

potential for change and it is felt by all of the characters; a mingling of hope and fear manifests itself in each character. Appropriately, this time of uncertainty brings chaos from the outside world. There are repeated scenes of indiscretion which disrupt the staid convent life.

From within *The Ant Heap* each of the women reacts differently to the shifting times. Virginia is a strong leader and futurist; she embodies the hope and the vision for the convent in a changing world. Her duties allow her to use her sharp mind for the good of the order, to ensure its future. Kunigunda is simple and devote, a woman a little out of time but strict in her faith and in her fashion. Discipline comes easily to her and off of her tongue; the scoldings she provides are based in the hope that the students around her will gain as much pure pleasure from faith if they practice it well. Helen is an outsider within. Her worldly knowledge and desire for the love of a man set her apart from the sisters, and the future they have in mind for her. Her fortune draws them to be kindly and interested in her as a future sister of the Order, but she escapes in a moment of confusion and gains her happiness through marriage. Erzsébet is the star of the convent; with her attractive clothes for home and graceful poise she is set apart from the other students and involved in activity outside the convent to the envy of the other women.

This novel provides a glimpse into convent life in the 1800s in Hungary. There is also reference to society outside the convent walls, the turmoil which prevails in the area, the impeding modernization of the western world, all of which is also played out within the Order. The frustrated feelings of these women are contrasted with the ordered, measured life of the convent to provide an illuminating and realistic account of the inner tensions life can provide despite the sheltering of convent walls.

## SCREEN MEMORIES: THE HUNGARIAN CINEMA OF MÁRTA MÉSZÁROS

Catherine Portuges. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

by Dina Iordanova

If you want to find out about East European women-filmmakers from reference books like the *Handbook of Soviet and East European Filmmakers*, you may as well forget it. Most reference books on the topic make almost no mention of any female presence in filmmaking. One is left with the impression that the field is entirely male-dominated, with the rare exception of a few actresses. *The Handbook* was published in 1992. As if to challenge its monumental disregard for East European women, a whole book devoted to a single woman-director appeared only a year later—Catherine Portuges' study of the Hungarian filmmaker Márta Mészáros.

Márta Mészáros is by no means the only significant female filmmaker from Eastern Europe. Notable figures include the Czech Vera Chytilová, the Bulgarian Binka Zhelyazkova, Poles Barbara Sass and Magdalena Lazarkiewicz, and Hungarians Judith Elek and Ildiko Eneydi. All of these women artists, who deserve more attention from North American scholars, would be well served by a study as insightful as Portuges' *Screen Memories*.

Hopefully the wide critical acclaim for Portuges' book will prompt American interest in Mészáros' films. Only a few of the movies are available in North American video distribution: *The Girl, Riddance*, and *Adoption* from Facets in Chicago; *Little Red Riding Hood* from Les productions la fête in Montréal; and several more in 16mm from New Yorker Films. Most of the films, like *Fetus* (1993), which Mészáros presented at the Berlin Film Festival last year, have never made it to North American theatres.

Portuges, originally a specialist in

French feminism, does a remarkably astute job in analyzing Mészáros' filmmaking. She applies theories from gender and psychoanalytical criticism to the personal and artistic dimensions of Mészáros' life. Her analysis of the filmmaker's career draws on numerous interviews, which provide a unique context for the study. The discussions of matters of personal creativity, such as Mészáros' marriage to the prominent director Miklos Jancsó, and her subsequent relationships with Polish actor Jan Nowicki, touch on issues sensitive to every woman-artist. Mészáros' relationships with these men were exceptional in that they managed to achieve balance between two dominant artists. Despite her marriage to Jancsó, for example, she never imitated the unmistakable visual idioms of his films. She does, however, admit to needing Nowicki's advice on issues of style and aesthetics.

Mészáros came to feature films in her 30s after a career in documentaries. Most of her narrative films reflect on personal experiences, although not always directly. Her lonely fragile heroines spend many rainy afternoons in utopian inquiries about severed family ties, often returning at night to cold rooms in orphanages and dormitories; they explore the painful vulnerabilities of human sensuality, frequently through stubborn introverted struggles from love. When Mészáros turned her attention to Stalinism with her "Diary" trilogy of the 1980s, the films retained the accent on interpersonal issues from her earlier work, depicting tensions between the imposed mechanical routine of communal space and the individual's pensive craving for privacy. As Portuges concludes, "Mészáros' representation of the female subject at odds with social convention illuminates the larger question of the constitution of the self in East-Central Europe which has favored group identity at the expense of the individual."

The valuable interviews illustrate a paradox common to many strong women from Eastern Europe: their resistance to being considered feminists even as they display thoroughly

feminist thoughts and actions. Mészáros is another one of these reluctant feminists. What, if not feminist, are claims like these: "What I want to work for is to help women become conscious of their being, the essence of their womanhood: this is what I want to express in my films, to make them aware of their own female personalities;" "Filmmaking by women represents a different kind of sensitivity. If you interpret my films as strictly political, you will see that I approach power relations differently from the way they are portrayed by male directors. Not because my films are necessarily better, or theirs worse, but because they are different."

Márta Mészáros, as portrayed by Catherine Portuges, is a real East European woman: self-sufficient yet reaching out to people, politically committed but also attentive to the individual, demanding but sensitive, living today's reality as a visionary.

## THE ANSWER/LA RESPUESTA: INCLUDING A SELECTION OF POEMS

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Critical ed. and trans. by Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell. New York: The Feminist Press, 1994.

*by Joan Gibson*

Juana Inés de Asbaje y Ramirez de Santillana was a seventeenth-century woman of New Spain whose most passionate commitment was to the life of the mind. Her fascinating defense of this choice, almost a physical necessity for her, is given in *The Answer*, virtually her last written work. Born illegitimate in Mexico probably in 1648, she learned to read soon after she learned to walk, and was in the habit of versifying every thing she said. She was almost entirely self-educated through reading in her grandfather's extensive library, de-

veloping lifelong interests in rhetoric, law, medicine, physics, mathematics, music, and literature. Even while cooking, she pondered the physical principles of food chemistry. By the age of seven she begged to be dressed in boy's clothing and sent to the university. Instead she continued her education in the library of the viceregal court in Mexico City, serving there as lady-in-waiting after 1664. A public display of her learning in an examination by the most learned men of the time brought her both renown and hostility. Five years later when her reluctance to marry and her commitment to study led her to enter the convent of San Jerónimo, she collected there one of the largest libraries of New Spain. Her memorable conversation and her amiable personality continued to attract the friendship and loyalty of many in the clergy and court, in addition to her community. Others had long been uncomfortable with Sor Juana's accomplishments and independent attitude toward male religious superiors. If her publication of secular poetry and political pagentry was an irritation heightened by her popularity, an excursion into theology provoked rage.

In 1690, Sor Juana complied with a request by the bishop of Puebla, and sent him her criticisms of a famous sermon by a powerful member of the Mexican clergy, with her clear and repeated instructions that it was a private correspondence. The bishop prefaced the critique with a letter which appeared to praise it extravagantly, and published it without her permission under the kind of grandiose title she often mocked as patronizing to women, "Letter Worthy of Athena." The preface was signed "Sor Filotea de la Cruz," a pseudonym previously used for a male religious director writing letters of spiritual direction to nuns. There, speaking as an admiring but concerned sister in religion, the bishop of Puebla urged Sor Juana to abandon all learning, especially secular learning, unless it served piety, which was to be pursued in a spirit of total obedience.

Sor Juana perceived in his hints of

the risk of damnation for overzealous nuns, a further hint of the threat of the Inquisition. Publicly humiliated, she responded to the feigned concern of the pretend nun in *The Answer*, which refutes the charges against her, challenges the implied violence, defends secular as well as sacred learning, and argues for the right of women to study and to teach—although tragically, self-censorship soon led her to deny herself these very rights. Using all the enormous resources at her disposal, she asserts the freedom of thought from dogmatism and prejudice, and the appropriateness of women's use of intellectual gifts. While keeping intact a deeply ironic appearance of the most submissive traditional femininity, she attacks the arrogance and ignorance of male critics, including the sexual masquerade of Sor Filotea. The result is a dizzying, exuberant display of erudition and emotion, the pain as palpable as the intelligence.

Arenal and Powell have done a superb job of fulfilling their goal to offer an accessible text together with the necessary background to unravel its intricately woven strands. They have kept to the forefront Sor Juana's own profound awareness of the gender issues surrounding her at court and in the convent; her sense of herself as a woman writer in a tradition of learned and wise women. While using contemporary feminist theory, they have shown scrupulous care in respecting the religious, cultural and political differences which separate her from modern concerns and thought forms. The lucid, well-organized introduction and helpful notes clear a path through the dense layers of meaning and literary forms which Sor Juana employs. The English translations of *The Answer* (33 pages) and the poems (14 pages) in the bilingual text, are stunning to read and are much enriched by their commentary. Sor Juana has been called "the first feminist of the New World." We are all fortunate to have such a foremother and this book is a worthy contribution to making her work more available to English readers.