

CANADA'S STUDIO D: A WOMEN'S ROOM WITH AN INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION

Chris Scherbarth

Le Studio D a fait ses débuts comme geste symbolique, mais il a évolué dans la direction d'une des composantes les plus célèbres de l'Office national du film actuel. Unique parmi les studios de l'ONF, le Studio D pourrait être décrit comme étant un "salon des femmes," avec son propre ordre du jour. Tout en fournissant un milieu de travail aux cinéastes pour qu'elles puisent leur vision de femmes, le Studio D a aussi prôné une démarche plus participatoire dans la cinématographie nationale. Les succès sensationnels de Not A Love Story et de Si vous aimez cette planète, et la distribution surpassant la moyenne du répertoire du Studio en général, prêtent du poids à l'argument que le Studio D devrait développer comme institution culturelle.

Beginnings

When the National Film Board's "women's unit," Studio D, celebrated its tenth anniversary on International Women's Day in 1985, there were three resplendent feathers in its cap. The first was that the Studio had come of age. What began as a bureaucratic token gesture to the women's movement, a team of three staff members "down among the pipes" in basement offices, was now a bustling corridor of programming, production and support staff.

The second plume was the product of the bustle: a sizeable body of film which, according to one journalist, established a "Studio D tradition of passionate, provocative filmmaking." The third was the swelling popularity of the Studio at home and abroad. In 1984 and 1985, references to Studio D appearing in Canada's national daily newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, were greater in number than in all other years, cumulatively, since its inception.

Media accounts of Studio D history typically attribute its creation in 1974 to the United Nations declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year. The Canadian government's endorsement of this declaration, however, does

not adequately explain the emergence of a women's unit at the Film Board (NFB). For instance, NFB management failed to access any federal funds earmarked for the Year to establish a proposed women's film program.

It was the hope for such monies, nevertheless, that fanned the true fire leading to the Studio's formation. This flame was the aspirations, arguments for equal opportunity, and daring of certain (among the few) NFB women filmmakers. The principal advocate behind the notion of establishing a women's

film studio, *per se*, was Kathleen Shannon, who had first championed the idea in 1971 during the heyday of the Film Board's "grassroots" film program, Challenge for Change.

Shannon, as the new Studio's executive producer, was to become the first woman to head an NFB film unit since the Second World War. Between 1971 and 1973, she almost single-handedly produced, directed and edited a set of ten consciousness-raising documentaries about the plight of working mothers. True to the observation of American



Kathleen Shannon, Studio D's first executive producer, receiving her honorary Doctor of Laws at Queen's University on 2 June 1984 for her work in filmmaking.

Courtesy: NFB

filmmaker Susan Kleckner that "In 1970, women making documentary about women was a revolutionary idea," Shannon's project represented one of the rare opportunities afforded to women at the Film Board. For her, it was an opportunity earned after fourteen years of NFB film experience, and several years of training male colleagues for higher-paying positions.

Shannon's "Working Mothers" films, along with the five francophone productions of the "En tant que femmes" film series produced by Anne Claire Poirier, were met with an overwhelming response by the Canadian public. The exceptional distribution of these films reinforced the arguments put forth by Shannon and Poirier: first, that the Film Board was failing in its mandate to "interpret Canada to Canadians" by omitting the female half of the nation — among both the interpreters and the interpreted — and second, that there was indeed a visible "hunger" for films by and for women.

To its credit, NFB management decided to make good on the rhetoric for a women's program it had presented unsuccessfully to the federal Treasury Board. Poirier, however, rejected the shoestring budget subsequently offered to her as the prospective head of a francophone women's film unit. Her concern was that such meager funding would marginalize women's work.

Shannon, alternatively, accepted management's parallel token gesture to English-speaking women, and was then appointed to develop a long-term women's program within the structure of a documentary film unit. Thus, Studio D was born.

A Women's Room Within a Patriarchal Estate

At the outset, Studio D was regarded as something of a "women's ghetto" from other quarters in the Film Board (even though there were nearly as many men filmmakers as women in the Studio during the 1970s). Despite this presumption of some, Studio D represented for sufficient others a positive space — a "women's room" — which promised to conduct its affairs as a film unit in a different fashion.

Unlike other NFB English production studios, the newborn unit derived its identity from the specific purpose and "social change" philosophy behind its film production, rather than from its geographical location or the form of its films. The Studio likewise represented

an unorthodox "separationist" strategy towards achieving equal opportunity for women. Such a strategy allowed not simply for increased training and career possibilities, but for the placement in women's hands of a certain degree of programming autonomy — and therefore, for affirmative action *on the screen*.

The Studio's original mandate, in short, was to address women's information needs and facilitate the framing of women's perspectives through the medium of film, and to provide an

environment of mutual support in which to do so. Over the years, this mandate has remained intact and even more defensible as the "experiment" has reliably proven to attract audiences. In Studio D's recent tenth anniversary statement, the point is highlighted that the Studio represents a necessary — albeit rare — alternative within a publicly-funded cultural institution: "the opportunity for women to work together... to express their previously unspoken perceptions and to tap their female vision..."



NFB film crew in front of St. Basil's Basilica, Red Square, Moscow during filming of *Women, Peace and Power*
Photo: Terri Nash

In addition to upsetting the bureaucratic apple cart in terms of some of its management practices (such as providing more flexibility in film production roles), Studio D has served as a model for an alternate approach to determining filmmaking priorities. The only NFB unit to employ a full-time audience researcher, and to meet regularly with community groups to actively solicit film ideas, the Studio has revitalized some of the founding principles of the Film Board laid out by its charismatic founder, John Grierson. This more participatory approach to its film program has also assured the Studio's relevance to a significantly large audience — or in Shannon's words, to its constituency.

Studio D's capacity to address the needs of its constituency — largely, those identifying with the women's movement — has grown surely but slowly since its inception. Currently operating with a total budget of \$1,800,000, the Studio's thirteen full-time filmmakers (all women as of 1985) command a low 9% of English Program resources. Given that women make up only one-third of the anglophone filmmakers, and that Studio D is the one site of relative programming autonomy for women, this 9% allocation is an undeniably slim endorsement for one of the most celebrated components of the present-day Film Board. (In the French Program, where no "women's room" emerged, women comprise only one-fifth of the filmmaking staff.)

Studio D's high profile as an environment receptive to women has undoubtedly worked against the greater integration of women in other NFB studios, soothing the conscience of studio heads who, despite the male majority on their staff, refrain from voluntary affirmative action. The Studio's reputation as a women's advocate has also led to high expectations on the part of women freelancers and would-be filmmakers. Their hope is that this one studio out of ten will automatically favour their proposals and resumé's.

In a submission to a parliamentary committee defending the future of the NFB and Studio D alike, Shannon observed: "We are swamped with film proposals from women, as everybody refers women to us. We...often feel like vocation counsellors."

One successful manoeuvre on the Studio's part to expand film career possibilities for women is the creation of the Federal Women's Film Program. Established in 1981 as a co-venture between the NFB and several federal departments interested in producing information

films for primarily female audiences, the program assures training/apprenticeship as well as experience-based employment opportunities. The resulting films, produced in both official languages, combine with Studio D productions to fill a substantial void. Only 16% of the films offered in the 1985 English NFB catalogue were directed by women, and less than 10% employ the lens of female experience to focus on social life.

The Studio D Repertoire

Since 1974, Studio D has produced a sizeable body of film — 70 productions, excluding French versions — giving not only a reliable voice to women's realities, but also a different vision of the nature of those realities.

While a significant number of children-centered portraits were produced in the 1970s, along with an even mix of women-centered portrait and issue films, the 1980s have seen an increasing emphasis on issue-oriented documentaries. Many of the themes of these later productions explicitly overlap, constituting a widening examination of militarism, capitalism and colonialism in addition to "strictly" patriarchal structures and ideologies. This unfolding and increasingly integrated critique of social issues, projected through the prism of women's experience, lies at the heart of the Studio D repertoire.

In addition to its early historical documentaries, *Great Grand Mother* and *The Woman from Grey County*, Studio D made an interesting contribution to Canadian women's history in 1978 by resurrecting eight of the very few women-centered films in the NFB archives. What can be discerned from these older films is that when the time came to make a film about women during the 1940s and 1950s, the proverbial "women question" itself was at issue, and was almost invariably answered from the perspective of male filmmakers.

In her 1982 dissertation (which was devoted to women's images in early NFB films), Terri Nash observes that the sex of the filmmaker has much to do with the "semantic differentiation" within the presentation of gender roles. She goes on to conclude that any meaningful change in the NFB images of women can be expected to come from women themselves.

As a "women's room," Studio D has been the ideal environment for such a shift in filmic vision to occur. Its films,

too numerous to discuss here, are likewise ripe terrain for the exploration of a feminine and/or feminist film aesthetic. The bulk of newspaper and magazine reviews already devoted to Studio D productions have begun this exploration; but to date, a comprehensive rendering of the unique "look" and "feel" that is implicit in this body of film has yet to be undertaken.

A few cursory generalizations might be that Studio D documentaries are as equally comfortable with emotional as with rational information (prompting one male critic to quip — with great passion! — that the Studio D formula must be "lights, camera, tears"); are less inclined to invoke a guise of dispassionate objectivity; and, as women's productions, are windows to privileged glimpses of social events that would not necessarily be revealed in the same manner or at all to a male-dominated film crew.

Although some film critics would have Studio D, as an inherently political film unit, leave behind altogether the (conservative) conventions of traditional documentary, its filmmakers have worked to subtly transform and make a distinctive contribution to a long-standing Canadian practice. Against the backdrop of a decade when the NFB itself has been seen as somewhat uncertain in its direction, the notable success of Studio D documentaries suggests, moreover, that it is in the hands of feminists that the proud old Grierson documentary tradition has been given new life.

The Making of an International Brandname

Studio D's rise to fame began in 1978 when director Beverly Shaffer, upon receiving the first Academy Award garnered by the Film Board since 1952 for *I'll Find a Way*, thanked the NFB women's unit for its support of her work — in front of one of the largest annual prime time TV audiences in North America. This massive audience was reminded again of the Studio's mission five years later, when Terri Nash graciously claimed her 1983 Oscar for *If You Love This Planet*. By this time, however, Studio D was already a well-known hub on the cinema world's map.

A short six months before the release of *If You Love This Planet* and the attendant worries of NFB International Distribution that the film might offend its American audience, Bonnie Klein's controversial *Not a Love Story* began a

record-breaking distribution career at the Toronto Festival of Festivals in 1981. A key referent in Canadian press coverage devoted to the issue of pornography over the next several years, during which time the appearance of porn-related articles multiplied by a factor of 10, *Not a Love Story* undoubtedly catalyzed what came to be known as the "anti-pornography movement."

As expressed by *Toronto Star* columnist Robert Fulford in 1982, the film "started out as a modest-scale documentary... [and] turned into something of a national crusade." The widespread use of the documentary as a community consciousness-raising tool and as a brief to decision-makers, including the famous submission of the film by MP Judy Erola to a parliamentary committee, stands in utter contradiction to the concurrent conclusion of the Applebaum-Hébert Committee — which is, that the Film Board no longer produces significant "national film experiences."

Even south of the border, Pauline Bart was prompted to state that "*Not a Love Story* is to the anti-pornography movement what the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was to the anti-slavery movement." *If You Love This Planet*, similarly, has served extensively as an eloquent manifesto for, and enticement to, the peace movement in both Canada and the United States. An NFB memo reports how one Montreal peace activist alone wore out a print of the film in her community.

Not a Love Story and *If You Love This Planet* have not just put Studio D on the map. They have been the most frequently booked (English) NFB documentaries, annually, since their release. The only other NFB film of any format to outperform them on occasion, in terms of Canadian non-theatrical bookings, is the 1978 animation, *The Sand Castle* (which also broke the NFB Oscar drought at the same time as Shaffer's *I'll Find a Way*).

In terms of cumulative bookings, Studio D's top two are the only NFB productions of the 1980s to rank among the top 500 titles of all time, and already are half way up this popularity ladder. *I'll Find a Way* scores high as well within the top 500 of all time, while the more recent *Abortion: Stories from North and South* and *Speaking Our Peace* figure among the 1985 annual favourites. Also in 1985, Margaret Wescott's *Behind the Veil: Nuns* was given hearty praise by Jane Fonda at a Montreal Film Festival press conference.



Still from *Abortion: Stories from North and South*.
Credit: Kandice Abbott

A more telling indication of the relevance to audiences of the Studio D program is to be found in the distribution performance of its repertoire as a whole. The forty English-language originals produced exclusively by the Studio as of March 1985 (discounting, therefore, co-productions and sponsored films) have been booked twice as frequently as a matched random sample of NFB fare. Although this margin of greater popularity drops from 100% to 50% when *Not a Love Story* and *If You Love This Planet* are excluded from the Studio D sample, these figures punctuate the extraordinary performance of the Studio's top two, while still illustrating the above average reception of the Studio D product in general. In short, Studio D films are in greater demand than the average NFB film.

A recent NFB distribution report remarks that Studio D has unquestionably evolved into an "international brandname," with "a public out there awaiting and expecting its products." In light of its reputation, the Studio has also become the focus of much academic interest. Queries have ranged from the nature of its operations as a creative women's environment to its reliable production of "community education tools" which go against the grain of the *status quo*. In either of these respects, it can be safely asserted that Studio D is an exceptionally popular, and now anticipated, contributor to the NFB agenda.

Current Affairs

Striking while the publicity surround-

ing Studio D's top two was very hot, Kathleen Shannon attempted in 1983 to transform Studio D's growing renown into structural change. Her goal was to establish a more comprehensive NFB women's division, which would enable further innovation and film production based on the Studio D model.

Rather than even acknowledge Shannon's proposal, NFB management replied instead (like any good bureaucracy) with a successive wave of overtures to women in various policy statements. It also initiated yet another employment equity study — the third since 1978. Management did promise in the 1985 five-year plan, however, to give Studio D a "national mandate." In brief, this mandate implies the go-ahead to better accommodate the many francophone filmmakers who seek work with the Studio, and to undertake more co-productions with regional studios and filmmakers.

Studio D has nevertheless found the financial endorsement for its new role sorely lacking in current studio allocations. Recent discussions to establish a counterpart to the Studio within the French Program, furthermore, erode the likelihood of the Studio's warranted expansion under the auspices of a such a mandate. Apart from the question of a francophone counterpart, the Studio's growth within the English Program alone would be a logical step, given the phenomenal results to date of the Studio D experiment.

The rhetoric of the present management has implicitly followed the line that an expanded Studio D would materialize only *at the expense* of the fuller integration of women throughout the NFB. This presumed "Catch-22" is not simply a censurable display of bad faith on the part of the Film Board, but a nearsighted refusal to place its bets on an evidently winning ticket.

Editor's Note: The NFB recently announced some significant changes concerning Studio D. They include Kathleen Shannon's resignation and the appointment of Rina Fraticelli as the new executive producer; and the establishment of the French Program Branch Women's Unit, with Josée Beaudet as its producer.

Chris Scherbarth, whose Master's thesis was devoted to the National Film Board's Studio D, recently graduated from the Institute of Canadian Studies at Carleton University. She resides in Whitehorse, and works for the Government of Yukon in communications.