

2016

Canadian Cinema 12: Bonnie Sherr Klein's Not a Love Story

Gordon Alley-Young
CUNY Kingsborough Community College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

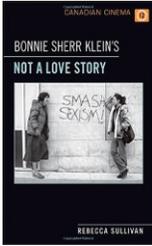
Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb_pubs

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alley-Young, Gordon, "Canadian Cinema 12: Bonnie Sherr Klein's Not a Love Story" (2016). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb_pubs/138

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Kingsborough Community College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.



Canadian Cinema 12: Bonnie Sherr Klein's *Not a Love Story*. By Rebecca Sullivan. Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2014, 129 pp. ISBN 9781442627246 (pbk).

The 1981 pornography documentary *Not a Love Story* (NALS) is one of the National Film Board of Canada's (NFB) most controversial productions. NALS and its impact are discussed in the twelfth volume of the Canadian Cinema Series, which also includes the seminal Canadian films/documentaries *Goin' Down The Road* (volume eight),

Le déclin de l'empire américain, *Les invasions barbares* (volume two), *Hard Core Logo* (volume seven), and *A Married Couple* (volume five). Author Rebecca Sullivan took on two tasks: first, to look more closely at the sex worker's voices in NALS, and second, to use interviews and research to better understand the different levels of meaning in NALS beyond the oft-cited critiques. Sullivan's introduction and first chapter orient the reader to Klein, the NFB, and its feminist Studio D; Chapter two outlines the making of NALS; Chapter three reorders the subject interviews to better appreciate the divergent voices within and outside of the film; Chapter four interprets the socio-political and cultural legacy of the film; and the epilogue looks at the contentious and mutually influential relationship between Klein and her key collaborator/subject, Tracey.

In the introduction and Chapter one, Sullivan notes that Klein and Tracey originally approached NALS seeking to present differing positive and negative perspectives on porn. Yet Sullivan argues that critics read the final film as a moralizing condemnation of pornography due to its Porn Wars association and its unbalanced juxtaposition and ordering of interviews, content, and reaction shots. Sullivan's book is especially effective in Chapter three, where she reorders NALS's content by looking at all the pornographers' segments together first, then all grassroots activists, followed by sex workers' segments, then feminist experts, and finishing with Lindalee Tracey. Looking at NALS in this way allows Sullivan, with historical distance from the Porn Wars, to argue for more thoughtful, positive, and open-ended readings of the film.

In Chapter two, Sullivan highlights the tremendous pressures that would fall upon a film that was initially envisioned as a project called *Celebration*, which was intended as a fun exploration of feminists' sexuality. NALS had a small budget, an extremely tight six-week schedule, and a broad subject—not to mention a lengthy editing process, some of which required police officers' presence in the editing bay to protect victims of sexual exploitation. Sullivan provides insights from camera operator Pierre Letarte, who clarifies how aware the cast and crew, especially Tracey, were of the risks that were being taken to include certain scenes (e.g., filming Tracey's photo shoot for *Hustler*) in NALS. Sullivan also tracks the fissures that developed in Klein and Tracey's relationship as they faced increasing critical pressure and undertook an exhausting schedule of appearances to promote, defend, and discuss NALS. Feminist critics have attributed the relationship breakdown to both Klein, who tries to make then-striptease artist Tracey change her perspective on porn, and Tracey, who performs this change for the camera (Elia & Cole 2007).

Sullivan's work generates new ways of thinking about NALS, and this conversation can accommodate more analysis, especially where critiques are presented. Sullivan illustrates how noted film critic Jay Scott and others shaped the critical discourse on NALS. Scott's opposition to NALS warrants more examination in terms of his perspective on anti-censorship, which may have been informed by his strictly religious upbringing that forbade films and by his later life as a gay man living in an era that suppressed LGBT sexuality. Gibb (2002) argues that Scott's film criticism reflected his personality and was not just about films but about the world, allowing him to draw on his extensive knowledge of film, literature, politics and history. The Stella Artois Jay Scott Prize recognizes an emerging filmmaker in honour of Scott, who died of AIDS-related causes in 1993.

Sullivan's epilogue offers a fitting final thought on the film by reflecting on how Klein and Tracey were both shaped as artists by each other and by the making of NALS. Sullivan cites Tracey's later documentary *Abby, I Hardly Knew Ya (AIHKY)* about her long lost father and argues that it shows that Tracey has learned post-NALS to invite viewers into her life while protecting her privacy. Sullivan recognizes how Tracey uses learning by feeling in *AIHKY* as she traces the steps of her father's downfall, similar to how she experiences in the world of pornography in NALS. After NALS, Tracey went on to be an award-winning filmmaker and journalist as well as a screenwriter for the NFB and the CBC before losing her fight with breast cancer in 2006 at the age of 49. The Lindalee Tracey Award has recognized the work of young independent filmmakers since 2007. Klein's career was temporarily put on hiatus by two strokes that she suffered in 1987. Sullivan notes how Klein evolved after her work on NALS to subsequently collaborate with pro-pornography lesbian activist Persimmon Blackbridge on Klein's 1997 memoir. Subsequently, Klein would reclaim her own identity and privilege as a disability activist and artist with her 2006 documentary *SHAMELESS: The Art of Disability*.

Sullivan's epilogue, like the entire book, allows audiences to see Klein and Tracey as evolving as artists and activists, even as some will try to fix their image to what we see in NALS. This book is well suited to academic readers in Canadian film history, feminist media studies, women's studies, and censorship studies. At the same time, Sullivan writes accessibly (e.g., cultural references are explained and technical terminology is minimized) for the non-expert reader with an interest in film history and/or NALS. Sullivan's approach of questioning the critics' and the filmmaker's views of each other and of the issues, and her commitment to reading the film through different levels and orders of meaning, effectively open readers' minds to new complicated possibilities while eschewing simple answers.

References

- CBC Arts. (2006). *Filmmaker, writer Lindalee Tracey dead at 49*. URL: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/filmmaker-writer-lindalee-tracey-dead-at-49-1.622268> [March 8, 2016].
- Elia, Noelle, & Cole, Janice (2007). Bonnie Sherr Klein: Two perspectives. NFB feminist icon's career analysed and appreciated. *Point of View Magazine*. URL: <http://povmagazine.com/articles/view/bonnie-sher-klein> [March 8, 2016].
- Gibb, Lyndsay. (2002, June 16). O critic, where art thou? *Ryerson Review of Journalism*. URL: <http://rrj.ca/o-critic-where-art-thou/> [March 8, 2016].

Gordon Alley-Young, Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York