Our Marilyn

Brenda Longfellow's

A woman swims across Lake Ontario in the dark in 1952. All we see of her are her arms and head moving in and out of frame. The image has been treated, drained of all colour and detail, a Rorschach pattern of black becoming white becoming black. The swim continues in a monotonous rhythm—struggle, setback, struggle—endurance. The image never seems to change much either—a continuous disturbance of ragged white on a dark field—but it holds a strange fascination. Somehow it is weirdly beautiful, seductive to watch.

This is the core of Brenda Longfellow's Our Marilyn, a woman, a lake and an optical printer. From these three elements you can make magic, something the film does effortlessly. This is a film whose images and sounds have a hypnotic sensuality, working with the emotional force of a chant, insinuating itself into the regions you can't reach by sense alone.

This all may seem somewhat strange for a film that is on one level so cerebral. The context for the film's sensuality is rigorously theoretical, but the body of the film exceeds theory, if by theory we mean the sort of discourse that walks around a thing countless times before deciding it must first interrogate what it means to walk.

E existing happily in the chasm between Fine Art and television, video artists of the past few years have accomplished what would have been impossible within either institution: they have championed the decodification of art, explored social issues which had little popular support, and restructured narrative formats and refined, the 'story' in its relation to entertainment.

Operating in the chasm, however, has meant forgoing the economic validation associated with sundry production industries. In 1977 a well-established video artist, completing a tape which took 12 months to make and cost $5,000, could reasonably expect $50 to exhibit it in a gallery or festival. In 1987 the fee is exactly the same but the tape probably cost $20,000-30,000 to make. A much-sought-after museum artist might net the artist $500 or $600. Not surprisingly, worth and economic value are seldom discussed in the same breath by video artists.

However, it is clear that, in their effort to garner support for their art form, video artists must speak, at least partially, in the lingua franca of our society: dollar-value. Realizing this, artists have gallantly rebuffed the broadcasters' offers over the years to show video art for grossly less than standard television fees, realizing that they would be forfeiting any claims to a reasonable rate of pay later on.

At the same time however, the artists have spent precious little effort concerning themselves with other venues of validation. Hence the 10-year price freeze on the absurdly low rental fees. A survey of several price-setters reveals a variety of attempts to improve this condition.

Vtape's existing rental structure is: Single Screening—0-30 minutes—$50; 30-90 minutes—$75. Library Screening: 0-30 minutes—$100; 30-90 minutes—$150. (Library usually means one public showing followed by screenings on request, for a period of one or two weeks.) These basic rates were established 10 years ago and have been commonly adopted by many distributors, exhibitors and artists.

Now, in consensus with the film and video caucus of the ANNPAC (Association of National Non-Profit Artists' Centres) Vtape is planning to institute a new fee schedule: Single: 1-15 min. — $50; 15-30 min. — $75; 30-90 min. — $100. Library: 1-15 min. — $100; 15-30 min. — $150; 30-90 min. — $200. Vtape recommends that institutions pay at least $400 for a purchase, but leaves the actual price-setting to the artist.

CARFAC (Canadian Artists Representation) has established a Recommended Minimum Exhibition Fee Schedule for visual artists exhibiting in public and artist-run galleries. This schedule does not presently include film and video, but CARFAC intends to develop a film and video policy as soon as it can.

The Centre for Art Tapes in Halifax has hit upon an uncommon but obvious fee structure for its audio and video exhibitions: for a three-week show, whether it is an installation or a Library Screening, they pay $1,000, a rate slightly in excess of CARFAC's recommended fee for visual artists. The healthy respect this implies for the work of video artists may be spreading: YVZ, one of Toronto's most conscientious artist outlets, has recently included film and video in its ongoing exhibition program and has also adopted a fee structure close to CARFAC's recommendations for visual artists.

Given these last two recent developments, it seems ironic that Vtape is increasing its fee schedule as little as it is, and that CARFAC does not actually have a recommended fee schedule for video. Perhaps if video-makers wish to be considered seriously as artists, they should initiate exhibition and fee structures which are on a par with artists working in other media. For it is clear that if artists, their representatives, and artist-run centres do not start to accord their own work more value, our cultural institutions (museums, broadcasters, funders) certainly never will.

Geoffrey Shea •


WEARY, BUT STILL FULL OF FIGHT, MARILYN PLOWS ON

Brenda Longfellow's Our Marilyn

Cameron Bailey •

Video Tales

by Geoffrey Shea

The effect of this narrative is direct, complicit. It isn't careful like theory is; it grabs you by your critical distance and makes you need to follow it to the end. There can never be a simple opposition between theory and practice, but the practice in Our Marilyn, the actual re-telling of the story stands out disturbingly from its context; too often this narrative seems to be the real film trying to get out of the way. Our Marilyn wants to be. It might be a lesser film, but it might also be more intense.

The power of the story is strange because you know how it ends, you know what is going to happen. But it still draws you in. There are those wonderful, abstracted images, a powerful soundtrack—the water, the narrator's rhythmic voice that follows the chronology of the swim.

Our Marilyn is a personal document, a blend of theory, formal experimentation, and historical reconstruction. But it's more than that; it's a confessional written from one body to another.

Cameron Bailey •

Our Marilyn

Brenda Longfellow

Our Marilyn

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