



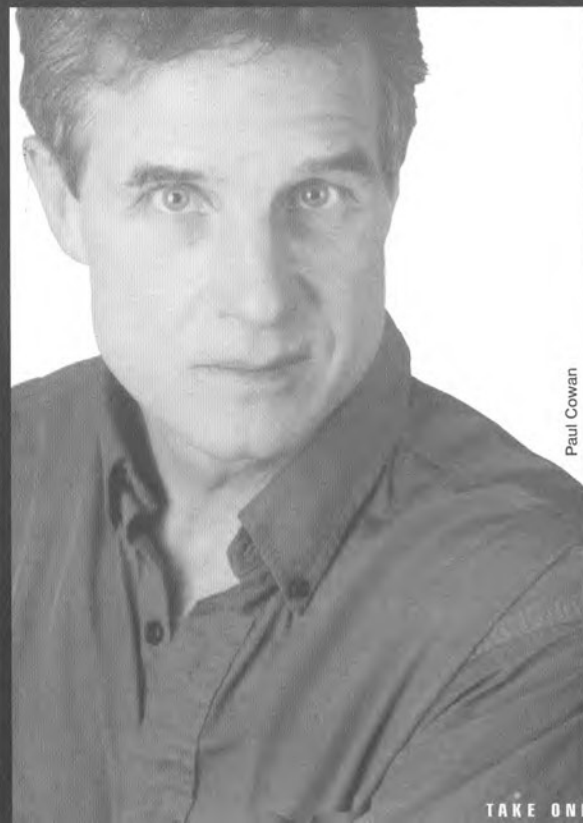
Photo taken from the NFB production 'Westray'.
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PAUL COWAN'S INQUISITIVE EYE:

WAR GAMES
PORN STARS
AND
THE GHOSTS
OF WESTRAY

BY Maurie Alioff

PAUL COWAN, WHOSE EMOTIONALLY CHARGED, INVENTIVELY CRAFTED FILM *WESTRAY* TOOK THIS YEAR'S GENIE FOR BEST DOCUMENTARY, SEES MOVIE MAKING AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO STEP INTO LIVES RADICALLY DIFFERENT FROM HIS OWN. COWAN SAYS THAT THE WANDERER IN HIM KICKED IN WHEN HE WAS A SUBURBAN TORONTO TEENAGER, AND HE DID THINGS LIKE "TAKE A BUS TO NEW YORK TO HANG OUT WITH THE WEIRDOS, THE PROSTITUTES AND PIMPS DOWN IN GREENWICH VILLAGE. I WAS IN HEAVEN." EVEN TODAY, LIVING IN THE COMFORTABLE MONTREAL HOME HE SHARES WITH TWO DAUGHTERS AND HIS WIFE OF 20 YEARS, CBC RADIO ONE JAZZ HOST KATIE MALLOCH, COWAN STILL HAS THAT INEXPLICABLE URGE. "I'M JUST A DABBLER IN LIFE," HE TOLD ME AFTER THE GENIE WIN. "I LOVE PARACHUTING INTO A NEW WORLD, FINDING MY WAY THROUGH IT, AND FIGURING OUT HOW CAN I CONVEY IT." IN FACT, ACCORDING TO COWAN, IF DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS LACK THE NEED TO KNOW, "THEY'RE IN THE WRONG BUSINESS."



Paul Cowan

Born in Montreal, the long-time NFB staffer began his career as a cinematographer and has shot many of his own pictures. His involvement with the Film Board goes back to the early 1970s when director Giles Walker, then with the NFB, asked him to collaborate on a film about the Canadian downhill ski team (*Descent*, 1975). "He needed someone who could ski and shoot," Cowan laughs, amused by the random twists and turns of fate. "I could ski and shoot."

The burgeoning moviemaker had been building a career in Los Angeles, which is where, after the skiing project, he momentarily lapsed from a lifetime faith in documentary. Like Francis Coppola and others who learnt their craft grinding out genre pictures for Roger Corman, Cowan went low-rent on an item he and his partners designated a "tits and terror film." Targeted at the southern U.S. drive-in market, the movie was so mild-mannered it could play on YTV today. Back then, it went out to 600 theatres and must have earned a decent return, but Cowan and his fellow producers lost their shirts on the deal, sucker-punched by a combination of creative accounting and legal threats from the film's wily distributors.

Soured on Hollywood and plagued by green-card problems, Cowan fled back to Canada and wrangled a job at the Film Board, where he remains as one of the last of a once-flourishing breed – the staff director. Cowan explains that whatever the NFB's limitations, it produces work that isn't necessarily driven by a hunger for big audiences. "That doesn't mean they're always good," he says, "but at least their intentions are generally honourable. At the Film Board one can fully explore and develop a subject like *Westray* and I honestly can't think of a film I'd rather do." Seguing into his ironic mode, he grins, "Also, it's all I know how to do. It's not that I wouldn't want to direct episodic television, but the fact is I don't know how."

Cowan admires friends who have those skills. He is also deeply sympathetic to filmmakers at the opposite end of the spectrum, the ones who try to make ambitious, long-form documentaries without the cushion of a government salary, and could earn more income from a steady gig at Mc-Donald's. (Cowan is too polite to mention the elite indie documentary filmmakers who take full advantage of the system, travelling around the world – from festival to festival, seminar to jury duty, buffet to buffet.)

Of all his movies, the documentary that pushed the limits of Cowan's creative freedom was *The Kid Who Couldn't Miss*, made in 1983. That picture triggered a national scandal, not to mention an emotional shock wave that threw his life off course. "It was totally demoralizing," Cowan says, clearly reluctant to reanimate nightmarish memories. "The pressure was so constant you couldn't do anything other than deal with it. I was hauled up before Senate subcommittees twice. Four or five hundred articles were written about the film in the press. My wife thought our house was going to be fire-bombed. There's nothing I could have done that could have aroused more anger."

For undoubtedly more than one motive, Cowan took on the subject of one of the few Canadian heroes anybody cares about passionately – the First World War flying ace Billy Bishop. For his skill and bravery as a fighter pilot, Bishop won the Victoria Cross, the British Commonwealth's top military honour, and gained unlimited public adulation. In *The Kid Who Couldn't Miss* (which, like *Westray*, is said to have nudged close to an Oscar nomination), Cowan's insouciant mockery and anti-war mind set shot the golden boy out of the sky. The film suggests that whatever his accomplishments, Bishop was

a spoiled brat who exaggerated them and ended his career as an aging poster boy for military recruitment. This icon-shattering view of the hero is supported by a new book, Historian Brereton Greenhouse's *The Making of Billy Bishop*. Scheduled to be published in June, it has already reignited the controversy.

Through ironically deployed archival footage, excerpts from John Gray's satirical musical *Billy Bishop Goes to War* and talking-head interviews that mix real subjects with actors playing long-dead veterans, young Billy Bishop is seen as a glib skirt chaser, who, according to the dryly ironic narration, "broadened his horizons to fist fighting and hellraising." You get the impression the Great Canadian Hero became a flying ace as much by fluke as by his excellent marksmanship. In one montage, cut to an anti-imperialist song from Gray's musical, he even gets obliquely linked to Italian fascism and the Nazis.

As a young boy, Cowan was himself enamoured by the Billy Bishop legend and the film was clearly the filmmaker's own kind of daredevil assault on unquestioning hero worship and military triumphalism. He got inundated by thousands of furious letters, rumblings in the Senate subcommittee on Veterans' Affairs, and demands that the government cut off funding to the NFB. To this day, the War Amputations of Canada defends Bishop against the film. And an elaborate Web site – www.billybishop.net/bishop – created by an American called Albert Lowe, features vitriolic attacks on Cowan, who, according to Lowe "did one of the foulest deeds possible without committing some form of violence." No NFB picture, except perhaps Brian and Terence McKenna's *The Valour and the Horror*, has ever aroused such public wrath.

In fact, whatever the truth about Billy Bishop, seeing him as flawed and confused makes him, in a way, more heroic than if he were portrayed as a 20th-century Arthurian knight bathed in a holy glow. Cowan is a filmmaker who sidesteps the trap of sanctifying his subjects and rendering them lifeless, a trap that too many Canadian documentaries succumb to. In *The Kid Who Couldn't Miss*, he makes it clear that even if Billy was self-absorbed and unhealthily addicted to aerial combat, it took a lot of guts to buzz around in dinky toy flying machines, trading machine-gun fire with rivals like the legendary Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen, who collected the ID tags of dead adversaries. "Putting your life on the line is different from anything else you can do," says Cowan. By the end of the film, Bishop deepens as a character, his arc having taken him from simple-minded excitement with his adventures to disillusionment and guilt-ridden dreams about the men he killed.

In the spirit of satires like Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* or Richard Lester's *How I Won the War*, the film's broader theme is the madness of war. In Cowan's view, upper-class First World War pilots risked their necks to engage in an absurd blood sport, an idea underlined by a sequence that intercuts a dogfight with a cheering, groaning crowd as you hear a mock play-by-play voice-over. The film points out that cold-hearted generals sacrificed thousands of these young adventurers for the sake of their own glory.

It's a measure of Cowan's inquisitive nature and his taste for provocation that during the tortuous development process that led to *Westray*, he spent almost four years on a subject far removed from pictures like *Democracy on Trial: The Morgentaler Affair* (1984) and *Lessons* (1995). *Give Me Your Soul* (2000) is Cowan's captivating tour of the Southern California porn industry. Adopting a non-judgmental stance, the movie insists that the porners we meet are intriguing human beings.



Cowan tells me that while researching a documentary about censorship, he zeroed in on conflicted, taboo-making attitudes toward sex. Soon after, he found himself prowling around in "the sexual underground of Manhattan. You know, the weirdest types of sex you can imagine, or can't even imagine." Eventually, the trail led to Los Angeles, and an international event called the World Pornography Conference, which is where Cowan hooked up with the West Coast triple-X scene. Unlike some Canadian documentary filmmakers who see themselves as missionaries in the wilderness of late capitalist Western society, Cowan admits to an unpolitically correct fascination with Porn Land. "I'm 54, and I was really glad that I wasn't doing that film when I was 24 or 34. I might have had some conflicts of interest."

Looking back at what was clearly an intense encounter with L.A.'s porn freaks, Cowan brings up his contradictory feelings. After a shoot, he would get fed up and return to Montreal, "but I was always glad to get back out again." Interestingly, making the picture echoes the cycles of boredom and excitement many porn viewers know well. Moreover, the process of filming *Give Me Your Soul* was a unique challenge. "You get a lot of people coming on to you," Cowan recalls. "These are 100 per cent, full-blown exhibitionists, and it becomes easy, in a sense, because they'll do anything you want them to do." Although tempted to stage whatever popped into his head, he refrained "because that would violate everything that a documentary's all about. That became a rule with me. I didn't ask anybody to do anything."

The principal characters in *Give Me Your Soul* are Bill "Papa Bear" Margold, a 52-year-old former porn star who runs a support group for people in the business; "Katie June," an eager starlet whose mom, Dolly, fully supports her daughter's plans to fuck for bucks; the sensitive J.D. Ram, who died ignominiously; and the legendary Luke Ford. The latter is a thirtysomething journalist, who until recently, ran a porn scene Web site that combined muckraking exposés, extensive bios of stars, and what *www.wired.com* calls "melancholic, angst-filled ruminations on living in the conflicting realms of smut and Sinai." The son of an Australian evangelist, Ford is a convert to Orthodox Judaism, who, says *wired.com*, has sold the Web site and plans to devote his journalistic skills to covering the Middle-East conflict from Jerusalem.

The antithesis of *Not a Love Story*, the NFB's long-ago foray into pornography, Cowan's documentary avoids simplistic moral abstractions. Although Bill Margold, "Katie June" and Luke Ford live off smut, they are not reduced to moustache-twirling misogynists, wretched sex slaves or harlots desperately seeking feminist redemption. The movie also suggests that while these people can be seen as an oddly childlike family, vipers lurk behind the seemingly placid fucking and filming that goes on in airy homes, 30 minutes from Universal City. For all their cool professionalism, some of the actors still die of AIDS, or from addictions that led them into the industry. In the documentary's most haunting images, Dolly attends her daughter's first day as a hard-core actor, and as we hear copulatory groans emanating from a couch in the distance, the camera pulls back into an indifferent, deserted patio.

Like *The Kid Who Couldn't Miss*, Cowan's *Westray* concerns people who get chewed up and spat out by ruth-

less, powerful men; like *Give Me Your Soul*, it's about literally dying for work. The troubling movie immerses the viewer in the horror and tragic loss endured by people in Pictou County, Nova Scotia, after a 1992 coal-mine explosion that killed 26 men. Despite a history of mining disasters that plagued the region for almost 200 years, fast operators managed to open its last and most dangerous coal seam, insisting that new technologies would make it safe. In reality, the now defunct mining operation had no time for standard precautions, its inspectors ignored danger signs, and potential whistle-blowers were told, "Take your fucking lunch can and you fly the fuck underground or you go home." At the end of a 1995 inquiry, the presiding judge called the Westray story one of "omissions, mistakes, incompetence, apathy, stupidity and neglect."

On television and in print, the story has been told many times. Cowan's movie is an object lesson in how a feature-length documentary can deepen understanding of an event, recounting it with an artistry that dignifies and universalizes the people involved. In *Westray*, Cowan finds the techniques he was groping toward in docudramas like *Justice Denied* (1989), which relied on predictable narrative techniques. *Westray* is much more fluid and graceful as Cowan collapses fragments of dramatic re-enactment into documentary footage and archival material, creating a non-linear stream of metaphors and heightened moments — "docupoetry" rather than docudrama.

Juggling several time periods, *Westray's* most haunting images are staged in black-and-white shots and tilted angles that take the viewer back to public moments like the September 11, 1991 launch of the mine, and intensely private ones in the lives of the victims. Images of bad omens run through this movie about doomed miners. For instance, in the opening moments, a sinister flock of birds takes flight and a hearse-like limousine crosses the path of a fire truck backing out of a station. *Westray's* striking visuals merge with a voice-over narration that sounds like nursery rhymes. A man and a woman (actor/director Michael Jones and Katie Malloch) trade lines like "He comes to town riding on a dream. Another feather in his cap, another impossible scheme." Or "If you don't act, that's a terrible crime, if you do, you're out of this mine." The sprightly verses seem incongruous, but they ironically bring to mind fairy-tale archetypes like evil kings, peasants under a spell and pied pipers who lead the innocent to their destruction. The narration underscores the naïveté of people drawn to the mine by the false promise of financial security.

Above all, *Westray* brings the miners and their widows vividly to life. Throughout the movie, survivors re-enact their own histories in country music bars and at stock-car races, the stand-ins for the dead miners looking like shadowy ghosts. Working closely with Hannele Helm, his editor, Cowan aimed at purging *Westray* of anything that looked like a traditional NFB documentary, particularly featureless subjects "who just represented their class, and narration [that] tells you what to feel, preaching to the converted. Filmmakers can be so ascetic in their belief in the rightness of their cause, they forget they still have to move people and use all the elements that drama does. Suspense, irony, relief, tragedy," says Cowan.

Westray is not the first time Cowan directed people to re-enact their experiences. However, this time he went much further by asking traumatized people to relive their most painful moments in the living rooms, dance halls and churches that trigger their memories. In a scene that recre-



Westray

ates the public announcement of the miners' grotesque deaths, Cowan moves in tight on the widows as they throw themselves back into the utter misery they will never forget.

Preparing *Westray*, Cowan sought people for whom "the repercussions of the event were rippling through their lives," but "were at a phase of dealing with their grief and anger. Enough time had passed that they now had certain insights that they didn't have before, but they still could be projected right back into that space again." Improvising ways to convey the stories of people like Fraser Agnew, a guilt-ridden shift foreman or the late Vicki Drolet, a vulnerable Cree woman who lost the only real love of her life, Cowan was dealing with an emotionally volatile situation. Although the NFB's resources gave him plenty of time to build a relationship of trust with his subjects, all of whom he still feels close to, Cowan was "on a knife edge all the time. There were certainly times when I felt I was exploiting people. You burrow on, plow ahead, and you don't even know. You do want them to go deep into their souls, their hearts of darkness, but that may not be healthy for them. You want it as a filmmaker, but you're not a shrink. You're not going to be there to pick up the pieces. It's human nature for people to reveal things at one moment that they regret a week or a year later. When you're filming, you're asking, 'Am I Maury Povich here, turning this woman's crank so she's going to cry on camera?' It's an aspect of documentary filmmaking I actually don't like."

Whatever the intricacies of the *Westray* experience, Cowan wants to put himself on the edge again with a story suitable for cinéma-vérité; if not the risky dramatizations that give his latest film its special power. As he contemplates his next project, he also worries that as far as content goes, the NFB might revert to nuts-and-bolts, social-issue documentary making, what he calls "a smaller range. I don't know whether *Give Me Your Soul* would be made today. My sense is I doubt it. But hopefully, the style in which we can treat subjects might be larger." For sure, Cowan is not a big fan of standardized production choices. He thinks "the best films come out of nowhere. I don't know that you can do much administratively to guarantee good films, or even to help them along. I think you've got to be open to what's out there, and when a good idea comes along, you've got to seize it, whether it fits into your program or not."

Paul Cowan's curiosity about the world, not politically correct ideology, leads him to his themes. But invariably, he has something to say about the state of the world and the conditions that menace human well-being. Regarding *Westray*, he says, "We've forgotten that the workplace is still pretty dangerous for lots of people as we move increasingly into a high-tech world. Whether it's in fishing, or lumber, or mining, all sorts of people are out there working in pretty dangerous worlds, and they're not making a whole lot of money for that danger." *Westray's* central issue is: "How important a job is to people. That's it. People will die for a job."