



Greyson, John (b. 1960)

by Eugenio Filice

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Internationally recognized as an avant-garde filmmaker and video artist, John Greyson was born in Nelson, British Columbia, but spent most of his childhood and teenage years in London, Ontario. He lived in New York for a brief time during the 1970s, but moved to Toronto in 1980, where he wrote for *The Body Politic* and local art and cultural magazines.

Greyson began as a video and performance artist before taking up cinema as a full-time vocation. Although he was a resident at the Norman Jewison Canadian Film Centre in 1990, he is largely self-taught as a filmmaker.

Greyson has never flinched from confronting contentious topics. The vast majority of his work, the earliest of which dates from 1978, boldly presents socially relevant themes, especially issues related to homosexuality, gay rights, and AIDS activism.

His films document the trials and tribulations of Toronto's gay community, while also dealing with such topics as race (*A Maffie Called Simon* [1986]), censorship and copyright (*Uncut* [1997]), police harassment and surveillance (*Breathing Through Opposing Nostrils* [1982]; *Urinal* [1988]), and the AIDS crisis (*The AIDS Epidemic* [1987]; *Angry Initiatives, Defiant Strategies* [1988]; *The World Is Sick (Sic)* [1989]; *The Pink Pimpernel* [1989]; and *Zero Patience* [1993]).

Recently, Greyson has begun to deepen his already wide repertoire of themes to include focused studies of love and relationships (*Lilies* [1996]; *Law of Enclosures* [1999]). Stylistically, his work runs the gamut from the whimsical (*Zero Patience*) to the poetic (*Lilies*). His films often interweave multiple story lines and are exceedingly involved compositionally.

Greyson's work may best be understood in terms of the drama theory advanced by Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), who believed that the goal of drama was not to evoke an emotional response or identification with the figures who appear on stage, but to cause an audience to think critically. Brecht thought that the use of historical characters in contemporary drama would prevent an audience from overly identifying with characters and induce them to contemplate the underlying message of a work.

Thus, Greyson features historical figures in many of his films and videos. For example, *Urinal*, the story of police control of public washroom-sex in Ontario, features such historical and fictional figures as Dorian Gray, Frances Loring and Florence Wyle, Langston Hughes, Frida Kahlo, and others.

In *Zero Patience*, Greyson confronts the topic of AIDS through an unlikely genre, the musical comedy. In this feature-length work, the filmmaker responds to the sudden glut of death by navigating a plethora of emotional and intellectual concerns and pronouncements regarding individual and media representations of AIDS, while also attempting to maintain a critical distance from other films that sentimentalize the disease.

Critics have not always responded positively to Greyson's films. However, *Lilies*, based on a play by the

openly gay Quebec playwright, Michel Marc Bouchard (b. 1957), is the exception.

A historical dramatization of a schoolboy love story, it is set primarily in a Quebec prison in the 1950s and tells the story of Bishop Bilodeau, who, having gone to hear a dying convict's confession, is held captive by conspiring guards and prisoners and forced to reveal his own sins. As the bishop watches through the confessional's key hole, scenes from his past are brought to life, including his love for a fellow classmate and the tragedy that followed.

The film received four Genie Awards from the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television, including one for Best Picture.

Greyson's most recent feature, *Proteus* (2003), is based on the transcript of a 1735 sodomy trial. It explores an interracial relationship in the South African prison on Robben Island.

In addition to his film work, Greyson has also directed for television, including an episode of the American version of *Queer as Folk*.

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About the Author

Eugenio Filice is a doctoral student in art history at McGill University. He is currently preparing a dissertation on representation of gay men in contemporary Canadian art, and on the revival of figurative painting that occurred during late 1970s and 1980s.