



● Two images by women directors: Marie Potvin's contemporary *Lettre à Catherine*, left; Anne-Claire Poirier's path-breaking *De Mère en fille*

# The mirror of feminism in film

by Anna Fudakowska

If feminism were to be simply regarded as a process whereby the female self stands strong and roundly autonomous, then the recent film series, Cinemama, leads right in to the heart of the dilemma. But the dilemma whose heart resounds within has its roots in our past. Examining antecedents thus usually provides an overview which may promote an understanding of that past.

Held in Montreal in early April, Cinemama, a historical retrospective of films by women directors, provided a look at these buried, overshadowed, and obscured antecedents. The retrospective's primary intention was to retrieve, restore and reconstruct.

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"Someone asked me the question: 'Why do you think these women were not recognized?' It is awfully difficult to answer and I don't want to speak of HIStory," explained Sue Stewart, freelance writer, editor and translator who conceived and coordinated the series. "Perhaps it could just be that many of these filmmakers were interested in women's subjects and women's subjects are not considered as subjects for art in many cases." There is no single reason why so few women filmmakers have been recognized by history, she went on, but one obvious reason is that their numbers have always been disproportionate to those of men in the film industry.

"Women who did make their mark were extraordinary individuals - strong, innovative," Stewart continued. "Some of them associated with avant-garde movements and therefore escaped popular notice. Their work was known

to the avant-garde elite but not to the general public."

Presented by Powerhouse Gallery (whose mandate is the exhibition of art by women), Cinemama was a collaborative effort launched with the help of the Cinematheque québécoise, the National Film Board and the Women's Collective of Concordia University. Calling it a festival would have been a misnomer, explained Stewart, as the primary motivation for the film series was to educate and inform; whereas, technically speaking, festivals are competitive and contemporary with the directors submitting their films to be judged for entry. Cinemama took an academic approach in that it selected films to be screened by researching periods in which women were particularly active.

Focusing on these periods, the selection committee singled out those women involved in filmmaking who were associated with "big leaps forward" in motion

picture art. A selection criterion was the pioneering nature of individual women who have contributed to the development and growth of cinema. Because of availability and other related factors, the series presented a limited sample, but one especially selected to investigate how women have looked at women over time.

As these pioneers are often less well-known than those who would popularize new developments, Stewart said it was a matter of refining the perception: true pioneers often do not receive the credit for developments or for breaking through that they deserve partly because they are more interested in the process than in its potential impact, thereby losing out on the recognition. Because women's participation in film productivity tends to parallel their participation in society (i.e. outside the home), the series set out to rediscover, affirm and construct a history of women in film.

The matrilineal tradition celebrated by the series proposed four Golden Eras with women cresting the peaks of film creativity. For purposes of identification, these eras were named *Suffragettes* (1900-1930), *Home Fires* (1940-1950), *Revolution to Recognition* (1964-1975), and *Evolution* (1975-present). These highly creative periods reflect times when society was in flux: the Russian Revolution, the Second World War, the cultural revolutions of the '60s and '70s on respectively. The organizers of the series tagged this last era as the only one in which women's presence as active authors does not seem to show definitive signs of a retreat.

Stewart and her collaborators believe that women have progressed beyond the point at which, in previous times, they were exiled from positions of authority and creative autonomy (positions in which they had the power to express themselves in their own way – in which they had access to means of expression) and returned to more rigidly defined roles and more limited possibilities. During the four periods of cultural transformation identified by Cinemama, women were better able to enter different areas of a society made flexible precisely due to the changing structures which accommodated a less narrow perception of woman – in film as well as in society in general.

Their virtually unrecognized tradition in film, maintained Stewart, dates from when celluloid pictures began. She said the film retrospective demonstrates clearly that although women may have been excluded from the history books they have been, however, consistently active and appreciated by their own audiences.

Alice Guy, the first woman filmmaker ever and possibly the first person to make a fiction film (*La fée aux choux*, France, 1896), headed the screenings of over 30 films with *A House Divided* (France, 1913). Also representing the *Suffragettes* in silent films were works by Nell Shipman, Germaine Dulac, Lotte Reiniger and Lois Weber. This period of social change spanned not only the industrial revolution but also the First World War and the cultural, artistic transformations of the '20s as well as the Russian Revolution. It was at this time also that Hollywood began film mass-production employing many women as actors, writers and directors. Women whose films were screened in this section are credited with such firsts as the use of double exposures, masques, reversing film direction (Guy), giving birth to surrealism (Dulac), first experiments – later adopted by Walt Disney – with the multi-plane animation stand and first full-length animation feature (Reiniger, in Germany and Canada), film responsibility encompassing scripting, producing, directing and acting (Weber in Hollywood).

There is a general lack of knowledge about film history except what has been popularized through television, Stewart stated. And those retrospectives tend to be quite superficial, dealing with directors whose films have more entertainment value and are thereby more representative of mainstream filmmaking. "We are familiar with the silent comedies, Keystone cops, Chaplin, but we don't know much about any other people, male or female, who worked in film during the silent era. Mind you, they're in the history books – but not the women."

The next spurt of film production activity by women, classified as *Home*

*Fires*, coincided with the Second World War and the years immediately following. This was largely due to the efforts of John Grierson, the Scot recruited to head the National Film Board. His personal vision of the power of documentary vested our fledgling national film institution with a legendary international status which remains intact to this day.

Works such as *Grand Manan* by Margaret Perry, *Women are Warriors* by Jane Marsh, and *The Impossible Map* by Evelyn Lambart emphatically illustrate the extent of involvement by the many women drawn into the machinery instituted by Grierson. These films serve to document the highly active contribution of women – not only to film but also to the war effort. The devastation wrought by the war on Europe did not touch this continent and subsequently its economy provided the young art form with the opportunity to luxuriate in unimpeded growth.

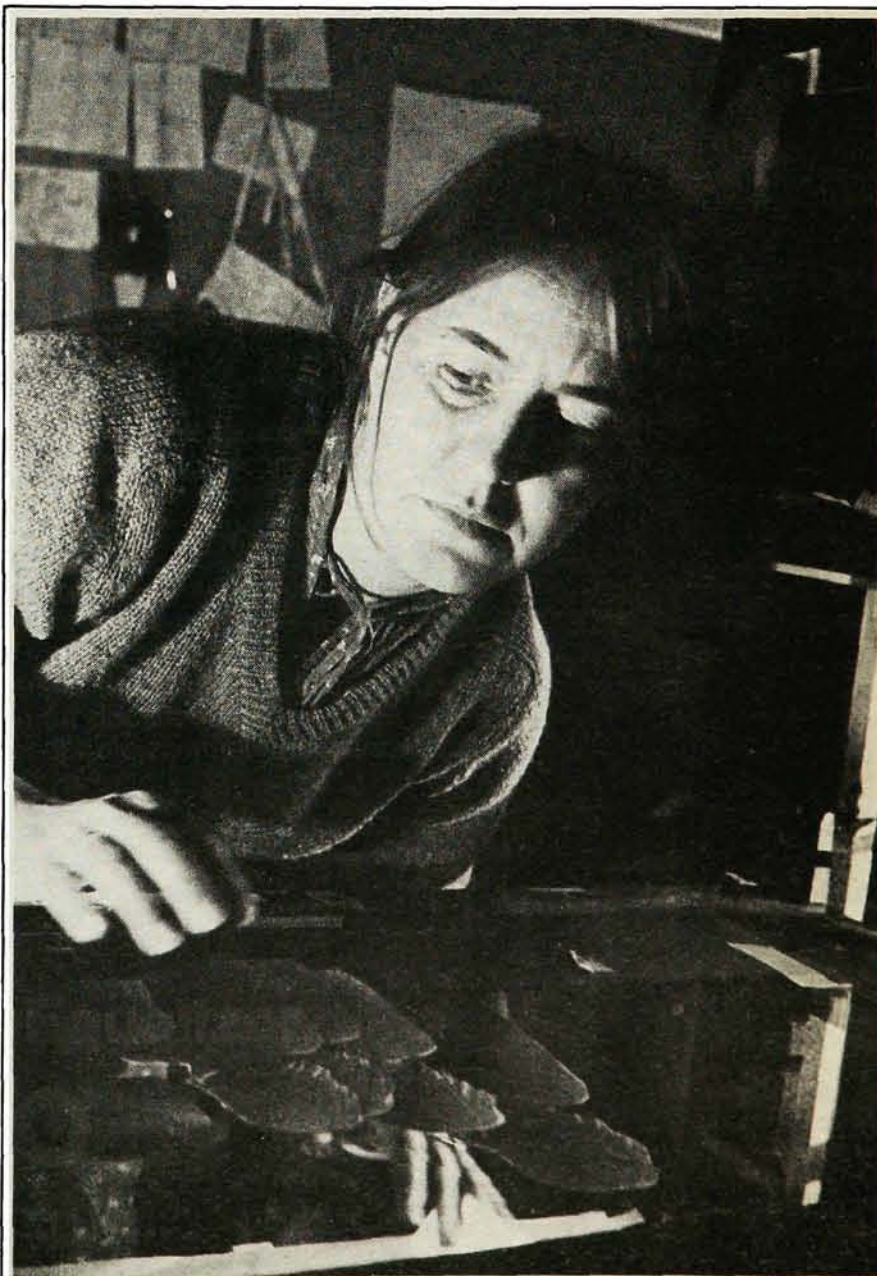
Although ravaged by war, England's growth in the domain of cinema was made possible by a rapid economic recovery in comparison to other European nations giving rise to Great Britain's Free Cinema movement. Lorenza Mazetti's film *Together* (Great Britain, 1953) marked by the documentary tradition and an innovative use of sound denoted an intensely personal outlook on social ostracization against a working-class backdrop.

At that time, changing trends in American film became evident through experimental work in film which continued a tradition of the genre precariously established in the twenties. Mary Ellen Bute, not only Maya Deren, helped to establish that tradition in the United States and, as well as initiating the movement, valorized the art form within the popular art form which mainstream cinema had become by then. Bute, in *Spook Sport* (USA, 1939) worked with the movements of non-figurative forms synchronized with musical scores, moving on to computers and oscilloscopes as movie-making tools in the early '50s. Deren's unquestionably groundbreaking achievement, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (USA, 1943) filmed with a 16mm camera, is the landmark of American avant-garde cinema. With choreography and dance as strong influences, she concerned herself with transposing workings of the psyche into imagery in this film.

The turmoil of the '60s and the examination of society's value system clearly permeate the films chosen from this period and called *Revolution to Recognition*. In them, woman begins to explore how her image is perceived by exploiting commercial interests (Monique Fortier, *La beauté même*, Qué., 1964). She slowly becomes aware of society's expectation of her to effortlessly juggle home/family with remunerative work and her placement vis-à-vis the medical system as regards childbirth (Anne-Claire Poirier, *De mère en fille*, Qué./Czech., 1967). For the first time woman is also able to image her lesbian culture (Jan Oxenberg, *Home Movie*, USA, 1973; Barbara Hammer, *Dyketactics*, USA, 1974), and discovers her connections through shared experiences with other women (Mai Zetterling, *Loving Couples*, Sweden, 1964). Her social confinement and isolation are strikingly depicted through her determined quest to resolve intelligently problems of employment and child custody by placing aside her emotions (Margarethe Von Trotta, *A Free Woman*, West Germany, 1972).



● Evelyn Lambart: drawn into the Griersonian machine



● Suzanne Gervais: no retreat for women's presence as active authors

# Women and film



● Anne-Claire Poirier: always outside trends and expectations

The fourth Golden Era, *Evolution*, as identified by Cinemama, opened with an animated short by the NFB's Vivianne Elnecave misleadingly entitled *Rien qu'une petite chanson d'amour*. The film is a statement on the mutually annihilating emotional nature which relationships often have. It was a fitting preamble which set the pace for what was to follow: a fictional representation of the intense struggle by a woman to break out of her environment of family violence. Acting in this film is done by women who lived through and escaped from the viciously circular pattern of abuse (Cristina Perincioli, *The Patience of Women is the Power of Men*, West Germany, 1978).

Contemporary works from Québec (by Caroline Leaf/Veronika Soul, Char Davies, Lois Siegel, Helen Doyle and Marie Potvin) illustrated woman's current creativity in animation and bold imaging of her self in the female part of society.

Three Australian films made up the end of the series. Essie Coffey's *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, 1979, boldly places the issue of white domination over black in all spheres of activity, stultifying that culture. Here, the matriarch of a subjugated race is enabled to express her activism through the media. As in many of the films illustrating a collective conscience, three women are the featured characters of *Farewell to Charms* by Carla Pontiac. This short is a delightful look at their differing evolutions. *On Guard*, produced by three women (Susan Lambert, Sarah Gibson and Digby Dun-

can) who are very involved in the independent film movement of Australia, images the potential threat of control posed by genetic engineering to woman as the reproductive species and juxtaposes this threat with that of nuclear energy. These films anticipate the natural progression of films made by women: the movement from woman's personal concerns to more political and social considerations.

But the most powerful revelation of recognition swept audiences attending screenings of *A Question of Silence* (Netherlands, 1982), Marleen Gorris' thriller about three ordinary women's 'conspiracy' to commit murder.

"In the early films," says Stewart, "women seemed secure in their positions, comfortable and fairly free: Guy Reiniger, Shipman, for example. While in the later films it is progressively more strongly stated that women have been victimized and that their social positions are treacherous, inappropriate and confining." She explained that in the former, there is a feeling of being able to act, a freedom of scope, latitude. In the latter, however, she said that to her the women are restricted, physically confined (Von Trotta, Perincioli, Gorris). They occupy small spaces both physically and mentally.

"Dulac (*La souriante Mme Beudet*, France, 1923) anticipated a feeling of woman's condition, being trapped. Gorris finds a women's world to operate in, a world from which men are excluded. In her film, women are no longer operat-

ing in a man's world as in Shipman's film, for example. In *Women are Warriors*, women act when men can't. She's a defender, protector in a male environment. In most of the later films, the women are acting in a women's world. Their energies are directed toward other women and men are hardly seen (the Australian films, Gorris and Perincioli) and when they are seen, they are seen negatively... the emphasis in the latest periods is placed even more on self-sufficiency of women to a point where men are seen as adversaries and antagonists."

For Stewart, Gorris' film takes for granted a lot of principles, views, with which men are unfamiliar: the frustration of women's experience in conventional roles, inadequacy of certain male-dominated disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry, or the legal system in dealing with women's feelings or experiences of women.

"About *A Question of Silence* I also felt that it was very pointed in the sense that it addressed itself fairly strictly to certain aspects of a woman's experience. That is, it dealt with the frustration, the anger, the sense of limitations. But what it did not deal with was other emotional facets of women's lives like mother-child relationships, low-level friendships with other women. What we are shown in this film is women in a highly dramatic situation in which their relationship is characterized by a strong political solidarity but we don't see any of the day-to-day friendships that these women might have had. We don't see the secretary, for example, in relation to the men or other women in her personal life. As such, the story, the context of the film, was very tailored. This gave it unity and an intellectual strength but it detracted from a more emotional understanding of the women as individuals."

Gudrun Parker, two of those films were screened (*Listen to the Prairies: Home Fires; Women Workers: Evolution*) worked at the Film Board from 1942 to 1953, continued working on a freelance basis and, in the mid-'60s, together with her husband, founded an independent film production company. She continues in film doing research, scripting and editing. Regarding the series, she said, "I realized that I was amazed that we accepted that kind of image - the image of condescension expressed in the films from that period - that the contribution of women was taken for granted. We did not assume a questioning attitude at the basic assumption that women are in a subordinate position. That condescension is implicit in the way women were represented in the films of the '40s and '50s in that what they are doing is very temporary and afterwards they would have to go back to being where they were before the war." She pointed out that women were never shown in positions of leadership, decision-making; that you never see a woman teaching a man. She said she was particularly shocked to see that - because she had been there.

"I was working on films during that period and I was totally unaware of how we were being represented. The most significant change that I see in the more recent films in the series is that women making films are now beginning to question that assumption. But I see no solution presented by the films." She points to Poirier's *De mère en fille* where the main character is questioning her relationship with her man, and children as well as her role as a profes-

sional. In Von Trotta, woman is dealing with a system, Parker said, trying to get control, and once awareness seeps in, there the struggle begins. For her, the films shows how the system is really not geared to deal with the character's problems related to work or the question of custody. Yet she tries very hard to get control of her life despite the fact that the system is not working for her.

For Parker, Zetterling's *Loving Couples* depicted three different levels of society through its three female characters once more and at no level do they seem to have control of their destiny. As for Gorris, she seemed to Parker to express a universal black anger through some very ordinary women. For her the progression evident in the series and culminating with the most recent films serves to demonstrate the growth of an awareness of woman's situation through a monumental struggle to gain control. She is fascinated with the process because it revealed itself to her in those pictures together and in their chronological order.

For Sylvia Spring, freelance writer/director, Shipman's film *Back to God's Country* (Canada, 1919) with its strong, wild female lead who tames bears, reflected a woman who did make it, who was able to write film and direct. She was not a threat to the system. "Women who were not perceived as threatening, as an exception, could do an exceptional film. When men feel they are in control, they don't feel threatened."

Spring also felt that the ideas in the films made by women about women are grounded in reality, making them credible. She found it refreshing seeing films where women are using their voices because she feels that, when men use women's voices, they somehow ring false, that although there are moments of truth there are great gaps in credibility. "We're so used to seeing lies about us that when we see Zetterling's or Gorris' film, there's a voice we recognize."

She thought that Von Trotta's film dealt with a woman's need to break away from male domination but without having the tools at her disposal.

"We are very concerned with what is going on in the world but it is very difficult to get the money for the films that need to be made. We have to approach male-dominated structures for funding. We also need a lot more support because of the prejudices we have to fight first. We need affirmative action and we need to make mistakes - women need to be able to learn from their mistakes."

Spring also believed that Gorris' film took a feeling that is very strong in women and said something very complex in a very simple way. By taking the individual, collective and cumulative anger of women, Spring stated, and placing it within the context of three very ordinary women, Gorris brilliantly demonstrated that it was gut-level knowledge. Through their action we recognize what it meant and why it had to happen. But, unlike dominant cinema, the notion of violence remained unexploited: we are not privy to the actual killing which Spring describes as a symbolic gesture through a realistic context. It worked on feelings of recognition and affirmation which are stronger than the abstract notion of justice that killing is wrong. "The film," says Spring, "acknowledges feeling on a cathartic level, and the context for the laughter is a solidarity in absolute frustration and anger that women feel."

● Caroline Leaf: bold imaging of the self in current creativity in animation

