By the time Joyce Wieland set out to make *The Far Shore* (1976), she was well-regarded as a painter and multi-media artist, while her experimental films were acclaimed by the avant-garde film communities of New York and Europe. But *The Far Shore* was qualitatively different from her previous film work; it was a full-length feature film with well-defined characters and a melodramatic story-line, complete with the elaborate sets and period costumes appropriate for a story that moves between Quebec and Ontario in the second decade of the 20th century. *The Far Shore* fictionalizes the life of that most famous of Canadian artists, Tom Thomson, although he is not the central character in the film. The protagonist of *The Far Shore* is Eulalie de Chicoutimi, an entirely invented woman from Quebec who moves to Toronto with her ambitious engineer/entrepreneur husband Ross, and eventually falls in love with the Tom character. In cinematic terms Wieland constructed this story from Eulalie’s point of view, so that the camera follows her around more than any of the other players, and zooms in on her face searching for signs of her emotional and psychic life; these stratagems ensure that the audience identifies with Eulalie’s plight as an unhappily-married woman and as an unfulfilled artist. Because of this revisionist narrative, the historical figure of Tom Thomson is re-introduced to the Canadian public—as part of a love-triangle, and as a Québécois woman’s object of desire.

*The Far Shore* can be categorized as a melodrama because of the film’s emphasis on surging emotion and repressed desires, which threaten to upset social conventions and attitudes. It is important to note, however, that the characters’ passions are directed not only towards each other, but also towards the natural environment. Although most of the film’s action takes place in Toronto, all of the characters are fixated—albeit for different reasons—on what they call the “North Country.” For Ross and his cronies, the land extending out from the country’s metropolitan centres is wanted for nation-building, for resource-extraction, for financial profit; Tom the landscape painter wants to claim those expanses of land for the sake of aesthetics and ecology; and Eulalie comes to regard that northward “far shore” as a utopian destination, as the very site of pleasure and freedom. In many feature films, landscape imagery seems to provide no more than a visual backdrop for human interaction, but in *The Far Shore* the northern natural environment functions as much more than background, and ultimately the landscape is fully integrated into the narrative. This is true even if it is only during the final half-hour of the film that the audience finally catches a glimpse of that landscape which up until then has been spoken about, argued over, imagined by, and even painted by the characters. But once Eulalie, Tom, Ross, and his alter-ego Cluny are physically re-located to the same north-country location, their colliding interests and desires occur in direct relation to that landscape. And it is only at the very end of the film, as the lovers attempt their escape, that Wieland finally introduces what are undeniably beautiful landscape images, rivalling in cinematic terms the painted canvases of Thomson and the Group of Seven.
When *The Far Shore* was released in 1976 some critics admired its non-naturalistic, fable-like qualities and politicized story-line, while others either found the film's symbolic load difficult to appreciate, or questioned why Wieland had strayed so far from her avant-garde roots. (It was due to her experimentation with cinematic form and structure that she'd been associated with the Structural filmmaking movement, alongside her friend Hollis Frampton and her husband Michael Snow, amongst others). In fact, Wieland did not regard her first venture into feature filmmaking as a rupture with the earlier experimental work, and she even stated that *The Far Shore* was meant to be the last instalment of a trilogy of films that had begun with *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1968), to be followed a year later by *Reason Over Passion* (1969). These earlier films are overtly experimental at the level of sound, editing, and other cinematic elements, but they do share *The Far Shore*’s preoccupation with the interconnection of landscape and narrative. The endearing rodent heroes of *Rat Life and Diet in North America* escape from imprisonment in the USA, crossing the border into a luxuriant and welcoming Canadian landscape; *Reason Over Passion* shows the country's scenery whizzing by, as if seen from inside a moving vehicle, even while the film shows how a nationalist discourse can be superimposed on this technologically mediated landscape. This orientation wasn’t limited to Wieland’s film production, as the concept of landscape was simultaneously deconstructed and reinvented in her photographic works, quilted and stitched pieces, and performances. This focus on landscape is also linked to the bigger question of Joyce Wieland’s political engagement, which is evident throughout the 1960s and ‘70s, as she took up diverse media, materials, and technologies, and as she explored Pop, Conceptual, or Structural modes. The narrative content of her films and artworks could be camouflaged (whether by pop-cultural noise or formal innovation), and so too with *The Far Shore* we learn that Wieland was intent on “embedding (the politics) ... in a very romantic script.” There is undoubtedly a politicized landscape aesthetic at the heart of this film, in the sense that Wieland’s feminist ethos, her commitment to ecological causes, and her counter-cultural affinities all contribute to this picture of the natural world. And yet, watching *The Far Shore*—especially for the first time—these political registers are not immediately evident, because just as Wieland intended, the politics of landscape are embedded in, and in a sense overshadowed by, the romantic twists and turns of the melodrama genre.

Melodrama is integral to the history of cinema, whether this implies the intense expressivity of the silent film era, the agonized heroines of the “women’s pictures” that emerged out of the Hollywood studio system, or in a more general way, if we mean that a melodramatic sensibility—an “expressive code” involving heightened emotional responses and cathartic releases—informs more traditionally masculine genres such as the western, the war movie, or the crime thriller. When *The Far Shore* was first released, some critics remarked on the use of melodrama, but it would be several years later (in the 1980s) that a new generation of feminist film scholars hailed the film as a remarkable experiment with melodrama. The melodrama genre was so compelling during these years, to both filmmakers and cultural theorists, because it seemed to show normative desires and gender roles in the very process of becoming de-stablilized. The affective momentum of women characters, in particular, can become a dynamic force that is powerful enough to disrupt domestic and social realities.
Wieland’s use of melodrama corresponds to a feminist project in that Eulalie’s unruly desires propel the narrative forward. But the melodramatic excess in The Far Shore is also marshalled to do something more: it provokes an imaginative rupture in the often-told story of Tom Thomson and his wilderness art. The Thomson surrogate who emerges from Wieland’s fiction is not the same neutered figure (celibate and de-politicized) we are so familiar with, and his important legacy of landscape imagery is presented in a new way: as caught up in strong interests and desires. Bringing the explosive force of melodrama to the genre of landscape, Wieland created what can be described as a new, hybrid art form: melodramatic landscape art.

Whereas the real Tom Thomson drowned in Canoe Lake in 1917, Wieland’s film is set in 1919, and so The Far Shore seems to artificially resurrect the artist, only to have him die yet again in a more spectacular and lurid fashion. Wieland’s film didn’t simply knock Tom Thomson off his usual pedestal, nor did she denigrate the man’s powerful artworks, but her melodramatic story did shake up complacent attitudes about the intersection of art, land, and national identity. The Far Shore’s supplementary, fictionalized death brings a new vitality to the iconic figure of Thomson, and by extension, to the possible meaning of Canadian landscape images. In Wieland’s account, the artist who confronts and represents a remote natural environment is never really alone in the wilderness; the cinematic landscape pictures that emerge from The Far Shore are shot through with matters of politics and ecology, identity, and gender relations, and they reveal intersecting vectors of passion and pathos. In The Far Shore it is the central characters’ desire for love and freedom that sets the plot in motion, and it is through these fictional characters that we are brought to a new imaginative threshold, to other ways of dreaming about Canada’s wild places.

JOHANNE SLOAN

QUESTIONS

1. With this film Joyce Wieland developed a fictional, “alternate-history” account of the celebrated artist Tom Thomson. If Thomson’s landscape paintings are often regarded as the very expression of a Canadian identity, how does Wieland’s film tell a different story about art, land, and nationhood?

2. The Far Shore can be described as a melodrama. What are some of the characteristics of melodrama, in general terms? Which of these apply to Wieland’s film?

3. At one point in The Far Shore, Ross says to his wife Eulalie: “remember one thing, my dear... you are the foreigner.” How does Wieland emphasize Eulalie’s outsider status, and how does she construct the film from this character’s point of view?

4. Joyce Wieland was part of a generation of visual artists and filmmakers who became interested in questions of gender and feminism, during the 1960s and ‘70s. How do these issues get taken up in The Far Shore? Can Wieland’s
feminist-inflected project in *The Far Shore* be compared to other films or artworks from this period?

5. *The Far Shore*'s mise-en-scène has been described as “painterly.” What connections can be made between the visual appearance of the film and painting? Do you detect references to any particular movements or styles of painting?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


FURTHER VIEWING


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