

A

Camera of
one's own

7



new films

by women

SELECTED BY CORDELIA SWANN AND TINA KEANE

A Camera of one's own

"The cinema can certainly tell a story, but you have to remember that the story is nothing. The story is surface...plot film or abstract film, the problem is the same. To touch the feelings and to give predominance to the image."
Germaine Dulac (1922)

The words of Germaine Dulac are an ideal introduction to the films of these 'new' women film-makers who have taken control of their means of production and through animated collages of woven patterns, super-impositions, visuals and sound are exploring images which question 'the beautiful,' the 'mythological' and the traditionally 'taboo' subjects of death and incest as well as re-interpreting the approach to areas such as lesbianism in film in an open and poetic way so that the viewer is given a personal and collective understanding of women's consciousness and feelings.

Tina Keane



BEFORE AND AFTER FRENCH KISSING



MOTHFIGHT

L'ANGE FRENÉTIQUE

The films which have been included in the following two programmes are the result of the first years of work produced by young women film-makers. Some of these film-makers have recently finished film courses at art colleges, others are still studying and a few have recently moved to film from other areas of practice. They are part of a new generation which is the first to have grown up within the women's movement of the 1970s. As a result, these women are in an unprecedented privileged position; although some of them, as individuals, do not feel that their work is aligned with an overt feminism or women's movement.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to disregard the generations of women film-makers who have worked in previous decades; especially as many of the women included in 'A Camera of One's Own' have chosen to start making films much in the same personal and poetic way as such film-makers as Germaine Dulac (1920s), Mary Ellen Bute (1930s-50s), Maya Deren (1940s-50s), Marie Menken (1940s-60s), Shirley Clarke (1950s-80s), Margaret Tait (1950s-80s) and many other women who started making films in the 1950s and 60s and have continued until the present day. Before World War II, portable film equipment was not readily available to men or women who weren't inordinately wealthy or part of a studio system. During the war, when cheap and portable 16mm cameras did become available, women took up the camera for themselves. The psychodramas of Maya Deren (with their personal content of dream imagery brought about by a non-narrative form of editing) and the amateur diary films of Marie Menken had a particular influence on film-makers of both sexes for generations to come by defining what has become known as experimental film. Unfortunately, from the 1920s until today, women, as in other areas of work, have not been allowed to take the leading roles in either mainstream or experimental film-making. The tragic stories of the careers of Germaine Dulac who was heckled out of being a director by the surrealists, of Maya Deren who was repeatedly refused funding and Shirley Clarke who went to Hollywood, only to be forced out of the film industry for nearly fifteen years, are proof of the odds that existed and still exist against women working in film.

"I couldn't find a producer who would accept my films as I wrote them; I didn't have any means of getting money. It may have to do with the fact that people with money do not talk about money to women. That's one of the things that showed up in my Hollywood dealings... when I got out there, they had a man who was going to tell me how I should make my film... men just don't like to talk to women about money—that's all."

Shirley Clarke

Is it the lack of funding which forces women into making experimental or personal films when they are first starting out? To some extent it would seem so. When Shirley Clarke stated, 'I started in films by doing everything myself. I was writer, director, cameraman, editor, sound engineer, and lab messenger, I enjoyed it and learned a great deal about the craft.' (1977); she reinforced the notion that personal film-making is merely a stepping stone to larger and more ambitious film. Some of the women in 'A Camera of One's Own' have declared their intention of going on to make higher budgeted films which would reach a larger audience. Many of them also feel there are political limitations in work which may appear too self-indulgent and elitist. For the most part, however, these film-makers are satisfied making films with a different approach from the traditional format of the narrative film. This different approach enables them to express their own ways of seeing.

"...My films are concerned with meanings - ideas and concepts - not with matter."

My films might be called poetic, referring to the attitude towards these meanings. If philosophy is concerned with understanding the meaning of reality, then poetry - and art in general - is a celebration, a singing of values and meanings. I refer also to the structure of the films - a logic of ideas and qualities, rather than of causes and events."

Maya Deren's Statement of Principles

Since the time of Maya Deren, the women's movement has created more space for women to make films, but it has also had an impact on their way of viewing the imagery and the aesthetic and cultural rules of traditional art and film. It is no longer enough for women simply to be allowed to make films. The way women have been portrayed in films and even the way they have portrayed themselves in now being constantly questioned and rejected. In the following two programmes this questioning has manifested itself in a new language of reversal and juxtaposition so that traditional aesthetics, myths and logic are often reversed (see programme notes for individual films). The films in 'A Camera of One's Own' have all been made with very low budgets; although many of them have received total or partial support from either a college, a regional arts council, the Arts Council, or institutions such as the London Film-makers Co-op. This lack of money for 16mm film stock and the cost of printing has meant that many of the films have had to rely on Super 8 and video for shooting and in some cases the films have been processed and printed by the film-makers, thus avoiding high lab costs. As for the cameras, they are relatively expensive, borrow or steal and some film-makers do own their own, but the cost of synchronising sound is such that only one film in either programme has actually made use of it.

Paradoxically, the end result of this financial dilemma has created a sort of triumph over the limitations of film. The graininess of blown up Super 8 and the distracted quality of re-filmed video have created a new surface which is being used to form a framework that can both define and express new concepts. The dream like quality of super-imposition can be utilised to present complex and multi-layered meanings. A hand-held camera can convey the awkwardness of childhood better than the most intricate tracking shot. In short, the possibilities are endless. Of course, these devices have always been used by experimental film-makers of both sexes; what is revolutionary is that they are finally in the hands of a new and confident generation of women film-makers who possess the beginnings of 'a room, a view and a world of their own.'

With thanks to Tina Keane for her tireless efforts and to the women in the programmes who have also contributed their ideas.

Cordelia Swann

PROGRAMME 1

A COLLECTION OF FILM SKETCHES *Helen Rayner, 1985, 8½ mins*
The only Super 8 film to be projected in either programme, A COLLECTION OF FILM SKETCHES is a silent study of the movement (both within and outside the camera) of sunlight across walls and floors of empty rooms. Although simple in its intentions and editing, this film is controlled and at the same time traditionally beautiful so that it is an appropriate introduction to the rest of the programme and to those who might not be used to non-narrative film.

Time and light are major themes within my work and previously I have worked exclusively with photography. The strong narrative content of my photographs led me to start binding them into books and the books became like still films.

Helen Rayner

SIAMESE CAT SONG *Cathryn Marshall, 1985, 8 mins*

Like Maya Deren, Djamane Dulac and Shirley Clarke, whose first films were related to their interest in dance and movement being transposed to a different rhythm in film, Cathryn Marshall has achieved, with her hand-painted sets, specially composed music and editing, a dreamworld something akin to the work of her predecessors (although this may not have been her intention).

SIAMESE CAT SONG is about a natural rhythm and an invisible spirit that is inside everybody maybe. This idea is expressed through a musical dream that travels through different sequences of ambience, feeling and rhythm. It is interpreted through the eyes of a girl who experiences a special dream one night when she feels the forces of the spirits who actually enter and take over the room in the dream. She wins their friendship. It is a first film and therefore very raw which is also its subject matter.

Cathryn Marshall

CUPIDON *Lois Stone, 1985, 5 mins*

A concise yet rich homage to movement in film which takes on the appearance of a moving abstract painting; CUPIDON is an example of a film-maker's total control of the limitations of her chosen medium.

...made from a collection of images shot in colour on Super 8 and re-filmed in stark b&w onto 16mm. Pariscapes, abstract video forms, lace and neon are all transformed into a collage of moving shapes and textures.

Lois Stone

I SEEK *Julia Harrington, 1985, 16 mins*

With the use of super-imposition, re-filming (of both Super 8 and video), and by contrasting b&w to colour combined with, at times, an awkward hand-held camera, Julia Harrington prepares the ground for an intricate and frightening journey into the Dream which is the nightmare of the transition from childhood to the state of existing as a woman with all of its accompanying emotional and physical requirements. Through her rhythm of editing and her juxtaposition of different images and textures, young men sitting in a cafe eating eggs and sausages, a pan across a children's playground, a small girl running towards the camera, a long tunnel, a mountain of biscuits backed by video monitors, and the birth of a child are all made to seem equally beautiful, loathsome, and terrifying.

I SEEK is a strange sensation of searching for something that you know you already possess. Using memory and dreams to find a sense of self.

Julia Harrington

ANNUNCIATION *Bella Kerr & Carole Bellon, 1985, 8½ mins*

Like many of the other films in both programmes, ANNUNCIATION uses the grainy quality of Super 8 to create a mythical world different from the one that exists in more polished films. Through the moving grain of this b&w film one perceives a man attempting to dance with a woman, a hand letting earth fall through its fingers, a prone figure set against more earth and the many sets which the film-makers have constructed. These images, accompanied by music and a matter of fact voice-over, are linked together so that one's perception of the immaculate conception in particular is gently rearranged. Blown up to 16mm from Super 8, ANNUNCIATION is the collaboration between the film-makers who also work together on photographs and installations, some of which are included in the film.

I dreamt last night that Mary was in a walled garden, where Joseph left her alone all day. There was a gate in an arch in the back wall of the garden. A man knocked on the door, they spoke at the gate, the door ajar, and Mary let him in. Then they had sex and this is how Mary conceived. (Introduction to ANNUNCIATION)

Bella Kerr & Carole Bellon

TEA LEAF *Kate Novacek, 1985, 8½ mins*

A road movie which forays into the realms of the forbidden. The city streets at night, lesbian love-making, shoplifting and even Jewish folk music are given new meanings when they are pulled together by the use of super-imposition, harshness of texture, editing and an abrasive soundtrack so that we are given a new sense of feminine beauty and a feeling of the film-maker's anger and resolve.

The film is the beginning of a story about living in a city, having no money, no culture and a closet identity....being a lesbian where there is no liberalism, the inability to fit in the inability to become middle class and self fulfilled.

TEA LEAF is a comedy about living in shit and dragging out the advantages of refusing to sell out, most of all the film is romantic and sketchy, a short story with the atmosphere of a circus....like most women's films, it is personal and political....it uncovers what is crushed and forgotten....and tries to entertain. About living in a climate where everyone seems heterosexual, where there is no street life, where everyone is desperate and drawing out their culture or sinking into a repressive police state in 80's Britain. A story of a desperate, alcoholic, frustrated, lesbian shoplifter.

Kate Novacek



THE HUMPBACK ANGEL

PROGRAMME 1

A COLLECTION OF FILM SKETCHES *Helen Rayner, 1985, 8 mins*
SIAMESE CAT SONG *Cathryn Marshall, 1985, 8 mins*
CUPIDON *Lois Stone, 1985, 5 mins*
I SEEK *Julia Harrington, 1985, 16 mins*
ANNUNCIATION *Bella Kerr & Carole Bellon, 1985, 8 mins*
TEA LEAF *Kate Novacek, 1985, 8 mins*
MOTHPIGHT *Vanda Carter, 1985, 10 mins*

PROGRAMME 2

L'ANGE FRENETIQUE *Maggie Jailler, 1985, 4 mins*
THE HUMPBACK ANGEL *Joanna Woodward, 1985, 14 mins*
BEFORE AND AFTER FRENCH KISSING *Sara Pirozek, 1985, 10 mins*
THE LADIES ROOM *Jane Dilworth, 1985, 15 mins*
FIRST COMMUNION *Martine Thoquenne, 1985, 13 mins*
TO BE SILENT IS THE MOST PAINFUL PART *Cheryl Edwards, 1985, 5 mins*
TERMINALS *Sandra Lahire, 1986, 15 mins*

Programme 1 will be accompanied by a speaker who will introduce and discuss both programmes.



CUPIDON

PROGRAMME 2

MOTHFIGHT Vanda Carter, 1985, 10 mins

Originally intended as an experiment, with the film-maker scratching black leader and sticking letraset onto clear leader, this film was also processed and printed by the film-maker instead of being sent to a lab. The end result is a light filled and multi-layered film which only took a few days to complete. MOTHFIGHT, which never even uses a camera, is a testimony of what can be done with a small budget and the materials at hand; although, like CUPIDON, it uses the expensive and relatively complicated 16mm equipment at the London Film-Makers Co-op.

In conventional visual language, light represents good, order, truth and life. Dark represents evil, chaos and death. The moth in the film, fighting to escape the light, is a metaphor for personal feelings which contradict this set of accepted symbolic 'meanings.' The light bulb and the candle flame are deadly for the moth; darkness is safety and life. Often in the darkness I have been frightened of the light, frightened of being overwhelmed by the assault of visual impressions, scared of responsibilities of the daytime, tied down by the assumption that what is 'seen' must be what is 'real,' scared of hurting my eyes in the brightness if I strike a match. In the dark I feel more free to imagine, maybe altogether more free.

The ending, however, is perhaps inevitable. Everything was fine; then God said 'Let there be light,' the interfering bastard, and nothing has been quite the same since.

There seems to be no escaping it.

A moth just flew right into my face while I was typing the paragraph above, which just goes to prove that nothing under the sun is random. Vanda Carter

L'ANGE FRÉNETIQUE Maggie Jailler, 1985, 4½ mins

A carefully constructed and edited film which uses what has become known in some circles, as the *gay male aesthetic* and then lovingly pokes fun at it with make-up, time-lapse, a dinky theme tune, and dogs from the Battersea Home barking in the background.

An ejaculatory study of frustration, torment, stupidity and insolence. Filmed on 8mm and blown up to 16mm. Cerith Wyn Evans as the angel.

Music by Michael Nyman.

Maggie Jailler

THE HUMPBACK ANGEL Joanna Woodward, 1985, 14 mins

At first glance THE HUMPBACK ANGEL appears to be a conventional animated film of a traditional fairy tale; until one realises that the story has made two or three unexpected leaps and that the animation itself often flies off into different perspectives and drawing styles. Even the happy ending is pleasantly rearranged. Originally shot on Super 8 and then blown up to 16mm, this film which must have been very laborious to make (especially as Super 8 cameras are not designed for accurate animation), is a technical feat in film-making.

As much of a spoof on animation and animated films as it is on the role that woman is expected to play in them.

She grew in a vase, sticky with dreams

Hidden behind her eye

Till the kings in sadness ran with her, to save her

Run oily into the sky. (From THE HUMPBACK ANGEL). Joanna Woodward

BEFORE AND AFTER FRENCH KISSING Sara Pirozek, 1985, 10 mins

A comparison of the myths of psychoanalysis and fairy tales to the real experience of growing up with other girls. Close-ups of texts are distorted as are scenes of childhood. Some images are very clear; others are re-filmed. When edited together, they belittle and dismiss the myths of childhood and sexuality.

Before french kissing, so dark, hiding under plastic sheeting in the back yard. I didn't know about kissing much at all. I had a lot more sex friends then - before the kissing ritual - I can't remember what we did really, dark all around that time. Hot good summers when you wouldn't talk about who belonged to who - we just went to the pool, ate wagon wheels, learnt to drive and played sex, but no kissing. In the winter we played in the snow. It was more or less the same. All the boys were cowboys, in their boots.

Sara Pirozek

THE LADIES ROOM Jane Dilworth, 1985, 15 mins

Set in a ladies room in a disco, this film stands out from the other films in both programmes because of its different form and intentions. It humorously follows the tribulations of two girls who are after the same boy. The disco itself is only occasionally glimpsed so that the enduring image is of the riotously coloured shirts in the strife ridden, but cosy, neon-lit ladies room.

FIRST COMMUNION Martine Thoquenne, 1985, 13 mins

As in many of the other films, FIRST COMMUNION uses the technical devices of re-filming and super-imposition so that an overall surface texture is created. It is in the content of the images and sound that a contrast is made; young girls marching down the street in cowgirl costumes, children receiving their first communion and little girls playing in a room are set against men celebrating in a French cafe, a priest giving a blessing and an angry voice-over which exposes the crimes of a man who rapes his stepdaughter. Martine Thoquenne, by using these juxtapositions of content and by creating a sense of continuity with a surface texture, transforms the personal account of an innocent girl who has been a victim of incest, into an indictment of the man and the society which have forced her into a sense of secret shame for a crime which they have committed against her.

Incest, the sexual molestation of a child by any person whom that child sees as a figure of trust or authority, parents, relatives (whether natural or adoptive), family friends, babysitters, youth leaders, social workers, teachers, church officials, priests, etc. We see the questions of blood relationship and taboo as red herrings which obscure the central issue; the irresponsible exploitation of children's ignorance, trust and obedience. Incest is the abuse of power.

Selected from I.S.C. (1981) by Martine Thoquenne

TO BE SILENT IS THE MOST PAINFUL PART Cheryl Edwards, 1985, 5½ mins

The construction of a set of projected b&w slides of master paintings, with the figure of a woman (in colour) being manipulated into the same poses as the woman portrayed, is the centre for this film which uses colour against b&w, pain against beauty, and the stillness of the images against a hissing soundtrack of whispers so that the meaning within the title becomes crystal clear.

Exploring a Woman's relationship with Her-Self in the context of a male dominated, heterosexual society. Exposing roles, repression, ambiguities and possibilities.

Cheryl Edwards

TERMINALS Sandra Lahire, 1986, 15 mins

A stream of consciousness, TERMINALS is an attack on nuclear power and radiation which uses many of the devices evident in the work of the other film-makers in both programmes. A coarseness of grain and colour with a choppy style of editing, when applied to seemingly everyday objects and scenes, takes on new significance; the flag waving outside a nuclear plant, the printout on a computer, the nuclear trains, the barbed wire, the beach, the men fishing, the children playing and the woman climbing the stairs which are enveloped in sunlight all take on a new, allegorical meaning. Even the film-maker's own body, when revealed, is protected by the web of her own skill at film-making which reverses many of the ways of seeing and manipulating film.

The 'work faster' ethic is written on the door to the terminals and hundred-letter words swim before the eyes. Hazards to fertility or risks of female cancers (Breast, Uterus) are not criteria in setting 'acceptable' levels of exposure to radiation at work. At the Visual Display Terminal, women are staring directly at a source of radiation. In the Pacific, shadows of people are already printed on the wall. Here the deadly connection, between nuclear power and weaponry, has begun a Third War already. Bomb tests and waste disposal are the white man's cancer imposed on the people of the Pacific, and on the 'provincials' of Britain.

Women need to work in technology on our own terms instead of being railroaded into Manpower camps.

Sandra Lahire



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