

Commentary

Two Journeys: A Review of *Not A Love Story*

BRUCE ELDER

If Canadian documentary films have a single overriding characteristic, it is surely that of using forms that tie knowledge to direct experience. The most common means of organizing such films has been to use what I refer to as "observational structures" — structures which lead the spectator through the development of some process — and the most common of these has been the chronicle of a filmmaker's "intellectual journey" into one domain or another. In order to ground a film's claim to being authoritative (imparting *knowledge* rather than mere *opinion*), and in order to encourage the spectator (always assumed to be a *tabula rasa* on which the film will inscribe its information) to identify with the artist's quest for truth, the filmmaker in this genre sets out on his journey ostensibly devoid of any preconceptions. Furthermore, he appears to acquire understanding not through an intellectual act of synthesis, but rather exclusively through the experiences depicted in the film. The didactic programme which motivates such filmmaking rests on the assumption that because film is a realistic medium which presents the filmmaker's experiences veridically, and because knowledge is produced exclusively by experience, the spectator will gain precisely the same knowledge that the filmmaker is depicted as acquiring.

While I find these beliefs not only wrongheaded but abhorrent, the frequency with which forms of film construction based upon them have been used at the National Film Board has virtually given them institutional sanction. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Film Board's controversial production, *Not A Love Story*, has been written about as though it were exactly this sort of film. Indeed, its resemblance to this form is striking — so striking as to embarrass the film.

The impulse for making the film, we are told near its beginning, arose when Bonnie Klein discovered that her eight-year old daughter was exposed at the local variety store to magazines containing images of naked women. This discovery stimulated her desire to know what effects that exposure would have, particularly on her daughter's self-image. Consistent with the conventions of the form of construction we have been describing, we see Bonnie Klein, on-camera, searching out experiences and experts in order to find the answer to her question. Furthermore, as in so many films of that type, the introduction presents two models for understanding the topic under inquiry — in this case,

for understanding the effects of sexually explicit imagery. One model is articulated by Kate Millet and is based on the assumption that such art can be positively life affirming; the other is, I infer, represented by instantiation by the person of David S. Wells (the publisher of *Elite* magazine),¹ and is based on the assumption that such imagery invariably becomes negative, violent and pornographic. It appears, at first, that, as in most films of this sort, we will be asked to determine which model is more adequate — which, in this case, realistically expresses the more commonplace role of sexually-explicit imagery.

As though to reinforce the impression that the film is unbiased, that its conclusions could be accepted by anyone, regardless of class or previous belief, with the requisite experience,² the film depicts stripper Linda Lee Tracy's quest for understanding. This quest begins in the apparently genteel clubs where she performs (under the stage name "Fonda Peters"), and leads her into the world of violent, hard-core pornography. Predictably, the film concludes with Tracy's decision to stop performing as a stripper because, the film's form leads us to infer, she has gained some insight into the social practices involved in the commodity-fetishization of the female body.

Many commentators on *Not A Love Story* have found themselves uneasy with the filmmakers' use of Linda Lee Tracy; they have explained that this uneasiness results from watching the filmmakers manipulate an honest, working-class woman into feeling badly about the work she does. There is truth in these claims, but they do not go to the core of the problems with the filmmakers' use of Tracy, to say nothing of those with the film's organizing principles. These, I believe, lie in the deceptiveness of *Not A Love Story's* appearance, in the fact that while it *seems* to be an empirical documentary, while it *seems* to begin free from preconceptions about "pornography," while it *seems* to be a chronicle of a search for information, it *actually* begins with a definite — even if not very fully worked out — theory of sexuality that converts Tracy's apparent quest for understanding into a mythically structured moral odyssey.

The theory of sexuality which informs *Not A Love Story* is adumbrated in its opening sections. Bonnie Klein explains her concern about her daughter's having been exposed to sexually explicit imagery with the comment, "Everything has a reaction," and elaborates upon this comment by remarking that while *she* had avoided dealing with the pornographic imagery which surrounds us all by putting on blinkers, "her daughter would be affected" by such imagery. Somewhat later Kathleen Barry clarifies these comments when she states that the images one sees are "going to stay with you and be translated later into behaviour." She also proclaims that such imagery makes all women victims.

The notions which underpin such assertions are

fundamentally anti-psychological. They suggest that once an image is registered in a person — installed, so to speak, in his mnemonic repository — they represent a permanent threat to him. This is because, according to this view, all behaviour is modelled on, indeed mimics, the behaviour represented in these mnemonic traces. On this view, then, these traces represent a permanent potential for the performance of the actions that they depict. These notions, then, encapsulate a very crude form of behaviourism, one that neglects all considerations of how imagery is processed internally, of the dynamics by which memory traces are returned to consciousness or are repressed, of how images are transformed when they reappear in consciousness, of the relation between mental imagery and the drives, of the role imagery plays in directing behaviour and, for that matter, in mediating between the drives and behaviour in a way that sometimes renders it unnecessary for the drives to pass over into action. Could any clear-thinking person ever believe that by merely observing some piece of behaviour, a person — even a very young person — was forever threatened with the spectre of committing that behaviour himself.

That *Not A Love Story* is based on such anti-psychological, “monkey-see/monkey-do” theory of learning is, after all, not really so surprising when it is recognized that what the film ultimately offers us is not a scientific theory of sexuality but rather a theological view of the effects of the abuse of sexuality: the film describes the effects of sexually-explicit imagery not in terms of the intra-psychic functions of mental representation, but rather in terms of its potential to corrupt the soul. The film is very clear about the nature of that corruption. At the very beginning of the film, feminist writer Susan Griffin asserts that pornography puts the heart in prison, puts the heart on its knees, renders the heart silent, if need be. One has only to substitute the term “soul” for the term “heart” — as the filmmakers ultimately do, by identifying a gentle form of eros with the highest form of human love — to produce the very traditional Christian view that sin is a form of bondage that renders one spiritually impotent and morally ineffective. When Dr. Ed Donnerstein, a research psychologist who has constructed a film, quoted in *Not A Love Story*, depicting a woman sucking on a gun inserted in her mouth, which many have taken to be yet another of many examples of the unlovely pornography that is commonly available for sale, tells us that pornography desensitizes a person, he is uttering a similar view. When poet and ideologue Robin Morgan expounds the view that the recent “revolution,” which has gained for us all a greater measure of sexual freedom, has only served to “benumb sexuality,” to “render it comatose,” she, too, is expressing a similar view; when she goes on to say, referring explicitly to a fall from grace, that the effect of this is to isolate the individual, the sketch of the

traditional view is nearly completed, for the filmmakers are telling us that when the soul is weakened by corruption, it can no longer experience the best form of love offered of one’s fellow man, that is to say, can no longer experience the Divine. All that remains to be added to the outline to produce a total picture of the traditional view is the idea that corruption leads to the death of the soul. This is done during a group interview with members of the San Francisco-based *Men Against Male Violence* collective, who deport themselves as though paying penance for the ills of society. One man speaks of contemporary sexual conduct having its roots in a death-oriented culture. (Another even hints at the traditional belief that the God of Love is the Ultimate Reality and that to lose contact with God is to experience the dissolution of things into unreality. He proclaims that “Everything is images. Everything is unreal. We are a victim of a fantasy.”) Indeed, the filmmakers seem to construe the violence so frequently contained in pornographic imagery in a manner similar to that in which Freud conceived of the aggressivity characteristic of *thanatos*, as expressing hidden death wishes. If images of violence are as widespread as the film shows them to be, it is, the filmmakers suggest, because our society is hell-bent upon death. *Not A Love Story*, then, is not a love story because it is a death story — it is not about *eros*, but about *thanatos*. It is about the death of the soul.

What *Not A Love Story* offers us is a spiritual vision and it does so to establish the grounds for the moral judgements the film so liberally makes. Eros, we are told, should abet the soul’s efforts to participate in a spiritual community; it should gentle the soul, for only a gentle soul can respond with sensitivity to all dimensions of the Other. But the soul is all too easily overrun by the demands of the flesh, wherefrom a brutal *libido* arises — a libido that has been fused with aggressive drives — which coarsens a person, rendering him, by the very potency of his own self-serving drives, insensitive to the needs of others. Thus, the film suggests, any sexuality other than a gentle, tender “other-regarding” sexuality isolates a person by failing to provide the means for the ultimate communion between people. There is, of course, much to be said for the view that a tender sexuality has a divine aspect. This notwithstanding, one should not be misled into believing that it is the whole of the story about sexuality, for even the most basic consideration of sexuality’s functional aspects reveals the importance of a harder and tougher sexuality. Perhaps it is a consideration of their necessary biological tasks that have made so many males to whom I have spoken about the film so angry at the scene portraying the interview with this MAMV group. More than one has remarked that if being like the men portrayed here were the only alternative to a coarse “macho” sexuality, they’d be forced to choose the latter.

The filmmakers even put forward the quasi-mystical notion that because love is an inner movement of the soul, it cannot be seen. Marc Stevens, an actor in sex films, tells us that he often really loved the actresses with whom he performed but, he exclaims, pointing accusingly at the camera, "That never got it. The camera never got it." Though it goes unstated, the argument advanced here is a key to the film's programme. The film begins by differentiating between two possible sorts of sexually explicit images — let us call them "erotic" and "pornographic"; the former are supposed to embody love, the latter not. Now, it is suggested if the camera cannot capture love on film, there will be no instances of sexually explicit images of the first sort, for by definition, they embody love. All sexually explicit images therefore are pornographic. Since no sexually explicit images can embody love, all will embody its absence, its lack, its death — or even, as we so frequently see in pornographic images, love's being killed. When making up our minds about the effects of sexually explicit imagery, we needn't, then, consider the possibility that it might be positive, erotic, life-enhancing. We have to make up our minds knowing it can only be pornographic — negative, violent, and death-driven. This argument, that the quest for a genuinely erotic art is doomed to failure, seems simply to confirm the filmmakers in their own view, for we know from interviews that *Not A Love Story* began as a project to make a genuinely erotic women's film, a project which was abandoned as impossible to realize.

The theological conception of the effects of pornography which we have been describing transforms Linda Lee Tracy's odyssey from the voyage of discovery characteristic of the empirical documentary into a redemptive journey, for it culminates not with the intellect's discovery of a truth but with the soul's purification and salvation. She, like the viewers of the film who are expected to identify with her, is not supposed to be informed so much as transformed. This is why, unlike the characters in empirical documentaries, the characters in this film do not begin without preconceptions, for the dramatic structure of this film demands that their lack be not the want of information, but rather of virtue.

As we now see, it is Linda Lee Tracy's journey, not Bonnie Klein's, that is the principal one. Bonnie Klein acts more as a guide, guiding our seeker, unbeknownst to her, ever deeper into the circles of hell, on her way towards salvation. This description of the film's structure as mythological is not overstatement for the film is, in all its aspects, informed by the myth of the fall and the redemption. At the beginning, Tracy tells us that she attended a feminist discussion of pornography. She felt judged by the condescension of the participants when she told them she made her living by stripping. "The party line," she states (using that very term), implies that she is stupid for allowing

herself to be so used. She wonders whether "the party line" is not the same as the line men take on women, for according to both, women are stupid. In this way, we learn that Tracy is situated outside the community of believers. In the next scene we see her, nude at the end of her performance, raise her hands and exclaim, "God bless the working women!" The irony involved in the use of the term "working women" to refer to a stripper, and its undeniable association with the even more disreputable trade of prostitution, along with the profanity of the context of its utterance, make the statement, within the context of the film's theological framework, at least impudent, if not actually blasphemous. We also hear her refer to the strip club as "a very honest arena." Her self-deception in this, as in her rejection of "the party line" and her conviction in the rightness of her behaviour, is proof that she is so mired in sin that she fails to recognize her wrong-doings.

In the following scenes, we hear that pornography is widely circulated; that the sales of some pornographic magazines outstrip those of *Time* and *Newsweek* combined; that it is a growing industry (in one year, the number of pornographic magazines imported into Canada rose from eight to thirty-two); that the imagery is becoming "rougher" all the time; and that there are four times as many sex shows as McDonald's Restaurants in the United States. We also witness a photo-session conducted by Suze Randall, where the female model has to do a painful mid-air spread (though hardly as painful as the feats performed every day by gymnasts and ballet dancers, without evoking much consternation on the part of the spectators), and hear sex-show participant Patrice Lucas say that the pleasure taken by at least some of the spectators at her show comes from seeing her downed, and that a few even call out — apparently to her great amazement — for her black boyfriend to "hurt her." The cumulative effect of all the scenes is the impression of a fallen world.

This impression reaches a culmination in a scene at a New York "sex supermarket," which the film presents as an emporium of emptiness, loneliness, pain and suffering. The purpose of the scene is made pointedly explicit when Ms. Tracy, after watching a sado-masochist film, turns accusingly to the manager and says, "That hurts!" The next scene portrays her meeting with Bonnie Klein in a sex bookstore, sharing an embrace with her and confessing that she now wonders whether she will be able to return to Montreal unscathed. In sum, we are presented with an image of the pain and the tribulations that follow upon corruption.

Shortly thereafter, inside a theatre with the ironic — but nonetheless significant for that — name of "The House of Ecstasy," we see men sitting in isolated booths watching a group of nude women cavorting about. In a series of emotionally affecting shots, the camera moves to the front of the peepholes through

which they peer; as the viewing time they have purchased comes to an end, the shutters over the peephole windows slide down, as though shutting them totally in their isolated environment. The isolation of the men, their sequestration by the downward movement of the shutters, the music that despite its tawdriness is reminiscent of an Albinoni composition, all suggest that these men are damned to a God-forsaken loneliness. An extraordinary shot follows. The scenes just described have occurred in near obscurity; now the camera, as though fleeing from what it has just witnessed, enters a dark tunnel and ascends a set of stairs that lead from the darkness below to the intense light above. The geography of this episode is plainly patterned on the cosmology of Augustinian Christianity.

If the previous scenes hinted at the presence of a mythology in the film, the next several scenes provide a final confirmation of its structuring function. For immediately after "The House of Ecstasy" scene we see Linda Lee Tracy, her previous beliefs about pornography quite thoroughly shaken, standing in front of a burlesque house, reading aloud to passersby a poem she had written. It includes the lines "They come to worship women in their nakedness/Corporate men confess their piety/in a holiness they invent to fill some hole." An invented holiness (i.e., an unnatural and fictitious religion) involving the worship of naked goddesses is nothing other than paganism. This is the charge being made against devotees of pornography.

In the next scene, we hear author Susan Griffin remark that "pornography is the mirror-opposite of religious worship" for it involves "the ritual of desecration of the woman's body." This mirror-opposite of true religion, whose rituals involve desecrating a female, could be none other than Satanism. The enthusiasts of pornography are no garden-variety pagans; in fact, they are nothing less than devil worshippers, and pornography is integral to their devilish rituals. One recalls here the comment by the members of the *Men Against Male Violence* group that "Everything is images. We're a victim of fantasy," for, in the traditional view, Satan is the conjurer of illusions.

The next scene depicts the strength that belongs to a community of believers, as the San Francisco-based *Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media* demonstrate outside a Columbus Avenue sex show. These women stand up against the bouncers and bigots, no doubt because the truth unites them, and in unity there is strength. Soon after, a confused and distraught Bonnie Klein seeks out Kathleen Barry. The purpose of the visit is tantamount to confession. She admits to the sin of having lost hope and asks for Ms. Barry's advice. Ms. Barry suggests to her confidant that the way to overcome hopelessness is to seek understanding, for one can never turn one's back to the surrounding world. The significance of the advice, in the context of the film's mythological structure, is that once one has

entered the fallen world, one cannot regain faith through recovering one's innocence but only through achieving understanding; once one has lost an intimate knowledge of the Divine, one can learn of His ways only through the use of reason. Soon after, we hear Robin Morgan tell us that grace is possible, that one must determine to love men furiously, even in the face of all their oppressiveness. What she suggests then is the Christian antinomian solution to overcoming the ills of society. The paralleling of her advice with Barry's reflects the Augustinian paralleling of the effect knowledge has on the intellect with the effect grace has on the will.

After a brief interpolation, which follows the structure of a *Women Against Pornography* slide show in tracing the affiliation of imagery from ads on billboards (including the ads for Calvin Klein jeans, one depicting a male, the other, sexier ad depicting a female), through soft-core to hard-core images,³ the mythological drama reaches its climax! Linda Lee Tracy submits to having her genitals photographed by Suze Randall. She feels degraded by the experience. "I hit rock bottom," she states later, in a poem about the occasion. "I became an object." She reached the nadir of existence, and having reached that point was, like Saint Augustine, redeemed.

The nadir of existence, as the statement "I became an object" implies, is the loss of subjectivity, of *soul*. Lest we miss the point, Susan Griffin interprets the Linda Lee Tracy/Suze Randall photography session for us when, in the following scene, she shares with us what she refers to as a "mystical truth," that spirit and matter belong together, that spirit cannot be separated from matter. Linda Lee Tracy has felt the spirit awaken within her. Redemption, then, according to the doctrine the filmmakers espouse, is the integration of the person, the making of spirit and flesh one. "*Sentire non est corporis sed anima per corpus*," wrote the Bishop of Hippo.

Not A Love Story has been hailed as a work that is important because it raises pressing issues for discussion. The form of the film makes lies of these claims. The film does not raise issues for discussion; it seals them off from discussion, for the theological framework of its normative considerations of pornography put its claims outside the bounds of empirical verification. A psychological inventory of the roles that imagery plays in mental life, of their functions in directing behaviour, is useful because it offers statements that can be proven false and rejected. The assertion that pornography is evil because it separates the body from the soul affords no such possibility; it can, therefore, only be accepted on faith. *Not A Love Story* is ultimately a theological/moral text masquerading as an empirical documentary. This sort of form is thoroughly objectionable.

NOTES

1. It is interesting that the film has women *articulating* their viewpoints while men *embody* theirs, a reversal of the usual arrangement.
2. Thus, the role of the subject in producing knowledge is downgraded so that experience can be understood as the exclusive agent in its creation. This confirms the thesis that the film appears to be what I call an empirical documentary.
3. It was in the *Women Against Pornography* slide show that the parodic *Hustler* magazine cover designed in response to condemnation of the magazine from sections of the women's movement, showing a woman's leg sticking out of the top of a meat grinder and a bowl of ground beef underneath, made its appearance as an object of condemnation on the grounds that it revealed the hidden desires of pornographers.

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