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Frame line, Nelson, Gunvor, 1984

"....As befits the dualities within Klahr's films, he often organizes his series to accentuate contradictions. Thus the romantic *Cartoon Far* is followed in Part Three by *Yesterday's Glue*: in a strange, sci-fi-like interior, women's bodies undergo various sex acts, some involving inanimat objects. There are suggestions of space travel, and the black-and-white imagery has a dark, institutional coldness that, combined with the weird sex, is starkly dehumanizing.

"....Klahr's object fetishism is also a commentary on the materialism of our mass culture, a fact that's particularly clear in the last film of Part Three,...*Elevator Music*...The film as a whole suggests a formalist *Peyton Place*, a kind of fantasy exposé of what goes on behind the well-scrubbed facades of suburbia...

"....Klahr's films also relate to our mass culture in a way that far transcends any specific referenes. What he gives us is a cinema in which no form of representation is privileged over any other—a cutout of an actor he has photographed, a cutout from a magazine, a live-action hand are all placed in the same continuum. All are true; none is truth. I suspect that this postmodern relativism, hardly unique to Klahr's work but realized here with particular care and intelligence, has its roots in the character of most 50s childhoods—the mixture of pop songs, photographic magazine imagery, comic books, and above all television and TV Channel switching.

"By giving form to such relativism, Klahr causes me to reflect once again on what I find most troubling about postmodernism, which is its refusal to place any unique value on the physical, on any particular part of the natural world. Humans, who after all need oxygen and water and sunlight rather than ozone and benzene and darkness, nonetheless regularly provide us with visions in which all objects are created equal, in which a cutout can stand for the universe. But such musings are reflections on our culture, not on Klahr's depiction of it. Indeed, his work offers a pleasurable and compelling vision of a media-made universe, teetering on the brink of a kind of mental apocalypse in which past and future, real object and flat image, fantasy and reality, are all interdependent, all threatening to meld into one."

—Fred Camper, *Chicago Reader*, 20 September 1991

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**GUNVOR NELSON:**  
*A Life in Film*

*Thursday, November 12 - Sunday, November 22, 1992*

After 32 years in the United States, the majority of them spent living, working and teaching in the Bay Area, Swedish-born filmmaker Gunvor Nelson is returning home. Her films have had an inestimable impact upon the development of experimental filmmaking in the U.S.—particularly on the West Coast—and have influenced a generation of film artists interested in using cinema as a vehicle for the expression of personal concerns. The Cinematheque is honored to have this opportunity to present a four-program retrospective of Gunvor Nelson's films, including the world premiere of her new film *Kristina's Harbor & Old Digs* on Sunday, November 22. Additional programs in the Gunvor Nelson retrospective will be held on Sunday, November 15 (*Before Need*, co-made with Dorothy Wiley) and Thursday, November 19 (*Red Shift* and *Frame Line*).



*Program I*  
*Filmmaker Gunvor Nelson in person*

*Thursday, November 12, 1992*

*Schmeerguntz* (1965), co-maker: Dorothy Wiley; 16mm, b&w, sound, 15 minutes

*Kirsa Nicholina* (1970); 16mm, color, sound, 16 minutes

*My Name is Oona* (1969); 16mm, b&w, sound, 10 minutes

*Take Off* (1972); 16mm, b&w, sound, 10 minutes

*Moons Pool* (1973); 16mm, color, sound, 15 minutes

*Time Being* (1991); 16mm, b&w, silent, 8 minutes

A central theme in Nelson's work is her meditation on the nature of female beauty. She contrasts the contemporary American definition of female attractiveness with the more universal principle of feminine beauty perceived in nature. She sees these two definitions as irreconcilable because the cultural model is based on the direct repression of instinctual and natural female behavior and appearance. Her films suggest that the technological society is as dedicated to the eradication of the organic in modern woman as it is to the eradication of the natural environment. Thus woman today is trained to purchase protection against all of her natural functions: deodorants to disguise her body's odor, pills to short-circuit her body, and cosmetics to discolor her face. Yet somewhere beneath it all, a natural woman remains; Nelson helps us to rediscover her and to redefine her beauty on a human scale.

Yet, in dealing with childhood, birth, sexuality and self-hood, her films have universal appeal. Like Doris Lessing, Nelson believes that what is most deeply personal often connects mysteriously with what is most widely shared in human experience. "I want," says Nelson, "to go into myself as much as possible and hopefully it will be universal."

Nelson's evolution as a filmmaker from *Schmeerguntz* through *Moons Pool* might thus be described as the gradual discovery of the Self. From the plastic anti-beauty of the American Way of Life in *Schmeerguntz* she traveled complex paths through *Fog Pumas* to the confrontation of natural beauty in *My Name is Oona* and *Kirsa Nicholina*. In these films, the film-maker approaches self-acceptance indirectly through the figures of Oona and Kirsa's mother. *Take-Off* is the final explosion of exploitative myths which depersonalize and alienate the body. It is an explosion which clears the path for *Moons Pool*, the ultimate recognition of *this* body, this Self in its naturalness; *Moons Pool* radiates a sense of wonder at the natural self which is without narcissism or self-indulgence.

Nelson is a truly visionary artist whose masterful control of her medium and whose sheer power of imagination should assure her a place in the ranks of the best American experimental film-makers.

—June M. Gill, *Film Quarterly*, Spring 1977

*Schmeerguntz* (1965), co-maker: Dorothy Wiley; 16mm, b&w, sound, 15 minutes

Home-made in the best sense of the word, *Schmeerguntz* is one long raucous belch in the face of the American Home...



Its elements are unprepossessing—in fact revolting. Random items from the public, sanitized, ad-glamorized American scene are thrown rapid-fire against homey shots of the unmentionable side of the Home: the gunk in the kitchen sink, the dirty clothes mountain, the squalling infants, the filthy rump, the used kotex. Even Motherhood gets its knocks: after an organ prelude with shots of the moon, an incredibly distended belly and a funny problem with dressing, followed by doleful pregnancy exercises and recurrent urps in the toilet.

A society which hides its animal functions beneath a shiny public surface deserves to have such films as *Schmeerguntz* shown everywhere—in every PTA, every Rotary Club, every garden club in the land. For it is brash enough, brazen enough, and funny enough to purge the soul of every harried American married woman.

—Ernest Callenbach, *Film Quarterly*, Summer 1966

Brenda Richardson: Were you ever especially conscious of being women making movies?

Dorothy Wiley: Not the way you would be today, no, with women's liberation and all.

Gunvor Nelson: But I remember with *Schmeerguntz* we wanted to make a 16mm movie, I think. But we had no subject. And one day I was looking at all the gunk in the sink and thought of the contrast between what we do, and what we see that we "should" be—in ads and things—and that was the idea right there, from the sink.

DW: We always divided it up equally for some reason. We both filmed, we both edited, and we seemed to agree on things.

BR: What do you think the advantages are of making movies together?

DW: For me, up until lately, I was never highly motivated to do something for myself. But if I said to Gunvor I'd be there at eleven, to please her I'd be there at eleven, and do it. But if it had been up to me, I would probably have done more dishes or something.

GN: Yes, for me too. It's like getting away from the fear of it or something.

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BR: Was *Schmeerguntz* the first movie you showed publicly?

GN: Yes. It was New Year's Eve in Sausalito. Everybody roared.

DW: It was the last movie on a program with about five other films. I didn't think it was so great or anything, but people hooted and hollered and stood up and clapped. It was a good audience.

GN: And then it won about five awards...

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BR: Dorothy, you were the pregnant one in *Schmeerguntz* and therefore you were the subject matter of it in a way. Was that sense of the hostility to the pregnancy really a factual thing—Miss America and advertising on the one hand and, on the other, pregnancy and falling over to get your socks on?

DW: I've thought about that, and at that time it was just factual. I just wanted people to see it, and I don't think I thought about the pregnancy very negatively from the more personal point of view.

GN: For me, that was America. Of course, some of the things in it are pur accident, because we were pretty careless.

DW: Like the soundtrack, we didn't know how that would fit in until we saw the copy of it.

GN: Like when you threw up, and "he kissed her again" is on the soundtrack. We didn't plan that.

BR: What did your husbands think about the movie?

GN: I think they were very impressed. Bob [Nelson] was anyway. And I remember Bill Geis came over, and he had never spoken to us as human beings before, and it was as if he was seeing us for the first time or something.

—Brenda Richardson, "Interview with Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley," *Film Quarterly*, Fall 1971

I would like to add a historical note concerning *Schmeerguntz*. Although Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, was published, I believe, about 1963, Gunvor and I were not aware of the book nor had we ever heard anything about the women's liberation movement when we made this film. I read *The Feminine Mystique* a year or two after we had made the film and I understood much better what we had expressed from our own experience. Also, *Schmeerguntz* was finished in 1965 and it wasn't until 1968 that a group of women went down to Atlanta to protest the Miss America Pageant and it hit the headlines they had burnt their bras (even though they hadn't). Our footage and sound of the Miss America contest was filmed right off the TV in 1965...



## San Francisco Cinematheque

We had a neighbor that wasn't the best housekeeper, and we asked to film at her house to illustrate some of our points. I know that when we were trying to capture some of the crudeness of life and we looked thru the camera at, say, piles of dirty dishes left on the table till the next day, or a filthy refrigerator, what we saw in the camera was ethereally beautiful, the light would illuminate objects as if we were in heaven, and we fell in love with film.  
—Dorothy Wiley, 1992

"Film is the one place in my life where I have an illusion of control."

—Gunvor Nelson

*Kirsa Nicholina* (1970); 16mm, color, sound, 16 minutes

At first glance, it is difficult to believe that the person who produced *Kirsa Nicholina* also produced *Schmeerguntz*. But the two films have much in common. Both reject a sterile, technological society which disguises or denies its natural functions. In both *Kirsa Nicholina* and *Schmeerguntz*, Nelson insists upon recognition and acceptance of the human body, particularly the female body.

If, as Amos Vogel suggests in *Film As a Subversive Art*, *Kirsa Nicholina*, and the lifestyle it depicts, betrays a "desperate romanticism," it also provides a valuable counter-balance to those films, so common in the Sixties, which depicted birth as a secret ritual, isolated the woman and excluded the man, and denied the very act of love and procreation. Certainly, any discussion of family films would be incomplete without this aspect of family life.  
—Catherine Egan, *Sightlines*, Spring 1978

That Gunvor Nelson is indeed one of the most gifted of our poetic film humanists is revealed in *Kirsa Nicholina*, her masterpiece. This deceptively simple film of a child being born to a Woodstock couple in their home is an almost classic manifesto for the new sensibility, a proud affirmation of man amidst technology, genocide, and ecological destruction. Birth is presented not as an antiseptic, "medical" experience (the usual birth film focuses on an anonymous vagina appropriately surrounded by a white shroud) but as a living-through of a primitive mystery, a spiritual celebration, a rite of passage. True to the new sensibility, it does not aggressively proselytize but conveys its ideology by force of example.

—Amos Vogel, *The Village Voice*, March 18, 1971

BR: Have any children or teenagers seen that movie [*Kirsa Nicholina*]?

GN: Yes. And Oona and her friends. Oona said it was almost as good as a cartoon.

—Brenda Richardson, *Film Quarterly*, Fall 1971

*My Name is Oona* (1969); 16mm, b&w, sound, 10 minutes

In *My Name is Oona*, Nelson continues the process of exploring and recreating feminine mythology while extending the commentary on beauty begun in *Schmeerguntz*. Here beauty is the antithesis of the pre-packaged model which Nelson exposed in her first film. *My Name is Oona*, a film-portrait of Nelson's nine-year-old daughter, is based on a rhythmical montage of shots showing Oona playing, grooming her horse, and riding horseback in the forest....An elfin blond child, Oona is as beautiful as the forest, sea, and beach in which the film is set. Nelson emphasizes the attraction of each with elliptical cutting, liquid slow-motion photography, and flowing super-impositions.

Oona's is the protean dream-world of childhood, which impudently defies our definitions of our structures. We are gradually immersed in *her* visions, where reality and fantasy blend and flow endlessly. Like Castaneda's "other reality," Oona's fantasy hints at another field of vision, one from which "ordinary reality" can be seen in



perspective and given its true value. Fantasy provides the key to the deepest and most private self, that self which alone can challenge the oppressive roles which constitute our public reality. Oona, a girl-child, living in the unspoiled world of her personal myths, unselfconsciously furnishes us with alternative perceptions of "woman's place."

In her closeness to nature, Oona recalls legends which reach beyond her individual existence into the larger reservoir of feminine myth. Riding bareback through a dark forest, swirled in her blond hair, she recalls those other fair-haired horsewomen of Norse mythology, the Valkyrie. This image, perhaps suggested to Nelson by her own Scandinavian heritage..., reminds us that for primitive woman there was no contradiction between beauty and strength, nor between femininity and power. The Valkyrie were, like Oona, "sun-bright" and "fair," but strong, skillful horsewomen and warriors. They were goddesses of both war and fertility.

—June M. Gill, *Film Quarterly*, Spring 1977

But the revelation of the program is Gunvor Nelson, true poetess of the visual cinema. *My Name is Oona* captures in haunting, intensely lyrical images, fragments of the coming to consciousness of a child girl. A series of extremely brief flashes of her moving through night-lit space or woods in sensuous negative, separated by rapid fades into blackness, burst upon us like sweet firework clusters, caught by a beautifully fluid camera. . . one of the most perfect recent examples of poetic cinema. Throughout the entire film, the girl, compulsively and as if in awe, repeats her name, until it becomes a magic incantation of self-realization.

—Amos Vogel, *The Village Voice*, March 18, 1971

***Take Off*** (1972); 16mm, b&w, sound, 10 minutes

The 1972 *Take Off*. . . subverts the spectacle of the striptease. Professional exotic dancer Ellion Ness (a female untouchable) shimmies against total blackness. Skewed, jumpy angles excitedly frame her copious gyrating body, as she slowly discards gloves, veils, and peekaboo fringe-fetishistic totems of female sexuality. This striptease's critical moment is announced with the inevitable G-string and pasties. But Ness transgresses the tease-taboo: She stares right into the camera and exposes her nipples. The moment of defiance shifts the meaning of the strip from dance for others to dance for self. Having crossed the margins of male-defined sexuality, she's free to define her own relationship to her body. After Ness awkwardly removes her G-string, she continues dancing naked and unencumbered. Then, without skipping a beat, she removes the blond wig to reveal a bald head. Through masking and seamless editing, she then removes her legs, arms, and breasts. Her head pops off like a plastic doll's. The headless torso begins to revolve, spinning wildly, until, superimposed upon a field of stars, it disappears into outer space. The female body in *Take Off* is completely dismantled to make way for a new, limitless cosmic one.

—Manohla Dargis, *The Village Voice*, January 3, 1989

***Moons Pool*** (1973); 16mm, color, sound, 15 minutes

*Moons Pool* . . . relates a journey of self-discovery through the revelation of the body. In contrast to *Take-Off* which showed the depersonalized, demythologized body of the stripper, *Moons Pool* depicts a highly individual exploration of the film-maker's own body and body myth. It represents Nelson's acceptance of her own deepest physical self. Her nudity expresses her will to shatter the taboos which alienate us from the body's wisdom.

As in *Take-Off*, the action takes the form of a ritual dance as the naked bodies of the actors swirl through the opalescent water. But this time the dance is stripped of its lasciviousness; it is no longer display or seduction as in *Take-Off*. Instead it becomes the pure beauty of physical communion among the dancers. . . *Moons Pool* expresses the strongest sense of male-female rapport seen in Nelson's work since the affectionate solidarity between husband and wife in *Kirsa Nicholina*.

—June M. Gill, *Film Quarterly*



"Initially I was not going to be in *Moons Pool*. And almost halfway into the filming I wasn't. Since I was a child I had always felt that my inside did not correspond with my outside; that what I felt inside whether it was strength or anger or warmth or whatever the feeling, it didn't register on the outside, on my face or my body. I tried to bury that feeling, telling myself that it didn't matter and yet the sore was always burning somewhere inside. So the film was without me originally. I took the abstract idea of this feeling and wanted to use other people to show it. Slowly it crept in, into me and into the film, that I was daring to put myself in there. Maybe for other people that is not a daring step but it was for me, to bluntly put myself out there, naked as I could be and then seeing it was alright and not having to hide myself in having other people represent me.

"I wanted it to be a journey I could take into something and return from it. Same as a dream but literally underwater..."

—Gunvor Nelson, June 1974, excerpt from interview in *Canyon Cinemanews*

*Time Being* (1991); 16mm, b&w, silent, 8 minutes

"A quiet film with my old mother."

—Gunvor Nelson

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*Program II*

*Sunday, November 15, 1992*

*Field Study #2* (1988); 16mm, color, sound, 8 minutes

*Before Need* (1979), co-maker: Dorothy Wiley; 16mm, color, sound, 75 minutes

*Field Study #2* (1988); 16mm, color, sound, 8 minutes

Gunvor Nelson's use of film collage is one of the more visible formal threads running through her films. Earlier films such as *Schmeerguntz* (1965) and *Take Off* (1973) both employ collagistic strategies to comment on processes which dehumanize women through the fragmentation and literal "cutting-up" of their bodies. As her filmic interests shifted away from specific considerations of woman's body and moved towards personal meditations on the passage of time and the capriciousness of memory, so too did her approach to collage. This change emerged full-blown in her 1983 masterpiece, *Frame Line*, a film about reshaping memory and time whose emotional power relied almost entirely upon a brilliant synthesis of visual and audio elements to create a haunting, introspective work of "total" collage

Since 1983, Nelson has created a series of other collage films, each one extending ideas and discoveries first presented in *Frame Line*. These include *Light Years*, *Light Years Expanding*, *Natural Features*, and *Field Study #2*. Nelson's description of *Field Study #2*: "Superimpositions of dark pourings are perceived through the film. Suddenly a bright color runs across the picture and delicate drawings flutter past. Grunts from animals are heard."

—Gunvor Nelson, *Canyon Cinema Film/Video Catalog 7*

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*We started with some dream images, a few actors, friends and relatives. The snow had melted and it was impossible to repeat. Standards of perfection applied to all the selves, the relationships, the layers of memory. Where are the tables for one?*

—Dorothy Wiley & Gunvor Nelson

*Before Need* (1979), co-maker: Dorothy Wiley; 16mm, color, sound, 75 minutes

Starring:

Cleta Wiley and John Nesci  
Silver Spangled Hamburg and White Faced Black Spanish  
Saun Ellis and Marcus Mislin  
The Bog People and Queen Elizabeth  
Oona Nelson and Ethan Wiley  
Niagra Falls and Thou Shalt Bible  
Experts and Jungle Sounds  
Games, Puzzles , Surprises  
Sea and Scab  
Ray Rodrique and Vacuum Cleaner

Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley were Muir Beach neighbors when they made their first film together in 1965. "It was our first serious effort," recalls Nelson. . . "It seemed so romantic to us to make films."

That first film, *Schmeerguntz*, containing images and visions of the American household and way of life, won first prize at the Ann Arbor Film Festival and took prizes at Kent University and Chicago Art Institute film festivals.

Since then, the women have made three other films together. . . *Fog Pumas* in 1967, a prize winner at the Belgium International Film Festival; *Five Artists* in 1969 and their latest effort, *Before Need*. . .

*Before Need*. . . is described loosely as "sequences of images that express the emotional discoveries of an aging woman." The filmmakers point out, however, that the film exists on many levels and was created organically. Visual ideas ("things with mirrors," "images with chickens") were captured on film first, then dialogue without a definite story line was written and finally scenes with actors were shot in a month-long burst.

The filmmakers derived some of their inspiration from dreams Wiley collected from children at Lagunitas School. "The parts of the dreams we responded to were the images we could relate to as adults," she says.

"We think a lot of the film is absurd," Nelson elaborates. "It is on the brink of being too serious and too stupid. It's complex. There are all these unexpected things. Things are multi-layered. That's our point of view. The beauty the woman sees in the different roles she's taken in her life and looking back on those states of being is both beautiful, pathetic and absurd."

A painter until she began making films in the '60s, Nelson. . . explains her attraction to the medium of film. "For me it was a combination of the visual—within that the use of color and black and white—with the timing, the dance, the motion, plus whatever else there is—the story, sound. It's so multi-media it's almost too overwhelming."

Wiley, a former English teacher. . . saw new creative frontiers in filmmaking. "I find my interest in films peculiar because I'm not interested in machines, and there are an awful lot of machines involved in making films," she says.

"But it was such a new medium. The possibilities that hadn't been explored were tremendous." Both women say that the creative process hasn't changed much between the first film 14 years ago and their latest work. "We were



just astonished,” Nelson says. “It’s the same thing then as now. We made a film we were interested in making, but we have no idea if other people will be interested in seeing it. This one was just as much a chance as that first one.”

—Paul Liberatore, *Independent Journal*, 1979

There is a branch of film that grows in the same direction as music and painting and has very little to do with the storytelling film, especially as it looks in theaters. This “poetic” film has a long history: from the Lumière’s contemporary, Georges Méliès, over Futurists and Surrealists to the American West Coast film after the war to the unprecedented flowering the world over of so-called underground film during the Sixties.

These films demand much of the viewer, not the least a preparedness to see and learn another film language. But in this country that is totally forgotten! And that hits me when I see a film like Gunvor Nelson’s uniquely striking *Before Need*, which now has a few showings in Stockholm. Suddenly unfolding before one’s eyes is a pictorial work as taut, complexly rich and beyond the workings of verbal logic as a music piece by Penderecki or Cage.

I think her picture web about time and death and language...will be put side by side with Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* and Stan Brakhage’s *Songs*. We make a big mistake if we don’t count Gunvor Grundel from Kristinehamn and Muir Beach among the most interesting of Swedish filmmakers.

—Carl Henrik Svenstedt, *Expressen*, 1980 (translated from Swedish)

*Before Need* is a look at aging, death, the breakdown of the body, memory and dreams as experienced through the breakdown of image and language. ...the narrative backdrop of the film is set at a family get-together. The table conversation is disjunctive, inter-weaving the bits and pieces of conversation, arguments and dreams of those present. They betray a sense of unfulfilled desire and expectation (as when one character, a young boy, recites his excuse litany: “I wanted to, but I didn’t want to...I meant to...I started to...” which an older woman then takes up as a sort of chant in voice-over). It is this older woman’s voice-over which ties together the elliptic narrative of *Before Need*.

The woman is present at the table, but she has chosen not to speak, simply to listen. She is the woman experiencing her aging as understood through her narration of body and memory decline. The notion of decline or breakdown is reasserted through intercut images as those of ice being ironed, a dentist drilling teeth, old photographs being burned. The repetition of burning photographs provides a key to the film. They are sometimes surreal (as wedding albums in which everyone—from groom to bride and bride’s maids—have identical bearded faces), and sometimes touristy snapshots and postcards. These souvenirs of the past remind us of the tricks of memory: remembrances as not about the real event, but of a spectacularized version of it, ultimately vanishing.

At their gathering, the people look at a photo album of the luncheon they are attending while the older woman comments, “I’d waited years for this event.” Instantly the present becomes the past, part of memory with all its vicissitudes, and waiting—as we are told will happen to all that is “permanent”—to be “washed out.”

—Karyn Kay, *Besides Bergman—Swedish independent and avant-garde films*



*Program III*

*Thursday, November 19, 1992*

*Frame Line* (1983); 16mm, b&w, sound, 22 minutes

*Red Shift* (1983); 16mm, b&w, sound, 50 minutes

*Light Years* (1987); 16mm, color, sound, 28 minutes

Gunvor Nelson's two long films from the 1970s, *Trollstenen* (1976) and *Before Need* (1979, made with Dorothy Wiley), began to address issues which she would explore more deeply in subsequent works. Family, memory, time, displacement from one's native culture, mortality, and mother-daughter relationships: these became significant elements in Gunvor's films of the 1980s. Beginning with her two breakthrough films of 1983—*Frame Line* and *Red Shift*—and continuing through her new film, *Kristina's Harbor & Old Digs*, Gunvor mines a rich and seemingly inexhaustible lode of images and ideas. With these films, too, Gunvor reasserted her skills as a painter and collagist, often painting directly over photographs and film images and frequently combining three-dimensional objects (leaves, crumpled paper, etc.) with "flat" two-dimensional images. Most importantly, however, Gunvor began a profound exploration of self in these films—a project which she continues refining and enhancing in each new film she makes.

For me, the intention is trying to dig deep and find those images, to find the essence of your feelings. I guess about a year ago it just struck me that the outside world for me, all those things that are there, are symbols for what I feel. Trying to use film as a medium to express what's inside you, you have to use those symbols. If you want to communicate you can't just show a simple cup the way it is always shown; you have to find an angle that actually expresses those feelings, not only for other people, but for yourself, so you don't just see that cup or the coffee grounds. Most people won't have seen it the way you have seen it, and you have to dig into it really deeply to show yourself, and hopefully other people then, what you see. But specifically, it's very hard to tell what you want to express. I've had many people discuss with me, especially in Sweden, how many artists have this line of doing art for a cause, or for the masses, or something like that, and they are just the medium for expressing this thing which is bigger than they are. I want to go into myself as much as possible and hopefully it will be universal, or another world that somebody can look at. In seeing other people's art, the more personal it is, the more into their head it is, the more I'm interested in it. To see other people's worlds. To communicate that way. So the more personal it is, the more interesting it is.

—Gunvor Nelson, "An Interview with Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley," Brenda Richardson,  
*Film Quarterly*, Fall 1971

*Frame Line* (1983); 16mm, b&w, sound, 22 minutes

*Frame Line* is a collage film in black and white. Glimpses (both visual and audial) of Stockholm, of people, of gestures, flags, and the Swedish national anthem appear through drawings, paintings and cut-outs. It is a film with an eerie flow between the ugly and the beautiful about returning, about roots, and also about reshaping. (GN)

Absolutely blowing the lid off any attempt at patronization, *Frame Line* by Gunvor Nelson took the advantage to radically ignore any limits of emotional expression. Without excuses, or so much as even a token glance back, *Frame Line* at once set standards that put to rest that silly notion "the tradition of the Avant Garde." Rendering explanation redundant in its wake, *Frame Line* alternately bulldozers and embraces a ruthless sort of Everyman's puzzle; a re-arrangeable pop-bead rosary of personal fx with framelines the only constant. Distilled bits of psyche break from the assemblage to skitter across struggling planes seeking niches and forming patterns with careening desperation. Some fit.



Seamless, complex, subliminal and totally effective in its role, the sound is heart as the images are mind to this demanding 22 minute black and white. *Frame Line* wasn't intended to entertain or even to be liked. Consequently, it was the most satisfying film shown.

—Rock Ross, *Reversal*, 1984

*Frame Line*: A collage of shots and groups of shots. Some grouped under various titles. The titles are quite independent, like images, titles such as: "Reluctantly leaving behind," Necessary tilt," All remote random," "And in harmony," Lingering notes."

All material, seemingly (to me) autobiographical. Images of Stockholm. Occasional glimpses of Gunvor's face. Attempts to obliterate the images of memory, of the past, by superimposing various substances on them, painting over them, drawing. Eerie, surreal sounds give to some parts surreal tone. Most of the images used are very random. It seemed to me that they were selected for their lack of any grace or aesthetic/pictorial appeal, going out of one's way to select the most uninteresting images—to de-romanticize, to desentimentalize the memories. Same goes for the "animation": graceless, sloppy, careless. At least that's my impression after two viewings.

—Jonas Mekas, "Two Films by Gunvor Nelson," *Motion Picture* No. 3, 1987

***Red Shift*** (1983); 16mm, b&w, sound, 50 minutes

Starring:

Carin Grundel, Oona Nelson, Gunvor Nelson, Regina Grundel, Ulla Moberg, Gunnar Grundel.

Assistant: Diane Kitchen

*Red Shift* is a film in black and white about relationships, generations and time. The subtitle is *All Expectation*. The movement of a luminous body toward and away from us can be found in its spectral lines. A shift toward red occurs with anybody that is self-luminous and receding. There is uncertainty about how much observable material exists. (GN)

*Red Shift* is the most beautiful, most personal and most expressive film about mother-daughter relationships that I have ever seen. It involves Gunvor Nelson, her mother and her daughter. Carefully and with great tenderness it focuses on these three women, trying to show us their relationship, succeeding with an emotional impact that is hardly ever found in such a subject. It is not the social context which is exploited but the little gestures, everyday events. *Red Shift* is a radical film; it sets new measures for Avant-Garde filmmaking dealing with personal problems.

—Alf Bold, The Arsenal (Berlin)

... *Red Shift*, subtitled *All Expectation* and shot in Nelson's native Sweden, is an intricate meditation on the relationships among three generations of women. ... Faces are shown only in cropped, choked close-up. The camera examines and compares in obsessive detail the women's bodies, framed to isolate their eyes, mouths, necks, and skin. The soundtrack is a series of discrete, distilled moments: whispered clichés, words of motherly advice, childish pleading. Nelson plays the "roles" of both daughter and mother to her real mother and daughter, and, as in Marguerite Duras's *Nathalie Granger*, it's the family house that assumes symbolic significance. In *Red Shift*, Nelson uses interior and exterior space to define generational bonds and to explore the complex relationship of women to the private sphere of the home (as both projector and prison). Woven throughout the film are voiceovers of Calamity Jane's letters to her daughter, read while the camera is looking outward at the snowy scape. The interior claustrophobia of the Swedish home (where Nelson was raised by her domineering, athletic mother) contrasts vividly with the freedom of the adventurous American frontierswoman, who kept her diary tied to her saddle. There's no reflex move to create a false harmony—the shift alluded to in the film's title isn't toward resolution, it's a gesture toward tentative, fragile coexistence.

—Manohla Dargis, *The Village Voice*, January 3, 1989



*Red Shift* is punctuated by a series of quotations, some from the letters of Jane Hickock, better known as Calamity Jane. Writing to her daughter, Jane says at the end of the film, "I am taking my secrets with me—what I am and what I might have been." This is perhaps the most concise expression of what *Red Shift* is about: mothers and daughters, growing older, the discoveries of experience, the impossibility of conveying much of that experience. But most of all, the apprehension of that experience through sound and image. This film has a *tangible* quality from the gravel-voice of Jane Hickock (provided by Edith Kramer of Pacific Film Archives) to the silver-gray images of silk and velvet, of wrinkled hands on smooth, unmarked hands, of the mechanics of sewing. Nelson's film is dense with detail that is the stuff of memory.

Autobiographical material has been a rich source for Nelson ever since she began making films in 1966. While she and members of her family have figured in over half of her films, one always had the impression that the narratives were about more than the specific people we see on the screen. *My Name is Oona*, for example, is about a kind of experience of childhood, not just the childhood of Gunvor's daughter Oona. *Red Shift* takes this one step further. The aging parents in the film are Nelson's parents—but they are not playing themselves (if it is entirely possible to escape such a role). Speaking lines gathered from all of Nelson's friends ("What sayings, maxims, etc. did *your* mother tell you?"), *Red Shift* is an anthology of puzzling and wonderful attitudes and lines ("The North Wind is the broom of the sky") that evoke the wonder of growing up and the mystery of older generations.

It is tempting to compare this film with Stan Brakhage's *The Stars Are Beautiful* (1974). Beyond the similar soundtracks, they both are composed of striking images—*Stars* in color, *Red Shift* in black and white—that are often close-up and intense, domestic and familiar, but new. It is startling to again see a grandmother's jewelry box, to watch through a doorway as yarn is rewound in preparation for sewing. . . To peer backwards and forwards, to know and not know ("I don't want to tell her about everything"). In her program notes Nelson says that "a shift towards red occurs with anybody that is self-luminous and receding." Of course, in physical terms, the word "anybody" should be "anything," especially since it will not happen until *somebody* is accelerated away from Earth on his or her way to another star. But Nelson speaks with metaphors, and in her film we can see that shift here, across human years if not light years.

—Robert Haller, *Field of Vision*, No. 13, Spring, 1985

***Light Years*** (1987); 16mm, color, sound, 28 minutes

*Light Years* is a collage film and a journey through the Swedish landscape, traversing stellar distances in units of 5878 trillion miles. (GN)

*Light Years* continues to develop the concerns and techniques begun in her earlier film *Frame Line*. In *Light Years* Nelson blends collage animation with highly textured live-action material to creating a haunting evocation of her displacement from her native Swedish culture. Particularly striking is her use of wet ink on glass to create a constantly shifting image of a path leading to a house. With these passages of the house and moving images of the Swedish landscape as threads, *Light Years* becomes a tapestry of change as experienced through constant motion. It is a personal reflection on the filmmaker's memories of her past.

The film is so filled with visual ideas that Gunvor Nelson has extended the film's themes and techniques in her subsequent effort *Light Years Expanding*. All her recent films suggest that while the distance of time makes home further, the intensity of memory makes it richer.

—Parabola Arts Foundation brochure #3

Not only is *Light Years* one of Gunvor Nelson's greatest achievements, it's also one of the most beautiful films ever made. That covers a lot of time and distance, "ever" does.

—Albert Kilchesty, Filmforum (Los Angeles)



*Program IV*  
*Filmmaker Gunvor Nelson in person*

*Sunday, November 22, 1992*

*Kristina's Harbor & Old Digs* (1992, World Premiere); 16mm, color, sound, Part I: 50 minutes, Part II: 20 minutes

My new film is a collage film that combines animation, live footage and the re-photographed footage of what I filmed in Sweden in 1990. (GN)

*Every film I start is new and dangerous. There are no guidelines except to follow the initial feeling and also let the film itself be an interchange of direction between myself and it. A new strange country is created.*

—Gunvor Nelson, *SF Bay Guardian*, October 15, 1976

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Gunvor Nelson, from “scratch” of her collaboration with Dorothy Wiley, through her dreamscapes and tender autobiographical envisionments, to the electrical synapting (albeit laboriously created) moving-thinking films of late, has proved more true to the intrinsic possibilities of film than any but a few in the history of the medium.

—Stan Brakhage, 1992

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I'm not going to comment on the qualities of Gunvor's films that make them so inventive and beautiful, nor on her teaching, except to say that she was a very good teacher for me, but I would like to say that one thing that Gunvor has brought to a life in film is a lot of very hard work. Bringing into film a painter's refined sensibility of color and other aesthetic concerns, she has had to overcome some daunting obstacles to get what she wants in a medium that is often hard to control. She has always had very strong preferences and opinions about what she wants, and an ability to intensely focus her energy and attention and a tenacity that will see a project through, no matter how much energy it takes.

—Dorothy Wiley, 1992

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There is real joy in finding that the juxtaposition of two shots can create new and unexpected meaning. . . this is beyond the original meaning of each shot taken separately. There are multiple layers of facts to combine and coordinate to make a film succeed as a whole. . . the integration of ideas, feelings and structure have to be investigated. What is the progression of the film. . . where should it start. . . where is the middle and how should it end. . . and why? When you are really immersed, you, yourself, totally interested in solving the “problems” of the film, then you forget how much work you are giving to it. . . then the film emerges. Usually the solution seems just right and logical. Why did I not see it before! But it did take all that interest and study and hard work.

—Gunvor Nelson, from a class on film editing at SFAI

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With insistence and conviction, Gunvor Nelson taught me how and why to live inside my films. I know that each and every shot is a reflection of a moment in my life. I know this now, and Gunvor realized it then, when I was one of her graduate students at the San Francisco Art Institute from 1987 to 1989.



Sometimes I whined to her about my films. When would they be able to walk on their own two feet? Gunvor told me that the best part of filmmaking is the MAKING, not the finishing. Be patient, and delight in the work.

No change, no manipulation could ever be anything less than organic, or else the viewer's experience would always ring untrue, artificial, insincere. I remember the way she would read my sometimes confused visual language, cutting away superfluous, perhaps beautiful shots, allowing us to discover a kernel of meaning and maybe, just maybe, transcendence. Arrivals at transcendence were rare, of course. But with Gunvor we always proceeded together. Never ahead, always with.

Often, I wouldn't listen to her suggestions, as we sat hour upon hour at the editing table in a dark room, moving our way through my film. With every step forward, I seemed to take two steps back: Gunvor always needed to know how a choice ten minutes into the film connected formally to another somewhere back at the beginning. And I would just say it felt right. I did it and it must stay. She would sigh, look skeptical, and then move on. Whether she agreed with us or not, Gunvor trusted her students' decisions, for she saw us as committed artists involved in an often painful, sometimes joyous struggle. After each and every editing session I would feel drained, yet profoundly connected to the challenge at hand. Only several days later could I appreciate the masterful insights Gunvor brought to my work. I now know how lucky I was to have experienced the exquisite eyes and ears of such an artist.

—Lynne Sachs, 1992

Gunvor Nelson grew up in Kristinehamn, Sweden. After living in both England and Holland she returned to her native Sweden and attended Stockholm's Konstfakskolan. She moved to the United States in 1953 and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from Humboldt State College, and, in 1960, received an MFA degree in painting and art history from Mills College in Oakland. After a brief return trip to Sweden, she moved back to the Bay Area and married Robert Nelson, a fellow art student (and maker of celebrated "underground" films such as *Oh Dem Watermelons* and *The Great Blondino*). She moved from a career in painting to filmmaking in 1965 with the release of *Schmeerguntz* (made with Dorothy Wiley). Her films have been screened internationally at venues such as the Berlin Film Academy, the Wadsworth Atheneum, the Walker Art Center, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the National Film Theater (London), the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), the Cannes Film Festival, the Swedish Film Institute, Pacific Film Archive, and Anthology Film Archives. She has been the recipient of numerous awards and grants including a J.S. Guggenheim Fellowship, American Association of University Women Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts, Filmverkstan Fellowship, Sweden, American Film Institute, and a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship. She recently resigned a film teaching position at the San Francisco Art Institute—a post she held for more than 20 years—and will soon return to her home town of Kristinehamn.

### Gunvor Nelson Filmography

(all films 16mm)

*Schmeerguntz* (1965), co-maker: Dorothy Wiley; 15 minutes\*

*Fog Pumas* (1967), co-maker: Dorothy Wiley; 25 minutes

*My Name is Oona* (1969); 10 minutes\*

*Kirsa Nicholina* (1970); 16 minutes\*

*Five Artists BillBobBillBob* (1971), co-maker: Dorothy Wiley; 70 minutes

*Muir Beach* (1970); 5 minutes

*One & the Same* (1973), co-maker: Freude; 4 minutes

*Take Off* (1972); 10 minutes\*

*Moons Pool* (1973); 15 minutes\*



## San Francisco Cinematheque

*Trollstenen* (1976); 125 minutes

*Before Need* (1979); co-maker: Dorothy Wiley; 75 minutes\*

*Frame Line* (1983); 22 minutes\*

*Red Shift* (1983); 50 minutes\*

*Light Years* (1987); 28 minutes\*

*Light Years Expanding* (1988); 25 minutes

*Field Study #2* (1988); 8 minutes\*

*Natural Features* (1990); 28 minutes

*Time Being* (1991); 8 minutes\*

*Kristina's Harbor & Old Digs* (1992); Part I, 50 minutes-Part II, 20 minutes\*

### Dorothy Wiley Filmography

(all films 16mm)

*Cabbage* (1972); 9 minutes

*Letters* (1972); 11 minutes

*The Weenie Worm or the Fat Innkeeper* (1972); 11 minutes

*Zane Forbidden* (1972); 10 minutes

*Miss Jesus Fries on the Grill* (1973); 12 minutes

*The Birth of Seth Andrew Kinmont* (1977); 27 minutes

\* denotes films shown in this retrospective

Gunvor Nelson's films are distributed by Canyon Cinema, Inc.

**Gunvor Nelson: A Life in Film** program notes written and compiled by Albert Kilchesty, with assistance from Steve Anker and Michelle Sabol.

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**D'GHETTO EYES:**  
***Emerging Media Artists of Color***  
***presented by Third World Newsreel***  
***Program II***

***Saturday, November 14, 1992***

***Splash!*** (1991), by Thomas Allen Harris; 3/4" video, color, sound, 7 minutes

This experimental collage reflects on the artist's childhood fantasies and the impact of family on his becoming a gay man.

Thomas Allen Harris has been a staff producer at PBS affiliate WNET in New York. Harris is currently working on *All in the Family*, an experimental documentary exploring the worlds of three groups of gay and lesbian siblings.

***Ex-Voto*** (1990), by Tania Cypriano; 3/4" video, color, sound, 7 minutes

An experimental video homage to Nossa Senhora da Aparecida, the national patron saint of Brazil. Cypriano produced her devotion piece as a gesture of gratitude for surviving a fire that burned her severely when she was a child.