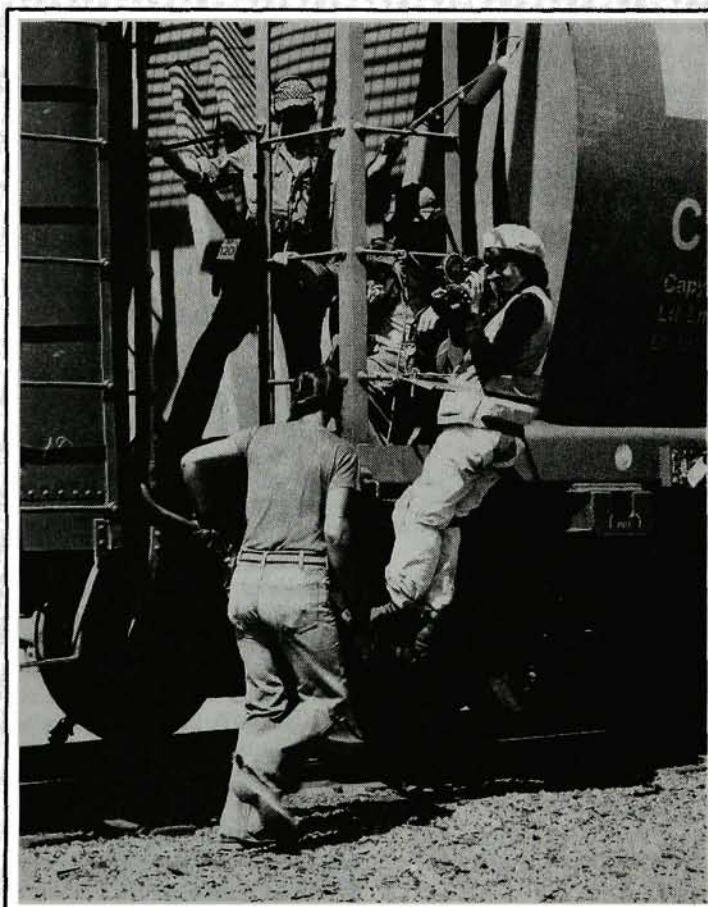


Special Section

by Barbara Halpern
Martineau

Leading Ladies Behind the Camera



No soft touch for these women: here, director Barbara Tranter (left) and cinematographer Jan Martell keep track of the action.

Canadian Women Filmmakers

Canadian women filmmakers are not new — just few, and far between. Though they are seriously committed to indigenous film, their work is thwarted by the industry's male-dominated, bureaucratic structure. It is high time their efforts, and Canadian audiences, were rewarded.

There is a connection between the concepts of women in film and women and film, but the connection is neither simple nor direct. Women make films, women show films, women see films, and images of women appear in films. Women write about films, women write films, women act in films. Considering these categories, which ones seem "natural," and which strike you as more unusual? For example, how many women filmmakers, distributors, critics, and screenwriters can you name? How many in Canada? If you're proud of yourself because you can name some — and you have a right to be proud — compare those figures with the numbers of men you can name in the same categories. Compare the number of women you know who are actively engaged in film production/distribution/exhibition with the number who passively consume films, whose lives are affected by films and the attitudes they represent.

It's not that women who make films, automatically make feminist films, or even films which are sympathetic to women. It's not that men don't make films of interest and use to women. I start with the observations that most films are made by men, and most are male-centered and objectify women, often violently. From that starting point there is a long way to go towards an understanding of how this is so and what can be done. And while a fair amount has been written on the subject of women and film, very little has been written which is specific to contemporary production — hardly anything which deals with women and film in Canada.¹

The role of women in making films, and the effect of films on women's lives, are both complex issues which vary widely according to what kind of film is being discussed.

Feature films are, for the most part, made within the film industry, and are heavily affected by marketplace considerations. Audience response (which is not the same as box-office receipts) rarely has much effect on feature production; conversely, features can play a large role in shaping popular (mainly urban) consciousness.

Television has considerably diluted the effect of theatrical features: in 1978 there were 81,597,000 paid admissions to movie theatres in Canada — a slight but steady increase from 79,020,000 in 1974, and an enormous decline from 299,312,348 in 1949, the peak year in Canada. In 1978, the national average of admissions to movie theatres was less than four per capita each year; in 1980, it is estimated that the average Canadian watches 22.8 hours of television each week. There are 8,648,800 Canadian women over eighteen — 8,507,000 of these watch television every week.²

Although movie attendance has declined, admission prices have risen, and in 1973 theatrical film rentals in Canada (paid by theatres to distributors) amounted to \$50.8 million while TV rentals the same year were only \$19.9 million. Features are still where the money is for producers. Non-theatrical rentals (mainly in 16 mm, to film societies, universities, and so on) came to \$4.9 million. Across the board these markets are dominated by the United States, which received \$60 million in that one year.

At the present time 96% of the films viewed in Canada originate outside the country, 44% of them from the U.S. Understandably, Canada is the largest foreign market for U.S. made films. It is this latter point that upsets those Canadians attempting to form a distinct Canadian cultural identity.³

Documentary films are usually made for a more specific audience than features, and for a smaller market (financially speaking). The bulk of documentary production in Canada is controlled by the National Film Board, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and government agencies which tender films through the NFB. Documentary producers tend to be concerned about audience response, so there is a potential for feminist input; also, probably because lower levels of finance are at stake, more women have access to creative positions in documentary production than in features, although the numbers remain token in both areas.

Experimental films are usually made for the satisfaction of the filmmaker and are supported by government or foundation grants. Audience response and the degree of possible women's input therefore varies from zero to 100% depending entirely on the filmmaker.

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Alternative films are defined primarily as films made outside of the institutional or commercial mainstreams which dominate Canadian filmmaking. Unlike most experimental films, alternative films tend to be politically oriented and, at least in theory are made with a high consciousness of audience needs. Alternative cinema has been an important area for feminist input and has also had effects on women's organizing in other countries. However, due to certain peculiarities of the Canadian situation with respect to educational film, we have very little in the way of alternative cinema here.

In the U.S., commercial producers and distributors of educational films have been given assistance from federal and state funds. Little or no such encouragement is given in Canada. Canadian producers and distributors have to compete not only with the heavily subsidized products of government agencies but also with perhaps equally heavily subsidized commercial products from the U.S. This perhaps explains why, out of some thirty educational media distributors in Canada, only five are Canadian-owned and operate on a nation-wide scale; all the others are subsidiaries of firms in the U.S.⁴

This is another important issue. Not only do we need to distinguish between women in film and women's involvement with film; between mainstream features and other kinds of film; we also need to look at the effect of American domination on all kinds of film.

The overwhelming majority of feature films exhibited in Canada are American; 'our' television stations carry American films and programs (40%); our educational market is flooded with American products (60% of 16mm films held by film libraries of education systems).

Recently there has been a boom in Canadian feature filmmaking, based on a tax write-off policy of the government. Many of the new features are co-productions, carefully filtered clear of any Canadian traces; many, due to the chain-owned and block-booked system of 'Canadian' movie theatres, will never be seen by audiences in this country. So, although there will be more made-in-Canada-to-some-extent-by-Canadians features in 'our' theatres, the greatest Canadian influence on our filmic consciousness will continue to be CBC docu-dramas and news programs, and National Film Board documentaries. (The CBC English network produces 80% of its programs on film, of which only 6% is commissioned from independents, and two-thirds of the Canadian films in our educational libraries were made by the NFB.) We are colonized from the outside and institutionalized from within. The massive bureaucracies of the NFB and the CBC, like Scylla and Charybdis — the rock of paternalism and the whirlpool of 'objective' coverage — guard the entrance to our Canadian consciousness, placing in double jeopardy the fate of hapless would-be independents.

Both the CBC and the NFB have been the most important factors in the growth and organization of the media labour force, but their activities have tended to inhibit the growth of the private sector and its utilization of creative talents.⁵

Most of the documentary, animated, and dramatic non-theatrical films made in Canada are produced by one of these institutions. They are also distributed by them, 'free' — having been paid for by taxpayers' money. The implications for alternative circuit-builders are enormous.

The Canadian market is fragmented and small, and most producers need universal distribution...in order to achieve break-even levels or profitability... Producers often put a lesser emphasis on distribution, not realizing that distribution of the product is possibly more critical than production.⁶

Not only does the NFB distribute its own films and CBC films 'free' across the country and internationally; it also controls the production of films sponsored by government agencies, plays a significant role in determining which Canadian films are submitted to foreign film festivals, and is in charge of certifying films produced in Canada as 'educational material'. Films so certified are exempt from domestic sales tax and from customs duties when exported. In addition to the guidelines laid down by UNESCO for certification, the NFB has added some requirements of its own:

...the Board, by way of example, will not certify material:

- a) The primary purpose or effect of which is to amuse or entertain.*
- b) The primary purpose of which is to inform concerning current events (newsreels, newscasts, spot news)...*
- d) Which by special pleading, attempts to influence opinion, conviction or policy (religious, economic or political propaganda) to inculcate any dogma; to constitute a ritual or denominational service...*

Feminism :

- a) the theory that women should have political, economic, and social rights equal to those of men ;*
- b) the movement to win such rights for women.*

Feminist :

*An advocate or supporter of feminism.
— Webster's Twentieth Century Dictionary, 2nd edition.*

Ten years ago when I became involved with film and with feminism, I decided that there is no such thing as objectivity. (Only subjective interpretations of historical reality.) So all this while I have been working out subjective film feminisms, but with an academic background of thirty-four years trailing behind me, I tend to produce work which is sometimes interpreted as being objective. The following article, for instance, may well be criticized as an incomplete and biased account of women's film-making activities in English-speaking Canada. Incomplete and biased it certainly is — an account of anything other than my own attitudes and observations it is not. Those women who feel that they, or others, should have been included and were not, are encouraged to write in and make themselves known. Clearly, some system of exchange is needed through which women who are making films, and are interested in what other women are doing, could communicate. As for bias, I think it's time that we women began to assume our own voices and validate our own visions — voices and visions that have too long been muffled, darkened, suppressed. That bias, my personal view of women and film in English-speaking Canada today, runs through this account.

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h) Which it considers as not augmenting international understanding or good will, and cannot certify any material which may be perceived to lend itself to misinterpretation of Canada or other countries, their peoples or institutions.⁷

The question 'perceived by whom?' is appropriate here. To give a personal example, when I submitted the film **Good Day Care: One Out Of Ten** for certification I was informed that the film didn't really qualify as educational material because it advocates good day care for children. Just this time certification would be granted, but I really should keep the criteria for certification in mind for future productions.

So much for control of the market. In terms of employment opportunities:

Both the NFB and the CBC are perceived in the industry as heavily inbred, providing work opportunities and relatively high incomes only to the select few...

The CBC is by far the largest employer and engager of creative talents, but spends only 11% of its operating budget for that purpose, as compared with, for instance, 35% by the British Broadcasting Corporation...

The private television networks and stations provide only a small percentage of the work available for the creative talents...

The cost of talent and labour in film production in Canada is 50% lower than in the United States.⁸

The practical implications for women involved with film in Canada are clear. Colonization and institutionalization spell paternalism, patriarchy, and patronization. Collective pressure by women's groups and women in government has resulted in some response; more could be done if the mass audience of women were organized.

The philosophical implications of looking at women and film in a Canadian context are more difficult to get at. The concepts of exploring one's identity through background, of constructing filmscapes from our Canadian landscapes, of

examining social issues from a personal perspective, are familiar concepts to feminists as well as to "alternative" filmmakers, female and male. These ideas tend to be associated with regional rather than national affinities, just as feminism tends to be local and international in focus, rather than national. Certainly the film producing institutions have a mandate to encourage 'national unity'; certainly the reality has been a tug-of-war between the centres of power in Toronto and Montreal, and the increasingly self-assertive regions. Independent Canadian filmmakers don't have a strong national network — links to the rest of the country are mainly by way of the NFB or the CBC, at least in terms of production. The Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre (Toronto and Vancouver) and DEC Films (Toronto)/IDERA (Vancouver) provide a minimal national network for distribution of independents.

For feminists the primary question must be whether national identity is useful to women in challenging national patterns of oppression; if so, how can production/distribution networks across Canada be improved? To the extent that Canadian law and Canadian custom discriminate impartially against women in all provinces, a common front is important. To the extent that women in different provinces face different situations requiring different strategies, it seems important to develop awareness of those differences (which is still national strategy) and to encourage a strong sense of local identity. The clearest evidence for filmmakers that there is an unresolved problem lies in the difference between access of Canadian women's films to American markets (minimal, if the films are identifiably Canadian) and access of American women filmmakers to Canadian markets (extensive, if they take the trouble to seek distribution here).

In any case, there is value in recognizing that we, as women, have in this country a history and a contemporary context of women working in film production. While it's true that comparatively few women have had significant input, and even fewer have taken an active stand on issues of concern to women, still we have had input and experiences which have been ignored for too long. Ignorance of our own presence in history has been crippling for us all.

Our Presence in History

Nell Shipman (1892-1970) was the first Canadian woman filmmaker. She was born in Victoria, B.C., became a vaudeville actress as a child, emigrated as a young girl to the U.S., and became, like her compatriot Mary Pickford, a star of the Hollywood silent screen. Nell Barham married the Canadian entrepreneur Ernest Shipman and worked with him in the production of a series of successful features, in which Nell not only starred and performed her own stunts but also wrote the scripts and worked at different times as photographer, director, and producer. She loved the Canadian West and the North, and schemed to have films shot on location in 'God's Country.'

Nell Shipman wrote the script, played the lead role, and had considerable creative input into **Back to God's Country** (Canada, 1919), of which the National Film Archive in Ottawa has a master print. Ernest Shipman was the producer, and David M. Hartford is credited with direction. The film is a classic Canadian melodrama, with extraordinary scenes of

Nell playing with bear cubs and porcupines, diving into a raging river to save her father, and flourishing a pistol as she urges her dog team across the frozen tundra to save her ailing husband and her own honour. In her autobiography *The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart* (unpublished, written in 1925, Nell described her work on the film:

In Back to God's Country...sitting on the floor, leaning against a large plain door of dark wood, I was to dream of my Northwoods home and my wild animal friends. The lensman genius, Joe Walker, went along with my notion. I claimed that people did not dream clean-cut, single visions but mixtures. I wanted the wilderness inhabitants to blend in and out, here a wolf, there a bear, over in a tree a cougar, a raccoon washing his dinner in a stream, squirrels popping in and out, bobcats peering, porcupines bristling, all of them dissolving in montage against the dark background while I, at the bottom of the

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The Arctic was "God's country" for the spirited, filmmaking pioneer, Nell Shipman.

frame, dreamed it. It was the most difficult double exposure ever attempted. ... There were numbers of takes, covering shots where one or no more than three animals would dissolve above my dreaming head, but the topper was to have a total of twenty-eight animal characters. Starting that strip of negative it meant that at a future date, when we were on the Kern River location along with the zoo, the film would pass the aperture twenty-nine times. If you'll consider the gross area of .35mm film and mentally cover it section by section with pinpoint spaces upon which each image was to show, you've a notion what Joe Walker was attempting. I doubt a computer could master it today. The tiny scenes had to come in and out, not overlapping each other but in a patchwork pattern. Anything could go wrong — a buckle, tear or miscount, lab trouble in the developing, a bad animal actor in a take — and no re-takes — light which did not match the overall scene; a thousand to one chances for success. But *A Dream! More real than reality*, to be pointed up by an obsequious caption: 'Dolores Dreams of her Forest Friends.'

The script of *Back to God's Country* was based on the short story (by the popular writer James Oliver Curwood), *Wapi the Walrus*, which gives much more time to the dog and much less to the woman than Shipman's script. She recounts their first meeting:

James, though not physically a brawny stalwart, was publicized as a big, out-door Game Hunter. Huge bearskins adorned his backgrounds and I'd a still of him with his foot on the head of a slain Grizzly — a picture I did not admire very much. But I did not mention my dislike of hunting as we squared away that afternoon in Calgary, the pencil-slashed pages

of my script in his hands. 'Now, right here at the beginning,' he said, snarling a bit, 'is the first error. You say "Iris in." There is no character in my story named Iris.'

Thanks to poker training my face remained blank. I gently explained the technical term, illustrating with my fingers how the iris on the camera lens opens, flower-like, on Scene 1. ... He listened more quietly and with growing enthusiasm we went through the script, typed page and scrawled annotation. One by one these were brushed aside as he began to develop the action author-wise. The Girl did not simply look at the man who would rape her as she came naked from a forest pool. She trembled. Her fluttering hands clothed her heaving bosom, tears, like spilled opals, coursed her pale cheeks and her hair, her bountiful, glorious hair, glistened wet from her swim with her pet bear and flowed about her alabaster shoulders like a protective mantle.

When Star and Author came from the session, arm in arm, the news of the unification was shouted to the anxious management and the worried director. 'We've added a million dollars to the picture!' cried James Oliver Curwood.

It was half a million that 'the picture' was to gross in its first year, thus becoming Canada's most successful feature. Six years later, having parted company with both Curwood and Shipman, Nell was in Priest Lake, Idaho, with her 'zoo,' working on a different scale.

By now the 'Star' image had faded. I was a woman who ran a Camp and sometimes made moving pictures. We used the Lone Star Ranch, eleven miles away, for a locale for one of the little pictures and Belle acted for us, in a bed, playing a sick neighbour for whom we must fetch a doctor. The slender plots

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were woven about such incidents — how we overcame obstacles aided by the animals and friendly humans...But Pathé turned down our first two-reeler...they expressed interest when it was announced I was making a series of out-door pictures, but were disappointed when 'Trail of the Northwind' was screened. There was no villain except Nature on the rampage. No sex. I remember what Doc Graff had said when a Heavy drooled behind a tree, looking at Our Nell: 'I want it and I want it now!' and I wondered if audiences would not enjoy a respite from sexpot pursuit.

In the little picture, Barry (Nell's son) rode to the rescue of our stricken neighbor, Belle, on our huge mule. This animal was so big the boy had to climb aboard by shinnying up a foreleg. On a trail with deep in drifts they came to a deadfall...and Barry stepped over it, bursting through the mounded snow like a clown coming out of a hoop and regaining his enormous steed on the other side. A simple enough piece of business, but, in the frame of white bending the graceful cedars, the low light sparkling on cones and twigs, bark, moss and powdery snow, in the patiently plodding bulk of the mule and the serious intent of the small actor, I thought there was something which made a moving picture.

Another sequence showed me driving the dogs across bad ice, Barry in the toboggan. We came to an open space where black water seeped. I was afraid the lead-dog might balk and the load go under, but one after the other they jumped, harness

taut. The small sled bridged the gap and I followed, only wetting my mukluks as the crunching ice sloughed off. Not much of a scene, I suppose, but it was real. We did it. The camera caught it. But the exhibitors and Pathé wanted the menace to be a man.

In 1925 Nell's production company in Priest Lake was dissolved. This was a time when independents both in Canada and the U.S. were being squeezed out of the movie-making scene by the rising Hollywood monopolies. Of the handful of women directors who had built Hollywood careers in the twenties, only one, Dorothy Arzner, survived as a filmmaker into the thirties. Nell Shipman did not make any more films, but she continued to write, and maintained an active interest in the film industry.⁹

Apart from Nell Shipman, the history of women as filmmakers in Canada begins with the formation of the National Film Board and revolves around the figure of a short, fiery-tempered Scotsman, John Grierson, whose influence on Canadian filmmaking was enormous. Grierson came to Canada in 1939 and left in 1945, having founded and defended the amazing institution known as the National Film Board of Canada, from which the traditions of Canadian documentary and animated film have evolved.

Gudrun Bjerring (later Parker)...had started work on the Winnipeg Free Press. One of her assignments was to interview distinguished visitors, and one of these turned out to be John Grierson. It soon turned out to be an interview in reverse, with Grierson asking all the questions. The upshot of it was that Grierson offered her a job with the fledgling National Film Board. ...At Halloween a party was held and someone told Gudrun Bjerring that it was a costume affair. She arrived to find the party going strong, but no one else in costume. Embarrassed and angry, she ran into Grierson, who casually asked her how things were going. She said she wanted to make a film herself. Grierson calmly said, 'Why don't you?' The next day she visited Dr. Pett of the Department of National Health and Welfare. Over the inevitable tomato juice which he served, she explained she wanted to make a film on nutrition. They decided four short films on vitamins would be wonderful. With Judy Crawley, she set out and shot the material. She edited it into cutting copies and prepared rough commentaries.

A few weeks after the party, Grierson asked her if she had a script yet, and Mrs. Parker calmly said she had four cutting copies ready. He screened them and loved them. Before Christmas the films were finished (Vitamins A, B, C, D).¹⁰

Grierson was a chauvinist-imperialist-genius, a pragmatic idealist who used women because the men were off to war, who used French Canadians because it was politically advisable to do so, but who firmly maintained the dominance of the British marketing empire in his filmic domain. "I look on cinema as a pulpit, and use it as a propagandist," he wrote in 1933; there was no nonsense about objectivity under his regime.

The most pervasive effect of Grierson's presence in Canada has been the dominance of the documentary form in Canadian filmmaking. In his day there were no credits on NFB docu-



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mentaries — Grierson said they were team-made films, and that individual contributions were not ultimately important. In effect, of course, these films were all known as Grierson's films, and later people remembered Stuart Legg and Tom Daly as having had considerable input. Only recently have film scholars begun the complicated job of digging out production files to discover who did what. To the surprise of the women in Studio 'D', the 'women's studio' established at the NFB in 1974, it turned out that they were not the first to involve women in camera, lighting, and sound, as well as production and direction, nor even the first to have all-women crews. Evelyn Spice Cherry, Margaret Perry, Judith Crawley, Gudrun Parker, Jane Marsh and many other women played crucial roles in the production of 'classic' wartime documentaries, and were conveniently pushed aside and forgotten, like other women all over the country, once the war was over.

Jane Marsh Beveridge, born in Montreal in 1915, was a writer, director, and producer at the NFB from 1939-1944. She made **Women Are Warriors** (1942) for the Canada Carries On newsreel series — the film is an extraordinary document of women's participation in the war effort in England, the USSR, and Canada. Her original title for the film was **Work for Women** (changed by management), and her initial research resulted in a long document on the historical background and contemporary situation of women, including statistics and analyses from twenty-six countries. She began her research report (unpublished) with a list of quotations illustrating misogyny through the ages, remarking that:

A general consensus of opinion of women as expressed by men during the last six thousand years leads one to believe that although quite indispensable they are also dangerous because incomprehensible and unpredictable, and they should therefore be kept apart as much as possible, either by being

- 1) Put up on a pedestal and hypnotized into thinking they are frail, incompetent and dependent or
- 2) Subjugated for the expediency of

1. lust

2. cheap labour

and that all of them have two duties which should occupy the whole of their lives, thoughts and ambitions, i.e.,

1. to make men comfortable

2. to bear children

and that on no account should they be allowed to use their faculties for anything else as this would bring about disorder by upsetting the status quo.

Jane Marsh left the NFB and Canada in 1944, following a disagreement with John Grierson about the Canada Carries On series, which she was then producing. She said that Grierson was extremely unhappy about having a woman in that position, and that years later when she met him in New York, he told her she had been right, but that he would never give in to a woman.

I resigned in April 1944, as Grierson had developed megalomania about the Canada Carries On potential.

On women at the NFB in the Grierson years:

They were so grateful to be working in interesting jobs that they didn't realize they were slaves.¹¹

Jane Marsh was the only woman at the NFB to direct films specifically dealing with the armed services. Other women at

the Board concentrated on the domestic front: Evelyn Spice Cherry with her husband Lawrence headed the Agricultural Unit; Gudrun Parker, after the films on vitamins, made one on wartime day care centres, **Before They Are Six**, and went on in 1945 to make her best-known film, **Listen to the Prairies**, a document of the Winnipeg Music Festival. Most of the films made by women in those early years of the Board fell under the mandate to 'interpret Canada to Canadians,' as did Jane Marsh's Quebec film, **Alexis Tremblay, habitant** (1943, photographed by Judith Crawley); Laura Boulton's ethnographic series which included **Eskimo Arts and Crafts** (n.d.), **Arctic Hunters** (1942), **Peoples of the Potlatch** (1943), **Habitant Arts and Crafts** (1943); and Margaret Perry's Maritimes films such as **Grand Manan** (1943); and **Capé Islander** (n.d.) None of these films have any explicit feminist content — most seem based on the assumption that sexism didn't exist in Canadian society. And most of the women who worked in wartime production look back on that period with nostalgia, as a golden period when dedication and ability were all that counted. Their accounts of why they left the Board vary; some got married and continued to work, for their husbands; others went on to other work in other fields; some like Evelyn Spice Cherry and Margaret Perry, left to work in their own regions (Cherry Productions is still active in Regina). And for the next twenty-odd years the role of women in documentary production at the NFB was to be minimal. With the exceptions of Gudrun Parker and Julia Murphy, who made films about children and popular psychology, women were restricted to work as negative cutters, secretaries, and in



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some cases as editors. The NFB's *mandate* to interpret Canada to Canadians had become just that.

Women in documentary films were now depicted as case histories illustrating psychological problems which were invariably explained by male doctors, or else as appendages (wife, mother, sister, daughter, secretary, nurse, assistant, etc.). An example worthy of feminist analysis is **Feelings of Hostility** (1948), described as 'a dramatization of the story of Clare, a young woman whose only satisfaction comes from competing successfully.' Clare is shown at the end of the film as a successful career woman whose life is empty because she can't love anyone.

Not until the sixties, when the political climate was changing (even in Canada), and Beryl Fox started making documentary exposés for the CBC, and Dodi Robb was running women's programs at CTV and then the CBC, and Patricia Watson was making humanist documentaries at the NFB, and then the Challenge for Change program got underway at the NFB, making room for the talents of Bonnie Klein and Dorothy Henaut and a few other women, did NFB films start to show women in more central and independent roles, with more complexity and interest. Finally, in the seventies, when Kathleen Shannon's Working Mothers series came out of the Challenge for Change program and led to the formation of

Studio D in 1974, women began to criticize NFB films for their stereotyped images of women and men, and their implicit and explicit sexism. Now there is a special catalogue put out by NFB women of films by and about women, including some of the old oppressive fifties films as examples of stereotypes.

The history of women at the NFB from 1939-1979 demonstrates a strong and complex connection between the role of women in production and the images of women in films — a connection which is crucially affected by the consciousness of the women involved. So long as women play decisive roles in production the films produced will reflect that fact — women will tend to have decisive roles or at least important roles in the films, whether dramatic or documentary. But only when women in production arrive at a feminist analysis of their own position and what they are doing in production, will films reflect that view and offer to the audience a way of looking at the roles played by women and men which is critical, and not merely acquiescent.

To provide some basis for considering where we are now in terms of feminist potential, I'd like to sketch in a bit more of the ragged history of the fifties and sixties, and contemporary scatterings of English-speaking Canadian women filmmakers.

Ragged History and Contemporary Scatterings

Outside of the NFB there was very little documentary production by women after the war, with the above-mentioned exceptions of Margaret Perry in the Maritimes and Evelyn Cherry in Saskatchewan. Sally Macdonald, who recorded sound at the NFB during the war, directed industrial films at Crawley's in Ottawa after the war. There was no feature film industry in Canada — the government had cheerfully agreed not to have one, provided Hollywood mentioned Canada from time to time. (Even today, bandits in Hollywood films talk about escaping to Canada. This is supposed to help Canadian tourism.)

Experimental and animated films comprise an area where women have done considerable work, in Canada as well as in other countries. Again, it started here at the NFB, where Grierson set up a protected kingdom for another Scotsman, Norman McLaren, who became the guru of animated film in Canada. Everyone has heard of McLaren, or seen such famous films as **Blinkety Blink**, **Pas de Deux**, or **A Chairy Tale**, and most film students know that McLaren was the first to draw directly on film. But not so many know of Evelyn Lambart, who worked closely with McLaren from the start, and has made an impressive body of films herself, such as **Maps for Action**, **The Impossible Map** (n.d., wartime), **Fine Feathers** (1968), and **The Hoarder** (1969). Recently Margaret Wescott directed a portrait of the artist in her 'retirement,' **Eve Lambart** (1978).

Alma Duncan and Audrey (Babs) McLaren left their work in animation at the NFB in 1951 to form Dunclaren Productions, an independent company. They lived in rented rooms in Ottawa, working with primitive equipment and a stand they built themselves to make puppet animations: **Kumak the Sleepy Hunter**, **Hearts and Soles**, and **Friendly Interchange** (all made in the fifties). They found it impossible to survive as independents, and Dunclaren Productions has been inactive

since the late fifties although both women have continued to do other creative work.

There are now a number of women doing exceptional work in animation, most of them based around the NFB animation studio in Montreal, like Veronika Soul, a freelancer who does some work for the NFB and makes 'garbage' collages (**How the Hell are You?** 1972; **Tales of the Vienna Woods: A Freudian Romp**, 1974). She and Caroline Leaf, whose films include **The Street** (1976) and **The Owl Who Married a Goose** (1974), recently made a film about each other called **Interview** (1979), a wonderful film combining drawings, collage, and live-action (Caroline in her studio visited by her characters), with voice-over comments by the two women:

C: *People like my films and that makes me like myself better than I used to. But people only see my films, they don't see me.*

V: *You're very hard to see. You're in a cloud, like a foreign person. You're like a cloud in skirts, and I am a cloud in pants.*

C: *I love what my hands are doing. I would never sacrifice my own life now for anybody.*

In Halifax Ramona MacDonald has her own animation studio, called Doomsday, where she works with Elaine Mackie (**Sand Switch**, 1978). In Vancouver Bettina Matzkuhn has made an extraordinary animated film for the Pacific Regional Office of the NFB, a celebration of the process of embroidering a picture of a young woman leaving her hometown (**Home-town**, 1979). In Toronto Patricia Gruben used animation to solve narrative problems in her experimental film **The Central Character** (1978), a film about groceries, kitchen floors, and entropy, using a printed text as well as diagrams, stock footage, and step-printing of live action. By the end of the film the woman is central to the cosmos.



Undaunted by the scale of the project, Lois Siegel tackles her first feature, **A 20th Century Chocolate Cake** with The Great Antonio. Photo: Daniel Villeneuve

Gruben is now completing a second experimental film, two years in the making, called **Sifted Evidence**, which uses front projection and studio actors to examine the memory of a woman who journeyed to Mexico and returned home, different, perhaps. In Montreal, Lois Siegel, who has been making experimental films for nearly ten years and, more recently, documentaries, is nearing completion of a self-sponsored "budgetless feature" called **A 20th-Century Chocolate Cake**, which combines dramatic and documentary techniques to comment on the absurdity of twentieth-century Montreal life.

Other women now working experimentally in film in Canada include Kim Ondaatje in London, Ontario; Kay Armatage, Nancy Nicol, and Kalli Paakspuu in Toronto; Lynn Smith and Joyce Borenstein in Montreal; Ellie Epp in Alberta; and Sandy Wilson in Vancouver, whose film **Growing Up at Paradise** (1977) uses home movie footage shot by her father and voice-over comments by both parents to reinvigorate the 'personal' film form.

By far the best-known woman who has made experimental films in Canada is Joyce Wieland. Like Nell Shipman, like many other talented Canadians, Joyce Wieland went to the U.S. to develop her work, growing along with the new American cinema movement in New York City. Like Nell Shipman she retained a deep love for Canada, particularly for the Canadian landscape, but Wieland's love for Canada

coincided with a new flowering of Canadian nationalism in the late 1960's. While still in New York, working on ways of expressing her Canadian woman's identity, she prepared an art show called 'True Patriot Love,' shown in Ottawa in 1971. One of the exhibits was the 'Water Quilt,' with embroidered veils of Arctic flowers which lift to reveal sewn-in pages of *The Energy Poker Game* by Jim Laxer, about the American rape of the Arctic. In 1968 she made a film called **Rat Life and Diet in North America**, using gerbils on her kitchen table to construct a parable of the great American exodus to Canada in the days of draft resistance and radical American contempt for Canadian political awareness.

Using crafts traditionally labelled feminine, such as embroidery and quilting, applying these crafts in her filmmaking, as in **Hand Tinting** (1967-68), where she dyed the film with cloth dyes and punctured it with sewing needles, making films using household objects as in **Water Sark** (1964-65) — "a film about myself making a film about myself — or hand-holding a camera, shooting through train windows and car windows on a trip across Canada as she did in **Reason Over Passion** (1967-69), Wieland has shown that domestic attitudes can produce serious results, that the artist's personal perspective provides a valid and disturbing angle of vision of world affairs.

In writing the script for **The Far Shore** (1975), her only theatrically-distributed feature film, Joyce Wieland was in-

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fluenced by the writing of the same James Oliver Curwood that Nell Shipman encountered over the script of **Back to God's Country**. The two films are linked by a bond deeper than Curwood's influence — the deep love of the Canadian landscape and its animals, the sense of melodrama in which the heroine plays a strong and resourceful role, the connection, only recently explored by feminist theorists, between women and nature in a positive sense, an affirmative sense.¹² This bond is more than historical coincidence. It has long been a dream of mine to raise funds for a new, tinted print of **Back to God's Country**, struck from the master at the National Film Archive, with a musical soundtrack composed and performed by Canadian women, to be shown across the country on a double bill with **The Far Shore**. I think both films would be seen in an entirely new light, and could be used to publicize women's participation in environmental movements. In an interview in 1975, Joyce Wieland spoke about her work.

I was conscious for quite a while about wanting to develop feminine art. I deliberately took feminine themes, because I knew that men wouldn't be interested in them... I clung to my cats as subjects, my rats, my dishes and pots, the view out my window. Our dining table and who came to visit us.

On **The Far Shore**:

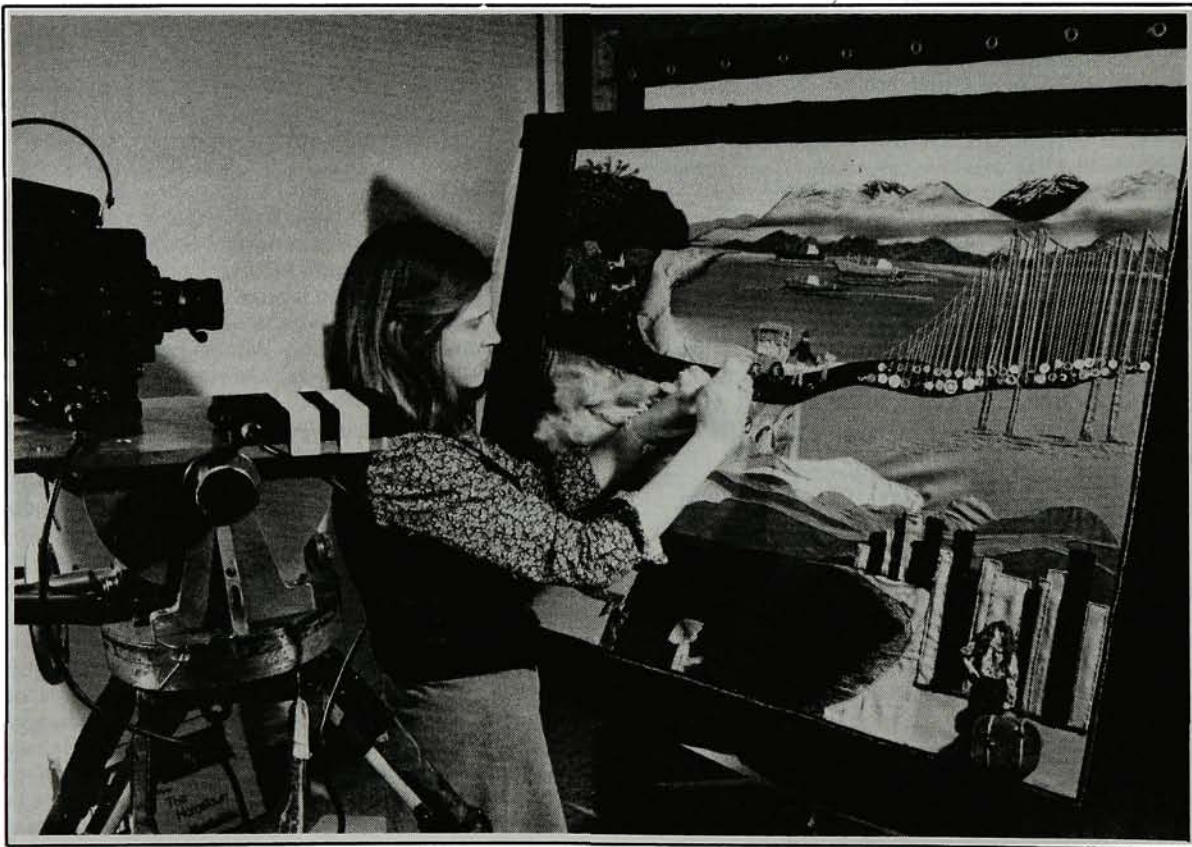
I did my best to embrace the form of the feature film in this work, without compromising myself.

What I had developed in my past films was stillness, the use of grain, love of light, and personal subject matter. I brought my knowledge of film and joined it to traditional form... I worked for two and a half years preparing story boards, designing camera movement, making notes on lighting. I have over 2000 drawings of which 600 became the working boards, which I used to discuss the camera, lighting, production design of the film. It saved money and made a good film. It's against the dominant tendency in film at this moment in time, yes. Because it's just about people's feelings, it's about art and music...

The vision of women, which may lack violence and big guns, could lead us to a new place. It would be nice to be allowed to see non-manipulative films in public in big theatres. Films about being, seeing, smelling, dreaming...

Reason Over Passion is a landscape film of Canada, embracing the land in pictures. **The Far Shore** is the same landscape, only peopled.¹³

Bonnie Kreps came to Canada from the U.S. in the early days of the American women's movement, and made her first film, **After The Vote**, in 1969 for W5 in Toronto. At that time the film represented the avant-garde of the new Canadian women's movement, strongly influenced by the Americans, putting suffragette history and American feminist theory (an



Attending to the minute details of "embroidering" her animation film, Bettina Matzkuhn works on **Hometown**.

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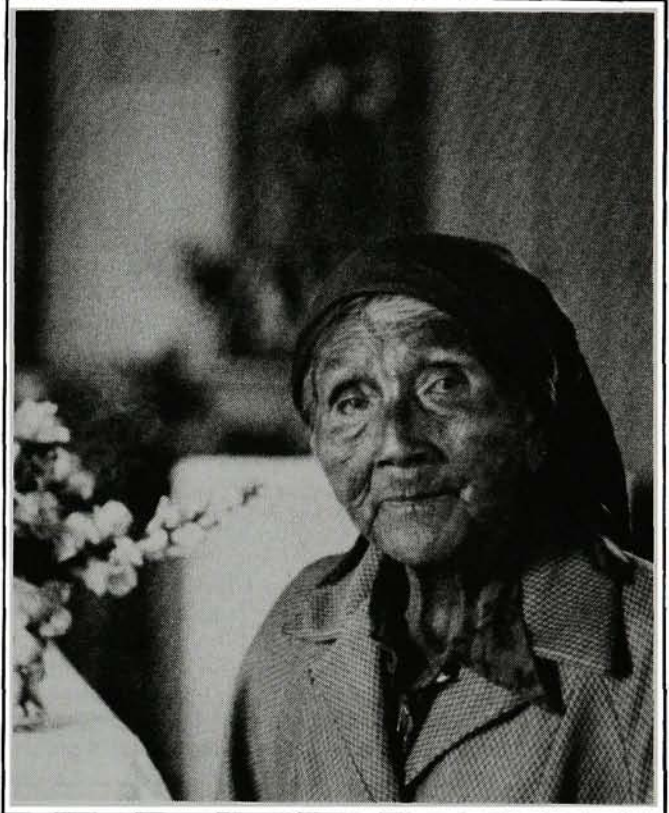
interview with Ti-Grace Atkinson, footage of a Miss America pageant) into the context of Canadian statistics: 'One-third of the labour force in Canada is women, and most of them work to supplement the family income.' Kreps has publicly regretted her use of a male sociologist to explain sex-role stereotyping (with intercut shots of the director looking peculiar). I remember seeing **After the Vote** in the mid-seventies and finding it simplistic and crude. Now it seems an astonishingly lucid document for its time, the first wedge in the closed door on women's issues in Canadian documentaries since the war.

Bonnie Kreps sees her films as developing through three stages, which parallel the development of radical feminism: (1) anger: what's wrong and how to respond (**After the Vote**); (2) affirmation and celebration (**Portrait of My Mother**, 1973, **Mountain Dance**, 1976); and (3) women's vision, developing a feminist aesthetic (**This Film is About Rape**, 1978, and **No Life for a Woman: Women in Single-Industry Towns**, 1979). (From **Mountain Dance** on, all of Kreps's films have been made in British Columbia.) In the last two films the emphasis is on letting women speak for themselves, using the craft of film to allow them to speak as clearly as possible with a minimum of distortion and interference. This can only be achieved when the filmmaker is working in close cooperation with her subjects, and when she is conscious of the implications of the subject matter. Both films work very well with a wide range of women, and the key seems to be that they offer a set of possible responses to a clearly-defined situation of women's oppression, always given of women who are articulate and ordinary: a grandmother who was nearly raped recently, but who cries only when talking about how her daughter was raped twenty years ago; a stewardess who remarks that the popular image of her as a 'cupcake' ignores her function — she must be able to evacuate a plane speedily and calmly and she is tested on this ability every year; a woman working in a women's centre up north who describes what it was like to live on welfare in a crowded trailer camp; other women describing their lives in single-industry towns, clearly and with full consciousness.

Both **This Film Is about Rape** and **It's No Life for a Woman** are very sophisticated from a feminist perspective, and both appear deceptively simple as films. In each case the film moves from a composite picture of women's oppression and alienation, through individual expressions of awareness, to analysis of the situation and how it can be changed by collective action on the part of conscious individuals — without the assumption that the system is either innocent or irresistible.¹⁴ Bonnie Kreps, who lives in Vancouver, is presently working with Studio D of the NFB on her next film, about physics, psychics, and radical feminism (!!).

Vancouver's Women in Focus Society is a small group of women who produce and distribute slide-tape presentations, videotapes, leaflets, and films about women's issues. In the fall of 1978 Women in Focus organized a Feminist Film and Video Festival, which was a major event bringing together recent women's productions for a west coast audience and offering a forum for discussion of feminist issues. (That same fall there was another festival of Canadian women's films sponsored by the Powerhouse Gallery in Montreal.)

The offices of Women in Focus now house Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), and the joint organization has a separate brochure listing materials available on that subject. They are currently producing, with the help of NFB's



A Shuswap Indian woman in the Cariboo Country of B.C. is the focus of Anne Wheeler's **Augusta**. Photo: NFB

Studio D, a 20-minute film in 16mm on sexual harassment of women in the work force.

Moira (Mo) Simpson is a Vancouver filmmaker who works as a video producer and film teacher at Capilano College. Her first solo film, **Emigrante** (1979), was sponsored by the B.C. Multicultural Department, and it's about racism in Canada — a lively musical collage of racist attitudes expressed as voices over sympathetic images of the people against whom prejudice is directed, a powerful example of how non-verbal expression can be used progressively to combat clichés.

Mo Simpson got involved with community video in B.C. in 1972. Eventually, through Women and Film, the national network set up by the Toronto Women and Film Festival in 1973, she started Isis, a women's distribution company for video and film, which eventually employed thirteen women and operated until 1976. She made two films with Isis: **Can You Hear Me?** (1974), selected for the NFB Studio D just-a-Minute reel; and **Dinette Suite** (1974).

Simpson is now working on **Soup du jour**, a 15-minute experimental/political/personal film based on her own experiences, ideas, and emotions while in Amsterdam. The film is evolving as a collective project strongly supported by the women working with her, and it reflects that collective spirit in its structure. One woman's voice accompanies images of different women in different situations — the effect is provocative and illuminating — a single woman's journey becomes a quest. So far Simpson has paid for **Soup du jour** (now near fine cut) with her own savings, recently supplemented by a grant from the Women's Bureau, Secretary of State.

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Elise Swerhone is a Winnipeg filmmaker, who has been earning her living and gaining experience as a camera assistant on feature films in Toronto and NFB films in Winnipeg. She shot and directed her first independent film, **Havakeen Lunch** (funded by Canada Council), in Winnipeg in 1978, then directed and shot a 10-minute documentary for the NFB about a Saulteaux Indian woman who collects maple syrup from Manitoba maples (**Nanoonse**, 1979).

Elise Swerhone's work is careful and quiet — she tends to allow people time to express themselves both visually and verbally. She is now working as camera assistant on a film directed by Norma Bailey for the NFB, a documentary about a romance between two street people in Winnipeg. Her next film, funded by the Canada Council, will be a filmed history of a Ukrainian family, probably her cousins.

Nose and Tina, the half-hour drama Norma Bailey is directing in Winnipeg, is being produced by the Prairies Regional Office of the NFB. Originally from Winnipeg, Norma Bailey lives and works in Montreal, travelling to Winnipeg to shoot her film. Last year Gail Singer, a Toronto-based filmmaker, made a documentary on battered wives, **Loved, Honoured and Bruised**, for the same Prairies NFB Office. She is now working on **Paraskeva Clark**, a portrait of an eighty-one-year-old artist who lives in Toronto — this time the film is being produced by Studio D of the NFB in Montreal.

Anne Wheeler (Mughda) is a producer/director with the NFB in Edmonton. Mughda started with Filmwest when that company formed itself in 1970, and like the rest of the group she learned by making films. She applied for an OFY grant to

make a film about the status of women, which became a collective project, **One Woman**, a short dramatic film focusing on a woman who leaves her marriage. Subsequently Mughda and Lorna Rasmussen, who had worked on **One Woman**, made **Great Grand Mother** (1975), a history of prairie pioneer women, and **Happily Unmarried** (1976), about an older single woman. Mughda then joined the NFB staff, and has since worked on a number of films; she directed **Augusta** (1976), a portrait of a Shuswap Indian woman in the Cariboo country of B.C. **Augusta** shares with some other Western women's films (**Havakeen Lunch**, **Portrait of My Mother**), a slow pace, a loose structure, and careful attention to the unobtrusive personality of the main figure. More recently, Mughda collaborated with Edmonton writer Myrna Kostash on **Teach Me To Dance**, a short dramatic film about two Prairie girls, one English in background, the other Ukrainian.

Mughda also produced **Priory: The Only Home I've Got** (1978), an award-winning cinéma-vérité document about one of the 'best' extended-care hospitals in Canada. I find the carefully neutral presentation of this problematic institution puzzling and disturbing in its 'objective' anonymity, especially in the light of Mughda's earlier portraits of independent, indomitable old women.

*...the last interview we did (for **Great Grand Mother**) was with a very articulate lady, the kind of community outcast you find in a lot of small communities because she was so outspoken and really independent in her old age. She didn't want to stay where she was, she wanted to keep her old stove, she wanted to pump the water and feed her chickens, and wanted everybody to stay away.*

I had told her that two people were coming the next day, and said to her, 'One of them is a man,' because we'd talked about very intimate women's subjects.

Rico came in. I introduced her to him and Lorna and about five minutes later she said, 'What do you take in your coffee, Susan?' Lorna turned to look at me and smiled like 'She's forgotten my name,' and said 'Well, I won't have any coffee, thank you.' But the lady said, 'I didn't mean her, I meant her!' pointing to Rico, you see, and Rico kind of looked up and she said, 'Well, if she's come to talk to me about women's subjects, she'd better learn to be a lady!' And you know, he just answered to Susan all afternoon.¹⁵

Mughda is now working on a film based on her father's diaries as a prisoner of war in Japan.

Other women making films out West include Shelagh Reljic, a veteran editor and producer working in Vancouver, mainly on contract to the NFB. She produced **She's a Railroader** (Barbara Tranter, 1979) and **Pretend You're Wearing a Barrel** (Jan-Marie Martell, 1979), films designed as apprenticeship projects for the young women directors. She is now producing another first film by Sharon McGowan about an immigrant woman, **Rosanna Santa Maria**. Shelagh believes that craft is the key word, and that more women should be trained in film craft.

Justine Dancy is a Vancouver editor/producer who works with her husband, Jim Bizzocchi. They've made a number of films for and about native people, including **Dene Nation** (1978)



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and a series shot in Super-8 and blown up to 16mm for the B.C. Union of Indian Chiefs. They're now in pre-production of a film about pre-natal care, for which funds are being raised by their family doctor. They see their work as representing the views and needs of their (independent) sponsoring groups, and so belong to a tradition of committed documentarians.

On Canada's other coast, Lulu Keating, at the Atlantic Filmmakers' Coop in Halifax, recently organized a tour across the country of work from Halifax and from the Newfoundland Filmmakers' Coop, in conjunction with the Canadian Film Institute. Keating's first film, **Lulu's Back in Town**, is now complete and she is working on her second film, **Jabberwocky**.

Other women involved in production at the Atlantic coop include Julie Hutchings and Jean Burgess, who are making a short narrative film with an all-woman cast and crew, and Ramona MacDonald, who made **Reagan's Cove** (1975), and **Spirits of an Amber Past** (1978).

In Hampton, New Brunswick, Marilyn Fox is making her first film, a drama about young children on an island, funded by an NFB/Canada Council training program for regional development.

In Montreal an independent group of filmmakers — Joyce Rock, Sophie Bissonnette, and Martin Duckworth — have completed a feature-length documentary made in close collaboration with Wives Support the Strike. The film is about the role of women in the strike against Inco in Sudbury by the United Mine Workers. **A Wives' Tale**, released in Quebec in French in October, 1980, and in Toronto in its English version in November, is the most ambitious independent women's project yet undertaken in Canada, as well as the most ambitious labour film. The story of the filmmakers' struggles for funding is at once inspiring and discouraging, indicating great determination on the part of the filmmakers and serious problems of production and distribution for independents in this country.

Margot Trevelyan in Toronto has made films on union issues for CUPE; Peggy Nash and Jacqueline Levitin worked with other Film League members to make **Up From The Bargain Basement** (1979), a musical docu-comedy about management/labour relations and the T. Eaton Co.; Colleen Bostwick in Vancouver produced and wrote **For 20¢ A Day**

(1979), a radical history of the Depression years in B.C.

Other women working independently in film now include Nesya Shapiro (**Passages**, lyric drama, 1978); Holly Dale and Janis Cole (**Cream Soda**, on strippers, 1976, **Thin Line**, on male prisoners, 1978); Marilyn Belec (**Taking Chances**, a dramatized documentary about teenage sexuality, 1979); and Dianne Corbin (**Soul Survivor**, documentary on rock singer Dianne Hetherington, 1980), all working in Toronto.

As for women in feature film production, a recent issue of *CineMag* (November, 1980) lists 30 features in production and 109 in negotiation. Out of all these listings there are seven women included as producers or executive producers; none (0) listed as full directors on feature-length dramatic films (but see below); six screenwriters, and one director of photography. These figures which are typical, not unusual, don't include **Love**, a feature-length "anthology" produced by Renee Perlmutter, which is being directed and was written in segments by an assortment of international women, including Mai Zetterling, Nancy Dowd, Germaine Greer, and Joni Mitchell. Of the four directors, one, Annette Cohen, is Canadian. Also listed in production is a National Film Board documentary, **Nuns**, coming out of Studio D, directed by Margaret Wescott, with camera by Susan Trow and sound by Ingrid Cusiel. Among the features, the one with most interest for women is **Latitudes 55**, written by Sharon Riis (author of *The True Story of Ida Johnson*), with script consultation by Anne Cameron. Cameron recently collaborated with Ralph Thomas on a feature script about cults, which was produced by Vivienne Leebosh (**Women in Cuba**, **ArtsCuba**). Other scripts by Anne Cameron include **Dreamspeaker** (1978), **A Matter of Choice** (1978), and **Drying Up the Streets** (1979).

*I'm a wordslinger. I use images, whether word-images or visual images, to make people respond, look at, see, and feel. The line that has been welcomed most in **A Matter of Choice** is the line 'He was inside me. I live inside me,' and I feel really good when women tell me that line says it for them, says how they feel about being invaded; when men tell me, as many of them have, that that one particular line made them feel they had begun to relate to the pain the woman feels, I feel like I did my job.¹⁶*

Fumbling for a Feminist Perspective

Looking at the (erratic) situation of women filmmakers in Canada the following observations seem pertinent.

(1) Most, by far, of the women now directing or producing films in Canada are working, on staff or as freelancers, for the NFB or the CBC.

(2) Very few women involved in decision-making levels of production are making feminist films, by which I mean films specifically concerned with defining, questioning, or challenging our patriarchal society.

(3) Women in English-speaking Canada have very little creative input into feature film production. I should make it clear here that the reason I haven't listed any women directing feature films or feature-length television programs in this country is that there aren't any. No woman in English-speaking Canada has ever directed a second theatrically-released feature film in this country. (The three who've directed one each are: Sylvia Spring, **Madeleine Is**, 1970;

Joyce Wieland, **The Far Shore**, 1976; and Janine Manatis, **I Maureen**, 1978.)

(4) So far, the feature 'boom' in Canada has shown small likelihood of producing films of any positive interest to women. The most positive effect of the boom has been that a few women have been hired as assistants or apprentices to sound and camera, and that women are getting work in props, various production jobs, and editing.

(5) Documentaries remain the most important field for women in Canada, in terms of accessibility and influence. Feminist input into documentary production is significant but not large.

There is an important distinction between the concept of equal opportunity for women in the film industry and the concept of a conscious feminist approach to filmmaking. So far I have been surveying the history and contemporary situation of Canadian women in filmmaking from a largely

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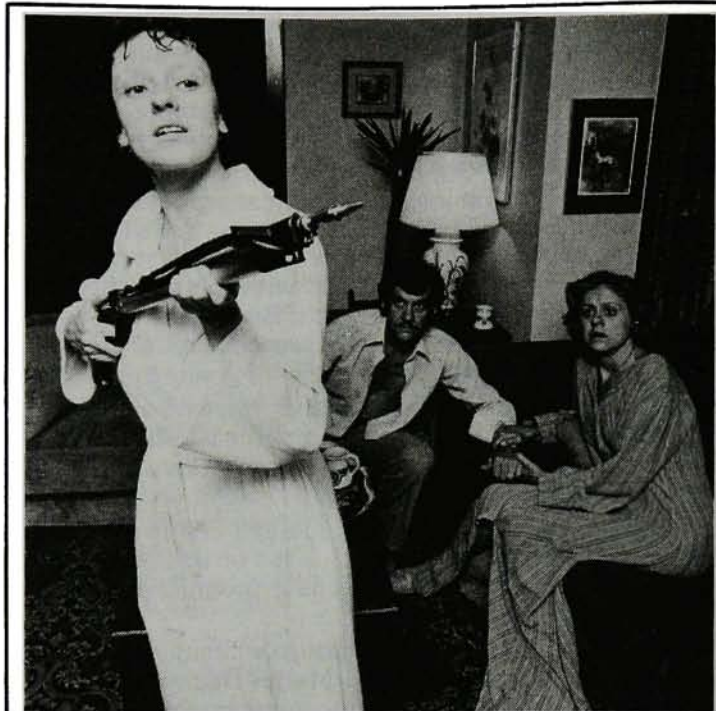
uncritical perspective. The one area I have not discussed is one place in Canada where women are working full-time, in close contact with other women, on the production of films dealing with issues important to women — that is, Studio D of the NFB. I would like to bring a more critical feminist perspective to bear on Studio D, because it plays such an important role in Canada in the production and distribution of films concerned with the position of women.

Two conflicting images come to mind when I think of Studio D: in its embattled position at the NFB it has produced a handful of films of great interest to women across the country, and so resembles a living branch growing green from a dead tree. At the same time, in its high-handed and exploitative treatment of independent women, Studio D, like its large and lumpish NFB father, sits toadlike in the way of a genuinely alternative production/distribution network for feminists.

Certainly films such as *Patricia's Moving Picture* (Bonnie Klein, 1979), *The Lady from Gray County* (Janice Brown and Margaret Wescott, 1977, a historical portrait of Agnes MacPhail), and *An Unremarkable Birth* (Diane Beaudry, 1979) are important feminist films on women's subjects which would have been difficult if not impossible to produce outside the NFB. Certainly also a number of independent feminist films on more controversial topics, such as *This Film Is About Rape, A Wives' Tale*, and *Good Day Care: One out of Ten*, have been produced outside of Studio D and the NFB on low budgets and with small return to the filmmakers. Regional studios, sometimes in cooperation with Studio D, have funded a few important women's films, such as *Post-Partum Depression* (Margrit Nance, Vancouver, 1978), *Loved, Honoured and Bruised* (Gail Singer, Winnipeg, 1979), and *Great Grand Mother*, which vary somewhat from the Montreal NFB stamp.

Of these latter, the most contentious has been Bonnie Kreps's *It's No Life for a Woman: Women in Single-Industry Towns*, produced for the Pacific Regional Studio, 1979. *It's No Life for a Woman* differs markedly from Studio D films in offering a feminist analysis of a powerful sector of the Canadian economy, and in showing how that sector oppresses women and what women have begun to do about it. Studio D films, like most Montreal-based NFB films apart from the now-defunct Challenge for Change program, have little to offer in the way of controversial analysis and tend instead to concentrate on stories of extraordinary individual women who have, either alone or with the help of friends, found success, peace of mind, fulfilment, or achievement through their work (The Working Mothers series, which doesn't follow this pattern, was initiated within Challenge for Change and produced by that studio. The series focuses on 'ordinary' women and is based on an overall impression of women's situation without pointing any specific fingers.)

It is a peculiar fact that the only Studio D film to offer explicit analysis is probably its least satisfactory and least used film (also one of its most expensive!), a reportage called *Some American Feminists* (Nicole Brossard, Luce Guilbeault, Margaret Wescott, 1977), consisting of interviews with American feminists by two Québécois women. The interviews tend to remain at an abstract theoretical level, ungrounded in any concrete reference to women's lives or specific situations, *Patricia's Moving Picture*, on the other hand, which offers no explicit analysis but is instead grounded in Bonnie Klein's long experience with the organizing process — and shows a



For this rape victim (Roberta Maxwell, left) a good offense is the only defense: with her, Neil Dainard and Fiona Reid in *A Matter of Choice*, written by Anne Cameron. Photo: CBC Photo Service

woman changing her life with the help of a Women's Centre — does exactly what Studio D is best equipped to do. I would like to spend more time here in discussing this film and this director as examples of the roots and potential of Studio D at its best.

Bonnie Klein's work in film, like Studio D itself, began in the Challenge for Change program in the late sixties. She made films about social change in Canada, films focussing on issues such as race relations, housing, and native education, using the work of the American radical educator Saul Alinsky to focus awareness of community organizing as an ongoing process. In 1969 Bonnie Klein and Dorothy Henaut directed, with George Stoney producing, a film called *VTR St. Jacques*, which documents the use of video to raise consciousness and pull people together in a working-class community in Montreal. The film remains a crucial document for the study of how media can be used by people instead of it using them.

In 1970 Bonnie Klein made *Citizen's Medicine*, about the St. Jacques community health clinic in Montreal, a film in which the clinic committee participated at every stage, from planning through production and editing. *Citizen's Medicine* was also produced by George Stoney, who made *You Are on Indian Land*, and, the story goes, shook up the NFB to the point where he had to leave. Kathleen Shannon, now executive producer of Studio D, was sound editor on *You Are on Indian Land*, and was taught by Stoney — his influence is clear in the Working Mothers series and in the grassroots inclination of Studio D films. But Stoney was anathema to the NFB bureaucracy. There was something very disturbing about giving the responsibility for a film's point of view over to a partisan group. It's so much more comfortable to retain control and to hold up an individual as a model — looking at her, rather than having her, presented by her peers, looking back at us.

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The tension between Bonnie Klein's background with Stoney and the quiet pressure of the NFB today is present in **Patricia's Moving Picture** (1979), her most recent film. Patricia combines Klein's consistent interest in the process of social change with a feminist perspective on the politics of personal relationships. Patricia is indeed moving — with the help of her local women's centre in B.C., she is emerging from a difficult transition period between fulltime wife and motherhood to a new and more independent existence. As she discusses her changing self with other women and with her husband she becomes an articulate and sympathetic focus for women in the audience.

There is one scene where a woman from the Women's Centre describes the first time Patricia came in, so nervous and suspicious she wouldn't even sit down, saying 'I don't know about this women's centre.' Patricia joins in the laughter and the description, adding that she was being pushed by one and pulled by another, and then talks about how much more confident she is now, with a job, her own car in her own name, her own bank account. In a discussion with her husband, Patricia is able to call him on emotional blackmail without cutting off communication. Her problems are seen subjectively, with a view to how she can change; her strength is demonstrated by her own presence and actions.

Patricia's Moving Picture is an important film, especially because many women in Patricia Garner's position feel threatened by the women's movement, erroneously convinced by the mass media that feminists don't value or respect women who work at home and raise children. My criticism of the film is that there is such a single-track focus on Patricia, with the film ending on a shot of her with her children, very reassuring, not at all challenging. The potential was clearly there for opening out to a sense of how many others there are like Patricia, and how the collective support of many other women has helped her to come through as she has. There is evidence of that collective support in the film, but by staying so tightly with Patricia, the structure of the film works against the sense of collectivity.

Bonnie Klein's newest project, produced by Dorothy Henaut, is a film about pornography, a subject which offers considerable scope for the kind of participatory documentary pioneered by Stoney and Klein in the old days. Combined with a thoughtful feminism it could be very strong indeed.

Patricia's Moving Picture, released last year, is already in widespread use; in January 1980 it was booked 206 times, and twelve prints were sold. The NFB estimates an audience of 100 per booking, which means that perhaps 20,600 people in Canada saw the film in one month, not including screenings of the prints sold. This is a good record, though not extraordinary for Studio D films — they tend to be heavily booked, which indicates that Studio D responds to a real need across the country. In terms of what this means to feminist filmmakers outside of the NFB, well, for one thing, no independent would dream of attempting to make an alternative film on the same subject as almost any Studio D film — there would be no market, no way of funding it. Whatever we think of **Patricia**, that is the film that will be used. Fortunately, it's a good film. In this respect independent feminist filmmakers are faced with precisely the same dilemma as any other independents in Canada. The NFB represents a (benevolent) monopoly, and as *The Film Industry in Canada* suggests, the private sector in Canada is not at all interested in benevolence, seeking only a fair chance to make its own way:

...the government, while not constrained by the profit requirements which govern the private sector, intervenes drastically in the normal market mechanism by being a price setter through its function as the major purchaser of private sector output.

...the government has treated the private sector in a traditionally paternalistic and benevolent manner, willingly assuming a role in the survival of the industry. The private sector, however, decries this attitude and only seeks a fair and equal competitive chance to gain access to markets which they claim are currently unjustifiably reserved for public agencies involved in film productions.¹⁷

To carry the documentation of the government report a bit further, let's look again at the claim that the Canadian market is fragmented and small. As an independent producer I am painfully aware that, unlike my counterparts in the U.S., I have no hope of making enough of a return on an alternative film (i.e., not an industrial or government sponsored film) to support myself, let alone to plow back proceeds into another production. Like others in my situation, I have accepted the argument that this is due to the much smaller population of Canada, spread over so much more territory. That is an objective fact, not to be denied. However, the NFB itself estimates that over 49 million Canadian viewers attend screenings of NFB films every year — more than half the audience for commercial feature films. Taking television broadcasts into account, the NFB estimate of its viewing audience rises to 267 million in Canada plus 707 million outside Canada, for a total of 974 million in 1978. These figures suggest that the difficulties faced by independent producers and distributors in Canada are not simply a matter of lack of initiative.

A further problem, not explored by the government report, is the huge difference in budget and technical resources available to NFB filmmakers versus independents. There is an insistence which often amounts to obsession, on the part of NFB producers, on a degree of technical gloss which rarely implies anything at all about the intelligence or creative impact of the film, but which, considering the omnipresence of the NFB product, has had the effect of conditioning Canadian audiences to expect gloss. Independent producers therefore feel constrained to aim for comparable technical levels, so that they can make essential sales to television and so that Canadian audiences will accept their films as 'professional.' This has resulted in the formulaic quality of many Canadian documentaries, all shot in beautiful 7247 color negative with lots of sync sound, lit to make every interior look cozy and bright, shot and edited to remove every trace of the filmmakers' presence. If it has been decided to show the filmmakers at work, a beautifully-lit scene of an all-woman crew may be included in the film, which is still shot and edited to remove every other trace of the filmmakers, such as a subjective camera which wobbles or changes focus, or editing which makes a clear statement by being obvious, or a scene which is long enough, in which the camera is still enough, that it becomes perfectly obvious that the subject is responding to the presence of a crew. Instead of using technology to achieve greater accuracy and clarity of presentation, technology becomes an end in itself — at worst, gloss which covers a lack of vision and hampers the development of badly-needed, always under-funded alternative viewpoints.

WOMEN AND FILM

There is very little experimentation with form and technique in Canadian documentaries. The corollary of this is that Canadian experimental film, including animation, is virtually all form and technique with very little interest in subject matter, especially subject matter which could be called political. There are a few exceptions — among women Joyce Wieland is one, Mo Simpson is another. Patricia Gruben's *The Central Character* is a rare example of a Canadian film which combines feminist subject matter and experimental technique.

One of the ironies inherent in our colonized and institutionalized film system is that, while our incentive to experiment is limited by the way our market has been carved up, we're also not getting to see the exciting work being done by women in the U.S. and other countries which might inspire us to experiment, regardless of markets. The American products which flood our markets don't usually include alternative films, and our few Canadian alternative distributors are (understandably) reluctant to take on many American films. Neither do we have access to European women's films — when they do appear they are shown as part of national retrospectives, usually once only — most Canadians are

unaware of any European women filmmakers except for Lina Wertmüller.

The difficulty of seeing independent films from Quebec is even more disturbing — it is a double problem of availability and French versioning. Brigitte Sauriol's feature *L'Absence* (1976) has never been released here, nor has Mireille Dansereau's first feature *La vie rêvée* (1972), although it is available in a 16mm subtitled version. A recent link between DEC Films in Toronto and Cinema Libre in Montreal will hopefully improve this situation.

The films made by Canadian women within and outside institutions show that we have considerable strength and clarity of vision. Courage to break our own rules will come only when we have confidence in our audience, and, so far, there has been no audience to support us. The other side of the call to Canadian women filmmakers to explore new ways of communicating with other women is a call to the audience of Canadian women to support exploration by becoming an eager, paying audience. The next time you see a crowded movie line-up, think about all those people paying \$4.00 each to see women exploited, idealized, ignored, destroyed. Curious, isn't it? Time for a change, I'd say. ■

Footnotes

¹ Of the book-length studies of women in feature film which came out during the seventies, the most useful is Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973). There are now two anthologies of feminist criticism: Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, eds., *Women and the Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977) and Patricia Erens, *Sexual Stratagems: The World of Women in Film* (New York: Horizon, 1976).

Beyond the bibliographies in these two anthologies it is advisable to consult the indexes for *Jump Cut*, *Screen*, *Screen Education*, *Film Quarterly*, and *Cinéaste*, as well as all issues of the now defunct *Women & Film*. *New German Critique* ran a special feminist issue (no. 13, Winter 1978), which included a collective piece: 'Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics.' The feminist magazine *Heresies* and *Chrysalis* have carried some important pieces — in particular, on Canadian women's film; Ardele Lister, 'Hewing the Wood and Drawing the Water: Women and Film in Colonized Canada,' *Heresies*, no. 2 (May 1977), pp. 103-105.

Also see Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson, eds., *Canadian Film Reader* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977); Eleanor Beattie, *The Handbook of Canadian Film*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977); Barbara Halpern Martineau, 'Women in Film,' *Communiqué* (May, 1975), pp. 32-35; and the index for *Cinema Canada*.

² Statistics about film are from Statistics Canada: statistics about TV are from the Bureau of Broadcast Measurement. In every case the most recent statistics available have been quoted.

³ *The Film Industry in Canada*, prepared by the Bureau of Management Consulting for the Department of the Secretary of State, 1977.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Statement on Certification of the International, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Character of Canadian-owned Audio-visual Materials in Accordance with the Agreement for Facilitating the International Circulation of Visual and Auditory Materials of an Educational, Scientific and Cultural Character (UNESCO: Beirut, Lebanon, 1948), National Film Board addendum, February 1969.

⁸ *The Film Industry in Canada*.

⁹ For a fuller account of her career, see Judith Smith, 'Girl Wonder from God's Country: Nell Shipman,' *Cinema Canada*, no. 51 (Nov./Dec. 1978), pp. 35-38.

¹⁰ Marjorie McKay, *History of the National Film Board of Canada* (unpublished ms.).

¹¹ Conversation with Barbara Halpern Martineau, in May, 1975. For a fuller account of women's participation in NFB wartime production see Barbara Halpern Martineau, 'Before the Guerrilleras: Women's Films at the NFB during World War II,' *Canadian Film Reader*.

¹² See Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: the Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978). Also see Barbara Halpern Martineau, 'The Far Shore: A Peaceful Film about Violence,' *Cinema Canada* no. 27 (April 1976), pp. 20-24.

¹³ Joyce Wieland, interview with Barbara Halpern Martineau, August 1975.

¹⁴ *This Film is about Rape* was co-sponsored by the B.C. Rape Crisis Centres and the B.C. Police Commission, and is available free of charge from rape crisis centres across Canada. It is accompanied by 'The Rape Prevention Resource Manual' which provides information to complement the basic message of the film: that rape is a crime of violence that has little or nothing to do with provocation by the victim; that every woman is a possible victim; that while some women can better prepare themselves to deal with aggression, not all women can or should be expected to repel unprovoked violence.

No Life for a Woman was produced independently by Bonnie Kreps for the NFB Pacific Region and is distributed by the NFB.

¹⁵ Anne Wheeler, interview with Barbara Halpern Martineau, December 1974, published in *Interlock*, nos. 2 & 3 (April/May 1975), pp. 21-30.

¹⁶ Anne Cameron, letter to Barbara Halpern Martineau, March 1980.

¹⁷ *The Film Industry in Canada*.