

Fantasy, Film and Feminism or An Affirmation of Male Paranoia

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Amazing! Some people actually read the last editorial in Cinema Canada and many expressed anger/confusion/resentment/curiosity at the overt sexism so daringly flaunted. I felt some clarification could be useful and have written this Refresher Course in honor of International Women's Year.

Scene I

Seven people hurriedly race through formal introductions, nervously joking because they have five minutes before taking part in a panel discussion. Their tension is heightened by realising that their work-areas are too eclectic to result in a focussed, coherent discussion. The little group includes two documentary filmmakers, an actress, an artist/feature film director, an animator, a personal film maker and a magazine editor. The reason they were lumped together? Similar genitals. (The topic was Women in Film.) "Tell me, sir, on behalf of men working in films. . . ."

What this article isn't

It isn't an article on women in film.

What this article is

It's a patchwork collage including several possible topics for others to cover, a piece on Canadian feature films directed by women, and utterly subjective opinions on feminism.

Portrayal of women in Canadian films

Dismiss this topic because it doesn't really exist. Although Québec's films often portray women in major roles — these roles generally symbolise Québec itself and do not delve into what it means to be Québécoise or what kind of people the individual female characters may be.

Canadian films have even fewer major roles for women. When they do, the women are Ultimate Victims and the occasional exception allowed a glimmer of hope is soon abandoned by the plot.

This is not necessarily bad. Male writers and directors could be evading women as a group and as individuals because:

- a. They know they don't know
- b. They refuse to deal with the situation preferring retreat into buddy-buddy films completely ignoring women (Close your eyes and it will go away . . .)
- c. They know they'll get pounced on regardless of what kind of women they invent
- d. With acute understanding and sympathy, men have realised they're not capable of creating relevant female characters and are waiting for women to show them the way.

e. They're sitting in the bushes . . .

Most probably, it's all of the above — choose your answer on the basis of your hard-won levels of awareness and cynicism.

Women film workers

Here's a great topic for an article! Historically, women were always editors or negative-cutters. The requirements explain: both jobs are tedious, requiring Patience, Endurance and Perfectionism. Nonetheless, editors can make movies from garbage (often do), comedies from out-takes, epics from telephone directories — they can make or break any film technically and artistically. Many women have earned great respect for their achievements in this field, but now there is growing interest in such 'technical fields' as camerawork, sound and lighting. Women are steadily breaking into these male bastions, and creating a (legitimate) threat to the big burly guys as well as livening up beer-breaks.

Women script-writers

This whole field is a mess — for men as well. It would be interesting for some analytical mind to explore how it is possible that a country blessed with so many major writers, poets and novelists (many of whom are also women) has not produced a teeming mass of script-writers? This wierd situation is changing, but right now it's still a mess.

Women making non-feature films

Thank Goddess there are so many women invading most areas of the media, we can look forward to still more books and articles on women making all kinds of beautiful documentaries as well as experimental, theatrical, personal, animation and historical films.

Women directing feature films

Yes, Virginia, they exist. Sylvia Spring directed *Madeleine Is* (1970), Mireille Dansereau made *La Vie Revée* (Dreamed Life — 1973) and Joyce Weiland is completing *The Far Shore*. (Not included is *Reason Over Passion* — 1968-69 — Joyce Weiland's brilliant feature-length thesis on Canada, because the title 'features' generally refers only to films made for theatrical release.)

Madeleine Is and *La Vie Revée* make a spectacular double bill — both as the first two features directed by women in Canada and as an excellent historical progression of the women's movement. And they both deal with female fantasies. . . .

Why female fantasies?

When Freud's daughter was asked why psychoanalysis is

on the wane, she replied that people used to try changing themselves to fit society but now they want to change society to fit them.

That's partially true. What it omits is that all oppressed groups eventually realise that major changes cannot be effective if new structures are created by the same consciousness which resulted in the old orders. For women, this meant we had to get at the root of our crippling fantasies to begin to define ourselves.

Feminist writer's confession:

Voice over despair, "It's enough to make me scream! Every time I look at Paul Newman's baby-blue eyes I feel like washing his socks!"

Female Fantasy No. 1

HE is sensitive, attractive, intelligent, understanding, and HE will mysteriously enter our lives and drive us mad with passion. This mythic male was created larger-than-life to compensate for women feeling just a little too small to cope. Amazingly, we held on to Mr. Everything for years even *after* getting politicised – we just added 'politically aware' to the list. . . .

Fantasy, Film and Feminism

Madeleine Is – concerns a young woman becoming aware of being exploited in society and in personal relationships. Historically, her story was shared by millions in those years. Women made their historical break with the New Left when we saw that the radical men we aligned with to change society still expected to come home to comfortable hippie pads and have dinner cooked.

Yet, when **Madeleine Is** was released, nobody could wait to put it down. Critics frothed, box-office figures were desolate, and the kindest thing people could say was: "Too bad – she's a talented filmmaker but this is such an awful film. Technically amateurish, the content is flimsy, it's just bad." Years passed and **Madeleine Is** became a skeleton in Canada's cinema closets. It was the Most Bad-Mouthed Film Ever Made in this country (and I had missed it).

A few years ago, there was another screening. Expecting the worst, I nonetheless decided to see it and was:

1. Totally mindblown
2. Then ANGRY
3. Finally, philosophically resigned.

Why? For one, **Madeleine Is** is technically one of the best films produced under the Canadian Film Development Corporation's low-budget programme. But it's also a good film and is *still* a relevant account of the chaotic sixties. As for content – if anything, the film tries to say everything about everything. As film critic Natalie Edwards explained in her account of the Women and Film Festival of 1973, "By the end of the delightful film I only wished that Spring hadn't bitten off so much for this first feature. But her fault is not uncommon, I discovered after a week of viewing women's films. The general tendency of women directors seems to be to cram their films with meanings and motives on as many levels as possible, almost as though they felt they'd never get another feature to make and had to say everything while they had the chance. And maybe there's something to that."

Certainly, the critical reception of **Madeleine Is** supports that argument – but what was so objectionable in that film? Numerous movies of the time dealt with political movements and many of them used fantasies to define their characters' consciousness. Yes – except that most films contained male fantasies – men's versions of themselves, of women, of the world. Although fantasy as a tool for self-discovery is quite acceptable, it was deemed heretical to explore women's fantasies.

Then came **La Vie Revée**. Although critically acclaimed (receiving the Wendy Michener Award for High Artistic Achievement, as well as Best Editing on a Feature for Danièle Gagné at 1973's Canadian Film Awards), Mireille Dansereau was condemned for not making a political film – by male leftists! With wounded dogmas they insisted on their Correct Methods of Being Political with as much outrage as those rightists who espouse Paternalistic Pedestalitis. (PP maintains that women should be on pedestals and not in the mainstream of life, "You're too good to join us, dearie. . . .")

In the years between **Madeleine Is** and **La Vie Revée**, women had discovered that:

1. Politics is human complexity multiplied
2. Feminists are humanists in a sick society.

Thus, the film reveals the political maturity women had achieved. **La Vie Revée** essentially concerns two women who have become aware of the systems **Madeleine** was just starting to question. They are a bit older, working, and they are friends. Together, they embark on destroying obsolete fantasies (Mr. Everything), finally becoming free to realise who they are.

Where do we go from here? Our next major breakthrough will be Joyce Weiland's **The Far Shore** – loosely based on Tom Thomson but essentially delving into the leading woman's character the feature concerns Canada's national identity and history. It will be brilliant – it has no choice.

What does all this mean? How will women change film? How will they change Canada?

Canada is desperately searching for its identity, not having a language barrier to stop our cultural massacre by the friendly natives to the south. Québec created its indigenous cinema when it became politicised. In English Canada only women have achieved this awareness, men are still aping "rugged individuality". Therefore, the strong emergence of women into Canadian filmmaking is needed for cultural survival.

Is there no end to this? (No) In terms of world cinema, women such as Lina Wertmüller, Agnès Varda, Elaine May, Márta Mészáros, Barbara Loden, Sarah Muldoror, Vera Chytilova, Margeurite Duras, Nelly Kaplan and many others are bringing the fresh vision cinema needs so desperately after the stagnation which followed the early sixties. Their major contribution is the rediscovery of humanism and a commitment to Life which male directors, with few exceptions, lost as payment for the absurd separation and polarisation of the sexes.

And then what? One of the first traps of the women's movement was hatred of men – that is dying out. Now, we will have a few years of female chauvinism. (It's much harder to overcome.) When that is also transcended, we will all become fully human regardless of sex. Then we can explore the beauty of human-ness. It should be fun. . . .

Scene II

(*Have you noticed how cyclical the logic is in this article?*) Several hundred people are joyously crammed in a sculptor's studio on a gloomy Sunday afternoon drinking wine and exchanging plans/hopes/dreams/project. There are people working in radio, television, art, journalism, film and who-knows-what-else and they're all thrilled and exuberant at being part of such an eclectic and successful group. There's no way to meet everyone, so numerous vows are made to meet elsewhere and do it again. Everyone leaves with renewed energy to get back to working – rejoicing in seeing that, contrary to our normal work environments, half the world's population really *is* made up of women! □