on (Experimental) Film

Barbara Sternberg

Congratulations to Brenda Longellow whose film Our Marilyn (col. and d.) 16mm, 24 min.) staked out 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 Institute’s Diina 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 Marilyns while a voice-over personalizes the place these two images 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 film from an ironic perspective on the typical nationalistic hurry-for-us treatment of the press. But as she researched the topic, she turned towards wanting to recreate the myth. The extant media footage and newspaper photos reflect the way the film was represented in history: they document only the beginning and the end of the film (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 breaking, the water, water, water... In this long middle section of the film Brenda feels she went beyond the theoretical premise of the film. Which is as well, she feels, as our bodies are beyond theory and mythology: in their movement, power, struggle there is resistance to the containment of mythologizing.

• Philip Hofman was invited for the second year in a row to the Salo (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 program some experimental work. This year there was a Godard retrospective and, in past years they’ve invited Syberberg amongst others. The largest audience turn-out 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 Hancock, Richard Kerr, and now Philip Hofman. All teachers at Oakville’s Sheridan College, have created a recognizable style of experimental filmmaking. Mike Holdboem, 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 Montre, an ambitious 15-minute film, complex, sensitive, well-structured and orchestrated—showing definite signs of the Hancock/Kerr sharp blue, blue skies, the gently panning camera caressing landscape, the Kerr/Hofman on-the-road-autobiographical motif, and the Hofman-esque 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 Bulson 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 heart 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 and staffed by Cathy Jonassen 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 videocassettes—five regional programmes (9 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 Attew, Lorne Main, Peter Dudas, Peter Lipski, Mike Holdboem, Chris Gallagher, Annette Mangan, Gary Popovich, Steve Vanguard, 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 festivals? 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 Images 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 Lipski and he hopes that the gate will cover the rentals/artists fees. The programme will include films by Larry Kardish, James Benning, Carl Brown, Betty Ferguson and Ed Emshwiller.