

The New York Women's Film Festival:

It's disgusting. Disgusting. I've seen naked bodies. I've seen childbirth, but this is disgusting. I wouldn't be surprised if it's supposed to be erotic.

— woman in audience at screening of Joan Jonas' *Last Year*, a minimal study in pregnant women's bodies.

I was bigger than that.

Are you a pregnancy critic or a film critic?

— exchange with my friend Marge during screening of Agnes Varda's *L'Opera-Mouffe*.

I've often wondered why festival viewers spend so much time and space recounting their adventures at the festival, their sense of atmosphere, trips to villages outside Cannes, glimpses of famous people at parties, but now I've been to a festival and now I know. Because seeing films at a festival is not like seeing a film at a theatre. There is a sense of context, and the overwhelming process whereby quantity becomes quality. Seeing *The Lizards* on a rainy Sunday noon after seeing three Nelly Kaplan films the night before, and rising at 6 with my little boy gave a new quality to that slow, softly black and white poem of a Sicilian village, with its singsong voices and vegetating men and desperate women. And the intervening subway rides on that rotting underground art museum of graffiti and decaying floors — that too illuminated and was illuminated by "The Lizards."

Well, the thing is that not only was it a festival, but a Women's Festival, and in New York, and I was there, incredibly, in the midst of a Vancouver holiday, having dreamt one morning that I was setting off for the festival with a big cigar clamped in my mouth, so I woke up and said, I'm off, booked a flight, wrote to a friend, emptied the bank account, packed many diapers, kissed Stephen, picked up Noah, and left. All that maybe irrelevant? No, because watching a program called *Maternal Images* and wondering how Noah was faring with that unknown baby-sitter and wishing there were daycare at the festival and understanding the nervous reaction of the young woman sitting next to me

but also sharing the mother's joy at watching her child emerge made *Kirsa Nicholina* by Gunvor Nelson a triple high — there was the beauty of the images themselves, the drunken soaring of the about-to-be-a-father's guitar music, and my own ability to get inside the total experience — that's what women's art is about, that's why the sex and age and nationality and race etc of the artist and also of the viewer all matter, because universality is rooted in specifics.

The first International Women's Film Festival was organized to encourage women filmmakers, who are said to suffer from notorious discrimination in the field. It is also designed to provide an outlet for selected works, and to serve as a forum for the exchange and dissemination of the woman's "point of view."

— Festival press release, June 11, 1972, my stress, their quotation marks.

Oh, no, what is it?

The baby's head.

— exchange with woman next to me at screening of *Not Me Alone* by Miriam Weinstein and *Al Fiering*.

I was increasingly troubled as the festival went on by a sense of missing context: not just the lack of daycare, the expensive tickets and no package deals, no place for rapping after the films (formal press conferences and panel discussions didn't serve this end) — it was a general impression that the festival was strictly for filmmakers and press, with the public encouraged to buy tickets and thereby finance the show. No accusations of greedy money-grabbing here: I know well that many good women worked hard for little or no pay to organize the festival, but I think the problem is one of approach. Because a festival of women's films inevitably raises the issue: why women? Do they share a distinct aesthetic (topic of a confused panel discussion) or a common subject matter or anything filmic which would justify such a grouping? Well, they share being an oppressed group whose films, when they get to make them, are poorly

distributed, critically ignored or condescended to and publicly neglected. Good enough reason for a festival to show their films? But then why should anyone come to see these films, except of course the filmmakers? Perhaps because women should get into their common cultural heritage? Ah, then, the women's way of looking at things is distinct? Aha!

Am I saying that the work of art does not stand alone, that knowing the speaker affects one's sense of speech, that context informs content? How then compare a film by a woman about "four great artists," who all happen to be men (*Where Time Is A River* by Gay Matthaei) with Amalie Rothschild's portrait of a young old lady sculptor (*Woo Who? May Wilson*)? Or how compare a film about the mostly marital imaginations of little girls (*Windy Day*, which says on its credits: by John Hubley and Faith Hubley — Faith in smaller letters below) with Patricia Barey and Gloria Callaci's *Until I Die* in which Dr. Elisabeth Kuebler-Ross talks of discussing death with terminally ill children? There are somewhat mind-stretching ways of making such comparisons; for instance the unsentimental insight into children's visions of old age given by the Hubley's beautifully drawn film stands up much better than the cloying final image of flowers in *Until I Die*. These films were on different programs, and the professionally orientated atmosphere of the press conferences and panel discussions didn't encourage such thinking on the part of festival-goers. Many of the audience comments I heard made me itch for discussion groups. Right away. Because if you're looking at films to see how creative women see their world, and why else go to a women's film festival, then you can't help hoping a change will be wrought in women's attitudes right there in the theatre. And we must help each other learn how to see what we've been trained until now to ignore.

We have not to be innocent, you know, a film is a very political thing.

— Nelly Kaplan, in an interview.

My first film at the festival (I only made it for the second week) was the noon showing of Agnes Varda's *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1961, color, 90 mins.). I was

so stoned that rushing home afterwards to feed Noah I was bopping to the jazz of the subway. What a fine film! I learned about organic growth and the relation of film time and my time in the course of watching a woman redefine for herself her concepts of self, beauty, love, life. Told by her doctor and her fortune-teller that she may have incurable cancer, Cleo's response is that predicted by Dr. Kuebler-Ross: denial. Looking in the mirror the popular singer tells herself: death is to be ugly, to be beautiful is to be alive, very much alive. To find the truth of that statement in the ninety minutes of the film, two hours of her life, she must reject the concept of beautiful womanhood imposed upon her by others, and

A Contextual Fragmentation

with the help of a soldier on leave from Algeria, who says he would rather die for love than for war, she discovers a different kind of beauty in living bravely and humanely. She learns (and we with her, in an entirely cinematic way) that what she sees is a function of how she looks, not to others, as she had thought, or at others, as she thinks for a while, but with others, as she does at the end. At the beginning, Cleo in a cab, condescending to the woman driver, asks if she isn't afraid at night. Afraid of what, says the driver, as the cab passes a window of African masks, Cleo's fantasy. In her friend's film Cleo herself is the girl who is killed when the observer wears dark glasses, not-killed when he removes them. In a moment of terror Cleo sees only freaks, but at the end, riding a bus with the soldier, she learns to see normality where it exists. In the course of watching Cleo learns these lessons of observation we learn to watch with her, and the initial image of a small world of luridly colored cards and monochromatic people enlarges with Cleo's vision to the lovely final close-up of Cleo and the soldier.

Thinking of Varda's subjectivity and how her ironies had deepened by the time of *Lion's Love* (I hadn't yet seen the savagely subtle *Le Bonheur*), and still intoxicated by the idea of a women's festival, I glossed over details: the lack of a registration book for women (provided later, but too late, as no one noticed it), the absence of friendly women's information or a literature table. They were good women organizing the festival, friendly, open, and unpretentious. I liked them.

So I was annoyed several days later, sitting in a crowded house to see *A Very Curious Girl* by Nelly Kaplan, because a woman in our row ousted one of the organizers to give room to her husband, who arrived late and seat-hungry. Then I looked around and saw that all the people sitting on the floor were women, mostly organizers and press, and giving up my seat didn't soothe my anger much as from the floor I watched men laughing at Mary being terrorized by the villagers. Mary gets her own back and more, as Nelly Kaplan shows us that a woman's film can pack a mean punch, but what about the women sitting meekly on the floor? Including me.

Similar problem the day before at the panel on directors, when a black woman was put down, by panel and audience, for

asking how poor people like her as opposed to rich people like Karen Sperling could make films, and another black woman said I didn't like her question but even more I didn't like the way you put her down, and that issue was never dealt with, and a few minutes later a man pontificated pointlessly and endlessly about *his* experience before the moderator finally managed to shut him up. (Flash to Bibi Andersson of *The Girls* saying: it's our turn to talk and yours (the men's) to listen.)

All of these doubts and wonderings don't erase the value for me of the good films I saw and the good women I met, but they do form the context for these things. In addition to the films discussed above, there was Judit Elek's *The Lady From Constantinople*, (Hungary, 1969, B&W, 79 mins.), which through its portrait of a single woman, elderly, widowed, childless, devoted to the past as centered around her seafaring father, conveys a deep sense of social context, or rather the lack of it, which is our lady's problem — modern Budapest and old age juxtaposed. At first we are aware of her as a rather ludicrous object, funny little old lady in a hat in a crowd, reminiscing publicly at a slide-lecture, feeding soup and talking volubly to the only person who will listen, a bed-ridden old man. But when the old man is taken to hospital, and she takes her soup to a workman in the basement who remarks only that it's cold, and we see her upright back receding deep into the frame, and then when she

holds an old party dress to herself in the mirror, grimaces and turns away, deep into the frame past a statuette of a laughing girl, then we are prepared for a two-sided understanding of the scene where she tries to give the dress to a work-weary young woman with children who tells her the carnival is over. We share her joy in the crowd of house-hunters partying in her memo-filled flat which is too large for one little old lady, then we share the sudden transition from absorption to alienation as the crowd presses and the music becomes too loud and carries over to the rooftop grave of the old man, where she sits alone among all the rooftops in the city. When at the end, the camera pulls back to show her sitting in peace and loneliness in her new small country house, we have entered her world sufficiently to understand the ambivalence of that image.

Preparation for death in an alienating world, treated nicely and rather conventionally. The other Hungarian entry, Márta Mészáros' *The Girl* (B&W, 86 mins.), is tougher and wierder in its vision of a young woman's travail in accepting life. Rather than fond memories of papa, this woman has to handle her revulsion from the artificial sweetness of her orphanage "mothers," and then the pain of discovering her "real" mother only to find fear of betrayal, resentment of her existence. "But I do exist and there's nothing you can do about it," she tells her mother, without anger, and with considerable insight into the frightened, limited world of this black-clad country woman who washes the dishes with water drawn from a well while her husband watches the Miss Universe contest on television. *The Girl* is a feminist treasure-house of sex-role insights and reversals: for instance the seduction scene with the young man from the train, when she dresses and leaves him, saying "you're a nice kid." Close-up of his bewildered face. The tone is low-keyed, low-contrast, with country landscapes during the visit to the mother drawing less attention than the factory background of the girl's daily life, and the soundtrack of whistles, machines, and well-used music is more vivid than the visuals. Visual metaphor is omnipresent but subtle, as when the bus, driven by a barely visible woman, and carrying only the girl, pulls out from the

village square and we see her mother in that scary wife's costume turning away in the background.

All this quiet complexity makes for an extra double-take at the end, so reminiscent of Marguerite Duras' weird situations, when the girl asserts her existence in a very unconventional way, hypnotizing a young man at a dance away from his partner and into her embrace. (And by the way, I was disappointed by the absence at the festival of Duras' *Destroy, She Said*.)

I was impressed by the way this woman director successfully conveyed the male point of view.

Hiss, boo, hiss.

Why are you hissing him? He's right. It's a good film.

*— exchange between two male critics and a mostly female audience following screening of *The Lizards*.*

Please note that Lina Wertmuller's *The Lizards* (1963, B&W), the first Italian feature film by a woman, is told from the point of view of a young girl, who attempts to escape her own impossibly limited Sicilian existence vicariously, through her fascination with a privileged male. It is this point of view which intensifies our sense of import when he returns "briefly" from his mind-blowing visit to Rome and the movie ends on her assertion that he will never again leave. It is this point of view which sharpens our sense of the crippling nature of the sex-role boundaries, as the street filled with lounging men turns to stare at the two girls tripping past, as the woman doctor reads in the sleep-heavy siesta hour because she has to know more than the others, and later tells the organizers of the would-be collective they have her support but shouldn't use her name because it might hurt their cause, as the mother-in-law rejected by her son's wife holds a finger to her lips to quiet the screaming neighbor woman as she prepares to commit suicide, as the sing-song voices of her mother ironing and her grandmother sewing attempt to comfort our young narrator for the loss of the young man who would never have married her anyway, voices which were silent earlier when her brother berated her for talking about books with same young man — nobody in our family reads literature! A man's point of view indeed — boo, hiss, pompous man from the audience. How better convey the machoistic nature of our own "liberated" society than confront it with *The Lizards* and watch its eyes close. ●

Barbara Martineau is a Canadian writer presently living in England.

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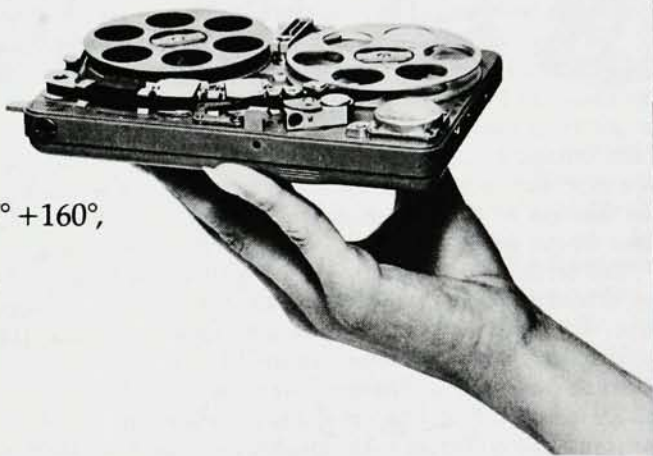
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