Writing about Joyce Wieland in 1970, film historian P. Adams Sitney noted that "La raison avant la passion/Reason Over Passion" “is a film to be seen many times” (Sitney 49). Despite its deceptively rigid structure and long running time (at over 80 minutes, it was the longest film Wieland had made to date), the generosity of her approach and complexity of the subject does indeed beget multiple viewings. It is in this film that Wieland’s poetically jarring filmic voice comes to the fore and enables her to envision through the moving image a subject, Canada, which was still in its own process of determination.

At the time of making Reason Over Passion, Wieland had been living in New York City since 1963 and had become productively embedded in the city's experimental and avant-garde film scene. Upon arriving in New York, she began attending Jonas Mekas’ “Filmmaker's Showcases” at the Gramercy Arts Theatre. While it was still very much a predominantly male community, Wieland was welcomed into the scene by the dancer and filmmaker Shirley Clarke. Together Clarke and Wieland were among the few women who were producing films alongside artists such as the Kuchar brothers, Hollis Frampton, Ken Jacobs, Jonas Mekas and others. As exiles from Toronto, both Wieland and her then-husband Michael Snow found a productive affinity with this film community, where an inclusive, open and collaborative spirit allowed for the production and reception of artists' experimental film.

Although having created a few shorter films while still living in Toronto, it was in New York that Wieland turned to film as a primary material in her practice. Prior to Reason Over Passion, she had made twelve films, all of which show the influence and integration of the tenets of structuralist film, while also indicating her own particular playfully direct and communicative sensibility for the medium. As the art historian Lucy Lippard noted, “her exposure to and work within the structuralist discipline undoubtedly had a benign effect on her art, rather like Eva Hesse's contemporary response to the minimalism she adopted primarily as an armature of her own emotive expressiveness” (Lippard 6).

In 1968 Wieland decided to travel by train from Toronto to Vancouver for her retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery. During the journey she filmed hours of footage of the passing landscape out the train window. Unsure about what to do with it, she put the footage away. Later that year, as she was becoming increasingly engaged with what was happening politically in Canada, Wieland and fellow Canadian and playwright Mary Mitchell attended the Liberal leadership convention in Ottawa, where Pierre Trudeau was on the brink of becoming the next prime minister. There, sitting only a few feet in front of Trudeau, she shot roll upon roll of film, even borrowing stock from CBC reporters standing nearby when she ran out. Again unsure of how to
proceed with what she had shot, this footage was also put away. It wasn’t until she filmed a second journey, this time a summer road trip from Cape Breton to Quebec City, that ideas began to coalesce, and that she became focused on making a film about her homeland. When asked about her motivation for the film, Wieland responded, “I was in a panic; an ecological, spiritual panic about this country... I photographed the whole length of southern Canada to preserve it in my own way, with my own vision” (Magidson and Wright 62).

*Reason Over Passion* is structured around four distinct sections, with a loosely constructed preface that introduces the motifs Wieland employs consistently throughout the film: strobing images of the Canadian flag; long shots of passing landscapes; and the lyrics to “O Canada,” didactically presented as overlayed text. Followed by a silent take of the artist’s face reflected in a mirror, singing the opening lines to O Canada, the origins of the title of the film are presented: a quote from Trudeau, in which he stated “About reason over passion, that is the theme of all of my writings.” While she did not have a particular film in mind when shooting the three portions of footage, when she later edited the film she described the structure as beginning on the East Coast and moving west, with her summer footage picturing the East Coast and Quebec, the Trudeau footage standing in for Ontario as the political and bureaucratic bastion of the country, and lastly the winter footage shot from the train covering the prairies onwards. However, once the film reaches the West Coast, British Columbia is only referred to by the flash of a postcard of a steamer ship on the Pacific Ocean at the closing of the film.

Wieland employs a number of key structural motifs that both celebrate and interrogate the idea of a unified Canadian “identity.” While she includes nationalist images and symbols that were designed to strengthen Canadian identity (the flag, the anthem, bilingualism), formal strategies such as flickering, repetition, textual superimposition and rephotography disrupt the continuity and visually seductive nature of these images. The aforementioned graphic of the Canadian flag, for example, appears throughout the film, flashing and strobing to an erratic rhythm, at times appearing upside down, sometimes treated to coloured filters. In the two sections of landscape footage, a timed beep accompanies the often-glorious images of trees, mountains, farms and highways, a distancing strategy which entrenches in the viewer an awareness of viewing. In addition, her camera is always moving and therefore drawing attention to the act of filming—be it the motion from the vehicle or train, or the camera itself as it pans, circles and shakes its wildly inclusive focus on cenotaphs, fire hydrants, barges and most often, the horizon.

Perhaps most noticeable of these motifs is the line of text based on Trudeau’s phrase “reason over passion,” which he meant to be a strategic goal for Canada’s future and the possibility of unity between French and English. In collaboration with Wieland, Hollis Frampton created 537 algorithmic permutations of the letters which make up the phrase, which occupy the surface of the film during both landscape sections. This textual insertion truncates meaning from its graphic manifestation, where “by using words to ‘illustrate’ the visual language” (Elder 186) the assertion of Trudeau’s phrase
takes on Wieland’s own subjective questioning of such a statement. Through their repetition the words become yet another defamiliarized symbol, in the same way that the recurrent flashing of the Canadian flag calls its status as a symbol into question.

Wieland references Trudeau in *Reason Over Passion* in multiple forms, the most visually explicit being in the middle section of the film. Wieland re-shot the entirety of her Trudeau footage through a moviola (a small film-viewing device) as she was, in her words, “hysterically dissatisfied” with the medium-shot footage she had ended up with after the Liberal conference. Through a process of zooming and rephotographing, Trudeau’s face becomes a mutable surface and the context in which Wieland was shooting becomes only partially visible. Trudeau as a political leader becomes an image, a space of projection that lies between Wieland’s own conflicted sentiments about Trudeau himself. Not unlike the sentiments of many Canadians at the time, Wieland saw in him a greatly desired potentiality for asserting an identity of difference for Canada, a nation that Wieland perceived as being under threat of disappearance due to the imperialist tendencies of its southern neighbour. She noted later in an interview from 1970 with Frampton that when she was filming Trudeau she wondered: “Was this guy, a man—an intellectual—who seemingly didn’t want power, or was he [just] acting like he didn’t want power?” (Frampton and Wieland 178).

Wieland's fractured stylistic approach to making a film about Canada mirrors the undetermined, tentatively nationalistic mutability of her chosen subject. In its complexity, Wieland establishes her own difficult position as being both “liberal and nationalistic” (Lippard 3) at the same time. In the same interview with Frampton, she likens herself to the German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl in her unabashed intention to make an affirmatively nationalistic film about her homeland. What she does create is a collection of all of the emblems, both visually and orally, that at the time of federalist nationalism were being used to create a sense of unity within a country that is near impossible to unite—something that her camera, through its relentless questioning, manifests. As in much of her film work, Wieland enables a material rigour of inconsistency. In *Reason Over Passion*, this stylistic inconsistency functions to represent and mirror a subject that proves itself too unwieldy to be given a definite shape or form. Sparked by her status as an exile and her need to document what she felt was disappearing, *Reason Over Passion* reveals the impossibility of a “last look at Canada,” or rather the impossibility of a unifying point of view. Through the filter of film, her subject becomes a surface disrupted by variable sound and text—the beeps, the French lesson voice over, the ironic marching band renditions of the national anthem—a song we experience as text, as mime, as music—all engage a deeply ironic questioning of an ideologically produced notion of national identity.

Upon finishing *Reason Over Passion* and showing it to her peers in New York, its reception became a contributing factor towards Wieland’s decision to move back to Toronto: “I was made to feel in no uncertain terms by a few male filmmakers that I [had] overstepped my place, that in New York my place was making little films” (Armatage 158). Her reaction to the reception of *Reason Over Passion* is testament to the hostile social reality of the time, one that was yet to undergo the
transformations achieved by second wave feminism. In addition, the spirit of the community of filmmakers was shifting to a more institutional and thus historically exclusive model through the creation of the Anthology Film Archives in New York. Wieland’s work was summarily left out of Anthology’s collection, despite the fact that she was a key figure in the community as both an artist and peer. Despite her departure from New York, *Reason Over Passion* sits assuredly within the discourse of structuralist film being created at that time in that community, while also being a fundamental benchmark within Canadian art history as at once a critical and generous celebration of one’s homeland.

**ANNE LOW**

**WORKS CITED**


STUDY GUIDE

VOLUME 4: LA RAISON AVANT LA PASSION/REASON OVER PASSION (1969)

QUESTIONS
1. What are some of the structuralist formal strategies that Wieland employs in *Reason Over Passion*? How do they compare or contrast to other structuralist films that you have seen?

2. What is the effect of the use of the on-screen text “reason over passion” and its permutations? What is the effect of the beeping on the soundtrack that accompanies it?

3. Why do you think Wieland re-photographed the footage of Pierre Trudeau? What is the effect of treating the imagery and sound this way?

4. What connections, if any, does the film have with Wieland’s visual artwork? Does it remind you of any particular works?

5. Based on *Reason Over Passion*, can you define Wieland’s vision of Canada? What issues are prevalent today that were not so in the sixties when the film was made?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


FURTHER VIEWING

_Portrait of Jason_. Dir. Shirley Clarke. USA, 1967


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writer: Anne Low
Editor: Larissa Fan
Technical Coordinator: Edward Fawcett Sharpe
Project Director: Lauren Howes
Design: Lisa Kiss Design