



in conversation with...

Helene Klodawsky

by JOCELYNE CLARKE

Following various educational ventures, Helene Klodawsky returned to Toronto, where she contacted filmmaker Laura Sky. It was the beginning of several years of apprenticeship, starting with menial gopher-type jobs and graduating to being co-writer and co-producer on *All of Our Lives*, a 1982 film looking at the rights of older women. With Sky, Klodawsky gained experience through working on numerous films for different unions, travelling extensively and learning about grassroots filmmaking and distribution.

She also worked on productions with John Walker and a couple of films with charismatic Cuban filmmaker Estelita Bravo. She particularly remembers the excitement and adventure of assisting on *Los marielitos* (a film about people who left Cuba when Castro opened the jails), and of being in New York and Florida helping to capture stories of new Cuban arrivals to the United States.

We spoke recently in her Montréal home, which she shares with her husband, John, a scientist and photographer, and her two daughters, young adults who seem to have inherited her passion and drive.





Above:
Motherland: Tales of Wonder
Helene Klodawsky
(Canada, 1997)

Left: On location for
Malls R Us
Helene Klodawsky
(Canada, 2009)



HELENE KLODAWSKY / FILMOGRAPHY

WRITER AND DIRECTOR

FEATURE DOCS

Malls R Us (2009)

No More Tears Sister: Anatomy of Hope and Betrayal (2004)

Undying Love (A toi pour toujours) (2002)

DOCS

In Search of Lucille (2000)

Hire Learning (1999)

What If... A Film About Judith Meril (1998)

Motherland: Tales of Wonder (1994)

No Time to Stop (Pas le temps d'arrêter) (1991)

Shoot and Cry (Des armes et des larmes) (1988)

Love's Labour (1986)

OTHER WORKS

Family Motel (2007), alternative drama

Survivors Inc (2001), segment from Sophie

Bissonnette's *Partition pour voix des femmes*

Painted Landscapes of the Times: The Art of Sue Coe

(*Portraits de notre temps: Sue Coe et son oeuvre*) (1986), art film

HK: Helene Klodawsky

Montage (M): Jocelyne Clarke for *Montage*

HK: My first film, *Painted Landscapes of the Times* (1986), was about the accomplished political artist Sue Coe, who comes out of the tradition of George Grosz and Goya, and political artists before the Second World War. That film brought together my interest in art and my interest in politics: here was a painter I felt was bridging those two areas I found so compelling.

I was young at that time in the sense of approaching a recognized artist and asking if I could do her portrait. I think she appreciated that I had no experience and that I was going to make this film in my own way. She had refused some quite big Japanese and American companies.

At the same time, I moved to Montréal and met a number of Sophie Bissonnette's friends, so it was also an encounter with Québec filmmaking. People were generous not only with their time and support and encouragement but also teaching me French and introducing me to a whole new culture. It was a really wonderful first film experience.

M: I love the way you use music in it...

HK: It was [avant garde jazz musicians] Jean Derome and René Lussier, so again it was a discovery of the kind of special talent that existed here.... [M]y own experience of coming to Québec is that it was a different country and a different aesthetic. It was very exciting to discover a sense of authorship and sometimes working outside of conventional boundaries.

M: Not that many English filmmakers would cross over to the French community, first of all, and also use music that is so present...

HK: It's another voice that can amplify emotions and provide another text in a way. With Sue Coe what was so exciting was the way Jean Derome and René Lussier saw the European-activist sensibility from between the wars and understood cabaret and Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht. I've done a number of films set in other countries and you can get into using folkloric imitation music that doesn't really apply to the reality. [Wherever I go] I've tried to seek out the soul of what the film is trying to say and work with musicians who are talented and open enough to be inspired by that country's music.

M: *Shoot and Cry* (1988), about the Israeli occupation of Palestine, was your next film. It was quite prescient, wasn't it?

HK: That film was shot in 1986. We finished shooting a month before the first Intifada. I had thought about this film for a long time because I grew up in a very Jewish-centred cultural milieu that also encouraged being involved in political-activist circles in Toronto and caring about international struggle. [Because of those factors, one] couldn't help but question the kinds of stories, ideas and beliefs one had about Israel. When I went over, I really thought I would be doing a film celebrating the peace movement. A lot of political activists were telling me, 'Don't make that film because things will explode.' There was a deep sense that things were really on the cusp.

M: Because it would be too controversial?

HK: No, because it would be too gentle. They encouraged me to be as strong as I could in terms of my statement about what was happening to the Palestinians. What's interesting about the film is how much has changed and how much hasn't. I really found something that is true,

which is the separation between perceptions of life: how Israelis think Palestinians live and experience and vice versa—these two competing realities.

The question I really ask in that film is, 'What is the occupation doing to Israel?' It was less a point of view of the Palestinians, much more focused on this kind of undermining that was going on in Israel itself. Feeling discomfort with the occupation but also being afraid of what lack of military strength would mean for their own survival. And that conversation continues....

M: You are situated as an activist and as a daughter of survivors. How did those factors play out in the Jewish community?

HK: I was very motivated to create a strong statement questioning the occupation, so that was my primary focus, but indeed it was a very uncomfortable feeling in terms of my own community.... When the film came out, I wasn't part of an organization that could defend me. Some of the screenings were very tough and I was personally attacked. But parts of the Jewish community were open to looking at the film. I see problems with the film, [since it was full of] complex ideas I was trying to work out. But I'm proud of the courage I felt at that moment.

Women are very devoted to loving their children and will make the sacrifice to create lives that are as good as possible for them. On a personal level, it really helped my own process because no one had achieved the goal of being a 'perfect mother'

M: *Motherland* came out in 1994, after the birth of your two children. How did that affect the film?

HK: I think all my films have come from powerful personal experience and working out of identity, whether they take shape in a film about Palestinians or reflecting on the lives of women. I guess I'm always attracted to what I perceive as the underdog, or the people who have no voice. That's been a great passion for me.

I know I'm not alone in saying motherhood is such a transformative experience and one has to see the world completely differently because of it. In the early '90s there weren't all these mommy blogs and this kind of sharing of information. My own question was 'How do you be a good mother?' I was completely obsessed with this search. I was also toying with a lot of issues that women continue to toy with such as 'How do you be a worker, how do you fulfill yourself, how do you be a partner, how do you do all these things at once...and if you're an immigrant woman, or a refugee woman, or a black mother, is it different or is it the same?'

I had access to my own children. I could do my research, and there were all kinds of struggles I was experiencing with my husband. His world seemed to stay the same, he was going out to work every day, and I was dependent on his salary. I had all these ideas about feminism....

The answer I came up with was that there is no one prescription [to the problems inherent in having kids] and that the State actually does make motherhood very difficult: it's invested in women doing a lot of unpaid, invisible work.

At the same time, women are very devoted to loving their children and will make the sacrifice to create lives that are as good as possible for their children. The way we mother and bring up our children has a long history and I looked into that history, which was really fascinating. On a personal level, it really helped my own process because no one had achieved the goal of being a 'perfect mother.' Even women who were devoting themselves 24/7 to staying home felt guilty. Everyone felt guilty. It was really funny. There's a lot of humour in the film.

Motherland was one of the last [of the NFB's feminist] Studio D films.

I think what was so exciting about that period was the whole idea of distribution and getting films out to popular organizations. As many problems as we saw with Studio D, there was a real commitment to looking at issues that hadn't been dealt with, like incest or pornography.... *Motherland* was kind of the end of that era.

M: You've worked with the National Film Board on several films, including *No More Tears Sister* (2004). What do you like about working with the NFB?

HK: That's a film about Sri Lanka I would never have been able to do elsewhere. Sri Lanka isn't one of those sexy regions of the world where everybody is dying to make films and know about that country. That film has been seen all over Asia. I get e-mail almost every week since it was done, so it's a film that has political meaning for a lot of people. I think the Film Board is best at doing those kinds of films that take political and artistic risks, and hopefully they will have the power and finance[s] to continue to do that.

M: How did you discover that story?

HK: There was an initiative at the Film Board to do a series of films about women and war. I was asked to come up with some ideas. I had read some political analysis by a Sri Lankan feminist that was outstanding and I thought, 'This is a conflict I don't know about, let's investigate.'

As soon as I read about Rajani [the assassinated Tamil human rights worker], I knew that she was the [main] character. I don't think at that moment it would have been possible for a Tamil filmmaker to make the film because things were so dangerous. I worked very closely with the family.

Sometimes I think as a filmmaker, you come upon a topic, and it's just the right topic at the right moment. When I finally found the person I needed to speak to, Rajani's sister, she was living in the U.K. I called out of nowhere, saying, 'I'm a Canadian, I want to do a film about your sister,' and her words to me were, 'We've been waiting for you for 15 years.' I still get goosebumps when I think of that. Sometimes I think you're just sent to a topic or a character or a situation that needs to come about.

The best moments for me as a filmmaker are when I feel that the topic I want to explore, that there's a need there and a strong desire from the subjects to make the film.

M: Were there concerns about your safety?

HK: Strangely, there is a kind of colonialist hangover in Sri Lanka, which ensures that white people are protected. But there was a great concern for the people in the film, and that is something [in which] I celebrate the Film Board. They were very careful in terms of the political problems, and getting the film out. It was all really impeccable.

M: Can we rewind a bit and talk about *What If...* (1998), a film about science-fiction writer Judith Merrill?

HK: That idea came out of a strange space because I had seen Judith Merrill on TV and had a powerful dream about her. I had read *The Handmaid's Tale* and was interested in the exploration of alternative realities from women's perspectives, how radical those visions could be. I discovered science fiction, which seemed such a male and not a very political medium, to be something very different. I was really astounded by this hidden history of women's involvement in science fiction, and how very present women had been from the beginning, and how that history was totally wiped out. And I was interested, the more I read about Judith Merrill, and her whole analysis and storytelling that came out of the atomic bomb and mutilation from it. I see *What If...* as being a little like my film on Sue Coe: artists on the margins who are creating these very powerful political and stunning portraits.

M: They share the same apocalyptic vision...

HK: They're both witnesses to particular political times and dangers. What's fascinating about Judith Merrill is that she was spot-on about the ecological dangers and how conflicts were morphing into extremes. In the course of my work I've loved uncovering these astounding women. There are so many of them.



Photos: Shoot and Cry, courtesy of NFB.



Above and left:
Malls R Us
Helene Klodawsky
(Canada, 2009)



Above and left:
*Shoot and Cry (Des armes et
des larmes)*
Helene Klodawsky
(Canada, 1988)

