

of value ever came from that country, then s/he is in fact saying that s/he is not of that country. It is, to my mind, a form of matricide, I go further — it is a form of pimping of the worst order, for first you destroy your place of origin and then you market your version of the destruction to those very forces that play a part in that destruction.

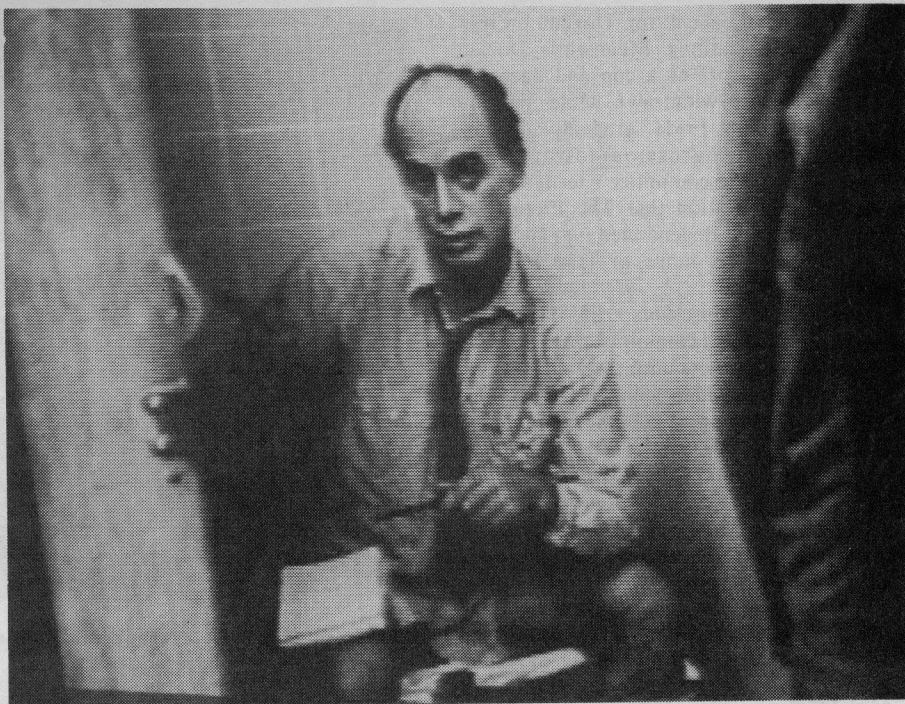
Why the accolades for this work and this writer here in Canada? In a publicity memo from Macmillan, Bissoondath's publishers, there is a quotation from the *Times Literary Supplement* on the writer's first book, *Digging Up Mountains*, a collection of short stories. "An accomplished first collection," the quotation reads. What Macmillan has conveniently omitted is that the *TLS* also wrote that if Neil Bissoondath could learn to control his racism he might someday become a good writer. This was the same work that garnered unqualified praise from critics in Canada. If we understand how this society works we should not be surprised at the reception of both this writer's works. Stanley R. Barrett in his work, *Is God a Racist?* writes: "racism in Canada has been institutionalized . . . racism in this country is as deeply rooted as that in the United States . . . it remains puzzling how Canadians have been able to maintain a reputation for tolerance and harmony. What has characterized Canada has been 'an ostrich like denial that a significant problem of racial hostility exists at all.'"

A work like *A Casual Brutality* and writers who mouth the sort of sentiments Bissoondath does, help fuel powerful myths in this country, myths that help to perpetuate the belief system that coming to Canada is the solution for one's problems, and the corollary of that, that colonialism and neo-colonialism are over and were not really problems in any event. To my mind this explains why a writer of such dubious talent is able to command advances in the range of \$200,000 for a first novel. That and his uncle's name. We need, however, to remind ourselves that contrary to the messages we receive, value and success are not one and the same thing. In his work, *On Moral Fiction*, John Gardner writes:

The lost artist is not hard to spot. Either he puts his money on texture — stunning effects, fraudulent and adventitious novelty, rant — or he puts all his money on some easily achieved or faked structure, some melodramatic opposition of bad and good which can by nature handle only trite ideas. (my emphasis).

A Casual Brutality falls squarely within this description. ■

Marlene Nourbese Philip is a Toronto-based writer and poet.



Sergei Eisenstein (Paul Bettis) explains the finer points of washroom sex.

Private Parts in Public Places

by Andrew J. Paterson

URINAL

JOHN GREYSON

Distributed by John Greyson Productions
1988

Urinal is a cinematic adaptation of John Greyson's sizeable body of video work, particularly *Jungle Boy*, *Moscow Does Not Believe In Queers* and *You Taste American*. Both public washroom sex and arrests for public washroom sex have played prominent roles in these tapes. So has the device of creating fictional summit conferences and encounters between historical figures. And so has the flagrant disrespect for the boundaries between fictional and documentary forms of time-based representation.

Added to these familiar Greyson motifs is a defiance of the conventions distinguishing film and video. Within the wider cinematic frame, Greyson employs the classical surveillance video-within-film but also makes extensive use of the post-production possibilities of video-intrinsic technology to create a hermetic almost impenetrable mon-

tage. The expressionistic use of video within *Urinal* implicitly parallels Greyson's critique of the state's regulation of desire. The various reactions of the "living dead" celebrity committee members to the simplified print and celluloid biographies of themselves draws a metaphoric relationship between the mythologizing effect of classical narrative and the control of desire.

A mysterious taped communique has assigned a committee of deceased 20th century artists, all of whom were either known to be or suspected of being gay, to investigate "the cause, history, and ramifications" of harassment and arrests of men who are sexually active in the tearooms of Southern Ontario. The committee consists of Sergei Eisenstein, Langston Hughes, Frida Kahlo, Yukio Mishima, hostesses Frances Loring and Florence Wyle, and the elusive Dorian Gray.

All members except for Dorian present evening dissertations. Meanwhile Dorian passes himself off as a cop and becomes more and more withdrawn while his portrait, painted by Frida, gradually decomposes. The progression towards the conclusion of the committee's term and the inevitable revelation that The Picture of Dorian Gray has degenerated into an image of a Mountie is more or less *Urinal's* trajectory.

As each artist presents a thoroughly researched paper, the committee proceeds like a comedy of manners until the multilingual, bi-sexual Frida Kahlo identifies washroom sex as an issue in which the personal is indeed political. When she states that washroom sex is "an example of the battle for sexual emancipation," differences between committee members are transcended and the menace of washroom surveillance becomes relevant to all concerned.

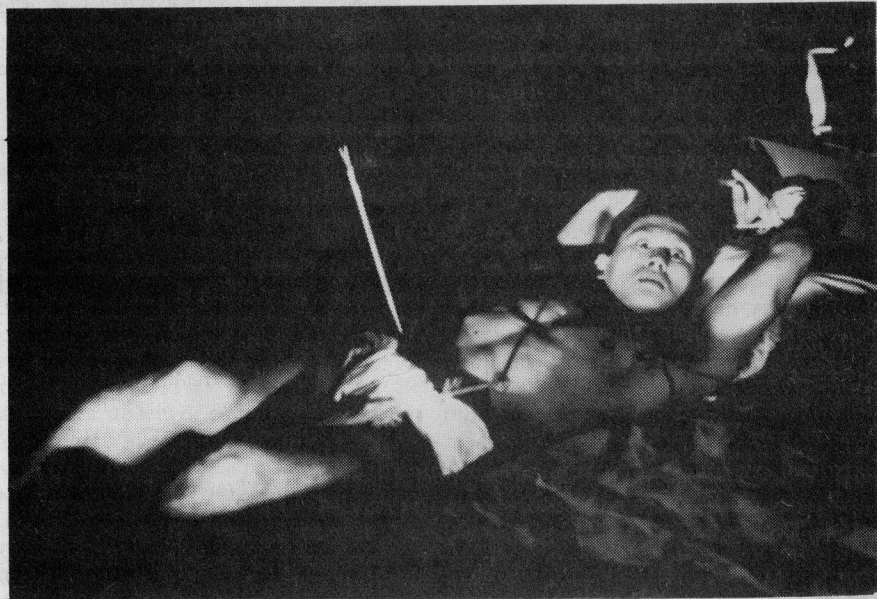
The committee is frequently interrupted by "talking head" interviews which expand on the public/private dichotomy of sexual practice. The interviewees, along with the committee members, address the paradox of increasing state control over private lives in a nation which is becoming increasingly privatized both economically and rhetorically.

Greyson outlines the development of the public washroom as a place to do what is to be done as privately as possible both in social and working situations. Ironically, the sex-segregated washrooms which initially benefited working women by creating a male-free environment naturally allowed possibilities for same-sex activities in the men-only facilities. On the one hand washroom sex provides a situation of relative egalitarianism compared to baths and bars, on the other hand, participants who are both aggressive and furtive about their activities are reluctant to reveal their identities. This need for anonymity, parodied by "talking head" interviews with obviously disguised performers, stands in contrast to an interview with a man who describes how his actual coming out was forced by his washroom arrest and its consequences. This man recounts his experience of watching surveillance footage of himself during his trial and proudly acknowledging his identity. (Did this man need to be publicly identified as gay in order to come out?).

This particular question could not be explored within the structure of *Urinal*. Greyson's montage barely hints at this man's struggle; similarly it makes brief reference to the current state of washroom and other "impersonal" sex in the age of AIDS and the relevance of "this gay liberation movement" to other liberation movements (black, marxist, feminist, etc.) Thematically and formally *Urinal* concentrates on locating the points at which private behaviour becomes



Sculptors Florence Wyle (Keltie Creed) and Frances Loring (Pauline Carey) discuss their strange group of guests.



David Gonzales as Yukio Mishima as St. Sebastian.

scrutinized. The artists committee members whose lives were subject to speculation are mirrored by the testimony of washroom sex participants, particularly the man caught indulging his private parts in public. The polite etiquette of the tea party at Florence and Frances's is complimented by discourses on the etiquette of tearoom encounters.

The film is itself a battleground between a relatively private language (video art and experimental film) and a public language (the expectations of mainstream filmgoers and programmers). Although *Urinal* does not depart thematically from Greyson's

video *oeuvre*, the cinematic scale allows for a greater degree of montage within *mise-en-scene* than is possible within the smaller video frame. Greyson is genuinely committed to expressing the personal within the structure of contemporary political cinema: unfortunately the film's unrelenting assault on the boundaries between film, video, fiction and documentary might prove uncomfortable for too many preconditioned programmers and viewers. ■

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