



Joyce Wieland, 1931–1998: One of the founders of Canadian experimental cinema and our most passionate nationalistic filmmaker.

Canadian cinema has so few pioneers

that each loss counts as significant, Joyce Wieland's especially so. Our most passionate filmmaker passed away on June 27, 1998, after a decade-long struggle with Alzheimer's disease. An internationally acclaimed painter and filmmaker, she was the first female living artist to have a solo show at the National Gallery of Canada and at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Wieland was a major figure in the avant-garde film scene of the 1960s and '70s and, together with Michael Snow, was one of the founders of Canadian experimental cinema. She may also be the first underground filmmaker to make the transition to the commercial film industry and was certainly only one of a handful of women feature-film directors in Canada at that time. Her body of work is rich and varied, mixing formal and political concerns, always with a touch of humour, and presented from a distinctly feminine point of view.

Joyce Wieland produced many of her films during the early 1960s in New York City where she had moved with her husband, Snow. There, they quickly joined the ranks of the city's underground filmmakers and became key players in a movement later to be known as Structuralism. It was marked by a formal rigor, exploring the physical properties of the medium. Together with a formidable list of filmmakers—including Ernie Gehr, Paul Sharits and Hollis Frampton—Wieland achieved international acclaim with works that proved important not only in avant-garde film circles, but within the history of cinema itself. She directed such classics as *Sailboat* (1968), a minimalist, playful and profound film consisting of a series of shots of a sailboat moving across the screen with the word "sailboat" titled across the top. In its simplicity, the film draws attention to the screen and to the perimeters of the frame. Moreover, the titles destroy any illusion of reality, underscoring the flatness of the screen. The superimposition of titles would become a hallmark of Wieland's cinematic style.

An Appreciation of the Films of Joyce Wieland

By Barbara Goslawski

"I think of Canada as female. All the art I've been doing or will be doing is about Canada. I may tend to overly identify with Canada."

Joyce Wieland

It was when she pushed beyond the boundaries of Structuralism, however, that Wieland's films really flourished. She stood out from the movement as someone who followed its core principles but explored different themes. She focused on the medium's physical properties and declared cinema to be a means of political action and a site for feminist inquiries. In *Water Sark* (1965)—set in the traditionally female domain of the kitchen table—Wieland submits everyday objects to a playful yet meticulous formal exercise. Each one is filmed through mirrors, prisms, even a glass of water. This process reveals the rich textures and colours of these objects, giving them a sensuality that would otherwise go unnoticed. The film is self-reflexive, focusing our attention on the woman behind the camera who submits her own body to these self-same transformations. Wieland returned to the kitchen table with *Rat Life and Diet in North America* in 1968, a study of her pet gerbils. She filmed them in extreme close-up among cups and dinner plates, eliminating all sense of spatial depth and place, producing luscious images teeming with texture and colour.

More and more, Wieland's films were distinguished by this sensuality, setting her apart from her male counterparts in the Structuralist movement. Interestingly, *Rat Life and Diet in North America* contains a narrative thread, transforming the gerbils into political prisoners who escape their American oppressors, played by Wieland's cats. They make their way to Canada where they set up an organic farm and appear to live happily ever after until an invasion by the United States. Influenced by Vietnam War protests, this political allegory is one of the most hilarious denouncements of American imperialism found in any genre. The film also betrays a basic Canadian fear and coincides with Wieland's increasingly nationalistic concerns. Discussions of such concerns were commonplace in Canada at the time and Wieland felt drawn in, even from as far away as New York City.

Rat Life and Diet in North America marked the beginning of a shift in her career. Moving away from the purely formal, Wieland plunged head-long into the political. As she did, she felt herself both disconnected from and rejected by the very movement that had initially inspired her. "I felt there was a downgrading of my work. It didn't get its proper place, its proper consideration" (from an original *Take One* interview, Vol. 3, No.2). Wieland believed she was excluded from screenings and discussions and by the time she made her first feature-length experimental film, *Reason Over Passion*, in 1969, she "was made to feel in no uncertain terms by a few male filmmakers that I had overstepped my place, that in New York, my place was making little films." (ibid)

While *Reason Over Passion* marked a series of endings in Joyce Wieland's film career, it also proclaimed a new beginning. The film confirmed her commitment to a political cinema, especially to a Canadian one. With *Reason Over Passion* Wieland focused her attention directly on Canada, submitting it to one of her typical microscopic analyses. Inspired by the famous quote by Pierre Trudeau, with *Reason Over Passion* Wieland created a meditation on and celebration of things Canadian. During the course of the film she trots out all the icons she can find, including the prime minister's face, the flag and a fully orchestrated version of *O Canada*. She also treats us to her own silent version of the anthem, enacted in extreme close-up so that we can see the variations in her lips as she sings. An extended cross-country journey comprises the bulk of the film, featuring travelogue-type footage shot from various moving vehicles. The conventions of the travelogue film are immediately subverted, however, by grainy images, rephotographed and shot by a hand-held camera. Our sense of time and place is uprooted as the images race across the country, giving us a strange sense of unity. Despite this speed, we feel the slow progress of the film, heightened by the soundtrack's relentless, repetitive beep. Wieland superimposes titles over these images, dozens of scrambled permutations on the phrase, "reason over passion," eventually rendering it meaningless. While these phrases are visually linked to the landscapes on the screen, one does begin to wonder what these nonsensical phrases have to do with the scenes presented, thus eliminating any connection between the prime minister's statement and the country he represents. In the end, *Reason Over Passion* is a powerful nationalistic statement, examining what would become throughout all of her work some of Wieland's favourite themes, such as French-English relations, the

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Canadian landscape tradition, the power of this country's symbols and Trudeaumania.

At the beginning of the 1970s Wieland moved back to Canada. By this time her artistic focus rested squarely on Canadian themes and she realized that she would reach the greatest number of people by making a theatrical feature-length film. In a move that still seems surprising today, this world-renowned avant-garde filmmaker began to work on a feature-film script. Originally titled *True Patriot Love: A Canadian Love, Technology, Leadership and Art Story*, it later became *The Far Shore* (1976). Wieland had been

studying the paintings of Tom Thomson and decided to loosely base the film on his life. Set after the First World War, the film became a period melodrama centred on Eulalie, a French-Canadian woman recently married to an English-Canadian engineer, Ross Turner. Eulalie realizes too late that she has married a philistine who measures the value of a painting by its size and she is horrified by his plans to ravage the northern landscape. She falls in love with Tom McLeod, a painter, and they run away together into the wilderness. The lovers are hunted down by her husband and his equally boorish friend and shot to death after a dramatic canoe chase on the lake in Bon Echo Park.

The storyboard for *The Far Shore* is made up

The following are 12 of these illustrations which comprise the shooting script for the film which first appeared in *Cinema Canada* No. 23, Nov. 1975.



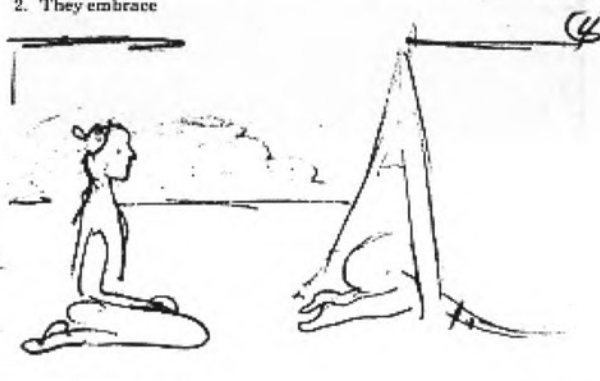
1. Eulalie and Tom are free at last



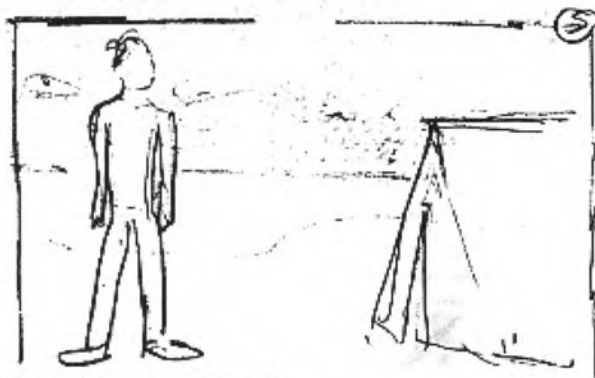
2. They embrace



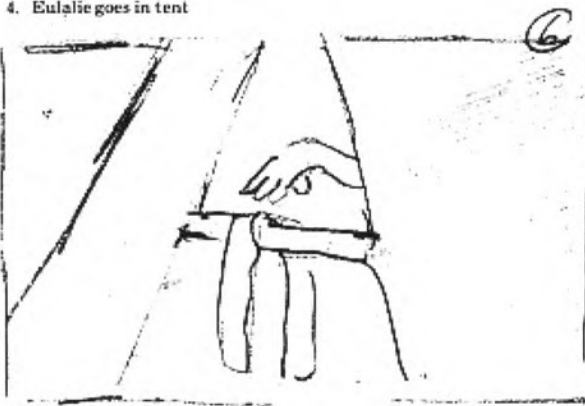
3. She leaves him, goes to tent



4. Eulalie goes in tent



5. Do whole master shot from here



6. Eulalie hangs up ribbon

The story of *The Far Shore* is as much about its production as it is about the finished film. For more than five years, Wieland toiled not only with the creative aspects of developing the film but with the financial ones. The process even landed her in the hospital for a time and she swore it nearly killed her. At the outset, Wieland formed a partnership with Judy Steed who would coproduce the film, but the women realized that they needed a third, more experienced producer. The pair went through a handful of hopefuls, none of whom could raise any money, and they spent many tedious hours sending out letters to prospective

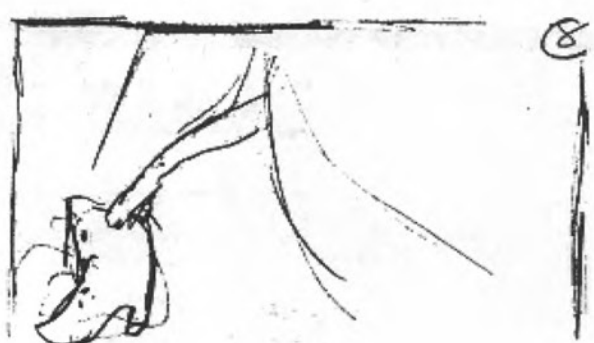
investors. Finally, Pierre Lamy, producer of Claude Jutra's *Kamouraska* and a number of other features, agreed to act as executive producer. According to a 1976 article in *The Canadian* by Douglas Fetherling, this was the first time English and French Canadian filmmakers worked together so closely. The film was financed by Famous Players, Baton Broadcasting, *The Toronto Star*, the Canadian Film Development Corp. and a handful of individual investors, with an eventual budget of \$450,000. This was enough to proceed with the production but not nearly enough to make the type of film that Wieland and Steed envisioned.

of some 2000 drawings by Joyce Wieland.

"Through a great deal of courage, determination and energy, Joyce Wieland produced a feature film at a time when it was an extremely difficult task for most filmmakers, let alone a woman."



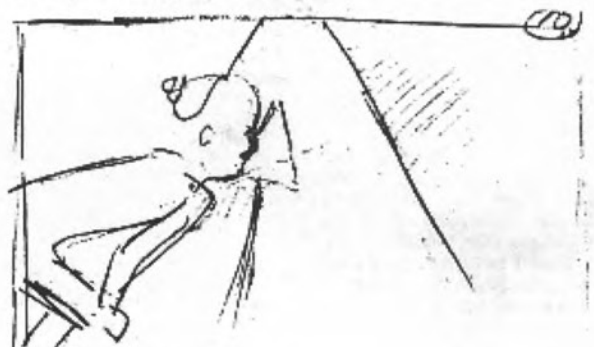
7. CU Tom looks at tent embarrassed



8. Eulalie puts boot out



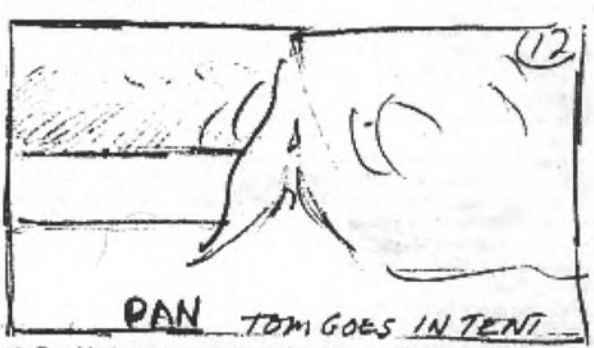
9. Hangs out her stockings



10. Med shot: Tom looks in tent



11. CU Eulalie looks out at Tom



12. Rumble in tent - sounds of laughter and love - a shriek, tent shakes



Joyce Wieland's films are being presented at the Cinematheque Ontario in a retrospective that runs from Oct. 15–22.



FILMOGRAPHY

All films produced, conceived, directed, shot and edited by Joyce Wieland unless otherwise noted.

- *Tea in the Garden*
(Warren Collins and Joyce Wieland)
1958, 4m, b&w, sound, 16mm
- *A Salt in the Park*
(Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland)
1959, 20m, b&w, sound, 16mm
- *Larry's Recent Behaviour*
1963, 18m, colour, sound, 8mm
- *Patriotism I*
1964, 4m, colour, sound, 8mm (blown up to 16mm in 1980s)
- *Patriotism II*
1964, 3m, colour, silent, 8mm (blown up to 16mm in 1980s)
- *Water Sark*
1964–65, 14m, colour, sound, soundtrack by Carla Bley, Mike Mantler, Ray Gessel, 8mm (blown up to 16mm in 1980s)
- *Peggy's Blue Skylight*
1964–66, 11m, b&w, sound, music by Paul Bley, 8mm (blown up to 16mm in 1985, re-edited and printed on colour stock)
- *Barbara's Blindness*
(Betty Ferguson and Joyce Wieland)
1965, 17m, colour, sound, 16mm
- *Handtinting*
1967–68, 5m30s, colour, silent, 16mm
- *1933*
1967–68, 4m, colour, sound, 16mm
- *Sailboat*
1967–68, 3m, colour, sound, 16mm
- *Catfood*
1968, 13m, colour, sound, 16mm
- *Rat Life and Diet in North America*
1968, 14m, colour, sound, 16mm
- *Dripping Water*
(Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland)
1969, 10m, colour, sound, 16mm
- *Reason Over Passion*
1967–69, 80m, colour, sound, 16mm
- *Pierre Vallières*
1972, 30m, colour, sound, 16mm
- *Solidarity*
1973, 11m, colour, sound, 16mm
- *The Far Shore*
1976, 105m, colour, sound, 35mm, also released in 16mm
exp Pierre Lamy p Judy Steed and Joyce Wieland d Joyce Wieland sc Brian Barney from original story by Wieland ph Richard Leiterman ed George Appleby, Brian French m Douglas Pringle with Céline Lomez, Frank Moore, Lawrence Benedict, Sean McCann
- *A and B in Ontario*
1984, 17m, b&w, sound, 16mm
- *Birds at Sunrise*
1986, 10m, colour, sound, 16mm

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Thanks to a couple of lucky breaks, they were able to make a film that still looks like it cost double the amount. They stumbled upon Sandy Best (an art collector, former classmate of Michael Snow's, and son of Charles Best, of Banting and Best fame) who donated his mansion in Rosedale for the shoot, eliminating the need to build an elaborate set. Perhaps more importantly, Wieland and Steed hired Richard Leiterman, the highly experienced and talented cinematographer, whose credits up to that point included Allan King's *A Married Couple* and Don Shebib's *Goin' Down The Road* and *Between Friends*. The combined visions of Wieland and Leiterman resulted in a visually sumptuous film reminiscent of Wieland's previous films yet visually suggestive of both 17th-century Dutch painting and the work of The Group of Seven. The strength of *The Far Shore* lies in the evocative tone set by the backgrounds; the key indicators of our heroine's state of mind, for her struggles and her eventual escape to freedom.

The Far Shore premiered at the 1976 Cannes Film Festival and opened theatrically in Canada later that year. In the end, though, it was a critical and box-office failure. There are those who champion the film, and certainly many more who appreciate the attempt, but for the most part its appeal is limited to Canada. Through a great deal of courage, determination and energy, Joyce Wieland produced a feature film at a time when it was an extremely difficult task for most filmmakers, let alone a woman. She was already famous as an experimental filmmaker and a painter, and could just as easily have remained so. By all accounts, however, she was a woman of her convictions, and once she had decided that she was going to give Canadians their own stories, there was virtually nothing that could stop her.

Sailboat

Soon after the arduous process of making *The Far Shore*, she made plans to adapt Margaret Laurence's book, *The Diviners*, and even considered directing a film about the Battle of the Plains of Abraham.

Wieland, however, abandoned cinema for a time, eventually returning only to experimental filmmaking. In a recent article in the *Toronto Star* (Sept. 8, 1996), *The Far Shore* producer Judy Steed recounts how Wieland "realized that her dream of helping to build an authentic English-Canadian film industry faced overwhelming obstacles." Steed admits that "Wieland was discouraged, at that point, by the copycat, B-movie mentality of many Canadian producers and investors." Unfortunately, for us as well as for her, the onslaught of Alzheimer's disease prevented any further thoughts on the subject. We will never know how Joyce Wieland might have affected the direction of the Canadian feature film industry, but I am certain that, had she been able to continue, her influence would have been substantial. ●

