

*The Long and the Tall of It: Frozen Moments, the films of Dianne Ouellette, by Gerald Saul*

Dianne Ouellette is a friend of mine. Not the sort of friend who I talk to in the middle of the night about troubles of the heart, not the sort of friend with whom I'd exchange heartfelt birthday presents, and not even the type that I'd call up and invite to attend the new Tarantino movie. She's just one of those people that I'm glad to see and happy to talk to when the fates agree to it. But Dianne has shared considerable secrets with me, not face to face but rather through her films. In fact, that is how I first came to know her at all, about ten years ago with her student film *Srassha* (1996) and her first independent film *December* (1997). I was immediately taken with her approach to cinema, as I wrote in NeWest Review "*Srassha* is a gripping and thought provoking film. It is able to weave powerful symbols without being burdened with a didactic narrative". Since then, my admiration for her and her bravery as a filmmaker has steadily increased. In this article, I would like to look back at Dianne's films and trace a number of themes I feel have woven their way through her work.

To begin with, I would like to consider daily life, travel, and memory. These factors consistency reoccur throughout Dianne's films. Memory is presented as fluid and sometimes frozen through the use of formal conventions. Altering speeds through the use of optical printing, in particular from super-8 home movies up to larger film gages, has become the mainstay of Dianne's cinematic approach. Using slow motion and detached sound/image and allowing the audience to become aware of prominent scratches and dust take them on a journey into a more comfortable past. Some moments of our past repeat in our minds, playing themselves over and over, even stopping on a single moment. However, as resilient as these memories may be, they are imprecise and are continuously mixing and being redefined through our present perspective. In *December*, Dianne used super-8 film as source material, copying and often step printing onto 16mm to shape the film into a reflection of the non-linear way we tend to remember. These source film clips are often shot in a home-movie style in which the subjects are aware of the camera and usually looking at it. The shot in *December* is of Dianne's sister. The film grows progressively slower as she turns towards the camera until, as she looks right at us, it turns to a freeze frame. Time stops just as memory obsesses over single moments, ignoring all others. The content of the home-movie-style film footage is a mixture of everyday images and travel or holiday images. Ironically, the "everyday" images are more exotic within this milieu than the travel images. Home movie cameras are more likely to be used for special occasions such as celebrations or vacations. Shots of flowers or of Dianne's sister walking on a railway track are beautiful but mundane, suggesting a filmmaker's eye rather than a naive one. These approaches continue with her 1998 film *Sisters*. Step printing is again used to slow the loose, silent film footage, and often employed on scenes of happiness and freedom. Similarly, *Sigh* features a repeating image of a galloping white horse, slowed down and freezing. In this case, the purpose is not as literal. The memory is not of an actual horse but a memory of a time of great emotional freedom and romantic innocence.

Within Dianne's films, the camera is often pointed out the window of a moving car. Sometimes this is to tell us that Dianne is approaching or leaving a family residence, but in *Sisters*, the lingering nature and step printing of those moments directs new attention to this idea. These car shots become the device for a metaphoric journey, of coming into the past or in leaving the past behind. This symbolic device is never more prominent than in *Sigh* (2001) in which images of married or romantic couples of different ages are intercut with shots filmed out the passenger window of a car in which we are looking both forward towards the horizon and backward through the rear view mirror simultaneously. This is the first of her films to suggest a

contemplation of the future rather than looking solely backward at the past. It is also much more directly personal than the previous films as it addresses Dianne's own relationship above issues of her sister, mother, and other family members. *Sigh* investigates romantic love, or perhaps romantic tolerance, of Dianne's youth, of her present, and as suggested through interaction with grandparents, her own future. Dianne suggests "When you grasp in the end to hold the hand and coax the dying to live so you will not be alone. Maybe that's it, the alone thing".

Dianne's first two films, *Srassha* and *December*, follow traditions of diary cinema such as the influential early films of Ann Marie Flemmig (*Waving* (1986), *You Take Care Now* (1987)). The soundtrack of these films generally consists solely of a highly personal story told in voice over by the filmmaker. With *Sisters*, Dianne began using multiple voices, combining them to create a patchwork portrait rather than a linear tale. This multiplicity of viewpoints is illustrated through Dianne's entire approach to diary filmmaking. The images and audio of her films are strongly tied but a subtle contrast exists that creates a complex duality in her work. As silent films, her work evokes a comforting nostalgia. The soundtracks of the films float on top of the images, sometimes directly engaging with each other but just as often existing as separate components. The visual side is contemporary images altered, step printed, and soiled to evoke the past. The soundtrack are voices in the present tense but relating stories of the past. Similar approaches are even integrated into Dianne's dramatic film *Daisy* (1999). This somber ghost story blurs past and present, real and unreal, solid and spiritual, all using techniques developed within her experimental films. This dichotomy suggests a competition between imagination and perception, like two halves of a brain competing for the spectator's attention. This is likely to continue as a convention with Dianne as she explores the problems of her sister's and her father's bipolar episodes.

Less prominent in Dianne's filmography are a series of super-8 rolls that she created as part of the annual One Take Super-8 Events. As these were presented unedited and unaltered, they offer interesting glimpses into Dianne's approach. *Damsel in Distress* (2002) shows us the playfulness that Dianne can bring to her personal life through her camera. In it, two of her wrestling friends compete over a woman who eventually rescues herself. It seemed obvious that the performers, all known to be friends of the filmmaker, were enjoying the process. In *Departure* (2003), *Aurthur* (2005), and *La Moo* (2006), the structure is much more akin to a home movie with people appearing to be aware of the camera, going about their activities in the real world. However, the content is so mundane (packing for a trip, a puppy playing, a trucker moving cattle) that we suddenly realize that we are watching something very clever. Home movies, like most cinema, is based in spectacle. We expect to see a home video of a special occasion or a vacation. This approach to home movies and snap shot photography is so pervasive that we never question the ways that we reinforce our own mythical histories. By showing slices of everyday life, these films of Dianne's become extraordinary. We begin to think about, and remember, our real day-to-day moments of our lives.

In contrast to the mundane, Birth and Death are recurring elements throughout Dianne's films. Beginning with *Srassha* in which an angel, shrouded in darkness and seemingly the angel of death, watches over a young, innocent girl (rope skipping denotes and untainted childhood). The angel becomes progressively brighter until he becomes a watchful guardian angel. The angel has a double role as both guardian and death. *December* deals more personally with both birth and death as the filmmaker's voice-over discusses her mother, the birth of her sister (who is nearly young enough to be her own daughter) and most importantly she describes her own miscarriage. This latter story continues *Srassha's* suggestion that of a co-existing of life and

death. The presence of water is prevalent in many of Dianne's films. She films herself and her sister on beaches and wading into the sea in *December*, *Sisters*, and *Ashes*. Water represents life, and for the catholic schooled Dianne, it will also represent birth. In *Daisy*, the central character, played by her sister, drowns after falling through the ice. In that film, Dianne finally brings to the forefront her continued nightmares about the water since her near drowning at the age of nine. Water therefore represents this collision of life and death. These themes of life/death recur sporadically. Dianne's second drama, a more conventionally constructed modern fairy tale *Dizzy Lizzy*, creates a sense of the surreal through a contrast between the innocence of a child and the aunt who loves death. In *Ashes* Dianne follows her grandfather as he mourns his late wife. However, the film does not feel sombre or depressing since death does not dominate life if one leaves behind a legacy. In discussion with Dianne, her grandfather suggests that the secret of happiness is in having children. In her most recent film, *Regard* (2007) a montage of home-movie-style images of people, mainly children, culminates in an image of a pregnant woman's belly. This montage is book-ended by images of Dianne kissing her boyfriend. While the metaphor is more obvious than usual, I am not in any position to guess at her personal intentions towards children (see paragraph one).

The purpose behind this decade of exploration of personal and family history is not clearly evident. It leads us to ask a number of question about Dianne's intention. Is she seeking to unify her family with her films by making them the subject of her work and by including her sister in them? Is she interested in finding a place for herself within the family through the documentary creation? Is she seeking to clarify her own identity through the making of the films? Is she using the camera to open doors and to approach family with question while maintaining a safe barrier vis-a-vis the lens? Is she creating art/document as a legacy? Dianne has said that her collected works will somehow all link together. I believe that they interlock and form portions of a bigger picture which, once complete, will be a masterpiece.

#### Filmography

Srassha, 1996, 8 minutes  
December, 1997, 11 minutes  
Sisters, 1998, 18 minutes  
Daisy, 1999, 13 minutes  
sigh, 2001, 8 minutes  
No Time For Purr-fection, 2001, 3 minutes.  
decisions, 2002, 2 minutes  
Damsel in Distress, 2002, 3 minutes  
Dizzy Lizzy, 2003, 10 minutes  
Departure, 2003, 3 minutes  
Ashes, 2005, 7 minutes  
Aurthur, 2005, 3 minutes  
La Moo, 2006, 3 minutes  
Regard, 2007, 1 minute  
Summer, in progress, 45 minutes