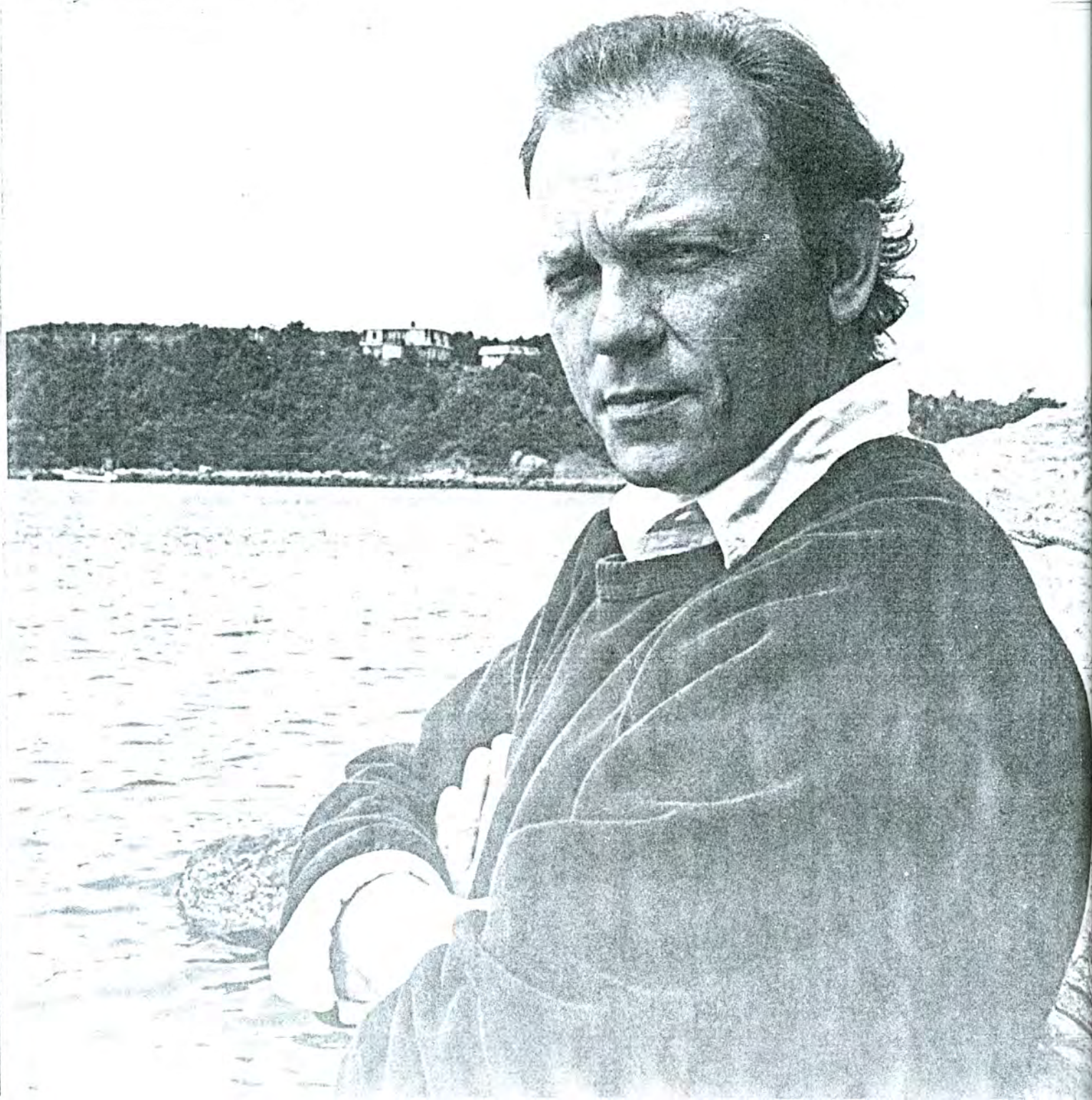


WILLIAM MACGILLIVRAY

By Tom McSorley • "Tell your own stories; get to know who you are." Only in Canada could this simple assertion resound like a rallying cry for change. Uttered by a defiant Newfoundland professor in William D. Macbillivray's most recent feature drama, *Understanding Bliss*, it is also the Halifax-based filmmaker's own passionate artistic



PERSISTENCE OF VISION

credo. In the interminable cycle of big budget, mass-marketed movies and the continued dominance of American stories on Canadian screens, such statements may sound quaint and quixotic, yet it is this quietly radical approach which has made MacGillivray one of this nation's most interesting, engaging, and important filmmakers.

MACGILLIVRAY HAS BEEN telling his own stories, in both fiction and documentary, for over two decades, with a particular combination of courage, wit, and sensitivity. In the process, he has created intelligent, evocative cinematic explorations of "who we are."

Born in postwar, pre-Confederation Newfoundland, MacGillivray moved to Halifax to attend the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. While studying Fine Arts and Design in Montreal and subsequently teaching art in public schools in Halifax, he developed a strong interest in film. "I was, and still am, attracted to the lie of physics known as persistence of vision, that profound mys-

tery at the heart of moving images. On another level, the moving image is the primary mode of expression in our age. As an aspiring late 20th century artist, I realized, how could I not make films?"

Pursuing his passion for cinema at the London School of Film Technique in England, MacGillivray began writing and directing films upon his return to Nova Scotia. He also became a founding member and first president of the Atlantic Filmmakers Co-operative in 1973, helping to generate and sustain a vibrant independent filmmaking community. With several collaborators, he established an independent production company, Picture Plant, in 1981. He

continues to be a vocal supporter of independent, artist-driven film production, eschewing the industrial model which encourages filmmakers, in his words, "to regard images as commodities, as objects of consumer exchange rather than as important purveyors of ideas."

Although he made several short films in the mid-1970s, MacGillivray's "cinema of ideas" begins to emerge with *Aerial View* (1979), a 59-minute drama about a young architect disillusioned with the materialist culture which surrounds him. His first full feature, *Stations* (1983), extends themes of identity and alienation sketched in *Aerial*

Bryan Hennessey and Catherine Grant in *Understanding Bliss*





Jacinta Cormier in Life Classes

"I WAS, AND STILL AM, ATTRACTED TO THE LIE OF PHYSICS KNOWN AS PERSISTENCE OF VISION, THAT PROFOUND MYSTERY AT THE HEART OF MOVING IMAGES."

View across the entire landscape of Canada. Set on a pan-Canadian train trip, *Stations* follows a troubled television journalist, Tom Murphy (Michael Jones), as he travels with a cameraman from Vancouver to his hometown in St. John's for a friend's funeral and a difficult family reunion. Murphy's personal journey is complicated by his having been assigned to produce a documentary of his cross-Canada odyssey, to "capture" aspects of national identity. With its fragmented narrative, existential concerns, and meditative modalities, *Stations* is reminiscent of early Wim Wenders; its explorations of identity, memory, and the relationship between individual and landscape are, however, quintessentially Canadian. Intelligent, inquisitive of its own powers of representation, and visually authoritative, *Stations* is one of the masterpieces of Canadian cinema.

In *Life Classes* (1987), MacGillivray pursues this vital intersection of identity and expression. It's the story of Mary Cameron, a young, pregnant woman who leaves small-town Cape Breton for Halifax. A struggling single mother, she supplements her income by modelling nude at an local art school. She is soon developing her own artistic talents. At once an eloquent portrait of self-discovery and an examination of the mysterious processes of making art, *Life Classes* also ponders the effects of imported cultural norms and attitudes, whether from cultural centres in Europe or the United States, on the individual imagination.

In 1988, MacGillivray produced *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, a thoughtful, decidedly irreverent feature documentary about his alma mater and significant centre in contemporary North American art, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Despite its occasionally whimsical tone (several sequences with artists entangled in byzantine theoretical explanations are hilarious), *Boring Art* reveals again MacGillivray's modernist preoccupation with the process and significance of

image-making. It also suggests, like its predecessor, that to speak in a borrowed voice in order to articulate your own ideas takes you nowhere.

This motif resurfaces in the awkward, disappointing return to Life Classes territory, *The Vacant Lot* (1989), a tale of a young female guitarist and her relationship with a middle-aged, fading rock star. Though not without pointed observations on marginality and the deadening, homogenizing effects of popular culture, it is overly conventional and remains MacGillivray's film *maudit*, his *Zabriskie Point*.

For his next film, *Understanding Bliss* (1990), MacGillivray returned home to Newfoundland. Shot in St. John's, *Bliss* examines the relationship between a literature professor from Toronto and a professor of cultural studies from Newfoundland. Despite their passionate encounters at conferences elsewhere, when she travels to St. John's for a reading of Katherine Mansfield's story *Bliss*, the relationship begins to disintegrate. In addition to tracing the dissonances of the relationship (personal, professional, and, yes, regional), the film investigates how and why we tell ourselves stories. Beyond the thematic level, the investigation is also inscribed on the actual film itself—*Bliss* was shot entirely on video and transferred to 35mm. This mixture of media is not only pragmatic (read inexpensive) and startlingly intimate visually, it also suggests alternate cinematic possibilities, new ways to tell our own stories.

MacGillivray ascribes his confidence in his own voice to his parents, who encouraged him to "speak without fear. From them I got a sense of the value of my own ideas in relation to dominant, and often external, cultural assumptions. This remains the most influential idea in my approach to cinema."

This confidence extends to his response to the great Canadian concept to which his name, as a filmmaker based outside Toronto and Montreal, is inevitably attached—regionalism. "Re-

gionalism is an institutionalized invention of those who think they live in the centre. I am a Canadian filmmaker who happens to make films about Atlantic Canada." For MacGillivray, while the "regional" context of films does resonate thematically, it neither determines the films' meanings nor their characters' possibilities. Although rooted firmly in contemporary Atlantic Canada, MacGillivray's cinema seeks to relocate its regional concerns into larger questions of alienation, identity, memory, and possibilities of personal transcendence.

From the simple, radical premise that telling one's own stories is important, William D. MacGillivray has emerged as one of Canada's singular filmmaking talents, whose work has been showcased at Canadian festivals as well as in Berlin, Melbourne, and Paris. Having just completed a television documentary on the 1917 Halifax explosion, MacGillivray is anxious to begin production on his next feature, *The Dreams of Jinky Drover*, and is currently preparing *Face/The Landscape*, an "experimental documentary" on government resettlement programs in Newfoundland in the 1960s. In spite of the usual difficulties in getting films produced and distributed in Canada, MacGillivray has persisted with intelligence and independence, creating a perceptive, particular vision of contemporary Canadian experience. It is a vision based on recognizing the importance and influence of moving images, something MacGillivray the storyteller never allows himself to forget. "As one with a certain access to the power of moving images, I think I should use it responsibly. Images must be treated as something more than consumer goods. After all, as a filmmaker, what appears on the screen is you." ✚I

Tom McSorley is Director of Programming at Cinematheque Canada in Ottawa, lectures on cinema at Carleton University, and is a contributor to CBC Radio's Prime Time and The Arts Tonight.