by Dot Tuer

The last days of July in Toronto are a sweating climax of a two-week heatwave. Pedestrians loll in the streets, manic drivers languish in traffic jams. On the usually chic Bloor Street, the scabrous edges of humanity are perspiring through the crowd’s expensive veneers. And in Yorkville, once the sprawling chaos of hippie idealism and now home to a number of exclusive shops and overpriced eateries, the Festival of Festivals staff evidence frenzied expressions as they rush about an overcrowded office.

The 1987 Festival is a little more than a month away, and the thousands of details which anatomize a film festival are being put into place. I arrive in the heat of the day, and in the heat of final programming decisions, to interview Kay Armatage, one of the Festival’s programmers for the contemporary world cinema, documentary, and Canadian perspective sections. Armatage, who has been with the Festival since 1982, is herself a filmmaker, and a professor of cinema at the University of Toronto. Her own film practice, which is experimental in its exploration of feminist and theoretical issues, and her courses at the University of Toronto on avant-garde cinema, contextualize a programming strategy which features films that are innovative in their theoretical, formal, and political orientation. She has also, in her position at the Festival, actively supported and highlighted the burgeoning growth of films by women in the 80s.

Thus it seems fitting that Kay Armatage’s latest film, *Artist On Fire*, which will be shown at this year’s Festival of Festivals, takes as its subject the philosophy and work of Joyce Weiland, a Canadian artist whose feminine and ecological vision was recently featured in a retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Weiland’s passion for cinema, which produced a number of experimental films including *Reason Over Passion* and *Pierre Vallieres* and culminated in her feature film *The Far Shore*, would seem an ideal subject for Armatage’s equally passionate interest in innovative and feminist cinema. However, the mystical and spiritual context in which Weiland frames much of her work (which includes quilting, painting, sculpture, needlework, and cartoons as well as filmmaking) seems antithetical to Armatage’s theoretical grounding in semiotic and political film analysis.

The resulting film, a lush, fluid document, blurs the cinematic boundaries between Weiland’s films, paintings, and personal surroundings, becoming a visual essay where Weiland and her creativity function as heroic signifiers of the artist’s role in society. Vision oversteps theory, and passion overrides analysis. The film becomes at once an evocation, and a strange displacement of an avant-garde tradition which has sought in recent years to deconstruct the subjective, to proclaim the death of the author, to question the mythology of the individual. And it is these contradictions which seem inherent in the double-edged exchange of the artist as visionary and the artist as theorist/artist which I am interested in exploring through the interview.

So as we sit at an outdoor table on Yorkville Street, accompanied by sirens wailing in the distance, car doors slamming, and humidity rising, I ask Kay Armatage about her strategies as a filmmaker, her impressions of cinematic directions in the 80s. And as our discussion ambles between her work as a filmmaker and her perceptions as a programmer and teacher, it seems that the paradoxes which emerge in *Artist On Fire*, between practice and theory, between poetry and criticism, find a larger context in the conditions and directions of contemporary world cinema.

*Artist On Fire* has worked, but with a strong impression of the artist and her perceptions. I am wondering why you chose this particular figure to represent on film. Was this a collaboration or your own idea?

Kay Armatage: No, it was my own idea. It came out of showing her films in my course on avant-garde cinema. After showing them every year or two, I was struck with how well they stood up, and how inadequately dealt with they were in terms of structural cinema. Although you could see the elements of structural cinema, there was something in her films that made them much more current and much less contained by that historical condition, that movement. I became very excited by them and wrote her a note to say so. And she wrote a note back to ask if I was interested in looking at some old footage she had shot.

We spent a winter together looking at her work, and it was during this time that I was able to get to know her and decide if I could work with her on a film. As an artist she is wonderful. She’s been relatively overlooked. She hasn’t been dealt with by the press very well. And there haven’t been serious analyses of her work for a very long period. I wanted to present the range of her work, not only her films but her work in all other media, and try to sort them in an analysis of her practice. I was not so interested in biography or in a personal portrait, but in creating a context for her work.

*Artist On Fire* is a collaboration with Weiland. She worked with me on the film, but with a strong impression of the artist and her perceptions. I am wondering why you chose this particular figure to represent on film. Was this a collaboration or your own idea?
within the boundaries of the film, a context in which Weiland presents herself, through her work, as a visionary. This is not a particularly popular perspective in current film theory. Did you find this context freeing or complex?

Kay Armatage: It’s definitely complex. In my last film, Storytelling, I started wanting to do a film about narrative and I was interested in performance. So in Storytelling I concocted this idea of doing a film entirely about Joyce Weiland as a woman, by portraying the sustaining narrative through the performance of storytellers. Coming across these storytellers was really interesting to me because so many of them were more or less holy people. They were doing it for very spiritual reasons for me to deal with them was challenging and difficult because I tend to be cynical and not interested in those kinds of issues at all really, except insofar as I consider them more or less retrogressive.

Thus it wasn’t so foreign to me when it came to dealing with Joyce Weiland. At first it was an element of her work that I didn’t get. I thought of her as not a forceful part of her that you can ignore. When dealing with her films I was more concerned with formal issues, but when you put her films relationship to her art and to the context of the range of issues she deals with, the spiritual and the visionary element came out very strongly. And it’s these themes that now seem to me not just in a spiritual sense but in a political sense which I am very interested in.

Cinema Canada: One of your motivations for making this film was to provide women, and particularly women in Canada, with narratives that would speak to them. Do you see this as a sustaining connection to her work, and body through shots that are constructed to feed in and out of her personal vision. What is interesting in this approach is the way her films and work as a woman artist the earth in the woods, the mouth is wiped on a statue which appears on his hand and then he turns the table on expectations. This is a continuing trend in the films you have done in recent years. I think that the theory work that theoretical analysis can be brought to bear on, but she is not reproducing out of that theory. I’m not answering that question very well, am I? I know I have a self-destructive tendency towards answering these kinds of questions.

Cinema Canada: But perhaps that has always been an element of avant-garde cinema. And in regard to this issue of class and gender in avant-garde cinema, in the late ’70s, early ’80s, when film theory really took off, there was a tremendous interest in writing theory, working with it, working out of it, making it an integral part of a film practice. Do you find, over your years at the Festival, that this is a continuing trend in the films that you are programming? Is something else emerging? Is there now a resistance to theory?

Kay Armatage: You can answer that in a number of ways. I think that the theory film as we came to know it was more or less dead. Partly because so few of them were successful and filmmakers became dissatisfied with not reaching the kind of audiences that they desired to reach politically. In the American scene, economics and the pressures of the money system of making movies is actively killing it, rigorously stamping out the possibility of producing a cinematic tradition.

Cinema Canada: So there are less and less independent films coming out of the United States?

Kay Armatage: I read this question as a question about the history of the current avant-garde. In that sense, the filmmakers who have written their own work about the ones who put the words into the mouths of the writers.
Kay Armatage: There are less and less avant-garde independent films. There are lots and lots of small-budget conventional movies who hope to be picked up by the Majors. This year has been quite difficult to find films more independent, and I would try to skim the programming has always been very innovative. You have all important very innovative. You have all quite a few films directed by women being produced? How are women surviving the current economic climate?

Kay Armatage: In certain countries they seem very well established, for example, Germany. I'm showing Doris Dorrie's new film, Paradise, which I am sure will be controversial. It is also a dark film, one that formally spirals out of control, into a descent of madness, murder. There are a number of first features by French women directors, and in Quebec, Mireille Dansereau has made a film based on Marie-Claire Blais's novel Le Sourd dans la ville while Jackie Leving's Eva: Guerrillera takes place in Nicaragua. In English Canada, however, there are very few feature directors. Our support here has been historically dreadful, shameful. Hopefully, this is beginning to change with the Ontario Film Development Corp. who took a risk with Patricia Rozema's I've Heard the Mermaids Singing, a wonderful film. There is also a great deal happening regionally, within the co-op system, particularly in Winnipeg and Halifax.

Kay Armatage: This year, as you know, we are featuring Asian cinema, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines. But Japan is not included in this program of work. There is a tremendous amount of filmmaking emerging from Japan, and very innovative cinema as well. Japanese cinema is in a period of explosive growth, a renaissance. I think in years to come we will be looking to Japan, to the East, for formal exploration, and of course, to the Third World. These areas are very exciting, and offer tremendous potential for the future of cinema.
Canadian Feature Film Index

1913-1985

D.J. Turner
Moving Image and Sound Archives Division

The index gives credits for 1222 Canadian feature films.
Films arranged in chronological order by shooting date, with complete archives holdings and seven indexes as follows:
• Alphabetical list of titles, alternate titles and working titles
• Alphabetical index of names of all persons mentioned in main entry with titles of their films and their function on each film
• Alphabetical list of titles produced each year
• Alphabetical list of production companies with their films
• Alphabetical list of all films in which CFDC/Telefilm has invested
• Alphabetical list of all films in which Institut Québécois du Cinéma /Société Générale du Cinéma has invested
• Alphabetical index of official & unofficial coproductions

Available in Canada through authorized bookstores or by mail from:
Canadian Government Publishing Centre
Supply and Services Canada
Ottawa Canada K1A 0S9
Catalogue No. SA2-163/1987
Canada: $25
Other Countries: $30

Catalogue No. 1987-2-163/1987

Canada
Canada

October 1987 - Cinema Canada/33