

Who's Afraid of the Religious Right?

An Interview with Barbara Doran: Filmmaker

Marilyn Porter

ABSTRACT

Barbara Doran is a Newfoundland filmmaker, now living in Montreal. She was a foremother of the women's movement in Newfoundland and most of her work addresses women's issues. Some of her recent films include: *Women Kill, Voices of Change, L.M. Montgomery Biography, Diary of an Innu Child* This interview took place while Barbara was doing the research for a film on the Religious Right.

RÉSUMÉ

Barbara Doran est une cinéaste terre-neuvienne, qui habite maintenant à Montréal. Elle était une des aïeules du mouvement de la femme à Terre-Neuve et a consacré la grande partie de son travail sur les questions de la femme. Parmi ses récents films on retrouve: *Women Kill, L.M. Montgomery Biography, Diary of an Innu child*. Cette entrevue a eu lieu pendant que Barbara faisait la recherche pour un film sur la Droite religieuse.

Marilyn

I'm an academic; you're a film maker, Barbara. When a film maker approaches a topic, like the Religious Right, what is the difference between your approach and mine? What are you looking for? What sparks you?

Barbara

Well, probably the same thing sparks both you and me--a curiosity about life and a desire to shine the light in dark corners in order to expose injustices around us. I was approached to do a film about the Religious Right and the inroads they are making in Canada. The subject interests me particularly because I don't think we take them as seriously as we should. The truth is that the Religious Right continues to have a growing influence on political thinking in the United States, and that influence is spreading slowly but surely into Canada.

I undertake all documentary films pretty much in the same way. I begin to research the subject through newspaper and television coverage, through magazines and books--essentially the same way you would approach a subject. Once I identify the key areas I want to look at, then I set out to meet the people who can bring those issues to life in the film.

I have to find characters who are going to bring that story alive. I need to get access to those people. I need to know if they will come across on camera; I need to find out if they will even agree to be part of the process. I guess that's the biggest difference in how you as an academic and I as a filmmaker approach a subject. The filmmaker has to engage with people in a direct rather than an observational way.

Marilyn

What got you going on this particular subject?

Barbara

I was in Pakistan making a film for the CBC, a two-hour special on women around the world to be shown the week of the Women's World Conference in Beijing. I made the segments on Pakistan and Guatemala. In Pakistan I did a piece on Asma Janhanjir, who is a lawyer and a human rights activist.

There was a fatwah declared against this woman because she had defended a twelve year old boy who was accused of blasphemy. Her law partner who was working with her on the case was assassinated in the street. Asma continued the case

alone. The court found the boy guilty and sentenced him to death. Under constant threats to her life, Asma appealed the case and finally won. The boy went into hiding and the religious extremists, angered by the court's decision and Asma's role in the outcome, kept up the threats and intimidation against her and her family.

Marilyn

So, she saved the lad's life?

Barbara

She saved the lad's life. He, of course, is still in hiding. She's had two terrifying attempts made on her life and will face her would-be assassins in court this November. When I went to Pakistan to begin research on this film I was familiar with the position of women in Islamic countries, but until I experienced the repression first hand, it had not really hit me. Usually when I go into a country to make a film, I spend time just familiarizing myself with the area. Apart from interviewing people for the film I like to spend time in the markets, the restaurants, the bars--essentially getting the feel of the place; getting to know the people, their culture, their politics. I arrived in Islamabad, checked into a hotel and then went out and walked into a restaurant. I was the only woman in this popular restaurant. When I walked in, a hush fell over the place. I was dressed in a shalwa chemise --I was completely covered. The reaction from the men to my presence was one of disgust. I felt as if I was polluting their space. I sat over in the corner and tried to fade into the wallpaper and eat my dinner under the weight of their stares. It struck me then that I could not approach making this film the way I had done with other work. I stopped going to restaurants and ate in my room. I didn't walk around the streets alone. So that whole part of sharing the life of a community before you start to represent it in a film was blocked for me. When the crew arrived and we started going out to interview people, the cameraman had to present himself as the director, because I would walk up to people (men) and start talking to them and they would just look beyond me to address the man in the group. It was the same when I put out my hand to shake hands, and the hand would be

withdrawn. Of course, I was aware of these religious/cultural norms before, so I wasn't really surprised--and I understand where it's coming from, but when it actually happens, you do internalize it and it really started to affect me. It affected my body language, it affected the way I walked down the street, it affected the way I looked at people, it affected the way I saw myself.

When we finished the film, came back home and had time to reflect on those days in Pakistan, I found the whole experience troubled me deeply because I knew that if I could so rapidly lose a sense of my place in the world, what must it be like for the women who are living there? While I was still reeling from the experience of that shoot I saw the Pope and the head of the Islamic coming together over one issue--birth control. And I thought if those two powerful forces can come together around that, we, as women are in serious trouble. So that led me into thinking--are there any parallels in the Religious Right?

Marilyn

The religious right in North America?

Barbara

In North America and the importation of the religious right from the United States into Canada.

Marilyn

So, how did you pick up the trail in Canada?

Barbara

I started by looking at the centre of the Religious Right in the United States, which is the Christian Coalition. It was around the time, last year, when all the Nominating Conventions were going on. The Christian Coalition was backing their candidates and looking at their positions, particularly with regard to women. Abortion especially was the hot button issue --like the bargain leader in the supermarket--the special that draws people in, and once you get drawn in on the abortion issue, you find you are voting against school lunch programs in inner city America. The Christian Coalition is made up of several member groups--and though the names of the

organisations differ, their platforms are strikingly similar.

My first real exposure to Religious Right on this side of the water was during the Human Life International Conference in Montreal in 1995. The conference agenda dealt primarily with the issue of abortion but the Conference participants were confronted by protestors who called them on other issues like their racist and homophobic sentiments. The conference participants were given workshops on 'sidewalk counselling'. Anti-abortion volunteers wait outside an abortion clinic and when a woman approaches they launch into their 'counselling'. They have also developed the 'block and tackle' technique of chaining cars parked outside abortion clinics. Abortion clinics have also been the target of fire bombings and one clinic doctor in Vancouver was shot.

The Christian Coalition are united primarily around the family, and within that, abortion and birth control. The definition of the family is a man, a woman and children, with the man the undisputed head of the family. The Reform Party, although not officially part of the Canadian Christian Coalition, have adopted a similar political philosophy as their American counterparts. Certainly they share a similar position on the family, as we saw recently in the debate around same sex marriage, and, for that matter caning.

Marilyn

Pro caning in schools?

Barbara

Yes. You saw that with Preston Manning and the Reform Party. That is part and parcel of the anti-government intervention, for example, their opposition to social workers who can come into your home and take your child away if they suspect a child is being physically or sexually abused. They see that as 'Big Brother'.

Marilyn

You also talk about organizations which are trying to restructure men, trying to turn men back into what they want them to be. How does that work?

Barbara

Part of the agenda of the Religious Right and what they are selling is fear, and the fear is that families are falling apart and because families have fallen apart, therefore society has fallen apart and we are all doomed. The Religious Right takes the position that one of the reasons that families have fallen apart is that women are out there working. They make an interesting link between the amount of money you spend in taxes and women working--what they sell to the average American is that what you are spending on taxes is only what your wife is bringing in. So, if you elect us, then we will bring the taxes down which means the missus can stay home and look after the children and society is going to be fine. They feel that the structure of the family is threatened because women have sought for and, in some respects, have gained some kind of equality on a social level and sometimes within the family--although not a whole lot. That's a real threat. So men are being encouraged to take back the control of the family.

Marilyn

One person has to be in charge of the family?

Barbara

One person in the same way that God is the head of the church, so the man is the head of the family. What they tell the men is that the reason women have taken control is that you have neglected your role in the family because you have spent too much time at work, and you've spent too much time on the golf course, and you've spent too much time with your buddies. So, on the surface of it, it looks like a very positive, progressive thing.

Marilyn

As happened during the Million Man march?

Barbara

Yes. But, what bothers me is two things, one is the exclusion of women. If it is about building strong families, then why aren't women part of the process? And frankly when I hear the word 'control' being thrown around I get very nervous. We all recognise that as a regressive move for women and children in

a family.

Marilyn

When such ideas come to Canada, where do they have their appeal--in terms of class or particular regions of the country?

Barbara

Well, it is mainly a white, working class, lower middle class phenomena, with the strongest presence in the West. There were already strong roots for right wing politics out West, certainly in the roots of the SOCREDs. I think that the border between western Canada and western United States is less well defined than it is in other parts of this country. There has always been a lot of cultural crossover and very fertile ground for shared political vision of the right persuasion. So it was no surprise that the first Canadian Christian Coalition came to life in British Columbia and brought together groups like Focus on the Family, the Christian Heritage Party, and Bill Vander Zalm. The Canadian Christian Coalition focus on the same issues as the Americans. Abortion and birth control are usually at the top of the agenda. Their battle cry is the family. They want to reduce taxes through cutting social programs.

A lot of people who consider themselves part of the Religious Right think that we are all going to hell in a hand basket because the country is in debt --mainly because of welfare moms, and welfare bums, and Medicare, and unemployment insurance, and old age security and all the things that we really can't afford. Those kinds of people would go down to the States during the Christian Coalition's Road to Victory every year, and there they would get training, as they see it, as 'warriors'. You have to realise that the Christian Coalition is highly organized, very sophisticated and it's organized on a grass roots level. It is not organized from the top down where you have lot of expensive overheads, where you have a cumbersome infrastructure. It is done in little tiny towns with fax machines and the Internet and seven or eight people who will get together and blitz. A politician who says something about any social issue, whether it's Washington, or whether it's the mayor of New York, or whether it's our own prime minister,

can get 100 to 200,000 faxes in a couple of hours. That's a pretty powerful voice and that voice is on a grass roots level.

Marilyn

What kind of numbers are we talking about in Canada?

Barbara

Well, let's take a look at the States. For years we dismissed the Religious Right and the right wing politics in the States. We underestimated their political sophistication and their political appeal. And now the Christian Coalition claims that it is running the Republican Party. Numbers? In Canada it is difficult to say, but certainly their voice is getting stronger; their appeal is growing. I think the rise of the Reform Party is indicative of that.

Marilyn

You see the Reform Party as part of this? As an aspect of the Religious Right?

Barbara

The Religious Right in Canada, I would say, would view the Reform Party as being liberal. And, of course, the effect that has is that anybody, on the left or liberal, has to move closer to the centre to counteract it.

Marilyn

Would you see the Religious Right as having influenced the Reform Party significantly?

Barbara

I think that the roots of the Reform Party are based in the Christian right. I don't know if the Religious Right influenced the Reform Party or if the Reform Party had it to begin with.

Marilyn

That's what I'm looking for. Is there any distinctive Canadian version of the Religious Right or is it just part of the flood up from the States? Are Canadians taking hold of this kind of stuff and changing it and making it more Canadian in ways that we should be

particularly aware of? After all we have a very different political system; a very different culture.

Barbara

Yes, I know, but ten years ago, who would have thought we would elect a Mike Harris to the Ontario legislature? Who would have thought we would have been talking about the real possibility of losing Medicare? and about welfare moms being the root cause of all our social ills? It's because you have the presence of the Reform Party and you have the support, certainly in western Canada, but more and more moving east. And once you have the support for that kind of thinking, you know that you can take those social programs away and you won't get the same kind of protest. I mean, I was delighted when I saw the people in Toronto get out and stand up to Mike Harris. But, for the most part, the left has paid very little attention to what is going on.

Marilyn

Can you put your finger on what the political consequence of these kinds of movements is?

Barbara

Well, I guess the first thing I would put my finger on would be the consequences, the ramifications for women and any kind of advances that we've made as women. In any of the groups that I looked at within the Religious Right, whether they were Canadian or American, there was a clear line, their position on women, their role in keeping the family together with the man at the head, and therefore, society together. The second thing, I think, is the kind of mean spiritedness towards social programs, essentially towards anything that does not represent big business and economic Darwinism.

Marilyn

We've spent most of the time talking about what's happening in Canada, but you started off by talking about the situation under a fundamentalist Islamic regime in Pakistan. What do you see as the connection between your experience in Pakistan and your experience with these groups across Canada?

Barbara

Again, I would say that it's primarily the position of women, and the kind of mindless following, unquestioning loyalty to the leadership of a movement, or a religion. There is a sort of blind faith that our leaders can control our destiny, can pull us through the debt crisis, the so-called rising crime rates, the breakdown of the family, all our social ills. All we have to do is have faith in their leadership. What they're selling, in fact, is fear. And people are buying into the package because they want the quick fix. They want to believe that getting women back in the kitchen and getting government out of social programs and boardrooms will cure all our ills. When I think about what is going on in Afghanistan at this very moment, I make a chilling connection between that repression and the real agenda of the Religious Right in this country. One day the women in Afghanistan woke up and were told they were not permitted to work any more; could not go to school or to university!

Marilyn

Like in *The Handmaid's Tale*!

Barbara

Exactly. I think that the position of women in any given society or movement, such as the Religious Right movement, is a good indicator of how healthy and balanced that movement or that religion is, and both the Islamic fundamentalists, our own Christian fundamentalists and our own Religious Rights, are all very scary when it comes to women.

Marilyn

How would you sum up your thinking at this point?

Barbara

Probably the main question that has to be asked is 'why are people flocking?' and I use the word advisedly, why are they flocking to the religious right? Why are we getting this backlash? It's not as if the gains made by the women's movement or the left in the last twenty to thirty years has been so great that it has required a backlash to get the balance back. There's something else. There's something else

drawing people in and I don't know what that is.

Marilyn

Do you have a handle on anything it might be?

Barbara

I think that television plays a big role in getting people whipped up into a state of hysteria whether that is over aliens who show up in Colorado, or the national debt. People are very uncertain about whether or not they are going to be able to hold onto their jobs. There's a perceived rise in crime rate, although there is no evidence, in fact, there is evidence is of the contrary. But, you can't tell that to Preston Manning, nor can you tell it to Bob Dole. There's fear of a kind of moral looseness, a lack of moral direction, that people perhaps used to get from families, from church, from community, whatever. There have been a lot of challenges to traditional beliefs. People are looking for a direction and they want to take an easy route. And it's a lot more difficult to sit down and ask yourself those questions: a lot easier to go to church on a Sunday morning, or go to a stadium event, and have somebody get up there and tell you the answers. 'We know what's wrong with this society, and if you believe in God, and if you build up a strong family, then that is going to result in everything being OK, and somehow you are going to manage keep your job, you are going to manage, if we can get the government out of your face, to get rid of the national debt'. And people are buying into it because they are afraid.

Marilyn

Well, I guess something that really concerns me is the notion that we seem to be turning into the worst kind of American. You keep saying that what is in Canada now is what is happening in the States. I thought we were a bit more 'distinct' than that.

Barbara

Well, I don't know. If you look here in Newfoundland for example. You think that because people have strong cultural roots, they are not easily swayed or sucked in, not a gullible group of people, partially because of our isolation and the way we've had to

survive. But then you look at the Pentecostals and the Fundamentalists, they have drawn a lot of followers by offering simple solutions to complex problems. We will probably be less dramatic in our expression, because Canadians are more low key in their expression of whatever the fervour is, but, I think the fear is the same and fear is what the Christian right is selling.

Marilyn

Well, let's not end on a totally gloomy note. What do we do about it?

Barbara

Naming it helps. I also think that the left should come to its senses and wake up. First of all realize what a real threat this move to the right is. The left has been splintered into small particles focused on single issues and we've stopped talking to one another. While those on the left have been busy explaining to each other and anyone else who will listen how different one group is from another and why one group couldn't possibly understand or represent the other group, the Religious Right have been putting their differences behind them to unite towards a common cause--a right wing political agenda. We will need to become much more politically sophisticated. We need to unite on issues that affect all of those interested in pushing back the forces of political, social and cultural regression. Ask yourself when was the last time that the Prime Minister got 200,000 faxes from the left wing? When was the last time we took to the streets in a demonstration?

Marilyn

Luckily, Mike Harris seems to have pushed people into expressing some resistance.

Barbara

But, it took Mike Harris to do that. In the meantime, all these other things are happening--very quietly and systematically, and very highly organized and with very sophisticated methods of organization, and community organization, and national and international organization. All this is happening while the left is sitting back in its armchair snickering

because they don't really believe this is a threat.

Marilyn

What can we do to convince people?

Barbara

I think we need to continue to shine the light into dark corners, to name what's going on and most importantly to unite as a political community. I remember the heady days of the women's movement when we took on political issues with passion and belief that we could affect the political reality of our lives and the lives of others. There is a sense now that we cannot effect change. So we sit back and watch the systematic dismantling of our national broadcaster and the National Film Board. We watch the obscene profits made by the banks and say nothing. We hold our breath hoping that Medicare and other social programs will not be dismantled. We should instead unite in one strong political voice, in the same way that the Religious Right has. They've made a difference in the political thinking in this country, maybe we can get our voice back as well.