

Cinema Femmes/ 5th Festival International de Films et Vidéos Montréal

BY CLEA NOTAR

Women working in the art of film face every artist's dilemma: working through the contradictions of being an artist in a business culture, in addition to working with our own specific differences – anatomical, psychological, spiritual. These differences are also externally reinforced by a kind of fragmentation or alienation, which has both natural roots and socially constructed conclusions.

Women engaged with other women give each other the confidence to value their individual differences, while providing a moment of respite from difference. In a room full of women, we can stop being gendered bodies defined in relation to the other gender, and move on to other definitions and representations. In other words, we can grow and develop as artists.

The festival International de Film et Vidéos de Femmes/Montréal is both a business operation and a feminist venture. This dual commitment may seem contradictory to some – on the outside. Being feminist and running a women's film festival demands that extra energy and consideration.

This year was the fifth in the "herstory" of the FFVF/Montréal, and the third since its inclusion of the "Cinémama" workshops. New additions to the festival's programming and awards included the creation of a Documentary Jury Prize. First place in this category was awarded to Alexandra Anderson and Anne Cottringer's *Hell to Pay*, the title referring, quite literally, to what the poor of the world generally, and the poor women of Bolivia specifically have to say about International Monetary policies, and how a Third World country's national debt chokes the hopes of growth for a mass of people, while it gluts the bank accounts of a tiny few. The film begins with eerie, tactile shots of bank plaques in London and ends with a strongly emotional and pointed plea to European women to take action against economic oppression.

The Jury Documentary prize was shared by Claudia von Alemann's *Le Siècle Prochain Nous Appartient*, part one of her two contributions to a 12-part series commissioned by West German television. *Le Siècle Prochain*, shot as von

Alemann stresses, "against TV aesthetics," covers the period in the German women's movement from 1830-1848, using original writings from feminist activists of the era. Von Alemann has used a dilapidated old film studio, as well as theatrical lighting and staging, to set the scene for her particularly German examination of the issues of politics, love, womanhood and time.

The second innovation during this year's FIFVF was the addition of a homage to actress Delphine Seyrig. Seyrig, first known for her work in the films of Alain Resnais, is a brilliant and talented, highly politicized and dedicated woman. She is also extremely charming. Seyrig appeared in Ulrike Ottinger *Johanne D'Arc de Mongolia*, the feature awarded the festival's Prix du public.

Johanna is Seyrig's third contribution to the fantastic and mythical world of Ottinger's films. The actress has also performed in work by Ackerman, Duras, de Kermadec and Meszaros, working primarily with women directors during the last 14 years of her career. In 1982, she was involved in founding the women's video distribution centre, The Simone de Beauvoir Audio/Visual Institute in Paris.

It was Seyrig and Ottinger who attracted most of the public's attention and fellow filmmakers and feminists' interest and debate during the early days of the festival. The first of the two Cinémama roundtables – the second was on the topic of "Women technicians and their Creative Freedom" – was initiated under the Duras-esque motif of "Sédution disent-elles," or "Seduction they/she said." Alongside Quebec actresses Luce Guilbeault and Geneviève Rioux, and director Anne-Claire Poirier, (subject of a retrospective), Seyrig and Ottinger fielded questions and provoked the discussion in the direction of greater depths and more lateral sweeps.

Seyrig, who may be best known for her ethereal speaking voice, used that voice with grace to tell the packed Goethe Institut screening room that *tout court*, "Seduction is a manipulation. Seduction is a taking of power, an exercise of power."

"Just as parent seduce their children, making them believe that it is actually the children who are seducing the parents, the public is like the child and the producer is the parent, always offering the same gadget or toy."

Ottinger was taken to the mat by various individuals, including India's Marjira Datta, whose *The Sacrifice of Babulal Bhuiya* is one hell of a visually beautiful, tough, and sharp film. Datta's documentary ran amongst very strong competition that included Donna Read's *Goddess Remembered*; Anne Wivel's *David ou Goliath: Un Film sur la Presse Internationale à Jérusalem*; Vanyöska Gee and Jac Avila's tremendously brutal look at voodoo, Haitian politics and the Duvaliers in *Krik? Krak!*; *Contes d'un Cauchemar*; Anne Crilli's made for TV/banned from TV

Mother Ireland; and Trin T. Minh-Ha's *Surname: Viet, Given Name Nam*.

The short film section of the FIFVF/Montréal posed, in general, less pointed political and philosophical questions (with exception of flashes of searing brilliance such as the out-of-competition *Oracion*). While this section's narrative work outnumbered the narrative features selected for screening in the Prix du Public section, these shorts were highly imaginative and technically polished. The public voted well and discriminatingly in selecting Ayelet Menahemi's tale of Tel Aviv's punk-runaway-gay subculture, *Crows*, Holland's Ellen Meske's animated feminist funnies, *Schoon Genoeg!*, Belgium's Monique Quintart's beautifully-shot *Terre Mère*, and France's Claire Simon's short film, *La Police*.

Videomaker Mona Hatoum, who was the subject of a video retrospective, won third prize for *Measures of Distance* in the Prix du Public – Vidéo section. *Longshot*, from the late Lynn Hershman, took second place, and American Margie Strasser's *Rape Stories* was awarded the top prize in this section.

In a city of numerous film festivals and during the month of the internationally-publicized NFB tribute to the documentary, the 5th Festival International de Films et Vidéos de Femmes/Mtl came and went smoothly. On screen, work as diverse and excellent as Sarah Butterfield's black-and-white short *Intérieur Nuit* to Delphine Seyrig's 115-minute, colour video *Sois Belle et Tais-Toi*, to provocative work in video from Leila Sujir, in film from Carol Anna McBride, West Germany's Helga Reidemeister, and Nina Rippl, stimulated and provoked.

The world of women's film never ends, that is to say, its surface may appear to be smooth, but looked at from up close – with a brave and eager eye – one sees a multitude of different textures, bumps, and grooves.

FOR RICHER, FOR POORER

This is the kind of film which should have come into this world as something else – a sociological report, a feature in a newspaper, or maybe even a documentary shot and produced in another time, like the '70s for instance.

Despite Ariadne Ochrymovyck's sharply-depressing subject matter – necessarily depressing – that of a recently separated single mother of two sliding down the class scale from sheltered academic (and abused) wife to welfare recipient, *For Richer, For Poorer* has little impact as a whole.

The film is in a manner of speaking, riveting but only because of the viewer's commitment to sifting through superfluous visuals and exploring elements of the film's subject matter that the filmmaker has not.

Ochrymovyck's subject (much like the traditional subject under observation in

psychological, sociological, or documentary studies) seems to reveal more to the critical eye of a viewer than she does to the recording eye of the camera. I get the impression Ochrymovyck has created a critical distance between her film and its viewers that was not originally intended.

For Richer uses some of the less-commendable trappings of an early feminist approach to subject matter, i.e. visual or formal aesthetics low on the list of priorities, in addition to that terribly paradoxical mix of objective camera presence (pretended absence) and hyper-subjective use of verbal and filmic language.

Also, in a film about poverty in North American society, how can the responsible filmmaker neglect to examine the facts evident in the spoken dialogue – that the husband in question, incapable of managing support payments, is a debtor because he lives the life of the Ultimate Consumer. Meanwhile *For Richer For Poorer*'s women/heroine/victim and prime target for the sales hype of consumer culture, claims that her spouse only spends all his money on "everything I'd like to do."

– Clea Notar

FOR RICHER, FOR POORER exec. p. John Spotton p. Silva Basmajian d. Ariadne Ochrymovyck ed. Roushell Goldstein cam. Joan Hutton cam. asst. Celest Natale, Lynnie Johnston sd. rec. Ingrid Cusiel, Peter Savade sd. ed. Chris Pinder orig. mus. Jane Bunnnett re-rec. Jack Heeren res./sc. Katherine Gilday narr. Jan Tennant Foley artist Terry Burke unit admin. Sonya Munro, Ed Barneveld. An NFB production. Part 2 of the Feminization of Poverty Series.

BLACK MOTHER, BLACK DAUGHTER

Black Canadian filmmakers? Name one. A documented history of Black Canadians? Just try and find it.

Sylvia Hamilton, the Halifax-based journalist and first-time filmmaker has put together, against all odds – she's black, she's a working mother, she's new to the film industry – a 287-minute documentary destined to speak straight to the hearts, minds, and spirit of thousands of Canadians. Black Canadians.

Black Mother, Black Daughter illustrates, through the lives of black women living in and around Halifax, Annapolis Royal and North Preston, Nova Scotia, the history of the black family in Canada, the important interdependence of church and black community in small maritime towns, the situation of blacks in a white country and, most of all, the integral function of the oral tradition – here on 16mm film – in keeping a culture and its history alive.

Hamilton's and co-director Claire Prieto's film is also the first from the NFB's Atlantic Region to be shot by an all-female crew.

Although the film suffers from the curse of the 16mm look, rather formulaic cinematography, and unpolished quality of Hamilton's narration (albeit the *only* voice that could narrate such a



personal account), *Black Mother, Black Daughter* demonstrates that Hamilton and other African-Canadian artists and cultural historians could produce stronger film work the next time around. And there had better be a next time around.

— Clea Notar

BLACK MOTHER, BLACK DAUGHTER p. Shelagh Mackenzie d. Sylvia Hamilton, Claire Prieto cam. Dominique Gusset sd rec. Jane Porter ed. Claire Henry. Title song by a cappella group, *Four the Moment*. An NFB Atlantic production.

GODDESS REMEMBERED

Donna Read's *Goddess Remembered* is an empowering film. Empowering because I left the cinema with feelings of pride, of anger, of hope and most of all, of energy.

I had been energized by the true documentary experience: that of feeling the global community of women, both actual and symbolic; that of being taken to other worlds (a rarer occurrence

than one might expect). *Goddess Remembered* is the first of a two-part philosophical, documentary exploration of Western women's spirituality: where this religious, matrifocal belief originated, how it was transformed and lost (or sold we might say) and how it has been preserved by various women's scholars and spiritualists.

It is a film about women's culture as it has been represented and is reflected in grand philosophical and religious ideologies, and how this devotion and respect has been (and in the rarest but happiest of places, still is) manifested in the particular and the individual. It is an anthropological, sociological, political (and sensual) visual treatise which succeeds without being either pedantic or boring.

Donna Read, an accomplished editor, combines her keen eye and hands with the work of Judith Merritt, Diane Carrière, Susan Trow, Martha Henry and Starhawk (as story consultant) to create a film which is not only intellectually and visually stimulating, but which culminates in a dynamic experience — female and human — of the spirit.

— Clea Notar

GODDESS REMEMBERED exec. p. Rina Fraticelli, Kathleen Shannon p. Margaret Pettigrew co-p. Signe Johansson assoc. p. Judith Merritt, Margaret Wescott d. Donna Read assoc. d. Susan Trow, Judith Merritt, Diane Carrière cam. Susan Trow loc. sd. Diane Carrière ed. Donna Read, Judith Merritt story cons. Starhawk sc. D.C. Blade, Donna Read, Gloria Demers narr. Martha Henry res. Holly Dressel, Dona Read mus. comp. Loreena McKennitt unit admin. Gisele Guibault re-rec. Jean-Pierre Joutel sd. ed. Jackie Newell mus. cd. Julian Olson. A Studio D production. 16mm, colour. 54 min. 1989.

STUDIO D FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY VIDEO

Sidonie Kerr
color 60 min., video

And then there was Studio D. Fifteen years after Kathleen Shannon founded the publicly funded women's studio of the NFB, Studio D has plenty to congratulate itself about.

If you Love This Planet (1982), *Flamenco at 5:15* (1983), *Dark Lullabies* (1985), *Speaking of Nairobi* (1986), *Firewords* (1987), *To a Safer Place* (1988), *Goddess Remembered* and *Burning Times* (1989-90). These are only a few of the films — not to mention the women, the skills, the jobs, and the opportunities that have come out of Studio D in the last decade and a half.

This 60-minute video tribute is a visual

chronicle and "herstory" of the big D's development and diversity. Premiered at the Fifth Festival International de Films et Vidéos de Femmes de Montréal, the video was greeted with applause, sighs, and the laughter of recognition and memory. Nostalgic indulgences after many hard years of work — work that continues today while women filmmakers across Canada continue to suffer from archaic attitudes, and while all new filmmakers continue to struggle simply to get their films made.

Sidonie Kerr, editor and director of *Studio D: Fifteen*, has pieced together, from extensive amounts of footage, a one-hour picture of women, film, and women's film at the National Film Board of Canada.

The four-minute "reduced version" of *Studio D: Fifteen* points a little more clearly, however, to what directions women's film can take. It features a high-energy, scat-singing Karen Young, light and joyous, travelling through the images of women in groups, women as individuals, women's hands, women's faces, women's colours, clothes, professions and passions. All care of the women at Studio D.

— Clea Notar

STUDIO D: 15TH ANNIVERSARY VIDEO

d. ed. Sidonie Kerr. Colour, 60 min. Video. An NFB Studio D production. Also available in four-minute condensed version.

