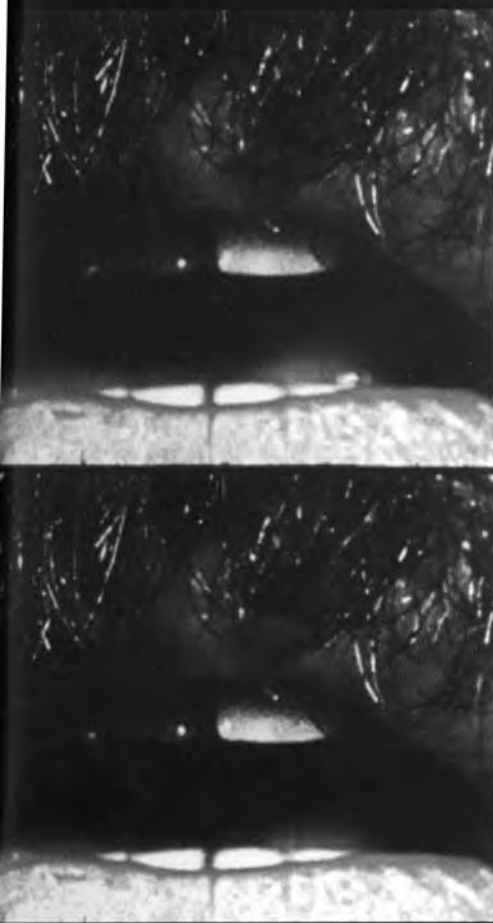


by Barbara Goslawski



Joyce Wieland's *Pierre Vallières*

1996 was the year that the Toronto International Film Festival all but gave up on experimental film. What I saw in Perspective Canada was either entertaining or informative—not a bad thing in itself—but, it's obvious that another important outlet for experimental film has dried up. The widely held assumption is that the general public is simply not interested. With the closing of so many local venues and the drying up of funds, is it time finally to admit that experimental film is irrelevant?

Thanks to Joyce Wieland's sudden surge in popularity, I would say "no." After years of fighting obscurity even within the experimental film community, many notable organizations suddenly have become interested in Wieland's work. There was an exhibition of her art work at the Bau-XI Gallery in Toronto. The *Toronto Star* published a feature article and no less than two weeks later, a glowing review by its top art critic, Christopher Hume. Earlier this year, the National Gallery in Ottawa mounted a major exhibition of her work, and the Cinematheque Ontario's

"Independents" series featured an evening of her films under its "Pioneers" program. This is a lot of attention for someone who hasn't produced a piece of art since the mid-1980s due to illness.

On the one hand, Wieland is recognized as a major artist, and on the other, she has been ignored. I checked *Visionary Film*, one of the seminal works of avant-garde film criticism. P. Adams Sitney makes reference to Wieland only once (and misspells her name). Michael Snow's work is discussed over 58 pages. Jonas Mekas delivered a speech earlier this year at the American Center in Paris entitled the "Anti-100 Years of Cinema Manifesto" in which he artfully retells the creation myth to include the moment when God granted artists the gift of filmmaking. He lists those who were blessed. Joyce Wieland's name is not among the chosen. The current surge in recognition of her work suggests that something in her art and films makes it worth reexamining; that it is topical. The earlier dismissal implies that her contemporaries were at a loss to understand how she fit in. What they didn't realize was that she stood out.

During the 1960s and '70s, poetic or philosophical considerations were the order of the day. This is not to say that there were no filmmakers at the time who mixed cultural-political issues with formal exercises; however, there were not many as skillful as Wieland in mixing both. In the brilliant simplicity of *Solidarity*, she offers a unique view of a strike. By focusing on legs and feet only, Wieland forces a complex contemplation of the nature of worker unrest. *Reason Over Passion* employs rigorous methods of repetition in its meditation on things Canadian. Wieland subjects the simplest icons like the flag and the national anthem to close scrutiny, while painstakingly contemplating the Canadian landscape. Adding to this mix a healthy dose of humour, she meticulously deconstructs, in mock-mathematical fashion, a certain phrase uttered by Prime Minister Trudeau. And who else but Wieland would present, in *Pierre Vallières*, a speech by a revolutionary in unrelenting close-up on his lips? As simple as her methods appeared, her body of work was difficult to categorize. Anyone attempting to discover, or impose, a pattern on the artistic activity of this time, would not find it easy to include Wieland's work. But as the latest screenings and gallery showings demonstrate, her

commitment to cultural and political issues such as feminism and nationalism, make her work still vital today.

Wieland's methods, in fact, coincide with recent developments in Canadian filmmaking. Now, the order of the day is either to inform or to entertain. Leaving the task of entertaining to the burgeoning commercial industry, independents have taken on the task of informing. This narrow divide leaves very little room for the traditional artistic considerations of the experimental film community. If "art for art's sake" was the slogan of the 1960s and '70s, it is no more. For better or worse, the focus is now on audience numbers and politically safe filmmaking. As a matter of survival, each genre has developed strategies to widen its audience appeal. That's why Wieland's body of work is so interesting: the issues she addresses are current and, more importantly, her films remind us that it is possible to make formally interesting cinema based on political and culturally relevant subjects. Unfortunately, this timely reminder has apparently not reached the people programming Perspective Canada. ■

**is it time
finally
to admit that
experimental
film is
irrelevant**

