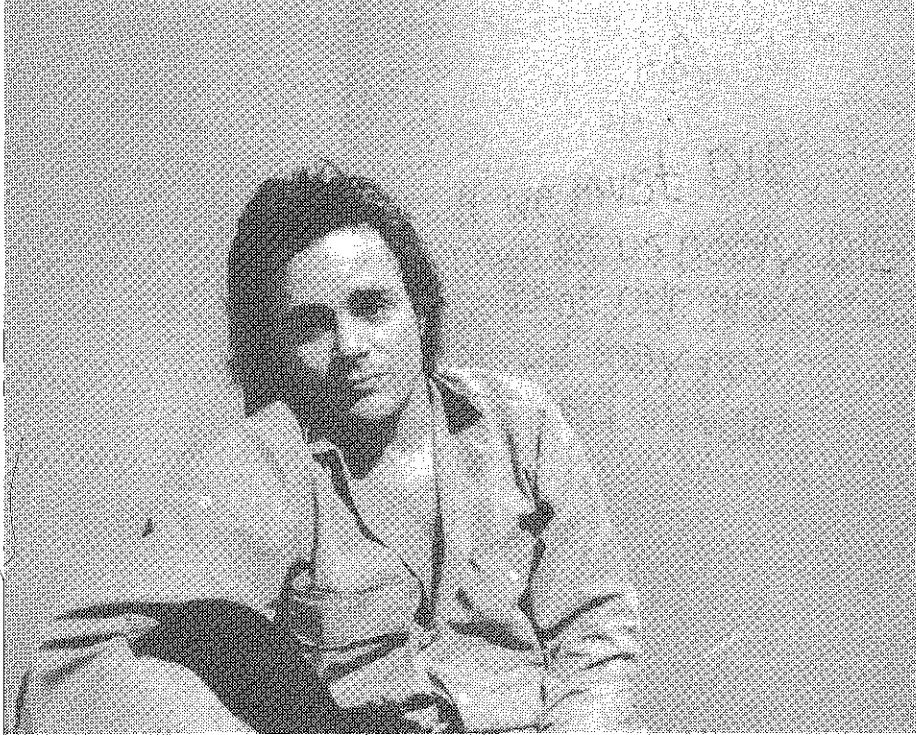


Is This The Voice Of God Speaking/?!

New Directions In Documentary/Docu-Drama

Glen Richards

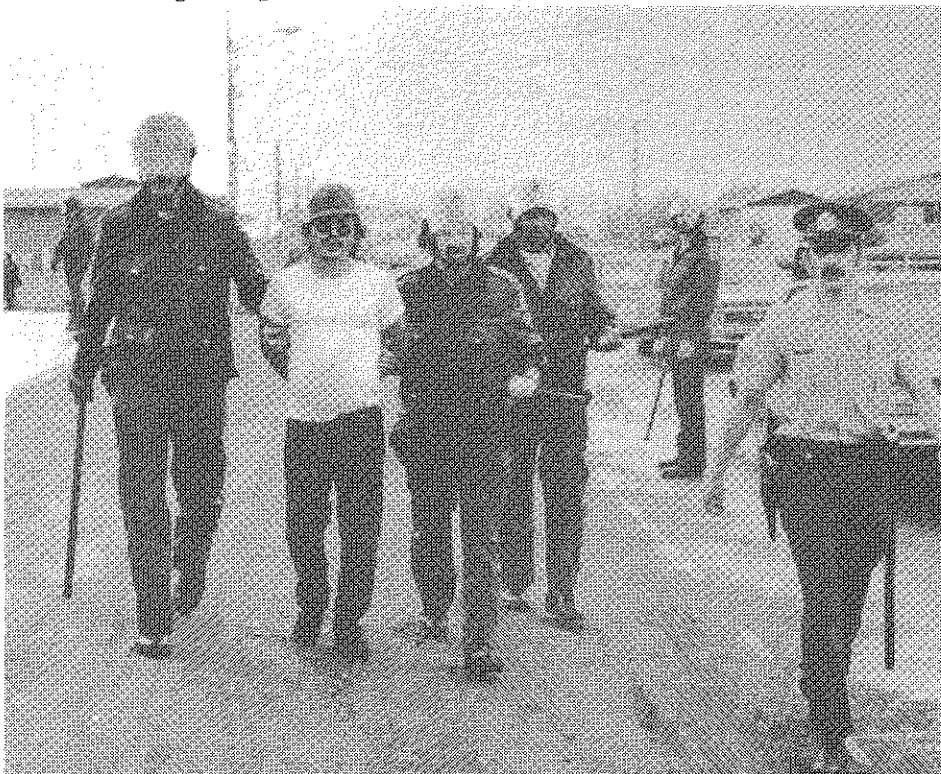
Walls



'Canada's worldwide filmmaking reputation rests largely on our tradition of excellence in the production of documentary films. Public opinion surveys clearly indicate great audience demand for documentary programming on Canadian T.V.'

from Canadian Independent Film Caucus
press release

Incident at Restigouche (photo: Journal L'Aviron)



Canada's

film traditions

have been largely defined and developed by the documentary and its fictional hybrid—the docu-drama. This tradition originated with the National Film Board, which was founded in 1939 under John Grierson. Grierson, a social democrat, minister's son and prime mover in the British Post Office Film Unit, was influenced by both the rhetoric of the pulpit and the moralism of social democracy. For Grierson documentary film was a 'pulpit from which to preach politics'. Brought to Canada by Mackenzie King to make war propaganda for the State, films under his regime at the NFB were full of patriotic anti-fascist polemic intended to arouse a slumbering nation. The distinctive form of these films had an influence that extended well beyond the war years.

Although the stated purpose was to 'interpret Canada to Canadians and the world', this form was limited and authoritarian. Much of the 'authority' of these films was derived from a specific inscription of a narrator. The function of the narrator was to give cohesion to the images, to interpret, to analyse and to develop the film's thesis. The anonymous voice, hidden and separated from the image, is given the power to interpret and by this distancing becomes omnipotent, becomes the 'voice of god'. Together with the artfully constructed images of 'reality' the audience is presented with a seamless view of the world, a world falling into the thesis of the filmmaker (or the sponsors). Therein lies the problem. Instead of a world full of contradictions, a world in process—changing, moving—we have the filmmaker's constructions which usually have only one possible conclusion. Instead of films that build on the viewers' conscious participation in the continued development of a social process, we have the 'blank-page-theory' which allows no cultural, social, economic or political ideas, only an open mind ready to be convinced by the 'logical argument'.

This style may have been relevant to the war years and even subsequently when film was used as propaganda for 'reconstruction'. It is a style which always sees the State as the institution of change. This belief in the liberal democratic State as the mediator in the conflict of classes has been somewhat eroded over the years. Likewise, there are new documentary initiatives that rely less on the old didactic approaches. The narrator-as-voice-of-god style is fast disappearing and in its place are a variety of new forms. These forms change the narrator's role to one of participant in the process. The films are also self-reflexive—they hold up their own images as 'constructs', not as 'idealized reality', and invite challenge as well as identification with their versions of the world.

Under the Table is the first film of Toni Venturi and Luis Osvaldo García, both immigrants from Latin America and both film students at the time of the film's production. The film is an exploration of life as an 'illegal' immigrant and draws on both Canadian and Latin American culture. Incorporating both documentary and fictional or docu-drama sequences, the film resists any attempt to fit it into a neat category—what is real? what is fiction? The film confounds the possibility of making these distinctions, refuses to allow itself either to be the bearer of 'truth' or 'reality'.

A slow pan opens the film. Across an old man's rented room the camera picks up the details of his life—a salt and pepper shaker, a kettle and, in the centre of the wall, an iron bed on which the old man sits. He begins his story as an illegal. He tells of finding a hearing aid in a pawn shop which then becomes his 'aid' to escape detection by the immigration authorities—he pretends to be deaf. The details of his life begin to build: when his workmates talk, he points to his hearing aid and shakes his head in response, so the foreman gives him the noisiest machine to work on because he won't be bothered by the noise. Always alone, unable to speak to anyone in his own language for fear of being caught, his pretense at deafness becomes his own prison. But while we are caught up in the details of the story and his documentary style of monologue, it becomes apparent that the details we are relating to are stylized. A soft blue light bathes the room, the shadows are surreal, the camera for the most part is static, the image is framed like the studied *mis en scene* of a studio set. All of this contributes to our growing awareness of the status of the image as fictional. Resituating the sequence as fiction transforms the man's particular story into a universal one. The injustice of illegality, the ingenuity and perseverance of the old man speak of and to the experience of all illegal immigrants.

The universal experience of the illegal is also joined to the story of the film itself. José L. Goyes, the film's writer, is himself an 'illegal' from Latin America. After several years of escaping detection, Goyes, who came to Canada to become a filmmaker, was eventually discovered and ordered to leave the country. Thwarted by his status as 'alien', Goyes had been unsuccessful in pursuing his dream of becoming a filmmaker. He decided to contact his student filmmaker friends, Osvaldo and Toni, who were unaware that he was an illegal. (Although immigrants are very often aware that some of their friends may not have landed status, most are careful not to ask questions.) They agreed to work with him to make a film about illegals based on his own experience. Along with the old man's story, Goyes' story is real—but it's transformed into fiction by its particular inscription within the film. Goyes the writer first appears in **Under the Table** as a kind of mystical apparition posed against a background of an urban night-scape, his face hidden behind a hockey goalie's mask. The image can be read in a number of ways: as an evocation of a ritual mask from another culture and as the 'warrior hockey player'. It is also the mask that the illegal, caught in a battle with the authorities, must hide behind, disguising his identity in order to escape detection. Here the immigrants' cultural heritage meets and joins with the icons of Canadian popular mythology. Later, when he is discovered by the authorities, the mask is removed, but ironically with his identity restored, he is forced to return to his native country.

This theme of alien identity is carried through in the 'documentary' sequences as well. The images of work—the restaurant dish washer, the office cleaners, the worm pickers—exist in a surreal twilight world where reality takes on the characteristics of a nightmare. A low-angle shot of a man mopping an endless corridor features the mop sweeping across the frame, stopping at each edge as if contained in the body of the camera. The worm pickers are ghost-like apparitions, appearing and disappearing in the darkness, cans in hand. In the hands of Toni and Osvaldo these 'documentary' images are transformed into cinematic echoes of Latin America's magic-realist literary tradition.

Under the Table represents a new development in the films produced by Latin American immigrants. Highly articulate and politically conscious, these young filmmakers have learned their film craft in Canada and have been here long enough to absorb Canadian culture and make it their own. While working within the framework of Canada's filmic traditions, they have approached the documentary/docu-drama without the ideological baggage of so-called 'objectivity' and 'realism'. Instead they have constructed a documentary that forces the viewer to appreciate not only the dilemma of the 'illegal' but also the contribution immigrants make to the cultural life of Canada.

Four films shown at the Festival of Festivals in Toronto last fall are good examples of these new trends. Two documentaries, **Under the Table** and **Incident at Restigouche**, a feature-length docu-drama, **Walls**, and a new-narrative feature, **Low Visibility**, are part of a body of work (produced both independently and within the NFB) which is giving the documentary form new life. And in an age of 'lowered expectations, mass culture and cultural cutbacks', these films inspire hope for an oppositional cultural renaissance.

'Santiago Alvarez, the Cuban filmmaker, has very well defined the line we wanted to pursue in this film: to make a fiction film with no fiction in it; to be extremely realistic about the testimony that people give—nobody would say that doesn't happen, (that) the

political level expressed by the people does not correspond to their cultural level. But at the same time the surroundings were created by the filmmakers—it helps highlight the reality they live in.'

Toni and Osvaldo

'...it was not just a story of using a hearing aid to hide your identity, it was a first step of an immigrant person to react to their situation. Even though he was not completely politically aware of the reasons why he was here, he was at the same time capable enough to think of a solution to his own problem by using this apparatus as a means of defense.'

Toni and Osvaldo

'Our object was not to cheat anyone.'

Osvaldo

'...It is all true...but we are not afraid to recreate a documentary'

Toni

'...The hockey mask that the illegal wears is very folkloric—the illegal is a warrior in some ways, but at the same time the mask is very close to death or something very horrible.'

Osvaldo

'I don't think the state will make good films unless they take all the filmmakers. It cannot be a system where you are either "in" or "out" because if you are out (as we are) you have to struggle and struggle.'

Toni

'I've tried to re-constitute myself as a dramatic director. That's what I hope will come from it, that suddenly I will be seen as a dramatic director. It really depends on what the public reaction is. If that happens I want to do more drama, because I think we're losing the documentary audience...we're losing the ability to read and I think the documentary is a very literary film form. There's language and art in it and polemic, propaganda...it's not literary, it's not literature, it's discursive. Documentary is part of writing

and I'll always want to make documentaries. If you make a film like Brenda Longfellow's **Breaking Out** about single mothers and you make a documentary you get a certain audience. But if you take the same story and put a dramatic form on it, a feature or a television drama, you get ten times the audience, and ten times the attention—and ten times the work. I want to take all my interest in documentaries and put them in a fiction story...'

Tom Shandel

'I don't know what a docu-drama is. We had no literary base to rely on, so we relied on the newspaper basis of a story. In that respect **Walls** qualifies. Except that **Walls** is based on a play, based on a real event. We

took tremendous liberty with the story of **Walls**, we didn't relate to it at all realistically; it became what we needed to make the story and do justice to the real events.'

Tom Shandel

'The only difference between **Walls** and **Dog Day Afternoon** is money. It took 19 days to shoot **Walls**, which meant I couldn't shoot detail. I could only shoot upfront. I had to stay completely on the foreground of the story. I couldn't dwell on the other characters, I couldn't dwell on the other people in the prison or the background of how a prison really operates. It's a function of money. You have a character standing there thinking and then you cut away to something completely irrelevant that he's

looking at. Well, in **Walls** there's very little of that and it's a function of the dough. The difference between the two is that **Dog Day Afternoon** was probably a six million dollar film and **Walls** was \$500,000. **Harlan County** is shot more like a feature film, like a drama...and that's where the American documentary tradition differs from our own, because they don't have the institutional support we have, they have to be more inventive.'

Tom Shandel

'The only way that I can see **Walls** as a docu-drama is in its intent. It intends to tell you something about something that is really happening. I'm not saying that the story is really happening. The story stands for something that is really happening. So that the crawl at the end brings the audience back to "this is what happened after the story ended". This is the implication. Guys are getting out, prisoners are released and if you don't do something soon, they are going to come out worse than they went in.'

Tom Shandel

Incident at Restigouche, by singer, storyteller, filmmaker and native culture activist Alanis Abomsawin is an effective documentary that combines native story traditions and traditional documentary techniques. Constructed very much after the fact (although Alanis was on the scene shortly after the second raid), from photographs, news footage and re-enactments, **Incident** is an investigation of the Québec Provincial Police raids on the Micmac Indian Reserve at Restigouche, Québec in June 1981, ordered by the Québec government to force the Micmac to comply with provincial restrictions on their traditional native fishing rights. While the Atlantic fishery harvests over 3,000 tons of salmon during their return to the spawning grounds, the Micmac take six tons. The Québec government determined that the Micmac would have to reduce that amount to protect the ecological and commercial balance, the 'natural order'. When the Micmac refused, the Québec Minister of Fisheries ordered the QPP into the fray to assert provincial authority over the reserve. The first raid, complete with helicopters appearing on the horizon à la **Apocalypse Now**, resulted in the destruction of fishing nets, men being beaten with police nightsticks and arrested, and women and children generally subjected to fierce intimidation. By the second raid, the community had organized resistance and set up barricades to protect their territory. Native people across the country rallied in their defense. The National Indian Brotherhood and All Chiefs' Conference decided to move its meeting to the Restigouche Reserve. There were demonstrations in Montréal and people came to help from as far away as Alaska. This time the QPP did not get into the reserve. Most people arrested in the raids were given small fines. Two people refused to plead guilty to the charges and in a blatant display of racism, a Québec judge fined them and put them on probation for a year, despite a number of photographs taken by one of the accused that contradicted

Walls, directed by Tom Shandel and written by Christian Buyere, is described in a press release as a prison drama based on the 1975 B.C. hostage-taking incident which resulted in the death of a prison social worker (supposedly killed in the crossfire). A dramatic feature film, both gripping and socially conscious, **Walls** fits more neatly into the proscribed definition of Canadian docu-drama. Featuring Québec actress Andrée Pelletier as Joan Tremblay, the social worker, and Winston Rekert as Danny Baker, the inmate protagonist, it is both well directed and well acted.

Danny is a natural leader and has spent the last five years in the 'hole', solitary confinement. A lawyer and Joan, the socially-conscious social worker who has not yet been 'institutionalized' by her job, are working hard to reform the prison system and challenge the 'hole' as a cruel and unusual punishment. The authoritarian warden, under pressure to agree to certain reforms, allows Baker out of the hole. He predicts trouble—and that's what happens. Baker is provoked into a violent outburst; about to be sent back to solitary, he rebels and with two other inmates takes a guard and several administrators hostage, including Joan. In a series of crude attempts to get the prisoners to surrender, the prison authorities lie and connive and eventually authorize an assault which results in the death of Joan.

The monotony, boredom and soul-stifling routines of prison life are highlighted in the rarified tenseness of the 'hole'. A prisoner pricks his finger to draw blood which he imprints on torn toilet paper to make playing cards—and is rewarded for his patience and persistence by having them confiscated by a malicious guard. A demented prisoner is deliberately set loose in the corridor with Danny so that there can be an excuse for a beating.

Paralleling the story of the inmates who are dehumanized by the prison system is the story of the social worker who recognizes that this brutalization serves neither the inmates nor the society they will return to. Challenging the system from within, the would-be reformers are thwarted at every turn by an intransigent bureaucracy, by scared guards and an antiquated system that bears a close resemblance to **Dungeons and Dragons**.

While director Tom Shandel would claim dramatic feature film status for **Walls** there are many similarities of style and construction that place it in the docu-drama category. It is difficult for the 16mm independently-produced feature film to have the seamless, glossy and super-realist look of a 35mm Hollywood production. Shandel works within the conventional forms of realism because it is an accessible form for audiences whose formative film experience comes from watching Hollywood films. He also admires independent American features like **Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?** and **Heart Like a Wheel**. **Walls** is no **Dog Day Afternoon**, which is also based on a hostage-taking incident. It is, however, an earnest and respectable attempt to turn an infamous prison event into a gripping drama and plug for prison reform. What **Walls** highlights is that docu-drama characters, even if they are full of contradictions like Danny, are principally intended to illustrate the social parable being presented. For Danny the wheels of reality are turning and he has no possibility of affecting the outcome. Admittedly, given the basis of this story, **Walls** can only make changes in the details of its telling and not in the outcome itself. Perhaps that sense of pre-determination limits the ability of the film to represent the possibility of change, the possibility of struggling against social and economic determinism.

'I was not able to get permission (from the Film Board) to go there right away when I wanted to go. Being an Indian person I wanted to be there right away to see what I could do...but I got there on the day after the second raid and I went there by myself and took a Nagra and did a lot of interviews. I didn't sleep for two days and two nights, we stayed at the band office, there was a 24 hour guard of all the entrances by a lot of In-

dian people who had come from all over. It was just like wartime there, it was unbelievable. They had scanners and I took notes and we listened to the QPP and they were obviously talking in codes because they knew we were listening. You could touch the feeling of something really weird in the air...the children were terrified. If a helicopter went over they would hide underneath the porches.'

Alanis Abomsawin

'When the boy was on the bridge he saw the RCMP on the New Brunswick side waving a stick at him as if they were going to hit him and he ran back and he saw the QPP on the other side and then he thought "there's a war on and those guys are on our side". He went toward them for help, but then he saw them running after his own people, he got really scared and went to hide.'

Alanis Abomsawin

'...A lot of people were taking pictures. For instance, when the police were urinating in front of the women and children there were Indians who took pictures, but their cameras

were confiscated. They took a lot of cameras, so we didn't have so many pictures to use.'

Alanis Abomsawin

police evidence. The judge declared these photos fakes. The convictions were overturned two years later by the Québec Superior court.

The film benefits greatly from two invaluable resources. One is the colourful descriptions of the events 'played out' by the participants as they recollect the events and the other is Abomsawin herself. Her forceful presence comes across in the film during an interview with former Québec Minister of Fisheries, Lucien Lessard, who betrays the hypocrisy of the white politician who is also a Québec nationalist. Possessing a quiet and serene appearance, Alanis Abomsawin is nevertheless a passionate and committed activist who forcefully argues with Lessard. By contrast, Lessard appears shallow and callous, a very accurate representation of the continued disregard with which the Québec and other provincial and federal governments deal with native rights.

Incident at Restigouche has many of the characteristics of the formal documentary. One of its editors is veteran Film Board producer Wolf Koenig and the film is an NFB production. What gives it freshness, however, is both its 'non-objectivity', its unqualified support of the rights of the Micmac and its careful integration of songs, story-telling recollections and some very tense re-enactments.

Low Visibility



Under the Table, 20 min., 16mm.
Available from DEC Films
Toronto.

Walls, 90 min., 16mm. Not
available in general distribution
as of the date of writing—watch
your tv guide and keep your
fingers crossed.

Incident at Restigouche, 45 min.,
16mm. Available from the NFB.

Low Visibility, 78 min., 16mm.
Not yet in general distribution;
available for special screenings
from the filmmaker, c/o
Communications Department,
Simon Fraser University,
Burnaby, British Columbia.

'There are lots of films I still have to make. I have to go on singing too and that's my life...sometimes some of the news (coverage of the incident) was not very accurate, other times it was. Sometimes some news people were looking for news that wasn't there. Because some reporters were there for months they had to feed the newspaper every day.'

Alanis Abomsawin

'...I go there like a bull (to the NFB) and all I think about is what I have to do and I'm going to do it to the end and I'll fight every battle every day. But a lot of people, their mind

doesn't function like that, they'd like to be in peace and make a film in peace and quiet. I would like that too, but I'm not going to wait till I have peace before I make a film.'

Alanis Abomsawin

Patricia Gruben's film, **Low Visibility**, is not a documentary or a docu-drama, but in many ways her avant-garde new-narrative drama is a critique of the 'realistic', 'objective' vision of the world offered by the documentary. The film is based on the 'true' account of a man found wandering on the highway and apparently suffering from aphasia (loss of the use or understanding of language). The opening of the film is constructed like a home movie. Two women are driving along the highway when they encounter 'Mr. Bones' (a name given him by one of the nurses from the hospital). The second sequence has a documentary form and shows a news crew that begins to 'construct' the story. The third sequence features the actual newscast. Later on, through a video camera at the hospital, we 'observe' Mr. Bones. Each perspective adds a detail, each detail another level of truth. Lorne Greene narrates a nature documentary on a hospital tv, ascribing all sorts of human social values to African ants—an anthropological ethnocentrism which relates to the kinds of social norms that inform a therapist's endeavour to 'cure' Bones—the cure being a conformist adaptation to an oppressive social 'real'.

The narrative is organized as an investigation paralleling police and journalists' endeavours to identify the man and the circumstances of his appearance on the highway. The police, informed by a woman psychic (who, by contrast to the rational empirical logic the film is critiquing, represents the 'feminine intuitive mode of thought'), make connections between the man and a plane crash where bodies are found that may have been cannibalized. As the story unfolds, the mystery deepens. Is Mr. Bones hiding his identity?

Paralleling the police and journalist investigation, the film provides an account of Bones' 'rehabilitation' in the hospital where we observe the day-to-day rewards and punishments that are used by his therapist to brainwash him into a replica of a 'normal person'.

Using television reports, video camera 'observations' and omnipresent tv sets, the film explores the authoritarian nature of the 'socialization process' and the equally authoritarian nature of the documentary image. As the point of view shifts from one mode to another—from television report of 'real' event, from observational documentary to the framing narrative—the frames of the 'real' become increasingly impossible to locate. The result of these shifting points of view and discursive modes is a constant sense of ambiguity that refuses to assign the status of 'truth' to any one image.

Low Visibility is as much a mystery story about images as it is of the events portrayed. At the same time as the film's narrative truth is illusive, contradictory and ambiguous, so too are the images that we construct from our own imprinted social perceptions, our own icons of truth. Thus, the documentary, the news reports, the 'objective observer' all turn out to be false prophets, conjurers and magicians. **Low Visibility** refuses to resolve the question 'What is truth?'

The key to the renaissance of the documentary and its new formations is diversity. Diversity in form, diversity of content and diverse groups of filmmakers. Out of the four films described only one is by a white Canadian male. Those who have 'traditionally' been outside of the mainstream of film possibilities are now (having struggled for decades) able to contribute new and exciting ideas. A new conjuncture of theory and practice has opened up new possibilities not only for filmmakers, but also for their audiences. In the days to come, if these films are an indication, audiences will embrace these new forms and engage in the continued social processes both they and the filmmakers have initiated.

Glen Richards is a freelance filmmaker who lives in Toronto.