Why not D?
An historical look at the NFB's Woman's Studio

by Chris Sherbarth

Of all the films emerging from the National Film Board in the '80s, Not a Love Story and If You Love This Planet have likely left the deepest, most indelible impressions on a broad spectrum of viewers. The fact that both documentaries are productions of Studio D, the NFB women's unit, is no coincidence. That they took Canadian audiences by storm in successive waves six months apart borders on the extraordinary. Even three years after their release, they remained the most frequently booked documentaries within the entire NFB repertoire. Ironically, at the same time these films were garnering unprecedented acclaim (and censure) across the continent, the 1982 Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee recommended a downsizing of NFB operations because the "Board's output no longer represents a significant film experience for the Canadian public."

The success of Not a Love Story and If You Love This Planet marks a significant moment in NFB history; more pointedly, they mark the beginning of Chapter Two in the tale surrounding the evolution of the globe's first state-funded women's film unit.

Chapter One: the experiment

Opinion is mixed within Studio D as to whether its birth 13 years ago can be chalked up to mere tokenism, or to the honest attempt of a federal institution to make amends for the near exclusion of women filmmakers from the NFB payroll for three decades.

John Grierson, the Film Board's charismatic founder, is sometimes praised for opening up a half dozen directing/producing jobs to women during the Second World War. The other side of the story, however, is that Grierson is on record asserting that film production was an area "where they [women] had ideas above the station to which it had pleased God to call them."

It did please the Film Board to let women near the cameras during the war, and, to pay them far less than men. But after the war, both societal and bureaucratic pressure found NFB women (with the exception of animator Eve Lambart) trading in their filmmakers' caps for other pursuits.

By the mid '60s, women had regained a limited degree of access to NFB filmmaking positions, making up 14 per cent of NFB production staff—mostly as assistants and editors. They were promoted slowly, surpassed by their own male trainees, and were even openly discouraged from aspiring to become directors.

Just as the ability of women filmmakers was suspect, so too were the film proposals coming out of female experience. Anne-Claire Potier, who became not only a direc-
tor but a celebrated director during the '60s, recalls being told once by her executive producer that "forgetting she was a woman" might be the key to coming up with better film ideas.

While the proportion of women in filmmaking did not increase over the next decade, 14 per cent proved to be a sufficient critical mass to prompt some change at the Film Board. The decision to create a separate film unit not only to employ women but produce films from a woman's perspective was the specific outcome of several factors.

First, the Film Board's Challenge for Change program, launched in the late '60s, became the unwitting sponsor of two very different series of films addressing women's experiences in male-dominated society: *En tant que femmes*, produced by Anne-Claire Poirier, and *Women's pasts*, produced by Kathleen Shannon. Both the making of these series (with largely female crews), and the energetic audience responses to them, furthered the case for more female representation on both sides of the NFB camera.

Second, in 1972 the Canadian Government announced its commitment to the goals of International Women's Year, set for 1975. This commitment gave women within federal institutions the moral ammunition with which to lobby for the improved status of women as citizens, and as employees.

And third, two key spokespersons, namely Poirier and Shannon, used that ammunition to press for continued funding to make film projects devoted to and orchestrated by women— a matter of course, rather than a one-time event.

Shannon's particular vision for a women's film unit eventually worked its way into the imagination of NFB bureaucrats, who agreed to make the vision come true— on a shoestring budget. Shannon was appointed to head the new studio in August 1974, thereby becoming the first woman executive producer at the Film Board.

Poirier, who had simply bid for increased funding and opportunities for women, was offered a Francophone women's studio. She rejected the offer on two fronts: she wanted more than a token amount of money, and feared that a women's studio would be treated as a women's ghetto.

Alternatively, Shannon was determined that the new studio would not be treated nor act like a ghetto. "Ghettos are where others put you, in their minds," she observed recently while contemplating Studio D's past. "Studio D is where we wanted to be, it wasn't a ghetto but a refuge. Besides, no one ever calls all-men situations a ghetto.

As a matter of fact, up until 1985 Studio D was never an all-women setting. During the '70s, men filmmakers working out of the Studio were almost as numerous as women. Their energies, however, were devoted largely to projects elsewhere in the Film Board.

During its early years, Studio D was regarded in fact as something less than a full-blown studio. Located "down among the pipes" in basement offices, it began with three staff members and a paltry budget of $100,000 enough to run some training and apprenticeship programs, plan a few films and conduct audience research.

The years 1976-77 saw a budget of $600,000, and the release of Beverly Shaffer's *My Friends Call Me Tony*, Filmvest Associates' *Great Grand Mother*, and Diane Beaudry's *Maud Lewis*. Shaffer's film was the first production of Studio D's *Children of Canada* series, now comprised of 10 film portraits of children who represent, in microcosm, the Canadian mosaic.

Shaffer came to Studio D not as a feminist seeking the environment of a 'women's room' in which to develop her craft, but as a talented although novice filmmaker looking for a chance to prove herself. She was referred, by the well-meaning gents of the NFB, to the women's studio, of course. And Shannon, with her wait of two decades for the opportunity to direct films recently behind her, gave Shaffer that chance.

The sweet reward for Shannon's decision came in 1978, when Shaffer's sixth film in the series, *I'll Find a Way*, was awarded one of two Oscars claimed by the Film Board that year. The Studio D production along with Co Hoedeman's animated short, *The Sand Castle*, put an end to the 26-year drought since Norman McLaren's Oscar for *Neighbours* in 1952.

From the time of its first studio meeting to its first Oscar, Studio D had evolved from an idea—an experiment— to an active film unit churning out modest, NFB-quality films.

In addition to the six *Children of Canada* films directed by Shaffer, Studio D had by then produced a core of films that accomplished what few other NFB films had ever done. That is, Studio D films used female rather than male experience to focus and comment on social life.

The Lady from Grey County, *Some American Feminists*, Eve Lambart, *Patricia's Moving Picture*, The Right Candidate for Rosedale: these films are all documentaries which, as a common denominator, bring the distinctive aspects of female experience to the screen as an essential— hitherto missing— reflection of human society. They also poignantly document, some more explicitly than others, how patriarchal power relations have impinged negatively on the experience of their subject films. In *Some American Feminists*, the articulate Kate Millet describes the painful process of recouping her soul from its occupation by patriarchal ideals. Housewife Patricia's struggle, in *Patricia's Moving Picture*, is expressed more simply although no less engagingly. Her sheer delight in signing her very first cheque or finally owning something in her own name is so quaint it demands serious attention.

(And now, Patricia has a film named after her?)

Also in 1978, Studio D produced *How They Saw Us*, a package of eight archival films from the '40s and '50s. What can be discerned from these black-and-white reprints is that early NFB films devoted to women subjects were devoted, rather, to the subject of women. The questions these films (almost all by men) attempt to answer are: what should women's role during the war effort? what should it be after the war effort? what should women do with this "new freedom"? what might be the key to gaining from the workplace?

Terri Nash, in her doctoral examination of the ten women-centred NFB films produced in the '40s (out of hundreds), concludes that the "semantic differentiation" within women's film images has much to do with the filmmaker's gender. Men's portrayals of women in these films are enmeshed in codes of passivity and triviality, whereas women's portrayals demonstrate competence and accomplishment.

Nash's prescriptive corollary to these observations is that, in general, the most meaningful changes in women's film images can be expected to come from women themselves.

Not all of Studio D's earlier films are dedicated to projecting new and challenging images of women. *Sun, Wind and Wood* by Dorothy Hénaud is an environmentalist documentary concerning renewable energy. Don Renick's *Boys Will Be Men* takes a bleak look at male juvenile delinquents in an urban centre. Two animated shorts by Laurent Coderre, *Rencentre and Rustling World*, are simple allegories of sojourning and warfare.

The remaining women-centred documentary produced during the first chapter of the Studio D experiment are *An Unremarkable Birth, Just a Lady and La La*. The first is a well crafted commentary on modern obstetrics, while the other two examine past and present-smuggling.

If You Love This Planet and Not a Love Story, which catapulted Studio D into the international limelight, are not 'better' films than their predecessors. Because of their incredible popularity, critics have actually gone to great pains to illustrate their shortcomings as cinema.

They do, however, possess a magic. And that magic is their bold and passionate grappling with controversial issues immediately relevant to the aver
age North American citizen.

In terms of conventional NFB programming procedures, these films are also flukes: projects that slipped into production between the cracks. The proposal for Not a Love Story, which was given the NFB nod to proceed by one solitary vote, was a hasty bid for Bonnie Klein's submitted proposal for a documentary collage of pornographic movement, which she noticed how friends' eyes lit up and nostrils flared when she broached the topic, and also how long-repressed feelings and testimonials would eventually come flooding out. This was Klein's market research.

Terri Nash, whose previous experience in filmmaking amounted to a one-minute short, would likely not have been given the chance to direct If You Love This Planet anywhere else but Studio D. She was convinced that Helen Caldicott's power to move an audience would come through on film, still in lecture format. And supplemented with historical footage already in the public domain, this celluloid lecture would have a wide audience. Studio D took the gamble, and Nash was proven correct.

A memorable page in NFB history

The evidence of the film experiences generated by Not a Love Story and If You Love This Planet would fill several books.

One of three focused studies on viewer reactions to Not a Love Story was conducted at the University of Illinois by Pauline Bart. Summarizing the overall impact of the film, Bart proposes "Not a Love Story is to the anti-pornography movement what the novel Uncle Tom's Cabin was to the anti-slavery movement"

In other words, the film's release was absolutely timely, representing the first documentary collage of pornographic culture presented from a critical - and accessible - perspective. (Some experimental films also contain collages of filmed porn, but the critical message requires much imaginative interpretation.)

For many women, the film was also a first exposure to images classified as hard-core porn: a measured exposure that brought the troublesome aspects of soft-core submission into deeper focus. Not a Love Story made a lot of women cry. And, it led many to defensiveness, and questioning. It also revitalized the NFB practice of post-screening group discussions.

Thanks to added publicity from the Ontario Censor Board's ban on public screenings, the subject matter of the film made for hot press, long line-ups, and unprecedented NFB booking contracts with mainstream movie-houses (outside Ontario).

In 1982, Not a Love Story was used as briefing material for a federal standing committee and a provincial commission. It has been used also as an educational tool in police stations and medical schools, and became a key reference in the 1983 Canadian protest against Playboy programming on pay-television.

Between 1980 and 1983, the discussion of pornography in the popular Canadian press swelled by a factor of ten, with much of this increase attributable to the catalytic effect of Klein's film.

If You Love This Planet, rather than sharing in the birth of a specialized movement, became a widely touted manifesto for an ongoing cause. From the earliest screenings, it was repeatedly described as a film that bowled viewers over, inciting them to action. As a result of the film, peace groups were established, peace marches carried If You Love This Planet banners and placards; school children sent letters to Prime Minister Trudeau and President Reagan, and to the CBC (which initially wouldn't broadcast the documentary).

The United States Justice Department was also incited to act, declaring the film "political propaganda" from a foreign agent. No doubt the dramatic footage of actor Ronald Reagan portraying a gun-ho bomber pilot helped provoke this response.

Accepting her Oscar in 1983, Nash did not miss the chance to tell Americans they sure knew how to show foreign agents a good time. (Its share has since decreased.)

Recent productions took in Louise Drouin, Veterinarian and Portrait of the Artist - As an Old Lady, and co-productions The Way It Is and the Oscar-winning Flamenco at 5:15. Another ten films or so were in production.

While things looked good on the surface, there were some fundamental hitches. Studio D could not meet the film needs of its constituency, made known to staff from substantial networking efforts, nor could it accommodate the numerous requests for employment and training from both francophone and anglophone filmmakers.

Some staff began to feel like vocational counsellors, since women with filmmaking ideas were typically refer-
red to the women's studio.

Women freelancers, who either honestly or cynically looked to Studio D as their best bet for equal opportunity at the Film Board, became discouraged and critical of the privilege held by the Studio's dozen permanent employees. Others knocked the Studio's apparent predilection for documentary, and equated its limited film inventory to limited imagination.

One significant step toward addressing the swelling demand for women-centred films and filmmaking opportunities was the formation of the Federal Women's Film Program. Co-ordinated by Studio D, the program was set up to produce and distribute basic information documents, thereby re-leasing Studio D funds for more creative pursuits.

What became more and more apparent as the '80s progressed was that Studio D was itself the Women's Program at the Film Board. And yet, it had only 10 per cent of funds for English Production. It was also becoming clear that Studio D's high profile obscured the fact that few women in other studios -- and in total -- at the Film Board had significant control over the setting of filmmaking priorities.

The aspirations of women filmmakers across Canada could not be met by the occasional hiring of a regional freedom by Studio D. Some francophone women who worked with the Studio longed to create in their native tongue.

In response to these pressures, to the paradox that it harboured the mandate to foster women's film culture yet with limited imagination, Studio D operated on a budget of $1.5 million, with 10.9 per cent of the English branch's discretionary funds. Its share of this money -- for travel, research and contracts -- dropped to 6.2 per cent in 1984-85, and 7.6 in 1986-87.

To a specially mandated studio, painfully aware of the limited resources placed in women's hands, these cutbacks were tantamount to a slap in the face: punishment for having 'expected' not simply a reward for success but a 'budget commensurate with our [Studio D]' task and vision.'

Two movements afoot at the Film Board have been offered as explanations for the money freezes and decreases. First, a higher ratio of NFB resources has been committed to regional studios, leaving proportionately less for those in Montreal. Fine, but not all Montreal studios have shared the burdens of regionalization to the same degree.

Second, NFB management says it wants to open the entire Film Board to women, and further, that women shouldn't have to conform to Studio D's 'philosophy' to inherit their own cultural resources. Fair enough, except that the NFB has historically done a poor job (even after two previous equal opportunity studies) of putting its money where its policy is. Why, if structural barriers have been all but removed, have the women in the French Program opted to create their own Studio D equivalent?

Why are Studio D's growth and greater fairness to all NFB women so often seen as mutually exclusive scenarios?

Current reports from Studio D state that there are no new films being developed due to lack of discretionary spending options. There are only enough dollars of this sort to support ongoing projects in the present year.

This has not been good for morale. And yet, who has carried the brightest torch for women's rights at the NFB for more than a decade, has declared herself burnt out. She stepped down from her esteemed post last summer, with an upcoming Order of Canada ceremony to recognize her achievements.

One could say the mid-'80s have not been kind to Studio D, for all that it was desired to accomplish this decade. Such a comment is by no means a reflection on audience response to its films, for Studio D's productions, as a whole, are quite popular.

Compared to a matched, random sample of NFB films, the average Studio D title is booked twice as frequently in Canada as the average NFB production. Excluding Studio D's 'top two' from the sample, Studio D films still outperform regular NFB fare by 50 per cent. Although the comparison is somewhat more than six recent Studio D documentaries show a rate of Canadian bookings higher than the random sample by a factor of five. (The NFB-wide sample includes a proportion of films from the '70s.) The six Studio D films in question are the "top two", plus Dream of a Country: A Message from Nicaraguan Women; Abortion: Stories from North and South; Behind the Veil: Nuns, and Speaking Our Peace.

These films are among the most explicitly political productions of the Studio. As a collection, they represent an integrated statement in the Western world, between sexism, militarism and capitalism. All of them have been called biased and one-sided. All of them have been praised for the unique perspective on various social issues they bring to the screen.

Other recent productions include This Borrowed Land, D.E.S.; An Uncertain Legacy: The Best Years of My Life; co-productions Dark Lullabies,
Speaking of Nairobi and No Longer Silent, and a series of spin-offs from Speaking Our Peace. (This is not a complete list.)

Like their predecessors, these documentaries add to the growing body of films that, as a basic denominator, recognize women as historical subjects and articulators of culture. Given the preoccupations of the NFB’s first three decades of production, this is no small feat.

In more eloquent terms, college instructor Barbara Latham describes Studio D films as tools for learning “in a burgeoning field of inquiry into women’s experience in Canada and the world, so that a large constituency which experiences itself as an international community, dare I say a global sisterhood, sees itself.” Men, likewise, are given by these film texts an alternate way of seeing the legacy of patriarchy handed down to them by their ‘forefathers’.

A recent NFB international distribution report points to a noteworthy effect of the production of films of this nature from one identifiable source. It states Studio D has become an “international brand name”, with “a public out there awaiting and expecting its product.”

With over a decade of experience to its credit, Studio D is ready to enter into a more mature phase of filmmaking – to further develop what Bonnie Klein refers to as its “visionism.” If the Studio must consistently turn its energies inward, and defend its funding base time and time again, we may never see that vision unfold.

Once again Studio D is being compelled to justify why as a women’s studio, as a centralized source of women’s film culture, it should have more creative license. Given that Studio D is a renowned Canadian brand name, we might be asking the Film Board, instead, why such license should not be granted.

Notes
1. In 1984, Film Australia established the world’s second permanent film unit for women. In 1986, NFB’s French Program branch undertook to create a francophone counterpart to Studio D.
2. The use of female principals is a simple but rare feature of NFB films. In the 1984-85 English catalogue, for example, about 8 per cent of the titles were listed under “women” or “women – portraits” in the index. No parallel heading existed for “men” or “men – portraits”.
3. I am not aware of their distribution performance over the past year.
4. These figures have been calculated from distribution data, as of December 1985, provided by the Film Board. The random sample was matched to Studio D productions in terms of running time (length) and date of release.