

# A R T S



Grierson at work at the National Film Board.

## facts stranger than fiction: grierson festival hits toronto

by Ira Glick

There was something new and cinematically crucial to check out last week; the Grierson Documentary Seminar and Festival. Hope you were there, because if you weren't, chances are you won't be seeing most of these documentaries again.

I know you're thinking, why is this guy hyping documentaries? I mean, if I want to, I can sit at home any Sunday night and gorge on the stuff, thanks to PBS and even the CBC.

It's true. Documentaries are well syndicated on the goggle box, but the ones shown are usually the most mainstream of the lot.

The Grierson Festival is a different take on the genre; brighter, newer, more experimental. The films scheduled this year, such as the Wim Winder's double-bill at The Euclid, were unique, compelling and highly watchable, and because the festival is still relatively new in this city, the whole event had a lovely intimate quality. Directors are often in attendance, and should you be

an aspiring documentarian or just a film buff, the seminar presents the opportunity to get your questions answered.

Documentaries happen to be very much in vogue at the moment, due in part to last year's Academy Award to the National Film Board for its 50 year contribution to documentary film-making. This country is, thanks to John Grierson, considered to have the most superior documentary film-making facilities in the world. And the finest documentarians. Canada's commitment to this genre is unparalleled the world over.

Another reason documentaries are now in the limelight has to do with distant, but connected, developments in television. Twelve months ago some of the hot buzzwords in TV programming were infotainment, confrontation and interactive. It was tabloid TV.

It was also a bastardization of documentary technique. Geraldo was on the cover of *Newsweek*. *Channels*, the TV industry's bible, had discovered the "news punks" and "reality shows." Everybody's mandate seemed to be to cut through the bullshit, and

grab the viewer by the lapels; programming to heat up a cool medium.

Documentaries have always had that live, fresh-off-the-press immediacy which lends an aura of importance to any subject. Documentaries are also a breeding ground for that elusive commodity most highly sought by programmers (and feature filmmakers) — credibility. It's *cinema verite* for the 90s.

### Here are some of the highlights of this year's festival:

*Alias Will James* (Jaques Godbout)

The story of Ernest Dufault, a Quebecois who moves to the States and becomes a cowboy who writes best-sellers. Godbout uses the story as a forum to examine the dangers of assimilation and the attraction the Quebecois feel for American culture.

*Une fille de ma gang* (Marilyn Burgess)

A powerful, hypnotic 20-minute video which makes extensive use of World War II documentation of a women's training camp in Nova Scotia. Young women are seen making uniforms, testing gas masks and

practising physical activities while a voiceover of a lesbian's experience in that environment is heard.

This film is essentially the story of one woman's experience with a human right's violation. I walked out awestruck by Svend Robinson's heroism for questioning the intolerance of the government currently in power.

*Phillippines: Portraits de femmes* (Marie Boti and Malcolm Guy)

This is a behind-the-scenes look at Marcos' and then Aquino's Phillipines through a female point-of-view. We find out that there's a strong feminist movement within the church. We also learn that Japanese men have been using this country as a sexual playground for years. It's a controversial eye-opener.

I spoke with one of the directors of the film, Marie Boti, who told me it's been a horrendous task getting *Portraits* programmed. It seems the Phillipines is yesterday's news and her unusually fresh outlook on that country doesn't "fit in" with the way the TV broadcasters want news events to be perceived.

*Gates of Heaven* (Errol Morris)

A funny and touching look at the people who operate pet cemeteries and the pet owners who use them. Shot in 1978, this is a film which clearly must have inspired David Byrne's *True Stories*. A loopy take on an off-beat phenomenon, Morris manages to hold up a magnifying glass to American society and explore the meaning of love, greed, failure and loneliness.

All in all the festival, and especially the seminar portion, was engaging and educational. If features represent fictional storytelling and documentaries represent non-fiction, there is a strong argument here for the old line, "Facts are stranger than fiction."

As a working screenwriter, I see the future of quality feature filming encompassing a hybrid of these two forms. "Reality" programming is not about to disappear; as it represents a style of storytelling which reinforces the impact of an entertainment experience.

The documentary will continue to thrive as both a viable form in its own right as well as a source of inspiration for feature and TV film directors and writers.