by Joyce Nelson

“What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.”

From a poem by Muriel Rukeyser

“To make visible the full meaning of women’s experience, to reinterpret knowledge in terms of that experience, is now the most important task of thinking.”

Adrienne Rich

“The scope and capability of human love are as wide and encompassing as this vast universe that we all swirl in, one for all and all for oneness. This fight will not end in terrorism and violence. It will not end in a nuclear holocaust. It begins in a celebration of the rites of alchemy, the transformation of shit into gold, the illumination of dark chaotic night into light. This is the time of sweet, sweet change for us all. This is Isabel for Phoenix-Regazza Radio, signing off until tomorrow.”

Lizzie Borden, “Born In Flames”

While I was attending “Through Her Eyes,” the festival of women’s films organized by Hannah Fisher at Toronto’s Harbourfront (Nov. 22-Dec. 2), a moment occurred in my daily reality that served to focus the struggle in which feminists are engaged. My neighbourhood corner store, where I usually buy milk, cigarettes and the like, is owned by a young Korean couple who take turns at the cash register throughout the day. I had not seen the woman for several weeks, but this particular afternoon, she was there at the counter, and it was immediately apparent that she was pregnant—her belly was beginning to swell beneath her loose shirt. Though we know each other only by smiles and simple exchanges, I spontaneously congratulated her on her pregnancy and asked if she was happy. She looked at me shyly and, in her broken English, answered: “I shame.”

The moment stayed with me through the festival and added profoundly to my understanding of the work of women in the arts, and women in film specifically. For what we are engaged in is the absolutely necessary transformation of our ontological shame into a celebration of womanhood. Centuries upon centuries of Patriarchy have equated woman’s Being with all that it deems shameful. At the same time, Patriarchy inflates its notion of Woman into shame’s flip-side: glorious salvation. This familiar Madonna/Whore split not only leaves no room for the real humanity of actual women, it effectively silences and makes us invisible. Under Patriarchy, woman is nothing more than the fantasy projection of man. Neither side of that fantasy allows for the actual voice or vision of women to emerge. As Claire Johnston wrote in 1973: “It is probably true to say that, despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent.”

Thus, for women, finding our voices and our own vision has been the fundamental task of the feminist movement throughout this century. Both as a movement and at the level of each individual woman, it is nothing less than a coming into self and self-expression. It is an alchemical process, both psychological
and political, that transforms the whole of one's being and that, I have no doubt, also slowly transforms the world. As Adrienne Rich has written: "If we have learned anything in our coming to language out of silence, it is that what has been kept unspoken, therefore unspoken, in us is what is most threatening to the patriarchal order in which men control, first women, then all who can be defined and exploited as 'other.'"

"We only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us." — Jean-Paul Sartre

The coming into one's authentic voice and vision, both for oppressed groups and for the individual, seems to unfold along a certain identifiable path that involves particular stages. To a degree, that path was partly evident in the films shown during Through Her Eyes — not only in terms of the content of the films but in the kinds of films that women are now increasingly making. One obvious aspect of Through Her Eyes as a festival was its focus upon fictional, narrative feature films and the wide range of story-telling in which women filmmakers are now engaged. This in itself, to my way of thinking, speaks of a significant change in women's emergent filmmaking voice and vision.

When the First International Women's Film Festival was held in New York City in June 1972, and was followed quickly by similar events in Edinburgh, London, Toronto, Washington, Chicago and Paris, the great majority of films screened were cinema vérité documentaries. Clearly, there were specific economic explanations for this, as well as factors such as accessibility of lightweight equipment, the relative openness to women's participation by 1960's filmmaking organizations like the National Film Board's Challenge For Change and Newsreel. As film scholar E. Ann Kaplan notes: "While other film styles and modes (e.g. animation, non-narrative abstract films, formalist films, short narrative films) are represented, the cinema vérité style clearly dominates. The precise causes for this, other than economic ones, are unclear..."

Now that, as Through Her Eyes and other recent women's film festivals make clear, women filmmakers are blossoming into fictional narrative cinema, it seems useful to speculate upon the causes, other than economic, which may have lead women to documentary in advance of fiction. Such speculation may illuminate, in turn, the range of fictional story-telling revealed in Through Her Eyes.

In thinking about this festival and about women's filmmaking in general, I found myself continually returning to a conceptual model described by a friend who had learned of it first-hand from its creator, Dr. Nola Symor. Called The Dependency Cycle, this model was developed by Symor during her doctoral research in Saskatchewan with native peoples. The model illuminates the four stages - Dependency, Counter-Dependency, Independence, and Inter-Dependency - through which any oppressed group moves in the efforts to throw off the dependency created by colonization oppression.

The stages of Counter-Dependency, Independence, and Inter-Dependency each seem to contain their own kind of voice, which is both a refusal and an affirmation — a re-naming of reality. Only Dependency is silent and mute, a mere mouthing of the words and values and point of view of the dominant other. As Frantz Fanon wrote in his own examination of "the wretched of the earth": "In the colonial context the settler only ends his work of breaking-in the native..."
FESTIVALS

when the latter admits loudly and intelli-
gently that she values her own values. The
values in the decolonization, the colo-
zoned masses mock these very
values, insult them, and vomit them up."

"Patriarchal may have multiplied
many times, but through silence and
through silence. Facts we have
needed have been withheld from
us. False witness has been borne
against us."

Adrienne Rich

"In 1970, women making a
documentary about women was
a revolutionary idea."

Susan Kleckner, co-director
of "Three Lives"

If we take the model of The Depen-
dency Cycle, there is a certain appro-
priateness in the documentary mode
for the first two stages of liberation.
"Colonial-
ism," writes Fanon, "is not satisfied
merely by being in opposition
in its grip and emptying the native's brain
of all form and content. By a kind of per-
verted logic, it turns to the past of the
oppressed people, not to destroy it,
but to transform it."

Thus, there is a great need to
redress the lies of the oppressor,
to untangle the distortions, to speak the
truth about the past, to use the
cinematic form that most readily
works for this. It is also the mode
which seems most amenable to the
sharing of unearthed facts, previously
hidden knowledge. Documentary is
perhaps the first speaking voice
that comes out of a history of silence.

Since the 1960's, women filmmakers
have been creating a profound re-
newing, re-thinking, and re-vision, it
is fitting that women filmmakers
were in the 1960's, to documentary film.
As filmmakers, they have a
positioned in a panel held during
"Through Her Eyes," women filmmakers' use
of documentary during the late '60's was an
"iterator" to the distorted images
women have been perpetrating on
for television and Hollywood.

Arguably it is the last two stages of
The Dependency Cycle, Depend-
ency and Inter-Dependency – that fully
allow for the blossoming of fictional
narrative films. Grounded in hard-won
truths, a unique and separate
view of a female mind emerges
of the power and equality of
the female imagination, women film-
makers have, since the mid-1970's
created a quantum leap in terms of feature
filmmaking. The 40 or so features
screened for "Through Her Eyes" were a
precious handful selected from the
hundreds of women-directed features
made just in the last few years. This
phenomenon surely indicates not only
a growing economic power within
the industry, but also a genuine
full confidence and pride to tell our own stories and
use the medium in our own ways.

"Perhaps it is necessary for
feminist film practices to
move through these stages and
along with those that according to
Franz Fanon, primitive cultures
have to move through in relation
to colonialism: increase has to be
achieved, where the only
strategies available to us are those
conditioned by being in opposition
to dominant ones. We need to think
about how the strategies have
changed merely reversing what is estab-
lished to creating truly alternative
films, but this involves the basic
problems of how to move beyond
biases that are dominant... It
may well be that we can only free
ourselves by moving through
dominant discourse."

E. Ann Kaplan

I say to you: the future belongs
to the film that cannot be told.
The cinema can certainly tell a
story, but we have to remember
that the story is nothing. The story
is surface. The seventh art, that of the
screen, is depth rendered
perceptible. The ditto here lies
beneath the surface; it is the
musical ungraspable."

Germaine Dulac, 1928

Filmmakers have long been
grappling with the notion of a female
narrative form and content. By a kind of per-
verted logic, it turns to the past of the
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on each other's obsessions and personalities, or else struggle to maintain their boundaries in the face of an overwhelming 'other.' In Sisters, the vampirish quality of the relationship is disturbingly clear, while in Sheer Madness the presence of a husband seems to continually prevent the desire for symbiosis from developing to its implied extreme. In both films, love is seen to be mutually beneficial on some level, as the old woman redisCOVERS the joys and pains of interrelationship. Another film, Moral (The Philippines, 1982; Marilou Diaz-Abay), explores the lives of four different young women who are friends but whose choices take them each in quite different directions. What is of interest in this film is the extent to which the director attempts to interweave the political unrest of Manila with the personal. This is true of Like the Sea and Its Waves (France, 1980; Edna Politi) as well, wherein the tension in the Middle East fully reverberates within the friendship between a Jew and a Moslem, two women who are reunited in Paris after a 10-year separation.

Since women are strongly socialized to be aware of relationship, it is not surprising that their films focus on the nuances and subtleties that unfold between people. Narrative structure tends to emphasize a psychological depth of developing character, rather than a series of dramatic exterior events. This exploration of inner growth, and its subtle manifestations in relationship, perhaps accounts for the recurring use of a cyclical structure in the feature films screened in "Through Her Eyes." Again and again I noticed that the films' endings returned to their beginning scenes, not in the sense of closure, but in the sense of having achieved a new understanding of what came before. In other words, here fictional narrative is not strictly linear, but more a spiral: just as psychological growth of itself depends upon re-experiencing one's past in order to fully understand it and move out from it.

My favorite use of this spiral structure is in the extraordinary film, The Ascent (USRR, 1977; Larisa Shepitko). The opening images are of a snowy, wind-swept landscape, somehow conveying a terrible sense of the awesomeness of Nature. Gradually, human figures rise up from their hiding and scurry across this landscape in search of shelter. It is a group of Russians, civilians and soldiers, fleeing the Germans during the Second World War. The Ascent tells the story of two of these soldiers who are captured by the Nazis and pushed to the limits of human endurance. One capitulates immediately, betraying his friend and his people. The other endures horrific torture and is finally hanged just before his death, as he stands on the makeshift gallows. This man saw a young boy in the small crowd of onlookers assembled by the Nazis. The gaze exchanged between them speaks of a shared courage and the pride of resistance. There is the extraordinary sense of an older generation passing on its true spirit to a younger one. With the film's ending, we return again to the wind-swept, frozen landscape. This time there is a sense of the human endeavor simultaneously confined within, and yet transcending, the awesome natural world. This extraordinary allegory was the last film made by Larisa Shepitko, who was killed in a car accident in 1979. For me, it was a highlight of "Through Her Eyes"—one of its most moving narratives.

I was also thoroughly astounded by the work of a Norwegian director, Laila Mikkelsen. Her two features, Children of the Earth (1983) and Growing Up (1981), both depict an horrific milieu seen through the eyes of a young, innocent girl. Mikkelsen's films are lean and stark, with an economy of dialogue that heightens the visual and seems to make every shot resonate with meaning. There is absolutely no sentimentality in her portraits of childhood. The terrible pain of children, struggling to understand a hellish world created by the adults, is what Mikkelsen holds up for us. By allowing us to see the world through her eyes, Mikkelsen shatters any illusions we may have of adult superiority. "Through Her Eyes" was also the occasion for a Tribute to Jeannie Moreau: both as a distinguished actress and, more recently, as a film director in her own right. The Festival included a retrospective of great films she has starred in, a screening of her documentary Portrait of Lillian Gish (France, 1984) and her fictional feature, L'Adolescente (France, 1978).

In addition, the Festival celebrated the 10th Anniversary of Studio D—the Women's unit of the NFB—with a fine collection of films. Some old, some new, including the newly released Behold the Veil (1984). Margaret Wescott, Gloria Demers. This fascinating feature-length documentary is more than a study of nuns; it is an examination, an exploration of women's spirituality, and a tracing of that spirituality back to its roots in matriarchal cultures. The film worked extremely well within the context of the whole Festival, providing a kind of spiritual grounds for the other narrative works we had seen blossom on the screen.

Indicating the range of Studio D's 10-year growth were: The Spring and Fall of Nina Polanski (1984; Kathleen Shannon). If You Love This Planet (1982; Terri Nashi). Dream of a Free Country: A Message From Nicaraguan Women (1984; Kathleen Shannon, Ginny Stikeman). Our Dear Sisters (1974; Kathleen Shannon, An Unremarkable Birth (1978; Diane Beaudry), and Abortion: Stories From North and South (1984; Gail Singer). The Festival, in fact, was made up of a wide range of films from North and South. This year there was a fine showing of some old, some new, of women directors voicing and making sense of women's spirituality, and a collection of films, some old, some new, of women directors voicing and making sense of women's spirituality, and a collection of films, some old, some new, to the world, is thoroughly in touch with the interests and needs of people. And that is the overall sense that I got from "Through Her Eyes": a wide range of women directors voicing and envisioning what needs to be said and shown. It is impossible, unfortunately, to see everything screened in a Festival. What I did see was inspiring for its honesty, beauty, and the taking of risks.

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