

# Surfacing: Canadian Women's Cinema

*Festival of Festivals surveys 70 years of herstory*

BY KASS BANNING



Evelyn Lambart at work at the NFB.

A scene from the 1965 NFB production *The Things I Cannot Change*.



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 by dissolving images of domestic appliances (irons and sewing machines for example) into images of factory pistons; 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

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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 relegated/upheld and initiated 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. Existent 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

*Surfacing's* impetus perhaps stems from the revisionary imperative and celebratory nature of women's film festivals, but it also differs. Restrospectives, by nature, foster a historical logic; re-evaluation and a concern to represent seminal developments, rather than celebration, usually guides selection. With *Surfacing*, a historical overview of Canadian women's film, accompanies the evolution of works by prominent individual filmmakers—women filmmakers who have (mostly) only recently gained *auteur* status. (A difficult feat for any Canadian filmmaker, regardless of gender). Early films by Anne Wheeler, Sandy Wilson, Joyce Wieland, Paule Baillargeon, Janis Cole and Holly Dale, and Patricia Rozema are set beside their more mature (and lengthier) works. Watching these individually authored films in this context (back to back and historically) offers a unique experience. One not only notes the obvious improvements in craft over the years, but the consistency of vision, energy and often subject matter—even when genres are crossed.

To note but a few correspondences between early documentaries or shorts and later realized features: Anne Wheeler's 1976 documentary *Augusta*, a portrait of an 88-year-old Shuswap woman, with its acute rendering of environment, anticipates the attention both to the minutiae of women's lives and the topology of the western landscape evident in Wheeler's 1986 feature *Loyalties*, (an aspect again very prominent in the soon-to-be released *Bye Bye Blues*). A concern with representing "realistic" images of First Nations people is additionally



From Joyce Wieland's 1968 *Rat Life and Diet in North America*.

carried-over: *Loyalties'* Tantoo Cardinal's fully realized character offers a refreshing antidote to the prevalent stereotypes.

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 1977 short, *Anastasia, Oh 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 Rouge*.

Rozema is the female representative of the eighties-style initiation into commercial feature filmmaking; unlike her seventies English Canadian sisters, Rozema did not cut her teeth making documentaries. Her "calling card" short, *Passion: 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 offscreen fantasies of the central character.

The auteurist 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



Anne Claire Poirier's *Mourir à tue tête*.

shooting "outsiders" evident in Janis Cole and Holly Dale's *Minimum Charge No Cover* is further realized in *P4W: Prison For Women*. The output of this team is consistently impressive; in addition to honing a unique style that owes much to *vérité* (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*—offer engaging documents that always surpass the limitations of the portrait film. Joyce Wieland's range is represented in the short experimental film *Water Sark* (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—from sea to shining sea.

### CANADA IS FEMALE

Our particular site—Canada—contributes greatly to the divergencies in women's film production. Questions of naming and identity have always been at the forefront of the dialogue on Canadian film. This concern with collapsing a single identity or categorization onto these films made by women parallels (somewhat) the fears articulated by our more sensitive/astute writers on Canadian cultural politics. (The commonplace that Canada is female can perhaps bear the weight of the comparison.) This concern with specificity, the wariness in positing one identity, shares a common motivation with feminism—naming our difference.

Canadian women's cinema is not necessarily a shared tradition. The tremendous range and diversity owes much to circumstance: the circumstance of birth, economics, geography, language, funding institutions, and most importantly, the prevailing attitude towards women in each particular decade inform what films get made and what form will shape them.



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 repeats a familiar pattern. After Nell Shipman's pioneering presence in the '20s, for example, a hiatus ensued that was not broken until the state formed the NFB in 1939.

Enter Evelyn Spice Cherry (*By Their Own Strength*, 1940), Jane Marsh (*Women Are Warriors*, 1942), Gudrun Bjerring-Parker (*Listen to the Prairies*, 1945) and Margaret Perry (*Grand Manan*, 1943 and *Glooscap 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 *Women Are Warriors*, for the *Canada Carries On* series, for example, hardly resembles the ambition of her original treatment on women's contemporary situation. Notwithstanding Lorne Greene's relentless voice of authority and the film's propagandistic goals, it remains a charming document. The delightfully crude correspondence between women in Russia, England and Canada, coupled with the wonderfully simplistic dissolve equations between domestic and industrial labour, fosters nostalgia for (what appears to be) a less complex existence. After a final disagreement with Grierson (he refused to let a woman head his *Canada Carries On* series) Marsh resigned from the NFB in 1944.

Gudrun Bjerring-Parker's poetic documentary *Listen to the Prairies* contributes to the well-trodden Canadian landscape tradition (later joined by Joyce Wieland) by juxtaposing singers at a Winnipeg Music Festival with the topology of Western Canada. On the east coast, Margaret Perry captured localities in numerous documentaries. *Grand Manan* explores the life of fishing folk in the Bay of Fundy; while *Glooscap Country* explains, through poetic rhythmic documentary form, the origins of Nova Scotia through a local Micmac legend. It was only with the formation of Studio D, founded in 1974, that women could turn to subjects that directly related to them.

Films by Canadian women cannot be categorized by gender alone. To begin with, the different film genres represented – the dramatic feature, the documentary, animation, the various avant-garde practices and the mixed hybrid – make a homogeneous assessment difficult. (The particularities of the numerous institutional frameworks that support these divergent genres additionally impose constraints, again making uniform appraisals

**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.**

difficult. Such variegated cultural products cannot be accessed collectively, as independent commercial backing and the various funding bodies, such as Telefilm, OFDC, The National Film Board, and the arts councils have their own guidelines and agendas for production.)

Second, there is a tremendous range in subject matter. Some films' topics are directly related to women's lives. Others are not. It is a commonplace, however, that films made by women, on whatever subject, are inflected by what used to be called "the woman's perspective." The validity of this belief is now up for grabs; its use, more nuanced over the years, has spilled over into theories which relate to authorship or the inscription of an author's signature which is often said to have a gender correlation. Films by women range from those based on broad social issues – the effects of poverty, war, race relations – to the specifics of women's lives – rape,



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

PHOTO: RON LEVINE

abortion, equal pay or child care.

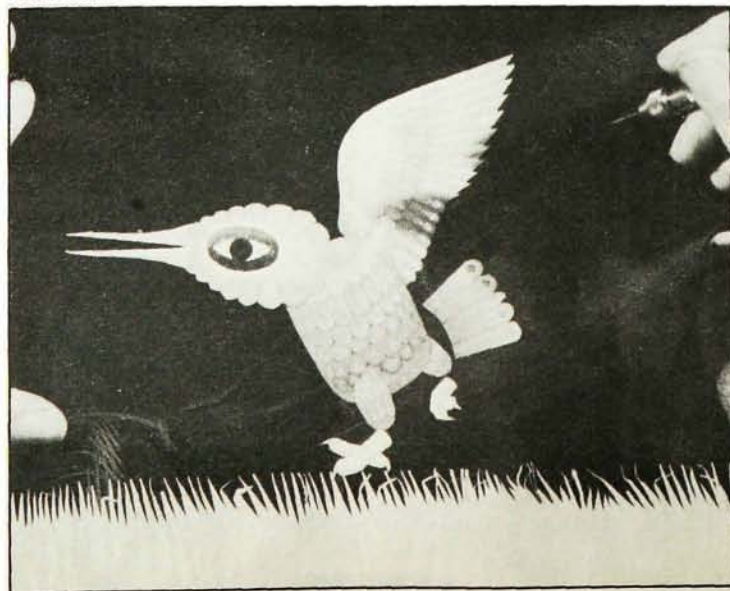
Until the recent and growing emergence of women filmmakers into the mainstream of commercial narrative production, English Canadian filmmaking had been polarized between a dominant documentary practice on the one hand and a tradition of feminist avant-garde cinema on the other. The importance and accomplishments of the documentary tradition of women's filmmaking in Canada cannot be underestimated. Tanya Ballantyne's *The Things I Cannot Change* (1967), for example, made for NFB's *Challenge for Change* series, remains a doubly problematic and

landmark film. In hindsight, its relentless *verité* style probing into the lives of a poverty-stricken family is ethically questionable – it is frankly exploitative. Yet the NFB learned from this experience; they realized they had overexposed the family and in subsequent films the participants screen-tested films made about them before completion. This led to an increase in interactive projects, using film as a catalyst for communities in what came to be known as "the Fogo process", where the camera was handed over to the participants.

**IN THE MILLS OF TELEVISION**

Canadian television produced some of the most powerful documentaries of the sixties. Beryl Fox, who produced and directed with both CBC's *This Hour Has Seven Days* and *Document* directed (and wrote) two exemplary films, *Summer in Mississippi* (1964) and the award-winning *Mills of the Gods: Vietnam* (1965). Twenty-five years later, these films remain rivetting and compelling; watching these documents through the grid of the Hollywood features *Mississippi Burning* and *Apocalypse Now*, the surprising correspondences cast an eerie, almost surreal quality to the events depicted – the all-too-familiar images of the American south and Vietnam are now entertainment. *Summer in Mississippi* examines the disappearance and murder of the three young civil rights workers near Philadelphia, Mississippi – James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. Fox interviews friends, relatives and enemies of the young men. The interview with "Big Red," the local sheriff, is worth lining up

**Fine Feathers**





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 clichés; 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 pacifists 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") Duvall 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 *Behind the Veil* to name two, severe criticisms have been levelled at Studio D (and the NFB in general) for their closed-door policy towards independents. It was viewed (by some) that a state "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 represent this Studio D trend.) With the implementation of Studio D's proposal to disband its stable, more assistance to women independents (through workshops and the PAFPS programme), outreach programmes for immigrant women and women of colour, it 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, Luce Guilbeault and Margaret Westcott combined newsreel footage with interviews with key American feminists (Betty Friedan and Kate Millet) in *Some American Feminists* (1977); that mix became a standard form. Gail Singer's *Portrait of An Artist As An Old Lady* (1982), about Paraskeva 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 texts into her own context. Associational editing matches original to context: the historical figure Wieland quotes her own work in the film by reenacting parts of it; she duplicates scenes from *The Far Shore* and *A and B in Ontario*. Armatage also matches her style - fluid, vivid, sensuous - to Wieland's. She takes Wieland out of the art-historical modernist considerations, and places the works within Wieland's personal concerns. Interviews with

**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 EVENTS THAT HAVE LED TO THE RECENT KILLINGS OF A BLACK YOUTH BY TORONTO POLICE.**

(the camera 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, Québécois 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



Sheila McCarthy as the lovable loser, Polly Vandersma, in Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*.

friends and critics of Wieland are intercut with examples of her work; here Armatage uses voice in a nonconventional manner. Armatage blends the voices of critics into polyvalence, speaking around Wieland, not directly addressing her, therefore not fixing her; the interweaving voices allow Armatage to lessen the effect of narratorial authority.

Canadian women's cinema was born out of the documentary, and many women filmmakers began with the straightforward documentary format and then evolved to more complex formal modes of expression. Women of colour and immigrant women often make films which are grounded more in documenting struggle, and thus employ a more straightforward cinematic style. The NFB documentaries of Alanis

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, songwriter 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), documents 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

ontological concerns and breathing space of execution, but themes of young girls and mother/daughter relationships constantly resurface. Mirielle Dansereau's feature film, *La vie rêvée* (1972) is a landmark film. Using a multifomed structure, it is part musical, part fantasy, part consciousness-raising. The earlier mentioned *La Cuisine Rouge*, additionally takes chances with form and pushes female language into the resonances of silence. *Mourir à tue tête's* (1979) form clearly differentiates it from an English-Canadian film. Anne Claire Poirier 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 Lanctôt's *Sonatine* (1984) is told



straight out, from their point-of-view (the pace purposefully matches the banality of their lives), without adult sympathy. Léa Poole's impressive feature debut *La Femme de L'Hôtel* (1984) kick-started a continuous string of successful, unique dramatic features. Diane Létourneau's *The Handmaidens of God* (1978), influenced by Quebec's cinema 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 *Sifted Evidence* (1982). In both films the questioning of the status of truth is realized in the interdependency of documentary and fiction and the ineptitude of language, by decontextualizing the quotidian. 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



Tantoo Cardinal and Susan Woolridge in Anne Wheeler's *Loyalties*.

juxtaposed with the landscape as phrases, 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 *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* echoes that of the earlier *La vie rêvée*. The Quebecoise feature's concern with language, new forms and feminine language (evident in the films of Paule Baillargeon and Léa Pool for example) is shared in the experimental, hybrid or experimental documentaries of English Canadian films.

*Surfacing* 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. •

*No Address*, by Alanis Obomsawin.

