Surfacing: Canadian Women's Cinema

Festival of Festivals surveys 70 years of herstory

BY KASS BANNING

Since Nell Shipman, writer and star of Back to God's Country, fled across the snow-blinding Canadian landscape back in 1919; since Jane Marsh's Women are Warriors called the house-bound Canadian woman to (industrial) arms; since Beryl Fox took her television crews into those dark psychic and physical places of the sixties in Summer in Mississippi and The Mills of the Gods: Vietnam; since Joyce Wieland made Water Sark and Rat Life and Diet in North America on her kitchen table, Canadian women have been making movies.

Toronto's Festival of Festivals showcases this contribution to our national cinema with its retrospective Surfacing: Canadian Women's Cinema. This is the first sizeable survey devoted entirely to Canadian women's films.

This year, veteran Festival of Festivals programmer Kay Armatage hit the archives, looking to the past, complementing her usual activity of scooping the best of women's emerging international cinema. Armatage claimed she was faced by some tough decisions; narrowing the field to 21 program slots would mean omissions. After screening the films, her original goal—the familiar Canadian one of fair representation—gradually gave way to the quality factor. According to Armatage, "sheer quality" guided her programme choices: the films stand up as simply good films, without qualification, gender or otherwise. After screening most of the selections, I would, (for the most part) agree. Given women's belaboured cultural history—the struggle for validation, within cinema or any other field, and the battle against the erroneous notion that selectivity is a neutral concept—the "weight" of such substantiating statements should not be

Kass Banning is a Toronto freelance writer, critic and film lecturer.
disregarded. “Good” or “quality” is not a natural category, but a constructed one. Feminist critics (among others) have addressed the processes whereby certain sorts of objects are privileged and others disappear from sight, and how relations of power are constituted through claims of quality. And “good” always constitutes relative value, standards that are reestablished and inherited by the dominant—until very recently, a constituency of white males.

The Women’s or Feminist film festival is by now a very familiar animal. Existant festivals, Montreal’s annual Women and Film Festival, and Vancouver’s upcoming “Invisible Colours: International Women of Colour and Third World Women Film and Video Symposium” (Nov. 15-19) offer immediate examples. These festivals generally feature new International work. At Canada’s first women’s film festival, the Toronto Women’s (1897-1973) International Film Festival, which took place in Toronto in 1973, Armatage (with a handful of other women) doubled as an organizer and programmer. From this festival’s catalogue it is obvious that Canadian women’s films made up until 1973 could hardly warrant their own festival. Things have indeed changed.

CANADIAN WOMEN AUTEURS

Surprisingly, Surprising seems to arise from the redefinition, imitative and celebratory nature of women’s film festivals, but it also differs. Representations, by nature, foster a historical logic: re-evaluation and a concern to represent seminal developments, rather than celebration, usually guides selection. With Women’s film festivals, but it also differs. Sandy Wilson’s My American Cousin, a drama of the defiant, but ennui-ridden life of a small-town teenage girl, picks up from material in the director’s 1977 documentary Growing Up At Paradise. Here Wilson uncovers both her own family’s mythology and postwar family life by reassembling family footage shot by her father. (My American Cousin’s sequel, American Boyfriends, again promises to be rich in allegorical theses on Canadian and American relations.)

In Paule Baillargeon’s 1979 short, Anastasie, Od Ma Chérie, cinematic space and language take on specifically gendered characteristics while the main action comprises a role reversal. Instead of de-robing the female character (a female Pee Wee Herman), the intruding male characters transform her, dress and make her up into a proper woman—“the beauty ideal.” The differentiation of language and space along gender roles is pushed to its limit in Baillargeon’s and Frédérique Collin’s engaging and original 1979 feature La Cuisine Sauvage.

Rozema is the female representative of the eighties-style imitation into commercial feature filmmaking; unlike her Seventies English Canadian sister, Rozema did not cut her teeth making documentaries. Her “calling card” short, Passions: A Letter in 16mm (1985) was substantial enough to allow her to make her debut feature I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing (1987). The extended direct address to camera, the core of the earlier film, expands to the latter’s off-screen fantasies of the central character.

The aesthetic component of the programme is not limited to the royal advancement to feature filmmaking: documentary and experimental work by seasoned filmmakers is set against later works. The successful mix of interviews, cinéma vérité and just plain good judgment calls when shooting “outsiders” evident in Janis Cole and Holly Dale’s Minimum Charge No Cover is further realized in Pow! Prison For Women. The output of this team is consistently impressive; in addition to honing a unique style that owes much to revelry (their close relationship with their subjects infuses the films with an immediacy which manages to avoid the pitfalls of the technique) their films (and subject matter) are often rough and raw, but rarely voyeuristic. The combination of the political—a critique of a social element—with the personal—mostly women’s lives—offers engaging documents that always surpass the limitations of the portrait film. Joyce Wieland’s range is represented in the short experimental film Water Skirt (1966) and the 1969 feature epic Reason Over Passion. In the earlier work the camera explores her own body and quotidian objects through a prism; in Reason Over Passion the kitchen table is supplanted by the grandeur of the landscape. Wieland’s body (behind the camera) overlays the topology of Canada itself—sea to shining sea.
At the same time, women's production ran parallel (and still does) to the formative influences experienced by their male counterparts: similar social and economic determinants affected the production of films. Yet the gaps in women's production over the decades repeat a pattern. After Nell Shipman's pioneering presence in the 1920s (1912), for example, a hiatus ensued that was not broken until the state formed the NFB in 1939.

Enter Evelyn Spiers (Cherry by Their Own Strength, 1940), Jane Marsh (Women Are Warriors, 1942), Gudrun Bjerring-Parker (Listens to the Patience, 1945) and Margaret Perry (Grand Manan, 1943 and Glossop Country, 1961). In spite of the obvious self-interest (Grierson needed extra hands for the war effort) the NFB, kickstarted English Canadian women's film production, establishing Canadian women's strong ties to the documentary. They joined the chorus of "interpreting Canada to Canadians" by making films about regional life and the war effort. There were casualties; John Grierson's hand could match the tyranny of any Hollywood mogul. Jane Marsh's final cut of Canada Carries On, 1941, Jane Marsh's final cut of Canada Carries On, 1941, was a case in point. The NFB's hiatus was brought to a close with the formation of Studio D in March of 1987.

Festivals

UNTIL THE RECENT AND GROWING EMERGENCE OF WOMEN FILMMAKERS INTO THE MAINSTREAM OF COMMERCIAL NARRATIVE PRODUCTION, ENGLISH CANADIAN FILMMAKING HAD BEEN POLARIZED BETWEEN A DOMINANT DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE ON THE ONE HAND AND A TRADITION OF FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE CINEMA ON THE OTHER. THE IMPORTANCE AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE DOCUMENTARY TRADITION OF WOMEN'S FILMMAKING IN CANADA CANNOT BE UNDERESTIMATED.

The women of the NFB's studio D, in March of 1987.

Such variegated cultural products cannot be accessed collectively, as independent commercial backing and the various funding bodies, such as Telefilm, the National Film Board, and the arts councils have their own guidelines and agendas for production. Their financial support and access to production facilities and facilities cannot be underestimated. Tanja Bâllantyne's The Things I Cannot Change (1967), for example, made for NFB's Challenge for Change series, remains a doubly problematic and difficult. Such variegated cultural products cannot be assessed collectively, as independent commercial backing and the various funding bodies, such as Telefilm, the National Film Board, and the arts councils have their own guidelines and agendas for production.

The recent and growing emergence of women filmmakers into the mainstream of commercial narrative production, English Canadian filmmaking had been polarized between a dominant documentary practice on the one hand and a tradition of feminist avant-garde cinema on the other. The importance and accomplishments of the documentary tradition of women's filmmaking in Canada cannot be underestimated. Tanja Bîllantyne's The Things I Cannot Change (1967), for example, made for NFB's Challenge for Change series, remains a doubly problematic and
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for, a history lesson in action, and James
Chaney’s mother’s comments “if it hadn’t been
for the other (white) boys nothing would have
happened” still ring true.

Mills of the Gods: Vietnam is both a unique
document and an example of one of the sixties’
favourite documentary techniques (especially at
Studio B): irony. As Petula Clark belts out
“Downtown” we see familiar icons turned into
chicely; a montage of flashing signs that are mere
simulations of romance (generally officers and
prostitutes). Mills offers an impressionistic view
of the war in Vietnam and its effects on the
peasants which includes interviews with
peasants, student pacificists and men in the field.
Fox accompanied the U.S. Marines on jungle
patrols and even witnessed an air strike
firsthand, with a pilot whose enthusiasm for
“hits” nearly matches that of Robert (“I love the
smell of napalm”) Devall in Apocalypse Now, or
Slim Pickens’ orgasmic determination in Dr.
Strangelove.

Studio D was founded in 1974 by Kathleen
Shannon (director of Would I Ever Like to Work,
1974) to provide a forum for women filmmakers
to bring a woman’s perspective to film.
Although many Studio D films have gained
notoriety, Not a Love Story and Behold the Veil
have two, severe criticisms have been levied at
Studio D (and the NFB in general) for their
closed-door policy towards independents. It
was viewed (by many) that a state’s “stable
approach” to filmmaking did not encourage
films that were formally innovative, but works
that merely presented issues in a longwinded
fashion. Wide shooting ratios do encourage
the tendency to cover all of the bases. The broad
sweep of Gail Singer’s Abortion Stories From
North and South (1984), despite its strengths,
could not be considered as part of the Studio D
trend.) With the implementation of Studio D’s
proposal to disband its stable, more assistance to
women independents (through workshops and the
PAIPS programme), outreach programmes for
immigrant women and women of colour, looks
as if Studio D has become more accountable to
women filmmakers throughout the country.

IN THE AFTERMATH OF STUDIO D
Yet many of the films Studio D produced in the
seventies nurtured the independent filmmakers
that would follow. These works are also
touchstones for the women’s movement and
continue to benefit and educate Canadian
women. A variety of documentary forms were
honed at the studio. Nicole Brossard, Louise
Guilbeault and Margaret Westcott combined
newsreel footage with interviews with key
American feminists (Betty Friedan and Kate
Miller) in Some American Feminists (1977) that
mixed became a standard form. Gail Singer’s
Portrait of An Artist As An Old Lady (1982), about
Panaskeva Clark, is a prototype portrait film, a
form arising out of a feminist revisionary
imperative of documenting the lives of
outstanding women. Anne Wheeler’s Augusta
shares some of these features.

Kay Armatage’s independent documentary,
Artist on Fire: The Art of Joyce Wieland (1987) is
only superficially a straightforward portrait
film. Armatage invents a new kind of art
historical document with Artist on Fire. Mixing
footage from Wieland’s art and films, Armatage
weaves Wieland’s tests into her own context.
Associational editing matches original to
text: the historical figure Wieland quotes her
own work in the film by narrating part of it; she
duplicates scenes from The Far Shore and Aard B
in Ontario. Armatage also matches her style–
fluid, vivid, sensitive – to Wieland’s. She
takes Wieland out of the art-historical modernist
considerations, and places the works within
Wieland’s personal concerns. Interviews with
Sheila McCarthy as the lovable loser, Polly Vandersma, in Patricia Rozema’s I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing.

JENNIFER HODGE’S HOME FEELING; STRUGGLE FOR A COMMUNITY (1983)
TRACES THE EFFECTS OF POLICING
(THE CAMERA LITERALLY TRACKS THE
POLICE OFFICERS’ BEAT) ON A
TARGETED COMMUNITY, TORONTO’S
JANE FINCH “CORRIDOR”, A
COMMUNITY WITH A LARGE BLACK
POPULATION... THE FILM ALSO
CHILLINGLY ANTICIPATES THE
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RECENT KILLINGS OF A BLACK YOUTH
BY TORONTO POLICE.

Obomsawin and the late Jennifer Hodge are
part of the racial group they deal with; formal
innovation takes second place to engagement
and expression – the need to tell their own
stories. Obomsawin (singer, songrrtiter and
filmmaker) started making films for the NFB in
1967. Richard Cardinal: Cry From The Diary of a
Métis Child (1986) portrays a symptomatic
wasted life; Incident at Restigouche (1984)
document the struggle of the Micmac people to
secure fishing rights. Obomsawin pushes the
limits of cinema direct as she passionately
“interviews” (or more correctly badgers) the
Quebec Minister of Fisheries Lucien Lessard.
Jennifer Hodge’s Home Feeling: Struggle for a
Community (1983) traces the effects of policing
( filmed literally tracks the police officers’
beat) on a targeted community, Toronto’s Jane
Finch “Corridor”, a community with a large
black population. Despite the odds, social,
economic, etc. the individuals interviewed
emerge as empowered. The film also chillingly
anticipates the events that have led to the recent
killings of a black youth by Toronto police.

FOCUSING ON THE DIFFERENCE
Films by Quebec women differ immensely from
their Canadian counterparts. Taking their cues
from the Quebec nationalist cultural struggle,
Quebec women filmmakers of the seventies
have focused on difference, relying on the
rhythms of language (cinematic and spoken)
to inform their evocative fictions. Some of these
tendencies also share modernism’s stress on
ontological concerns and breathing space of
execution, but themes of young girls and
mother/daughter relationships constantly
resurface. Mattie Danishefsky’s feature film, Le
Père (1972) is a landmark film. Using a
multiformed structure, it is part musical, part
fantasy, part consciousness-raising. The earlier
mentioned Le Couteur Rouge, additionally takes
chances with form and pushes female language
into the resonances of silence. Maman a la tête’s
(1979) formally differentiates it from an
English-Canadian film. Anne Claire Poitier
takes rape as her subject, but by employing
distancing devices, such as framing the main
action, she accomplished much more than a
telling story. The story of the young girls of
Micheline Lanclos’s Soutène (1984) is told
from their point-of-view (the pace purposefully matches the banality of their lives), without adult sympathy. Léa Pool’s impressive feature debut La Femme de L'Hôtel (1984) kick-started a continuous string of successful, unique dramatic features. Diane Lebouthier’s The Haunted Ones of God (1978), influenced by Quebec’s cinéma direct movement, engagingly examines the role of nuns in the context of Quebec’s history. The results are surprising; the film focuses on how Quebec nuns have been empowered by their roles as nuns, at the same time it analyzes how this power relation varies within the hierarchies of the church.

In English Canada, the seventies gave rise to new practices of filmmaking that were influenced by, but not necessarily aligned with, an avant-garde tradition. Joyce Wieland is the “mother” of this tradition. Wieland plays with our myths, those edifices of identity that are constructed to ameliorate the anxiety of difference. Her works never comprise simple celebrations of identity - they are always in excess of prescribed categorizations. Wieland’s Canadian epic, Reason Over Passion comes out of a familiar Wieland thematic preoccupation - male/female opposition. In Wieland’s hands, the materiality of Canada becomes quite something else.

AN OPPOSITIONAL AESTHETIC

The seventies gave rise to what was called an oppositional aesthetic. Issues of representation, on the filmic text, the relation of the spectator to the text, the play of language, and the question of the female gaze became significant. These positions engendered a backlash towards more traditional forms of representation; recent reconsideration of the realism debate has acknowledged that the former bias was somewhat unsubstantiated. Filmmakers began to employ strategies which would foreground women’s relation to language; issues of naming and women’s attempt to speak within patriarchal language were considered important issues. Language, and how it was constructed and maintained along lines of sexual difference was of seminal importance. Patricia Gruben uses language against itself in both her neo-narrative films The Central Character (1977) and Sifil Evidence (1982). In both films the question of the status of truth is realized in the interdependency of documentary and fiction and the ineptitude of language, by decontextualizing the quotation. Again, both works expose how women relate differently to language and representational systems. A radical disturbance is effected through the disjunction of sound and image (in written and spoken texts) that repeat and contradict one another.

Barbara Sternberg’s work, Transitions (1982) deals with similar issues, but in a more poetic, modernist execution. Repeated superimposed images of a woman waking and sleeping is juxtaposed with the landscape as phases, snatches of language are intoned on the soundtrack. Brenda Longfellow’s experimental documentary Our Marilyn, engages with negative aesthetics; it pushes the limits of documentary form and utilizes the techniques of multivalent voices, the circling and de-centering of a historical personage, Marilyn Bell, but the film is additionally rich in visual pleasure. In spite of the divergence, some consistency is evident. From Margaret Perry to Joyce Wieland to Anne Wheeler to Ellie Epp, women filmmakers continue to represent the Canadian landscape; to re-invent iconography or to deconstruct its mythology. With English Canadian women’s emergence into feature filmmaking, the pioneering Quebec features can merge somewhat with these concerns. The reliance on fantasy in For Hand the Mermaids Singing echoes that of the earlier La vie rêvée. The Québécois feature’s concern with language, new forms and feminine language (evident in the films of Paule Baillargeon and Lélé Pool for example) is shared in the experimental, hybrid or experimental documentaries of English Canadian films.

Surface offers the opportunity to view Canadian women’s filmmaking in a unique historical context. These films have laid the foundations for future developments. The films themselves will initiate only the beginning of a more comprehensive understanding of this rich and diverse film culture.