

# the far shore

a film about violence  
a peaceful film about violence

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by Barbara Halpern Martineau

photo Paul Appleby



Eulalie, Ross and Cluny during a moment of silence in memory of the war

**"I would like to reach a Canadian audience – that's my first aim. This film is an emotional history about a fictional moment in our past. A recognizable love story."**

Joyce Wieland

**"I will tell them he was in love with a tree, a rock, and a piece of sky."**

Eulalie,  
in **The Far Shore**



photo Larisa Pavlychenko

**The Far Shore** is a feature film by Joyce Wieland.

It is about love, nature, art, Canada. It is set in 1919, in Quebec, Toronto, and Northern Ontario. The central character is Eulalie, a would-be pianist, who marries Ross, an engineer, and falls in love with Tom, an artist. The plot is melodramatic. The settings are beautiful. The camera swirls, pans, stops and watches, moves again. The music, superb, is used sparingly. The pace is flowing, precise.

It is a simple, straightforward film. It is immensely complex.

It is Joyce Wieland's first commercial feature, a beginning. It is preceded by her considerable output of experimental films and artwork. It is the result of skilled work by many talented people.

It has serious flaws. I love it.

Quebec: 1919. Sky, with clouds, a tree, a little girl gathering strawberries. Music in a minor key. A man and woman stroll in the peaceful countryside. They discuss the bridge he is planning to build.

Eulalie tells Ross her brother is cheating him. "That's a small price to pay for being welcome in your home," he says. "His home," she says, and turns away.

Eulalie agrees to marry Ross, and titles appear over shots of their wedding journey: **The Far Shore**, produced by Joyce Wieland and Judy Steed.

*The vision of women, which may lack violence and big guns, could lead us to a new place. It would be nice to go and be allowed to see non-manipulative films in big theatres. Films about being, seeing, smelling, dreaming. I can't walk into big theatres any more. I'm very careful about what I see, because I don't like having fantasies imposed or rocks thrown at my head.*

JW

There are three major moves in the film before Eulalie reaches the far shore: the chauffeured drive "home" to Ross' Toronto mansion is the first. The second is a visit to Ross' "property" in Northern Ontario; the third is Eulalie's desertion of Ross, when she swims across a lake to join Tom. This third move is the only one initiated by Eulalie, conceived and executed in violent refusal of the life she is expected

to lead – as the gracious and obedient wife of a successful businessman. Eulalie has observed the dealings of men, unscrupulous or "honest," based on notions of property and progress. A lovely woman is property to be won and held, a lovely land is property to be developed, exploited. Ross builds bridges, roads, sewers. As his partner Cluny says, "bridges are our bread and butter." Ross and Cluny also mine the land for silver, regardless of the destruction they cause.

*Reason Over Passion is a landscape film of Canada, embracing the land in pictures. The Far Shore is the same landscape, only peopled. It's my evolution to people.*

JW

Underlying the romantic love story, the vision of artists isolated and misunderstood, is the story of the land. Ross abandons his patronage of Tom's art when a dealer tells him it won't sell: "I've seen twenty-seven of his paintings and there's not a single cow in any of them." Ross suggests that Tom, who knows the northern land intimately, guide a team of surveyors. Tom refuses, describing the devastation caused by mines, and this provokes a fight between Tom and Cluny, seconded by Ross, which precipitates the melodrama of the story.

The formula is clearcut and complex: violence / materialism / progress / philistinism is opposed to love / art / nature / peace. Ross' "love" for Eulalie, like his attitude to his work, is shortsighted. When Eulalie suggests that she might become a concert pianist he reacts as to a joke. He is blind to her love

photo Larisa Pavlychenko



Eulalie and Tom

Barbara Halpern Martineau is a freelance writer and filmmaker who has recently completed a book on women writers and directors, *Women Imagine Women*.



The artist Tom (Frank Moore) is visited by his patron Ross (Larry Benedict) and wife (Céline Lomez) after a party

for Tom, and thinks she is still pining for her old fiancé, who jilted her.

*(Eulalie) chooses (Tom) because he understands her; he can hear the beauty of her music – he sees her as a total being and she him.*

*Tom's character in the film is completely based on Tom Thomson. But the film doesn't deal with the facts of his life... He was a great mate for Eulalie. The rustic English Canadian woodsman with the pure products of French Canadian culture.*

JW

The following criticisms may be applied to the narrative: 1. Eulalie is snobbish and exclusive in her appreciation of art. She is haughty to the housekeeper, who informs her that "it's a working world, ma'am." (But Eulalie is working, at her music. No one expects her to clean the house. The point is that she's interrupting Ross' serious work, his plan to rape the land for silver.)

2. The film is simplistic in its equation of progress with destruction. Surely bridges and roads and sewers are needed. (A just point, but outside the framework of this film. Wieland's point is that Ross and Cluny, old army buddies, are as unthinkingly violent and irresponsible in their civil engineering as they were in war.)

3. Although Eulalie tells Ross that music is all she needs, she throws everything away to be with Tom, knowing that Tom's painting is what

matters most to him. Had she not swum the lake, Tom would have pushed on north without her. Once again, women are portrayed as obsessed by men. Men have their work, women dabble. (Another just point, unanswerable. There were a few independent women of the period who chose to follow their work – Emily Carr was one. And there were many working-class women who had no choice. Wieland's feminism is obscured here by her emphasis on art – her point is that both Tom's painting and Eulalie's music are considered frivolous by the others. Eulalie does not have Tom's option of taking her art into the wilderness.)

4. The clearcut portrayal of character in conventional melodrama is rendered ambivalent here by psy-

photo Paul Appleby



Eulalie (Céline Lomez) plays Debussy while Tom (Frank Moore) listens appreciatively

chological undertones. Ross is pitiable, and Eulalie is arrogant. Tom and Cluny are more clearly drawn as opposing figures of white and black – Tom's affinity to the land and Cluny's lust and cruelty are more in keeping with melodrama than Ross' uncomprehending love for Eulalie and Eulalie's aristocratic disdain for Ross' ignorance. Matters would be simplified if Eulalie were a simple village girl and Ross a cold-hearted villain.

But, it is precisely this ambivalence, brilliantly caught and extended by Douglas Pringle's musical score, which brings *The Far Shore* into late twentieth-century consciousness and avoids the pitfalls of period nostalgia, costume romanticism.

*I'm working with Doug Pringle the composer, having meetings listening to the score. It's a delicate matter, talking music. But we look at the image and he tries to illustrate, sketching music and discussing what's necessary.*

JW

At the midpoint of the film there is a closeup of Eulalie's face, pained by Ross' insensitivity, lonely for the absent Tom. Iris in to her face in cameo, iris maintained while her face dissolves to a long shot of a canoe moving across a lake. Dissolve to a closer shot of Tom in the canoe, seen against a landscape of trees and water, strikingly reminiscent of the painting Tom gave Eulalie. (This shot was based on an actual painting by Tom Thomson, which has rarely been shown.) The sequence contains the essence of the film's strength: a loving portrait of the land in which music and art could flourish, rooted in human love and natural beauty. It is a fable expressed in the form of a melodrama, shot in a clear, carefully framed yet flowing style, edited according to a structure of large segments composed of scenes linked by dissolves, beginning with a frame filled with sky and clouds, ending with a frame filled by dark water. Within the ambivalent frame of natural elements there is the frail construction of human life.

*The Far Shore* is grounded in Canadian history – it is based on Joyce Wieland's vision of the painter Tom Thomson, whose canoe was found overturned in a northern lake; on the character of Joyce Wieland's mother-in-law, a Quebecoise who was reared in a convent and prevented by her family from becoming a concert pianist; and on the melodramatic stories of James Oliver Curwood, a popular novelist of the period. Cur-

wood, incidentally and importantly, worked with Nell Shipman, the first Canadian woman director. Shipman's film **Back to God's Country**, shot on location in Calgary and the Yukon in 1919, was based on a Curwood story – it is a melodrama to which **The Far Shore** bears striking affinity. (Joyce Wieland had not seen **Back to God's Country** when she filmed **The Far Shore**.)

**The Far Shore** is rooted in the reality of the Canadian landscape, in the reality of destruction of that landscape by willfully ignorant men, in the reality of English Canadian distrust and animosity towards the "alien" – the artist, the Quebecois, the unconventional woman.

*I did my best to embrace the form of the feature film in this work, without compromising myself. What I had developed in my past films was stillness, the use of grain, love of light, and personal subject matter. I brought my knowledge of film and joined it to traditional form.*

JW

**The Far Shore**, once again, is a simple film, with clear, somewhat stilted dialogue, and a strongly marked narrative line. There are rarely more than three figures in the frame, and the relations between characters are precisely delineated. This is no Hollywood flick, a far cry from the surface density of, say, Robert Altman. Unlike many commercial features, **The Far Shore** does not bury its ideology in tricky metaphor – the filmmaker conveys her beliefs as directly as possible, in dialogue and action, as well as visuals and music. When Tom tells Ross he is opposed to mining which will leave the land scarred like a battlefield and Cluny sneers "How would a goddammed pacifist know what a battlefield looks like?" Tom's answer is decisive, "An old soldier told me." Cluny has no reply but violence – the accuracy of Tom's answer is reinforced by Cluny's action.

Considering that the film ends with the deaths of Tom and Eulalie, must we say that the vision is bleak? I would suggest that the ending is real, as the best melodrama is real, based

on a true analysis of the situation. By retreating to an impossible idyll of escape in the woods, Tom and Eulalie react as romantic individuals to a force much larger than Ross and Cluny – they have no concept of collective struggle. Joyce Wieland, in her struggle to gather the money and resources to make **The Far Shore**,\* is herself an object lesson in how the artist as romantic individual must also learn to work collectively and in realistic terms simply to produce and show her work. Canadians wouldn't buy Tom Thomson's cowless paintings until long after his death – hopefully they will respond more immediately to the living art of Joyce Wieland. □

\* See Doug Fetherling's account of the financial history of **The Far Shore**: "Joyce Wieland in Movieland," *The Canadian*, Jan. 24, 1976.

All quotations are taken from an interview recorded on August 2, 1975, in Toronto, revised by Joyce Wieland in October 1975.

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## Joyce Wieland Filmography

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|--------|--|--------|--|
| 1958   | <b>Tea in the Garden</b> , Collins & Wieland, 16mm, 4 min.               | 1967-8 | <b>1933 Hand Tinting</b> , 16mm, color, 4 min.                   |
| 1959   | <b>Assault in the Park</b> , Snow & Wieland, 20 min.                     | 1968   | <b>Catfood</b> , 16mm, color, 13 min.                            |
| 1963   | <b>Larry's Recent Behaviour</b> , 8 mm, color, 18 min.                   | 1968   | <b>Rat Life and Diet in North America</b> , 16mm, color, 14 min. |
| 1964   | <b>Peggy's Blue Skylight</b> , 8mm, 17 min.                              | 1967-9 | <b>Reason Over Passion</b> , 16mm, color, 90 min.                |
| 1964   | <b>Patriotism</b> , Part I. 8mm, color, 15 min.                          | 1969   | <b>Dripping Water</b> , Snow and Wieland, 16mm, 10 min.          |
| 1964   | <b>Patriotism</b> , Part II. 8mm, color, 5 min.                          | 1972   | <b>Pierre Vallières</b> , 16mm, 33 min.                          |
| 1964-5 | <b>Water Sark</b> , 16mm, color, 14 min.                                 | 1976   | <b>The Far Shore</b> , 35mm, 1hr. 46 min.                        |
| 1967-8 | <b>Sailboat</b> , 16mm (black and white, printed on color stock) 3½ min. |        |  |

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