Petting to CLIMAX:
Direct Cinema, Direct Sex, 1956-1970

BY Thomas Waugh

Ann Landers: *"Sex belongs in marriage. This is what it's for."*

Albert Ellis: *"I would recommend that teenagers be encouraged to pet to climax."*

Mary Winspear: *"And I've been trying to say look my dear if you don't have to, don't."*

Ann Landers: *"Sex without a good spiritual and emotional relationship is just like sneezing, it's just something that you get over with, but it doesn't mean anything."*

From Tanya Ballantyne Tree's *Merry-Go-Round* (1966)

Canadian film aficionados are a remarkably amnesiac crowd. The 1960s are progressively disappearing from our "best" lists, pruned of all but those one or two most familiar feature films that still haunt our short-term memory. When I mention *Merry-Go-Round* as one of my favourite Canadian films from the 1960s, and salaciously describe its remarkable scene of teenaged boys attending a strip club and salivating over a statuesque dancer taking it all off, followed by a graphic scene of one of the boys masturbating to a *Playboy* centrefold, I am stared at in disbelief, especially when I reveal the work's NFB provenance. If one goal of this special history issue of *Take One* is to uncover the hidden secrets of Canadian film history, then I nominate *Merry-Go-Round* as a prime candidate—not only because of its intrinsic merits as bold and fresh film art; not only because it might sum up even better than *Nobody Waved Good-Bye* where I personally was at as a pressured and horny 17-year-old egghead stuck in Guelph; not only because of director Tanya Ballantyne Tree's and cinematographer Martin Duckworth's later emergence as household names of our Canadian documentary-film heritage. *Merry-Go-Round* deserves rediscovery also because it hooks up with one of the largely unexamined issues of Canadian film history, our national cinemas' fateful encounter with the sexual revolution on its path to the present.

For, like many national cinemas, Canadian movies emerged into artistic modernity at the same time as they embraced sexual modernity—simultaneously, interactively, irreversibly— during the successive generations after the Second World War. The context of the Sexual Revolution (SR) is indispensable for understanding our cinemas of the 1960s. The SR is the backdrop for the first stirrings of a commercial, theatrical industry, for example in Larry Kent's great and recently restored sexploitation epic *High* (1967); for all those sober youth alienation and coming-of-age docudramas, both on the Anglo and the Québécois side of the divide, by emerging baby-boomer auteurs Don Owen, Claude Jutra, Gilles Groulx, Jacques Godbout, George Kaczender, Robin Spry, etc., most getting their start at the NFB; for the embryonic queer cinema detectable in David Secter's *Winter Kept Us Warm* (1965) and Claude Jutra's *À tout prendre* (1963), both most decidedly *not* at the NFB.

The SR and all its mythologizations over the last generation can be most helpfully understood from the perspective of Michel Foucault. It was not a radical break, he argued, but the inflexion of a curve, a tactical shift rather than a reversal in the deployment of sexuality that had been intensifying in Western culture since the 18th century - and incidentally in the cinema as well since its invention at the turn of the 20th century. Yes, it was only an inflexion, but let's not forget at the same time the perceptions of filmmakers, audiences and critics who lived during the baby-boomer era, who experienced what felt like a monumental dislocation, both in the social field and the cinematic one. As Albert Ellis's expert voice-over booms in *Merry-Go-Round*. "…there's been a profound sex revolution among the attitudes and the behaviour of the young people." Like other film historians following Barbara Ehrenreich's germinal analysis of the "male flight from commitment" in North America after the war, I would identify a first *Playboy* phase of the SR, one of male entitlement and consumption, which the cinema, and the documentary cinema in particular—as we shall see—played out and problematized in the 1960s. Thereafter, a second phase that has been called "the women's sexual revolution" would be played out offscreen and onscreen in the 1970s, laying the groundwork for queer and other extensions of that momentum in the 1980s and ever since.

Now lets look at documentary, first noting the uncanny historical convergence of breakthroughs in medical technology and in representational technology during that first *Playboy* phase. On the one hand is the Pill, and on the other hand the Nagra, or in general the 16mm sync-sound portable documentary technology that made possible the new documentary aesthetic of direct cinema (or cinéma-vérité, as North American anglophones usually called it, thinking they were being hip and French). Thus a new art form extended the field of public representation and visual commodification into previously untapped areas of private life, and at exactly the same time we had global shifts in social organization, identities and attitudes around sexuality, gender, reproduction and the family. These shifts have been conceptualized also precisely in terms of their bearing on private life, namely the "blurring of the distinction between private and public" according to historians John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman. Boundaries that had once seemed stable and clear were redrawn, escalating the war over the sexualization of the public sphere, the intrusion of the state and the marketplace into the private realms of fantasy, relationships and the body.

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There's another NFB documentary from the same period, *Ladies and Gentlemen…Mr. Leonard Cohen* (1965), where the young poet lets a camera crew follow him around and comments naked and wry from his on-screen bathtub about a man allowing strangers into his bathroom to observe him cleaning his body. The comment is pertinent but somewhat disingenuous, for the new situation is not about public surveillance of private hygiene (although that is also an issue within the SR, of course). Rather, to put it more aptly, it is about a group of straight male white middle-class intellectual filmmakers, including co-directors Don Owen and Donald Brittain, planting themselves in the private space of a male public figure, using the alibi of homosociality and the aesthetic of the every day to look at the male body, but disavowing this desire, using the mystique of the ordinary to camouflage the cult of sexualized celebrity flesh.

Image courtesy of the National Film Board.

Ladies and Gentlemen...Mr. Leonard Cohen

This entry of the camera into Leonard Cohen's bathroom—which may be a first such intrusion by filmmakers not involved in law enforcement, incidentally—posits on a more general level the naked, private, individual body as receptacle of the self. If this film and other films of the 1960s began to see the gendered sexual body as the site of identity, as the locus of cinematic and social discourse, it was a clear departure from earlier documentary discourses that largely attached such meanings to groups of bodies in social or economic formations and contexts.

This interface of documentary technology/aesthetics with the SR had not exactly leapt off the screen during the first years of the new documentary of the late 1950s and early 1960s. It seems that the indexical realist form par excellence was cautious and even prudish, entrenched in what Bill Nichols has called the "discourses of sobriet." There were admittedly a few important pockets of unabashed doxploitation around, such as *Mondo Cane* (1963). But these sex–and–violence voyeurism documentaries reflected the revolutionary societal shifts less vividly and later than every other sector of the cinema; documentary bringing up the rear well behind the underground cinema, the art cinema, the erotic and exploitation cinemas naturally, and even the still heavily censored commercial entertainment cinema.

Still, beginning about the time of the two films I am discussing in this article, from 1964–6, and certainly by the end of the 1960s, the direct cinema escalated its effort to testify to, understand and sometimes deflect the major shifts in sexual regimes going on in the world outside. This happened firstly in literal terms of subject matter, with the sudden flood of films coming out of the NFB on teenage sexuality and abortion and so on, slightly in advance of Euro–American documentary as a whole. It also happened in terms of the more tandential areas whose connections to sexuality were often disavowed, from baby–boomer youth culture to science and education. This work took root in both of direct cinema's emerging branches, observational (Fred Wiseman) and interactive (Emile de Antonio), as well as in the lingering expository mainstream (Walter Cronkite), all three of which come together in *Leonard Cohen* and *Merry–Go–Round* in the distinctive ironic or self-reflexive manner characteristic of so many NFB products of the decade.

Now lets come back and dissect more directly *Merry–Go–Round*, released the year after *Leonard Cohen*, by Ballantyne Tree, a director a generation younger than the established male directors of the Cohen film, a work which I rediscovered at the casual suggestion of its cinematographer Martin Duckworth (to whom I will come back shortly). As I've said the film was anomalous: it isn't every 21–year–old McGill philosophy and history grad who gets complete artistic control over her first film, then or especially now, nor every SR film that is more playful than sober about all those traumatic changes underway. But despite its exceptional status, *Merry–Go–Round* is still symptomatic of the filmic impulses at play in the SR wave, of their roots and subsequent outgrowths, of the range of sexual iconographies, problems and solutions they offer, and specifically of the dialectic of public/private that shapes them.

At first it might seem odd to select a largely dramatized work to launch this discussion of the interface of direct cinema and SR. This is partly because Ballantyne Tree's dramatizations seem to hark back to an earlier generation of NFB social–problem films of the late 1940s and 1950s; dark earnest docudramas

that have been banished as far from the canon as you can get. These earlier films use scripts and acting to tackle then daring subjects like labour conflict (*Strike in Town*, 1955), prostitution (*The Street*, 1957), mental illness (*The Feeling of Hostility*, 1948), unmarried pregnancy (*Woman Alone*, 1956) and drug addiction (*Monkey on the Back*, 1956). All of these films showed individual private conduct and identities impinging upon the public sphere as a "problem." They thus set in motion cultural assumptions about ethics, privacy and tact—in short, about stigma. Along the way these films also confronted the limitations of classical sound documentary technology in capturing the human dimensions of these issues: the NFB was not about to go out interviewing hookers on Yonge Street in 1956 even if the right mikes had existed, which they didn't—not quite yet.

So the docudrama recipe of dramatization, scripts and actors was the solution to the aesthetic problems, but it maintained its marginal characters within the framework of social stigma and victimization. Clearly by 1966, the sensitivity of the topic of adolescent sexuality, especially in the government and educational production sector, was still high enough to maintain the assumptions of the earlier decade about documentary ethics. But the dramatization is now rendered in the new improvisational sync–sound direct style using real social actors in real social space. (Interestingly, Ballantyne Tree would get into ethical hot water the following year with her more famous film, *The Things I Cannot Change*, where she abandoned the tactful dramatisation she imposed on middle-class sexuality, and assaulted the working–class–bound cycle of poverty with no–holds–barred direct observation, inadvertently humiliating her family subjects publicly; this film would become an object lesson in problematical ethics for generations to come.) In *Merry–Go–Round*, docudrama performances are shaped by Ballantyne Tree's finely tuned peer–group complicity; the protagonists and the target audience are spared the victim construction of the earlier films. We no longer have the tragic sexworker of *The Street* as victim. (As my school–teacher mother would have put it back then in Guelph, Kathy drops her "ing's" and smokes and drinks. No wonder she's on the street!) Instead, we now have the sympathetic and horny teenage couple—Eric and Jenny—not as problem "other," but as self, as subject.

Ballantyne Tree's incipient feminism notwithstanding, in *Merry–Go–Round* it's primarily the male body, as in Leonard Cohen, that embodies the subjectivity of the film. The camera just can't stay away from the bathroom, but now the childlike homo-social bathing body and the athlete's body are in play, rather than Cohen, the charismatic poet exhibitionist. (It was Duckworth's memory of shooting the astonishing group shower scene featuring the 17–year–old Eric and his high–school classmates that triggered my sudden interest in this film.) "The male body was considered public territory," recalled Ballantyne Tree 25 years later, but it is a body whose sexuality is mostly carefully deflected by hygiene, homosociality and sports. The desiring body does come up later, but as consumer rather than object, when we see Eric in the coded masturbation scene tossing aside the well–thumbed *Playboy* magazine and its opened centrefold, and when we see Eric and his buddies visit a (heterosexual) strip club (Rockhead's, the famous black Montreal jazz club, which was clearly by the mid–1960s using strip acts to keep the doors open). No doubt because of its alibis and codes, the male body has not been sufficiently acknowledged as an icon of the 1960s documentary canon, especially American.

The flurry of sports and pop celebrity films at the start of the decade ended up with the youth revolt and social marginality films of the end. Canadian films never really developed the extreme voyeuristic attachment to the male body, principally marginalized, evinced in their U.S. counterparts where naked or all–but–naked child molesters and psychotics, drag queens, surfers, soldiers, tribals and rock fans suddenly became common currency (in *Titicut Follies*, *The Queen*, *The Endless Summer*, *In the Year of the Pig*, *Dead Birds* and *Woodstock* respectively). Allan King's voyeuristic *A Married Couple* (1970) would be the Canadian exception that proves the rule, though his yuppie patriarchal advertising executive in his bikini briefs is hardly marginal. All that documentary beefcak— or rather crypto–beefcake—conveyed with the luminous physicality that the new technology encouraged, together with the surprising invisibility of cheesecake (a pattern that was reversed in the erotic sector of the mainstream cinema proper), simply confirmed the sensibility of male entitlement, taken for granted male subjectivity that was the underpinning of the *Playboy* phase.

Tanya Ballantyne Tree

In *Merry–Go–Round*, the female body gets a different treatment indeed. Although Jenny's performance is authentic and nuanced, the revelation of both her body and her subjectivity is restricted (she even keeps her coat on during the prelude to the surrender of her virginity). In terms of her sexuality, she is more compliant with the desire of her boyfriend than acting on her own desire, but admittedly Masters and Johnson, the American gurus of the clitoral orgasm, had not been absorbed by either the protective Ballantyne Tree or the still patriarchal NFB. Elsewhere in *Merry–Go–Round*, the female body retains much of its traditional otherness, female authorship and female expert commentary notwithstanding. This is due to Ballantyne Tree's proto-feminist discourse of the female body as public territory, not as desexualized homosocial subject, but as commodity object of representation that is explicitly sexual rather than disavowed (alongside the centrefold, we see a hard–hitting barrage of lipstick and other sexist ads in the consumerist visual environment of rue Ste–Catherine). Ballantyne Tree's refusal of the camera voyeur with regard to her heroine is entirely set aside in the sequence–Canadian is all the more "other." She is performed by a real–life social actor, conveyed as spectacle through the boys' eyes, but with her sensuous glamour and dignity surprisingly uninflected by Ballantyne Tree's earlier reticence or by any hints of the feminist moralism that would come to the surface a decade later in Studio D.

The final image of the film shows the couple silhouetted against a window, after they have finally, by implication, "gone all the way." This lyrical but ambiguous freeze–frame establishes the couple itself as the centre of the film, and avoids the sexual morality and victim sympathy of earlier work. The image offers a very 1960s projection of feelings and relationships, pleasures and bodies as ultimate gauges of morality, not rules and prohibitions. In short, what they used to warn us about in Guelph Sunday School as the "new morality" was being promulgated by our very own government film studio!

Apart from the conventionally sentimental aestheticism around the heterosexual couple, the film's approach to the social issue docudrama format is decidedly irreverent. The chorus of three contradictory experts—the advice columnist, the permissive psychotherapist and the tolerant motherly educator—are gently satirized in the scenes of floor hockey that precede the famous shower passage (myths of working off all those hormones). Later, this send–up is taken even further when Ann Landers's admonition to teenage daters to avoid temptation by "do[ing] something" is mocked by accelerated shots of skiing, swimming and moviegoing. The film is topped off by a virtuoso machine-gun montage where the three expert voices, both interdictory and sympathetic, literally cancel each other out. This demolition of the expert voice–over—at long last—is the final signal not only of a new sexual morality but also of a shift in documentary modes. Rather than the closure of the earlier expository conventions entrenched by John Grierson, this open ending ushers in the age of modernist ambiguity and interactivity. Imagine the scene in the NFB mixing studio when the pretty young McGill upstart must have had to cajole the technicians into having the three voice–overs drown each other out!

Cinematographer Martin Duckworth, 11 years older than Ballantyne Tree, is known now as the cinematographer of the English–Canadian New Left both inside and outside the NFB. In 1970, he might rather have been identified with the youth film and the sexual revolution, and not only because of his appearance in what must be the only film in world history where the entire crew appears nude (the 1970 NFB / Swedish co–production *Pure and Untouched*)! Duckworth's camera virtuosity belongs already to a second English–Canadian generation of direct cinema, a moment less of discovery than of perfected fluidity, bringing the spectator not only into the showers, the gym and the dim strip club, but also into elevators, bedrooms, smoky folk clubs and the interior of a car parked on the midnight make–out spot on Mount Royal, peering over the shoulders of the necking couple. Duckworth's camera confronts whatever barriers between public and private space remain, between private experience and public roles.

Duckworth's technical virtuosity, almost taken for granted by 1966, masks an aesthetic and an ethic that become explicit in his archetypal youth movie, *Christopher's Movie Matinee*, shot for Mort Ransen in 1968. One of the teenage protagonists is visibly distressed about having been filmed in a "terribly personal" moment of kissing her boyfriend the previous day. "You broke into something personal and that upset me," she complains. Duckworth's voice responds: "It's only the personal things that are worth filming," followed by an unrepentent zoom in on her tears. In a nutshell, this transformation of sex into cinematic discourse, as Saint Michel would say, enacts the new aesthetic of the sexual private as public, and the SR ethic of sexuality as the core of personal identity.

Duckworth, along with Ransen, Derek May, Robin Spry and others formed a kind of straight-male auteur network in the English studios at the Film Board in the late 1960s, specializing in the youth and sexuality genres. In keeping with Duckworth's maxim, they veered toward personal documentary, often autobiographical and confessional in sensibility, interrogating the sexual subjecthood as well as parenthood and husbandhood that accrue to male heterosexual identity. Duckworth as cameraman on May's 1970 autobiographical film, *A Film for Max*, for example, intimately and tenderly interviews the director about his fears of losing his wife, Patricia Nolin, whom, incidentally, he has just shown topless. This confessional moment in direct cinema history has not been sufficiently explored by film historians, if at all. Aside from anticipating Michel Foucault with its enactment of both surveillance and confession, such films articulate both the male entitlement and homosocial intimacy, the male anxiety and crisis, that epitomize the *Playboy* phase of the SR in other cinematic sectors as well.

In direct cinema, paradoxically, this *Playboy* moment also points ahead to the second women's phase of the SR and of the sexual documentary. In this second phase, those invited into private space are not strangers but sisters, and the invitation would be not so much into the bathroom, as into the kitchen, the bedroom, the nursery, the laundry room and onto the consciousness raising sofa, one day even onto the mattress. The NFB didn't touch queer of course for a very long time, until it went all the way in the 1990s, but that's a merry–go–round for another day. In the 1970s, Duckworth the cinematographer was becoming Duckworth the director, eclipsing Tanya Ballantyne Tree who was symptomatically raising her own kids, her movies on the back burner for a while—a "What ever happened to…?" hiatus that ill–befitted one of the underacknowledged pioneers of Canadian cinema.

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