

**CINEMA  
OF  
DEATH**

## CINEMA OF DEATH



## THE DREAMER

John Paizs 3

## GENERATIONS

Tom Parkinson 4

## TANABE

Michael Rouse 5

## WAVING

Ann Marie Fleming 6

IN THE FORM OF  
THE LETTER 'X'

Mike Cartmell 7

## CARTOUCHE

Mike Cartmell 8

YOU TAKE CARE  
NOW

Ann Marie Fleming 10

## A DOCUMENTARY

Frank Cole 12

MALTESE CROSS  
MOVEMENT

Keewatin Dewdney 13

## BITTER GRAPES

Richard Bartlett 15

*"A new concept of society was born at the end of the eighteenth century... It was thought, and even felt, that society is composed of both the dead and the living. The society of the living is the reverse of the city of the dead, we are their image. For the dead have gone through the moment of change, and their monuments are the visible sign of the permanence of their city. We ourselves are an image of the dead, a memorial to all that has passed."*

Philip Aries

*"In the cinema, we watch death at work."*

Jean Cocteau

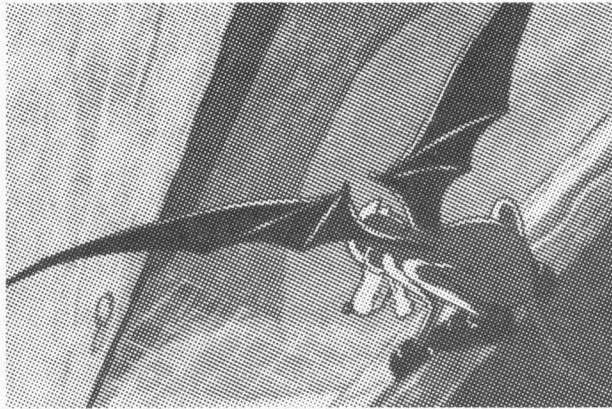
*Photo, this page:  
A DOCUMENTARY, Frank Cole  
Photo, cover:  
IN THE FORM OF THE LETTER  
'X', Mike Cartmell*

# THE DREAMER

3

JOHN PAIZS

3 MINUTES COLOUR 1978



E John Paizs is a Winnipeg filmmaker whose dramatic work of the early 1980s - *The Obsession of Billy Botski*, *Springtime in Greenland*, *Crime Wave* and *Ed Zorax of the Future City* sparked a new wave of prairie dramas. *The Dreamer* was made before all that, in a period of animated shorts made between 1975-78. Using a painstaking cel animation technique popularized by Disney, Paizs' luridly coloured mini-spectacle follows the the perils of its protagonist, a young elephant coloured luminescently pink. It begins with an immense gothic castle, the setting for this work of imagination. Our hero turns and dances into it, passing through its vaulted doors and into a succession of stages and spotlights. Taking on a variety of characters he is overlooked by an enormous drooling wolf with wings. As a portcullis drops beside the elephant, barring his departure, the wolf begins his dive towards

M his prey. A trapdoor leads him into the watery labyrinths below where he barely escapes the masticating clutches of the wolf. Cornered in a castle spire he is lifted aloft and hurled below, only to reawake beside his mother. Fuelled by the pop excesses of the Electric Light Orchestra, *The Dreamer* is an animated psychodrama whose overt sexual analogies would have kept Freud writing another fifty years.

A

H

# GENERATIONS

THOMAS PARKINSON  
14 MINUTES COLOUR 1986

*Generations* is the first film by Montreal filmmaker Thomas Parkinson. A graduate of Concordia University and member of the Main Film Cooperative, *Generations* was finished in Parkinson's graduate year at university. An accomplished blend of fact and fiction, this personal story is framed by the murder of its protagonist, itself 'framed' to look like a suicide. "Well, I guess the first question is why did I kill myself? Well the answer is I didn't. I was making a chicken sandwich when some guy bursts in and shoots me." Images of police officers and a staff photographer occupy *Generations'* prologue and epilogue, providing the impetus for a first person recitation, narrated in voice-over by the filmmaker. He tells us that he is speaking 'from purgatory', as a voice of the dead which affords him two distinct advantages: an unlimited opportunity to reflect on past events and a reunion with the already dead. Over the course of the film's fourteen minutes Parkinson does just that - comingling the two in a deadpan delivery whose ironic humour underscores the family death and separations that mark any movement through *Generations*. Reworking home movie footage, he shows adults limboing beneath a broomstick (referring ironically to his own state 'in limbo'), drinking, dancing, smoking, and talking. But if the image demonstrates

the possibility of community the historical voice-over relates another story. He tells of giving up his bed to his grandfather just before he died in it, of his parents' separation, the death of an American cousin and finally the death of his mother. Interjected throughout are testaments of a more personal order - periodizing his own history in a mock art critics tone. Over images of a childhood bath he announces, "This was my full frontal nudity period", or flailing hopelessly at a badminton bird, "My jock phase". Music underscores the lot, from shopping mall chutzpah to beginner's piano roll, insisting always on the film's status as 'amateur' - peopled by a domestic reverie far removed from the pleasure palaces of L.A.

As he looks back to glimpse the passing turns of relatives smiling for a last time as an image, he recognizes that any generational saga is bound up with death. Likewise, the images we are obsessively using to double the world we live in point finally to our own mortality, the way our own present hurtles toward a graveside rest. That we are able to stand so easily throughout *Generations* "astride a grave and a difficult birth" testifies to the director's sure comic touch and self deprecation. Never lapsing into sentimentality or the simply maudlin, Parkinson lends his subject a rare grace and tact in this film debut.

# TANABE

MICHAEL ROUSE  
2:45 MINUTES B/W 1984

Winner of the 1984 San Francisco Poetry Film Festival, *Tanabe* combines poetry performance with documentary imagery. Written and performed by Doctor Mongo, *Tanabe* began after Mongo witnessed the murder of Su-kejiro Tanabe, an elderly volunteer employee of the Pioneer Center Senior Citizens' Service Bureau. He was beaten to death as he waited for a traffic signal to change in Little Tokyo. The story is told in Mongo's dark, smoke-filled hotel room, across the street from the site of the murder.

*Tanabe* takes its cue from haiku poetry, whose abrupt collage of incompatible

parts are re-joined through metaphors that float between the two of them. The two faces of the film, Mongo and Tanabe, make a strangely elegant duet around the absent centre of the film - the murder itself. While the event itself is never photographed,

the film's two faces take up on either side - Tanabe's slow motion domesticity recalling a life before death, Mongo's chant-like recitation calling out afterwards, drawing words in the

place of the absent figure. This fugue dissolves from poem to person, from gesture to speech, passing through an event that can only be felt in its absence, through all that cannot be represented.

Smoking under window light, Mongo asks questions of the dead man, like Aeneas' journey into the underworld before founding Rome. Aeneas stands as a double witness - looking over the history of old soldiers as well as the embryonic fortunes of future emperors, men whose destinies are tied to his own success. But Mongo's history leads him only to a senseless slaughter, and his future must be weighed beneath

this sign of his own mortality. Shorn of the cosmology of empire his questions are necessarily rhetorical, intended only for the surviving. They are sounded with the unmistakable impression that it is we the living who are the exception, while death

remains the rule. Most have already joined the legions of the dead, only their reasons for doing so remain incomprehensible. He asks, "Are you on the other side, Tanabe?"



## WAVING

ANN MARIE FLEMING  
5 MINUTES B/W 1987

“On *Waving*... well, you know, this was always meant to be a very personal film. I was doing a video documentary on mother/daughter relationships (featuring, who else? My own mother and grandmother) and had some interview footage shot when my grandmother had an aneurism, and had to be hospitalized. No one had expected it at all. And as I went every day to visit her in the hospital, hoping against hope that she would wake up and everything would be okay, and go on like it always did, yet knowing full well that it wouldn't, I had this image of a woman falling - through space, through air, falling, over and over again. Falling, not necessarily to death, but away from me. Away from everything. We had been told that one of my grandmother's frontal hemispheres had completely collapsed and if she were ever to regain consciousness, she would be a vegetable. Vegetable. What a strange word. So, one morning, at ten minutes past three, I watched almost with anticipation as the line on the monitor told me that she was dying, even though another machine was still breathing for her. It was the monitor that told me she was dead. And then the quick creep of cold up her fingers. And I felt so tired. So relieved. So angry. The funeral was three days later, after an open coffin lying in state. The next day I shot *Waving*. (I don't

know if you've seen it, I'm in thick water, looking calm and tranquil, but actually I'm in a lot of pain, since I have a sinus condition). But that doesn't really mean anything. And then I transferred the 16mm black and white film onto video 8, shooting slo-mo off the Steenbeck. Transferred the V8 onto 3/4", coloured it, turned up the luminescence and got the essence of what I thought I felt through this whole ordeal. I edited my grandmother talking about her life with the visuals and was completely happy with the result. This was a memento mori for myself.

And then I showed it to some people. Who didn't get it. What did this voice have to do with this image? What did the history of this old woman have to do with me? Okay, I said, I am going to make it so clear that you will have to understand. This is a film about death. About how we have only empty rituals to help us deal with this inevitable part of our lives. This is a film about how I feel when I lose forever the most important person in my life. And I want to communicate that to you, because that is why I am making a film. Because I want you to know. This is an elegy to my grandmother.” *Ann Marie Fleming*

# IN THE FORM OF THE LETTER 'X'

7

MIKE CARTMELL  
5 MINUTES COLOUR 1985

*In the form of the letter 'X'* shows the filmmaker's son running repeatedly towards the camera. He moves towards the source of the image and of himself, even as computer generated titles issue a meditation on origins. The film is set in two parts, like the double bars that cross to form the 'X' of the film's title. In the opening half the son moves towards the camera, while in the second half he moves away from it, in reverse motion. The intertitles that figure in the film's first half are similarly chiasmatically rewritten in the film's second half. These titles, taken from Herman Melville's *Pierre*, describe a descent into an Egyptian crypt whose coffin is finally revealed to be empty, while a looping voice track echoes their intentions. The music is lifted from a Zombies song whose opening riff is looped and repeated, held in suspension until the song breaks into its opening lines over the final image: "What's your name, who's your daddy?"

"Mike Cartmell isn't my real name, that's one of the features of orphanhood. Tom Jones and me, it's not our name, if your 'name' comes from your father. On the other hand if the paternal relation is for all intents and purposes fictitious anyways, that name might as well be Melville if it turns out to be equivalent to Melville. That's

why the opening credits for *In the form of the letter 'X'* read Cartmell/Melville with the mell's superimposed one above the other. Both names mean 'X'. Cartmell means a place where carts meet. Meler means to come together, to intersect, to meet, as in roads meeting. And cartmell is literally a place where carts meet or a town at the crossroads. Melville is precisely the same thing, it means village at the crossroads. And by exhaustive translation the crossroads is 'X'. Now X is everywhere in contemporary philosophy. Merleau Ponty goes on about how the body is a chiasmatic structure. Chiasm comes from the greek letter chi, which is the letter X. Chimera for instance or conceivably cinema... What else do you use X's for? You cross stuff out, it's a signature if you don't know how to write your name. It pertains to the eye because of the optic chiasm where the optic nerves cross from one side to the other. *In the form of the letter 'X'* is chiasmic and works like a filmic signature, it's an inscription of X filmically." *Mike Cartmell*

E

M

A

T

H

# CARTOUCHE

MIKE CARTMELL  
7 MINUTES COLOUR 1986

Cartouche is the third film in Cartmell's four part series *Narratives of Egypt*. While the first film is about the father, the second (*In the form of the letter 'X'*) concerns the son, the third (*Cartouche*) the lover, and the last (*Farrago*) the mother. A 'cartouche' was the key used to unlock the mysteries of the Egyptian hieroglyphics - it shows the encircled name of the buried king, displayed in picture writing on the side of the pyramid. This name was then used to decode the remaining hieroglyphs. Cartmell's film mimes this operation by weaving two names throughout: his own, and that of a woman named Cathy. His own name figures in the title, the wooded crosspile (or X) mentioned in voice-over as well as the strategy of chiasmatic inversion which operates in *In the form of the letter 'X'*. Hence many images are repeated upside down or backwards, most notably Cathy's face in close-up, caught in a succession of freeze frames between biting her lip and smiling, between opening and closing.

"She's going to tell you something and then she doesn't. But that's private. When I made this footage of her she had found out days or weeks before that she was dying, she had leukemia, and they kept it a secret for eleven years the two of them, her and her husband, mainly because they didn't want their children

to know. She didn't want me to photograph her, then when I processed the film, it was a couple of years later I had a projector so I showed it to them and she was completely embarrassed and demanded to have it so I gave it to her. She gave it back to me when I went to see her, when I knew she was dying."

The clue to her withholding comes in the film's opening title, "Luxor Egypt 1947", which conflates the subject's birthday with the Egyptian Valley of the Dead. Likewise the repeated mention of 'a man advancing with both



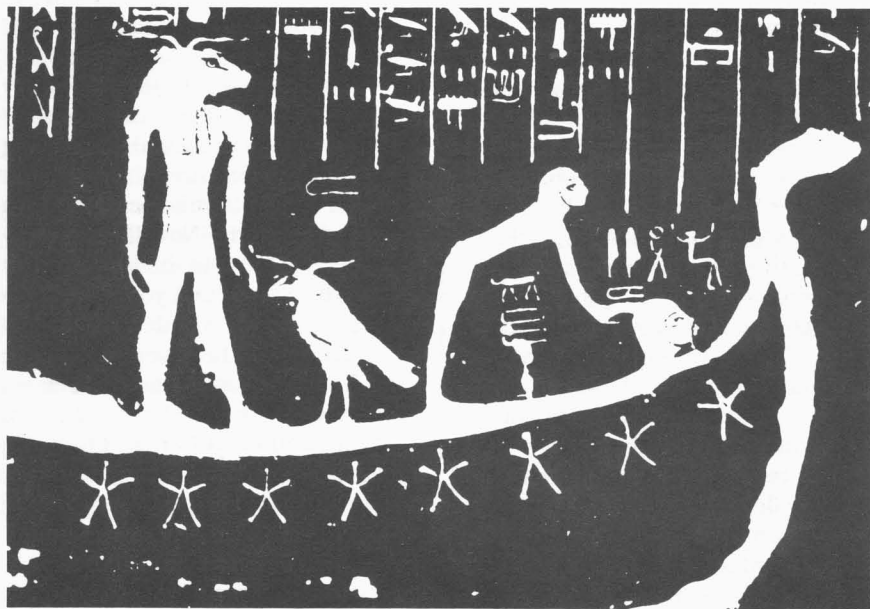
arms raised' which is the Egyptian hieroglyph for the soul's journey after death. If the filmmaker lends his name to the



film's entitlement, then it is Cathy who informs the passage of titles which close the film.

"The trace of her name is in those words, her name's Cathy, therefore: cathexis, catharsis, cathedral. Cathexis is the libidinal link, desire; catharsis is the purgative element, settling accounts, the work of mourning; and cathedral is the monument. The film operates on all these axes. Catharsis is the value of doing the work, to put grieving aside, to allow the dead to be dead. The cathedral is the place in which you worship, the monument as well for the grace of

"The work of mourning isn't taking place in the film but in its making, in the hiatus between her death and making the film. I didn't immediately think I'm going to make a film now... It happened because there was no funeral, no opportunity to make that kind of ritualized gesture. One day she said don't come back. I've enjoyed talking to you but... I visited her maybe eight-ten times over the course of a month - she knew that was enough and that she was going to die pretty soon." *Mike Cartmell*



God. The words are quite purposeful as well as containing this homonymical trace of the name.

# YOU TAKE CARE NOW

ANN MARIE FLEMING

10 MINUTES COLOUR 1989

Fleming's perilous travelogue recites, in first person voice-over, a tale of two cities. The first is Bridiski, where the patent sexism of her surround leads her to seek refuge in the hotel room of her unscrupulous tour guide. The second moves closer to home - where the simplest of street crossings becomes a nightmare journey of dark collisions, broken bones and ambulance drivers. While the stories she narrates are her own, Fleming relates them both in the second person (you), emphasizing the way in which film turns documentary into fiction, while implicating the spectator in the story's unfolding.

That one should speak of going to see the movies narrates the way in which film privileges the sense of sight above all others. But Fleming reverses this convention by beginning with the soundtrack, laying down a weave of voice and music which triggers an associative montage. Her rapid fire delivery and sure sense of dramatic timing underscore images which bear the signs of retrieval and reprocessing. These reproductive sites are not simple illustrations of the events described in voice-over. Instead they provoke an allusive chain of associations which move alongside the filmmaker's confessional narrative. Employing a variety of styles from sand animation, dance, animated photographs and dramatic

reanactment, these images are set in the present while her sounds remain rooted in past events, and it is this tension that gives the film so much of its power. Fleming's expansive image repertoire works to substitute present-day pictures for events which must remain unseen and unrepresented. Between the story of the past and images of the present is 'you', the narrated subject of her story, the audience itself made to shuttle between the demands of an impossible present and a tragic past.

"So, you're writing, after a lunch of fresh steamed prawns and enough coffee in your body that you feel yourself burning inside. You're in his room. You want to leave, but you just can't think. So you stay anyway. Because you don't trust your intuition. And then the locked door turns open, and the first fire starts. Now the next bit is a little hard to explain. You get the idea, don't you? You get raped. Maybe a little bit of dialogue will help you imagine... "Why don't you come on over here and take a little nap? I think you need to rest. I'm not going to try anything... that you don't want me to..." Now you're lying there waiting for something violent to happen, to be hit or beaten or for yourself to do something, like scream or fight or maybe pull out that



**E**ver-handy Swiss Army knife. But nothing like that passes. Because you're afraid you might hurt him, or you're afraid he might get angry and hurt you, or he'll call the police and tell them that you stole something, and you don't speak Italian. And you've heard all about the police... And you lie there, passive and violated, feeling like someone told you you were going to win an award, and then you didn't get it. Except the award was your dignity, your sanity, your middle class inviolability. It was taken away and given to someone else who never made the mistake of going to a hotel room in a strange place with a strange man. And all you were worried about was how to get out of there with your

**M**uggage intact, how to avoid upsetting this man who not only had a black belt in Tai Kwon Do but also had your ticket for the boat out of that nightmare land, and how to get somewhere safe to sleep. God, you wanted to sleep, so bad. But he'd told you that you look just like the *Giaconda*, and she hasn't closed her eyes in over 400 years. So, you take a picture of yourself so that you can remember what the *Mona Lisa* looks like when she realizes Leonardo is just another leech..." from *You Take Care Now* by Ann Marie Fleming

**A**

**T**

**H**

## A DOCUMENTARY

FRANK COLE

9 MINUTES B/W 1979

Frank Cole's first film is a starkly photographed document of his aging grandparents. Set completely inside the nursing home where this couple has been condemned to spend their last days, Cole's shooting turns around the gestures of everyday life: walking, dressing, sleeping, washing. These simple movements are lent a nearly unbearable gravity as we are made witness to a life reduced to its routines. Whether knotting a lace or smoothing a last shock of grey hair, we are ceaselessly reminded that these are scarcely the prelude to future actions. These moments of preparation seem instead an endless rehearsal of last rites, setting the stage for a homeless wandering of corridors and television re-runs. If these moments have nothing to 'look forward' to, no utility or service to which they could become attached, these gestures are pressed instead into a mnemonic stare, forced to look backwards in the place of looking ahead.

It is rumored that the moment before death is accompanied by an influx of images that unveil in rapid succession a lifetime of changes in a matter of moments. The nursing home is born of this moment, drawing it out, suspending it in a time between living and dead. It is the suburb of cemeteries and mausoleums, its tiny cells and elevators affording temporary respite

before the inevitable fall into sickness and death.

"I find the time very long here. I suppose I was more interested in things then. I did more. Time didn't hang heavy on me at all. I can't imagine what we did with all the time. But the days were just as long as they were now. The months were just as long. We must have done something." from *A Documentary* by Frank Cole

*A Documentary* walks a delicate mark between exploitation and an overwhelming pathos, preserving the dignity of its subjects even as they turn a skeletal remains towards death. It is their undying attachment that lifts this couple beyond pity or prey, their ravaged flesh grown old in a sign of mutual accomplishment. Despite its tortured passage, *A Documentary* is a love story, which shares with *Romeo and Juliet* (and a score of lesser dramas) this theme: that love's join has no place in our world of places, that love may only be fulfilled by death. The grandfather's uneasy recollections preamble his slow ascent to his wife, a shattered skeleton of a soul bedridden in these final weeks. In a series of photographs that close the film, Cole turns back to show the former times of their happiness, and finishes with a brief final glimpse of his grandfather standing before her coffin. For one at least, the waiting is over.

# THE MALTESE CROSS MOVEMENT

13

KEEWATIN DEWDNEY  
7 MINUTES COLOUR 1967

Keewatin Dewdney was a member of Canada's first co-op - London Filmmakers, based in London, Ontario. Along with filmers like Jack Chambers and Greg Curnoe, Dewdney contributed to a flourishing cultural life whose filmic expression has waned ever since. Producing just five short films between 1967-1971, Dewdney's great promise as an avant-garde filmmaker was given up in favour of mathematics, and today his monthly column can be read in Scientific American.

Twenty years ago he wrote: The projector, not the camera, is the filmmaker's true medium... The very use of the camera as a filmmaking tool has imposed the assumption of continuity on film'. Obsessed with language's ability to order and systematize, Dewdney uses the cinema's 24 projections per second to full advantage. He does so by dramatizing the act of projection itself, its movement of presence and absence, image and darkness, are connected here with the entry from the imaginary to the symbolic, from a world of pictures to a world of language.

"...the form and content of the film are shown to derive directly from the mechanical operation of the projector - specifically the Maltese cross movement which converts the continuous movement of the projector's drive

shaft into the discontinuous movement of the gears that pull the film in front of the gate, hold it while the turning shutter permits the projector's light to flash through it, and then, in the darkness of the closed shutter, move the next frame into position to be exposed to the light... and so on, until the entire film has made its stop-go stop-go journey through the projector. Dewdney's animation of the disk and the cross illustrates graphically the projector's essential parts and movements. It also alludes to a dialectic of continuous-discontinuous movements that pervades the apparatus, from its central mechanical operation to the spectator's perception of the film's images..." *William Wees, The Apparatus and the Avant-Garde, CINEMA CANADA*

In the film's opening we watch a maltese cross resting against a gear, while in the film's closing shot we see them one on top of another, spun together in a quickening revolution. What *The Maltese Cross Movement* will finally bring together is image and word, or an image's ability to signify. *The Maltese Cross Movement* is built on three primary sets of images. The first is a kind of drama played out in black and white (most images are in colour). As a young boy reads high in a tree, a young girl walks towards him like a

somnambulist. Pausing beneath his branch he climbs down and follows her through the forest. Eventually they reach a stream and sit down. He reads to her and she recites to him: 'Ever drifting down the stream/Life, what is it but a dream'. The second set of images concern a young girl who peers directly into the camera and who speaks in sync sound. After each sequence or movement is finished she returns, asking, 'Are you ready yet?' As a truncated image of a nose answers, 'No', still another sequence unravels until she reappears. Near the end of the film she recites a poem. Cut between her appearances are long sequences of images associatively montaged and named by a male voice on the soundtrack: tell, funnel, knife, fly, flower, love.

"Dewdney's soundtrack demonstrates that what we hear is also built out of continuous-discontinuous relationships... words of discrete sounds or phonemes. The film is organized around the principle that it can only complete itself when enough separate and discontinuous sounds have been stored up to provide the male voice on the soundtrack with the sounds needed to repeat the little girl's poem. (His response, 'No', to her repeated question, 'Are you ready?' indicates that he has not yet acquired enough sounds to produce the continuous sense of words which is the

poem she will recite.) Then, even when he does repeat her phrases, we hear them as composed of the separate original sounds. The poem itself alludes, playfully and ambiguously, to this whole continuous discontinuous process of the apparatus:

*The cross revolves at  
sunset,  
The moon returns at  
dawn,  
If you die tonight,  
Tomorrow you're gone.*

"Cross and moon: the mechanical parts of the projector's Maltese cross movement, but also the moon as the reflected light on the screen, which disappears as the cross turns while the shutter is closed (sunset), and returns after the shutter opens again (at dawn). The sunset and dawn are paralleled in the last two lines by 'tonight' and 'tomorrow'. If the movement does not occur in the dark (tonight), then another image will not be there when the light returns (tomorrow). Life and death, the poem also implies, are analogous to the frame-by-frame projection of the film: one moment you're there, the next moment, you're not. A grimly comic existential view: If I die, I'm gone (pronounced and pictured in the film as 'gun'.)"

Wees

# BITTER GRAPES

15

RICHARD BARTLETT  
18 MINUTES COLOUR 1968

Twenty years before the advent of the 'new narrative' Richard Bartlett was toiling away in the American heartland, fashioning his own brand of demented dramas. *Bitter Grapes* is the crowning achievement of his many award winning efforts which join the trappings of the sixties to a concern with mortality, aging and the struggle between generations. Bartlett eschews the word in *Bitter Grapes*, moving sound and image together in a causal chain of circumstance. *Grapes* opens with the first of its two lead characters, its roving camera stalking a nun photographing glimpses of gravestones, dead details held in a light box that is likewise a tomb, a scroll of dead signs, a still camera. As she passes into the frame line an abrupt cut sends us careening through autumn landfills on the shoulders of a 60s hipster, twisting to a psychedelic groove until she turns into a rock quarry. There she stops before the male lead who balances awkwardly before her. The two figures are a pointed study in contrast. Bartlett pursues this rift throughout *Bitter Grapes*, its dramatic divide enclosing light, women, redemption, nature and nurturing on the one hand and darkness, men, alienation and solipsism on the other. Reversing the traditional patriarchal dichotomy between active/passive = male/female, here it is only the women who are granted

movement while the man remains the passive recipient of experience. We never see his face, he remains throughout an eyeless imbibor of the pre-linguistic. His solitary broken by the dancing sprite he collapses, leaving her to flag down the nun from the opening scene. She bears him to a convent. He is left in a small square room painted uniformly white. Cast into the purgatory of the scientific method, his surround seems part scientific test, torture chamber and existential waiting room. After a time a nurse enters with a basket filled with fruits and vegetables. These are devoured in an orgiastic feast wherein the man's belly swells to enormous proportions, tearing his clothes from their moorings. Exhausted in his efforts, he collapses again. A vigorous massage by the nun, dressed now as a nurse, induces a massive vomiting fit. She leads him by the hand back into the world, pausing to strip him of his diaper-like underpants to stagger awed and wondering into the horizon.

*Bitter Grapes* is set in the world of the Imaginary, attuned to the worldless life of metaphor, symbol and birthing. Its obsession with the body's outpourings, its glib appropriation and admixture of genres and its studied use of irony mark it as a forerunner what Arthur Kroker termed 'excremental culture'.

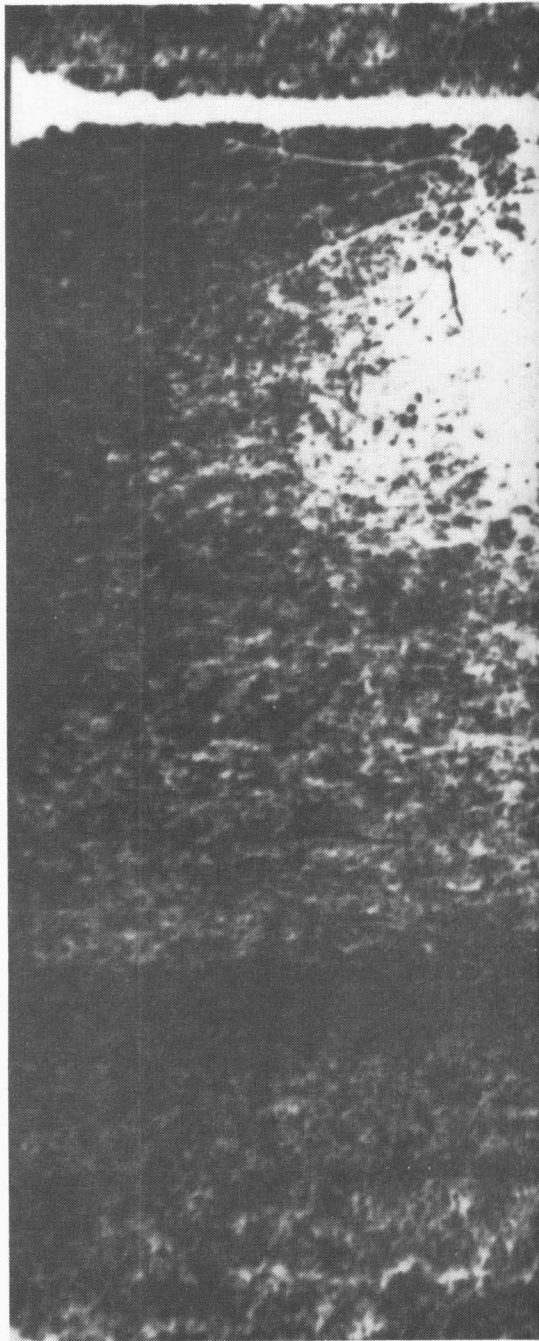
All program notes by Mike Hoolboom unless otherwise noted.

This program has been sponsored by the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre with the support of the Ontario Arts Council.



CFMDC  
67A Portland Street  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
M5V 2M9

(416) 593-1808



C

I

O

F

D

E

A