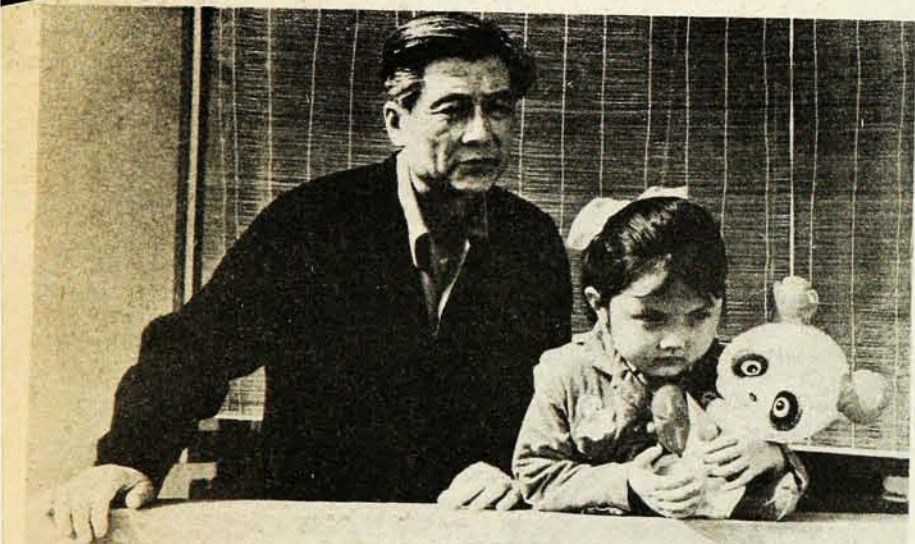




● M. von Trotta's *Balance of Happiness*



● Jeanne Moreau's *L'Adolescente*



● Shi Xiaohua's *Murmuring Spring Water*
● Ula Stockl's *The Sleep of Reason*



Through

The time of sweet Changes in feminist

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

Cinema Canada columnist Joyce Nelson is a freelance writer in Toronto.

Her Eyes: sweet change film practice

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 unspeakable, 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.

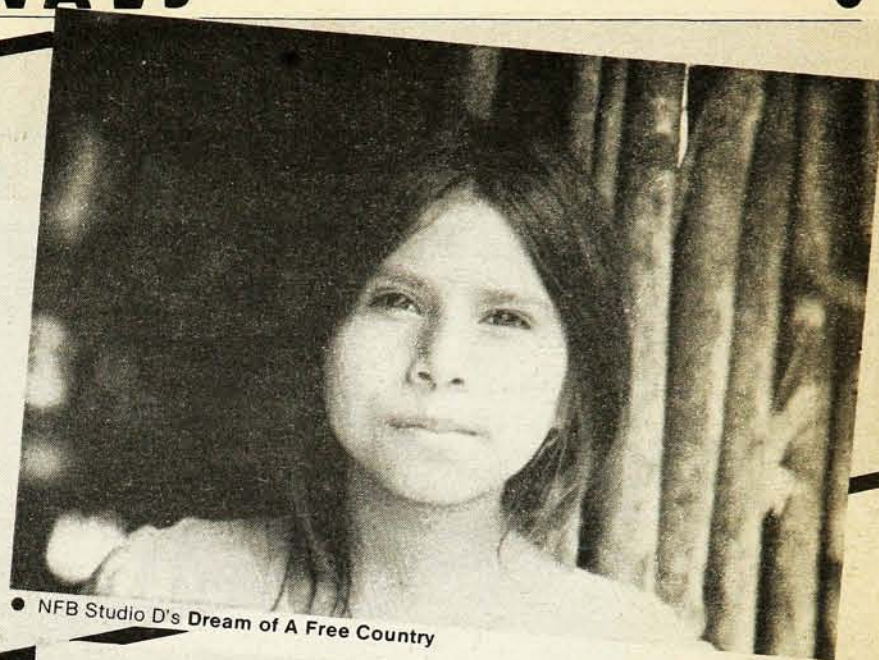
When the First International Women's Film Festival was held in New York City in June 1972, and was followed quickly by similar events in Edinburgh, London, Toronto, Washington, Chicago and Paris, the great majority of films screened were *cinéma vérité* documentaries. Clearly, there were specific economic 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 *cinéma 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 led 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



● NFB Studio D's *Dream of A Free Country*



● Actress and director Jeanne Moreau

● Mira Recanat's *A Thousand Little Kisses*



when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man's values. In the period of decolonization, the colonized masses mock these very values, insult them, and vomit them up."

"Patriarchal lying has manipulated women both through falsehood 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 follow the model of "The Dependency Cycle," there is a certain appropriateness in the documentary mode for the first two stages of liberation. "Colonialism," writes Fanon, "is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it." Thus, there is a great need to redress the lies of the oppressor, to untangle the distortions, to speak the truth as one knows it. Documentary is the cinematic form that most readily allows for this work. 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 one comes to out of a history of silence. Since liberation involves a profound re-naming, re-thinking, and re-vision, it is fitting that women filmmakers turned, in the 1960's, to documentary film. As filmmaker and scholar Kay Armatage noted in a panel held during "Through Her Eyes," women filmmakers' use of documentary during the late '60s was "a response to the distorted images of women" perpetrated by television and Hollywood.

Arguably it is the last two stages of "The Dependency Cycle" - Independence and Inter-Dependency - that fully allow for the blossoming of fictional narrative films. Grounded in hard-won truths, a unique and separate point of view and vision, and possessed of a full realization of the power and equality of the female imagination, women filmmakers have, since the mid-1970's, made 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 the 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 a series of stages analogous to those that, according to Frantz Fanon, primitive cultures have to move through in relation to colonialism: we may currently be at the stage where the only strategies available to us are those conditioned by being in opposition to dominant ones. We need to think about how to move beyond merely reversing what is established to creating truly alternative films, but this involves the basic problems of how to move beyond discourses 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 you have to remember that the story is nothing. The story is surface. The seventh art, that of the screen, is depth rendered perceptible, the depth that lies beneath the surface; it is the musical ungraspable..."

Germaine Dulac, 1928

Feminist film critics have long been grappling with the notion of a female aesthetic and the question of whether or not conventional narrative film techniques are suitable to feminist film practice. Most of the features shown in "Through Her Eyes" utilize what Kaplan calls "the dominant discourse." Nevertheless, their stories, structures and styles to a degree challenge that discourse while using it. The most obvious example is the British film *Biddy* (1983, Christine Edzard). Set in 1861 within the upstairs of an upper-class British family, this film tells the simple story of a nanny caring for two children from infancy to adulthood. By focusing on the seemingly most-marginal member of the household - a servant whose entire life is circumscribed by the duties of nurturing - this film illuminates, indirectly but powerfully, a wide range of social conventions, class differences, and sexist mores that continue to reverberate within our own time. *Biddy* illustrates, in the most stunning, excessive way, how point of view determines narrative. By keeping her at the centre of the film, the narrative must continually repeat itself since her life is nothing but repetitions: an unending stream of linen to be folded, clothes to be made or mended, buttons to be sewed, stories to be told, children to be lovingly attended. What is so fascinating about the film is that, by using the conventional narrative practices but using them to tell *this* character's story, those practices seem to collapse inward: a technique which in turn reveals the paucity of *Biddy's* (traditional woman's) dependency. Gradually, an insufferable claustrophobia builds up and we long for something "dramatic" to happen. When it does, it is strictly faithful to the terms of this character's life, and thus the obsessive nature of the narrative: a favorite button is found. Narrative itself is exposed as entirely dependent on who the central character is.

The excessive claustrophobia in *Biddy* - never once does the camera leave the house, and only rarely does it leave the upstairs domain of the servants - is echoed in *Summerspell* (USA, 1983, Lina Schanklin). Again we find the house to be the sign and locus of woman's dependency and entrapment. Set in 1948, this film uses the genre of family melodrama to explore the circumscribed world of women. What is interesting here is that the central figure, Bernice - struggling to remain sane by momentary escapes into the natural world around the farm - must quite literally grapple with Patriarchy by resisting her in-laws' efforts to move the aging, senile family Patriarch into her home. Through the course of the narrative, we realize that everything in this family has always revolved around the wishes and demands of the Father, who still, in his senility, determines their fates. The style of *Summerspell* is, like *Biddy*, close and suffocating: a

cinema of claustrophobia in which looks and gestures, silences, the unspoken, weigh far more than what is said. While *Summerspell* is conventional melodrama, it seems to push the genre to its limits and thereby expose, to a degree, the workings of this discourse at the same time that it uses it.

A Thousand Little Kisses (Israel, 1981, Mira Recanati) is also structured around the Father, but in this case it is his absence that reverberates through the lives of the women. Daughter Alma discovers that her dead father once had an extended affair which resulted in a son nearly her own age. The revelation of this truth sends shock waves through her own life and her mother's, and becomes the central obsession for them both. Here the claustrophobia plays itself out in their entangled, enmeshed relationships. Recanati insightfully explores the entrapment of personal dependency that masks itself as love.

Juliette's Fate (France, 1983, Aline Isserman) even more clearly elaborates on this central notion of the caged woman, who is, to my way of thinking, the embodiment of Dependency. In an early scene in the film, Juliette's mother has (again) gone mad and escaped the house to wander in the fields. It is an action that Juliette herself will repeat later when, married against her will to the violent Marcel, she momentarily abandons her daughter and flees the house. This film carefully plays out the inevitable and growing violence between the couple: placing it as the result of economic and societal factors as well as the personal psychologies of both people. In other words, here the entrapment of the woman is seen in a larger framework beyond just the nuclear family. Set in France in the early 1960's, *Juliette's Fate* is that of Everywoman, given the legal system which continually advises her to stay with Marcel "for the sake of the child." If the Patriarchy in *Summerspell* is confined to the individual family, here it is seen to reach far beyond the boundaries of the household. Entrapment is thus societal and encompassing. Only by Marcel's death does Juliette attain liberation, though it is a death that comes through illness during which she has dutifully remained his wife. The visual style of this film continually emphasizes this "fatedness" - framing Juliette within interiors, enclosing her within city structures and sounds, confining her to small gestures and movements. From an opening scene of her as a young girl swirling upon the dance floor and seeking out the eyes of the young man she loves, her world gradually becomes increasingly circumscribed. It is a painful film, beautifully done.

A characteristic of Dependency is isolation, especially from other supportive women friends. This is true of the films discussed so far in that their central female characters have female family members but no other women to whom they can turn. This is particularly evident in *Hedwig, Or The Cool Lakes Of Death* (Holland, 1982, Nouchka Van Brakel): a wonderously excessive film that takes its central character through a tumultuous life almost entirely defined by men. Naive, unthinking Hedwig, melodramatic heroine *par excellence*, spirals down into the depths of depravity, murder, insanity, addiction and prostitution - all for the love of a man - until finally, with the help of a kindly nun, she achieves Independence and decides to live on her own terms. Though the film is somewhat overblown

in its melodramatic turns, it contains a certain truthfulness in its portrait of a woman who must literally go through hell in order to find herself.

By contrast, another loose grouping of films screened in "Through Her Eyes" focuses upon women acting together to achieve some form of liberation. The most provocative and galvanizing of these films was *A Question Of Silence* (Holland, 1982, Marleen Gorris). Three women - a housewife, a waitress, and a secretary - are arrested for the murder of a male shopkeeper. A female court psychologist is appointed to prove or disprove their sanity during the crime. The flashback structure of the film allows for the murder, and the events leading up to it in each woman's life, to be witnessed by the audience. In other words, we are in the same position as the psychologist: piecing together the context and the crime. The murder, by three women who had never met until they spontaneously and methodically beat to death the shopkeeper who had tried to prevent one of them from shoplifting, evokes a kind of horrifying satisfaction in the female audience, and the final scenes at the court trial unite the women in the film, as well as the women in the audience, in a way I have never before experienced at the movies. This is simply an astounding film, not only in its effectiveness but in its careful structure that subtly refocuses the attention of the story from murder to the inner growth of the psychologist.

In *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (FRG, 1977, Margarethe von Trotta) bank robber Christa Klages moves from a male world of desperation, deceit and disguise, to a female world of fairplay, honesty and mutual solidarity. In this transition, her values change gradually until the final moment of the film when, confronted with the bank teller she has robbed, Christa Klages experiences a "second awakening." Of the three von Trotta films screened in "Through Her Eyes," I found this one to be the most positive in its exploration of women identifying with women, though it is also perhaps less psychologically complex.

A Woman Like Eve (Netherlands, 1979, Nouchka van Brakel) goes further than any of the other films I saw in its exploration of women-identified female characters. Here, a housewife who can no longer tolerate the strains of nuclear family and relatives is sent by her sympathetic husband on a vacation with a woman friend. At the beach she meets a woman (Maria Schneider) who intrigues her, and later visits the communal farm where Lillianne lives. The sensuous earthiness and lifestyle of Lillianne leads to an infatuation, which grows into love when the two meet again back in Holland. Their love-affair shocks the husband, the entire family, and seemingly the entire high-rise in which the woman has been living. Her decision to live with Lillianne and fight for custody of her children is depicted as clearly positive and an important choice in her own growth.

The other two von Trotta features screened at the festival seemed to examine women's relationship with women in far greater detail. *Sisters, Or The Balance Of Happiness* (FRG, 1979) and *Sheer Madness* (FRG, 1982) both focus on the suffocating symbiosis that develops between their two central female characters. Von Trotta seems fascinated by what might be called unstable psychic boundaries, so that her characters gradually seem to take

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 as destructive as it is affirming, with a certain underlining of the necessity of surviving alone.

The risks of relationship are also explored in *36 Chowringhee Lane* (India, 1981, Aparna Sen). Here an elderly woman schoolteacher, living alone and quite self-sufficiently, is manipulated into sharing her flat with a young couple who want a place for their lovers' trysts. What appears to be exploitation, however, is obviously mutually beneficial on some level, as the old woman rediscovers the joys and pains of interrelationship. Another film, *Moral* (The Philippines, 1982, Marilou Diaz-Abaya), 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* (USSR, 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 sees 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 enfolded 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.

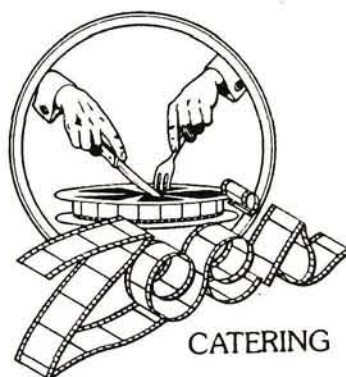
"Through Her Eyes" was also the occasion for a Tribute to Jeanne Moreau: both as a distinguished actress and, more recently, as a film director in her own right. The Festival included a retrospective of great films she has starred in, a screening of her documentary *Portrait Of Lillian Gish* (France, 1984) and her fictional feature, *L'Ado-*

lescente (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 *Behind 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 grounding 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* (1974, Kathleen Shannon), *If You Love This Planet* (1982, Terri Nash), *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 fact that the films made by Studio D are the most-requested titles of all NFB distribution indicates that this women's filmmaking unit, unique in the world, is thoroughly in touch with the interests and needs of the public.

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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