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"I WAS NAMED AFTER HER: BRENDA LONGELLOW'S *OUR MARILYN*"

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Marilyn Bell, age 14, entered Lake Ontario at Youngstown, New York late in the evening of September 8, 1954. She touched the breakwater near the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto 21 hours later, the first person to swim the lake. Brenda Longfellow's film, *Our Marilyn*[1], depicts Bell's swim through archival materials (newsreel footage, popular songs, radio broadcasts) and newly shot, optically processed imagery of a woman (Longfellow herself) in the water. Added to the montage are stock shots of women performing aquatic gymnastics. A small number of shots taken from a newsreel of Marilyn Monroe entertaining troops in Korea is optically slowed and freeze framed. Linking all this footage is the voice of a female narrator who begins her meditation on both Marilyns with the words, "I was named after her."

At first viewing, it may be argued that Longfellow's 1987 film won its prizes (The Prix du Publique at The 4e Festival International de Film et Videos de Femmes de Montreal and a shared Grand Prix at The Oberhausen International Film Festival) by using all these varied devices to make Marilyn "ours." The film elicits the pleasures inherent in expanding upon latent recognition. As does that other bit of Canadian historiography, Trivial Pursuit, *Our Marilyn* calls upon us to remember that we knew something about this obscure moment. Upon seeing the film, we will know it again. Marilyn Bell's swim is promised to us as part of the pleasures of the half-remembered made known, made ours. Ultimately, we will enjoy a redemption of ourselves.

The "our" of Our Marilyn is also evoked in a nationalist vein through the comparison to "theirs" (i.e. The Americans') Marilyn Monroe. Our Marilyn, like our self-image, is smaller, more pristine. She exists within a

diminutive history. Our Marilyn must be periodically rescued from being lost in the obscurity of our culture. She exists in opposition to their Marilyn who, as part of the American cultural hegemony, is the ostensible cause of just such local obscurity.

Our Marilyn, of course, chose to swim away from the United States to land in the fragile history of Canada. Her passage itself is also a kind of "making ours"—or, more precisely, a continuation of the time honoured ritual of the geographical ordeal. Getting from there to here and suffering every inch of the way is one way in which Canadians claim their cultural integrity—be it the Golden Spike, Terry Fox or Marilyn Bell. The object is to make oneself one with the land, the land that is, when all else is lost, Canada's enduring culture and history.

Marilyn Bell, the film tells us, took up the challenge when the CNE officials denied the lake swim to Canadians, refused to let the lake be "ours." "The American" Florence Chadwick, originally hired for the crossing, had to be pulled out when she could no longer endure the suffering, i.e. could no longer trade the body for territorial possession. The news—told first to the viewer and then to the on-screen Marilyn Bell—is both times followed by the proclamation, "The Lake is Yours." And, as the film's title implies: "you, who have made the lake yours, are 'ours'—are us."

Making the self corporeal as land and then claiming that self through a process of sacrificing the body is not uniquely Canadian. But it is undeniably patriarchal. "The lake is yours" (spoken by Bell's coach, Gus Ryder) is an echo of another voice in the documentary tradition, that of Ernest Hemingway in Joris Ivens' *The Spanish Earth*. Over shots of Republican soldiers advancing, Hemingway intones: "This is the moment that all the rest of war prepares for, when six men go forward into death to walk across a stretch of land and by their presence on it prove—this earth is ours."[2]

This claim of place through hard won physical presence is also the structural basis for the traditional Griersonian narrator. Implied in Hemingway's (or, in its Canadian manifestation, Lorne Greene's) very presence is the possession of what is seen by virtue of the narrator's work. He has come to know it, he has come to describe it, therefore it is his. In the traditional Griersonian narrative (revived nightly by all the world's anchormen), space (the here) and time (the now) are made, are owned, and are intelligible only through our complicity in that prior ownership. Were this not "our Beirut" or "our politician" or "our disaster" the image would be unintelligible, particularly in the commercial context that makes that image possible.

At its first level, then, *Our Marilyn* quotes this possessive vision by appearing to occupy the structural shell of traditional Canadian documentary revelation. Like a good Griersonian work, the film provides us with voice over image, voice defining image, pseudo-synch and music where it works. "This woman," it appears to say, "went forward across

a stretch of water and by her presence made it ours." And this narrator, having organized a proprietary ordering of the imagery before us, is here to perform an act of surrogate appropriation on our behalf.

It is upon this base of a conventional Canadian history through conventional documentary means, that Longfellow constructs a second layer of signification. *Our Marilyn* may also be viewed in the context of a richer tradition—the Canadian response to Griersonian rhetorical styles that runs, roughly, from the suppressed feminist work of the Wartime NFB through Unit B, Studio D and to Michael Rubbo's terminal *cinema verite*. Jane Marsh, in her preparations for *Women are Warriors*, came a little too close to seeing the historical contradictions that frustrated a straightforward reading of historical imagery. *City of Gold* assures us that we will never know what was on the mind of the Klondike prospectors we see. In *Not a Love Story*, the camera refuses to see with the pornographic intent normally elicited by the genitalia it is viewing. Rubbo freely admits, on screen, that he never quite made the film he intended.

Longfellow shares this ironic detachment (making *Our Marilyn* even more nationalistically "ours"). Her optical processing of the archival footage seems to suggest that the footage itself means little. What little meaning she finds in the historical record is cut further by the images of synchronized swimmers—swimmers whose labours create only perfectly symmetrical and perfectly pointless patterns. The hopelessly saccharine ballads that celebrate the swim demean themselves and the event they depict. In the end, the quizzical narrator leaves questions unanswered. What was finally accomplished by Bell's swim? What would have happened had the other Marilyn "swum the distance?" Was the importance of the event finally negated by the naivete with which it was celebrated?

This said, *Our Marilyn's* importance is not as a continuation of the Canadian rebellion against Grierson but rather as an assertion of an entirely new direction. Rather than being entirely informed by a stance of ironic detachment, the film works at this third level as a kind of dialogue with that stance. Most appropriately, Longfellow's dialogue begins with that first line of voice-over: "I was named after her." Actually, no one was: not Brenda Longfellow, not any of the authors of the narration, not the narrator, Linda Griffith. What we have from the outset is a fictional persona who, to mix the film's prevailing metaphors, must swim "between two bodies."

Unlike the Canadian documentary narrators who have had to negotiate their position *vis a vis* on-screen events, the fictional Marilyn must concentrate upon calling herself into being. The Canadian tradition might hide behind unnamed and unquestioned authority. The Canadian rebellion may assert: "I am Michael Rubbo and I don't know if I can make this film" or "We, the women of Studio D, decided to explore...." Longfellow's first line says, "who am I?"

But if the fictional Marilyn as narrator counters the Canadian tradition by bringing her own self into question, she also takes the first steps toward a validated pre-textual reality. The undefined speaker discussing the as yet unredeemed subject, she points toward what we may accept as truth. The perspective established in *Our Marilyn's* first line points us in this direction in three different ways:

First, the use of a female voice-over carries with it a challenge to the authority of the voice traditionally associated with male narration. The female voice, at the moment when Longfellow makes *Our Marilyn*, has reached the level of a well established adversarial signification. At least in the practice of progressive filmmaking the female narrator, by her presence, speaks against the established signification of her imagery, against the proprietary ordering of that imagery and, perhaps against the proprietary ordering of imagery *per se*. She then, perhaps most importantly, finds a way to speak amid the ruins of this deconstructed signification. Her means for accomplishing this is, in fact, her own fictionality. Longfellow's hypothesized woman speaks "as if" and in so doing may connote the veracity of a double negative: "I am a construct working with the now exposed devices of a previous construct for my own purposes." The female voice moves here from the connotator of "deconstruction" to the manifestation of a fully formed "other."

The second pertinent aspect of the fictional narrator's perspective is her use of the first person. On one level, this speaking body is the audio equivalent of Longfellow herself as she swims in the footage newly shot for *Our Marilyn*. The film would seem to suggest this reading by ending with the revelation of this new footage as the source for the optically enhanced material that might otherwise have been mistaken for part of Bell's original swim. But Longfellow's decision to film herself in Lake Ontario and optically process the footage to substitute herself for missing images of Bell's swim is more than a simple homage to her film's protagonist. Nor is the revelation of this device at the end of the film only attributable to the anti-illusionism of modernist practice. In the context of *Our Marilyn*'s use of the body as territorial metaphor, Longfellow's physical presence becomes the act of claiming the film's subject as "ours." its difficulty as part making of the film itself "ours." In one sense, to paraphrase the passage from *Spanish Earth*: "Longfellow by her presence makes this film ours." However, for the two women swimmers, this patriarchal territoriality is never quite decisive. Just as we are not sure who is speaking, we wonder which of the swimming bodies is really the subject here. All we do know is that we have bodies swimming, that the first person voice belongs to a corporeal being. This embodied voice also represents an equation of the uncertain identity of the speaker *cum* speaker and the equally uncertain identity of the subject *cum* subject: she who depicts the swim is also swimming.

It is this sense of process and incompletion in the narrator's role that is most easily associated with the investigation of the historical Marilyns,

Bell and Monroe. "I love what you withheld from the world," Marilyn the narrator says directly of Monroe and, by implication, to Bell. It is an odd statement when taken in juxtaposition with the conventional history of the two women. Even *Our Marilyn* appears to demonstrate that neither woman withheld much of anything: Marilyn Bell swimming to exhaustion, Marilyn Monroe playing out her star's role to the end. But what is withheld in both acts is, of course, the physical suffering, the self that, in patriarchal mythology, claims a place. The phrase, "what you withheld," also points us back to a narrator who is withholding a reality that exists beyond the representational powers of the medium. The third Marilyn, the fictional persona, exists no place, at least no place that can be located with the conventions of narrative or filmic structure. Yet, as the first person singular insists, she exists (perhaps in a new tense, something like "the first person other").

The narrator's stance is, thirdly, her declaration of a personal relationship to the image. More specifically, the phrase, "I was named after her," construes a personal relationship predicated on a representational construct: naming. It acknowledges the propriety relationship enjoyed by the speaker over the imagery ("here *I* see it," rather than "here it is.") And then it serves to undermine that relationship.

Immediately after hearing the opening phrase, we are told that the narrator Marilyn was named for Marilyn Bell because her mother was enduring an especially difficult labour during the hours when Bell was making her crossing. The idea of linking the two names was, then the product of this physicality. The embryonic narrator was named for the endurance shared by Marilyn Bell and her mother—and that she herself comes to share with the images of Longfellow (and the film) recreating Bell's swim. The narrator's opening assertion then is used for a feminist undermining of the patriarchal use of naming for the bestowing of homage or legitimacy. Within the film, the naming was collective or perhaps, to quote a phrase used later by the narrator, the women were "beyond naming." All the Marilyns share the name on the basis of their female physicality. Put another way, none of the three had to "make a name for herself," the bodies being their own names.

To finally exhaust the reading of that first line, it is possible to see it as a failure of the identity it proclaims and as a proclamation of the importance of that failure. "I was named after her." Actually no one was; no *body* could be. The fictional nature of the narrator takes us from the world of naming to the world of bodies. Later in the film (it is tempting to say, "in the body of the work") we are pointed to the tangibility of those bodies by comparisons made between them that are framed in physical terms: Marilyn the narrator's birth during the hours of Marilyn Monroe's swim; Marilyn Bell in a cold lake intercut with Marilyn Monroe on a cold stage in Korea.

What informs all of *Our Marilyn*, then, is both the potential for a critique of representation and a movement away from that critique. To go

further though, it is necessary to look more closely at the means by which the film's three Marilyn's share their interactive exposition. The film is structured around this idea of the multiple perspective, be it the shared nationalist rendering or the second sense, the mutual experience of being Marilyn enjoyed (if that is the word) by the three women. In this latter usage, each of the three depends for her identity upon the other two. This is most obvious in the case of Marilyn the narrator as she swims between two the bodies. But it is equally true of Marilyn Bell and Marilyn Monroe as they exist within the delicate balance of Marilyn the narrator. Being linked by the name is also an avenue to dispensing with the name and naming *per se* as all three come to be actually, formally linked by what they withhold.

The precedent here is a seminal non-fiction film of this decade, Chris Marker's *Sans Soliel*. Marker's tripartite exposition is between his authorial presence, the film's female narrator and the fictional documentarian, Sandor Krasna. The mutual dependence of all three unfolds as the narration variously affirms and undermines the representational quality of the imagery. Janine Marchessault describes the mechanism succinctly:

> Unlike his one time collaborator Resnais where the interaction between imaginary (-) and real (+) is cumulative, Marker never collapses the two terms; rather there is always a social edifice operating outside the image–a pre-text from which the image is drawn. This pre-text does not attend some theoretical parade of essences and origins but it is highly material, ideological, reified; it is a concrete social reality.[3]

The net effect of Marker's narrational construct is a Brechtian quotation of the truth, a truth that is, if necessarily missing, nevertheless true. By the same token, *Our Marilyn's* "concrete social reality" works its way through the representations of Marilyn Bell and Marilyn Monroe to its identification as that reality which all three women in the film make true by its withholding. The film goes so far as to tell us that whether or not there was a "real" Marilyn Bell or Marilyn Monroe there are means for working with their invention. There is also a criterion, the physical female body, by which that work exists outside the representational apparatus at the artist's disposal. Longfellow, like Marker, points toward the necessity of a world outside the constraints of the apparatus.

Longfellow's choice of subject matter is, to these ends, especially apt. Her evocation of Marilyn Monroe might have pointed only to an evocation of the hyperreal Marilyn; her depiction of Marilyn Bell might be read as only the Canadian version of that hypereality. But Longfellow's presentation of both women–linked to a fictional self–points away from the hyperreal, back to the withheld, the body, the pre-text. An alternative reading is impossible. To suggest that only the hyperreal Marilyn–that which, at least in Marilyn Monroe's case, had not only displaced the corporeal but had killed it–is worthy of comment would be to foreclose any

possibility of the visceral understanding that underlies the film.

Finally, *Our Marilyn* leaves open the thought that it may be impossible to swim that other distance, from the Modern to a succeeding era. The swim, in its physicality and its eternal present, *is* the succeeding era. The body *per se*, even beyond (but thanks to) its feminist context, maintains an ontological reality. Everbody's toothache exists beyond representation and beyond the critique of representation. And everybody's toothache defines the present.

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Notes

1. *Our Marilyn* is distributed in Canada by DEC Films, 394 Euclid Avenue, Toronto M6G 2S9 (telephone: 416 925-9338). As of this writing the film has no American distributor.

2. Quoted in Richard Meran Barsam, *Non-Fiction Film: A Critical History* (New York, 1973): 93-94.

3. "Sans Soleil," *CineAction!* (Spring, 1986): 3.