

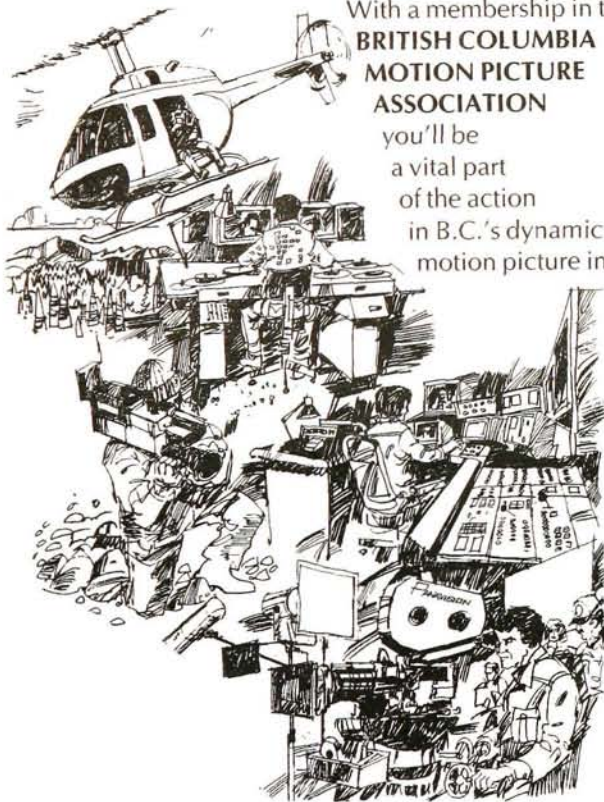
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On (Experimental) Film

MIKE HOOLBOOM

Anna Gronau's first film in five years, *Mary Mary* (60 min, col. 1989) opened March 7 at the Music Gallery in Toronto to an enthusiastic reception. It is the story of 'M', a filmmaker-recluse whose withdrawal begins a complex weave of dream diary, recorded conversation, titles, and tableau that takes as their central conceit the act of self-representation. *Mary Mary* is a psychodrama writ large, a film obsessively self-absorbed even as it unfolds the luxuriant vision of a mind at play, replete with swimming polar bears, whiteouts, flash-frame polaroids, and two long-gowned sisters demurely stepping into the heat of a summer afternoon 50 years before.

The film opens with a long and elegant tracking shot that leads us to the site of M's retreat, the film's literal and figurative home. This passage is twice refrained, first closing M's long drive outside (just one of four scenes set outside the house) and sounding from a TV set where M sits apparently reviewing the film's beginning. This reflexive loop joining the film's dark midsection with its opening threatens to enclose its protagonist in an Escher-like labyrinth of mirrored mirrors.

Much of *Mary Mary* moves between its implicit narrative codes and their eventual betrayal. Cutting from a dreamer to a dream sequence, we learn that this is not her dream but another's. The pictured house is not the one described in voice-over: a dialogue between two people carries only the voice of the protagonist sounding from both mouths (although both seem to speak in sync). All this points to the failure of narrative to account for our lives, that the way of our expression, our gestures of work, and love exceed any simply linear compact bent on resolution. Our mouth is not a story pining for conclusion but the alternating vent and receptacle of difference.

Four sets of 13 titles appear, enumerating in succession a polyphony of influences that move from children's books to native Indian calls for self-government. The wellspring for this intertextual weave is *The Secret Garden*, an English fairytale about Mary, an orphaned child who uncovers the family's secret cripple, teaches him to walk, and turns the key to the secret garden that was lost when the mother died. This story, in turn, finds its antecedents in tales like *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. Finally there are a succession of native Indian myths surrounding the Bear Mother. Tracing *The Secret Garden* back to its ritual antecedents in which women and beasts married before the beast's slaughter, Gronau spins a delicate web of allusion that quietly permeates the film. In her first scene, M is shown asleep, finally awakening not with a kiss but the ring of a telephone. If M's bed occupies as much screentime as M herself then this film, like the sleeping beauty in the story of the same name, occupies the place between sleeping and awake. The following scene outlines the classic doppelganger of the psychodrama. M wakes only to speak with her double while great floating polar bears swim alongside.

M: "If that there King was to wake," added Tweedledum, "you'd go out - bang! - just like a candle."

"I shouldn't!" Alice exclaimed indignantly. "Besides, if I'm only a sort of thing in his dream, what are you I should like to know?"

M: "Ditto," said Tweedledum.

"Ditto, Ditto," cried Tweedledee.

M's fragmented blend of identities coalesces here in the figure of Gronau herself ('A'), who waits opposite as the fictional and fictionalizing filmmakers stand mouth to mouth in a screaming wonderland that speaks of the horrors of dissolution. Between the joining of "A" and "M" ("am" or being) lies the great tank of amniotic fluid that holds its white bear in suspension. The rebirth (or bearing) M conceives for herself after her long sleep is inextricably linked with this archaic remnant, just as her house has been built on lands deserted by the Indians. Gronau suggests that the process of individuation is finally a political one - that we continue to live between the lines of a history that alternately obscures and illuminates - and that these traces of erasure must be resuscitated if our own lives are to have any meaning.

Each scene seems contingent here, isolated glimpses of a whole that remains tantalizing and elusive. Gronau's dangling of the veil issues only fragments: telephone messages from unnamed callers, disjointed dream memories, snapshots, tearing pages out of books in an intertextual frenzy, walks without destination and memories whose purpose is never to attach names and places but to energize new relationships. As M recites in voice-over: "Her life had become these moments."

M's solitary musings picture a body of parts recast in the light of representation. Early in the film, wrapped in a fold of silken sheets, she passes a hand mirror over herself, looking on as if she were another. Later she snaps self-portrait Polaroids - as we watch them develop, we realize she is privy only to her reflection, her image, or at best, her abilities to manipulate the means of reproduction. That the film's title is already doubled, underscores Gronau's project: to depict the development of reproduction in M's movement from inside to out, from the secret gardens within only she can till, to the wind-swept exteriors that demand a native's redress, from the house of her grandmother to the political struggle outside the looking glass.