

Film

OUR MARILYN

MISS...OR MYTH?

KAMIKAZI HEARTS

by *Randi Spires*

Our Marilyn

Our Marilyn, Brenda Longfellow's award-winning documentary film (in April 1988, it won the Grand Prix at the 34th International Short Film Festival in Oberhausen) had its first major Canadian Screening at the 1987 Festival of Festivals. The film opens in semi-darkness. Only seemingly abstract flashes of form — from a hand, a bathing cap, a shoulder — punctuate this night. Sounds of regular but laboured breathing as well as small frequent cries of agony are emitted from the figure. The focus here is not on the power and the glory of athletic achievement but on the pain, the monotony, the sheer will needed to get through any long distance event. The emphasis is not on triumph but on survival.

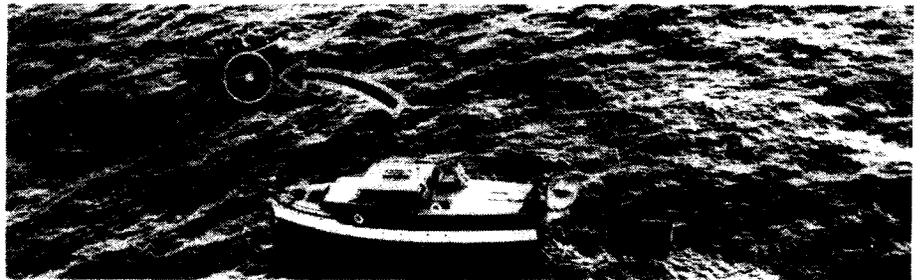
In the background a faint disembodied male voice calls out encouragement. Is this her coach watching out for her from a nearby boat or is the shout from one of the thousands of spectators and media gathered in anticipation on the far shore? It's probably the coach. But the voice, which is heard intermittently throughout the film, contains a worried yearning, an anxiety and a sense of expectation likely common both to those few crewing the guide boat and the multitudes waiting tremulously on land.

The swimmer is Marilyn Bell, the first person to swim non-stop across Lake Ontario. She undertook this task not only in competition with a young American swimmer, Florence Chadwick, but also in defiance of the official Canadian National Exhibition rules that made only Americans eligible for the competition. Bell was the people's choice. What carried her through those long relentless hours among the waves was not only her own grit and determination but also the sense that she was defending the national honour. For

STAY IN THERE MARILYN!



HAPPY AND FRESH AFTER ALL-NIGHT SWIM, MARILYN BELL REMOVES HER GOGGLES TO SMILE AND WAVE AS SHE NEARS ONE WATERFRONT.



STAR YACHT CARRYING NEWSMEN STAYS CLOSE TO MARILYN, WHO IN TURN, STICKS CLOSE TO HER BOAT DURING HISTORIC CROSSING.

those waiting at the edge of Lake Ontario or attending to the swim through the many media reports it engendered, Bell's efforts represented the ability of the colonial David to successfully spit in the eye of the Imperial Goliath.

This brief opening sequence is immediately followed by the contrasting images of women performing a water ballet. While Marilyn Bell's actions took place in the rough expansive arena of Lake Ontario, these women are performing within the confines of a placid pool. A lake's boundaries are irregular and subject to change. The rectangular borders of a swimming pool do not alter from one moment to the next. Diversity is dissolved and contained within the framework of the medium.

The water ballerinas are seen in slow motion. Their actions appear delicate, sensual, effortless. There are few splashes. Even while dancing in the water they don't seem to make waves. Juxtaposed against the strenuous strokes of the long distance swimmer, their efforts appear tenuous and timid. The point of a mara-

thon swim is to get from point A to B, a goal-oriented, traditionally 'masculine' prerogative. The point of a water ballet is the aesthetic and erotic pleasure of the spectator. The dance must appear easy so as not to distract the viewers from the kaleidoscope of patterns forming before them. To perform such rituals the water dancers must be well conditioned. But here any hint of athleticism is absent. These women are working not toward the instrumental but the decorative, that which has traditionally been seen as feminine. The body quickly becomes subsumed by the bawdy. And in contrast to the personal recognition Marilyn Bell will receive, the individual women in the pool remain anonymous, subservient to the nuances of group and form.

At least with the Esther Williams types there remains the possibility that their athleticism may be recognized. As such they occupy an intermediate position between the highly athletic but asexual, our Marilyn of the film's title, and their Marilyn, Marilyn Monroe, against which Bell is

juxtaposed.

The two Marylins, or at least their images, capture the two poles of female representation in patriarchal society. They also embody the different national ethos of their respective homes. Marilyn Bell, the Canadian, with her innocent girl next door looks, can be seen as a sexually repressed proto-madonna struggling for survival, striving for some flicker of recognition in the face of patriarchal and imperial dismissal. Marilyn Monroe, the American, became, with her own complicity, an icon of heterosexual male desire, at once completely available and totally inaccessible. The film is narrated by a fictional third Marilyn, a Canadian born during Bell's heroic crossing of Lake Ontario and thus named after her. The voice of this other Marilyn describes the difficulties she has had in creating a real identity for herself while being overshadowed by media images of Bell and Monroe. Besides linking the stories of Marilyn Bell and Monroe, the narration serves as a point of entry into the work for the female spectator and a point of departure as well. These reminiscences are largely personal tinged with the political. As such they encourage the viewer to rethink her own development in relation to media images of women. The result is a proliferation of potential viewpoints.

The bulk of the footage of *Our Marilyn* is of Marilyn Bell's swim across Lake Ontario. Our glimpses of Marilyn Monroe are much briefer. After several minutes of observing Bell struggling through the waters of the lake, we see a few seconds of Monroe negotiating a sea of soldiers.

Monroe, at least during the last decade of her life, was the focus of an enormous amount of media attention. She has been written about, filmed and talked of so much that it is relatively easy to understand just how much of a media construction Marilyn Monroe was.

The distance between Marilyn Monroe the image and Norma Jean Baker the woman is huge and difficult to fathom. Marilyn Bell's time of glory was much shorter. While all the images of Marilyn Monroe used in the film come from archival sources, much of the footage of Marilyn Bell's swim had to be constructed. The newsworthy portions of her swim — her entry into the lake, her final moments as she was escorted to the finish line by a flotilla of small craft, the shouts and cheers of her supporters on shore, her post-triumph interviews, have all been dutifully recorded on film. What was omitted was the long, arduous, boring middle. Longfellow recreated this part of the process by having someone film her swimming in super-8. This was then transferred onto 16 mm. As a result that portion of the film has a grainy archival or dreamlike quality. The use of step-printing further distances the image from its source. These mediated images are metaphors for the distance between our images of these two women and the reality of their lives. They are also metaphors for the dis-

sonance between media images of women in general and their lived realities. By situating her own body within the filmic narrative of the two Marylins, Longfellow places herself in solidarity with the two women whose lives she partially describes.

Miss...or Myth?

Let it not be said that only women can engage in feminist discourse. *Miss...or Myth?*, directed by Geoffrey Dunn and Mark Schwartz (and screened at the 1987 Montreal World Film Festival) looks at the conflict between the supporters of the Annual Miss California Pageant and the feminist community of Santa Cruz, California. Supporters of the pageant, which has taken place in that small city for over 60 years and involves thousands of volunteers annually, are allowed to state their case without ridicule or condescension. But their insistence on the positive nature of the event is belied by the images of pageants past we are shown between the in-



Porn Star Sharon Mitchell with her lover Tigr.

From Kamikazi Hearts.

interview clips.

The contestants are, as one would expect, overwhelmingly white and northern European. They're young, exceedingly slender and adorned with plenty of make-up. They also wear the crippling high heels and fashionably expensive dresses which are unsuited to any practical activity beyond sexual allure. These women, for all their vaunted talent and intelligence, have been narrowed to symbols of submission to heterosexual patriarchal norms. The tie-in between female objectification and patriarchal institutions such as the nation state and the military can be seen in repeated images of gloved and evening-gowned women parading down the street in flag-draped convertibles or open floats while flanked by military honour guards. On the floats, in the cars or on stage, the women are at once un-touchable and rather vulnerable to verbal or other snipings. The pageant supporters claim that beauty pageants provide a warm and supportive atmosphere for the contestants is counteracted by testimony from former contestants who describe the intense rivalry, the destructive eating disorders, emotional stresses and lack of real rewards that are all a part of the beauty contest scene. Pageant supporters in turn dismiss these criticisms as the work of those too ugly, too bitter or too unfeminine to succeed as "real women."

Feminist protest against the pageant began in the early 1970s. By the early 1980s the pageant had been relocated to San Diego, a larger city with a smaller feminist community. There it was estimated that feminist critique could be more easily drowned out by the roar of commercial approval.

One of the Santa Cruz feminist's organizing tools was the creation of a counter pageant, named the "Myth California Pageant," during which women of all sizes, races and ages were lauded in order to dispel popular but restricted notions of female beauty. Among the prime movers of the Myth California forces is former top New York model, Anne Simonton. Simonton was propelled on the road to consciousness after being brutally gang raped on the way to a modelling job. Her enlightenment was not immediate. Although the film does not point this out, it took several years before the dissonance between what she did for a living and what had been done to her forced Simonton to

reevaluate her profession. One of Simonton's earliest but most notorious actions was to protest the Miss California Pageant wearing a dress made entirely of meat. The symbolism of this attire was apparently lost on some of the male commentators.

Even though the Miss California Pageant had decades of community support behind it, feminist organizers managed, by the early 1980s, to garner support from even larger numbers of people. But awareness developed in one place, Santa Cruz, did not transfer to the larger venue, San Diego. So their victory was only partial. Thousands of girls still eagerly enter beauty contests each year. Many of the strongest supporters of these competitions are female. Millions of women, like a multitude of mini Marilyn Monroes, remain complicit in their own oppression.

Kamikazi Hearts

Beauty contests are a form of soft porn masquerading as innocence. In the real porn industry the participants utilize masks of a different nature to maintain their feelings of dignity. Juliet Bashore's documentary film *Kamikazi Hearts* (screened in Toronto) uses the relationship between two lesbians, Mitch and Tigr, working in the heterosexual porn industry as a means of exploring what pornography does to its participants.

What she wanted to know was how people maintained their sanity in a world where the most intimate of acts became the most public of actions. "How could people avoid confusing the real with the unreal?" she asks. What she discovered was that they didn't.

Sharon Mitchell's affair with Tigr began under a porn film spotlight. It turned out that off camera or on Mitch was always the same, forever performing for the benefit of a third party, real or imagined. As Tigr eventually found out, she was capable of little genuine intimacy.

From the first to the last moments on set, the porn world continually confronted Bashore's expectations. Her first encounter was not with Tigr or Mitch, but with a woman named Annette Harem. After a few takes Harem bounced about in a pink jumpsuit in utter happiness. "I had always been brought up in a world in which this (pornography) was considered to be the

ultimate in degradation and then here were these people and they were all happy," says Bashore.

Happy they may have appeared on the surface, but throughout the film we see evidence of a general lack of self-esteem — these indicators range from drug-taking to verbal bravado; from some genuine tears to some surprising moments of introspection. But the most powerful image is the yoga position frequently resorted to by Mitch on stage. Completely naked with her legs knotted behind her head and her hands immobilized under her trunk, she rocks back and forth like a giant humanoid egg. Her shaved genitalia are completely exposed. She has, in effect, twisted herself into a kind of autobondage; into a position of absolute vulnerability and absolute sexual availability. She inadvertently creates a scathing metaphor both for how pornographers view women and how she feels about herself.

One of the most powerful scenes involves not Tigr and Mitch but a subsidiary character, Jennifer Blowdryer. A seemingly dumb and emotionally frazzled Blowdryer is seen trying to resist the producer's exhortations to pose for some nude stills. Her agent has advised her not to. "When I am with him (the agent) I believe him; when I am with you (the producer) I believe you," says this confused woman. "So now you are with me, so believe me," the producer replies. Blowdryer may appear stupid, but Bashore informs us that Blowdryer managed to get out of the porn industry and into an ivy league college. So the woman isn't stupid. What she is (or, hopefully, was) is a real life example of extreme colonization.

Despite working for substantial amounts of time with people in the porn industry, Bashore did not make the connection between pornography and violence against women until after the film had been completed — until after she had been raped by a stranger. Bashore does say that exposure to the industry enabled her to cope psychologically with the assault because she recognized how her assailant scripted directly from pornographic materials. But it was the inequities of the male-dominated American justice system that really fuelled her anger and heightened her awareness of the effects of pornography. An irrepressible survivor, Bashore is now in the process of making a film about the serial rapist who attacked her.

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