin neg cut Francont Films opticals Film Opticals Hiles Meta Media i.p. Emma Richler, Jackie Burroughs, Larry Epp, Alan Zweig, Donna LaPointe, John Carr, Mark Fawcett, Rhonda Kristi. Colour, 16mm, 27 min.

Mike Hoolboom's From Home

Mike Hoolboom's new film is a powerful and disturbing work which deals with love, memory, sexuality, murder and desire. *From Home* is a neo-narrative that is frankly experimental in structure. Hoolboom utilizes fictional footage, personal documentary elements and archival sequences of either a historic or intimate nature in an abrupt and seemingly arbitrary manner that forces the viewer to reflect on the ontological and ethical implications of the cinema. The film contains sequences that are shockingly explicit about details in the director's - and subject's - lives. Hoolboom asks for, and gives, no quarter in his devastatingly honest depiction of the break-up of his relationship with Svetlana Lilova, a Bulgarian émigré.

The audience is made to see the two true lovers, their fictional constructs who play at being "Mike and Svet", meditations on the nature of the cinema, an odd private-eye satirical sub-plot, photos of Edward Weston and the birth of the airplane, and a series of reconstructed screen tests. While the viewer is confronted by these apparently disparate elements, he is not particularly reassured by the director's self-assessment, that he knows it is difficult to place "two pictures together" and make those parts into a seamless whole. In fact, the viewer, like the narrator/director, is forced to embark on a quest in search of the meaning behind the relationships in the text.

From Home is a film of contradictory impulses. It begins, and ends, as a consideration of the word "love". Eschewing the sentimental, Hoolboom presents what love can mean to a



Mike Hoolboom falls for a simple twist of fate in his controversial new film *From Home*

person during and after an affair. The desperation that develops at the end of a relationship as mutual comprehension disintegrates into anger and diffidence, is effectively contrasted with the wealth of good humour when trust in another still exists. Hoolboom is asked by a friend (Gary Popovich) to define love in semantic and intimate contexts. His only true reply is to film Svetlana making love to someone else. The acknowledgement that ultimately this director's muse is his art and not his woman, is presented as a painful realization. Yet this ebb and flow of love definitions is made to work against other formal elements in the complicated scenario.

From Home is elliptical in impact and digressive in construction. At one point, Hoolboom has a narrator state that, "Contradiction is only another way of saying the same thing twice." This may be a clue to Svetlana's enigmatic character but it reveals little of the structure for the film, which rarely re-doubles its constituent parts.

Indeed, the only deliberately "doubled" characters in the film are Mike and Svetlana and their *doppelgangers* are generally depicted in a phlegmatic manner. Fenway Crane, Hoolboom's alter ego, is given a farcical background as a potential Nobel laureate in a sequence which presents visually a home-movie of a typical suburban family's three children taking a bath, while on the soundtrack underneath the portentous description of the director's life, one can hear the old pop hit "There I've Said It Again." This complex joke is typical of Hoolboom's approach to character throughout the film. The audience is allowed to be dazzled, titillated and amused, but is never allowed an entry into the true spirit of Crane/Hoolboom or the two Svetlanas.

The reasoning behind the virtuoso structuring of the film becomes clearer in a remarkable sequence which depicts the romantic beginnings

of aviation at the turn of the century. Over shots that move from an aircraft taking off while a crowd cheers, to a ship, crippled, hurtling down from the skies, a voice (Hoolboom's) speculates that the memory of love is like an accordion: from one body can emerge many corporal forms. So it is with *From Home*. The multiplicity of forms that the film takes are manifestations of the cineaste's desire to come to grips with the memory of his private past.

From Home reaches its emotional peak when the director decides to film his protagonist in the act of making love. This section is as problematic as it is strong, and exploitive. Here the *verité*-like visual element is counterbalanced by a disturbing narrative about the cameraman who shot the "shambles" left by Jack the Ripper at the final dwellings of his victims. A shot of the director cutting film is placed tellingly near the end of this sequence, allowing Hoolboom "no way out" of this particular ethical closure.

Where can one hear Svetlana in this film? She can be heard recounting scientific and fantastic parables at various points. The viewer sees her talking, laughing, making love. Yet ultimately she remains a director's other quest, which is to feel capable of "putting one picture next to the other," to make a narrative. In this vein, *From Home* is successful, the finest work yet by one of Canada's most prodigious talents. Mike Hoolboom deserves the viewer's respect for this brave offering. Yet one is left dissatisfied. The viewer still wants to know: where is Svetlana and her voice?

Marc Glassman •

FROM HOME p./d./sc./ed. Mike Hoolboom d.o.p. Mike Hoolboom, Gary Popovich sd. design Tom Thibault, Mike Hoolboom sd. rec. Jim Anderson, Peter Chapman, Svetlana Lilova, David Müller, Karen Saunders, Randy Smith i.p. Martha Cronyn, Maria Friedhoff, Svetlana Lilova, Midi Onodera, Andrew Scorer, Camille Turner, Victor Willis Funding National Film Board of Canada, Ontario Arts Council, Mike Hoolboom. B & W, 16mm, 55 min. dist. CFMDC

Camelia Frieberg's Crossing the River

Amnesty International and the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador have recorded over 65,000 deaths since the civil war began in 1979. More than 7,000 people have disappeared and tens of thousands have been held as political prisoners. The death squads and the government's security forces, often working in collusion, continue to this day to carry out acts of terror and oppression with impunity.

- From *Crossing the River*

Crossing the River is a committed and informed investigation into the life of a Salvadorean refugee, Carmen A. (who has chosen not to use her real name in the film in order to protect her family living in El Salvador.) The film records Carmen's painful memories of El Salvador, her commitment to the Salvadorean cause and her adjustment to a new life with her children in Toronto.

Carmen A. was born in Guazapa, El Salvador, of a peasant family. Guazapa has been plagued by civil conflict between guerrillas and Salvadorean armed forces over the last 10 years. The film opens with a still photo of a group of Salvadorean women who are bravely dedicated to and brought together by a common cause called the "Committee of Mothers and Families of Political Prisoners Disappeared and Assassinated from El Salvador." Carmen A. joined this group after the disappearance of the father of her children. She later found out he was captured by the National Police. Carmen, along with her six-month-old son, was also detained, interrogated and tortured by the National Guard when she came to them enquiring of her husband's disappearance. Francisco was released after seven months but was gunned down a year later at a bus stop on his way home from work. Carmen believes his murder resulted from his membership in a local farmer's union. Carmen was left pregnant and with a two-year-old son. The spree of violence continued to haunt Carmen's family and friends to the extent that she had to flee her native country. Carmen had to leave her children behind, arriving first in Mexico before finding refuge in Toronto. She was later reunited with her children.

Carmen's blunt and direct line in the film "Francisco did not commit any crime" conveys a sense of the helplessness and frustration of the El Salvadorean people and the senselessness behind the tragic loss of her companion. Her testimony to the camera is set against a stark black background creating a feeling for Carmen's isolation and personal grief. Photographer Daniel Gantreau's stills provide a chilling backdrop recreating the oppressive atmosphere surrounding Salvadorean

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

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

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

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

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



Carmen A. tries to bury her horrors

suffering but of renewal.

The issues Carmen faces and the challenges in the film present us with a powerful message. One image that comes to mind is that of a National Guard policeman. Carmen tells of her empathy for him. She says she knows the truth of how his wife and children feel. Carmen, like the wisdom of the solidarity of the Committee of Mothers and Families, embraces the enemy who are instruments of her people's destiny.

Frieberg says that "*Crossing the River* is finally an optimistic film. It is fueled by the courage and strength of a woman who has suffered immensely and yet refuses to resign herself to despair, choosing instead to break the silence that terror breeds."

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

Peter Lynch •

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

Richard Kerr's Last Days of Contrition

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

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

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

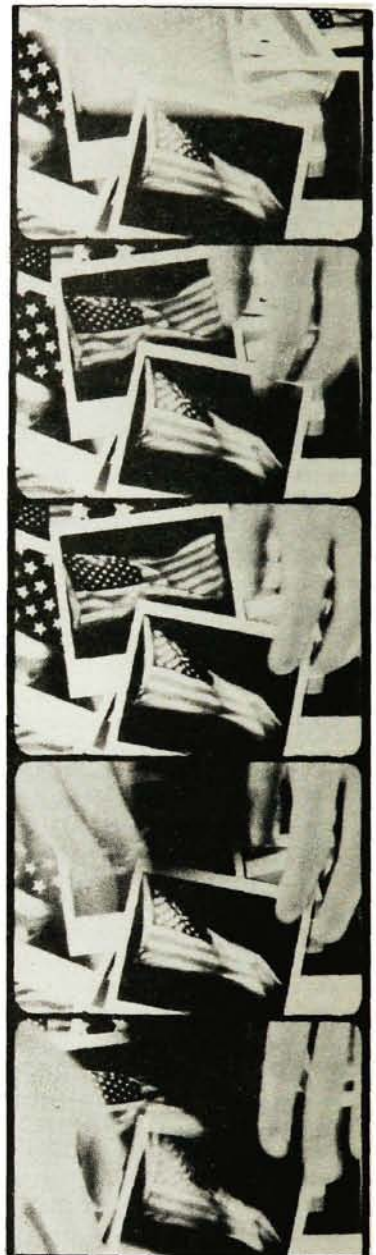
As a title, "Last Days of Contrition" refers both to the final Passion of Christ and to the specific meaning of the word "contrition," which is to be "completely penitent; crushed in spirit by a sense of sin." Here the sin can be read to be the militarization that has supplanted the democratic spirit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

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

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

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

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



Last Days of Contrition

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

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

Marc Glassman •

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

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New from Clairmont: our T4.5 1000mm lens

This is the fastest 1000mm lens in captivity. It's an entirely new design in every way – none of it is derived from any other lens.

We had it made because people often ask us for a fast, high-quality 1000mm. Extenders on a 600 or 800mm aren't the answer, of course. Chromatic aberration up; contrast down. Wide open becomes about T8.

No vibration

On the Clairmont 1000, focussing is smooth, easy and *internal*; no vibration. It works with the ARRI Studio Follow Focus and its flexible whip control; no vibration. The Follow Focus engages at the point of balance, right above the gear head's axis. No vibration.

Follow focus and watch the action

Another way our lens helps make your work look better: you can follow focus while looking at the subject. Standing up and facing you on top of the lens, at the front, is a big focus/distance scale.

That's in addition to the usual scale on the side of the lens, naturally. Also on the side of the lens: a Sports Finder, with cross hairs. It helps you to hunt for moving action with your other eye.

Four filters, two rotating

With telephoto lenses, filters on the front degrade the image. So we've built a three-stage filter holder at the back – 4×4 square filters. Two of them rotate, so you can use polarizers and grads. You can also screw a round filter inside the back of the lens.

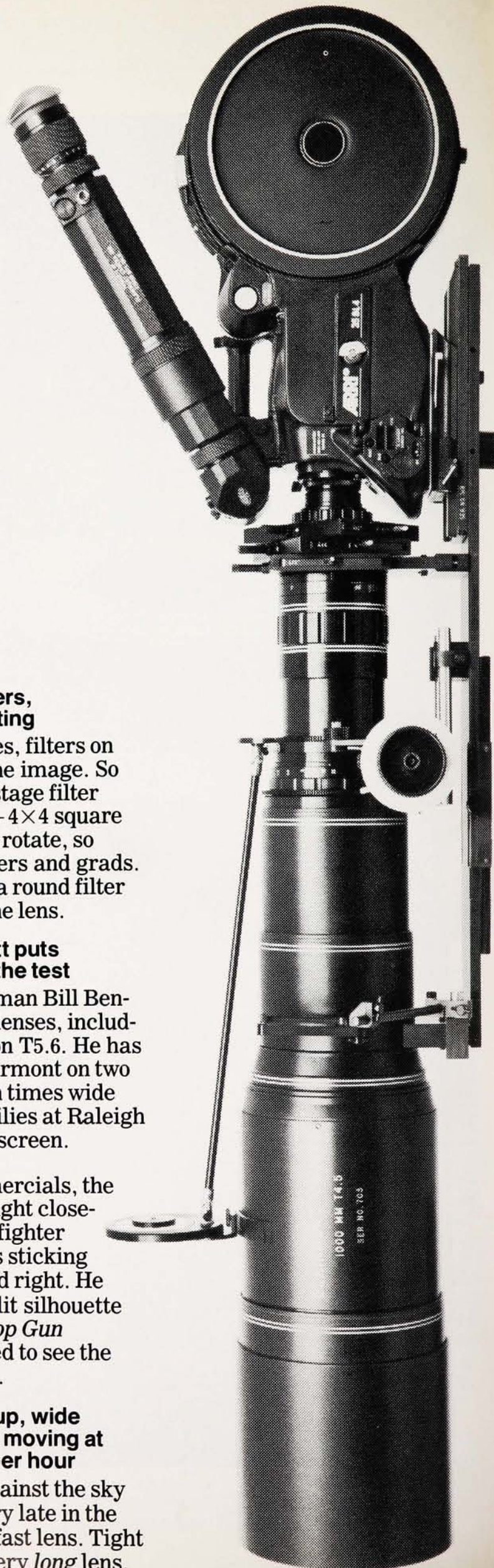
Bill Bennett puts our lens to the test

Hollywood cameraman Bill Bennett owns eighteen lenses, including an 800mm Canon T5.6. He has used a 1000mm Clairmont on two commercials – both times wide open. He ran his dailies at Raleigh Studios on a 14 foot screen.

On one of the commercials, the director wanted a tight close-up of a military jet fighter taking off. Wingtips sticking out of frame left and right. He also wanted a backlit silhouette against the sky – *Top Gun* style. And he wanted to see the jet's exhaust flame.

Tight closeup, wide open, subject moving at 150 miles per hour

To see the flame against the sky meant shooting very late in the day. That meant a fast lens. Tight framing meant a very *long* lens.



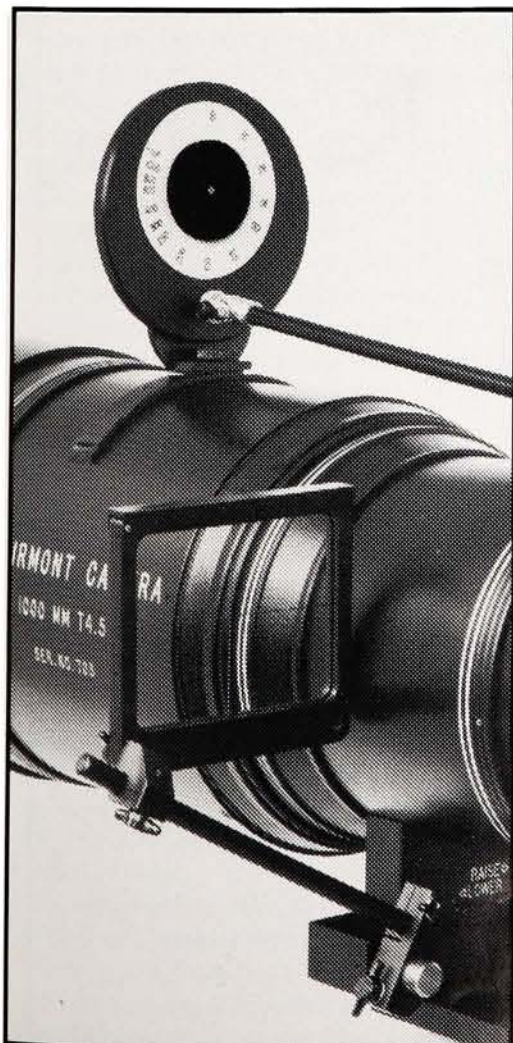
Backlighting meant shooting into the sunset sky, probably wide open. The fading light meant not many retakes. The plane would be moving past and away at 150 mph. *No problem.*

“We disguised part of Mojave Airport as a military base and we set up as close to the runway as we were allowed to get,” says Bill Bennett. “With the light going, we knew we’d get only a few shots at the takeoff. So I had two cameras rolling.”

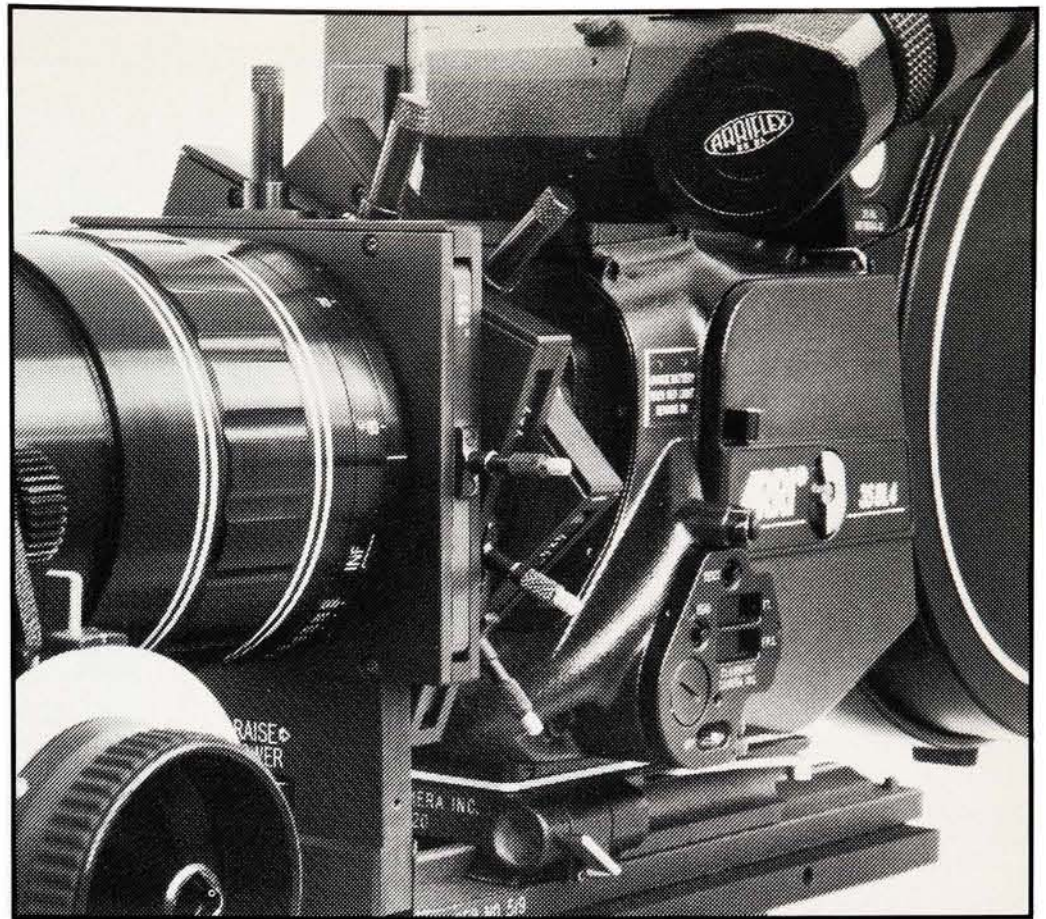
800mm as backup on second camera

“As a backup, I had my 800mm Canon set up on the other side of the runway, shooting the same (but opposite) angle. Three-quarter rear view of the jet fighter taking off against the blue hills and banking steeply out of frame against the orange sky.”

“When the plane entered frame, it was about 700 feet away, going away from us. With the 1000mm, the frame was a little under 15 feet wide at 700 feet. The plane’s wingspan was 22 feet. Just right.”



Our front-mounted Focus Scale and Sports Finder



Rotating filter stage at back of Clairmont lens

“To fill the frame with the 800mm, we would have had to pick the plane up sooner and pan with it. You try that – with an 800mm lens wide open and an airplane going by at 220 feet per second!”

Fast follow focus

“Kirk Bachman followed focus on the Clairmont lens. The front-mounted distance pointer really made *his* day. If he’d had to look down at the scale on the lens barrel, by the time he looked *up* again the plane would have been 200 feet further away.”

“We wanted the plane to be a strong black silhouette against the sunset sky, with sun highlights glinting off the aluminum wings. A lens with flare or low contrast would have turned that to mush. But the 1000mm gave us a superb cookie-cutter image.”

“The Clairmont 1000 was as sharp as my 5.6 Canon 800. And somewhat *more* contrasty. I was surprised.”

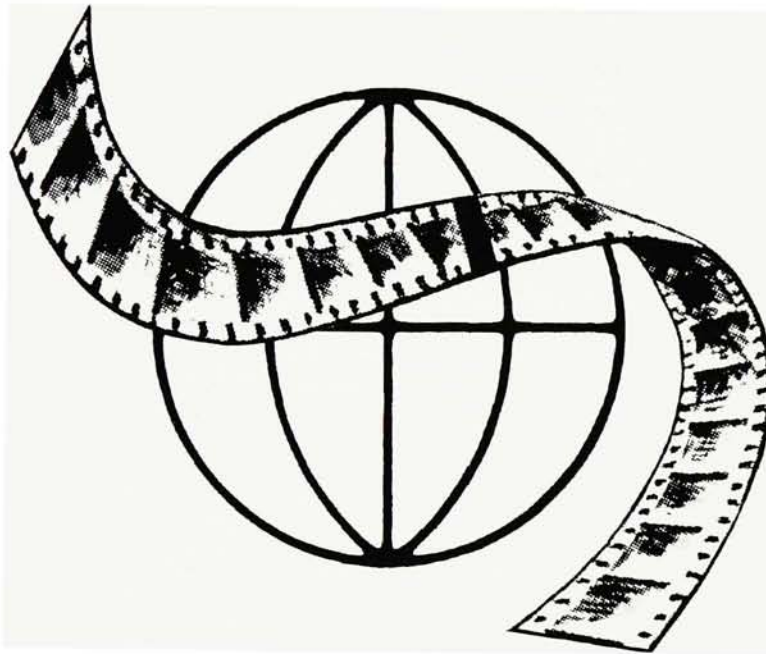
Comparison with the 800mm Canon

“So now we didn’t have to use the 800mm version,” says Mr. Bennett. “But I *did* get to compare the footage at the dailies. The Clairmont 1000 was as sharp as my 5.6 Canon 800. And somewhat *more* contrasty – I was surprised. Anyhow, we couldn’t have got that shot without it.”

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Valerie Buhagiar as Harriet

Alexandra Gill's Harriet Loves

Reviews present the fundamental conundrum of artistic endeavour. How does one adequately re-present experience; in this instance the watching of *Harriet Loves*, by

Alexandra Gill? Whether we are telling a story or retelling it, re-presentation or re-view delimit the infinity of consciousness and meaning. The magic of our minds diminishes in proportion to its structuring. For the artist, the fine line between a humiliating mess and mystical re-creation is the road travelled.

It is a road to which only the courageous, or fools are drawn. Alexandra Gill, as demonstrated in her first film, is of the former. In this neon Rome, where the so-called sciences of commerce and communication rule, *Harriet Loves* pays tribute to neither, it only nods in passing.

Watching this film, one knows it is the inspiration of youth. The product of someone of an age who, like Rimbaud, still sees innocence and the worm at once glance. An artist only gets one shot at expressing these inchoate emotions, before the devastation of self-consciousness takes hold. *Harriet Loves* follows a path few dare to cover, and fewer still successfully navigate.

The story, if such it must be called, is of two women, told as memory, revealed in pursuit. The narrator attempts to retrieve a friend, Harriet, who has chosen to cross the threshold of civilized behaviour. The abjured Harriet entices the narrator to join her on the other side. The narrator wants to follow and repossess her lost love. The narrator (sleep) walks through an industrial landscape, an incongruously pretty figure in white lace. She recalls moments from the time of their friendship. Knowing not the road she's on, her destination is never gained, Harriet's love's lost.

The form, as must be evident by now, is lyrical. There is no ordered sense of time, rather, the story unfolds by association. Like consciousness, moments are recalled, associated with others, then resonate and recur in patterns of growing complexity. With a poet's sure

sense, when the complexity is no longer sustainable and about to fall into chaos, night comes and the film ends with a final lament.

If Alexandra Gill's inspiration comes from youth, her production is decidedly mature. Fine performances have been coaxed from her leads, Valerie Buhagiar and Judy Cade. The tones and rhythms of Gerald Packer's photography and Bruce McDonald's editing are sensuous and tuned to the evocative poetry of the scenario. The soundtrack is an astoundingly rich orchestration of music, natural sound and dialogue. When gifted crafting and poetic imagination meet, the result might be confounding, but it's always a pleasure.

Harriet Loves is a short wander through the mystery of our consciousness. Trapped in a time-bound world, we seem cursed by the impulse to order. Invocations that set us free, that release us briefly to wonder in the magic of our beings, common enough in literature and painting, are too rare in film. *Harriet Loves* belongs to that fine art. "May Art continue to be the music of our Reason." - Guy Davenport.

Marsh Birchard •

HARRIET LOVES p. / d. / sc. / ed. Alexandra Gill d. o. p. Gerald Packer art dir. Virginia Rankin sup. ed. Bruce McDonald sd. ed. Michael Werth mus. Bill Gilliam 1st. a. d. Camelia Frieberg 1st. asst. cam. Charlotte Disher grip Cynthia Barlow prod. mgr. Derek Rogers soundmix Daniel Pellerin titles Metamedia l. p. Valeria Buhagiar, Judy Cade Funding LIFT, Ontario Arts Council, private investment. Colour, 16mm, 28 min. dist. Film Clips.

Martha Davis' Path

The "road movie" has a long and honourable history in both literature and film, encompassing everything from Bunyan's pilgrim looking for salvation to mindless teenagers searching for the victim of their next prank. After all the highway provides a ready-made metaphor for the journey from life to death and travelling allows a subject to encounter more of the sublime and the ridiculous than is likely to be available close to home.

Path, a feature-length experimental film by Martha Davis, is not exactly a road movie; it might be called a piece of sidewalk cinema. This bit of amblin' entertainment takes the viewer on a walk through various downtown Toronto neighbourhoods. Each brief stroll is followed by a period of reflection in and about the filmmaker's home during which the images previously gathered are re-ordered, re-examined and re-imagined. Of course, taking experience and reworking it into something meaningful is one of the main tasks of art and artists. The journeys are shot from the pedestrian's point of view while in the reflective portions the subject is usually in medium shot or closeup. Thus the



Martha Davis

PHOTO: GILL COLLYER

public domain is given a private perspective and the private realm a public aspect.

The segments thankfully vary in length and pacing. Over the course of the film the types of responses the artist has to the images gathered during her excursions gradually change. At first the reactions are literal. The sight of poultry in Kensington Market results in a string of paper chickens. Various dogs are seen and drawn. After encountering a group of boys playing war, the subject plays dead in her bedroom. The walking motif is paralleled by a series of wind-up toys. Davis has a great collection ranging from a marching telephone, a chain gang and two sets of wind-up shoes. Slowly the responses become more and more abstractly gestural, culminating in the ritual dance in the final moments of the film.

Some of these neighbourhoods aren't terribly exciting, being just rows of residences with a few yard dogs worth scratching. With the constraint of a single point of view, Davis has to resort to some time-honoured tricks to retain visual interest. These include shooting in mirrors, windows and puddles of water, creating irises by shooting through pipes of various dimensions and even shooting her own shadow. Luckily, for the most part this works, although the film does lag in places.

Besides pets, Davis has a penchant for children, perhaps reflecting her own playfulness, and digits. The number four is repeated frequently. Apparently, in numerology, the number four signifies transformation and change. Fortunately, obscure references such as this are kept to a minimum.

Very few women are among the adults filmed. Davis seems to prefer middle-aged or older males. She certainly isn't a consciously feminist filmmaker, nor does she appear to work from a strong theoretical base.

Although buried within the film there are moments of sadness, it is for the most part a playful and joyous work. Except for a few drunks sleeping on the street and one man with an amputated leg making his way crab-like along the sidewalk, few urban grotesques appear. Davis certainly could never become the Diane Arbus of Super-8. (*Path* was originally shot on Super-8. The film was later bumped up to 16mm

and is now being distributed in that format.)

Davis does have a happy facility for catching certain serendipitous gestures. For instance, during a marathon foot-race a young boy lies on the side of the road, his legs sawing the air. He is a horizontal reflection of the athletes passing behind him.

The one moment of real drama in the film also occurs by chance. A couple of unemployed men argue vehemently, first with a born again Christian preaching outside Toronto's Eaton Centre, then with a Hare Krishna more quietly spreading his word. Only the intervention of a nearby flower-seller prevents those secular boys and the follower of Krishna from coming to blows.

One of the most moving sequences in the film occurs after a visit to a graveyard and a mausoleum. In response, Davis makes her own set of tombstones from the dust jackets of books by her favourite photographers. These are loving mini-monuments; they are also a reflection of the inherent sadness and deathlike aura of all photographed images.

Besides being an essay on the artistic process, *Path* is also a kind of diary. But a cinematic diary has limitations a written one does not. With print, one can record thoughts and events at the end of the day. A writer can decide what is worth recording long after the fact. A photographer or cinematographer is more bound to the moment. Not all lost images can be readily recaptured. In addition, the very fact of creating a diary may change the diarist's behaviour. Would Davis have attended a scarecrow festival and watched a marathon and attended an antinuclear rally if she were not in the process of making this film?

Except for the argument between the religious types and the unemployed men and conversations between the filmmaker and two different blind people, the film eschews words, preferring to let the abstract rhythms of image and sound (the track is by Bill Grove) do the talking. The trouble is it takes several viewings to readily appreciate these patterns. But the film's length (104 minutes) makes repeat viewings, in most contexts, unlikely.

Most of Davis' previous films are concerned, as is *Path*, with the choreography of everyday life. Several also involve spontaneous, open-ended interactions with people on the street. *Path* may not have the slickness of Davis' most recent film, the Genie-nominated *Elephant Dreams*, but it has a good deal of charm and a number of cinematic ideas worth further exploration.

Randi Spires •

PATH p. / d. / ed. / d. o. p. Martha Davis mus. Bill Grove, Martha Davis, Glenn Milchem 2nd. unit cam. Karen Lee, Midi Onodera prod. asst. David Bennell, Ian Cochrane, Gill Collyer, Rae Davis, Mychol Dyer, Denis Fujiwara, Peter Gress, Ross McLaren, Music Gallery, Dot Tuer, Optimage Lab Funding The Canada Council. Colour, 16mm, 104 min.