

# A RADICAL FEMINIST'S NEW YEAR'S WISH FOR 2085



Credit: Police Gazette

## Bonnie Kreps

*L'auteure imagine le futur, dans un siècle, et prévoit une époque où la lutte pour l'égalité entre les sexes n'est plus nécessaire parce que les hommes auront pris conscience que la "lutte entre les sexes" était une manifestation de la pauvreté spirituelle de leur sexe. Ils auront à ce moment-là réinventé le masculin, comme les femmes réinventent aujourd'hui le féminin.*

I spend Christmas 1985 with my daughter. Someone has sent her a card that wishes us all a future of peace and freedom and equality for people. Following this feminist scent, I turn over the card. Sure enough, it is from NOW – founded in 1966, it says, to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of society. As so often before in the nearly twenty years I have been a feminist, I note

that this aim is not what I've been fighting for. I see that, though many things have changed for me in that time, I am still a radical feminist.

To me, the real aim of feminism is not equality; it is the abolition of the false division of humanity on the basis of sex. This division into masculine and feminine, and the sex roles built on it, have turned humanity against itself and poisoned our very lives. The trouble with the fight for equality is that, if it is not seen in the context of the need to abolish sex-role thinking, we are liable to end up in just another power struggle (the kind in which we get to have "Playgirl" as well as "Playboy" magazines). We do not want to integrate women into the mainstream. What we need is not to wrest power from men in order to give it to women in the name of equality: we need entirely new concepts about ways of being in the world. This is primarily a spiritual quest, not a political battle.

I applaud the fight for equality as a fight for justice, but it is a fight that ultimately will not help us. I think we are seeing this truth emerge already: a case of operation successful, but the patient remains as sick as before. We are losing sight of our roots – which, to my mind, are metaphysical.

Feminism is radical precisely BECAUSE it is metaphysical. It questions a perception as basic as "I" distinct from "not I," and that distinction is "masculine" as distinct from "feminine" (granting the inescapable fact that male is distinct from female). In short, feminism is metaphysical because it deals with the nature of being as we perceive it.

If we get locked into the "battle of the sexes" towards which the fight for equality propels us, feminism will lose its greatest opportunity: to challenge our

culture's prevailing model of reality. This great challenge feminism (our most profound social movement) shares with physics (our most respected science) and parapsychology (our least respected science). Each is radical, because each offers us a method by which we can question our implicit assumptions and thereby our inadequate and self-reinforcing view of reality. Feminism challenges our fundamental ways of being, modern physics our ideas of how the physical universe works, and parapsychology our ideas of how our minds work. They focus our eyes on the mental shackles that now bind us.

For sex-role stereotyping is, above all, the method by which we put ourselves in prison. It sets up a society which is unjust in that it gives men most of its power and privileges. That's bad enough. Worse: its bestowed male privilege prevents men from seeing that THEY have anything to

be liberated from, and the fight for equality will not help men cure this myopia. This is a spiritual calamity, especially in view of the fact that rampant masculinity, our predominant value system, now threatens the survival of our planet. Worst of all, because most profound of all: this method is really terribly effective in producing what I call mental fascism; that is, in training our minds to accept set ways of thinking. Mind sets. Because if you've trained from infancy to think (without really thinking about it) that men behave one way and women another (and the fight for equality never really gets at the root of this training), then you are well-prepared also to accept any number of other sets of implicit assumptions. Like mind sets about how "normal" people behave, how "sane" people think and feel, how nature works, and even what reality is like. The medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan saw. Thus, with

sex-role stereotyping we get a world that not only discriminates against women; we get one that teaches us all to be fundamentally rigid beings in a universe that is characterized above all (as physics and parapsychology are demonstrating) by flux and mutability.

And so this radical New Year's wish for 2085 is that there will be no need at all for the fight for equality, because men will long since have realized that the "battle of the sexes" primarily is an indication of their sex's spiritual poverty. Because they will have reinvented manhood, as women now are reinventing womanhood.

*Writer and filmmaker Bonnie Kreps is one of the founders of radical feminism in Canada. Her film "This Borrowed Land" is currently being released by the NFB's Studio D; meanwhile, she is writing Sparkledust: The Autonomous Woman's Guide to Romance, her first book. She lives in British Columbia.*

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LES EDITIONS COMMUNIQUELLES



## IN CELEBRATION OF CANADIAN WOMEN

Edited by  
Greta Hofmann Nemiroff

Call for submissions of poetry and short stories by and about Canadian women! For a thematically organized anthology edited by Greta Nemiroff, to be published early in 1986 by Fitzhenry and Whiteside of Toronto. The themes are: Growing up Female; The Body and Sexuality; Education; Romantic Love; Women and Men; Women and Women; Women and Work; Women in the Family; Mothers; Aging; Women's Transcendence: Art and Spirituality; and Women-Power. Deadline for submissions is 1 October 1985. For further information, please contact Greta Nemiroff, The New School, Dawson College, 485 McGill Street, Montreal, Quebec. H2Y 2H4.

# THE WEEK-END

*A Story by Mona Elaine Adilman*

Bebbs awoke to a Holiday Inn dawn, pink slashes of sky shafting the hazy parking lot. Open valises on the dresser and endtable yawned in the stale air. The wallpaper around the bathroom door had undergone two or three fadings, and curled back from the plaster like a claw. Even the light fixture looked out of place, with a spent bulb blackened and moldy.

Bebbs drew a quiet breath, thankful her body was free for a time from her husband's morose assaults of passion. The night before his hostility and anger seemed to flow through her like a lightning rod, transfixing her to a thousand barbed memories in the listing bed. Thirty years of contention festered like a herpes simplex cold sore bursting through the most casual conversation. In their married existence intimacy was synonymous with invasion, touching, with travesty.

She remembered last night's concert in the Tanglewood music shed, the usually formal musicians in shirt sleeves, trying to escape the ninety degree heat. Thousands of music lovers dotted the lawns with blankets, picnic baskets and candles, creating a magic orbit of the imagination. Everything fused into a familiar yet surrealistic landscape: the music and the festive, multitudinous melting pot of people.

Only her husband's unrest jarred the rapture of the evening. He rattled the program, twisted in his seat like a rebuked child. The Brahms symphony thundered over his bald head like a disoriented mistral, and the tumult of the finale which swept the audience to its feet with bravos brought an audible sigh of relief to his lips. He stumbled to the exit, crushed the program, and stepped on it with crass finality. Now for the good things in life – a Howard Johnson double scoop of butterscotch ice cream.

All around them in the restaurant people were discussing the concert, the conductor's sensitive interpretation of the score, the emphasis on *accelerando* for musical color. Her husband put a fat hand on her knee, slurping the ice cream. He was in his element. The creamy concoction vanished in seconds, and there was nothing more to say except a burped imprecation – "Bitch!" – when the waitress was slow in bringing the cheque. Reading lenses bridging his nose, he added up the bill a number of times. Bebbbs was relieved that he did not use his American Express card. This involved the complicated ritual of tearing up the carbon into minute fragments and crumbling it into the ash tray. He had been told that the signature can be duplicated, so every time he used his credit card, immense amounts of energy went into pulverising the carbon paper. He unnotched his belt, freeing a generous fold of fat, and put a heavy arm over her shoulder. "Come, Mama," he said. "Bedtime."

The maid had left the air-conditioning on and the motel room was freezing.

"Tomorrow," Bebbbs pleaded, "let's do it tomorrow." She touched his cheek. "You know how sexy you are in the morning."

A stream of abuse erupted, but Brahms had flattened the magnitude of his desire to a monotone. "This is costing, don't forget," he muttered to his wife, and turned his head to the wall. Almost immediately he exploded in snores, his jumping-jack legs jerking in spasm. She thanked God he was dead to the world and out of hers for the time being.

In the middle of the night his legs began to execute the pugnacious jabs of a Japanese wrestler. Bebbbs grimaced. She looked at

the broad expanse of silk pyjama with distaste. You phony, she thought.

Her husband was a doctor who hated people. All the spleen of his hate pumped out in those flogging legs. In his office he sat like a buddha for interminable hours listening to complaints. He wore the set smile of a rabbi whose beaming countenance belied his cynical thoughts. He had learned, like a politician on an election bandwagon, to roll along with the Great Cover-up. He bussed old ladies with the panache of a politician kissing babies. He donned and doffed his bedside manner with the rapidity of a sailor using prophylaxis in a foreign port. It served his purpose in and out of consultations, protected his image.

But at night the truth exploded in his legs. They jerked like living creatures under the knife of a slaughterer. Violent and painful spasms rocked the bed. Bebbbs was frightened. She saw a stranger behind a dark glass that threatened to crack at any moment.

She once tried tapping her husband on the shoulder. He awakened in a rage and hit her a brutal blow across the face. Since that time she endured his jumping-jack antics in silent martyrdom.

Bebbs popped her sleeping pill and waited for the blessed spacing-out, the slackening of nerve and sinew taut with tension. It took a long time before the knot under her ribs loosened, and the walls of the room lost their malevolent character. Other women waited for their knight on a white charger; she waited nightly for Morpheus on blue wings to transport her to halcyon pastures. Sleep was a bonus and a release.

Her dreams dissolved from the Tanglewood music shed to the McGill Faculty of Music during the thirties. She entered a darkened hallway, high-domed in sombre hue, oak doors leading to mysterious chambers. The sound of various musical instruments emanated from those closed doors, and she held her music case tightly against her slim body. She found her way through what had been a musty butler's pantry to a narrow flight of stairs. Her heart pounded with trepidation and the knowledge that she was held captive in a castle of musical ghosts.

Perhaps Beethoven was hiding behind the bust on the marble pedestal, or Debussy might pop out of the varnished woodwork. Schubert was sitting on the frame of a large painting; Handel leaned out of a faded print and tweaked her ear as she bent down to straighten her knee socks. The austere figure of Bach presided over the friezes adorning the ceiling. Her thoughts were sonorous with organ music. She could hear generations of students performing excruciating Czerny finger exercises.

She climbed high, with bated breath, and thought of Rapunzel, the fairy-tale damsel who let down her long, golden hair so a handsome prince could climb up to the tower and rescue her. She glanced at her watch with its black, imitation leather strap. Three fifteen . . . Mrs. Winifred Harris at Herbert Symonds School must be just beginning to conjugate the irregular French verbs. Mrs. Harris was proud that one of her pupils was attending the distinguished McGill Faculty of Music.

The stairway ended in a gloomy hallway fronting on a heavy door. Surely the portal to heaven or hell could not be as forbidding. She knocked fearfully, and a gruff voice from the ominous depths said "Come in."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hungerford," she lisped, to the elegant gentlemen attired in a wine velvet smoking jacket. He nodded with a langorous inclination of his head. A kettle of boiling water whistled vigorously, shaking the hospitality of the fragile, carved table on which it reposed.

He indicated the piano bench; she sat down and began her lesson. "Count to thirty on each note," he admonished, closing his eyes. He dozed throughout the entire half-hour lesson. Her fingers itched, ached to dance over the piano keys, but she obediently counted to thirty on every single note of the scale. Her heart dropped into the cracks between the ebony and ivory keys. She longed to escape, and gazed out the attic window at the trees on the McGill campus. Were they prisoners, too, she wondered, and kept counting . . . twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. Now for the Debussy. She turned to ask Mr. Hungerford if she could play the piece she had memorized, but he was nodding, fast asleep, a cup of strong tea tilted in his lap.

A legend in his time—but within the framework of his discipline she was compressed, bored, disenchanted, every ounce of her creativity desiccated by his lack of communication, his coldness. Oh, Rapunzel, she thought, you must have been trying to escape from the tyranny of a music teacher who was past all love for teaching or children.

The next morning brought the Holiday Inn decor sharply and agonizingly into focus. The Tanglewood music shed and Mr. Hungerford's study merged into a haze of memory. Bebbs felt an amorous nudge, and her husband proceeded, without a word, to shift his body over hers. He squeezed her breasts, and his head dropped to her nipples. She let herself go limp, remembering previous episodes of tenderness before their marriage. But this time his lips hurt, and her breasts became sore and tender. He

spent a long time fondling her, and she felt guilty that her only sensation was pain. She pleaded with him to stop, and the ensuing sex act seemed to tear her inside out. She tried to move rhythmically, but his bulk pressed her deeper into the sagging mattress.

"Move, move, damn you," he gasped. She struggled for air and sanity.

Finally, it was over. He lumbered to the bathroom and urinated. Bebbs stood in the doorway. He went over to the sink and put his thick fingers into his mouth. While Bebbs stared, incredulous, he withdrew the plastic guard he wore every night to keep from grinding his teeth.

She looked down at her inflamed nipples, and understood. Self-protective, he had called her, neurotic, frigid, slut, a hundred names from a hundred grisly experiences. Her past was not related to Brahms and Beethoven, but to the Marquis de Sade. Waves of helplessness eddied from the nub of her fear. She stared into the mirror, and saw endless years rolling by like a speeded-up film without focus, without meaning, juxtaposed on the relentless prison of habit.

What was the word . . . sado-masochistic?

The redness around her nipples was fading. Bebbs looked at her watch, which had a black, imitation leather strap.

"Hon," she called, "it's almost noon. Soon be time to check out." She picked up a comb and drew her gleaming Rapunzel hair around her throat.

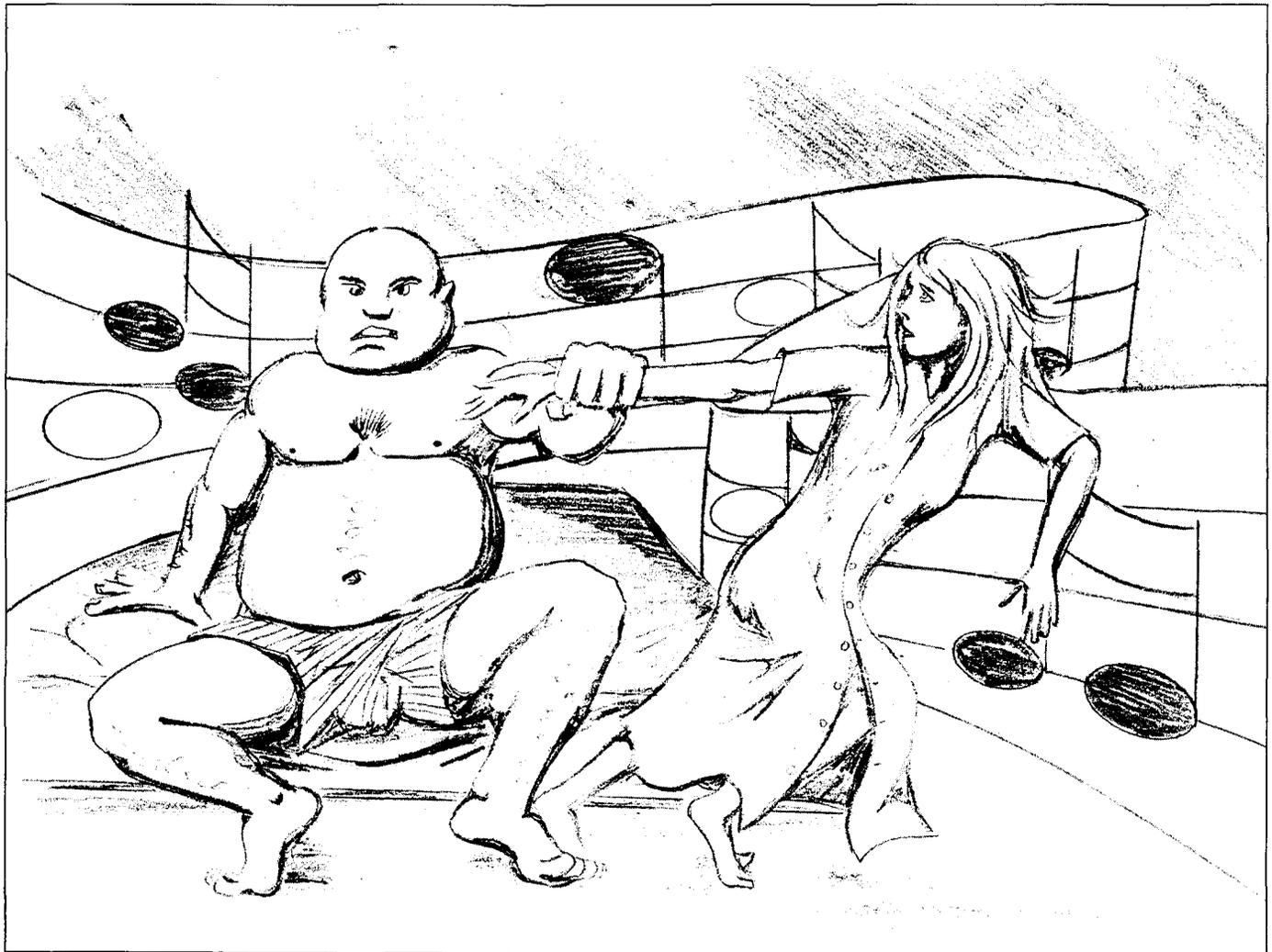


Illustration: Tony Venditello

# CHRONIQUE

## CINÉMA

### QUELQUES FILMS DE FEMMES . . .

*Simone Suchet*

Le 13<sup>e</sup> Festival du Nouveau Cinéma et du Vidéo qui a eu lieu à Montréal du 18 au 28 octobre 1984 nous a permis de visionner quelques films réalisés par des femmes cinéastes; certains films étaient de réalisatrices fort connues telles Chantal Ackerman ou Marguerite Duras, d'autres au contraire étaient signés par de nouvelles-venues à la réalisation, telle Francesca Comencini dont *Pianoforte* est le premier film.

Films de femmes? Films féminins? Films féministes-militants? Quelle appellation convient le mieux à ces divers films signés par des cinéastes appartenant à ce sexe que certains voudraient maintenir faible et que d'autres ont appelé deuxième pour l'amener sur la voie de la libération? Que représentent ces films des aspirations des femmes? Qu'expriment-ils de leurs luttes, de leurs victoires, et peut-être aussi de leurs désillusions?

Francesca Comencini est italienne, elle a tout juste 20 ans et elle signe avec *Pianoforte* son premier film. *Pianoforte* raconte l'histoire de deux jeunes héroïnomanes Paolo et Maria qui voudraient se défaire de la drogue mais qui, ne pouvant assumer la réalité quotidienne de leur amour, n'y réussissent pas. En dépit de certaines maladresses (la partie à Ceylan tombe vite dans la carte postale), *Pianoforte* nous touche car Francesca Comencini sait éviter le sordide et de plus elle a le sens du détail visuel et l'art de faire passer une émotion par l'image sans discours inutile. Le personnage de Maria est aussi riche et complexe; à la fois faible et forte, elle sait aussi parfaitement ce qui lui est nécessaire et ne subordonne en rien son existence à celle de Paolo malgré l'amour très fort qu'elle lui porte, car elle sait que là est le prix qu'elle doit payer pour sa libération.

Si Francesca Comencini a su éviter excès et clichés, il n'en va pas de même de la réalisatrice allemande Ulrike

Ottinger qui, avec *The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press* (Quel titre!), présente en la personne de Madame Mabuse une sorte de "wonder woman" parfaitement abjecte et antipathique. Le film n'est qu'un ramassis de clichés, de fantasmes sexuels et autres totalement imités. Véritable diarrhée d'images, ce monument de prétention et d'ennui oscille entre le délire visuel mi-expressionniste mi-surréaliste. *Lucy* de Verena Rudolph se présente comme une enquête sur un personnage disparu, Lucy, la tante de la réalisatrice qui, en 1934, avait quitté son village natal bavarois pour s'exiler aux Etats-Unis. Le film se compose principalement d'entrevues avec des personnes ayant connu Lucy et de visites des lieux qu'elle a hantés. Le film ne dépasse jamais ce niveau premier de cueillette de témoignages et malgré quelques scènes délicieuses dédiées à la vie nocturne de New-York, le film lasse.

Autre film-enquête, *Sunset People* de la réalisatrice britannique Jana Bokova est un portrait des nombreux artistes qui "vivent" sur Sunset Boulevard, lieu mythique par excellence du show-biz américain. Malheureusement, Bokova n'a guère rencontré que des ratés qui, entrevue après entrevue, scène après scène, ne cessent de parler du succès qui doit arriver . . . demain. Seule la séquence finale qui sous l'esbrouffe laisse percer la détresse financière, morale et professionnelle de ces laissés-pour-compte est forte, mais Dieu . . . que le chemin a été long et fastidieux!

*Low Visibility* est le premier long métrage de la réalisatrice canadienne Patricia Gruben. Un jour, on retrouve sur une route de montagne un amnésique qui agite les bras vers le ciel tout en poussant des cris. Son refus ou son incapacité de répondre à quelque question que ce soit ne manque pas d'exciter la curiosité de tous: médecins, journalistes, policiers . . . qui élaborent rapidement diverses histoires concernant Mr. Bones, l'amné-

sique. Commence alors à se dessiner un portrait à multiples facettes et exprimant une diversité de points de vue. Ce que Patricia Gruben a voulu dire, c'est l'ambiguïté du jugement, la fragilité et l'extrême relativité d'une opinion élaborée sur de vagues impressions; malheureusement cette belle intention tourne court et son récit mal structuré devient très rapidement l'expression d'une difficulté à cerner le propos. Tourné à la manière d'un documentaire, le film ne cesse de lorgner du côté de la fiction et nous demeure à tout jamais fermé comme l'énigmatique Mr. Bones qui ne cesse de regarder d'un oeil vide l'écran de l'omniprésente télévision.

Marguerite Duras s'était associée à Jean Mascolo et à Jean-Marc Turine pour *Ernesto ou Les Enfants du Roi*, fable moderne ayant pour sujet l'école. Propos et réalisation ne réussissent pas à former un tout cohérent et le film avance péniblement. Cet échec est pourtant traversé d'un éclair de grâce, celui où la voix de Duras s'élève sur un gros plan d'Alex Bougouslavsky (Ernesto) alors que la lumière naturelle change imperceptiblement. Marguerite Duras écrivaine, dramaturge, metteuse en scène, voilà le sujet du très beau film de Michelle Porte *Savannah Bay, c'est toi*. La réalisatrice suit l'auteure (Duras) et ses deux comédiennes (Madeleine Renaud et Bulle Ogier) pendant les répétitions de "Savannah Bay", une pièce écrite par Duras pour Renaud. Le film fonctionne comme une pièce à trois personnages et analyse les rapports de type à la fois professionnel et affectif qui se nouent entre ces trois femmes. Les interventions de Duras éclairent la pièce et la mise en scène. La réalisation très sobre de Michelle Porte est à l'écoute de M. Duras et de ses deux comédiennes.

Le Festival nous a donné l'occasion de revoir *Un jour, Pina a demandé* de la réalisatrice belge Chantal Ackerman. Produit par et pour la télévision française, ce

film est un documentaire qui témoigne du travail de la chorégraphe ouest-allemande Pina Bausch. Tout en demeurant fidèle à elle-même (le film abonde en plans fixes de très longue durée), Chantal Ackerman a su s'effacer devant son sujet et nous révèle avec une infinie pudeur toute la force captivante de l'art de cette chorégraphe révolutionnaire. Autre "reprise": *Sonatine* de la québécoise Micheline Lanctôt. Depuis sa sortie au printemps dernier, le film a eu le temps d'aller faire un petit tour à la Mostra de Venise où il a recueilli le Lion d'Argent. Trophée fort justement mérité en dépit de certaines réserves (les miennes – un scénario mal structuré, des longueurs, des personnages trop cérébraux – car *Sonatine* témoigne d'une réelle sensibilité d'auteure et d'un indéniable sens de la mise en scène.

*For Love or Money* de Megan McMurchy et Jeni Thornley, deux réalisatrices australiennes, est un documentaire percutant qui a pour sujet le travail des femmes. Ce film très puissant compile de nombreuses images – pour la plupart inédites – provenant de plus de 200 films produits entre 1906 et 1983 en Australie et juxtapose à ces extraits des documents d'actualités, des lettres et des entrevues personnelles. Le film explore toutes les avenues du travail féminin et révèle tous les problèmes qui y sont liés. Non agressif, le film exprime néanmoins une position militante et trace un portrait troublant et souvent révoltant d'une situation inacceptable. Très beau travail !

Que peut-on conclure? On ne peut nier que le féminisme a bien changé, il a bien perdu de la violence et du radicalisme du militantisme des années '60. La volonté

de démontrer et de convaincre a également perdu de sa virulence. Les personnages et les situations thèses ont aussi disparu des écrans. Les problématiques se diversifient. En fait, il semblerait que certaines revendications fondamentales étant maintenant acquises, les femmes peuvent maintenant se laisser aller à leur propre sensibilité et explorer des problématiques différentes sans crainte de se faire dévorer. Ces films nous laissent espérer que la femme cinéaste a enfin conquis le droit de s'exprimer à part entière sans plus avoir à se confiner à des problèmes "de bonnes femmes." Ce n'est pas trop tôt, c'est amplement mérité, mais – la victoire est encore bien mince tant il est vrai que la production féminine au cinéma n'atteint pas encore les 10% de la production totale.

# CHRONIQUE

## ART

### LECTURE ET RENCONTRE: AGNÈS GUITARD, AUTEURE DE SCIENCE FICTION

Marie LaPalme Reyes et  
Viviane Racette

Agnès Guitard nous accueille dans son coin d'écriture près du fleuve à Lachine. Nous essayons entre l'utopie, l'anti-utopie, la science fiction, l'esprit des Cahiers de la Femme, les fauteuils, nos trois personnalités, d'établir un point de rencontre ou plutôt un cercle qui nous permettra de cerner avec prudence, par à coup *Les corps communicants*. Dès les premières paroles Agnès nous en donne une définition lapidaire: un cri de souffrance en 388 pages. Agnès depuis toujours écrit, se raconte des histoires, raconte des histoires à ses copines, ses poupées. Tout lui est prétexte à personnage: ses billes, ses boutons, ses poupées. Ses amies l'entraînent dans les sports, elles les entraînent dans ses histoires, elles les fait écrire, participer, lire. Et finalement ce roman.

La lecture de ce livre a été un envoûtement et j'ai peur d'y replonger tout de suite. Parlons d'Agnès encore un peu. Elle aime la musique du Moyen-Âge avec

ses approximations successives d'instruments et d'interprétations: parvenir à insuffler à ces manuscrits un deuxième souffle. L'aspect répétitif de cette musique l'enchanté. Un des personnages principaux de son roman *Les corps communicants* est un musicien: un luthiste virtuose. Après la musique du Moyen-Âge, ou avant, nous parlons de Marguerite Yourcenar. Concision, précision, petite phrase courte incisive au je lancinant. Nous parlons de la littérature latino-américaine, Alejo Carpentier, Varga Llosa. Et nous voice de retour au roman. Les héros d'Agnès sont surtout des hommes qui appartiennent en général à une élite. Des hommes imaginés par une femme sont peut-être des hommes différents: elle met à nu les émotions, les sentiments et les faiblesses de ses héros, ce qui leur confère quelque chose de féminin. Peut-être est-ce ici que se glisse l'utopie. Nous avons devant nous l'être humain sans maquillage. Il est homme ou ils sont des hommes mais ils pourraient tout aussi bien être des femmes. Ça n'a pas d'importance. Sous la souffrance, la



Agnès Guitard Credit: Marie La Palme Reyes

torture, que reste-t-il?

Nous amorçons la descente aux enfers. Deux hommes, Valenze et Joarès, à la suite d'une opération occulte, apprennent à se contrôler l'un l'autre. Valenze contrôle la volonté et les membres de l'autre d'une façon volontaire. Joarès

contrôle inconsciemment le subconscient de Valenze. Leur symbiose est destructrice parce qu'elle est incomplète, il y a une impossibilité de fusion entre ces deux êtres: l'un veut "rentrer" dans le corps de l'autre, et l'autre veut rentrer dans la tête de l'un.

C'est le déroulement soutenu d'action immobile. C'est aussi l'histoire d'une longue agonie sur fond de sado-masochisme. On imagine le lieu comme une salle de torture où l'imposeur se laisse aller à exiger du corps de l'autre, les pires contorsions et douleurs. Le masochisme nous apparaît dans toute sa vérité lorsqu'on apprend qu'en fait la victime contrôle le cerveau du bourreau. Le bourreau ne fait donc qu'exécuter les impulsions et les fantasmes de la victime.

Pendant toute la lecture nous ne pouvons nous empêcher de nous enfoncer avec les deux personnages dans un immense frisson. Nous assistons impuissants à la décomposition de deux êtres: elle est lente, pénible et vouée irrémédiablement à la mort. Il émane de cette

énergie destructrice une puissance qui nous garde sous tension jusqu'à la fin.

Quelques éclairs fulgurants sur les supplices de Joarès: retour à l'enfance, manipulations du corps et de l'esprit nous laissent entendre qu'il se complait dans la passivité. Serait-ce cette passivité féminine tellement décriée? Un malaise presque physique face à des gestes oubliés, anodins, comme prendre un enfant sous les aisselles; et j'ai mal dans mon corps, dans celui de mes enfants. Descriptions minutieuses de cauchemars semi-éveillés, d'engourdissement, de restes d'anesthésie, un long voyage souterrain. L'enfer, ce sont les neurones qui éclatent, la respiration qui s'anime indépendamment de la volonté, le sang qui chemine péniblement dans des méandres sans issue où nous nous tapissons, témoins à corps défendant.

Le terme technique employé par l'auteur pour cette prise de possession que Valenze fait subir à Joarès, c'est l'imposition. A son tour, l'auteur aussi nous fait subir cette imposition, car l'on ne peut

s'empêcher de continuer la lecture, de suivre et de précéder ce piétinement de mots, de petites phrases qui nous entraînent dans un tourbillon au fond d'un inconnu visqueux, végétal, non humain.

Et maintenant relisons ces quelques phrases de Danielle Fournier (Arcade No.8. pages 54-55):

*Si le modèle amoureux, et donc aussi le modèle d'écriture est d'introjecter l'objet, l'autre, le/la mâle ayant enfoui en lui/elle sa mère, le/la mâle se fait mâle-femme, prêt à cracher et à vomir ce que trop souvent il/elle ne peut supporter, le féminin, construit en adversaire, en Autre, une Loi, une Foi, envers qui le rapport deviendra non seulement impossible mais aussi duquel il y aura un vainqueur et un/le vaincu.*

Danielle Fournier nous parle ici d'un rapport à l'écriture. Ces méandres, ces souffrances c'est le cheminement de l'écriture et alors qui écrit qui? Qui s'écrit à travers chairs et sang? Valenze? Joarès? Agnès?

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# CHRONIQUE:

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## CINEMA

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### CELLULOID WOMEN: WHO IS IMITATING WHOM?

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#### *Claudia Clausius*

For centuries woman has been instructed to console herself with her biological heritage as the creator of life. This effectively ignores the fact that, in our culture's dominant creation myth, God is the first creator; woman, so the story goes, was fashioned from Adam's rib, and thus only *recreates*. She isn't so much a creator as she is a perpetuator. Most admirable characteristics have been associated with men: "She had manly courage." Not surprisingly, then, in their strivings to gain equality, some women have tried to recreate themselves in the image of man. Rather than forging uniquely female identities and personalities they perpetuate the male myth. Man strives to be God-like, such a woman to be man-like. Carole Corbeil put it very well: "the shallow values don't change, just the genitals do."

So entrenched is this system of values in the popular imagination that, when movies illustrate women going to absurd lengths to become male-like, the result does not so much travesty the actual male myth, as one would expect, as it succeeds in rendering its female victim ludicrous (even when it might originally have intended to demonstrate her determination and independence). The source of the problem is that the symbols are simply recycled, although the subject is now different. A new symbolic language must be developed before the necessary differentiation between male and female is effected.

A perfect example of the dislocation between "language" and subject is a recent film called *Wild Rose*. Here a woman miner is among those laid off during a temporary work shortage. During the interval her lover finds work on a fishing

boat. When they are recalled by the mining company, she rejects her lover's offer to work with him on the boat and returns to the discrimination and hardship underground. As Corbeil describes it, "The last shots of the movie show her by the log cabin she is building single-handedly. She canoes off into the sunset: a woman's just gotta do what she's gotta do." Even the title, *Wild Rose*, with its allusions to courtly love and Harlequin romance, evokes the feistiness of pouted lips, dishevelled hair and besmirched face.

Marcia Pally warns against films that the film industry is calling 'progressive,' but that are in reality conservative, often reactionary: "we can be seduced by the presence of complex, gritty 'truth.' As a film appears to tell it like it is, we come to trust it, to lower our skeptical guard and see it as a reflection of ourselves. Believing it, we're more apt to believe the 'message'

it peddles.”<sup>2</sup> Since the Wild Rose herself seems content with her new-found liberation, we do not ask whether or not this Walden-like freedom is the best she could do. The important thing is that she succeeded where many a man would have failed.

Recent popular cinema extends to its female characters a premeditated ‘freedom’ that ensures a carefully calculated series of implications and reactions. The women recreate themselves according to traditional social prescriptions (*Experience Preferred But Not Necessary*); or they move within a script and among characters that compromise their strength and spirit (*Educating Rita*); or they are set into the masculine world of danger and adventure in which their actions and behavior serve only to give substance to male incomparability (*Star Wars*, *The Temple of Doom*, and *Romancing the Stone*).

Interesting in relation to this “recreation” idea is the conspicuously large number of current neo-Pygmalian movies. *Experience Preferred But Not Necessary* offers a particularly insidious example. A teenage girl in jeans, sneakers and an old sweater, struggles with her backpack while getting on a bus taking her to a summer waitressing job in a small Scottish hotel. In front of our heroine, a feminine, well-dressed, perfectly made-up young woman is gallantly helped with her suitcase by an admiring young man. The girl in jeans rolls her eyes at his obsequious manners, and we groan inwardly as the two of them spend the entire trip laughing and flirting together.

The cast of characters with whom she works in the hotel dining-room and kitchen are typical movie stereotypes: well-meaning, uneducated, working-class, on the look-out for a man or trying to keep the one they have. In an effort to help our heroine snag her man, the other waitresses “do her over.” Her hair is teased into an absurdly large bouffant hairdo; she totters on unaccustomed high-heeled shoes, while looking uncomfortable and ungainly in an ill-fitting tight skirt and blouse. Her overly made-up face resembles a grotesque mask. In the end, she is a walking caricature of these woman’s tastes and ideas: nevertheless, she gets her lover.

In the meantime she has also attracted the attention of the hostess of the hotel – an elegant woman of superior accent whose expensive car and clothes testify to her relationship with the hotel manager. She too sees the diamond beneath the

rock. Luckily, this woman has style as well as good intentions – intentions that are validated by her own success. While the waitresses worry whether their boyfriends will ever marry them (one of them is even pregnant and contemplates suicide), she has a respectable job and a secure position. We listen with objective sympathy as the women in the kitchen fret over their love affairs; we watch with humorous compassion as they get ready for their dates, squeezing into clothes that are too tight for their fleshy bodies. The hostess, on the other hand, has the money to afford the best coiffeur and couturier in town. She and the girl drive off in her convertible sports car and have lunch in an intimate little café. This time the cocoon-to-butterfly transformation proves successful; the girl emerges as the beauty we’d always suspected – complete with frilly dress and carefully wind-swept hair.

The heroine’s options are thus restricted to two stereotypes which are predominantly based on social class. Armed with new confidence the girl climbs aboard the bus to go home. And this time it is she who elicits second glances and helpful hands. We last see her beside a handsome young man on the bus, laughing and enjoying her new-found “experience.” We rejoice in her happiness. Our education has been witnessing the girl’s ‘education,’ so that at the end of the film we applaud that which we laughed at in the beginning. We accept the implicit moral that in this world ‘experience’ is preferred.

In *Educating Rita* the heroine acquires an education that apparently takes her full circle. Rita, a hairdresser played by Julie Walters, gains admission to university in order to further her education. Her tutor, an English professor named Frank Bryant, played by Michael Caine, is at first irritated with her; but her naivety and enthusiasm soon disarm him. He begins to look to her to restore his mis-spent life. The esteem Rita evokes in the professor is essentially narcissistic. The prototypical Pygmalian story has not been updated.

The film balances precariously on its sets of stereotyped characters and incidents. Beside a wedding buffet a little boy sneaks a drink while a little girl stuffs herself with cake. In the pub Rita’s father and her husband Denny, with their heads together, join in singing an old song. Rita’s mother sits by crying silently and says quietly: “There must be a better song to sing.” Rita hides her birth-control pills



under a loose floor board so she can educate herself. During his remodelling of the house Denny finds Rita’s hiding place; the couple’s final fight occurs in, of all places, the kitchen, where Denny makes a bonfire of Rita’s Ibsen and Chekov books. While he tries to improve their living conditions she connives to limit them.

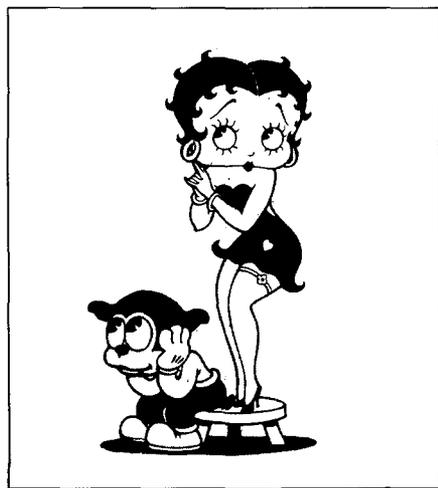
These scenes are intended to persuade the audience that the scriptwriter and director appreciate Rita’s difficulty, that they are keenly aware of the obstacles working-class women encounter when they attempt to better their lives. But to balance a film on juxtaposed clichés is neither to offer insight into the obvious nor to imply any resolution, however tenuous. Indeed, the factual exposition often falls short of objectivity by interpreting the facts for us and directing us to a predetermined diagnosis of the problem.

Both Rita’s mentors – her alcoholic tutor and her cultivated (if suicidal) room-mate Trish – ultimately serve her only as negative role models. More significantly, Rita herself, despite her infectious vivacity and quick intelligence, effects little change in either of her friends; she fails to temper their feelings of worthlessness. She refuses, though, to allow her determination to be undermined. This “carry-on-regardless” attitude simultaneously inflates and deflates her image as a strong woman because the film fails to elucidate any real recognition on Rita’s part. Trish’s suicide attempt and her tutor’s alcoholism alert her to the discontent and cynicism of

the class to which she aspires, but insufficiently to penetrate her basically naive idealism. Rita's muttered avowal to Frank at the end of the film that she knows her high grade in the course "doesn't mean anything" sounds more like a modest disclaimer than an acknowledgement of the complexity of life. Nor do we feel that she ever comes to see that education represents the *means* of understanding life: she carries her books – Shaw, Lawrence, and Blake – in her mind, but not in her heart. We never witness Rita applying her knowledge to practical reality.

Nevertheless, in the end we do feel that Rita's final test of strength lies in her rejection of her tutor's invitation to accompany him to Australia. Yet her refusal coincides with the audience's moment of greatest sympathy – with *him*. The true source of this scene's impact resides in our unconsciously evaluating his personal loneliness higher than her personal independence. In identifying so strongly with Frank, we take a small step away from Rita; although we never seriously considered the possibility of a different ending, our feelings at the end are rather more wistful than joyful.

Today's adventure genre suggests a second kind of neo-Pygmalianism. In *My Fair Lady* Henry Higgins moans "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" Movies like the *Star Wars* epic, *The Temple of Doom* and *Romancing the Stone* depict women who have accepted the "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" principle. Here again the woman must proceed through male self-regard, self-love, and distrust of women before she can put herself forward without fear of rejection. The traditional values of courtly love are hereby inverted: now the woman must prove herself worthy of the man's attention. Courtship becomes a rite of passage through which



the woman's mettle is tested. The common ground upon which the sexes meet is not the magnetism of attracting opposites, but the comfort (for him) of the familiar and unthreatening. Although the woman reminds him of himself, she is never allowed to outgrow the resemblance sufficiently to undermine his superiority. No matter how feisty she is, the struggle against evil remains essentially his territory.

By its very nature the typical adventure story usually speeds along its story line at a precipitous pace. The main characters, who involve themselves in destroying the enemy and discovering the gold, are too occupied to indulge in soul-searching. The dramatic tension depends on plot rather than character development. When the man and woman are paired up as "Buddies" fighting a common foe, even the most basic potential sexual tension dissipates since she functions as a surrogate male.

Precisely this neutral 'transvestism' successfully suspends their sexual awareness of one another. The ambiguous enticement of Dietrich's husky voice, her trousers and trenchcoat, and the unapproachable aloofness of Garbo's femininity, were both essentially sexual in nature. Perhaps this "masculine" aspect made their allure more challenging than the predictable "sexiness" of the stock pin-up girl or sex-pot. Couples like Hepburn and Tracy, Bacall and Bogart, or Bergman and Bogart, create their own electricity because they sense the powerful sexual attraction they exert on one another. They may suspect it or circumvent it; but they do feel it and their eroticism charges us as well. The basically adolescent male characters who populate the adventure tales feel only the peevish irritation of a young boy for his baby sister or, worse yet, the neighbourhood girls who get in his way and spoil his fun. Princess Lea and Han Solo of *Star Wars* fame behave in a ludicrously pubescent fashion while trying to conceal their true feelings. Unlike the couples of earlier film history, where the central tension was generated at least as much by their conflicting faults and strengths as by their mutual admiration, today's couples adopt an adolescent plan of attack dictated solely by the dramatic exigencies of the script. In films like *Star Wars* and *The Temple of Doom* the personal animosity between hero and heroine evaporates the moment the enemy is vanquished. Far from providing a backdrop for their growth and change,

today's films merely use the characters in the service of plot. Their story becomes subordinate to adventure.

The critics were unanimously disappointed in *The Temple of Doom* (the sequel to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*). The film fails to convey its parodistic intent, a fault that surely must be laid at the feet of its depiction of the central male character. Harrison Ford's Han Solo, whose ironic self-awareness endows him with both humanity and humour in *Star Wars*, plays Dr. Jones, savior of the starving Indian village, with a studied seriousness – thereby passing squarely onto the shoulders of the traditionally subordinate woman the entire burden of what parody there is. Exempting the hero/adventurer from the general caricature leaves his heroic stature intact.

The famous bug scene in the dungeons below the temple demonstrates how the film's parody functions on a selective basis. Dr. Jones and Short Round are just about to be perforated by a descending ceiling of giant spears; Willy, standing on the other side of the wall, must put her hand into a crevice full of spider webs and giant insects in order to activate the mechanism that will stop the ceiling's descent. Tense moments pass as Willy seems too squeamish to insert her hand into the bug-infested opening. In establishing a relation between Willy and the empathetic audience on the parodic level, the film saves the hero and his mission from derision; the myth of man as hero and savior, aloof and separate, remains intact.

In accordance with tradition Dr. Jones gets the girl at the end – the same girl he held at knifepoint as a hostage in the beginning of the film. Willy's final attempt at self-assertion, a classic case of the lady protesting too much, plays a crucial role in the romantic climax of the story in which the man demonstrates his superior knowledge of what is good for both of them. Dr. Jones literally whips Willy into shape as she submits, smilingly, amidst a bevy of grateful children.

*Romancing the Stone* is a brilliant mélange of traditions – a modern adventure tale with parodic elements in a Harlequin romance framework. A plain-Jane, pop-romance writer (played by Kathleen Turner) flies to Columbia to aid her kidnapped sister who has become embroiled in the criminal underworld. Upon her arrival in South America, she takes the wrong bus and soon finds herself on a deserted jungle road in the

middle of nowhere. Here she meets the hero (played by Michael Douglas), who lives a hermit-like existence and scours the rain forest for rare tropical birds he sells in an effort to save enough money to buy a yacht. Their first meeting on the road is, conventionally, less than auspicious. He blames her for the loss of an entire carload of full cages, but as soon as the shooting starts they join forces and flee the bandits. Unlike *The Temple of Doom*, here the heroine occasionally outwits her male protector – often at the most crucial moments. Nonetheless, she ultimately loses him to his yacht dream (after he has rescued her from an alligator and other antagonists).

She returns to New York and submits the entire story in book form (complete with happy-ever-after ending) to her publisher, who extols it as her best work to date. Plain-Jane who now stands transformed before us, with her curled hair loose and cascading down her shoulders, beautifully made-up and dressed. She replies languidly, "I was inspired." Her make-believe world of unfulfilled dreams has been lifted off the page and transferred to her reality – with the exception of a real-life unhappy ending. She then looks wistfully out the window and sadly

makes her way home. In the street in front of her home she finds an enormous sailboat, high as a skyscraper. The hero raises one foot onto the side of the boat to show her his alligator-skin boots. Like the Neanderthal with his bear-skin, or the warrior with his eagle feathers, he must bring back from his quest a symbol of victory. She hands him her grocery bag and he helps her aboard their boat. Reality has improved upon art. The woman's previous existence – alone in her apartment with her hair tied back, in comfortable old clothes, in the company of her cat and her typewriter – has been vindicated as a *temporary* phase. Her lonely dreaming was only the trial period prior to her salvation by a hero who was previously only imaginatively alive. Long before the story begins she creates the man of her dreams; when she finally meets him, she fashions herself into the counterpart she so often has put into her novels. She only has to wait for her fiction to come true. He, on the other hand, must actively pursue his dream and cannot think of returning to claim her until his battle has been won.

The common denominator in all these films is comedy. Precisely *because* the

central challenge is couched in comic terms are the means often mistaken for the end. Marcia Pally warned us against being influenced by the "gritty truth" of some movies; we must also be on our guard concerning the subject matter of comedies, and not let ourselves be fooled into believing that everything within the comic structure is allotted equal criticism. In typical comic fashion the films end with a couple as a symbol of balance, if not of equality. All problems are forgotten; everyone, on the screen and in the theatre, is in high spirits. And no one can argue with a happy ending.

<sup>1</sup>*The Globe and Mail* (6 September 1984).

<sup>2</sup>Marcia Pally, "Fool's Gold," *Film Comment* (May-June 1984), p. 28.

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*Claudia Clausius teaches twentieth-century literature at the University of Toronto and is writing her doctoral thesis on "Time and Memory in the Works of Harold Pinter." She does dramaturgical research for the Mercury Theatre and lectures as part of the PACE (Public Affairs and Continuing Education) program in conjunction with the Stratford and Shaw festivals.*

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## CHRONIQUE:

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## MUSIC

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### "OUR TIME IS NOW" – THE CANADIAN WOMEN'S MUSIC AND CULTURAL FESTIVAL

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*through the eyes and ears of Heather Menzies*

The man beside me was affable. A senior bureaucrat with CMHC en route to Winnipeg on business, he exercised the easy assumption that attends anyone flying at full fare on a weekday: he treated me as an equal – that is, to borrow from Virginia Woolf's brilliant observation, as an honorary male.

"Let's face it," he began expansively. We were discussing women's advancement, or lack thereof, into senior managerial ranks – whether in government or industry mattered little, for the plain truth in his view was that "most women still aren't prepared to make the

sacrifices required to make it in the business world. Most women really want to be housewives," he said.

I asked why it should be an either/or affair for women when, as his boast of two children attested, it isn't for men. He said that business demands sacrifice, in the form of twelve to fourteen-hour days. I suggested it was time for a shorter work week. He said that international competition forbids this self-indulgence. I pointed out that less than 40 per cent of Canada's GNP is sensitive to foreign competition. He ignored me. I turned away, my spirits drooping, and knew once more why I was on my way to the first women's folk festival in Canada.

The women's movement is not a single-

issue crusade, nor is it short-term. Its agenda is long: not only equal access for women to all opportunities in our society, but also the transformation of that society by bringing into all our institutions the feminist values and heritage which have been excluded so much in the past. This will take many lifetimes and, in each, will tax every one of us to the point of burn-out. So we need events like the women's literary conference ("Women and Words/ Les femmes et les mots," held in Vancouver in July, 1983, and reviewed in this issue of CWS/cf) and the women's folk festival ("Our Time is Now," held in Winnipeg over the Labour Day weekend, 1984) to restore our souls. They also stretch our minds and hearts to a larger

vision of the transformation we're trying to bring about.

The Women's Music and Cultural Festival, as it was officially named, did both those things. From Friday night through Sunday midnight over fifty performers filled a large park in North End Winnipeg with music of exquisite relevance to the lives of women in Canada today.

Ferron sang her near-signature piece, "Testimony," inspired by a request that she write the theme song for a film about rape: ". . . And by my heart be I woman/ And by my eyes be I open . . ." Moon Joyce sang "I got the North of 60 Blues . . ." about being moved to Yellowknife because someone you're married to got transferred there. And another song called "The Infinite Edge: "I don't want to hear the wind die . . ." Debbie Romeyn sang that "I want to celebrate the differences that make us all the same . . ." Barb Spence sang "I'm a woman of potential . . ." and another song dedicated to a friend (one of the festival organizers) Chris Lane: "There's country lane that takes me where I want to go/Where the laughter flows from a trickle to a raging waterfall . . ."

Poet, seer Maara Haas intoned: "I know God is a woman, but is she ethnic?" Alanis Obomsawin sang "Bush Lady:" "Hey Bush Lady, so beautiful; some with me . . . /You hear? Bush Lady got a big belly now . . ." Arlene Mantle sang about working women: "Well, if it's women's work/It's time we had the say." Poet Lillian Allen spoke about Black women and about all oppressed people: "There will be no peace, peace, peace, peace, peace/Until there is equality and justice." Nancy White did some of her political epigrams: Papal Pampers, and Johnny T. (the bum patter). But then, more soulfully, she sang about "The Children of War:" "They see things they should never have to see/The children of war are children who hate." Marie-Lynn Hammond sang about growing up on an armed forces base: "You spend your whole life cocked and ready/Oh Papa can't you see we're not the enemy?," and another song about her free-spirited Grandmother called "Elsie Won't You Dance."

Marie-Claire Séguin took some old Québécois folk songs that trivialize and even glorify violence against women (one about rape, another about wife beating) and put new words to the familiar old tunes – words of peace and harmony for, as she explained, "if we sing another song, maybe we will make another life."

Lucy Kownak and Emily Alerk from Bakers Lake, N.W.T. went back to pre-literate times to do some traditional throat singing: strange, guttural sounds rising from deep in their throats, unearthly sounds that seemed to reach into the shadows of the unconscious to call forth something of the Great Spirit, sounds that as suddenly dissolved into gales of giggles – a signal that this was just a harmless old game of nerves, the object of which is to make one's opponent laugh. It was also a nice reminder of one of women's oldest strengths: not taking themselves too seriously.

There were performers from every part of the country and from every category of citizenship: white Anglo-Saxons like Rita MacNeil, Heather Bishop and Connie Kaldor; French-Canadians like Marie-Claire Séguin from Quebec and Suzanne Campagne from St. Boniface; native Indian women like Alanis Obomsawin, Metis women like Beatrice Culleton and the two Inuit women throat singers; black immigrant women such as Lillian Allen, and native-born women such as the *a capella* group, Four the Moment, from Halifax; ethnic women such as Llena Zarembo; and, finally, women from rural areas – Kris Purdy from Thunder Bay – as well as urban centres.

Some of the performers could be identified as belonging to the mainstream, at least of folk music. But most could not; instead they have enjoyed small, almost cultishly loyal followings among lesbians, trade unionists, and ethnic or other minority groups. This festival represented the first opportunity for them all to come together *as women*. By their addressing an audience which, in its diversity, represented the full 52 per cent of the population that is female and, equally, by that audience's identification with the themes of the artists, almost totally self-authored songs – what it is to be a victim of rape, incest or sexual slavery; what it is to be native, black, an immigrant or a lesbian – they sealed something significant in women's culture and set in motion what has to be a whole new meaning of the word "mainstream."

The festival grew out of a sense of frustration at the longstanding under-representation of women's music at the well-known mainstream Winnipeg folk festival, particularly as this manifested itself in the hearts and minds of a handful of women who not only happened to have long been involved in the Winnipeg Folk Festival, lobbying for more female artists

on the program, but who also chanced to be part of a mad-cap group of Manitoba feminists. Calling themselves the SDBs (meaning the "same damn bunch," after the tendency in practically every city, town, and village since time began for the same bunch of women to pitch in to do whatever it is that needs to be done: raise money, organize an event, get up a petition, and so on), these feminists firmly believe in having fun in between rounds of, and even in the midst of, trying to transform the world. Accordingly, they organize such things as SDB retreats where they sit around talking, drinking a little wine, playing guitars, singing songs, having a few laughs. During such a retreat these women impulsively decided to organize a women's music and cultural festival, any proceeds from which could go into their scholarship fund to aid women who want to study in a "non-traditional" subject area.

A core group of six SDBs (Joan Miller, Chris Lane, Shirley Walker, Terri Gray, Bev Suek and Eileen Johnson) began organizing the festival in a display of seeming anarchy (madly making SDB calendars and handbooks for fund raising) that's quite in keeping with women's historical capacity for top-notch organization. In the end, a staff of five (Kris Anderson, Dorothy Codville, Joan Miller, Sheryl Peltz and Rachel Rocco) and a large coterie of volunteers had the financial support of both the Federal and Manitoba Governments, at least two unions, and four corporations.

The atmosphere over the three-day event went well beyond what is in fact a fairly superficial intimacy at most folk festivals. Of course the weather played its part, blowing in damp and cool on the unsuspecting out-of-towners dressed in t-shirts and sandals. Whereupon the Winnipeg women emptied their winter closets and drawers, producing the quilted, layered look of multi-colored borrowings, and much hilarity while tucking blankets and sleeping bags under chilly cheeks. Clearly, though, it was the music itself that made the festival. Song after song spoke to every one of us, tenderly, angrily, passionately, touching us and drawing us all together.

By Sunday the audience wasn't just clapping and singing along: we were whooping and hollering and, at the end, hugging each other with misty eyes and new entries in address books. The performers were moved as well, moved right out of character. They stopped delivering

a polished, pre-designed product and began improvising freely from the intense creativity generated within the festival itself. They called out to the sound mixer Nancy Poole: "Hey Nancy, could you give me a little more on the guitar" or whatever. And they grinned – beamed – with total self-abandon.

"Aren't we havin' a good time?" Moon Joyce asked as she skipped onto the stage to do her stint as volunteer mistress of ceremonies. She went over to the gleaming black piano and tentatively reached out to stroke it. "You know what? I've

never been this close to a grand piano before," she said mischievously. As she introduced Nancy White, who'd just returned from a concert in Nicaragua, Connie Kaldor, herself just returned from a concert in Scotland, couldn't resist whispering a joke into her ear. As Nancy convulsed with laughter, Connie repeated the joke to the audience. "What do you wear to the revolution? Oppressed pants."

As Heather Bishop was introduced by Winnipeg alderperson Leslie Hughes during the closing concert, her face shone

and her smile couldn't have been broader. "I don't know that I've ever felt this proud before," she said. After a slight pause to allow the whistles and cheers of fellow feeling to die away, she continued in her normal, low-key, gentle way: "So here we are, and what we're doing is changing the world."

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*Heather Menzies is the author of three books: The Railroad's Not Enough: Canada Now (1978); Women and the Chip (1981); and Computers on the Job (1982).*

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# CHRONIQUE:

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# WORDS

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## WOMEN AND WORDS/ LES FEMMES ET LES MOTS

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Ellen Creighton

*(Man) has monopolized nearly all profitable employments, and from those (woman) is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honourable to himself . . . He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education . . . He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.*

(quoted in Tillie Olsen, *Silences*)

One hundred and thirty-six years have elapsed since these words were issued in the Declaration of the first women's rights convention in the world. In what was billed as another historical event, "Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots," more than 750 women gathered almost two years ago in the University of British Columbia's stately "Old Auditorium" to reflect upon how far we have come. The four-day, bilingual conference was organized by the West Coast Women and Words Society. It was a cross-country, multicultural conference formed as a "conspiracy united in a purpose" – to create a network of support for women of all backgrounds, in all facets of writing and communication. The recent publica-

tion of *Women & Words: The Anthology/Les femmes et les mots: une anthologie*,<sup>1</sup> selected from material collected by an anthology committee formed while the conference was being organized, struck me as an appropriate occasion for offering some retrospective comments on the 1983 conference.

The all-women event was bound to elicit charges of "preaching to the converted," both by its gender exclusiveness and by the restriction of female-only press members to arranged interviews. Happily a last-minute change of heart permitted the press access to all the proceedings.

As befits a conference concerned with language and communication, seminars and workshops involved the gamut of issues from criticism and the literary tradition, through feminist publications, ethnicity and women's writing, entrance into publishing, funding searches, translation, networking, lesbian writing, the subversiveness of feminist art, and many related topics. To round out the programme, short theatre pieces were presented, and poetry readings, held in the evenings, were open to the general public.

Some of the seminars were formal and pedagogic, while others were casual. All were informative, entertaining and provided a good introduction to many of the major female literary figures in Canada:

Margaret Atwood, Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, Marian Engel, Joy Kogawa, Dorothy Livesay, Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska, Jane Rule, Phyllis Webb and (the list went on and on). The visibility of lesser-known writers such as Betsy Warland, poet and conference organizer, and Erin Mouré, will no doubt have increased their followings.

Throughout the conference, indisputable truths about the state of the female presence in the literary world rose up like a chant inciting more questions and more affirmative action. Women described the lack of female representation in the world of letters, the lack of women editors, publishers, and journalists. P.E.I. publisher Libby Oughton quoted publishing statistics which substantiate this contention: while women make up 52% of the population, only 18-20% of books published are written by women. Oughton claimed that if women spend 700 million dollars on books, they should be more fully represented. She and her colleagues are redressing this situation by publishing fiction and poetry exclusively by women.

*That women are not heard from often enough is symptomatic of the phallogocentricity of our modern Western languages, languages which are barometers of patriarchal cultures. "Men and women pretend to speak the same language," said B.C. poet Sharon Thesen, yet "male subjectivity is the operating*

theatre of the male and female consciousness." While all modern Western languages spring from patriarchies, French as compared to English is more overtly sexist. The grammatical structure of the French language enforces male dominance, as Quebec writers Louky Bersianik and Louise Cotnoir made abundantly evident through word play. Cotnoir presented woman's identity as analogous to the mute 'e' (signalling the female gender) in French, "une existence morte" – a dead existence, a silent one. French-speaking feminist critics and writers therefore begin approaching the word through a greater linguistic awareness of sexism than their English-speaking counterparts.

One's mother tongue, however, did not affect the conclusion that *all* women must find a language suitable to our reality, a language of our own. The central question of the female writer becomes "how do I write?" what is the language indigenous to my reality? Sharon Thesen quoted Adrienne Rich to illustrate this dilemma: "How do I write if there are no words except my self?" In the past women were silent because culture and language excluded female experience and expression. Now women acknowledge that silence can also be positive – when used deliberately rather than out of feelings of insecurity and impotence. Two of the most frequently recommended works throughout the conference were Louky Bersianik's *L'Eugélonne* (1976), considered by some participants an 'ovular' work in the search for a truly female language, and Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1978), which explores how social circumstance (sex, colour, class) and the climate of the times have contributed to literary silences of both women and men.

Women of minority groups spoke about their silences as the result of discrimination by the ruling majority – white middle-class society – and the lack of self-confidence imposed on them by this majority. These sentiments mirror the male-versus-female arena of our patriarchal society as evinced through its phallogocentric language. Black feminist-activist Makeda Silvera castigated the feminist world for not challenging racism and classism. She claimed that a "cultural censorship" built upon patriarchy, capitalism, racism and imperialism effectively silences women of colour; the feminist arena itself is a world of internal contradiction where the white majority discriminates against other races.

In contrast to Silvera's diatribe, native poet Beth Cuthand proudly illustrated her personal growth from self-perception as victim to subject, by reading two of her poems which had been written many years apart. Cuthand now believes that Indians are a "people of power and leadership capabilities" and she calls for "the exploration of the female in her dignity as subject." While affirming the positive direction in her development, however, she claimed that few native women have been published in mainstream presses because they do not have "the confidence to enter the other world."

Women need role models in order to foster their confidence and self-development, in order to break the silence. Yet in tracing the history of literature and literary criticism we discover, as freelance writer Carolyn Hlus pointed out, that we do not even know *who* the significant women writers were. In addition, we must ask how many truly found a female voice?

"Women and Words" was both a revelation and a disappointment. Technically it was well-organized, well-attended, and generally accessible to all participants. Unfortunately, however, the unity one might expect in a feminist gathering was limited to groups who shared similar ideologies, backgrounds or inclinations. One divisive incident occurred when Linda McKnight, President of McClelland and Stewart, became the target of vituperative remarks from the radical feminist front. She was branded as a supporter of the mainstream, made up of non-feminists, capitalists, and racists.

If feminism is truly the new humanism, as many speakers and participants claimed, perhaps at the next conference (scheduled for 1986) we shall come together in a spirit of unity as women and as people concerned with instituting positive social change, not through anger but through self-enlightenment. Only then will we have the necessary concentrated strength to achieve our aims.

'Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing Co. Ltd., 1984.

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*Ellen Creighton, an aspiring writer, is an avid reader of poetry and prose who lives in Vancouver.*

## ARRIVE

Foot hills  
like the great hairy bellies  
of some prone old men

## SETTLE

Three deer at sunset  
fawna doe  
fawna ray  
fawna me

## STAY

Crows on the mate  
caw caw caw caw  
ouch

*Sandra Dempsey*  
Calgary, Alberta

## Nightengale

I have no faith  
I am uncertain  
you leave for a moment and  
panic  
it is over  
it is done  
locked out again  
left high and  
mighty

My longing beckons  
I need you beyond temptation  
you nurture my spirit and  
comfort  
it is new  
it is now  
freed at last  
found warm and  
lowly

o spread your wings  
that we might fly  
as one  
tonight

*Sandra Dempsey*  
Calgary, Alberta