ILLUSIONS AND REALITIES IN THE MEDIA

Bonnie Sherr Klein

Cet article invite un changement dans la façon par laquelle nous concevons et vivons la réalité. La cinéaste Bonnie Sherr Klein met en question les notions dominantes de la "réalité" et de "l'illusion" telles que promues par les reportages des média, et elle explore la position patriarcale et féministe sur "l'objectivité." Les images des média sont issues d'un point de vue patriarcal: la compétition, la guerre, et la violence sont les marques centrales de l'image globale qui en ressort. Les préjugés patriarcaux ignorent et nient les epistémologies et les ontologies alternatives. Les femmes forment 70 pour cent des membres des organismes mondiaux pour la paix: elles offrent une autre vision qui sort d'une compréhension expérientielle de la relation dialectique, qui est plus coopérative, inclusive, et attentive. La position féministe est beaucoup plus sensée dans le monde d'aujourd'hui.

> *You people sit there, night after night. You're beginning to believe this* illusion *we're spinning here. You're beginning to think the tube is* reality, *and your own lives are unreal.*[1]

I'd like to look briefly at how the mainstream media define "reality" and "illusion": basically, that war, violence, competition and greed are reality, and that peace, non-violence and cooperation are "unreal" — illusions. I'd like to suggest that with a different perspective, we can begin to validate peaceful alternatives not as illusory, but as representing an equally real expression of human experience and human potential.

Let me clarify. I am not suggesting that we can eliminate conflict, which is inevitable in social organization, especially among nations. We are not talking about a world *without* conflict, but of our response *to* conflict. I believe that violence is one end of a spectrum that encompasses other behaviors, both actual and imaginable. All of us are familiar with these other responses. Consider, for example, the way a parent looks for a win/win solution to sibling rivalry, or how municipalities and provinces design social institutions to resolve conflicts of territory or jurisdiction, without resorting to arms. Other examples exist only in gestational form, like the United Nations, and depend on faith in our own intelligence, determination and imagination to make them more real.

Let's dispel a common illusion about

NFB Studio D directors Bonnie Sherr Klein (left) and Terri Nash

the media. The media do not merely reflect or report reality, they *create* it because they provide so much of the information on which we base decisions. They shape our personal and public agendas. They define our way of seeing. Media news defines "reality" almost exclusively in terms of violence and confrontation. We hear about strikes, riots, wars, terrorism. We do not see the conflicts that get resolved, the strikes that don't occur because of successful arbitration, the wars that do not break out. These non-events, the evidence of successful peace-making, are perhaps by their very nature invisible. But are they less "real"?

If my own perceptions about life as I experience it are not reflected in the media, I doubt my perceptions. And as I doubt myself, I lose my power to act, to change, even to speak. I believe this is at the root of our individual and collective passivity: *our profound disbelief in our own power to act upon our world.*

Anyone who has been involved in peace-movement activities knows what it is like to be considered a "special-interest group" by the media. You know the difficulty of trying to publicize information meetings if they do not promise a polarized debate, preferably with a prominent speaker, preferably American. And the problem is that if it isn't covered, if we don't make the news, the event is not "real" in the eyes of the public and even in the eyes of the participants. It's hard to sustain organizing energy if you don't experience the impact of your activities. Moreover, we are thus deprived of historical antecedents from which to learn and to seek inspiration. Part of the empowering excitement of the current wave of feminism has been the recovery of lost women's history.

We can't confine our discussion of media to news and public affairs. Our television entertainment shows are all media — the culture of our children, the culture we are exporting around the world. And they are overwhelmingly violent. Statistics about how many murders our children watch on television in the course of one week, combined with the fact that they spend many more hours watching TV than in the classroom, leave no question about what we are teaching them about "reality." I can't review here the literature relating heavy television viewing to passivity, nor the rather conclusive evidence correlating violence on television with aggression in real life. Even more interesting is the hidden side of the same coin — the

Rosalie Bertell (top) and Muriel Duckworth, from Speaking Our Peace. *Credit: NFB*

creation of a victim mentality, or what Dr. George Gerbner, the dean of research on the social impact of television, calls the "mean world syndrome." His studies demonstrate that heavy television viewers overestimate the statistical chance of violence in their own lives and harbor an exaggerated mistrust of strangers.[2] Gerbner and others have also demonstrated how television reinforces prejudice of all kinds — racism, ageism, classism, and sexism.

The ABC Network just released a major mini-series, *Amerika*, which is set in North America after a Soviet take-over, and in which the "enemies" are liberal "collaborators." A major part of the series was filmed in Toronto. This is the cultural equivalent of the Canadian production of components for American arms systems, and raises critical questions for the free-trade and cultural-sovereignty debates. At the same time as we pride ourselves on and defend our free press, we must ask *whose* social realities are considered in the business of cultural myth-making. Here's Gerbner again:

> *Selectivity and control, which are inherent in any communication, dominate the mass-communication process. The right to acculturate a nation and to shape the public agenda has never been open to all; it is one of the most carefully guarded powers in any society. The real question is not whether the organs of mass communication are free but rather: By whom, how, for what purpose and with what consequences are the inevitable controls exercised?*[3]

I believe that there is a link between the goal of peace and the full participation of women in society, especially in the media. This link has to do with the fact that patriarchy is characterized by hierarchical thinking in which some people matter less than others, and in which power is maintained by violence or the threat thereof. Women, who have been excluded from that system, have become the custodians of ways to solve conflicts without violence, and so have an enormous contribution to make. According to a United Nations statistic, women comprise over 70 percent of the membership of peace and social-justice groups worldwide, which contrasts tellingly with the number of women in positions of political power. I hasten to add that I am not talking about biological determinism, but rather the accumulated knowledge resulting from culturally determined gender roles.

Let me be more specific by focusing on two areas I know best: women and film. I work at the National Film Board in Studio D, which was established in 1975 to bring the missing perspective of women to film. We produced *If You Love This Planet.* Terri Nash, who had never made a film before, saw Helen Caldicott speak and was incredibly moved. Kathleen Shannon, Executive Producer of Studio D, agreed the matter was urgent. The NFB Programme Committee of the time, however, criticized the idea as uncinematic — it was just an illustrated speech, said most of our male colleagues. Besides, they added, Caldicott was, well, shrill. Strident. Hysterical. Once *Planet* was

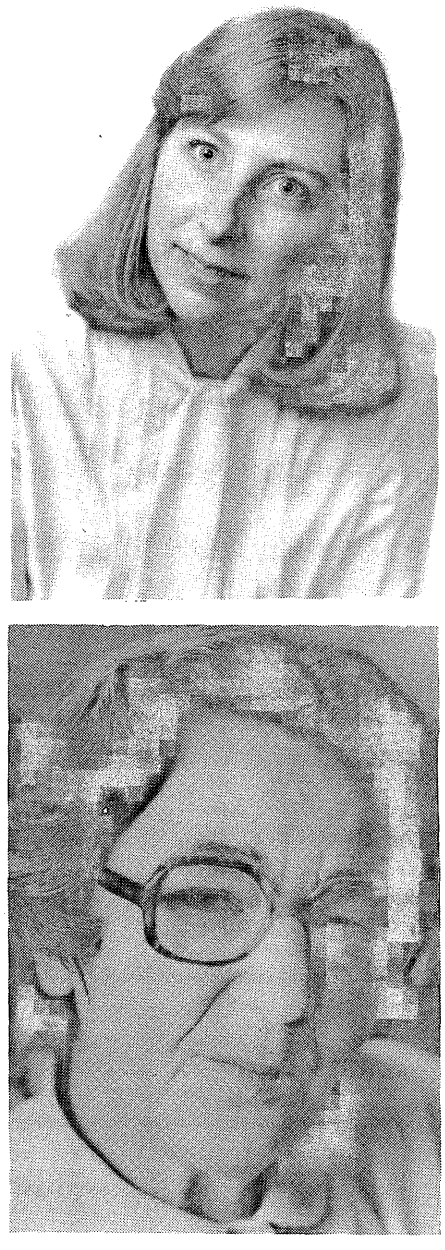
made but before it was released, distribution officials at the NFB said we should remove the clips featuring Ronald Reagan as a bomber pilot in old war movies; they would offend the U.S., and besides, were a "cheap joke." What they failed to understand was that women weren't laughing at the correlation between nuclear madness, machismo, and media.

We resisted this internal self-censorship. *Planet* has become one of the most-used films in Canadian history. It has awakened more people to personal action and spawned more grass-roots peace groups than any other single event. You know the story of the U.S. Justice Department's attempt to suppress it, but you may not know, because Canadian media have little open self-criticism, that *Planet* was rejected by the CBC because it was considered biased. Terri's response was simple: How do you show the "pro" side of nuclear war? It was finally aired on "The Journal," with no advance publicity and with a disclaimer about advocacy journalism, the night it won an Academy Award, an American award.

Which brings us to the question of "bias" and "objectivity." Reality is obviously standpoint-dependent. Objectivity in the media is usually defined as giving expression to two sides of a controversy. This is the same either/or, win/lose thinking that characterizes our dangerous political environment. I believe that the "objectivity" practised by the media is of a type to uphold the status quo. Deriding those who object to the status quo deprives the public of access to new information and to new ways of seeing and understanding the world. The rejection of Studio D films for television *really* means that our films reflect a bias other than that of those who control the airwaves. Their bias is so pervasive yet so invisible that it is declared non-existent. This bias calls itself "objectivity." Kathleen Shannon interprets this word as a simple contraction of "I object to your activity," or, "I'm objective, you are objectionable."[4]

Here is another perspective on objectivity, from a paper from Studio D at the start of its second decade:

> *We believe in the films we make. The objectivity we practice is that of not letting one's own set of vested interests interfere with another person's telling of her own truth. But we do not believe there is value, at this time, in the kind of "objectivity" that pretends detachment when dealing with matters of life and death, of justice, truth, and human well being.*[5]



Kathleen Wallace-Deering (top) and Ursula M. Franklin, from Speaking Our Peace. *Credit: NFB*

We see emotion and reason as complementary, not contradictory; we see the division between emotion and reason as schizophrenic.

Terri and I undertook to make *Speaking Our Peace* (1985) — a film about women, peace, and power — because we wanted to go beyond fear and look at the causes of war and the possibility of alternatives. We discovered a long, rich history connecting women and peace. We found women were asking different — and I think more fundamental — questions. Not who has more missiles, where's the strategic advantage, or where will terrorism stop if we don't retaliate, but how can we secure a future for the planet? Women were linking domestic and public violence, defining peace and security as freedom from fear and want, and defining "power" as power *to* , not power *over*: the power to foster the development of others to a position of equality, and to resolve differences equitably. As we made the film we were overwhelmed by the clarity, the strength, and the imagination of the women we met around the world. We asked ourselves: "Where are these voices in the media? Can we afford not to hear them? Why have they not been acknowledged as 'experts' on questions of war and peace?"

Let me give you examples of some realities we encountered and how they were treated by the media.

Terri and I went to film the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common, England, and were awed by its power. Now, Greenham Common has been news on and off. News of a freakish bunch of women whose actions were outrageous and theatrical, like climbing barbed wire fences to dance on the cruise missile silos under a full moon. But as the women became an international symbol and inspiration, they came to be perceived as a serious threat to the status quo. British media coverage became increasingly vicious, with lies about the women's personal lives and their hygiene, which helped incite local violence against them. When such intimidation didn't work, a kind of news blackout was employed that has made most of the world assume Greenham is over. The reality is that an ever-renewing group of women is still living there, resourcefully and even joyfully, under miserable conditions, and has been *for more than four years*. It makes me wonder where the serious investigative journalists are hiding. Perhaps they are all at press conferences where the news is managed by highly-paid spokespeople, themselves former journalists.

In June 1985 there was an International Women's Peace Conference in Halifax, which brought together approximately three hundred women from thirty-four countries. The significance of that event, to anyone who participated, was that for the first time on this scale, white middle-class women, from both the Western and Eastern-bloc countries, were listening to women of color, from many of the so-called Third World countries as well as from our own. And because we listened, we expanded our ideas about peace and security, our sense of urgency was heightened, and we changed our agenda.

Enormous political conflicts surfaced and were resolved in round-the-clock consensus meetings. It was an amazing event; I would call it life-changing for myself and most of the women who were there. And the *Globe and Mail*, which calls itself our national newspaper, reported all this with a headline that indicated *not* that we had hungrily listened and learned, but that there had been some sort of confrontation, a "power struggle" between black and white women, in which black women had one-upped uppity white women.

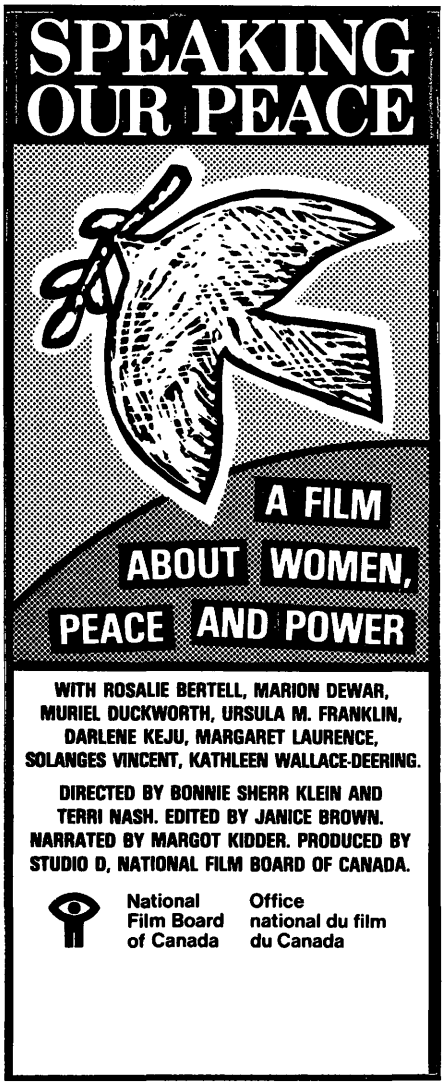
The CBC wasn't there at all. In a certain sense, and for most Canadians, this important conference never happened, never became part of our history of successful peace-making.

The following month saw Nairobi, the End of the Decade for Women Conference. Seventeen thousand women from around the world struggled to go beyond the divisions of national politics and reached consensus on essential issues for the future of the planet. We learned how little news we have of each other's lives, especially of the courageous and creative solutions to life-threatening problems. And the same thing happened. Without news coverage another reality became illusion.

One central idea of feminism is to acknowledge, respect and celebrate diversity. White male ownership and control of the media, worldwide, has created an imbalance, a distortion, which prevents us from hearing the multiplicity of voices that make up our world. The voices of women, of old people and young people, of many colors, classes, faiths, nations, geographies. Voices we must hear if we are to have an accurate picture of the world and our place in it. We appreciate of course that there is no one "objective" reality; that these different voices all speak their own passionately held truths.

Peace can only be hoped for if we use the media to learn from, to speak to, and to hear about each other's realities, and if we work together for our common survival.

New visions and new voices *can* be heard through the media. We *can* use the media to get to know each other; to promote understanding and exchange among the people of the world; and to support people, organizations, institutions and initiatives that promote positive change. Dr. Ursula M. Franklin, a professor of metallurgy at the University of Toronto and a founding member of the Voice of Women, talks about the "dream of democracy":



If we no longer have a forum for reasoned discourse, to debate matters of principle, to ask the big life-and-death questions, to chart our moral values as a people, then we've lost the dream of democracy.

That forum should be the media. We must insist that we find ways in which those things are debated and debated genuinely, both in the constituencies and in Parliament. Because the solutions only come when there's discourse.[6]

Margaret Atwood offers this poetic challenge:

We in this country should use our privileged position not as a shelter from the world's realities, but a platform from which to speak. A voice is a gift, it should be cherished and used, to utter fully human speech if possible. Powerlessness and silence go together.[7]

We *can* make peace a reality, and war the illusion it is.

*This paper is an edited version of one presented on 22 April 1986 at the International Conference on Peace and Security, "Illusions and Realities in the Nuclear Age," sponsored by McGill University. Bonnie Sherr Klein requested inclusion on the Media Panel on War, Peace and the Media when she noted no female voice was slated, and received a standing ovation for her presentation.

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[1] Spoken by the character of Howard Beale in Paddy Chayesfsky's *Network*, quoted in "Life According to TV," *Newsweek* (6 December 1982), 136.

[2] George Gerbner, "Life According to TV," *Newsweek* (6 December 1983), 138.

[3] George Gerbner, "Communication and Social Environment," *Scientific American* (September 1972), 156. Quoted in Nash, p. 2.

[4] Kathleen Shannon, "This is about Objectivity, Objections, and Some Objectives (or Some Sacred Cows are Bullshit)." Address given to Women's Network Luncheon at Annual Conference of Centre for Investigative Journalism, Toronto, 2 March 1985, 4.

[5] Statement from Studio D, "Studio D of the National Film Board of Canada: Starting the Second Decade."

[6] Ursula Franklin, outtakes from filmed interview, 1983, *Speaking Our Peace*, National Film Board of Canada,

[7] Margaret Atwood, "Amnesty International: An Address," *Second Words* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1982),

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