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On (Experimental) Film

BARBARA STERNBERG

Congratulations to Brenda Longfellow whose film *Our Marilyn* (col. snd. 16mm 24 min.) shared top prize at this year's prestigious Oberhausen Short Film Festival. She shares the International Jury Award with a Soviet film. *Our Marilyn* was pre-selected for submission to the festival by the Goethe Institut's Doina Popescu and once there was selected for competition, as was Gary Popovich's film *Immoral Memories*. Brenda was at the festival, (although she had left before the awards were announced!) and noted that this year a large section of the programme was from Eastern European countries; that films tended to have a strong political slant, reflecting, perhaps, the involvement in the festival of the trade unions.

Our Marilyn refers to Canadian Marilyn Bell and the film contrasts her public persona with that of the American Marilyn - Monroe. The viewer is presented with stock newsreel footage of both Marylins while a voice-over personalizes the place these two imagings had/have in a growing girl's experience/memory.

Brenda explained that she had started out interested in the way women's bodies have been mythologized and the national differences in this mythmaking between Canada and the U.S. At first, Brenda had approached the swim from an ironic perspective on the typical nationalistic hurra-for-us treatment of the press. But as she researched the topic, she turned towards wanting to recreate the swim. The extant media footage and newspaper photos reflect the way the swim was represented in history: they document only the beginning and the end of the swim (CBC didn't cover it at all until well towards the end) - Brenda concentrates on the middle. By optically printing certain phrases of the existing footage, repeating it, slowing it down, Brenda creates a sense of the swim - hours upon hours, the endurance, the hallucinatory states, the breathing, the water, water, breath... In this long middle section of the film Brenda feels she went beyond the theoretical premise of the film. Which is as well, she realized, as our bodies are beyond theory and mythology; in their movement, power, struggle there is resistance to the containment of mythologizing.

● Philip Hoffman was invited for the second year in a row to the Salso (Italy) Film and Television Festival, this year to screen his new film *Passing Through/Torn Formations*. Phil reports that although this is not a huge festival - one can actually see all the films screened - and although the competition is only amongst feature films, they always programme some experimental work. This year there was a Godard retrospective and, in past years they've invited Syberberg amongst others. The largest audience turnout is for the mainstream feature films, yet, Philip feels, a lot is gained from the networking that takes place. Phil is planning to put together a package of Canadian films to be screened, hopefully on film, during next year's festival.

● Hey! I think we have a 'school' in film happening right here - the "escarpment group" as they're being called - Rick Hancox, Richard Kerr, and now Philip Hoffman, all teachers at Oakville's Sheridan College, have created a recognizable style of experimental filmmaking. Mike Hoolboom, experimental film officer at Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre, instituted a prize to be awarded from the Centre for the best Sheridan student experimental film. Mike and I juried this first year. Best experimental film was awarded to Hugh Bissett's film *Mantra*, an ambitious 15-minute film, complex, sensitive, well-structured and orchestrated - and showing definite signs of the Hancox/Kerr sharp blue, blue skies, the gently panning camera caressing landscape, the Kerr/Hoffman on-the-road-autobiographical motif, and the Hoffmanesque introspective voice-over! Overall the quality of all the films, technically and thematically, was exceptional - such that we added four smaller prizes awarded to Tim Rivers, Lisa Miles, Stephen Butson and Shelley Morrow. It was obvious that there was something at stake in the films' making - something personal - that took these films beyond student assignments. We can take heart in the future of experimental filmmaking. We can take art into the future by experimental filmmaking.

● An update on the state of experimental film (and film in general) at the major public galleries: Meetings of the film committee at the Art Gallery of Ontario continue with the result, thus far, of the creation of a Film Department headed and staffed by Cathy Jonasson and Norma Elms. Policy and funding for this department are still in the talking stage.

The National Gallery of Canada opened its new building with a gala event which includes screenings of recently acquired videotapes - five regional programmes (39 videos) which are screened daily in the gallery through the end of June. Films, on the other hand, rented for one screening each, will be shown Sunday and Monday evenings in a programme of new works by independent Canadian filmmakers, *Emerging Images*. And this after filmmakers such as Michael Snow, David Rimmer, Joyce Wieland, Blaine Allen, Lorne Marin, Peter Dudar, Peter Lipskis, Mike Hoolboom, Chris Gallagher, Annette Mangaard, Gary Popovich, Steve Sanguadolce, myself and groups such as the Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers, Atlantic Filmmakers Coop, and the Film and Video Alliance all wrote letters protesting the inexplicable exclusion of film acquisitions from the mandate of the film and video officer. What now?!

● Who said that summer is down time for experimental screens? May/June/July/August sees the light flickering at the National Gallery (see above), at Pitt International Gallery in Vancouver, in Toronto with the *Northern Visions Festival* and at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The *Summer Screen* series at Pitt International, Sunday evenings, June through August, is being organized, gratis, by Peter Lipskis and he hopes that the gate will cover the rentals/artist fees. The programme will include films by Larry Kardish, James Benning, Carl Brown, Betty Ferguson and Ed Emshwiller.