



CHEEZIE VOGUE

THE
ESSENTIAL
MODERN
CINEMA
POVERA
OF
COLIN
CAMPBELL

Colin Campbell as Mildred in *Woman from Malibu*

BY Randy Gledhill

"I'm the only 'art star' in Sackville. You can check the phone book. I'm the only one listed." (*Sackville, I'm Yours*)

When Colin Campbell unexpectedly passed away last October at the age of 59, a remarkable body of irreverent, witty and profoundly personal video art works was brought to an untimely close. Campbell's pioneering contributions to media art are fundamental to understanding the historical development of the art form. He was acknowledged as one of our greatest contemporary artists. As the celebrated auteur of some 40 original video works, he achieved a rare unanimous vote of critical approval. His work found immediate and continued international success in prestigious festivals, symposia, broadcasts, biennials, museums and gallery exhibitions. Major personal retrospectives were curated in 1990 and 1993. Inclusion of his works is an essential component to every important video collection or archive.

Since 1972, Campbell created an evolving laboratory of distinctive works. These productions fly in the face of the established and prevailing notions of television and film, yet are among the most exuberant and penetrating contemporary cinematic works produced here – or anywhere – in any genre. Campbell's oeuvre speaks with a humility and a perspicuous brevity of form that is a continual relief to a medium usually long on production value and short on intelligence. Although he chose to work within the parameters of low-budget, independent video, Campbell's adroit, inventive approach to storytelling compares substantively with the most influential auteurs anywhere working under the umbrella of film or media-based cinema. Behind a deceptively unsophisticated veneer lay an intellectually astute examination of narrative cinematic structure and a cognitive dramatic fluency that transcends the limitations of technology.

"Campbell creates temporary disturbances through irony and other transgressions. If his work has any ability, it is to be found in the disquieting consistency of subversion." (*Colin Campbell: Otherwise Worldly* by Bruce W. Ferguson)

Campbell's works explore fractured multiple territories. The stories revel in dualities that parody, skew and ultimately reinvent popular notions of glamour, sophistication, celebrity, sexuality and modernity. They careen forward, unapologetically transparent, sketchy yet fully developed, scripted but spontaneous, playful though serious, naive but sophisticated, camp and...well, they are definitely camp. The plots unfold toward an implied certain resolution, then veer off in a new direction, slipping into a new territory, peeling away the artifice, jump-cutting to a new subtext. We are kept off-kilter, suspicious of the intent and complicit in the farce being perpetrated. Intellectual pretensions are continually imploded.

To Campbell it all began with storytelling. "I think everybody likes stories," he told Sue Ditta in *A Work in Progress: An Interview with Colin Campbell*. "If you can tell a good story instead of something that appears to be merely confessional or diaristic, you probably will have an audience that is interested in what you are saying. If you can bind the viewer up with a persona that makes them emphatic, that is a more interesting way to do it."



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This is the homespun cousin of structural postmodernism, showing both the artifice and the strategy, pulling back the curtain of illusion to share the deception, speaking from both sides of the mouth, simultaneously constructing and deconstructing the fiction. This Oz is always just an elaborate dream. I am tempted to draw parallels between Campbell and his contemporary internationalist film auteurs – Fassbinder, Godard, Jarman, Anger, Resnais, Snow, Kuschner, Warhol, et al. The deconstructionist gods do share common narrative territories. Many of Godard's famous quips about the nature of his own filmmaking can be used to describe Campbell's works. Yes, they generally have a beginning, middle and end; and yes, it is seldom in that order. Campbell sets about to tell his own intimate stories in his own personal way, through whatever means is available. He is never thinking in terms of appropriation, but he is not operating in a vacuum. Campbell's work is informed. We all go to the movies, honey. Surprise, surprise.

Campbell remains his own greatest invention. He displays an incredible knack for comedy and feeling for comedic timing through an amazingly diverse (and entertaining) range of characters. In his early works, his multiple identities are concerned with simply delivering a monologue directly into or slightly askew of the seeing eye of the camera. Throughout his more elaborate works featuring multiple actors, the personal monologue continues as an internal diegetic narration. Coming full circle, his brilliant late works allow us privilege to new personae, again addressing the lens to speak to us directly. By allowing us confederacy to the gossipy confessional disclosures, we are made complicit in the fictional deceit. This intimacy creates an almost interactive illusion of camaraderie. The experience of watching becomes participatory and personally inclusive.

Campbell's many fictional escapades tread a territory somewhere between kitsch, avant-garde, gender studies and *I Love Lucy*. His unique, hybrid body of work, perhaps inadvertently, defines the notion of postmodern Canadian urbane. With his demise, we lose some of our most enduring femme fatales – genuine homegrown movie stars all. We mourn the loss of the triple-threat sisters: Mildred, Robin and Colleena; we will miss the future hijinks of Art Star, Anna, Moira, Mary, Colleeta and their numerous colourful co-conspirators. Their wit and wisdom will be missed more than they ever

knew. Without them our world has become a decidedly more linear place.

Sexual definitions as we know them don't apply to this brave new world. Campbell's work raises the bar, defining a new skewed behavioural model for society. It's back to the drawing board for Masters and Johnson. There can be no straight, gay, androgyny, transy, fairy or fey. There are no nancy girls, cross-dressers, pansies, butches, flip-flops or ponces. Things here are no longer defined by former sexual codes or conduct. All are beautiful in their own way. All are comfortable in their new fictitious skin. The only way to describe these folk is as just plain "critters." And so they live in perfect harmony. Theirs is a better place. And to make matters even more interesting, their emperor has found a whole trunk of new clothes.

"Why does she call herself Ms. Susan?"
"That's easy...if you call yourself Miss...you're single. If you call yourself Mrs.... you're married. But if you call yourself Ms....it means you're bisexual."
(*Bad Girls*)

Typically, the stylized dramas proceed through breezy narrative twists and turns to eventually arrive at a logical but totally unexpected conclusion. Everything begins slightly askew then is spun deliriously off-kilter. In a rare reversal of established sense, fiction becomes stranger than fact. The bevy of wacky characters unflinchingly become endearing to us, like those odd-ball relatives we all have but can't quite believe we are related to. At this Betty Ford clinic, Elizabeth Taylor is as dotty as our favourite aunt. Like us, they are slightly south of the archetypal classical ideal. Like us, they are absolutely gorgeous. We revel in wishing it were our own reflection. In the oddly naive geek-chic loop of their own self-proclaimed perfection, participants drift contentedly within their eccentricity, marching to their own drummer. Performers are as peculiar as the kooky characters they portray. Talent ranges from brilliant, to good, to adequate, to embarrassing. It's all so revealing, inviting, seductive, sophomoric, pretentious – so desirable. Everything is so painfully amateurish when art imitates life. It's all, of course, absurdly hilarious.



Colin as Coleeta Sackville-West in *Dishevelled Destiny*; photo credit: Martha Newbigging

Consumer-video technology demands low-end production. Hang a Venetian blind on a brick wall and it's a window. Place a plant in front and it becomes a restaurant. Project a slide on the wall and you are transported to Rome. Unabashedly direct, the productions revel in their own faux facade with an almost conspiratorial glee. Campbell's work is always modestly opportunistic in the way it integrates available resources. The early work is recorded on half-inch black and white, unedited, with a Sony PortaPac. Over the next decade (as basic technology is made available through the art community) straight-cut editing introduces new narrative devices, intercut fragments, parallel storylines, the occasional reverse shot and multiple points of view. As consumer technology advances, the work appropriates the available means. The final works are shot on Hi 8 and digitally edited. This idiot savant is a crafty fox. High camp on a low budget. This work is not only fiscally responsible. It's actually financially successful.

What defines a great Canadian film? What defines a great Canadian filmmaker? We are generally a modest, self-effacing culture, yet we constantly try to measure our success against some unobtainable big-time foreign acceptance. We crave international commercial success but have no viable homegrown support, no real distribution network. Gotta make it. Gotta make it. Gotta make it. Oh, Canada - get over it. In the words of actress Jackie Burroughs, the reason she chooses Canada is: "There is no fear of failure because there is no possibility of success." Campbell's work is free from the fear of failure. It's successful. He summarily dismisses the notion of his endeavour as industry. He utilizes film (video) as a convenient storytelling tool and searches out the most economical, least complicated means to realize his stories. The end is greater than the means. The whole is bigger than the sum of its parts. Campbell never participated in the Canadian film scene. He was the Canadian film scene. His entire oeuvre probably cost less than a single Telefilm-financed feature-film project. He made his cinema without needing or asking permission. He insisted on remaining exclusive. There can be no compromising authorship. I call this cinema povera.

I am an unabashed fan of Colin's art. It has made a big impression on me for nearly three decades. I still can't figure out how or why it became such a significant influence. Perhaps I adore these works for all the wrong reasons. Perhaps I can actually locate myself in these fictions. Perhaps we all can. In the end, I most admire just how sensitive and funny these stories are. I like the unapologetic low-band aesthetics, the irreverent cult-drama performances, the unabashed voguing of pretension, and ultimately the optimistic look at the sunny side of a world in which all are free and happy to be just who they are...well sort of.

A few thousand words are barely enough to scratch the surface of the multiple strategies presented in the collective body of this great artist's work. Fortunately, the oeuvre has thoroughly and extensively been examined in available scholarly texts. It will undoubtedly continue to be interpreted, analyzed and deconstructed. I hope this article can serve as a kind of informal introduction - a crude sketch or simple map to the work of this essential Canadian auteur. **TAKE ONE**

Let's share a few favourite moments from Campbell's classic 1979 underground masterpiece, *Modern Love*.

Meet sexually ambiguous Robin (Colin). By day she works as an office temp running a Xerox machine in the TD Centre. At night she likes to party at the Beverley Tavern. When the incorrigible Lamonte Del Monte (played by David Buchan) shows up in his gold lamé outfit to share Black Labels and Cheezies, things go from good to bad to worse and poor naive Robin gets quite an education. Oh, you cad, Lamonte.

Lamonte: "Like some Cheezies?"

Robin: "Oh, I love Cheezies. I didn't know you could get Cheezies here."

Lamonte: "Oh yeah, well you really can't but Wally keeps a few things behind the bar, special like"

Robin: "I guess he knows you're pretty important in show biz. What are you doing in Toronto now?"

Lamonte: "Working on a TV show, doing a special with Anne Murray."

Robin: "With Anne Murray! I really like Anne Murray."

Lamonte: "Oh yes, she's had a couple of really big hits you know. She's got a hit that's number one in the States."

Robin: "I'm not really creative like you Monte."

Lamonte: "Babe you want something, you got to reach out and grab it."

Robin: "Oh, I do too. Is this an original?"

Lamonte: "Uh huh...it's an oil."

Robin: "A real oil painting. It must be from Europe, I bet."

Lamonte: "Well sort of from Europe. I mean it was painted from a photograph that was taken in Europe. A friend of mine was there recently."

Robin: "It's very realistic. Is it France?"

Lamonte: "I think so. South of France I believe. It's done with vanishing points."

Robin: "When he said water sports, I thought he meant swimming. I certainly never knew people did things like that. If only my mother knew. And all those little machines and instruments. I never saw a bedroom with so many outlets. I always thought a French tickler was some kind of bilingual joke. Remember that day you didn't untie me until noon?"

Lamonte: "Boy, do I."

Robin: "But what about romantic love?"

Lamonte: "That's a bunch of bullshit. Get with it. This is 1978. Modern love is where it's at now. We're just like two buses that pass in the night. Modern love, well it's like an orchestra. There's a horn section and no strings, that's how I want our relationship to be...no strings attached."

Robin: "What about commitment, Monte?"

Lamonte: "I'd never commit to you."

Robin: "Romantic love...I guess I could get into it - once I find another room, another job...but there will never be another Monte."