



VISIONS OF THE HEROIC

An Interview
with

Kay Armatage

by Dot Tuer

The last days of July in Toronto are a sweating climax of a two-week heat-wave. Pedestrians loll in the streets, manic drivers languish in traffic jams. On the usually chic Bloor Street, the seamier edges of humanity are perspiring through the crowd's expensive veneers. And in Yorkville, once the sprawling chaos of hippie idealism and now home to a number of exclusive shops and overpriced eateries, the Festival of Festivals staff evidence frenzied expressions as they rush about an overcrowded office.

The 1987 Festival is a little more than a month away, and the thousands of details which anatomize a film festival are being put into place. I arrive in the heat of the day, and in the heat of final programming decisions, to interview Kay Armatage, one of the Festival's programmers for the contemporary world cinema, documentary, and Canadian perspective sections. Armatage, who has been with the Festival since 1982, is herself a filmmaker, and a professor of cinema at the University of Toronto. Her own film practice, which is experimental in its exploration of feminist and

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theoretical issues, and her courses at the University of Toronto on avant-garde cinema, contextualize a programming strategy which features films that are innovative in their theoretical, formal, and political orientation. She has also, in her position at the Festival, actively supported and highlighted the burgeoning growth of films by women in the '80s.

Thus it seems fitting that Kay Armatage's latest film, *Artist On Fire*, which will be shown at this year's Festival of Festivals, takes as its subject the philosophy and work of Joyce Weiland, a Canadian artist whose feminine and ecological vision was recently featured in a retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Weiland's passion for cinema, which produced a number of experimental films including *Reason Over Passion* and *Pierre Vallières* and culminated in her feature film *The Far Shore*, would seem an ideal subject for Armatage's equally passionate interest in innovative and feminist cinema. However, the mystical and spiritual context in which Weiland frames much of her work (which includes quilting, painting, sculpture, needlework, and cartoons as well as filmmaking) seems antithetical to Armatage's theoretical grounding in semiotic and political film analysis.

The resulting film, a lush, fluid document, blurs the cinematic boundaries between Weiland's films, paintings, and

personal surroundings, becoming a visual essay where Weiland and her creativity function as heroic signifiers of the artist's role in society. Vision oversteps theory, and passion overrides analysis. The film becomes at once an evocation, and a strange displacement of an avant-garde tradition which has sought in recent years to deconstruct the subjective, to proclaim the death of the author, to question the mythology of the individual. And it is these contradictions which seem inherent in the double-edged exchange of the artist as visionary and the artist as theorist/critic which I am interested in exploring through the interview.

So as we sit at an outdoor table on Yorkville Street, accompanied by sirens wailing in the distance, car doors slamming, and humidity rising, I ask Kay Armatage about the process of making *Artist On Fire*, about her strategies as a filmmaker, about her impressions of cinematic directions in the 1980s. And as our discussion ambles between her role as a filmmaker and her perceptions as a programmer and teacher, it seems that the paradoxes which emerge in *Artist On Fire*, between practice and theory, between poetry and criticism, find a larger context in the conditions and directions of contemporary world cinema.

Cinema Canada: *In Artist On Fire*, the viewer is presented not only with the diversity of images and materials with

which Weiland has worked, but with a strong impression of the artist and her perceptions. I am wondering why you choose this particular figure to represent on film. Was this a collaboration or your own idea?

Kay Armatage: No, it was my own idea. It came out of showing her films in my course on avant-garde cinema. After showing them every year or two, I was struck with how well they stood up, and how inadequately dealt with they were in terms of structural cinema. Although you could see the elements of structural cinema, there was something in her films that made them much more current and much less contained by that historical condition, that movement. I became very excited by them and wrote her a note to say so. And she wrote a note back to ask if I was interested in looking at some old footage she had shot.

We spent a winter together looking at her work, and it was during this time that I was able to get to know her and decide if I could work with her on a film. As an artist she is wonderful. She's been relatively overlooked. She hasn't been dealt with by the press very well. And there haven't been serious analyses of her work for a very long period. I wanted to present the range of her work, not only her films but her work in all other media, and try to sort them in an analysis of her practice. I was not so interested in biography or in a personal portrait, but in creating a context for her work.

Cinema Canada: *Which becomes,*

within the boundaries of the film, a context in which Weiland presents herself, through her work, as a visionary. This is not a particularly popular perspective in current film theory. Did you find this context freeing? Or complex?

Kay Armatage: It's definitely complex. In my last film, *Storytelling*, I started out wanting to do a film about narrative and I was interested in performance. So in *Storytelling* I concocted this idea of dealing with narrative through the performance of storytellers. Coming across these storytellers was really interesting to me because so many of them were more or less holy people. They were doing it for very important spiritual reasons. For me to deal with them was challenging and difficult because I tend to be cynical and not interested in those kinds of issues at all really, except insofar as I consider them more or less retrogressive.

Thus it wasn't so foreign to me when it came to dealing with Joyce Weiland. At first it was an element of her work that I didn't intend to dwell on. But it's such a forceful part of her that you can't ignore it. When dealing with her films I was more concerned with formal issues, but when you put her films in relationship to her art and to the context of the range of issues she deals with, the spiritual and the visionary element come out very strongly. And it's these themes that she returns to. They're visionary not just in a spiritual sense but in a political sense which I am very interested in.

Cinema Canada: One of your motivations for making this film was to provide women, and particularly women in Canada, with narratives that would speak to them. Do you see this as a sustaining narrative that will not only deal with Joyce Weiland but will function politically as an intervention, as an inspiration to encourage other women to produce art?

Kay Armatage: In terms of a principal text for the film, I can answer that negatively. I made every attempt to situate Joyce as a heroic figure. For instance, the interviews with Joyce are very formal and part of the conscious design. But on the negative side, I wasn't interested in dwelling on the problems she had encountered as an artist with critical reception, or with fighting her way into the art world and she has had lots of those problems. You could make another film entirely about Joyce Weiland as a victim of the art world.

Cinema Canada: Why did you choose the heroic mode?

Kay Armatage: Because I think it's worthwhile to do that. In making a film about Andy Warhol or Picasso you would make every effort to humanize them. But in a case like this where we don't have a lot of heroes I think it's interesting to present this very ordinary woman who takes on a beauty from the passion with which she speaks. She is an ordinary woman in an ordinary situation of a certain age, but the combination of

these factors with the heroic setting turns the table on expectations.

Cinema Canada: So in a sense, it is both her position as an older woman and as a Canadian artist, that created the impetus for the heroic stance. She is also, in her work, a mythmaker, constructing a mythology about Canada, and about the feminine. So perhaps in making this film, you are also participating in mythmaking, creating a vision and a mythology around a historical Canadian figure.

Kay Armatage: Well, I guess so.

Cinema Canada: It's very rare, this strategy; our history is very flat. How important, in making a film like this, is your relationship to the artist? Did it evolve into a collaboration?

Kay Armatage: No, in a very real sense it didn't. Certain parts of the film were constructed and shot in order to contextualize her work, particularly her film work, but I chose these situations to shoot in because of the work I knew, the connections I could make. I didn't set out to make a work that would imitate her work or her approach to film. There were suggestions of Joyce that I took up, for example shooting her quilts outside in the woods, or her desire to construct a self-portrait from a Renaissance painting. Otherwise, I constructed the montage.

Cinema Canada: In a way, the film becomes a visual essay, one that incorporates her work and a 'writing' of her work and her body through shots that are constructed to feed in and out of her personal vision. What is interesting in this approach is the way her films and your film begin to blend. In this idea of 'writing' the body, where you have shots of her films directly on parts of the human body, did you want to emphasize this personal relationship of Joyce to her work?

Kay Armatage: Yes, but also to create a connection with a much older avant-garde, to suggest a historical connection in a tangential way. In the shot of *Pierre Vallières* projected onto a hand, I wanted to make a reference to Jean Cocteau's image in *Blood of the Poet* where the mouth appears on his hand and then he wipes his mouth with his hand and then the mouth is wiped on a statue which begins to speak. *Reason Over Passion* was projected onto the body because it was so beautiful, and of course, because of Joyce's use of Canada as the feminine. And although she never created a literal image of this metaphor, clearly in her work there is a notion of the relationship of the body to Canada, to the feminine, to landscape. She talks about the eroticism of landscape.

Cinema Canada: Within feminism there has been a concerted critique of the woman/nature metaphor, and I was wondering if you had an opinion about this coming into the film and whether working with Joyce, who so

clearly has a vision emerging from this connection, changed that?

Kay Armatage: But she was a precursor of that critique. At the point where she was constructing that kind of mythology, it was very early on in the feminist movement, in the late '60s. *Reason Over Passion* was shot just before 1968, when Trudeau was brought in as the leader of the Liberal Party. And the nationalist thrust and the connections she made between the environment and women's work in things like *Waterquilt* came before the feminists for the environment movement. Her work may partake of the same ideology but it was not instigated or inspired by such movements. For Joyce it was a revolutionary idea that was completely original and brought together her real concerns: nationalism, the environment, politics, the position of women, the relationship of Canada to the United States.

Cinema Canada: In the film, I get the impression that there is a tremendous love on your part for Joyce and for her images. It is not an objective or cool film. I was wondering if for you, who produces theory and teaches theory, if working with someone like Joyce made you begin to deconstruct your theories? Where do you see theory and practice intersecting? For Joyce it is not an issue of a theory, it comes from out of her lived experience, and then whatever theories critical writers construct out of that comes from another impulse. It is what she says in the film, some people work in an ordered way and others from whatever that place is. How do you work as a filmmaker, do you work from another place?

Kay Armatage: No, not at all. I work very consciously. I'm much more interested in theoretical issues than she is. She has an absolute abhorrence for them.

Cinema Canada: If one is working as a filmmaker in a conscious way, one is also working as a strategist, and I was wondering what it means contextually in 1987 to take risks? For I think that the film is a risk: it risks essentialism, by projecting Joyce's film on a body of a woman, by portraying the sustaining force in this woman artist as the unconscious, by constructing a heroine.

Kay Armatage: Well, I'm not interested in misrepresenting her. It's there. Her work is intuitive. She does work from her feelings, her sensations, in a clearly principled way. You can't deny that.

Cinema Canada: No, I agree, but I am interested in your relationship to this film. Do you see the film purely as a biography or do you see it as taking up a position, as inserting something into Canadian art history? Is this an attempt to take structuralism outside of its narrow parameters? Is it an attempt to get out of a paradigm?

Kay Armatage: If you had asked me this question before a discussion of the visionary, I would have said that I was much

more interested in placing her work in a context around the issues she takes up around representation, women and sexuality, and what I consider a pre-semiotic approach, her use of titles, the relationship of word to the image. So that's what I would have said before we talked of the visionary element. Now I don't have any answer to that question.

Cinema Canada: Do you think Joyce as an artist, and this film points to the fact that it is the artist with their unconscious or their intuition that interpret what is contextually occurring in society before it becomes a paradigm, solidified, analysed?

Kay Armatage: Theory is produced after the work.

Cinema Canada: Which makes Joyce a different filmmaker than, for instance, the British school of cinema.

Kay Armatage: Absolutely. She is, I think, very much producing the kind of work that theoretical analysis can be brought to bear on, but she is not producing out of that theory...I'm not answering that question very well, am I? I know I have a self-destructive tendency of shyness towards answering these kinds of questions...

Cinema Canada: But I think it's better not to be able to answer them pat. For if you can answer them pat then how much contradiction or paradox is left in how you're even thinking about theory?

Kay Armatage: But I think one thing you learn from the history of the current avant-garde is that the filmmakers who have their work written about well are the ones who put the words into the mouths of the writers.

Cinema Canada: But perhaps that has always been an element of avant-garde cinema. And in regard to this issue of theoretical paradigms, it seemed that in the late '70s, early '80s, when film theory really took off, there was a tremendous interest in writing theory, working with it, working out of it, making it an integral part of a film practice. Do you find, over your years at the Festival, that this is a continuing trend in the films that you are programming? Is something else emerging? Is there now a resistance to theory?

Kay Armatage: You can answer that in a number of ways. I think that the theory film as we came to know it is more or less dead. Partly because so few of them were successful and filmmakers became dissatisfied with not reaching the kind of audiences that they desired to reach politically. In the American scene, economics and the pressures of the money system of making movies is actively killing it, rigorously stamping out the possibility of producing a theoretical cinema.

Cinema Canada: So are there less and less independent films coming out of the United States?

Kay Armatage: There are less and less avant-garde independent films. There are lots and lots of small-budget conventional movies who hope to be picked up by the Majors. This year has been quite interesting. Normally my contacts in New York would turn up a lot of people who were working more or less independently, and I would try to skim the *crème de la crème* off the top. But there is very very little of that work being done in general. Most of the American independent films come to us now through distributors.

Cinema Canada: For myself, and I think for a lot of festivalgoers, your programming has always been very important, very innovative. You have always had an eye for films that take narrative and push it formally, to redefine boundaries of narratives. Are these films more difficult to find?

Kay Armatage: Yes.

Cinema Canada: Just in America?

Kay Armatage: No, all over.

Cinema Canada: And do you attribute this purely to economics?

Kay Armatage: I think a lot of it is economics.

Cinema Canada: Do you find overt political content matter?

Kay Armatage: Very little.

Cinema Canada: So since you have been programming at the Festival, do you find film in a period of retrenchment?

Kay Armatage: Retrenchment?

Cinema Canada: Is film utilizing purely conventional modes? One thinks of the late '70s, when the art world spilled over into the film world as a time of tremendous experimentation. Filmmakers took tremendous risks. Do you see that the general economic political climate is reflected...

Kay Armatage: In the lack of that now? Yes. Virtually all over the world now, films are made for television. It structures not only the kind of political debates that can be embarked upon but the formal explorations that are possible. When you have to get a TV license in order to get money, it's bound to have an effect. It doesn't mean that good things can't be done, but it's harder to find.

Cinema Canada: In the films which are being programmed for this year's Festi-

val of Festivals, are there any observable directions, commonalities?

Kay Armatage: Well, quite a few films deal with relationships, and some of the most interesting films are very dark. **Franchesca**, by Verina Rudolph, is poetic, hallucinogenic. James Beening's new film, **Landscape Suicide**, is concerned with the relationship of the American landscape to murder. I guess you could say that quite a few films are concerned with the visionary, the dark side of life.

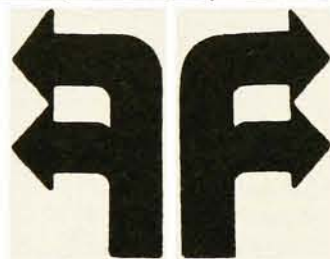
Cinema Canada: And are there a lot of films directed by women being produced? How are women surviving the current economic climate?

Kay Armatage: In certain countries they seem very well established, for example, Germany. I'm showing Doris Dorrie's new film, **Paradise**, which I am sure will be controversial. It is also a dark film, one that formally spirals out of control, into a descent of madness, murder. There are a number of first features by French women directors, and in Quebec, Mireille Dansereau has made a film based on Marie-Claire Blais's novel **Le Sourd dans la ville** while Jackie Levitin's **Eva: Guerillera** takes place in Nicaragua. In English Canada, however, there are very few feature directors. Our

support here has been historically dreadful, shameful. Hopefully, this is beginning to change with the Ontario Film Development Corp. who took a risk with Patricia Rozema's **I've Heard the Mermaids Singing**, a wonderful film. There is also a great deal happening regionally, within the co-op system, particularly in Winnipeg and Halifax.

Cinema Canada: Given the economic situation we have discussed facing cinema, and the subject matter that is emerging as themes in the late '80s, does the festival have any long-term strategies, or focuses that will be pursued in the upcoming years?

Kay Armatage: This year, as you know, we are featuring Asian cinema, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines. But Japan is not included in this program of work. There is a tremendous amount of filmmaking emerging from Japan, and very innovative cinema as well. Japanese cinema is in a period of explosive growth, a renaissance. I think in years to come we will be looking to Japan, to the East, for formal exploration, and of course, to the Third World. These areas are very exciting, and offer tremendous potential for the future of cinema.



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