

“CAMERA, ACTION, WOMEN”

“Women want to concentrate on the process and pay less homage to the form.”

BY ELIZABETH DONOVAN

A male voice booms — “Lights. Camera. Action.”

As the scene unfolds a slight figure appears pacing to and fro behind iron bars. Her perfectly pencil-lined eyes are full of resignation. When the camera pulls back we see the woman in full view — her hair slightly mussed, her lips full and red, her thin wet dress clinging to her body.

A sudden hope registers in her eyes as she spots a man in the distance. Her protector, her man, her reason for living. The Hero.

Fighting off the enemy, he frees her from her captors. The damsel in distress is safe in his strong arms. His brave soul, his strong body, his rescue mission.

His noble deed does not go unrewarded. He carries her — his trophy — off into the sunset. End of scene.

But as this scene, typical of the portrayal of women in mainstream film and video, closes, other scenes are just beginning. Scenes of women created by women, who are trying to define women's own images through the camera's lens.

In the last 20 years women have begun to challenge the images of women offered by Hollywood films. These images of woman as whore, woman as Madonna and woman as helpless child or nurturing helpmate have served to control and limit the real lives of women. Today, feminists are taking up the challenge and working outside the mainstream film and video industry to create a feminist alternative.

For Karen Fainman, a feminist filmmaker in Halifax, creating new images means also dealing with the problems women have had trying to create a voice in the past.

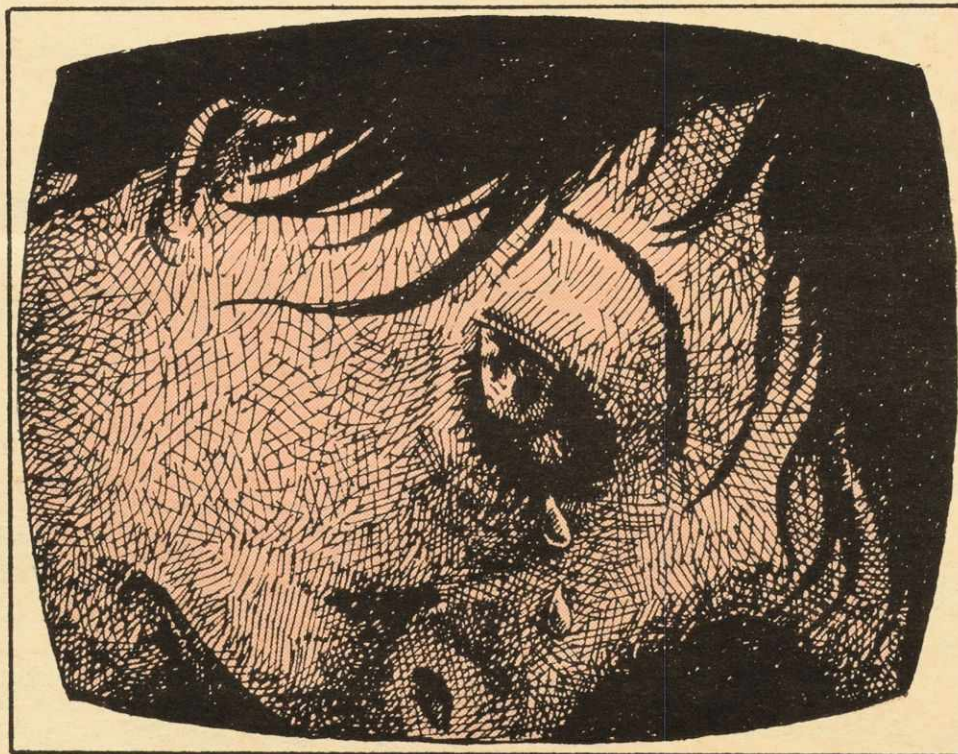
“I dealt a lot with women and silence. I wanted to build a language beyond silence. I was tired of not being able to speak,” says Fainman. Using the feminist slogan — “The personal is political” — as her guide, Fainman uses her own experiences as a woman in a male-dominated and male-defined society as a base for her films.

“Often in my films I contrast the outside objective world by juxtaposing my personal experience in relation to this.”

Tradition, Fainman's most recent video, places questions about women's changing role in society up against the traditional values of Jewish culture.

With the soundtrack of the *Fiddler on the Roof* playing in the background, a woman scrawls questions such as “Why do I have to go to the Synagogue?” on pieces of paper.

This personal-is-political style of women's



filmmaking truly began with the “Second Wave” of feminism in the 60's.

The roots of feminist filmmaking can be found in the 1960s when women began to organize film and video centres as a means of creating and distributing women-made films. *Women in Focus* in Vancouver, *Cinema Women* in London, England and *Woman Make Movies* in New York were all born in this period. The women involved in these centres tried to develop their own films based on how women see themselves and society.

In 1974 the National Film Board of Canada created Studio-D, an English women's branch of the film board. Within the film board itself women occupied less than one-sixth of all creative positions and even less occupied positions with creative authority. Studio-D had as its purpose to reach out to women film-makers and technicians with offers of apprenticeships, assistance in producing independent films and technical training programmes.

Gaining technical experience is still the biggest barrier for women who want to make films.

Pat Kipping, a feminist and filmmaker living in Halifax, says she decided in 1976 that there were far too few women with any technical

experience working in film and actively sought training. In her four years as a freelance film technician she says she was often the only woman working on a set.

“It was uncomfortable sometimes,” she recalls. “I really missed working with women then. But it is so important for women to develop skills in all areas of film, so that if a woman wants to make a film from beginning to end then she can draw on the talents of other women.”

In Halifax women have organized a local version of Studio-D to combat the problems women have working in mainstream film co-ops. Although the group, called *Women in Film*, is only a year old, it already has ten active members.

The members of *Women in Film* are trying to share skills within the group so that it will be possible for them to produce their own independent films. Even this method of teaching through sharing hasn't solved all the problems. When they find that no one in the group knows how to do a particular task it becomes necessary to bring in men to give workshops.

“It's hard for men to relinquish their reign of power but we are not going to reject the expertise that men have and can contribute, since men still

have had the support and training,” says Maxine Tynes, one member of the group.

Men's stranglehold on filmmaking skills comes from a history of male domination of the film industry. According to the Directors' Guild of America, of the 7,332 films produced in the United States between 1949 and 1979, only 14 were directed by women. Canada's own record isn't any better. Between 1968 and 1980, of the 260 films made with the Canadian Film Development Corporation funding, only 11 were directed by women.

Practical considerations aside, women film makers often have a different philosophy from men about film and video productions.

Liz McDougal, a feminist video artist in Halifax, says she doesn't see making videos as an end in itself, but more as a political tool. Liz's commitment to grassroots activism is reflected in her video about MUMS, Mothers United for Metro Shelter, a group of single mothers without permanent housing.

MUMS, like several other groups Liz made videos with, is organized on a collective, non-executive basis. Working with these groups gives her a more supportive base for her feminist perspective than traditionally structured groups.

“The male-stream (mainstream) has a whole hierarchy of roles within it,” says Liz. “Feminists try to have an egalitarian or non-hierarchical structure.”

Liz says video is less expensive than film and as a result more accessible to political grassroots groups.

The relatively low cost makes it possible for feminists with limited financial resources to make videos. Liz says the distinguishing difference between women-centred and male-stream film and video is emphasis on process versus product.

“Many feminist films/videos are non-slick productions. Women want to concentrate on the process and pay less homage to the form.”

Liz doesn't just talk about her feminist politics — she practises them.

In her video of the Debert peace protest organized by women, Liz recruited women who never operated video equipment before. For some of these women, working with technical equipment was a chance to de-mystify the operation of these machines.

Feminists are also challenging the “objectivity” myth in mainstream film-making, which tries to balance “both sides of the story” by distancing itself from the topic.

Continued on page 9