

The last CINÉ MAMA



• Isabelle Miquelon and Marie Hélène Montpetit in *L'Usure*



• *Demain la cinquantaine*

by **Leila Marshy**

Cinémama began its third year on November 21 for three weekends of film, video, workshops and panel discussions. This is the second year for organizer Carolyn Rafman-Lisser (the first was co-produced by Susan Stewart and Powerhouse Gallery), and the last, as both Rafman-Lisser and *Cinémama* will be joining forces with *Cinéfemmes'* Linda Soucy to produce *Silence, elles tournent!*, the international festival of women's films, in June.

As Rafman-Lisser explains, the merger is not an "absorption" of a smaller effort into the larger, "but a fusion"

to ensure that *Cinéfemmes/Cinémama* can become a better resource centre and "feel less constrained by formal or mainstream concerns."

This year's films were categorized in three separate themes, one for each weekend: Love and Language, Investigating Documentary, and Screenwriters and Storytellers. At the Cinema Guy-Favreau, a full house attended the opening film, the North American premiere of the German film *Ein Blick – Und die Liebe Bricht Aus/One Look – And Love Breaks Out* by Jutta Bruckner which Bruckner wades through male/female 'love' expectations in a surrealistically conceived Argentina. Audience reaction ranged from anger because of its pornographic representation of oppressive relationships, to enthusiasm for Bruckner's painful realism.

Considering this festival's target audience, and its inspiring lineups of discussion venues (the three panels were, 'Writing Love Stories' with Jutta Bruckner, Gabriella Rosaleva from Italy, Jeanett Iljohn and Lis Rhodes from England; 'Les stratégies documentaires' with Sophie Bissonette, Morgane Laliberté, Alanis Obomsawin; and 'Femme comme auteur' with Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, Jovette Marchessault, Susan Lotbinière-Harwood, Gail Scott), the overall poor attendance should be a factor in any discussion or evaluation of *Cinémama*.

The average attendance for any of the screenings was between 25 and 35 – an alarmingly small number for a city whose feminist community can be significantly felt in many artistic and social arenas. Does *Cinémama* represent this community and, if it does, did it make enough noise to provide that both organizers and audience benefit from each other? It was disappointing to see worthwhile films and artists having their voices reduced to a whisper. A workshop, for example, on the second Saturday was frustrating for Rhodes, Iljohn, Bodil Trier from Denmark, and a representative from La Maison des Quatre in Quebec City, as less than 10 women came.

A decision was made to cancel the one on the following Saturday (the workshops, as distinct from the panel discussions, were held at the Université du Québec à Montréal and moderated by Alison Beale), which was to have discussed 'Cinema as a Tool of Political Awareness and Creativity' with a screening of *Les Guerrières*, the

French version of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*. Ironically, and testament to shortsightedness in some regard, a substantial number, almost 40, were at UQAM for the ill-fated workshop.

The question of mutual responsibility is pertinent when speaking of marginal films and a marginal audience. Producers, distributors and organizers of screenings should see to it that the best of all possible conditions exist to promote the viewing, not the least of which is making it *known*. And the members of the audience, if they are to encourage artistic output in their community, must attend to it and nurture it with their presence.

It would seem that both parties have a habit of expecting miracles in a vacuum. The audience will just *appear* – one day *the* politically correct all-encompassing all-satisfying feminist film will light up before my very eyes.

The films as they were programmed were for the most part very satisfying. 16 of the 37 films and videos were Canadian productions. A brief rundown of these entries follows.

Las Aradas by Janis Lundman is a camera panning through the rocks and underbrush of a forest in Ontario, which could be anywhere in El Salvador, could be the ingrowing remains of a razed village, could be anywhere in the world, any man's war. The voice-over, in English, sets the image in May 1980, in a refugee camp in Las Aradas, in the memory of a massacre by the Salvadorean army. The text, like a last surviving voice, evocatively recounts the nightmare, "the blood... the blood," picking up the bones of the forgotten

photo: Louise Oigny

and the faraway. **Las Aradas** is a good example of what an imaginative committed filmmaker can do with minimal resources.

Terri Nash, director of **If You Love this Planet**, put together a series of shorts from outtakes of **Speaking our Peace**. One of them, **A Writer in a Nuclear Age**, has Margaret Laurence speaking about language and the nuclear arms race ("megadeath is an obscene word - a glib reference"). She articulates the difficulty of distance and death or, more precisely, distance from death. There is a "crisis of the imagination", she says. World leaders do not seem to realize "they're talking about real human beings" when they play the numbers game. Her own distance as a writer of fiction comes from the necessity of approaching issues through the "life view of the characters." There is some kind of frustration in being unable to address issues directly in fiction, "artists really cannot write didactic prose." Using techniques similar to those of **If You Love this Planet** (in this case, Laurence intercut with images of war and destruction), Nash effectively demonstrated how one person *can* speak for many.

Not unlike Laurence, Obomsawin tells a story behind which urgent questions are raised. **Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child** employs a voice reading diary excerpts of a young man who ended his life by suicide at the age of 17. These passages, fictionalized in a compelling and unsentimental manner, are intercut with interviews of the people who affected Cardinal's life. At a young age Cardinal was taken from his parents (a common fate for native children whose parents are judged incapable by outside social workers) and siblings and began the destabilizing process of being passed through one foster and group home to the next, over 25 in all. While many of these environments were positive and caring, they were unable to provide for Richard what he most wanted - his real family and his real home.

It is crucial to Obomsawin that her people tell their own story. In researching her 1984 film, **Incident at Restigouche**, she found the supposed 'objectivity' of journalists appalling. Exaggerations and distortions were perpetuated to satisfy the demands of a sensationalizing media. What she achieves with this film is the underscoring of the brutalizing effect of a system that is often not understood by its victims. Richard Cardinal finally went home, but in a coffin.

From another perspective comes **Justice blanche**. Morgane Laliberté and Françoise Wera document in a more traditional way the legal system and its values imposed on Northern Quebec Inuit by their southern colonizers. The film illustrated quite clearly imbalances created by the visiting court circuit, nicknamed the 'flying circus', which visits the region every few months prepared only to recognize the aberrant

symptoms of a much larger social problem.

Two elements are lost in Laliberté's and Wera's treatment of a native issue. They are an intimate and compassionate understanding of individual suffering, as well as the absence of the question of native self-government as an alternative to the Canadian justice system. Instead, the presence of the camera lens is at times a stinging intrusion, especially in a court scene (in the rest of Canada cameras are barred from the trial proceedings out of respect for the defendant and due process of law). As well, a lot of focus is placed on ways to ameliorate the existing system as opposed to supplanting it altogether by Inuit concepts and customs of justice.

Another issue was presented from two different approaches. **Demain la cinquantaine** by Hélène Roy dramatizes the 'affliction' of menopause and women's stigmatization because of it. Dominique is misunderstood by her family (husband and so on) and misrepresented by media images which at their very best console her anxiety and at their worst confront her with their own. Menopause is another 'curse' she must deny ("après la pilule, les pilules"), and one ad even entreats a husband to buy brand X for his wife so she can once again "say yes" to him. Heaven knows the worst consequence of hot flashes is "saying no."

Roy is tackling misconceptions and superstitions surrounding menopause and it is encouraging that these lies and their destructiveness is countered by her character's encounters and friendships with other women her age.

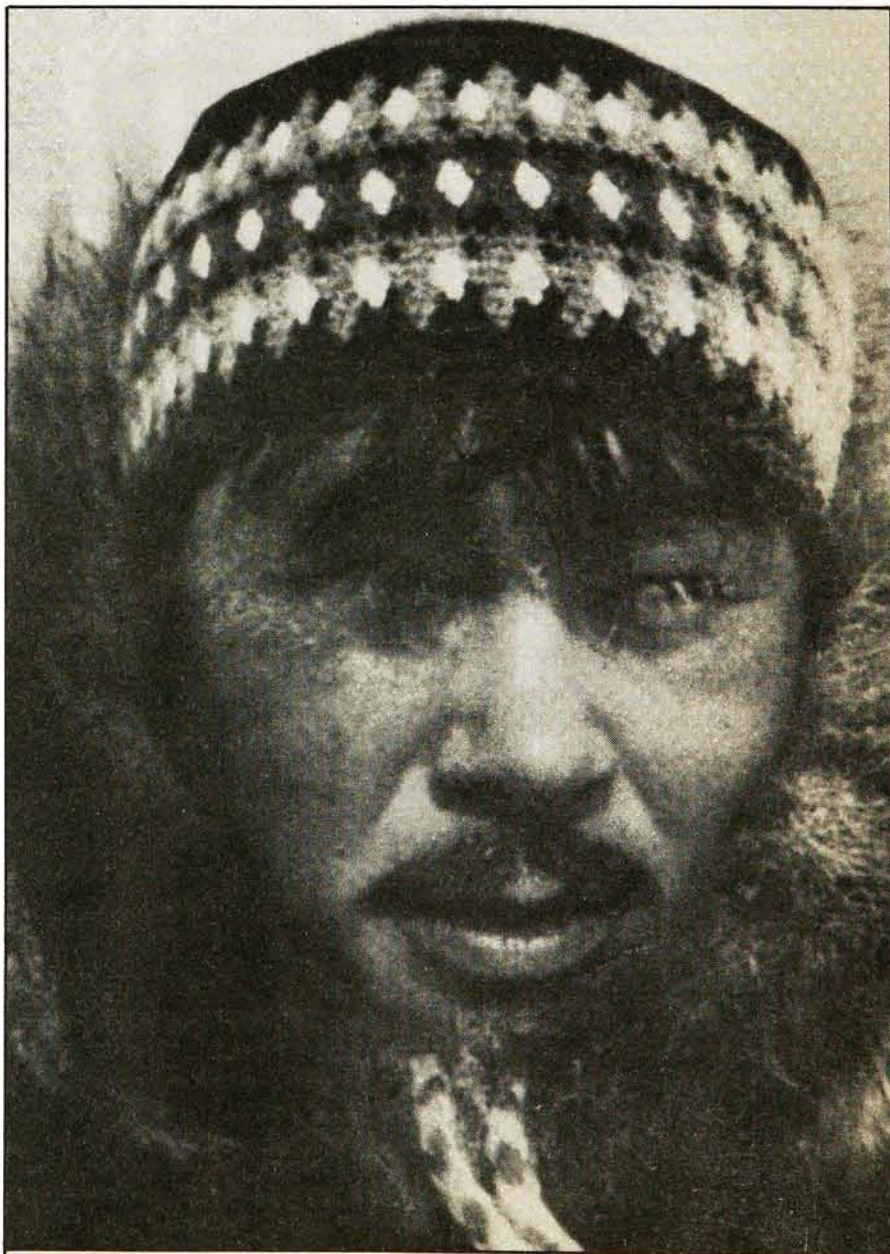
Roy's strategy is to be involved with the initial struggles against debilitating deceptions of menopause. Patricia Watson, on the other hand, interviews women for whom their middle and senior years are fertile and enriching, where menopause is a small hurdle soon left behind and forgotten. **The Best Time of My Life: Portraits of Women in Mid-Life** is a series of interviews with 12 women, many of whom found the breakup of long marriages signalling a new life. As one said, she "came out of it feeling she had emerged from a cocoon."

Myths of menopause are hit straight on. One vibrant woman in her fifties asks her high school class who they see when they think of a woman going through menopause. "Edith Bunker" is the agreed-upon reply. There is an un-filled silence when she asks for positive images. Yet, it is exactly these positive images that Watson fills her film with. She succeeds in providing role models where before there were faded or dead models. Joy Kogowa, one of the women featured (they are all unnamed until the final list of credits), says into the open space around her, considering the little deaths we must confront throughout our lives, "aging must be one of the great privileges we have."

In 1985, as part of the International Year of the Youth, the National Film



• Barbara Sternberg's experimental **A Trilogy**



• Morgane Laliberté's and Françoise Wera's **Justice Blanche**

Board of Canada's Studio D undertook to bring together and train 25 young women from across Canada. Their mandate was to create a body of short films dealing with subjects related to women and youth. *L'Usure* and *First Take, Double Take*, two of the films, were featured at *Cinémama*.

L'Usure by Jeanne Crépeau and Stéphane Fortin is an 8-minute whimsical look at kissing – does it wear out the lips? Two women try to decide as they approach each other, intercut with scenes of couples kissing, men and women, men and men, a woman and her cat. All I can ask is, why does that woman have to be there, kissing her cat? The play on (unspoken) words is a bit too cursory for liking.

First Take, Double Take, on the other hand, takes its subject very seriously. Directed by Paula Fairfield, a young girl walks through darkened city streets alone. Accompanied by only her own voice, she is assailed by public and derogatory images of herself (neon lights on St. Catherine flash "Girls! Girls! Girls!"), and men who at any step may choose to take her life in their hands. Justified fear and insecurity make her "aware of every sound" as she alone must fight the seemingly endless battle

to "take back the night."

Another Studio D production, Dorothy Todd-Hénault's *Les Terribles Vivantes* premiered at the Festival du nouveau cinéma et de la vidéo this fall and now the English version (with subtitles and the dramatized sequences with Pol Pelletier reshot in English) premiered at *Cinémama*. In either language, this film is a landmark of sorts considering the celebratory tone of its reception. Hénault brings to the screen the three most influential and intelligent female writers in Quebec today, and introduces them and their ideas to English-speaking audiences across Canada.

The essential characteristics of each woman is articulated, be it the discovery of herself as a writer, her radical battles with language, or, in two of the cases, her lesbianism. Bersianik, Marchessault and Brossard are challenging the traditional confines of language through their choice of both content and style. At the forefront of radical literature, they are unfortunately circumscribed by a filmic style and structuring that separates the authors into three distinct segments (each heralded by a flash of fireworks, thus the English title) that would rather view them, in

the convention of western thought, as artist-as-individual-as-genius. This disservice is in contradiction to the author's place in her community and the endless spirals of history.

Spirals and cycles are what also typify *A Trilogy*, another development in Barbara Sternberg's exploration of experimental film. Sternberg studied at Ryerson for two years to master technique, but her interest is primarily in challenging the plasticity of the medium, in fact she "never even thought to make a narrative."

The title is in reference to the layers of being that Sternberg explains encompass human perception and existence. There is a mingling of image and sound with three distinct points of reference: one, a middleclass kitchen and a 'successful' young nuclear family, two, repeated shots of a man running, and three, ambiguous yet deliberate sequences of a mother and a young boy, birthing, growing, separating.

The kitchen personifies the surface structure in which we can live our lives "in order to have order," also a time, a point of reference, the 20th century TV-radio inundated society. The space-time linear mode is symbolized by the man running through space, in time. This is

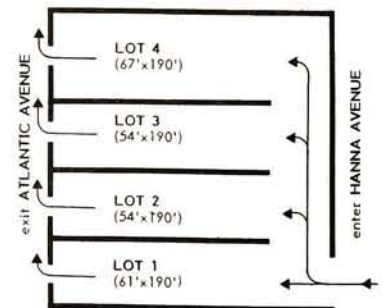
all fused with what Sternberg refers to as the "space of othernesses." Both the process and the product, for Sternberg, arise out of an organic and fluid relationship with the sense of mystery in our lives.

The lineup of Canadian entries, from NFB productions to independent shoestring productions, fare well against their American and European neighbours. As a group distinct from the mainstream, the women filmmakers displayed their desire to reclaim their voice, rewrite history, unearth old bones.

Many of the filmmakers attended their own screenings and were available for questioning outside the scheduled discussions. Suzanne de Poe, from the Toronto Women in Film and Video group, discussed the productive necessity of networking to provide creative exchange and financial support among women in the industry. It is obvious from the festival that Montreal is clearly ripe for such an organization. When asked if she feared that American influence would diminish Canadian output (the mother organization of Toronto Women in Film and Video is in the U.S.), "Well, no," she said, "Hands across the borders, right?" Right. •

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