

Tan – Take Two

The mature familiarity with the topic of sex evident in the *Québécois* feature is sadly lacking in its English-Canadian counterpart. Other than the obvious fumbling adolescent efforts, as evidenced by the NFB's recent attempts to produce 'adult' dramas (e.g. *The Last Straw*), or the odd Cronenberg perversity, sex is not common fare in English-Canadian film. Enter *A Winter Tan*, straddling sex in both its guises – as gender and activity.

Not only does this film break new ground as a Canadian film, but its gutsiness and audacity "dares to go where no film has gone before." The courage of the filmmakers to take on what the less adventurous, more profit-motivated would consider to be too risky a subject – the raunchy and often degrading sexual exploits of an 'older' woman on the edge of sanity in Mexico – is only surpassed by their blatant and sophisticated treatment of the material. Congratulations Canada, the sex-talk genre has sprung a new hybrid – "sex and the older girl."

A Winter Tan originates with Maryse Holder's published letters, *Give Sorrow Words*, but injects them with an additional meaning – "give sex words." What we see on the screen is a woman feverishly scribbling, talking and screwing madly – as if her life depended on it. And it is the presentation of this complex relation between sex, race and language that marks this film as exceptional.

A Winter Tan depicts a woman's – a somewhat disturbed, but very articulate woman's – painful attempt to speak as a desiring subject within the confines of a male language of desire. Adopting the lexicon of the pornographic, Holder's excessive outbursts attempt to push through and speak sex as language. Mixing the vernacular and the literary in a manner approaching Joyce or Stein, Holder breathlessly, giddily, exhausts the obscene in fragments of drunken poetry, in rants that attempt to go beyond 'talking dirty', to articulate her desire in a language of sex that exceeds the perverse. The unique speech of Maryse Holder, with its troping between vulgarity and aestheticism – "a cunt is a cunt" – echoes the spirit of Molly Bloom's affirmative "Yes"

The camera remains riveted on Holder's body, a body verbally and visually stripped of eroticism – there is no evidence of airbrushing here. In an early scene Maryse critically takes stock of her body direct to mirror/camera. With an odd mix of unflinching scrutiny and overvaluing narcissism, Holder 'check-



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lists' her body like it was an outdated car. We are doubly fascinated and repelled as she appraises various body parts for their desirability/longevity. These graphic depictions of an aging body, a body in ruins, are set against Holder's often sardonic commentary on aging – "too bad you can't vomit up age."

The phrase "you're not getting older, you're getting better" is fitting if you are fortunate enough to be Jane Fonda or Tina Turner. But most women are disenfranchised by the media's trendy interest in women over 40. The recent celebration of these women does not accommodate despair, only denial. *A Winter Tan* faces age – body on. By refusing to hide behind the soft-lens veneer of beauty and romance, *A Winter Tan* forces us to address the materiality of aging and sex. For Holder sex is libertarian – it offers identity, freedom and ultimately, transcendence.

The audience at the Festival of Festivals screening likely expected nothing less than 'another tour de force performance from Jackie Burroughs' and nothing more from the film itself. Ultimately the triumph of the film is that it offers more than just a context for a winning performance. At the same time, to ignore the triumph of Burroughs' performance (her first since her series of archetypal Canadian grannies) would be a mistake as well as an injustice. Bur-

roughs' complicitous direct address to the camera doubly infuses Maryse Holder's letters with desperation and humour. Burroughs sustains this balance; she carries the film through its zig-zag of euphoria and despair. It is those moments where Burroughs shifts from extreme narcissism to melancholic self-abrogation that achieve the brilliance and complexity of the film, its downright wonder. Maryse Holder was no simple gal and depending on her success at conquests, she either gushes or rails. Entire scenes can sustain these moods. When happy, Holder "loves this country, I love it with all of my heart, everybody is a fucking genius." When rejected, she reaches paranoia, "I think I hear them objectifying me, throwing pebbles of hostility and desire at me."

A female academic trying to bed the youth of Mexico and meeting rejection at nearly every turn, offers but one of the many contradictions *A Winter Tan* elicits – it is its *modus operandi*. Instead of analyzing sexual tourism, *A Winter Tan* unflinchingly presents it – its contradictions intact. The stakes and ultimate meaning here are indeed altered by the specific variables of the film – that is, gender. The fact that the protagonist is a pathetic woman does not necessarily cancel out the fact that she plunders and reduces a nation to a sexual laboratory. On the other hand, this film cannot be

simply explained as an exercise in racism. Power relations, after Foucault, cannot be reduced to simple equations of dominance; there is no such thing as a simple exchange. The specific interrelations that make up *A Winter Tan* – youth versus age, men versus women, white privilege versus Third World oppression – make it difficult to assess exactly who is on top at any given moment.

Through the grid of sex, (libidinal economy combined with economics) power relations in *A Winter Tan* are complex, variegated and downright ambivalent at times. What fascinates here is the constant power shifts between the Mexican men and this white woman. Holder's continual rejections and eventual murder, supposedly at the hand of one of these 'experiments' certainly disrupts that delicate balance the film negotiates. In Maryse Holder's words, "If you transgress, you get punished."

Differences are critically exaggerated here but the film in no way gives allegiance to these differences, especially Holder's values. It is a truism that a film whose character exhibits racist strains, is not in itself a racist film. To label *A Winter Tan* as racist is knee-jerk at best and at worst ignores the complex issues presented here.

In fact the charge of racism highlights what is bravest about the approach of the filmmakers – ignoring the common wisdom that an 'unsympathetic' character can only be presented within an analysis of the character's unsympathetic nature. Rather than distancing themselves from the film's 'subject' by means of the typical finger-pointing moralism, the filmmakers bravely let Holder have a forum. Holder's racism is presented in all its horror, for the viewer to analyse. Only in that she is the subject and therefore 'heroine' of the film can the filmmakers be said to be celebrating Holder's attitudes. Even then the film's very 'flatness' of presentation discourages any presumptions about the filmmakers' intents or attitudes.

By offering a complex portrait of a complex modern woman and presenting it without accompanying discussion, *A Winter Tan* encourages the kind of debate that has already begun in these pages. *A Winter Tan* proves that that big O for 'other' can mean different things to different people. It offers a site to begin to examine these differences. If nothing else, the film echoes the history of narrative film from its early days to its recent clarity in the slasher films that teach a woman, "If you fuck you die." In this regard it is not insignificant that the film is based on a true story and tries within the confines of a fiction to preserve that reality. It presents the old reality with a sophistication and complexity unmatched in Canadian filmmaking.

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Credits for *A Winter Tan* were published in issue No. 146.