

Locked out of the women's room

Montreal International Festival of Women's Films and Videos

BY JOSÉ ARROYO & JAMIE GAETZ



The idea of women's film festivals grew out of the need to create a room of one's own, an alternative space to that taken by the mainstream cinema, to the boys' cinema. Women's film festivals in the '70s were not only indicative of women's increasing economic independence but of a release from ideological shackles. The festivals were places to exchange ideas, forge ties, and, perhaps most importantly, to build an audience for women's films. Even when they were not proclaimed as such, these festivals were feminist. So we must question *why* the recent International Festival of Women's Films and Videos in Montreal felt a need to state repeatedly that it was *not* feminist.

Are these disclaimers just an awkward attempt to change the festival's image or does it indicate a change in ideology? What has happened to the marginal, the radical, and the different? Have they merely been soft-pedalled, or have they been locked out of the women's room? Whatever the reason for the festival's renunciation of feminism, it was a needless affront to many women and only served to alienate them.

The Quebec women's film festival (Festival des Filles de vue de Québec) no longer exists. Moreover, Cinemama has merged with Silence, Elles tournament to create the present festival. Thus, it bears the heavy burden of having to cater to a broad and varied audience. The aim of this year's program was to please everyone, in the "something for everyone" mode. There was a selection of new features and shorts, a tribute to the Creteil festival, a mini-retrospective of Frances Marion's work, and a wide selection of videos.

The last autonomous Cinemama took place in November 1986. It developed as an alternative to the traditional style of festival and was organized around formalized discussions of the

films presented, often in the presence of the filmmakers. This was one way of bringing women together to discuss what they had seen—a form of consciousness-raising within the context of a film festival.

The Cinemama component this year consisted of two days (Saturday and Sunday) of panel discussions and conferences. Saturday was a roundtable discussion devoted to "The Role of Women Artists" and a presentation of *Women With a Past*, a video by American Lyn Blumenthal. On Sunday there was a special presentation of the fascinating collection of videos titled "From the Museum of Memory" by Madelon Hooykas and Elsa Stansfield, a team now working out of Holland. Both women were present and led a discussion, accompanied by slides, about the development and concept of their videos, and how they basically evolved out of their installation art.

Paying homage to screenwriter Frances Marion was a wonderful idea. Unfortunately, there were problems in obtaining many of her films, so the festival ended up with *Grand Hotel*, *Dinner at Eight*, *Camille*, and *Min and Bill*. The first three are acknowledged Hollywood classics and were no great coup. They often show up on television and the rep circuit and are staples of Intro-to-film courses. The festival managed to get some superb prints but overall the retrospective was poorly publicized and awkwardly scheduled. The public was not told enough about Marion's career, her personal life, or of the tremendous power she held in male-dominated Hollywood. She was influential in establishing and shaping the careers of such stars as Greta Garbo and Marie Dressler. Her role in the history of Hollywood

film is an important one, and the festival could have done Marion greater justice by including these four films in a collective tribute to women screenwriters of the '30s (such as Anita Loos, Zoe Akins, and Salka Viertel) rather than make her a victim of "slim pickings."

Iris by Dutch filmmaker Mady Saks won the Alcan Prize for feature film. It is a formulaic narrative about *Iris*, a veterinarian who leaves the apparent comfort of a city job and relationship to buy a practice in the country. She is an untraditional heroine placed in a traditional filmic setting; a woman who triumphs in the end, without having to "get her man." Its message is obvious (*Iris* ultimately rejects two male lovers and nearly castrates one) and provoked a strong and loud response from the mostly female audience who saw it on closing night of the festival.

But there are serious problems with this film in its jarring reliance upon the conventional "male gaze" kinds of shots that focus our attention on *Iris*'s body. For example, the opening sequence contains shots that direct our attention to her legs, in exactly the same sort of framing used in "men's films". As well, the sex scenes are filmed in a completely traditional style with the female body visually dominating—the object of the gaze. *Iris* is an entertaining film that strikes certain deep chords in the feminine psyche, but it is no match for a film like *A Winter Tan*—collectively produced and directed by Jackie Burroughs, Louise Clark, John Walker, Aerlyn Weissman and John Frizzell. It is bewildering why *Iris* won the prize over *A Winter Tan* which is painful, disturbing, and thought-provoking as well as beautifully acted, photographed and edited.

No matter what their focus, most festivals (except in Quebec, it seems) usually highlight indigenous work. Several years ago there were protests against Montreal's World Film Festival because it had not programmed many films from Quebec. The Women's Festival is open to the same criticism this year. *A Winter Tan*, *Eva Guerrillera*, and *Chronique d'un Temps Flou* are all interesting films, but at the same time, some of Quebec's and Canada's most celebrated filmmakers released films this year that were not included. Why not? Ann Wheeler, Alanis Obomsawin, Sophie Bissonnette, Mireille Dansereau, and Micheline Lanctôt were conspicuous by their absence.

If Canadian and Québécois productions were suspiciously lacking in number, so were works from the Third World, or even from Southern Europe. The tribute to the Creteil festival, celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, was also a great idea. It seems that only one film in this category however, *Kacik Dusmani* (*La Chambre de mariage*) from Turkey, was given a prize at Creteil. Yet the most logical way to pay tribute to the festival at Creteil would have been to select the prizewinning or the most popular films; the choices in this category are mostly inexplicable.

Video remains a problematic medium, for those who work with it as much as for those who sat through the two-hour video programs at the Goethe Institute. However, this section of the festival provided perhaps the broadest spectrum of themes and issues, some of the most challenging and demanding work, and certainly the largest number of experimental works. In total 64 videos were shown, 12 of those from the Hooykas/Stansfield retrospective. There were 10 Canadian and six Québécois videos included. Some of the most interesting, and memorable of these are *Scars* by Lorna Boschman, a documentary using voice-over of four women who talk about "slashing" themselves as a form of emotional release; *Gerçure* by Jeanne Crépeau, a humorous study about the hazards of Montreal winter slush and cold; *Des Squatt heureuses* (*The Happy Squatters*) by Eve Lamont,

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Myreille Audet, and Diane Daoust about women squatters in Europe; and *The Measure of Success* by Cherie Moses and Coleen Finlayson which makes a strong statement by simply having a woman in silhouette respond to the statements of a man in voice-over.

The video that won the Public's Prize was Catherine Russo's *Enough Crying of Tears* from the U. S. It is a powerful documentary about the CoMadres (Committee of Mothers of the Disappeared) and their fight for justice and peace in El Salvador and contains some heart breaking and unforgettable interviews with women compelled to confrontation and action in the most violent and desperate of circumstances.

Of the experimental films included at the Festival, some of the most interesting were Canadian. In fact, *Our Marilyn* by Brenda Longfellow was the public's choice for best short film. It is a provocative, visually compelling film that examines the differences between Canadian and American culture through two cultural icons - Marilyn Bell, the 17-year-old Canadian who swam Lake Ontario (*our Marilyn*), and Marilyn Monroe (*their Marilyn*).

For a festival trying to widen its audience there was a perplexing lack of "star attractions" this year. Granted, Anne-Marie Mieville was scheduled to attend with several of her films, but had to cancel at the last minute. Suzanne Schiffman, who worked with François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette, was present with her first feature *Le Moine et la sorcière*. The screenings of Schiffman's film were among the best attended at the festival; people were turned away in droves. An event of this kind establishes its reputation, and its audience (if it is going for a mainstream, popular audience) through the "stars" it has in attendance because they get the press attention. If the Festival continues aiming for larger, more mainstream audiences, this is obviously the best way of bringing them in.

The existence of such films as *Iris* and *Le Moine et la sorcière*, conventional narratives with the difference of being informed by feminist



Alcan Prize-winner *Iris*, by Dutch filmmaker Mady Saks, operates on conventional levels



While Jackie Burroughs et al's innovative *A Winter Tan* was kept out of the spotlight

ideology, is significant. Maybe we can read the existence of these films made purely to entertain as signs of the firm establishment of a consciousness, of a women's culture. A parallel may be drawn with the Canadian culture which has struggled for so long to permit space for films and television meant just for fun. For women, they represent an important step but simultaneously pose another question about what happens when women work within the confines of the mainstream narrative which, for the most part, has been developed by men. One of the most prevalent comments overheard at the Festival was about the difficulty in determining that these were women's films, they could have been done by men.

Ultimately, it was these films that personified the 1988 festival; *Iris* as the public's choice feature, and *Le Moine et la sorcière* as the biggest crowd attraction. But there has been a lot of disappointment and discontent expressed about this year's festival, and it is probably due to the prevalence of films like these. The Festival's program was large and varied in the sense of what the films and videos deal with, but ultimately all the themes, issues, and ideas were handled in much the same way. There was an uncomfortable homogeneity to the program in the countries and cultures it represented.

The Montreal Women's Film and Video Festival is a most important one, and with its absorption of Cinemama and the demise of the Quebec festival its role has become paramount. If it is unable to, or chooses not to, bring in people like Margarethe von Trotta, Helke Sander, and Marta Meczarus who will attract the large crowds, at the same time as it eliminates the challenging, independent, less accessible films and ignores indigenous productions, the question must be asked: What is it going to program? What was an attempt to please everyone this year seems to have resulted in pleasing no one. The women's room now has a solid foundation, and its dimensions are growing, but sadly, at this festival it was painted all one colour. ●

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