





Frame enlargements from *Nunaqpa* (1991) by Zacharias Kunuk. Photos courtesy of V Tape.

NWT). Super Shamou is a low-budget Inuit Superman, who uses traditional Inuit powers to keep the village kids out of trouble. The plot structure and cheesy special effects are familiar (the time-honored strategy of depicting the superhero in flight is used: a sudden pan down the length of his body, followed by a shot of him stretched horizontally with the islands of Baker Lake glittering below). However, aspects of the show that would be rejected from mainstream TV—the wildly varied pacing, ample sight gags and body jokes, and of course the all-Inuk dialogue—suggest that there are sweeping changes afoot.

*Nunaqpa* (1991) by Zacharias Kunuk (Igloolik, Nunavut) is a second hour-long costume drama by the self-taught creator of *Qaggig* (1989). Like its predecessor, *Nunaqpa* uses actors from Nunavut's community to portray traditional activities of their grandparents' generation. Kunuk's extremely slow, meditative style—it often seems to be a real-time narrative—draws attention to an entirely different pace of life and concept of labor. Here, families make the annual walk inland to hunt caribou while the grandparents wait at home. Although there are fewer visual anachronisms than in *Qaggig*, *Nunaqpa* takes advantage of historical recreation to play with tradition as at once intimate and strange. The women who prepare camp and amuse themselves with games while they wait for the hunters to return seem to be trying to disgust their real-life daughters by comparing recipes for snacks: drips from the seal oil lamp or ptarmigan droppings mixed with meal.

Much Canadian independent work has a coherent identity by virtue of being centered in either Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver (or

Winnipeg, thanks to the Winnipeg Film Group). At Images 92 Toronto work emanated a recognizable style—blue-lit, stylish, and often vapid. But it was regional and ethnic works that best, and most self-consciously, debated with the issue of Canadian identity. In Janet Hawkwood's *The Old Country* (1991, Vancouver, B.C.) the "Maple Leaf Waltz" plays in the background, but when the face of Anna the Holstein cow looms, big-nosed, skinny-necked, into the distorting lens, with a Canadian flag high and tiny on a pole behind her, we get a sense of the proportional importance of local and national issues. "Just about everything that's important you can learn on a farm," Hawkwood's laconic voice-over asserts. A color shot of the cow made with a fisheye lens gives the slowly revolving figure, with its black island on sea or white against the blue sky, global significance. The ability to capture the minute details of what is not significant also characterizes *The Final Gift* (1991) by Brian Stockton (Regina, Saskatchewan), a portrait of the town of Mayfield, Saskatchewan in which exquisitely small things—an afternoon of playing polkas, the gift of a gallon of antifreeze—appear as pivotal points in the life of a man now dead.

*Bolo Bolo!* (1991) by Gita Saxena and Ian Rashid (Toronto) focuses on the responses of diasporic South Asian communities to AIDS, and in the process describes the complex sexual and political dynamics within these communities and their relation to white gay culture. A Toronto cable station canceled a series called "Toronto: Living With AIDS" because it included *Bolo Bolo!*, which the station deemed offensive—very likely not on the

basis of its erotic scenes, since other tapes in the series contained far more explicit imagery, but because it focuses on the sexual conventions of ethnic minorities.<sup>1</sup> Brenda Joy Lem's *Open Letter: Grasp the Bird's Tail* (1992) (Toronto) raises similar issues in a very different way: how to survive fetishism, Orientalism, and bodily danger as a woman of Asian ancestry in North America (also a theme of Lem's previous film, *The Compact* (1990)). The effect of the entire film is like the dance with ribbons performed by director/actor Lem at the film's beginning: colorful, shimmering, with illusory depth. *Open Letter* is strongest in its poetic evocation of the threatened and desiring body, through the metaphor of a magic show knife-throwing illusion seen from the point of view of the magician's female assistant at whom the knives are being thrown. Oddly, the film is weakest when it mourns specific racist and misogynist attacks, from the Montreal massacre to Yusef Hawkins to Vincent Chin.

A sense of loss pervaded a number of the programs at Images 92, particularly in the program of tapes about mourning, curated by Annette Manguard, called "Wish You Were Here." The best of these addressed the inability of film to convey their sense of loss. *Seeing Is Believing* (1991) by Shauna Beharry (Moosejaw, Saskatchewan) evokes with surprising eroticism the closeness of daughter to mother expressed in terms not of vision, which would already imply a degree of distance, but of touch. The filmmaker's grief at the death of her mother is colored by resentment of the emphasis on visuality in Western culture that has deprived her of certain memories. Beharry's camera searches a still photograph of her mother over and over, as though trying to make contact on a level that the image itself obscures; it is only when she puts on her mother's sari that she feels she has "climbed into her skin."

In the same program was *R.S.V.P.* (1991) by Laurie Lynd (Toronto), a film in which music acts as a slender thread through time and space. The simple hook is this: a man returns to his home, which holds the traces of his love, how could he hear on the radio a song that his lover had requested some time ago—Jessye Norman's version of Hector Berlioz's *Le Spectre de la rose*. Her clear voice fills the room, and the song continues to play over the radio—in a Toronto AIDS activist office, on the headphones of a high school girl who had been the man's student, in the stony silence of the man's parents' home in the Midwest—joining the people who knew him, annulling their homophobic estrangement, and permitting them to grieve. Another work about healing is James MacSwain's *Sonnambulist* (1991, Halifax, N.S.), which is based on a *National Enquirer* story. A child's voice tells how she witnessed her father murder her mother and then kill himself. Meanwhile a sleepwalker, her hair and gown flowing as she moves, glides

through a garden and dances on a wharf with a grace that redeems not only the pain in the story but also the banality and prurience of its tabloid source.

Loss and anger in the age of AIDS are the only sentiments that unite *R.S.V.P.* and (*Tell Me Why*) *The Epistemology of Disco* (1991) by John Di Stefano (Montreal), a strobe-lit ahistorical reading of disco culture. Nostalgic clips from *Cruising* (1980) by William Friedkin and "Love Hangover" by Diana Ross punctuate a faux-academic semiology of, for example, the Levi's 501 jeans so central to the gay club scene of the early '80s. *The Epistemology of Disco* quotes Andrew Halloran's essay "Dark Disco: A Lament," which locates the birth of disco exclusively in white gay culture; on its dizzying trajectory the film barely acknowledges the contradiction of ignoring the origins of disco in black funk. Reading with the knowledge of hindsight also motivates Johane Fréchette's *Tout désir d'oubli disparu* (1991, Everything You Want is Gone, Montreal). Fréchette's tape shares with Janice Tanaka's better-known *Memories from the Department of Amnesia* (1990) an awareness of the incommensurability of different kinds of story telling. *Tout désir* tells the story of the filmmaker's contraction of lymphatic cancer after years of swimming in the St. Lawrence River at three different levels: the intimate personal reminiscence, the fact-laden environmentalist exposé, and the cynical critique of medical authority. Each level informs the others, drawing on different sorts of authority that at the same time mark the inadequacy of each alone.

As the films dealing with "Canada" demonstrate, national identity is informed as much by local legends and dissent as it is by official discourses. Several works in Images 92 expressed the necessity of using multiple means to evoke a truth that escapes official acknowledgement: as well as Fréchette's and Tanaka's tapes, these included *Homes Apart: Korea* (1991) by J.T. Takagi and Christine Choy (New York) and *How to Behave: A Film About Kindness* (1987, Thanh Van Thuy, Vietnam). One of the brightest points in the festival, *How to Behave* is a ruminative collage about life in contemporary Vietnam, with a personal voice-over narrative that calls to mind the work of Chris Marker and Kidlat Tahimik in its mixture of disenchantment, subversion, and poetry. This clandestinely made work was the last request of Dong Xuan Thuyet, who asked his colleagues to make a film about *tu-te*, "kindness" or "human relations." In the course of interviewing their compatriots about the meaning of this term (which is met with incomprehension, cynicism, or nostalgia), the filmmakers face uncomfortable truths about the state and their cushy position as its apologists. "Even the children laugh at our boring films." *How to Behave*, by taking as its subject the filmmakers' own ambivalence, ultimately skewers the hypocrisy both of the regime and of those who have the luxury to ask such questions.

I cannot end this review without mentioning *Beauborg Boogie Woogie* (1991) by David Rimmer (Vancouver). This short film subverts the reverential, contemplative mode of museumgoing, using film animation to make the work of Robert Delaunay and Wassily Kandinsky in the Beauborg Museum buzz as they ought to.

The 79 works in Images 92 connected across the 16 programs as much as they cohered in each, around themes as elusive as loss, reflexivity, and Canadian identity. It is appropriate to end this review by mentioning the discussion around Lister's *See Under Canada Nationalism*. When finished, the tape will include a list of adjectives Lister's interviewees come up with to describe Canadians; so far they are almost all relative terms, like "not overly aggressive." Audience members, in the same kind of self-critical, identity-by-denial manner, critiqued the tape in progress for being too pro-Canadian. This summer, as I write, Canada is undertaking constitutional talks with regard to the potential separation of Quebec and the self-determination of the First Nations. As we watch such processes of balkanization around the world, it is useful to consider the role of self-criticism and recognition of difference in the creation of national identities.

#### NOTES

1. See Kim Tomczak, "Video News," *Fuse* 14, no. 4 (Spring 1991), p. 12.