

Lori Spring: A Case Study

By: Robert Hamilton

For: Brenda Longfellow

In Lori Spring's young career, she has written and directed three short films and is presently working on her first feature, which is to be titled *Flora and Fauna*. All three of her short films deal with the forging of (female) identity through the creation of a personal space, and the subsequent violation of that space. The invasion may be an unwelcome touch or gesture, or an aggressive assault on the very need to create the haven. The latter is the case in Spring's first film *Inside/Out*.

The protagonist in *Inside/out* is an agoraphobe who constructs a livable environment for herself within the confines of her apartment. Apparently she is a writer, which of course she can continue from her home. Her groceries are delivered and she exercises on stationary equipment in order to stay in shape. She also spends time on a form of video-art-therapy in which she documents the world directly outside of her window. The only real contact that she has with another human is with the grocery boy. Other than that, her communications are filtered through technology. Her friends speak to her answering machine, her employer receives work from her computer, and she develops a curious relationship with a home-ridden old woman across the street through her video camera.

After this haven from the outside world has been adopted, there are two specific moments when the vulnerability of her fortress is revealed. The first is when Joanna has guests over for dinner. Her friends bring along an American who insists upon badgering Joanna about her reclusiveness in a particularly aggressive and obnoxious manner. She attempts to explain herself by showing some of her video art to the group, but it is dismissed

as garbage by the American and is politely referred to as "interesting" by the bewildered couple.

The second invasion of Joanna's constructed reality is non-aggressive, but ultimately the more effective of the two because it actually draws her away from the sanctuary of her home. Mrs. Ambrose (the woman across the street) lays motionless for far too long, and Joanna is forced to cross the road in order to check upon her well being. This both forces Joanna to realize the impossibility of her task (complete autonomy) and to interact with people outside of her apartment.

As far as understanding the concerns in *Inside/Out*, the scene in which Joanna shows the video to her guests is pivotal. The monologue which Joanna has dubbed over the images speaks of an ability to receive a pure message from the outside world by filtering it through the camera lens before ingestion. Part of this has to do with the post-rationalization that Joanna has engaged in order to justify her agoraphobia. Nonetheless, the argument that in our society, experience is increasingly a byproduct of technology is a valid point. The experience that one receives through technological means is not necessarily less valid than true experience, it is simply an alternate.

a distinct mediated version of 'reality'?

What *Inside/Out* calls into question is not necessarily the validity of experience through documentation, but rather it explores what place each must take in our everyday lives. Clearly, the prominent position that technology has in Joanna's personal interactions is an artificial and unhealthy construct. Although she

recognises that there are fundamental differences between first and second-hand experience, she is more comfortable with the latter, and therefore does not acknowledge that the personal aspects in her life are fundamental to her mental and emotional well-being.

Joanna's claim that she is more aware of her surroundings as she experiences them through her recorded images touches upon one of the chief recurring paradoxes in Canadian postmodern art. Although Linda Hutcheon speaks primarily about literature, her analysis of the document within the fiction is equally relevant to film. She asserts that it is a sort of

...double or even contradictory movement--one, first authenticated immediacy and authenticated recording (visual or aural); but by this very act of recording...a double distance is obviously created...the implication of instant access to the "real" is what results in a distancing from the "real". The tape recording (like the camera) has provided an obvious but problematic mimetic device...While it records, it also frames and automatizes. By definition, it is exclusive: it excludes the recorded object from the presence of the replaying (except in the capacity of listener), but it also excludes the receiver the presence of the "reality" when it was being recorded. (Hutcheon 49)

While Joanna understands the benefit of having the actuality of experience in a replayable form, it is unclear whether or not she acknowledges the extent of removedness that she has from the real. It is not until the crisis of Mrs. Ambrose's illness strikes that she feels the impotence of the situation she has created for herself.

Lori is aware of how her use of video imagery is linked to the work of other Canadian directors - in particular Atom Egoyan.

Atom looked at *Inside/Out* during post-production and this is when Spring became aware of the parallel between the work that she had done on *Inside/Out* and that which Egoyan did on *Family Viewing* (Faragalli 15). When asked about her use of video and its possible further incorporation into her films, she stated:

It affords me that opportunity to play with imagery. I think that is sort of an innate tendency that will never go away. In my way of pursuing my subjects, it will come up recurringly--the desire to penetrate the image somehow. I think that was what my use of video was about...to get to some sort of essential experience of the image. (Nov.20, 94)

Above and beyond the artistic and stylistic advantages that video images afford the film-maker, Spring also asserts that video is simply a fact. It exists in our lives in a prominent manner, and it should be addressed as such.

When people go into a morgue now, to identify a body, they don't actually look at the body, but at the face on video....It really is just part of the architecture of our lives - so it should be there. (Nov. 20, 94)

The existence of video (and the other technological elements) in *Inside/Out* serve the double purpose of accurately reflecting the physical reality of postmodern life while simultaneously providing a device through which to isolate moments. These are the moments that allow the image to be explored as an entity in and of itself, as opposed to simply part of a sequence of events.

In Spring's second film *Beach Story*, the identity of the protagonist (Alex) is established against the identity of her mother (Sylvia). The fifteen minute film is set upon a beach where mother and daughter are sun-bathing together. Through the limited

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interactions that the two have with each other, a vast separation of personalities is established. The mother enjoys deep tanning, trashy novels and flirting, while Alex reads literature, wears sunblock and leaves when a male bather approaches the two. A series of childhood flashbacks punctuate the film. In these sequences, young Alex is confused by the bulge in a male bather's swim trunks, frightened when the man notices her investigation and betrayed when her mother and her friends laugh at the incident.

Like *Inside/Out*, the emotional undercurrents are what carry the film as opposed to any sort of standard framework that can be easily broken down in a plot summary. As viewers, we are invited to share in the frustration and agitation that Alex experiences. This is partially achieved through an amplification of certain ambient sounds on the audio track. The exaggerated noises mimic the unbearable awareness that Alex has of her mother filing her nails or slopping tanning oil in her skin. The agitation culminates when, for a moment, Alex pictures the stranger on the beach strangling Sylvia. By this point, Alex is at the water's edge, she looks back and the two exchange waves. This small moment of contact between mother and daughter signals a hope that perhaps reconciliation is possible, but it also marks a point in Alex's search for identity. Although civil communication is possible between the two, it is more comfortable with the luxury of some degree of physical removal.

Linearity is discarded in this piece more than in Spring's other work. There are certain events that take place, but it is

This time he is in full female attire and trimmings.

Once again, Spring has presented us with a film that we cannot do justice to upon the basis of plot summary. A major theme in the film (and of course the outcome) has to do with gender roles and sexual power relationships. Allison's personal space is invaded by each of the other tenants and the landlord by way of suggestiveness, conversational undertones and small physical come-ons. For example, upon acceptance of the room (the ceremonial handshake), the landlord (Mr. Zirmuchinsky) holds onto Allison's hand for an inappropriately long period of time. The event obviously makes Allison uncomfortable, but she accepts the episode as part of life.

It is not until the realization of Philip's fondness for her sundries that Allison decides to remove herself from the situation. This is one of the telling moments of the film because, as mentioned earlier, she does it without hostility. She is aware that somehow the physical violation of her home and belongings by this confused man is the least of the impositions that have been placed upon her during her stay. Although it is Philip's actions that trigger Allison's move to separate herself from this environment, it is not because his actions are more severe than those of the other males in the film. Instead it is more because his actions are removed from the realm of accepted societal discourse. While the sexually overpowering gestures of George (who insisted that Allison was too young to be alone) and Mr. Zirmuchinsky are the more oppressive, they are common occurrences.

Allison's socialisation causes her to accept the little abuses of her other neighbours, but she has nothing to prepare herself for Philip's anti-social behaviour.

She had an innocence that I think she needed to get over....But she has an instinctive wisdom that tells her that this seemingly horrible thing, the one that seems most threatening, is ultimately the most benign. (Nov. 20, 94)

The threats posed by Mr. Zirmuchinsky and George are finally the more terrible because they have to do with possession of Allison's sexual being, as opposed to Philip's violation which was incidental to finding his own sexual identity.

Related to the themes of identity and personal space is the symbol of the mother. Although the notion of the mother is present in each film, *Beach Story* is the only one that actually includes her as a visible character. Since we have already discussed the mother/daughter relationship in *Beach Story*, we shall move on to the other two. In *Personal Effects*, Allison's parents are conspicuous in their absence from the scope of the film. This is true to the point that George attempts to claim the role for himself. The reasons for Allison's leaving home are unclear, but the implication is that she either doesn't want to or cannot return. The concept of having a parental surrogate in the form of George is equally unappealing. The institution of parentage has taken on greatly negative connotations in these two films, a sentiment which is echoed (although a quiet echo) in the first film, *Inside/Out*. The mention of Joanna's mother in *Inside/Out* is brief, but once again she is seen as one which imposes on the autonomy of the

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daughter. When Joanna's friends are arriving for dinner she mentions that her mother had been over earlier, Robin replies (almost sarcastically) "Full day!". However, Joanna's weary "Yes" implies that a visit from her mother is a trying experience--just as a visit from her friends would be.

The search for identity is an archetype, not only in film, but in all the arts. Spring has taken this exploration of the self and examined it through these three short films, but in each film there are more questions raised about both the need to search and what the possibilities are of actually finding the self. They do not have the pretention of work which claims to have the answer, only the hope that there might be one.