

POINT OF VIEW

Letter from Vancouver: the 1993 Van

By Colin Browne

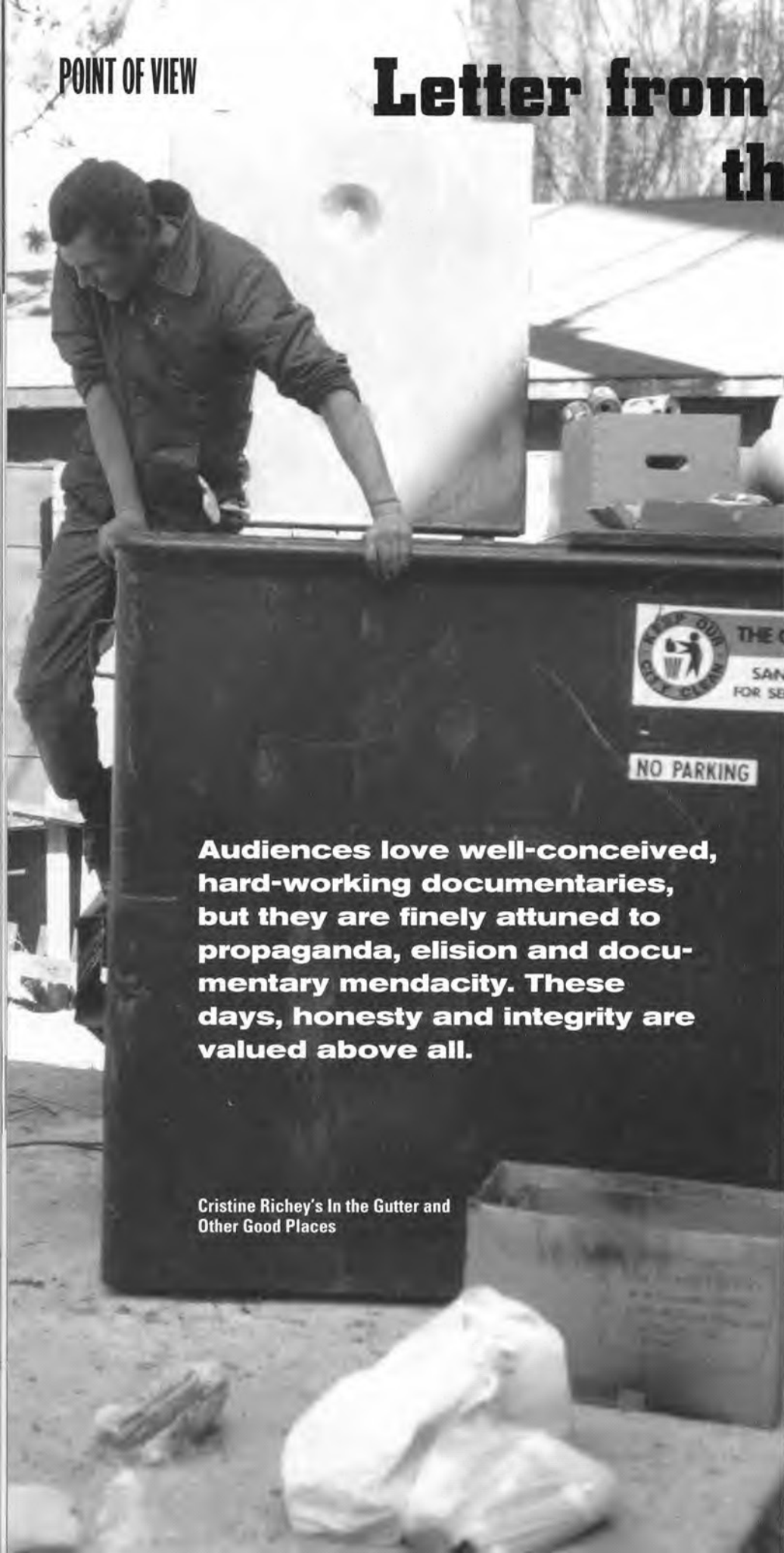
The Vancouver International Film Festival is the only festival in Canada to devote an entire program to Canadian and international documentary and non-fiction films. (I'll call them documentaries, by which I mean to include everything from journalism to intensely personal films and videos.) At a time when festivals are under siege economically, it may seem a bold move, but for two years now the documentary series has proved to be remarkably durable, the audiences loyal and enthusiastic. It seems right in a city where "Cowboy" Kean struggled so long to find a voice (and a dollar); where Arla Saare, Allan King and Jack Long pioneered *cinema verité* in early tv docs like *Skid Row*, and where Video Inn, the oldest video co-op in Canada, has just celebrated its 20th anniversary.

Feature length documentaries are a difficult, often unsatisfying, but sometimes triumphantly revelatory form. If the half-hour or hour-long documentary is like a magazine essay or interview, the feature length documentary must correspond to the depth and complexity of an entire book; it must have *density*. You can't just tack on additional material. The task is to dig deeper. The work must become richer, more contradictory, more relentless in its pursuit of underlying structures and delusions. Audiences love well-conceived, hard-working documentaries, but they are finely attuned to propaganda, elision and documentary mendacity. These days, honesty and integrity are valued above all.

1993 will go down as the year of *Kanehsatake* (as I write this I'm in a hotel room in Edmonton and even the four letter code on my door key reads KTSE). Alanis Obomsawin's NFB-produced chronicle of the Oka incident reminds us of how desperately we need at least one documentary as engaged and impassioned as this to be shown on national television each week. I've heard considerable whining among non-natives about the "lack of analysis" and the

Audiences love well-conceived, hard-working documentaries, but they are finely attuned to propaganda, elision and documentary mendacity. These days, honesty and integrity are valued above all.

Cristine Richey's *In the Gutter and Other Good Places*



Selected Documentary Films from Vancouver International Film Festival

"bias" in this film (is point of view a privilege limited to non-natives?), but those familiar with the director's work—consider *Incident at Restigouche*—will recognize a pattern. Obomsawin refuses to build her story around personalities. Familiar faces emerge, but this film is about community dynamics, and it remains essentially an administrative record of events as they unfolded at Oka and on the Mercier Bridge. Those who seek biographical exposés may misunderstand the function of the film, which is to be a witness to duplicity. *Kanehsatake* provides a step-by-step account of how a people who have suffered betrayal at the hands of a cynical, cowardly government for almost three centuries continue to be betrayed today, even as they continue to act in good faith. No matter how seductive the aesthetic alternative might be, Obomsawin insists that the focus be kept on the central issue, implicitly challenging the biographical imperative.

The more satisfying, less superficial documentaries at the Vancouver festival this year fell into two categories: antidotes to dominant media representations, and meditations on death and sexuality. In the former category: *Kanehsatake*; Makoto Sato's respectful, intimate *Living on the River Agano (Aga Ni Ikiru)*; *Nuhoniyeh*; *Our Story*, directed by Allan and Mary Code in collaboration with the Sayisi Dene; Cristine Richey's evocative *In the Gutter and Other Good Places*; Nicolas Philibert's *In the Land of the Deaf*; and *SA-Life: Documentary Films and Video Documents, Sarajevo 1992/3*.

Most of these films have one thing in common—they represent the view from *inside*. They are seldom didactic, yet each is made with the passion and ardour of someone determined to set the record straight, to seek justice in the face of overwhelming odds and to subvert the dominant view of things.

SA-Life is a video compilation produced under horrific conditions by "professionals, students of the Academy of Film and Theatre, and unknown amateurs" in the besieged city of Sarajevo. The work is often

grim and graphic. However, the artistry involved in conceiving and shooting these episodes makes me reflect on how there seem to be two levels of documentary filmmaking: artistic and journalistic.

Artists are generally aware of the contradictions inherent in the act of film or video representation, and their work reflects these contradictions. Their work is often tentative, personal, reflective, ironic, humorous, contradictory. Artist documentarians tend to acknowledge the shortcomings of their genre; journalist documentarians usually accept them. Artist documentarians begin with raw elements and work toward something unknown, unexpected; journalist documentarians use them to illustrate a thesis. The artist documentarian is or becomes an insider; the journalist documentarian speaks as an outsider to outsiders. The journalist documentarian may become a personality; the artist documentarian may become the next film's subject. How risk is portrayed and relayed is always revealing.

In *SA-Life* the risk is understated. The opening video, Nino Zalica's "Travelling Children," begins with shots of hideously battered automobiles. Before long we hear children's voices making sounds of gears shifting and motors accelerating. We locate a tiny child through a mangled chrome-lined car window. He is sitting on pieces of shattered glass working the steering wheel for all he's worth. He's leaving for Croatia. But this is Sarajevo, as the crack of a sniper's rifle and the clatter of machine gun fire remind us, and no one is going anywhere. By juxtaposing the horrific and the innocent, the filmmakers have re-contextualized the siege of Sarajevo. The utter banality of these children's activities speaks more eloquently than any scene of war. We realize that this is also our city and we must also be the snipers in the hills. Conventional news reports come and go; the first few minutes of *SA-Life* will never be forgotten.

There were a number of films that place the filmmaker's life at their centres, including Ross McElwee's *Time Indefinite*, Patricia Gruben's *Ley Lines*, Frank Perry's *On the*

Bridge, and Mina Shum's delightful *Me, Mom and Mona*.

Time Indefinite, Ross McElwee's autobiographical sequel to *Sherman's March*, takes him from his engagement to the birth of his son, Adrian, several years later. It's an ordinary journey, in the sense that the ordinary is miraculous. McElwee has a troubled, sometimes neurotically tuned persona, and the film is peppered with his bemused reflections about the meaning of life. He gets married, his father dies very suddenly during the making of the film, and the newly married couple experience a miscarriage (which does little to quell McElwee's anxieties about children).

Throughout the film, McElwee questions his role, and the role of the camera. He struggles with his desire to record his life and family, and acknowledges that the camera enables him to hide. At one point, he sits in an old fauteuil and delivers a long, weary (or is it mock-weary?) monologue to his viewers on the nature of life and film. To choose life, of course, is to choose death. To choose film is to live on indefinitely, in "time indefinite."

This film grows on me. I still carry in my mind the images of a fish gasping for life on the South Carolina wharf where McElwee grew up, as well as any number of banal domestic scenes and ceremonies recorded in the hope that some day it might all make sense. I wonder, however, if McElwee's clinging to the camera has something to do with his being unable to trust it entirely.

Patricia Gruben's *Ley Lines* is a work as allusive and circumspect as McElwee's is obsessively confessional. It is an extended essay about identity within family and memory. It brought to mind Allen Ginsberg's visit to Ezra Pound in 1969, during the time he spoke of the older poet's writing as "a working model of your mind." *Ley Lines* is a working model of Patricia Gruben's mind, and it's a place that seems haunted by the shadows of those she has left behind or, more accurately, of those who have left her behind. Ross McElwee's film is about fatherhood—about losing a father and becoming a father. Gruben's film is determined by her

unrequited daughterhood in a world absent of hermetic signs and codes that seem intellectually stimulating but emotionally inadequate. With a poetically charged first person voice as our guide, *Ley Lines* is a geographical tour through an imagined history that leads, inexorably, to the only person who can release Gruben from her phantoms. *Ley Lines* is unlike any other film I've seen. It is "about" the material most films would ignore or leave out. It is an act of preparation and, perhaps, prevarication, destiny unknown.

Two documentaries stood out in Vancouver: Nicolas Philibert's feature *In the Land of the Death*, and Cristine Richey's hour-long *In the Gutter and Other Good Places*. The title of Richey's film is taken from the words of Colin, a schizophrenic prophet of the Calgary garbage tips. *In the Gutter* follows the lives of some of that city's most successful bottle-pickers through the fall months and into the winter, and although it is a film from the outside, it manages to reveal the obvious respect and affection the filmmaker has for her subjects.

Most people are aware that a new culture has taken over their back lanes and alleys, a scavenging culture that has an unmistakably entrepreneurial air about it. In Richey's film, scavenging is beautiful to look at; there is no gritty camera work here. Calgary shimmers with apocalyptic light and the bottle-pickers are remarkably articulate. A man who was once an engineer in a large oil company gazes up at his old window in an office tower as he rests below with a bag full of tins and bottles. Colin, a brilliant social analyst and arguably the most efficient and successful scavenger in the city, tackles the dumpster the way Glenn Gould approached a keyboard. His analysis of garbage and economics are those of a poet and produce a shock of recognition.

With the exception of Colin, who prefers his vocation to anything else, the men are alcoholics. They live where they can. One has a room when the film begins, but by the end of the shoot he is living in a cement bunker under the street. None of these men asks for pity or compassion; not one is repentant.

The film raised some eyebrows (how could a privileged young filmmaker speak

for these men) for its stunning production values (how dare she make all this look so beautiful). Yet, "gritty" has become a cliché, a convention. The extraordinary attention paid to light and colour in this film seems to say that these men are worthy of the attention paid to them. Somehow Richey has managed to renew one of the oldest documentary genres (the bums-on-the-Bowery school of social concern), and the result is absolutely compelling.

Does a film like *In the Gutter* play in to the right-wing agenda by stressing the men's self-reliance and refusing to present a larger social analysis? Is bottle-picking in Canada an acceptable profession? Are we



Patricia Gruben's *Ley Lines*: allusive and circumspective

so poor in imagination that hopelessness has become a tolerable option? On these subjects, the manic Colin speaks out with lucidity and a terrible passion. We can only tremble for him.

In the Land of the Deaf (*Le pays des sourds*), directed by Nicolas Philibert, is a film of rare delicacy with an uncompromising structure and a simple strategy that takes your breath away. The film was shot near Paris over a period of eight months, among people who are profoundly deaf and who live in what Philibert calls "a true deaf culture, which has its own roots, codes, models and customs." According to one writer, this "planet of the deaf" now makes up a "sixth continent" of nearly 130 million people around the world who communicate in a multitude of regional and national gestural languages (Jean Gremion, *The Planet of the Deaf*).

The film is not about statistics, however, nor is it a tract or even an exposé of the issues that exist within the deaf community. It is about seeing. Perhaps, for us, it is about learning to see. There is no explanatory material at the beginning; the people we

encounter are strangers. We become the recipients of unfolding, accumulating disclosures which draw us into the community.

This is in many respects an interview film, and there are wondrous tales to tell. One young man explains that he was once fitted for a hearing aid, but after a few days of urban noise he unplugged, preferring instead the state he was born in. A class of elementary students struggles mightily and without easy success to pronounce a vowel, a struggle shared equally by the teachers. Another man tells us that, in his experience, hearing people just don't seem to be able to communicate well.

Remarkably, these interviews are conducted in sign language. The subjects occasionally vocalize, but for the most part this is a silent film (there are subtitles for those of us who need translation). Interviews in sign must be framed and edited differently than hearing interviews. What is said is seen; the talking head must be re-thought. Indeed, issues of language are at the centre of this film. Teacher Jean-Claude Poulain is vital and eloquent in his explanation of the parallels between cinema and sign language, with its

concept of the "frame" within which complex levels of gesture are produced.

Philibert found a deaf couple who were planning to get married and decided to include them. At the end of the film, the couple is shown hunting for an apartment. Accompanied by a deaf friend, they enter into negotiations with a landlord, a hearing person. They struggle for some minutes. They try to repeat the sounds they hear; they gesture, they try to reframe the questions, yet remain absolutely incoherent to the landlord. We are left in the bare apartment, the landlord somewhat exasperated, the couple at a loss for what to do.

When I left the cinema, I found myself shocked to hear talking again. It was an affront to the ears, to the psyche, to the heart. I had not realized how absorbed I'd become in the land of the deaf—a land of "silence," close observation and physicality. I felt a powerful, unexpected, liberating affiliation with the young man who had pulled out his hearing aids ●

Colin Browne is a Vancouver filmmaker who teaches at Simon Fraser's School for the Contemporary Arts.