



Images courtesy of Global Mechanic

Ann Marie Fleming – a.k.a. AMF – is a prolific independent filmmaker. Her 18 films, made over the past 14 years, range from experimental and animation to documentary and dramatic genres. They explore themes of family, history and memory in a continuing media critique.

At a recent Vancouver screening of her latest film, *Lip Service: A Mystery*, AMF stood before the packed house saying, "Why would anyone want to do this? I don't know." Clocking in at 45 minutes, each frame of *Lip Service* is digitally painted and filtered. The effect is both painterly and dreamy and looked stunning on 35mm film, projected on the large screen at a local commercial theatre. The protagonist of the film is a detective (played by Valerie Buhagiar) whose upper lip is missing. She narrates the story of her first job, which is the investigation of the disappearance of a young man's mother. In the process of her telling the story with a tough matter-of-factness, we learn that she is not who she seems to be. She uses her disfigurement as a veil between her inner self and the circumstances in which she finds herself. While the mystery is eventually resolved, the real purpose of *Lip Service* is a poignant observation about the central character's identity and the subtle transformation that happens to her despite her tough outer shell.

The painted and filtered effects are constant throughout the film, sometimes directing our attention to a particular story point, other times creating ambiguity in our interpretation of the images and the story they represent. Adding to the eye candy, animated sequences interact with the live-action footage to form another layer of narrative. So we have four

things going on at once – the voice of the narrator; the live-action footage; the manipulation of the footage; and an animated visual commentary of both the footage and the narration. It's a busy film to watch, but one that also lets you drift among these levels of story and image. Like the painterly effects, the voice of the narrator is a continuous ramble. It's not unlike the voice that lives inside your head, never taking a breath. The constant voice and moving graininess set up the dream-like tone that lets you float along with the story. "As some of you know, I'm very peripatetic," said AMF before she slipped out of the theatre and the screening began. I had to look up peripatetic in the dictionary. The OED defines it as "performed or performing while moving about." This is AMF and her film, *Lip Service*, precisely.

How did you develop the ideas behind Lip Service?

There were four separate events in my life having to do with missing persons and isolation that blended together to form the fictional narrative for *Lip Service*. When I was living in Toronto in 1995, I used to go for a weekly appointment across town. I ignored the street names because I had a landmark, a used-car-showroom marquee. You could see the marquee from miles away. One day, I drove right past my stop because the sign was gone. There was a news report on the radio about how they had found the body of a Jane Doe in her 30s when the concrete floor of the showroom had been demolished. It was determined that she had been there since the 1950s. I started to think about who this person might be. Maybe she was a post-war European immigrant,

THE PERIPATETIC METAPHORS OF *Lip Service*

An Interview with Ann Marie Fleming

BY LESLIE BISHKO



Lip Service ~ a mystery ~

someone with no family, no friends, looking for work. Then I met a doctor in Toronto who had last seen her son three years ago. She usually visited him once a month – he lived in Montreal – and when he didn't show up for one of their meetings, she went to his apartment and found it empty. She contacted the police and private investigators, but he was never found. Later I attended an artist residency at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in a castle outside of Stuttgart, Germany. I spent the first six months in the writers' wing. Most of the residents who were there went home from time to time. Sometimes in the snowy, bleak winter, I would find myself alone for days. The only way I would know if people were there is if they left their overshoes outside, in the hallway. I imagined that since I wasn't in regular contact with my family or friends, nor did I have a regular schedule, I could be gone for a couple of weeks before anyone would even think to ask about me. Later still, when I was travelling in Italy, I met a woman whose brother had moved to Canada several years earlier, and they were out of touch. When their mother was seriously ill, and subsequently died, she tried to contact her brother, but he had left his job and didn't leave a forwarding address. She had literally lost him. So you can see, the subject was on my mind.

I've made several works involving first-person monologues. I wanted to deal with issues that concerned me personally, but in another kind of voice. I created the character of the narrator, who is an out-of-work single woman in her 30s who has lost her upper lip due to an altercation with a dog. I've always been interested in the voice of an unreliable narrator ever since reading Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*. The narrator in *Lip Service* is so

obsessed with the way she thinks people look at her, because of her disfigurement, that she sees the whole world through this filter. She thinks of herself as a monster and creates a tough-guy persona to compensate for this. This is why I decided to animate the film. The original video footage is heavily processed and manipulated, with animated elements weaving in and out. We see her – and what she is looking at – filtered. However, where she sees ugliness, we see beauty. I decided to do it all digitally because I didn't have access to traditional film equipment at the time. I wanted to be able to do something in-house, so to speak. Something hermetic.

The main character's voice is the driving force of the film. What is it that makes her an unreliable narrator?

She is an unreliable narrator because she is so obsessed with her lip. What she sees as a severe mutilation colours how she thinks other people view her. As it is treated in the film, sometimes you can see something strange going on in her upper-lip region. Sometimes you can't. You don't really know how bad her lip thing is. You know much more about it through her narration than through what we actually see. Because she sees herself as a monster, she mistrusts everyone else's motives. We all have this potential for self-loathing and it completely colours our world at times – how we act, how we perceive others. Her self-image as a single woman in her late 30s who is unattractive, friendless and unemployed is justified by blaming these factors on her lip. I've been thinking of this unreliable narrator thing since reading *My Last Duchess*, and, in the manner of the Victorian novels, my detective doesn't even have a name. She doesn't even have an initial. She is trying to disguise herself as an everywoman, even while pointing out her unique particularities.



How did the filter metaphor work its way into the film?

My initial idea for this story was to be able to see the world filtered through the detective's eyes. I began production with the idea of rotoscoping over live-action images. I wanted to blend the complete casualness of shooting with a hand-held, mini-DV camera with the careful, meticulous world of animation. Richard Linklater's animated documentary *Figures of Speech*, though stylistically different from *Lip Service*, marries live action with animation and is a good example of the direction I wanted to take. My plan was to keep the live-action quality of the backgrounds and paint over the characters and props with Photoshop. As I experimented with different styles, I couldn't come up with anything that I liked. I wanted to make something that didn't look like digital out of a digital medium, but I didn't want it to look cartoony, and I ironically started playing around with the "real" filters in Photoshop, like photocopy, etc. I thought they were pretty beautiful, but instantly recognizable and clichéd as individual illustrations. To see them move was something else. I had originally wanted to play up the lip thing, and then I thought it was more interesting to leave it ambiguous. I wanted, even though I was using filters, to emphasize the handmade-ness, and had originally wet-erased the backgrounds in such a way that you clearly see the characters moving through an ever-radiating substance. The air around them was palpable. Because quite a few people were working on this film, there were issues of consistency, and I ended up going for a more erased background. The filters I used were a watercolour and a cross-hatching after a blow-up to film resolution. This was done in a batch-capture – it took several weeks to transform the 21,000 original mini-DV frames after I edited it – and then I did kind of a crash-colour timing. As well as hand-erasing around the characters, the detective's lip is smudged and the eyes of all the people are erased. Because the images are so painterly, I took a nod from Japanese animated films where they make the eyes larger for easier audience identification. I thought if they could see the actual eyes in *Lip Service*, it would be less alienating. The thing is, it works so well that after a very short time you don't even see the art working anymore. You are just following the story. Or, that's what it's like for me.

Without giving away the mystery, your detective does manage to find some answers by the end of the film. Does this mean that she also finds an identity and self-acceptance?

I don't know if she finds any answers. What she discovers is her own vulnerability as a single person out in the world, without friends, family or community. She doesn't need a lover or a child or anything like that, but she realizes how important community is and that it includes her. It's not something outside of her. She also comes to accept a new time in her life. She is dependent on other people and they on her on a day-to-day level. She learns this through her attachment to the young man she is helping, to whom she feels responsible. It's like she has to accept being an adult and the terrible things that can mean, rather than the fantasy role-playing that she's been trying to hang on to, a Lone Ranger version of herself. On the other hand, she's still a loser. She's a lousy detective. She's bad with money. But she does manage, for a while, to forget about seeing herself in terms of her lip.

How do you see Lip Service in context with your earlier work?

My work often incorporates the themes of family, history and memory, and there is always an acknowledgement of experience. My stories are often autobiographical. *Lip Service* is a fiction, but it brings a lot of people's stories together. And again, it's a first-person monologue. In terms of how it was made, *Lip Service* most resembles *You Take Care Now* [1989], which was a mixture of live-action video, film and animation. It plays around with different textures, trying to tell a slightly different story with the visuals rather than the sound or narration.

What's next for AMF?

Right now I'm working on a documentary about my great grandfather, Long Tack Sam, who was a famous, world-traveling Chinese vaudeville magician and acrobat. What I can't find in moving footage of his shows, I'm recreating through stills and illustrations. I hope to develop a dramatic feature-length script about his life story as well. I'm also keeping busy as head of independent production at Global Mechanic, which my partner, Bruce Alcock, and I started in the spring of 2000. We're making multimedia commercials and independent films.

What is your experience of making both commercial and independent work?

The commercial world quickly co-opts what independents are doing. I think independent animators should be part of that process, instead of having other people capitalize on their ideas and techniques. There is a lot to be learned in the commercial world. It would be nice to have more of a mix. At Global Mechanic we like to work with people from all types of disciplines. Commercials are not for everybody, but we like them because we're able to try out so many different techniques and the jobs don't last very long. Being able to experiment with different forms of image production with a decent budget is in some ways a dream. We haven't been that involved with other sectors of commercial animation, such as a series or features, as of yet. We like to be able to have a lot of creative input and we like to be able to change things to keep it interesting. Me, I like doing my independent work.

What excites you? What limits you?

My animated work is quite hermetic. I'm just starting to work with other people. It's driven by the technology, I guess. I need other people to do what I can only talk about. I like to think of myself as part of a film culture, an art-practicing culture, not just an animation culture. There are a lot of really talented people out there. I'm always inspired by other people's work and I'm always thrilled to see people turn out independent work for reasons that do not come from the forces in the marketplace.



TAKE ONE