The idea of women's film festivals grew out of the need to create a space for women's own, alternative spaces to that taken by the mainstream cinema, to the women's cinema. Women's film festivals in the 70s were not only indicative of women's increasing economic independence but of a release from ideological shackles. The festivals were places to exchange ideas, forge ties, and, perhaps most importantly, to build an audience for women's films. Even when they were not proclaimed as such, these festivals were feminist. So we must question why the recent International Festival of Women's Films and Videos in Montreal felt a need to state repeatedly that it was not feminist.

Are these disclaimers just an awkward attempt to change the festival's image or does it indicate a change in ideology? What has happened to the marginal, the radical, and the feminist? Have they merely been soft-pedalled, or have they been locked out of the women's room? Perhaps these disclaimers just an awkward recognition of what has happened to the festival. Maybe the festival's dismantling of feminism was a way of saying that feminism is no longer a valid idea.

The Quebec women's film festival (Festival des films de la femme) no longer exists. Moreover, Cinema has merged with Silence, the women's cinema. The festival was to create the present festival. Thus, it bears the heavy burden of having to get some superb prints but overall the release from ideological shackles. The festivals are all indicative of women's increasing economic independence but of a release from ideological shackles. The festivals were places to exchange ideas, forge ties, and, perhaps most importantly, to build an audience for women's films. Even when they were not proclaimed as such, these festivals were feminist. So we must question why the recent International Festival of Women's Films and Videos in Montreal felt a need to state repeatedly that it was not feminist.

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Myrielle Audet, and Diane Daoust about women squatters in Europe; and The Measure of Success by Cherie Moses and Coleen Finlayson which makes a strong statement by simply having a woman in silhouette respond to the statements of a man in voice-over.

The video that won the Public’s Prize was Catherine Russo’s Enough Crying of Tears from the U.S. It is a powerful documentary about the CoMadres (Committee of Mothers of the Disappeared) and their fight for justice and peace in El Salvador and contains some heart breaking and unforgettable interviews with women compelled to confrontation and action in the most violent and desperate of circumstances.

Of the experimental films included at the Festival, some of the most interesting were Canadian. In fact, Our Marilyn by Brenda Longfellow was the public’s choice for best short film. It is a provocative, visually compelling film that examines the differences between Canadian and American culture through two cultural icons — Marilyn Bell, the 17-year-old Canadian who swam Lake Ontario (our Marilyn), and Marilyn Monroe (their Marilyn).

For a festival trying to widen its audience there was a perplexing lack of “star attractions” this year. Granted, Anne-Marie Mieville was present with her first feature Le Moine et la sorcière, Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette, was scheduled to attend with several of her films, but had to cancel at the last minute. Suzanne Schiffman, who worked with François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette, was present with her first feature Le Moine et la sorcière. The screenings of Schiffman’s film were among the best attended at the Festival; people were turned away in droves. An event of this kind establishes its reputation, and its audience (if it is going for a mainstream, popular audience) through the “stars” it has in attendance because they get the press attention. If the Festival continues aiming for larger, more mainstream audiences, this is obviously the best way of bringing them in.

The existence of such films as Iris and Le Moine et la sorcière, conventional narratives with the difference of being informed by feminist ideology, is significant. Maybe we can read the existence of these films made purely to entertain as signs of the firm establishment of a consciousness, of a women’s culture. A parallel may be drawn with the Canadian culture which has struggled for so long to permit space for films and television meant just for fun. For women, they represent an important step but simultaneously pose another question about what happens when women work within the confines of the mainstream narrative which, for the most part, has been developed by men. One of the most prevalent comments overhead at the Festival was about the difficulty in determining that these were women’s films, they could have been done by men.

Ultimately, it was these films that personalized the 1988 festival; Iris as the public’s choice feature, and Le Moine et la sorcière as the biggest crowd attraction. There has been a lot of disappointment and discontent expressed about this year’s festival, and it is probably due to the prevalence of films like these. The Festival’s program was large and varied in the sense of what the films and videos deal with, but ultimately all the themes, issues, and ideas were handled in much the same way. There was an uncomfortable homogeneity to the program in the countries and cultures it represented.

The Montreal Women’s Film and Video Festival is a most important one, and with its absorption of Cinemama and the demise of the Quebec festival its role has become paramount. If it is unable to, or chooses not to, bring in people like Margarethe von Trotta, Helke Sander, and Marta Meczaros who will attract the large crowds, at the same time as it eliminates the challenging, independent, less accessible films and ignores indigenous productions, the question must be asked: What is it going to program? What was an attempt to please everyone this year seems to have resulted in pleasing no one. The women’s room now has a solid foundation, and its dimensions are growing, but sadly, at this festival it was painted all one colour.