Larry’s Recent Behaviour (1963), Peggy’s Blue Skylight (1964), Patriotism (1964), Patriotism Part II (1965), Barbara’s Blindness (1965) and Water Sark (1965) are among Joyce Wieland’s earliest films.¹ They were completed shortly after her arrival in New York (1962), where she lived with Michael Snow until 1972. These films were conceived and completed exclusively by Wieland, with the exception of Barbara’s Blindness, which was a collaboration with Betty Ferguson.² These six early New York films already demonstrate Wieland’s incredible versatility and imagination as a filmmaker, while revealing certain thematic and formal preoccupations that she fully developed in her later films.

Wieland brought her sensibility as a visual artist working in various two- and three-dimensional media to bear on these films. Similarly, her interest in film initiated works in painting, collage, assemblage, and soft sculpture that bore traces of this medium. Wieland’s earliest works as a visual artist were drawings. She continued to draw throughout her life, including during her time in New York. Drawing permitted her to convey the immediacy of experience and feeling through the spontaneity of line, which gave energy to her compositions. In one of her notebook entries, Wieland noted: “I feel and draw what I feel” (qtd. in Lind 58). Her skills with drawing (her natural ability to create energy with line and thus convey the immediacy of experience) were effortlessly transferred to her film compositions. Referring to Water Sark in her conversation with Hollis Frampton (1936-84), she made an explicit connection between this film and her drawings: “It resembles the drawings that I did for the ten years preceding that film. It was an extension of those drawings. It was a drawing film” (qtd. in Wieland & Frampton 172). By means of her camera handling and editing, some of these early films, to a greater and lesser extent, resemble sketches, notebook entries, collage compositions, and even lyrical poems.

Wieland’s imagination and her sense of visual composition activate the meaning in her works as a process. This process is mobile and inexhaustible. It already has its origin in her drawings and is most prominent in her drawings of lovers, in which Eros amplifies the sense of living. Brenda Lafleur situates this process right in-between the marks of Wieland’s pencil, in their breaks and fissures, which convey the sense of incompleteness as process in her compositions. “Even the way Wieland draws the bodies,” Lafleur writes, “highlights the sense of process, of the always becoming. There are lines that do not always connect up, there are gaps and openings, a disparity between desire and result. It is the metaphorical porosity of these bodies to multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings that give these works such currency today” (36).

Process as “the always becoming,” as the inexhaustible spring of meaning, and always possessing something that slips, hides and evades the grasp of reason is
also the domain of collage. Collage involves the juxtaposition or placement of found or collected materials, unrelated to one another, in one composition to create a greater (more poetic) whole. By virtue of being put together, a new and previously unthought-of, or unexpected, connection is revealed. Or in Max Ernst’s more eloquent definition of the mechanism of collage: “It amounts to the exploitation of the chance meeting on a non-suitable plane of two mutually distant realities—a paraphrase and generalization of the well-known quotation from Lautréamont ‘Beautiful as a chance meeting upon a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella’... [T]hrough a new relationship its false absolute will be transformed into a different absolute, at once true and poetic: the umbrella and the sewing machine will make love” (Ernst 77).

The mechanism of collage is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in Wieland’s films—specifically in Barbara’s Blindness and in the trilogy: Larry’s Recent Behaviour, Peggy’s Blue Skylight, and Water Sark. Barbara’s Blindness is a collage composed entirely of found film footage and sounds. In the trilogy, Wieland’s editing of shots and layering of images (as superimpositions or side-by-side) engage this mechanism. In Larry’s Recent Behaviour, Wieland employs both in-camera superimpositions and superimpositions created by projecting footage on various surfaces and in varying sizes. In Water Sark layering is explored differently. It relies less on building layers one on top of another, as one would in superimpositions, but rather side-by-side. Her use of colour gels, prisms, and translucent and reflective surfaces in Water Sark affects, for the most part, only portions of the composition, while leaving others intact. We are very often permitted a glimpse of the space in front of and behind Wieland’s camera, seeing the objects on the table in front of Wieland and the window behind her, all in one composition, thus—echoing Ernst’s definition—bringing two distant “realities” together. In collage, images and language often coexist in one composition and are used interchangeably. In Wieland’s films images, words, and action are also composed in such a way as to create rhymes with one another. This engages a sort of wor(l)d play, which opens the composition’s meaning to process, rendering composition poetic. She explores this quite extensively in Larry’s Recent Behaviour and Peggy’s Blue Skylight. For example, in Larry’s Recent Behaviour we see a delightful animation of objects on a kitchen table, including the dishwashing detergent with the name brand Joy. A couple of shots later we see Joyce Wieland’s reflection in the mirror; she is holding her camera, shooting and waving at us. Her waving hand also visually rhymes with another shot in this film, one towards the beginning, of the American flag waving in the wind and, towards the end of the film, with the water waves that sink the boat in one of her paintings.

In 1966, Wieland embarked on making “para-cinematic” soft sculpture works titled “stuffed movies,” thereby bringing film to her collage work. They were long, narrow, vertically oriented and divided into compartments (frames), thus resembling filmstrips. Two of the film hangings, Larry’s Recent Behaviour (1966) and Patriotism (1966-67), were made as soft sculpture companions to her films Larry’s Recent Behaviour and Patriotism. She also literally brought cinema to her cloth collages by using plastic with pockets and pouches sewn into it, with enlarged frames and filmstrips from her films included inside them.
Some of Wieland’s collage, assemblage and cloth works contain objects and messages that are hidden and not to be revealed. Referring to hidden messages in her cloth collage *Heart On* (1961), Wieland noted: “It’s good because no one has to know it. It just might come up some day that these things exist. It is good to have mystery because people want to explain everything” (Nowell 224). One can also easily detect this sense of mystery in Wieland’s films. Her films simply refuse to be pinned down—they refuse to be stilled in the process of their continuous becoming.

**The Trilogy**

The trilogy consists of *Larry’s Recent Behaviour*, *Peggy’s Blue Skylight* and *Water Sark*. These films are akin to sketches of Wieland’s life, friends and home while she was living in New York. The trilogy can also be viewed as three separate, yet interconnected, portraits. It progresses from a more general and universal portrait of humanity (human behaviour and passions) starting with *Larry’s Recent Behaviour*, to a more personal portrait of Wieland’s home and friends in *Peggy’s Blue Skylight*, and ends with an intimate self-portrait in *Water Sark*. However, Wieland noted that her portraits (drawings) of other people, whether they are women or men, are also always of herself (Lind 67). In this sense, this trilogy is also an unconventional and highly imaginative self-portrait of Wieland, rendering these films very personal indeed.

Mirrors draw attention to the portrait character of these films. Footage of Wieland shooting her own reflection in a mirror is present in the three films. The first two films are, as if, rehearsals for its explicit deployment as a technique and exploration in *Water Sark*. Mirrors are also present in all three films to serve as a self-reflexive device of the film medium, i.e. to remind us of the mediated quality of the image (that it is, a re-presentation of the world, and a selective one at that). In *Peggy’s Blue Skylight* and, especially, in *Water Sark*, mirrors also contribute to the transformation of viewers’ perception of space. They serve as a space-disorienting device which situates the viewer in the middle of the “virtual” space, or in-between what is in front (on the screen) and what is, seemingly (because reflected in the mirror on screen), behind the viewer. This sutures viewers right into the film (the virtual space of the film), because the distinction between the real, lived-space is momentarily suspended in the viewers’ attempts to orient themselves in the space created by Wieland on the screen. In *Water Sark*, this produces extremely visceral effects, which become particularly compounded by Wieland’s dynamic camera handling and rhythmic cutting.

In the trilogy we can trace Wieland’s transition into cinema. In *Larry’s Recent Behaviour* the presence of her paintings and collages is quite explicit, as she includes one of her paintings and a cloth collage in the film. Her exploration of the film medium in *Larry’s Recent Behaviour* is very much grounded in her practice as a collage artist. Thus, splice-marks, film burns, and projected film are treated like objects in a collage composition. In *Peggy’s Blue Skylight* we are first introduced to Wieland as an accomplished Canadian painter, then she takes her camera, and us with it, for a walk in her neighbourhood and we meet Wieland the filmmaker; her camera handling, along with her ability to create a dynamic composition of light and rhythm, draws out the nascent lyrical voice in her film-
Another theme in *Peggy's Blue Skylight* is the relation between light and time, and how it manifests itself in cinema. The title provides a clue, as blue light is natural light, which is a measure of time for us, and the film follows the activities of Wieland and her friends from noon until dawn the next day. Wieland draws attention to light (including electric lights) throughout the film, and allows the available light to shape it. With *Water Sark* her attention shifts almost entirely to cinema (the medium of light, motion, sound, and time) and its transformative potential: namely, representation and transformation of perception. On the one hand, it is a film about film. And, on the other, it reveals right on the screen the process of transformation: the transformation of the outside world through the inner world of the artist by means of poetics (making). In doing so it transforms our perception, while explicitly drawing our attention to it.

Wieland draws on the mechanism of collage in these films. This approach contributes to the thematic cycling, as well as cycling of content, within each film and between them. Wieland repeats or cycles some of the (actual or thematically related) footage within each film and between the three films. She also repeats and reworks certain themes, which creates rhymes between the films. For example, the footage of a boat on the Hudson River is repeated in *Larry's Recent Behaviour* and in *Peggy's Blue Skylight*. This boat becomes a toy boat in *Water Sark* and a model boat towards the end of *Larry's Recent Behaviour*. The mechanism of collage is not only at work at the image level of these films but it also extends to the sound, specifically the image and sound juxtapositions. Perhaps the best example of this is in *Larry's Recent Behaviour* where the seemingly innocuous song “I Have a Boyfriend” (1963) by The Chiffons is juxtaposed with the sequence of photographs of Kennedys, beginning with the photograph of Jackie and JFK at the airport in Dallas. However, Wieland’s choice to include additional visual elements, such as a spinning LP on a record player, real to a perceptive viewer that there is more to this sequence than meets the eye. This song was playing on the local Dallas radio station (KLIF) on November 22nd, 1963 when Gary DeLaune interrupted it with the announcement of JFK’s assassination. By employing the footage of a record playing (especially as an out-of-focus circular spinning shape), Wieland also created a visual rhyme between the record and the concentric circles of a target, and hence of the scope in the rifle that aimed at Kennedy. But these further associations only become apparent to us once the image and sound relation has been deciphered.

In these films, images and sounds eschew the logic of temporal progression. Instead, they are matched according to their plastic or linguistic, as well as thematic, similarities. This also affects space, as it ceases to be anchored in time, and it too takes on a plastic quality. Even the imperfections and “mistakes” (flash frames, light flares, splice marks, and shaky camera) are transformed by Wieland’s imagination and her hands. They become part of the composition and shape its intricate rhythm. As such, these films are more akin to collage compositions, which defy sequential time, where each element is independent from others and only relate by virtue of contiguity. Each film seems to cycle back on itself; the end meets the beginning, like a loop that eschews conclusion.
**Patriotism and Patriotism Part II:**
In comparison with the films in Wieland’s trilogy, **Patriotism and Patriotism II** are composed of very few shots. They also contain very few visual elements, just a handful of objects. However, their apparent visual simplicity can be quite deceptive, for the (mise en scène) compositions of both films are rich in witty and evocative juxtapositions. In **Patriotism and Patriotism Part II**, the dynamism of Wieland’s camera handling, which is characteristic of the films in her trilogy, is replaced with stillness. Moreover, both films also involve the stilling of the animate or alive elements (the actor) and animating, by means of stop-motion animation or by hand, the inanimate objects (food and miniature flag in *Part I*, objects on the table and American flag in *Part II*). This formal choice helps underscore strife—between life and death, love and destruction, and feminine and masculine—as the underlying theme of these two films.

Both films, as the title **Patriotism** suggests, deal with love—the love of one’s country. This love, of course, is also met with violence and death, as one is willing to fight for it and defend it in war. The formal approach of the two films reinforces the latent theme of the strife between love and destruction. In **Part I**, Wieland’s witty juxtaposition of John Philip Sousa’s music, the *U.S. Field Artillery* (1917) march, a military march of victory, with the shot of a (naked) man in bed reinforces this tension. Just as does the waving of the American flag in **Part II**, which at first entices from a distance, then caresses the face of the man and eventually shrouds it (suggesting the shrouding of a dead soldier). Patriotic love, in patriarchal culture, does not let the “other” be; instead it takes over, tries to merge into one, while annihilating (through violence and war) the other. We can also see its connection to the greediness and the celebration of mass products in capitalism, where there is no true variety grounded in difference or respect of difference, instead only derivatives of the “one.”

Patriotism, as its etymology suggests, is a masculine kind of love. In both films, however, Wieland also points to the possibility of another, the feminine love, which does not obliterate (engulf) the other but respects that difference (the space) between the two, allowing the other to be. The experience of our first (maternal) love was the feminine love. It was intimate, sensual and nurturing, yet it allowed us to grow and grow up into our difference as the other. The feminine, and the feminine notion of love, is repressed in patriarchal cultures. Wieland, however, permits it to irrupt in the content of these films; both films show the mass arrangements broken up by one of its parts breaking off and away, like a fugitive, disrupting the unity of arrangement (for example, the Statue of Liberty in **Part II**). In **Part I**, she enlists the products of mass consumption (in this case hot dogs), which are also symbols of capitalism and patriarchal domination, to undermine the very system (order) that produced them. Humour also contributes to this overturning (riot) in these films, for it undermines the dominant reading by slipping otherness into it. But its presence is mostly felt in the form, in the ceaseless opposition between the animate and inanimate elements, and in the cyclical composition of the film, which refuses an ending (since the ending bears visual similarities to the beginning, prompting a replay in the mind’s eye). This refusal to end, to come to completion, but rather to cycle on itself, and the refusal to conform (to mass arrangements, structures, language, politics) but instead to
disrupt, undermine and irrupt within, is what rebellion and riot is all about. It is also what others, for example Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray (nearly a decade later than Wieland), have identified as the province of the feminine. Hence, in both films, Wieland infuses the feminine by means of riot and humorous rebellion into the masculine structures, language, politics, love and aesthetics, thereby transforming the meaning of “patriotism”.

**Barbara's Blindness:**

*Barbara's Blindness* is a collage film and collaboration between Joyce Wieland and Betty Ferguson. It relies solely on 16mm found footage for its content. It is a collage of sounds and images shaped by skilful editing, wit and cynical humour. It relies on associative montage and cyclical editing of images and sounds to build its plastic complexity and rich visual metaphors for sight and blindness, light and darkness, and life and death. The filmmakers combine the seemingly innocuous footage of a world seen through a child’s eyes (a little girl named Mary, who miraculously regains her sense of sight) with hard-hitting footage displaying violence in nature and the havoc wrought by human greed and unrestrained aggression, thus imbuing this composition with dark irony.

This film builds on several thematic and formal oppositions: life and death; beauty and horror; constructive (creative) and destructive forces (in nature and in human beings); (childhood) innocence and (adult) arrogance; light and dark; illusion and reality; film and painting; and abstraction and representation. These oppositions produce strife, which animates the form and the contents of this film. The most recurrent opposition in this film is between life and death and it is, perhaps, best exemplified in a sequence shaped around the time-lapse of the blossoming sunflower, starting approximately five minutes into the film. The sunflower is intercut with footage that either depicts or suggests death and destruction (also of values and tradition), and which becomes more violent and horrific as the sequence progresses. As the sunflower bud slowly turns into a full blossom, coming to the peak of its life, the other footage progressively moves in the opposite direction—towards destruction, death, and complete annihilation (the atomic bomb explosion). By alternating between the life-bound and the death-bound contents, while relying on metric montage, this sequence develops a back-and-forth rhythm, which is crucial in establishing the parallel between the contents of this sequence and the experience of its form.

*Barbara's Blindness* is composed of black-and-white film footage but it includes many hand-painted and tinted sequences. Tinting of footage helps create links between footage in different parts of the film. The filmmakers’ choice to employ individual colours in greatly interspersed intervals, on the one hand, accentuates the monochromatic palette of the black-and-white footage and, on the other hand, breaks the illusion of reality. These coloured sequences also draw attention to the film material by pointing to paint itself as another medium. The tactile quality of paint on film also connects with the theme of touch in this film, and ultimately with the theme of blindness. Its connection is introduced right at the beginning of the film, in the title sequence, where the title and credits of the film consist of perforations on white paper suggesting Braille. Lastly, painting directly on the film also serves as a self-reflexive device in this film. Its function is to remind us that
we are watching a film, a photographic representation of reality. It prevents us from succumbing to the illusion of reality and the drama on screen, by constantly drawing our attention away from it and towards itself. As a result, it forces us to slide between the illusion of reality situated in the photographic content of the film sequences and the surface events of this film, which reveal the true reality, the film itself as a tactile material—a plastic that can be painted and cut.

On one level, this film engages in questions concerning seeing, representation, illusion, reality, and cinema itself. It presents sight as a sense that prevents us from actually seeing things as they are. We are distracted, diverted by images of destruction—destruction that we have ourselves wrought—but are incapable of breaking the spell of these images over us and thus ending our indifference and inactivity. Although we can see, we are actually blind—blind to life and to the real disasters and death. On another level, this film deploys cinema as a tool to examine the tension between life and death, and the constructive and destructive aspects of humanity and nature, as they have been captured on cinema for decades. In doing so, it suggests that cinema, as visual technology, is complicit in some of the disastrous turns in the history of creative pursuits by human beings. Human creativity recruited for technological innovation and progress has replaced the significance of art (as a communal and spiritual activity). As such, it looks at blindness as a metaphor for the human inability of greater seeing, seeing imaginatively.

Conclusion
Gaps and openings—suggesting the process, the always becoming—are present in Wieland’s drawings, collages and cinema. This is the mark of her poetic imagination, which is intimate. But intimate in a more capacious sense, relating to Lucy Lippard’s definition in describing Wieland’s art: “It is intimate because it offers interstices into which the viewer can enter with his or her own associations” (8). Her films, like her visual art, are ultimately personal but also reveal Wieland’s preoccupation with the more general subject of the human condition, for they engage with timeless themes of life and death, love and destruction. Thus, the strength of Wieland’s art lies in the fact that one never tires of it, nor is able to exhaust the wealth of meaning and experience that it engenders. Every time one encounters it, it reveals a new layer, a new dimension, and a new experience. One can grow old with it but it will remain as novel and as exciting for the new generation as it was for the previous ones. This is the legacy of the great artist and filmmaker Joyce Wieland, who generously and unabashedly shared her own experiences of life with us and continues to do so through the joy and wonder that her work imparts to us.

DR. IZABELLA PRUSKA-OLDENHOF

Endnotes
1 All of these films, with the exception of Barbara’s Blindness, were shot on 8mm film and were later blown up to 16mm. Some of her subsequent films in 16mm continued her “drawing film,” in particular in the handling of the camera. These early New York films were her last films in this format, as the films she made subsequently were shot on 16mm and one (The Far Shore, 1976) on 35mm.
2 She collaborated on two other films several years prior with her colleagues from Graphic Associates (a film production company specializing in animation where Wieland was employed in the mid-1950s):

Hollis Frampton used the term para-cinematic to refer to Wieland’s paintings and soft sculpture works that “shared at least one quality with cinema” (169).

The painting that appears in Larry’s Recent Behaviour is already “para-cinematic,” as it is divided into a grid that represents the temporal progression of a boat sinking from frame to frame. Undoubtedly, Wieland’s time at Graphic Associates influenced her to bring cinema into closer proximity with painting. Around the time she was working on this film, she made several paintings that incorporate frame-by-frame fragmentation of action, often inside a grid-like composition or in a vertically oriented one resembling a filmstrip.

An example of Wieland treating projected light as an object in a collage is the sequence preceding the titles in Larry’s Recent Behaviour. In this sequence, she projects 8mm film footage on objects and manipulates the film frame by reducing it in size, while moving the projector, and skewing it.

She films the March/April 1964 issue of Canadian Art magazine, which includes an article on her visual art “Joyce Wieland at the Isaacs Gallery” by D. Donnell, along with several reproductions of her paintings, and an announcement for a group show at the Isaacs Gallery.

R. Bruce Elder has noted that Wieland cycles themes and footage in her films. In his essay on Wieland he also notes, “Wieland cycles material she uses from one medium to medium” (68). An obvious example of this would be in her soft sculptures, her “home totems” and “stuffed movies.”

For more on the themes of patriarchal domination and capitalism and their symbolism in Wieland’s Patrioticm Part I, please see “The Development of Feminist Strategies in the Experimental Films of Joyce Wieland” by Lauren Rabinovitz in The Films of Joyce Wieland.

In the title sequence of Patriotism Part I Wieland right away draws our attention to the word “riot” by dividing the title of this film into three syllables “PAT”, “RIOT”, and “ISM”, one under the other and placing “riot” in the center of the composition. She also superimposed “riot” with “films,” from CORRECTIVE FILMS PRESENTS, which is quite self-explanatory of her intentions behind this film.

In 1971, National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa mounted the retrospective exhibition of Joyce Wieland’s work. Wieland chose as the title for her exhibition True Patriot Love/Véritable amour patriote. Her choice of this title is very telling of her effort to give another sense to “patriotism,” to infuse it with the feminine, since much of the artwork she completed for this exhibition had drawn on the women’s lap craft tradition of quilting, sewing, and needlepoint, and she enlisted a large group of women to work with her on these projects.

Paul Arthur points out that Barbara’s Blindness shares its dark irony with films by two other collage filmmakers from the same period: the American visual artist and filmmaker Bruce Conner (1933-2008) and the Canadian filmmaker Arthur Lipsett (1936-1986) (59).

Wieland explored hand-tinting more extensively in a later film, which she appropriately titled Handtinting (1967-68). In this later film she employed fabric dyes. She and her collaborator Betty Ferguson used watercolour paints in Barbara’s Blindness. Moreover, they tinted and painted every release print of this film individually, thus rendering every print of this film unique.

WORKS CITED


QUESTIONS
1. What are some of the visual rhymes in Larry’s Recent Behaviour? How do they add to the film’s theme?

2. What might be the function of the odd behaviours performed by the two couples in Larry’s Recent Behaviour? How do they contribute to the theme of this film?

3. How is the sound used in Water Sark? What does it contribute to the film?

4. Peggy’s Blue Skylight is both a lyrical and, to some degree, a collage film. Can you identify sequences in this film that demonstrate these compositional methods?

5. Larry’s Recent Behaviour, Peggy’s Blue Skylight, and Water Sark are a trilogy. What are the predominant colours in each film? What is their role in each film? How do they function in the trilogy as a whole?

6. Given that Wieland made Patriotism and Patriotism Part II during the Vietnam War, and as a Canadian living in the U.S., what observations can you gather out of these films about Wieland’s commentary on this conflict and on American patriotism? Are these films still relevant today? If so, how?
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Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof is a Toronto-based experimental filmmaker and scholar. She is a graduate of the Media Arts Programme at Ryerson University (B.A.A) and the Communication and Culture Programme at York University (M.A.) and (Ph.D.). Her doctoral work concentrated on identifying the feminine aesthetics in avant-garde cinema and body art by drawing on Julia Kristeva’s and Luce Irigaray’s theories on vanguard poetry and language. Izabella’s film and video projects have screened in numerous group shows at international film festivals, cinemathèques, galleries and art centres in Canada and abroad. More recently, solo screenings of her works have been presented at the Diagonal Film Archive in Seoul, South Korea (2008); at the 10th Festival des Cinéma Différent de Paris in France (2008); and at Canadian Film Institute: CAFÉ eX in Ottawa (2007). She has also received several awards for her films. Izabella is the co-founder and an active member of the Toronto-based experimental film collective, the Loop Collective (www.loopcollective.com). She is an assistant professor at Ryerson University and teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in the Faculty of Communication and Design. Izabella is presently reworking her doctoral dissertation into a book manuscript and is working on several short films.

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