

Brutal art from mean streets by Marshall Delaney

Like the best young filmmakers, they don't know that it's impossible to make films, so they go ahead and make them. Janis Cole (left) and Holly Dale are only twenty-three years old but already they have four short films behind them and in a way they are among the most astonishing products of the film boom of the 1970s. You probably haven't seen any of their films, but eventually you will. They have ambition, energy, and a restless urge to describe the world the way they believe it should be described. Their subjects are whores, transvestites, and criminally insane young men, and their films are gripping because Holly and Janis are committed not only to their own remarkable young careers but to the lives of their subjects.

Holly and Janis started making films together at Sheridan College in suburban Toronto when they were both twenty. Unlike most filmmakers, they couldn't be classified as middle class—they have a brutal, direct, lower-class approach that reflects their origins. Someone asked them recently about two of their films, documentaries on Yonge Street low life: "How did you get those people, those whores and transvestites, to take part in your films?" Holly answered, "Well, they're all friends of ours." In 1974, at twenty, Holly was assistant manager at a Toronto body-rub parlour called the French Connection.

Cream Soda, the short they made in 1975, is about the body-rub industry. It shows the women talking together in the dressing room at a massage parlour, it shows customers furtively coming in and leaving, it contains a passage on the sound track where a young whore describes how she fastidiously holds two pieces of Kleenex in one hand while she masturbates her customers. And it has a marvellous bit of unconscious humour from one girl who says "I earn a very decent living."

Then there's *Minimum Charge No Cover* (1975), which is about transsexuals, transvestites, and female impersonators. Early in the film there's a scene in which we meet an ex-male, the subject of a successful sex-change operation, sitting in her bathtub and displaying her pretty little breasts. There's a trio of black female impersonators who come on like the Supremes, only somehow sexier. There's a young man

who says that he was into homosexuality years ago and that, now everyone's getting involved, "It's *passé*, a little boring . . . homosexuality."

The big accomplishment of Holly and Janis, so far, is a film called *Thin Line* (1977). Their idea was to penetrate the Ontario hospital for the criminally insane at Penetanguishene. They spent six months going there, carefully cultivating friendships, slowly winning the trust of the administrators, the therapists, and above all the inmates, or patients. Then they got a \$10,000 Canada Council grant, went to the hospital, and started shooting. The results are astonishing: young murderers, rapists, and knife artists talking about what made them what they are and how they hope to become something different. The young men, uniformly sad, come across as both threatening and somehow reassuring—reassuring because they believe in their own therapy and because, curiously, the filmmakers believe in it too. "It was part of my criminal pattern," one young man says, "to commit the ultimate crime, murder, the one you can be most respected for in the penitentiary and criminal society." Another patient talks about how when he was a child his father locked him up in a cupboard for a day and a half at a time. Another talks about his life as one of eight children with an absentee father, and we meet his unfortunate mother, knitting in her living room. There's an account of something at Penetanguishene called The Capsule, which patients volunteer to enter as a way to break down psychological reserve. For days at a time they live in a room eight feet by ten feet. They use an open toilet, they get food only through straws in the wall. They're constantly videotaped and watched by other patients on TV screens. In the end they find it therapeutic. *Thin Line* may be a real first for documentaries on mental hospitals: it conveys the impression that the system may actually be working.

Holly Dale and Janis Cole aren't "sensitive" in the way of many avant-garde young filmmakers: their work is frank and unvarnished, the product of the mean streets they know so well. "We want to make films," they've said in a joint statement, "so that people can see what they normally are not exposed to and have some kind of understanding." Which indicates, as their movies do, that they already know exactly what documentaries are all about. ●

