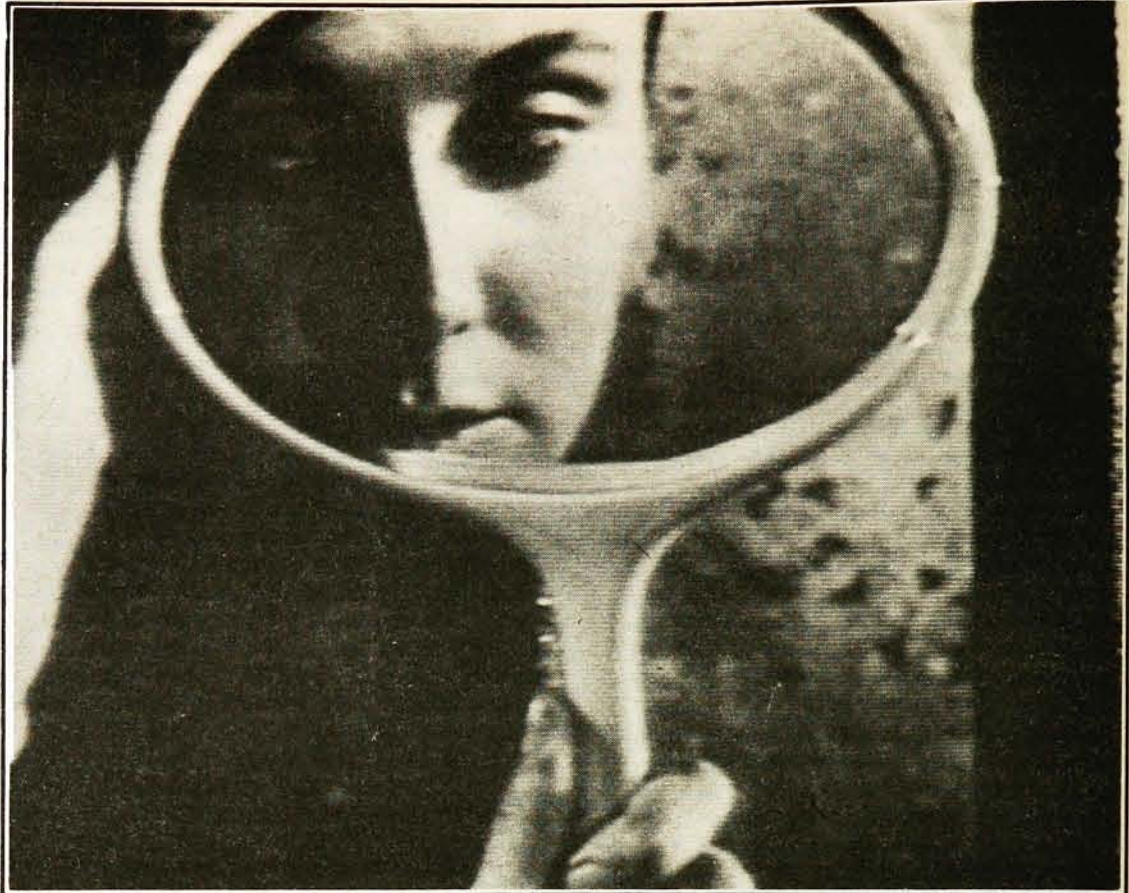


Through Her Eyes



Woman reflected in *Dry Cleaning en Voix off*

by Leila Marshy

The Troisième festival international de films et vidéos de femmes presented, from the 4th to 14th of July in Montreal, 79 films and 52 videos by women from, if we can generalize, around the world. The Canadian content, which is what we are concerned with here, added up to 35 – 18 films and 17 videos.

Above all, the urgent beauty of a festival of women's film and video is that it orchestrates the disparate and demonstrative voices of women artists into a single cacophonous note that says, at the end of its breath, "Listen!"

To get a sense of what these films and videos are saying, I divided them into three thematic categories: *Intimate Explorations*, *Playing with Fire/Images*, and *Reversing Orders*.

In the first group, both *Espaces* by Louise Martin and *À Force de mourir* by Diane Letourneau explore death as it touches a woman's life. In the first, Louise Martin uses black & white photographs to evoke the lost and regained spaces of intimacy after the death of the woman's lover. His parents reclaim his belongings, and she is left abandoned and grieving to find her territory – first with another man and then, eventually, on her own. In a concise 33 minutes, Martin manages to escape sentimentality and nostalgia in evoking the pain of a woman alone.

Equally dignified is *À Force de mourir*. A woman in her early thirties has assumed the responsibility of caring for her dying father at home. Eventually, the ravages of cancer and the inability of her mother to confront this despair, are too much for the daughter to handle. Her life is the routine of changing bandages,

administering doses of morphine, and brief respites with her walkman and diary. "*Que l'espoir est violente* (How violent is hope!)", she writes. One morning she gives her father his medication – many times the dose. She will wait, but this time for the end.

Manon Briand takes death into the realm of the senseless. In *La fosse particulière*, a young woman seeks out a psychiatrist to discuss the dilemma of death. But whose? Have gun will travel, Briand externalises the woman's malaise. She is not self-destructive – except that the other she will kill ends up being herself.

Coming from Quebec like the three previous, *Minuit à huit* by Nicole Bedegain, Pascale Bilodeau, Carol Gagnon and Carol Jarry, is a 25-minute film about a woman for whom night is a question of life. Working on a computer in the archives basement of a large building on the night shift, Charlotte encounters everything from an opera-singing cleaning lady to a Brazilian soccer team to a colleague on the 6th floor for whom working at night is a utopian sanctuary. With an almost surrealistic flavour to the film, Charlotte is the questing Everywoman in a world of decisive confusion.

With only two exceptions, the *Playing With Fire/Images* grouping is comprised of video works. With its financial and technical accessibility and its freedom from a constricting and defining history, video is a medium of exploration and exclamation.

"I see all and much is missing," comments the Queen in Tanya Mars' *Pure Virtue*. Pointing her finger at 16th-century corsets and 20th-century advertising, Mars' Queen Elizabeth I bitingly informs us that all is not well in this continuing kingdom of men. Mars pays little attention to the formalities of continuity or high production, but uses the medium to quickly and mercilessly make her point.

Likewise, *Manufactured Romance* by Anne Ramsden, *Culture* by Francine Chainé, *Dry cleaning en voix-off* by Monique Crépeault and Elizabeth Vander Zagg's *Hot Chicks On TV* present a feminist sensibility either, as in the case of the first two, in the context of the demands of the patriarchy or, with the latter two, in a more self-referential manner.

In *Culture*, for example, a woman all dressed up and ready for her aerobics inertly watches what she is supposed to be doing on the TV – "now for the killer – put both knees together!" Another woman, in *Dry cleaning En Voix-off* watches herself in the mirror. Can she make the Guinness Book of World Records? Can she see herself?

Robbing us of MuchMusic-nurtured expectations, *Rivière aux cerises*, *Rest-o-rant* and *Framed* all rely on music, or its semblance, to either structure the tape or throw expectations into the air.

Chantal Dupont's *Rivière aux cerises* is a pensive study of solitude, movement and creation. On a beach a woman constructs a tent frame with wood, she is robed in white, almost winged. Enveloped by the material and the music, she moves through the space until she becomes movement itself – the image dissects, decomposes and dissolves, to her and to the music.

Rest-o-rant, on the other hand, remains decidedly there. Photographed and transferred to video by Suzanne Girard, with music by Les Poules, it is a humorous portrait of La Paryse – the famous and delicious see-and-be-seen hamburger joint. Reflective of Girard's desire to document familiar and lesbian territory (she is a founding member of Plessigraphe, the Montreal-based photo-collective) she creates a warm and technically masterful tape that is, word for word, image for image, out of the ordinary.

Similarity, but different, Penelope

Buitenhuis has done the same thing with *Framed*. Shot in super-8 and transferred to video, set to the (off) beat of original music and the raspy eager rap of a woman who narrates the story, it was one of the funniest tapes of the festival. More or less comprised of eight separate vignettes, "I wanted to tell a story of misdirected passions, framed in a circle surrounded by madness and violence," it is an urban romp through decay and open arms.

Other tapes/films in this category are *Breath* by Margaret Dragu, a meditative ponderous and delicate study of the movement and, possibly, the motivation of breathing. *Du pain et des jeux*, shot in 16mm, is Marie Potvin's projection of mundanity, future tense. Seductive consumer images are screened on glass skyscrapers as a 21st-century bored housewife tries to find some sense of reality.

I Need A Man Like You, by Kali Paakspuu and Daria Stermac, fights claw and tooth out of banality. Shot in 16mm, The Clichettes, Sheila Gostick, Helen Porter and Ana Palma Dos Santos send up patriarchal designs with the caustic humour of women on the move.

This leads us well into the third category of films which try, each in its way, to overcome traditional presentations and interpretations of women's reality.

Lani Maestro by Margaret Moores, *Have You Ever Had A Nuclear Nightmare?* by Marilyn Burgess and *Reportage Bresil I* by Collette Loumède and Nancy Marcotte are three videos, all under 15 minutes, which open up the medium to investigative and personal testimonies.

Marilyn Burgess transfers super-8 footage of Montreal civil disobedience demonstrations, with all its graininess and hesitations intact, to video. Over the images of women battling apartheid, pornography and the police, voices reveal their impressions of the state, organized resistance and personal power.

Lani Maestro is a Filipino artist now re-

siding in Canada. Combining political issues with a moral imperative in her art, she attempts to reconcile her experiences of tyranny and torture with the formalistic demands of communications. Wanting to make art that reaches people, Moores has made a video that fulfills the promise of Maestro's simple but pressing message.

Likewise, **Reportage Bresil I**, is the first in a series of investigative tapes whose intention is to aid in the exchange of ideas and information between Brazil and Quebec. Marcotte, who splits her residence between the two, reports on the creation of 20 new police stations in and around Sao Paulo - all completely run and operated by women.

Both **No Longer Silent** and **Sanctuary of The Earth Goddess** are, like **Reportage Bresil I**, Western translations of Eastern or Third World subjects. But, while **Reportage** and **No Longer Silent** succeed in staying true to the source thanks to the intimacy and dialogue the directors share with their material, **Sanctuary of The Earth Goddess** strives for objectivity in the worst sense of the word.

A maternalistic voice-over summarizes a history and a culture while the images, a village people in West Sumatra who have chosen a woman as their

spiritual leader, remain mute and exotic. It is a film less inspired by its content than by *National Geographic*.

Though **No Longer Silent** may easily garner criticism for the voices and politics Laurette Deschamps has chosen to animate, she is nonetheless right there with the women and issues of India. Working in collaboration with the women from the feminist revue *Manuschi*, she surveys such preoccupations as bride-burning, amniocentesis for the murder of the female foetus, the rampant suicides of unhappy women. Deschamps's film is one in which the heat of the voices and the country have been made tangible.

No Longer Silent, a CineSita-National Film Board of Canada co-production, is an encouraging reflection of Studio D's efforts to reach out, as best they can, to worlds and questions that implicate their own.

Also from Studio D are **Thin Dreams** by Susie Mah, **The Children of War** by Premika Ratman and Terri Nash's **A Love Affair With Politics: Portrait of Marion Dewar**. In 1986 Studio D undertook an apprenticeship program to train 25 young women from across Canada. **Thin Dreams** and **The Children of War** are two of the short films to have spun out of the project.

Susie Mah poignantly mixes dramatized vignettes with personal testimonies of teenage girls who confront an enforced obsession: their bodies and the tyranny of thinness. Both naive and intuitively wise, the girls discuss the pressures of being who they are: women with bodies.

In **The Children of War**, Ratman follows last year's International Youth for Peace and Justice Tour in which children from upheaved and war-torn countries toured Canada speaking to schools and groups of their experiences. The kids, from Northern Ireland, Namibia, Guatemala - all over - speak to the camera, to each other, to stunned Canadian children, in a film that offers a different example of foreign intervention; peaceful, not political.

A generation apart is **A Love Affair With Politics: Portrait of Marion Dewar**. Dewar, ex-mayor of Ottawa, was the engineer behind Project 4000, the welcoming of over 4,000 Cambodian boat-people into Ottawa. Though hounded by opposition and strict immigration laws, she eventually succeeded in persuading other cities to do the same, ultimately raising the country's immigration quota many times.

The film is a simple documentary of a woman for whom politics is simple. Her

concern for all for whom things don't come easy is sincere and without pretension. Nash, director of **If You Love This Planet**, does justice to Dewar's frankness and wish to be approachable.

Premiering at the festival were **Ikwe** and **The Wake**, two of the NFB's *Daughters of the Country* series directed by Norma Baily. Dramatized accounts of the history of the Métis people, they are shockingly touching and uncompromising in their affirmation of the Metis as victims of white/Western subjugation and genocide. **The Wake** won the festival's Prix du Public, sponsored by Alcan.

Winner of the same prize for video was **Où étiez-vous?** by Diane Poitras, of Quebec. Shot during last year's festival, Poitras asks of visiting directors three questions: where were you in 1976, where are you now, where will you be in 10 years. The responses of Suzanna Amaral, Paule Baillargeon, Juliet Berto, Judit Elek, Caroline Leaf, Janis Lundman, Mira Nair, Hélène Roy, Ilene Segalove, Manuella Sera and Eva Turska, are revealing, informative, touching and humorous. All filmed in the same chair, from the same angle, with the same world outside the window behind them, the video brings film, and the festival, face-to-face with itself, its audience and its future.

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