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Lynne Perras

### **“Steadier, happier, and quicker at the work”?**

#### **Women in Canadian Animation**

In the film industry, historically it seems to be a truism that women have not occupied major positions. Although they have participated in the profession, there has been a relatively small number of female producers, directors, and head writers for many years. A similarly small number of women have held positions of influence in the animation industry.

A variety of reasons might be suggested for the scarcity of women animators: these might include systemic discrimination, institutional bias, and the fact that traditional animation and its focus on violence and physicality appealed to very few women. The relative dearth of females in the industry notwithstanding, the status of women in animation in Canada is anything but discouraging. From a cultural and historic perspective, this discussion will focus upon Canadian female animators and their experiences and suggest that at least some of the pessimism regarding women’s contributions to animation may have been overstated. Through examination of the challenges faced by female animators as well as strategies discovered that sustain their work, it becomes apparent that there is clearly a reason to celebrate the efforts and progress of women in Canadian animation, past and present.

That women have not had an easy path in animation in general must not be forgotten. Sharon Couzin remarks that with few exceptions, “Historically a woman had no voice at all in animation. The field was occupied by men in the conception, rendering and distribution” (Pilling, 1992, p. 72). Karen Mazurkewich has called animation studios “boys’ clubs,” noting that there were “no girls allowed – except in the paint and ink departments” (1999, p. 5). Jayne Pilling confirms women’s somewhat lesser status when she notes that “[w]omen have always comprised a large part of the animation workforce – as paint’n’tracers, or ink’n’painters, or in-betweeners, colour-ists or designers” (1992, p. 5).

In 1951, Canadian animator Colin Low observed that that “people best suited for [organization of a cel cartoon film] are skillful at lettering. Girls are usually steadier, happier, and quicker at the work – they are neater and more methodical” (Mazurkewich, 1999, p. 185). While Low’s comments suggest that women indeed performed very useful functions in one form of animation, in this statement he seems to have relegated them to secondary, less significant, and perhaps less creative roles. Even almost a half a century later, Linda Simensky, Cartoon Network’s Director of Programming, is only slightly more positive:

“First there is the history of the industry. While there have always been women in animation, historically the more important jobs have gone to men. This is much a function of the eras involved and of the history of the business. When you consider that the entire animation industry has been around for less than a century, and that for years women were systematically relegated to such ‘lesser’ jobs as ink and paint, women have actually done fairly well even getting into any positions over the last twenty years.” (Simensky, 1996)

Nevertheless, a definite change for the better has been occurring for the female in animation more recently. Maureen Furniss observes that there is “an effort to hire and promote females as creators and producers (as well as in various other capacities) in order to rectify an imbalance created in the past by institutionalized policies of sexual discrimination – in part because women have made it to the top ... and are now looking out for the future of other women” (1998, p. 234). In Canada, the number of female animators has increased, both at the National Film Board

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and at independent film companies. Women have had and continue to have an increasingly strong voice in animation. They enjoy many opportunities to practice in the field and are generally given considerable encouragement to do so. While in the commercial sector of the industry women seem to have less of a presence, in other areas women's work flourishes and adds new perspectives, themes, and techniques, thereby immensely enriching Canadian animation as a whole.

Whether there are discernible gender differences between animation created by men and women has been a matter of some debate. Marian Quigley has noted that Australian Antoinette Starkiewicz feels animation is "particularly suited to women because it requires infinite patience" (2005, p. 16). Ann Shenfield (who names Canadian animator Caroline Leaf one of her influences) sees a relationship between animation and gender, as she notes that "animation itself is like a gender issue. Animation is marginal, without any doubt ... .Being a woman animator is a bit like being against the margin of the margin – not that you can't succeed, but ... it's tricky" (2005, p. 93). Animator Carol Beecher perceives few significant differences in themes and approaches; however, she adds that if violence occurs in women's films, there is often a more obvious and concrete psychological or sociological reason for it, whereas in animation created by men, the violence sometimes exists for its own sake or for pure effect (Beecher interview, June 26, 2006, Calgary, Alberta). Jayne Pilling has noted that "[t]here is no overriding thesis about the specificity of women's animation," but concedes that persuasive theories exist (1992, p. 6). She believes that women's early experiences while growing up may account for their ability to express more easily personal emotions than their male counterparts: "men and women are socialized as children in different ways, with the result that women tend to be more able to explore and share personal experience" in their work (1992, p. 6).

Not surprisingly, then, women's animation has also explored and expressed feminist issues and concerns specific to the female experience. In *Women and Animation*, Pilling also discusses animator Susan Young's belief that the fact that the socialization of boys emphasizes hierarchical play might help to explain men's domination of character animation; the latter also thinks that this can account for women's increased development of new styles and techniques of animation (1992, p. 6).

There is no question that women in Canada have made and continue to make their mark in the country's animation, and one of Canada's earliest and most talented animators was Evelyn Lambart. Most closely associated with Norman McLaren, Lambart's early career was spent as the assistant to the Scottish animator, but Lambart played a role in helping McLaren achieve the recognition and respect that he did. Karen Mazurkewich specifically notes colour correction, the incorporation of dust into an artistic image, and the enhancement of the personification of the chair in films such as *Begone Dull Care* (1949), *Mosaic* (1965), and *A Chairy Tale* (1957) respectively as aspects added by Lambart to McLaren's films. Mazurkewich is appalled that Lambart's name was left off the credits of *Chairy Tale* (supposedly the film's producer wanted to maintain the illusion that the chair in the film was actually alive!) (Mazurkewich, 1999, p. 188). Nonetheless, in the end it was both Lambart's technological knowledge and imaginative sensibilities that refined and improved the films on which the two worked (Ibid). Lambart herself seemed less bothered by the treatment she received and always felt grateful for the experience she amassed in the years with McLaren. An independent spirit for the most part, Lambart said, "The way I was brought up was to think of yourself as a person who had an obligation to use your talents in any way you could. Whether you were a man or a woman didn't make any difference." (Munn, 1982, p. 64) In a 1988 interview, she described her early experiences as an animator:

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“I must say that in those early days everybody was always highly cooperative. There was never any question of discrimination. I didn't feel any differences displayed between the men and the women. This was partly due to my own background. My father had taught us that certain behaviour was expected of women and certain behaviour of men, but that we all had the same intellectual capacity. (Pilling, 1992, p. 30)

Despite the fact that one might argue that Lambart spent much of her time in McLaren's shadow, much to her detriment, and was recognized for her work far too late, that Lambart refused to see herself as a kind of second class animator is telling. Lambart not only enriched McLaren's work but she also benefited from his tutelage both with regards to technique and theme. Gradually she came to learn what intrigued her and what no longer held her interest. Instead of simply taking McLaren's lead, she kept pace with him despite the fact that the public saw only him for a large part of the time. Sociologist Seymour Lipsett has long compared American and Canadian values, and he maintains that Canadians typically are more collectivity-oriented than their southern neighbours. The belief that group effort and success is more important than individual glory has pervaded the Canadian psyche, and the dynamics of the partnership of Lambart and McLaren might have fit into this paradigm rather than a more hierarchical model. (Lipsett, 1992).

Once her work with McLaren had slowed down, Lambart began to pursue her own style of film. She used wholly different techniques and content, leaving behind abstraction and pastels and focusing on linear stories with animated cut-outs and bright blues and reds. Her films often centred on concrete stories, frequently fables incorporating animals as characters; for example, she made *The story of Christmas* (1973), *Mr. Frog Went A-courting* (1974), *The Lion and the Mouse* (1976), and *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse* (1980). She continued to make films for both the National Film Board and independently for a great number of years.

Another renowned and highly gifted female animator, Caroline Leaf, also began her career under the tutelage of a male artist, Derek Lamb. Leaf's films have garnered much attention and received fulsome praise for their “compassionate sensibility to the lyricism and a humanity which one finds all too rare in animation” (Talia Schenkel in Pilling, 1992, p. 41). Like Lambart, Leaf sees the value in working with and learning from others; in the many interviews she has given, she speaks of her inexperience and her own uncertainty about her artistic ability rather than any overtly sexist attitudes or behaviour as obstacles to overcome. Derek Lamb was not Leaf's only mentor; although he tried to get the National Film Board's English Programme Unit to hire her, it was Co Hoedeman from the NFB's French animation studio that ultimately hired her in 1972.

The French office of the NFB in fact actively promoted the hiring of women in its department, and it was most notably Rene Jodoin who supported female animators. In order to produce highly original films, Jodoin not only encouraged young artists, but mentored women artists in particular. French-Canadian animator Francine Desbiens speaks fondly of her work with Jodoin: “At one time ... there were more women than men. After he left the department, there were ten years where not one woman was employed as a freelancer or as a permanent ... [Jodoin] was way out in front of everybody” (Robinson, 2000, p.2).

Like Lambart, Leaf strives for the merging of innovative techniques and compelling stories. Interestingly, Leaf began her career animating films using animals and legends – similar to Lambart's later work. Perhaps Leaf's most famous technique to date involves her use of glass with sand or ink. Its originality and potential impressed even Norman McLaren who exclaimed, “This is wonderful! In all my years of animation, I've never thought of this!” (Talia Schenkel in Pilling 1992, p. 41). In *The Street* (1976), the animated adaptation of Mordecai Richler's touching story of a child's first experience with death, Leaf's ink and glass brilliantly illustrate the use of

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metamorphosis, which evokes the passage of time and memory (Wells, 1998, p. 69). A more recent film, *Two Sisters* (1990), reveals yet another technique involving etchings that transmits both the fragility and power underlying codependent sibling relationships as well as the darkness and stifling atmosphere that can pervade these relationships. Irrespective of the techniques, Leaf consistently conveys a sense of pathos and authentic emotion. As Caryn James has observed, “At her best ... Leaf combines visual elegance with a deep humane narrative” (1992, p.1).

Animators following in Lambart’s and Leaf’s footsteps include Janet Perlman, Wendy Tilby, and Amanda Forbis. Like their predecessors, they focus on and value collaboration and the development of new techniques. Perlman, an independent animator for most of her career, has successfully used cel animation in her acclaimed *Lady Fishbourne’s Complete Guide to Better Table Manners* (1978), *Why Me* (1978) (co-directed with Derek Lamb), *The Tender Tale of Cinderella Penguin* (1981), and *Invasion of the Space Lobsters* (2005), to name a few. Themes in her work range from the very silly to the very serious: *Lady Fishbourne* pokes fun at social conventions while *Why Me* explores the nature of terminal illness.

Both from western Canada, Tilby and Forbis have been inspired by Caroline Leaf, but have attempted to create their own individual techniques and narrative structures. Their award-winning *When the Day Breaks* (1999) stands out for its complex technical execution; the animators use Hi-8 film with live actors, photocopied frames, and re-drawings. The theme of the film examines the inter-relatedness of all people as it portrays how a chance encounter between two strangers changes both of them forever. Although Tilby and Forbis each make their own films, they value collaboration. Forbis says that their partnership, “allowed us to air and explore ideas in a way that we couldn’t have done alone” (Siegel, 1999, p. 4). She also commends the NFB for its unqualified support when she notes that she and Tilby were “supported, encouraged, and paid. We had excellent technical assistance, and our David Verrall not only championed the project from beginning to end, but he also provided excellent insight in the editing room.” (Siegel, 1999, p. 9)

It is perhaps in the independent sector where the greatest number of female Canadian animated artists can be found. As Harvey Deneroff points out, it is important to be aware of “the dominant role [women] play among independent animators, whose films often constitute half the offerings at major international animation festivals” (1996, p. 1). One organization specifically for women animators is Women in Animation – an international support and resource system whose members mainly hail from the United States and Canada. Its mandate is “to foster the dignity, concerns and advancement of women who are involved in any and all aspects of the art and industry of animation” ([www.womeninanimation.org](http://www.womeninanimation.org)).


Open to both genders but no less supportive is the Quickdraw Animation Society (QAS) in Calgary, Alberta. Situated in a prairie city whose focus is on oil and gas and the corporate sector, QAS remains a strong and flourishing enterprise. Its official description calls it “a unique organization operated by animation artists dedicated to the production, education, and appreciation of animation” (*QAS pamphlet*, 2005). Located in a set of rooms on the floor above an ethnic restaurant in downtown Calgary, QAS contains all manner of equipment designed to create and enhance various forms of animation. Both traditional and computer animation can be produced effectively at Quickdraw. The society boasts an impressive library of books on animation as well as a huge array of tapes, disks, and other animation paraphernalia.

What is most striking about Quickdraw, however, is the artistic and emotional support given to animators and would-be animators. Classes, workshops, and less structured events are offered to both the aspiring and the more seasoned artist. Animator Richard Reeves maintains that the

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society consciously strives to make the atmosphere welcoming to animators of both genders, and women who have been associated with the society concur (Reeves interview, October 10, 2005, Calgary, Alberta). Carol Beecher is one such animator who has branched out on her own and now is co-owner of Fifteen Pound Pink Productions, a small animation company. Her influences include Norman McLaren, Caroline Leaf, Wendy Tilby, and Amanda Forbis (the latter two also spent time at Quickdraw themselves). Another favourite animator of Beecher's is Gail Noonan, an animator living in British Columbia. Noonan's work often centers on issues more geared towards women's interests: two of her most comical films are *The Menopause Song* (1995) and *Your Name in Cellulite* (1995). It is Beecher's opinion that it might be easier for female animators to produce films in Canada than in the U.S. because the former provides more grants to auteurs than the latter. She also states that she perceives sexism in the industry to be far less prevalent in Canada than in other countries, most notably Japan and the U.K. (Beecher interview, June 26, 2006, Calgary, Alberta) Her work (often done in collaboration with Kevin Kurytnik) includes satire or parody rather than introspection or social commentary. *The Wind between my Ears* (2000) comments on the vacuous nature of television, while the cel-animated *Mr. Reaper's Really Bad Morning* (2004) pokes fun at death itself. Her most current project is *Intergallactical Who's Who* (2006), which parodies *Hinterland's Who's Who*, CBC's short fillers that spotlight Canadian wilderness animals.

Keltie Duncan and Anne Koizumi are Calgary animators whose enthusiasm for their work is infectious. Duncan has spent time at Quickdraw, and like Beecher, she feels that women and men are treated equally by the organization, and she sees few obvious or significant differences in animation done by men and women. Nonetheless, she adds that male and female animators often can contribute different strengths to each film and is not surprising that some of the finest animation has both men and women working along side each other. Men and women view the world differently in many respects, and each perspective complements each other (Duncan interview, June 26, 2006, Calgary, Alberta). Koizumi recently returned from the National Film Board's Hothouse Project in Montreal, where she made a short film using plasticine on glass with paper cutouts. She believes that gender differences in animation may exist, but she feels more comfortable saying that every animator is different regardless of his or her gender. Because she is an independent animator, like Carol Beecher, she sees little sexism in the industry. Like other independent animators, she strongly encourages others to continue actively pursuing their interests (Koizumi interview, June 26, 2006, Calgary, Alberta).

To conclude, the fact that female animators in general have not been afforded the same opportunities as men throughout history should not be ignored. However, in Canada women artists have done very well in the field despite their lesser numbers. More importantly, women animators seem to have found ways to remain optimistic and creative, and when discussing women animators, perhaps more emphasis should be placed on their success than has previously been done. Colin Low may have been unknowingly prophetic when he used the words "steadier, happier, and quicker at the work," in his discussion of women in Canadian animation. They have been participating in the field since its inception, and show no signs of slowing down. As evidenced in this discussion, female animators enjoy their work immensely and discuss it enthusiastically. Indeed, women seem to be thriving in the profession and are being recognized for their art, whether it is done at the National Film Board, in independent companies, or on its own. Positive self-perceptions, a supportive environment, and a focus on collaborative efforts have helped to secure a permanent and significant place for women in animation. 

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