

Cold snaps

IMAGES '88, Northern Visions showcase of new film and video

Images '88 was a festival of film and video held in Toronto and organized by the Northern Visions collective. The collective consists of directors, producers, writers, distributors, critics and academics who, in their words "came together because of a commonly held desire to promote the excellent work being created by filmmakers and video artists across Canada." Helen Lee's review focuses on the *Sexuality and Representation* portion of Images '88 while Andrew Patterson covers the rest of the programmes.

BY ANDREW J. PATTERSON

Images '88 was conceived as a new showcase for independent film and video, viewed back-to-back on one main screen. The very inclusion of videotapes alongside a programme of experimental film is innovative, at least in Ontario.

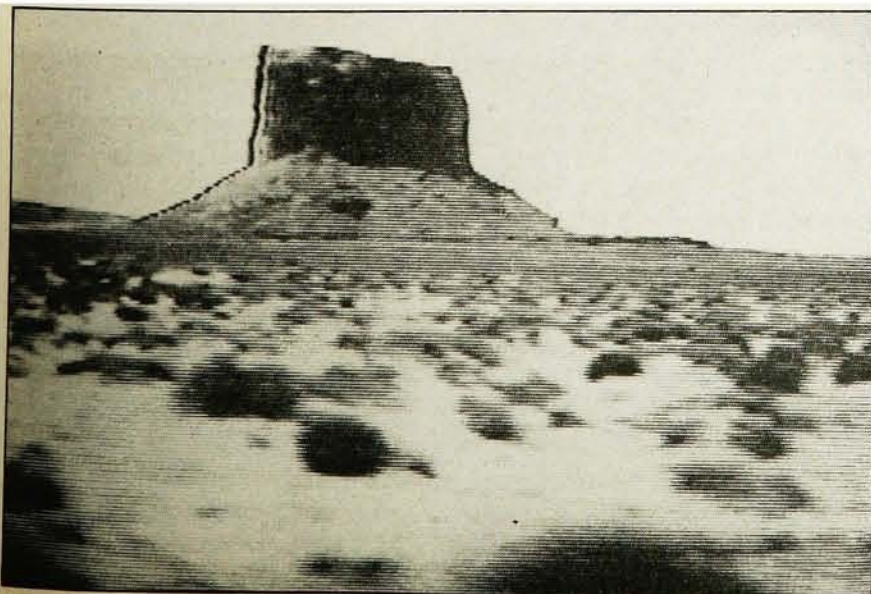
Images '88's collective, Northern Visions, which selected the works, assigned itself a mandate to provide a balanced retrospective with work from veteran, intermediate and emerging producers; with feminine and masculine entries; and with different racial, ethnic and provincial perspectives. This balancing strategy also resulted in a divergence of tape lengths - although only one tape was as long as the longest of the cinematic master-works.

But the licence to include as great a variety of producers as possible meant that many of the tapes tended to be short and fleeting. While brevity and clarity are always appreciated in the context of lengthy programmes (and well-

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John Greyson's *Ads Epidemic*



Jan Peacock's *Siren Song*



Cop Out by Gary Kibbins

conceived short tapes are very easily programmable in both festivals and theme shows), many short tapes frustrate because they present ideas which are deserving of further elaboration. Images '88 suffered from a preponderance of slight, one-idea tapes which all too frequently dissolved into one another. But the best of the under-five-minute tapes did exhibit a welcome irreverent abruptness.

Fluid landscapes

The four evenings were divided into eight different programmes: In The First Person, Contemplations, Sexuality and Representation (in two parts), Voices Of Experience, Women Working Through History, Fluid Landscapes and Neo-Narratives (And Other Melodramas).

These designations seemed to me to be a somewhat arbitrary method of grouping the various tapes with respect to their potential for mutual compatibility. While it is probably true, for example, that Michele Waquant's *L'Etang* (the most meditative tape in the festival) would not be particularly compatible with Sara Diamond's *Keep The Home Fires Burning* (containing the most facts of any entry), many of the contemplations, voices of experience and fluid landscapes could easily share programmes.

The title Fluid Landscapes referred not only to the preponderance of water and life-in-water but also to the tapes' need to be exhibited outside of any traditional entertainment format. Within that programme, Kate Craig's *Ma* self-consciously referred to its own editing rhythms as well as the rhythms suggested by the elemental images depicted in the tape. Thus the tape moved quickly for me while *L'Etang* seemed to me to be a truly timeless tone poem.

Contemplations shared both meditateness and associativeness with Fluid Landscapes. However, while *Ma* is concerned with materials-in-sequence, a tape such as Jan Peacock's *Sirensong* (shown among the Contemplations section) is primarily concerned with the artist/narrator's personal reclaiming of iconic objects which have been usurped by their media associations.

Sirensong is constructed from the artist's point-of-view, with its dissolve from a domestic application of water (the drudgery of the kitchen sink) into its continuously tracking road shot. While avoiding such an obvious narrator's presence, *Ma* and *L'Etang* are at least as intensely personal in the artists' manipulation of those landscapes.

Similarly, Vern Hume's and Leila Sujir's *Buck* (Buck, the fading cowboy, being the voice of experience) shares with *Sirensong* an artist's personal need to deconstruct media-defined mythologies. The remembrance in *Buck* belongs to the *raconteur* as does the technical point-of-view in a couple of those driving sequences (the automobile having replaced the older meaning of the word "horsepower"). But the hands of the tape's co-directors are visibly at work

playing editing tricks with the cowboy's story so that it becomes an actor's recitation rather than an "authentic" voice-over. A point in which *Buck* differs from *Sirensong* and shares with Lorna Boschman's *Scars* is in the directors' adaptations of their subjects' histories or narratives and subsequent transformation of the tapes' voices from third-person to first.

Although flirting with the surface objectivity of documentaries, both *Buck* and *Scars* are in reality first personalizations of others' voices of experience.

Neo-rock/music videos

Perhaps because of Images '88's need to include as many different tapes as possible and the subsequent overflow of shorter-than-five-minute tapes, there was an abundance of neo-rock/music videos. This is a media-saturating form which has not generally been addressed by Canadian video artists. Because the music video uses the rapid-editing and fetishization of images which characterizes advertising, the form offers considerable latitude for blatantly propagandistic artists.

Diane Poitras' and Ian Boyd's *Comptines*, Greyson's *Ads Epidemic*, Nicole Giguere's *Histoire Infame*, Craig Condy-Berggold's *Up to Scratch*, The Mr. Tim's Collective's *Another Man* and even Hébert's *La La La Human Sex* all, to varying degrees, utilize options within the criteria for programmable music video while attempting to subvert the form's unequivocally capitalistic language.

Comptines and *Histoire Infame* are women-produced tapes designed to counteract the predominant objectification of women which has been characteristic of music videos. *Histoire Infame* (A Degrading Story or A Shameful History) seeks to frame an individual performer within a historical context but also frames that performer/singer in a traditional product/identification manner. The camera follows her through a series of potentially confrontational and/or soluble encounters which are not realizable because of the inherent inflexibility of the iconic figures encountered.

Comptines is more successful at subverting the form because it avoids the star/product syndrome. The response of a group of women to the news of a Belfast hunger striker's death becomes the message rather than the product. After its opening elegy and its collective expression of rage by the banging of garbage can lids, *Comptines* becomes a magnified street dance. Unfortunately, the multiplication of one sandal-clad foot into a chorus of such identical feet serves to designate the sandals as product, and, for a moment, the tape lapses into a counter-cultural footwear commercial. Still, *Comptines* does contain an emotional variance or flexibility which becomes sanitized in its mainstream counterparts.

Ads Epidemic goes one further by blatantly acknowledging the language of advertising and



then punningly labelling that language as *Acquired Dread of Sex*; a dread induced by the media's constant barrage of "frightening facts" and apocalyptic predictions involving AIDS.

The Mr. Tim Collective's *Another Man* contains a different safe sex message. A condom is used to suffocate the evil Jerry Falwell and thus it is illustrated that condoms can indeed be useful in the fight against disease.

Craig Condy-Berggold's *Up to Scratch*, which interprets a song by Clive Robertson, is an agit-prop promo tape with appropriated images courtesy of Public Utility. Because the song is a rap/travelogue as opposed to a hook-oriented pop tune, Condy-Berggold is able to use a multi-faceted, multi-cultural collage format rather than having to fetishize a particular star or product. This diversity, in fact, becomes the product.

The icons of popular culture, or the manner in which popular culture transforms ideologies into fashion (the Maoist with the revolutionary ghetto-blasters) are also a concern in Paul Wong's *Body Fluid*. Shot in a style reminiscent of a mid-seventies, hand-held performance documentary, *Body Fluid* combines the imagery of advertising and music videos with the time-base of a performance. *The Face* magazine models and the Bruce Weberesque blond musclemen are indeed all surface. The catalogue notes tell us that "the tape appears to critique popular culture by robbing it of any ostensible content". Those who believe that popular culture achieves and maintains its currency by, in fact, eliminating content from its source materials or else simply transforming all potential content into style, might fail to notice any critique or subversive presence in *Body Fluid*.

Performance-based time

Images '88 contained several tapes which operated within what seemed to be a "real" or performance-based time. Wendy Geller's *Learning About Female Sexuality* featured the artist's abruptly humorous dismissals of her invisible, impersonal analyst's attempt to induce the performer into the passive role of a patient.

Tammy Basaraba's and Jennifer Babcock's *A Woman's Work Is Always Done* was a hilarious on-location (a kitchen sink not dissimilar to that featured in the opening shot of *Sirensong*) expression of the private hell of dishwashing; the chaos achieved through the rapid-fire manipulation of pots and pans.

Colleen Kerr's *A Pack Of Lies*, while using a split-frame technique to indicate the performer/narrator's inconsistencies, transcended the simplicity of the epithets "split-personality" or "schizophrenic" through the performer's strong, disturbing presence.

Chris Hawkes' and Gerhard Gehrman's *What's This All About?* used a subjective technique similar to that used in *A Woman's Work Is Always Done*. A skilful manipulation of "zap" editing allowed a rapid alternation between the television soap opera and the character/watcher's own.

Sherry Moses' and Colleen Finlayson's *Say It*, like *Learning About Female Sexuality*, placed its subject/performer in an impersonal office or interrogation room. The immigrant woman has to prove herself as a performer in order for her to become assimilated. The voice of the male counsellor is, over the course of the tape, joined by a technologically-altered chorus.

Computer-based, video-sensing, robotic entity *Say It*, a tape which identifies the second person as one who is by definition condemned to remain in that second position, is almost a mirror image of Tom Sherman's *Exclusive Memory*. In that tape the veteran writer/monologist (and former mandarin) identifies his audience with a "computer-based, video-sensing, robotic entity of the artist's creation". In fact, the monologist is questioning the audience's existence while addressing that very audience. Sherman has taken one of the oldest forms of videotape production, one in which he was himself a pioneer, and technologically updated the form while paying homage to the days of that kitchen-table, Western Front direct-address production.

Cathy Busby's and Melodie Calvert's *Girls Just Wanna Have Funds* and Maurice Van Themsche's *Demi-Portion* were both concerned with individuals who occupy positions in which they have no choice but to be public figures. Whereas the arts administrator in *Girls* fantasizes about having the strength and determination of gender-reversal heroine Joan Crawford (in Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar*); *Demi-Portion*'s Jack Video (an alternative media man) feels excluded from the possibilities of emulating most of the media-designated masculine role-models (although cigarettes always look good while stuck in the profile position). Perhaps the character's identification in *Girls* with such a contradictory role model as Crawford could have benefited from further elaboration. *Demi-Portion*'s essential one liner, by contrast, did not seem to overextend itself

and, as a result, the tape was one of the best-received of the festival.

Gary Kibbins' *Cop Out* was the most neo-narrative out of all the tapes designated as such. More than *A Pack of Lies* or *What's This All About?*, *Cop Out* drew its imagery from the conventions (and fetishes) of what can be considered one of the classical film narratives. *Cop Out* puns on the standard "is there a gun in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?" machismo found throughout the action/thriller form. Not unlike Godard's *Alphaville*, two detectives have an assignment to come up with the "shots" necessary for the production of the thriller itself. The punning title aside, *Cop Out*'s real concern (not unlike *Demi-Portion*'s and *Buck*'s) is media-defined requirements for generic masculinity.

Nancy Marcotte's and Collette Loumede's *Reportage Bresil* was the closest thing to a traditional propagandistic documentary at *Images '88*. The police station, run and staffed by Brazilian women, is presented as an ideal to the tape's immediate, home-based audience. *Reportage Bresil* has a specific focus and it is accordingly tight without any need for embellishments.

Sara Diamond's *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, an almost feature-length docudrama, was beautifully crafted and ardently researched. At times it utilizes an almost collage-like density in its alternation between archival material and interviews with women who were active in the work force and union movements during World War II. What cluttered the tape, especially in its latter half, was the use of dramatizations. The interview subjects were so informative and engaging that the dramatic reconstructions seemed not only superfluous but interventonist. Fortunately, the first half of *Keep the Home Fires Burning* was so strong that this flaw did not negate the sheer density of information conveyed by a director obviously in tune with her documentary subjects.

Looking to *Images '89*

Images '88, despite its tentativeness, is a welcome and sorely necessary addition to national experimental film and video screening possibilities. The back-to-back programming between the two different media was extremely streamlined. The resolutions of the film and the video were practically indistinguishable. The videotapes, however, deliberately used a traditional grainy aesthetic. Hopefully, the increased length of the proposed 1989 festival coupled with the invitations to be extended to individual curators will enable the programming simultaneously to celebrate the thematic variety of Canadian film and video while covering themes which were somewhat neglected this year. The *Images* festival has the potential to play a valuable role in destroying the illusion of marginality which still hangs over independent personal film and video production. ●

Safe sexual imagery

BY HELEN LEE

Given the not so latent animosity between film and video, their producers, critics and (arguably) audiences, the programming intentions of *Images '88* set a strong precedent of solidarity. Well-attended throughout the four, sometimes exhausting nights, *Images '88* provided a forum for those still hashing over the problematic relationship. If filmmaking seduces with the beauty of its surface (optical printers are guiltiest of all), video co-opts the agenda of experimental film. Differences, on one level, were smoothed over and films and tapes projected with great sensitivity to the debate. Unencumbered, viewers were free to just watch.

The most outstanding feature of the programme, next to its heterogeneity, was the uneven quality of the work shown. Ranging from ill-conceived student stuff to the institutionalized avant-garde, nothing proved this more than the programmes entitled *Sexuality & Representation, Parts I and 2*.

Why two separate programmes? The sheer volume, 18 works, is the most obvious reason. Also, the "theme" allowed for some room in constituting that already catch-all term, "representation." Inscribing the interpretive gesture right into the act of representing, the theme gave not only voice but a mandate.

The politics of sexuality, long a priority on the video community agenda, is an issue without circumscribed boundaries. It lacks definitive status since it is exactly that probing pluralism that amounts to self-definition and its viability as theme, mandate or as an implicit otherness. If narrative projects a need for the self, sexuality and alternative representation on the screen exists to question, overturn, even attack, not to affirm. Not an easy task and, once again, one taken up mainly by video producers in *Image '88*.

A lot of one-trick ponies respected their modesty and didn't take up too much time. Both *Miss Representation* and *Dorothy* baldly set out their motives and, without preciousness, were over in three minutes. In *Miss Representation*, Kim Blain's critique of the beauty pageant effectively abstracts institutionalized, male-identified beauty into patterns of ritualized movement, repetition and saturated colour. Like *Dorothy*, a deadpan guessing-game that sleuths out *Dorothy*'s lover, it's no-nonsense but not without some humour. *Demi-Portion*, on the other hand, tries hard for laughs and heads

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Frances Leeming's *Orientation Express*: "A meticulous and sublime excursion into the modern female psyche"

the list of some surprisingly weak tapes. The escapades of a man who can only live in profile, *Demi-Portion* teases out a moral subtext but the guy's too slimey for you to care. *Learning About Sexuality*, a silly, smug pie-in-the-face to Freud, misses all the offhanded wit and whimsy that a six-point (anti-) lesson on psychoanalysis could offer.

In some cases, the hype and reputation preceding a few people seemed disproportionate to the actual work we got to see. To be fair, *Body Fluid*, *Hot Chicks On TV* and *Détrez-nous du mal* were more ambitious in scope, the shots slip into redefine sexual attitudes toward, respectively, the body-object, femininity and aging, and the male orgasm. Paul Wong's overly long *Body Fluid* perches human models on a revolving pedestal as signposts of cliché, artifice and our consuming desire to look – and be content in the looking. But the music grates, the shots slip into self-indulgent repose and the appearance of a Chinese communist woman seems gratuitous and moralizing – a bid for some substance on a manicured surface. With *Hot Chicks On TV*, ideas are obviously floating about but they lack structure – the tape's a mess. Elizabeth Van der Zaag attempts to compile shots of girls prattling on about rock stars, computer graphic doo-hickeys and groovy bag ladies (the politics are right-on). But through a technic's manipulation of the image, only the animated, pulsating vulva (like *Le Plaisir*) also spectacularizes genitalia but, in our act of seeing, implicates us. But the tape invites it.

Offering, in macro splendour, the hard-on as anatomical specimen, *Paradis* blithely insists "masturbation is a drag". "I sure look plain," lies the handsome lead character. Full of gloom and unconvincing self-pity, the voiceover tows the line that sex is overrated – a counter-productive, even dangerous stance. And puzzling when the images themselves celebrate gay eros so openly.

Ads Epidemic seems to answer that tendency toward self-immolation. Flip, fruity and so

much fun, John Greyson's take on *Death In Venice* exterminates Acquired Dread of Sex with utopic ease. Aschenbach trembles while Tadzio and friend, safe with rubbers in hand, whoop it up by the fountain. They're wholesome, bronzed lads and Aschenbach's clearly missing out. Lynda Peers' *Le Plaisir* maps out the parameters of female representation as a site of pleasure, and then exceeds them. Fantasies are legitimized as viable experience and women pleasure themselves – but not without lesbian and auto-erotic guilt. Though vulnerable, women are not permanently cast as victims or martyrs, introducing yet another set of codes to help "read" experience.

Using the same distinct power relation that *Le Plaisir* strives to eliminate, *La La La Human Sex Duo No. 1* explores sexual dynamics within the sphere of the dance. Compelling and brimming with elegant, athletic choreography, *La La La* succeeds brilliantly on the level of performance. Capturing the rhythms, peaks and pleasures of the duet, the tape clearly serves the dance, rendering the formal aspects nearly invisible. Conversely, *A Little Older* is all about style and little else. Like a moody jeans or soft drink ad, the clip divulges two minutes of random shots sutured together under the designation of "film". But it was selling trend, image and lifestyle.

Contrasting the more underdeveloped work, Frances Leeming's *Orientation Express* offers a meticulous and sublime excursion into the modern female psyche. Guided by a saucy, incisive sense of humour and a fearless urge for the banal and the ridiculous, the film's a very sophisticated feminist tract. It's easy to fall for a film that laughs at itself. Entirely constructed from old *Life* magazine clippings, this giddy and guffawing piece of animation was two years in the making with time well-spent. One of the works (too few in number in *Images '88*) that didn't need to excuse itself as "work in progress" – an admission of deficiency.