

CHRONIQUES

CINEMA

THE 1986 FESTIVAL OF FESTIVALS AND THE 1986 INTERNATIONAL GAY FILM FESTIVAL

Randi Spires

THE 1986 FESTIVAL OF FESTIVALS

The Toronto International Film Festival began its second decade with a feeling of optimism. In addition to the usual crop of new works, this year's festival featured a 150-film retrospective of Latin American cinema. To make matters even more exciting, this year's contingent of Canadian films was unusually strong. But by now they have had plenty of press, so we'll look at three non-Canadian films, two of which should soon get distribution to major centres.

Suzana Amaral didn't make it to NYU film school until 1968, when she was 37 years old and the mother of nine children. During the first fifteen years after her graduation she wrote and directed over forty documentaries for Brazilian television. Her first feature film, *The Hour of the Star*, was screened at the 1986 Festival of Festivals.

The Hour of the Star is the story of Macabea, a homely young girl from a small town in the northern, underdeveloped part of Brazil, who comes to Sao Paulo to find work. She's slovenly, uneducated and seemingly without basic common sense. She finds work at less than minimum wage, but she is so incompetent it's a wonder her employers keep her on — even at that bargain rate. She finds accommodation in a dingy dormitory and constantly has the sniffles. The mainstays of her diet are hot dogs and Coca Cola — "because they're cheap." There are frequent insinuations that her personal hygiene (and consequently her body odour) are less than acceptable. Macabea believes with simple-minded faith the most ridiculous radio commentaries and nourishes absurd romantic dreams.

Most of the time she remains joyless



From Forty Square Metres in Germany

and passive, possessed of an undeveloped mind, not capable of much further improvement. Her ready acceptance of Coke and hot dogs is symbolic of the ways in which colonial peoples easily discard certain aspects of their own downgraded traditional cultures, in order to identify with the prestige and prosperity of the Imperialist countries. Whatever they have displaced, Coke and hot dogs represent the dregs of American culture.

Nursing her blank-eyed dreams of Harlequin romance, the mousy Macabea presents a pathetic picture: she is such an emotionally unattractive heroine that the dismal ending seems almost merciful. Amaral's skill as a filmmaker is such that we are neither bored nor completely repelled by this character. Her intentions are two-fold: she wants to make us re-think some of the romantic notions we have about the people who make up the bulk of the third world and to encourage her fellow Brazilians to take a more active role in shaping their own destinies.

Forty Square Metres In Germany is a strongly feminist film made by Tevfik Baser, a Turkish man now living in Germany. It was filmed almost entirely within the confines of a small one-bedroom apartment occupied by a Turkish guest worker and his newly-purchased wife. The man is unhappy with his boring job and hostile toward German culture. He is probably as xenophobic about the Germans as they

are racist in relation to him. The one area of control he feels he has in life is over his wife, and he is determined to keep things as they are by isolating her within their tiny home.

Although she is curious to see the sights of the materialistic western world, she has been socialized by her own culture to submit to patriarchal authority. She is as frightened by her husband's threats of violence as she is by the buzzing confusion of the city. Her first few tentative forays out of the apartment end in terror — long before she reaches the bottom landing.

The husband's casual brutality is shown in a number of ways. On one occasion, he arrives home from work sexually aroused and demands to be serviced. When she replies that she is busy, he insists on screwing her doggie style — even though she is busy scrubbing the floor. Throughout the film, whenever they have sexual contact she appears to be either bored or in pain. There is no lovemaking here. Knowing he will not permit her to go out alone, she repeatedly asks her husband to take her out for a walk, pleading tearfully that she feels like an animal in a cage. Although she had to work much harder back home, in the fields and in the house, she misses the camaraderie of other women. In order to silence her, he promises to take her out next week: we realize far sooner than she does that he has no intention of ever doing so. The only moment of real tenderness between them comes after she announces to him that she is pregnant. Delighted at this proof of his virility, he says "bear me a son and I'll take you out wherever you want." One of the warmest scenes in the film comes when the wife makes eye contact through her apartment window with a young crippled girl who lives across the courtyard. The girl is confined to her home by a physical malady, the older woman by a cultural malaise.

In other hands such a film might have



Lizzie Borden, director of *Working Girls*

been unbearably claustrophobic and depressing. But Baser lets us feel both the woman's confinement and the rage that seethes beneath her seemingly docile exterior. Having gone through this harrowing experience, she learns to become slightly more assertive. When she finally walks out into the daylight without a knowledge of the language, the laws or the customs of the country she is truly in for the first time, we begin to fear for her. Alone in Germany or back home in Turkey, her prospects for happiness are not good.

Working Girls was written and directed by Lizzie Borden, whose first feature, *Born In Flames*, was a sprawling, sometimes stylish feminist fable. In contrast, *Working Girls* is a low-key look at the lives of prostitutes operating out of a high-class Manhattan brothel.

The most significant thing about this film is its matter-of-fact tone: prostitution is presented as a job like any other — except that it pays much better than most and the women can set their own hours. Most films about prostitution either romanticize the sex trade or focus on the women as victims. In this film one of the hookers is a student working her way through college. Another is a photographer who finds that with this job she can make ends meet and still have time to practice her art, something a 'respectable' but low-paying nine-to-five job would not permit her to do.

There is little danger (these are not street whores, after all) and no glamour (they aren't call girls either). But they do get to work in a clean, well-lighted place that has more the feel of an informal office than a chamber of lasciviousness; in fact, the problems the women have with their Madame, Susan, are similar to the ones any secretary might have with her office manager. Although the sex is perfunctory, certain illusions are maintained: throughout the day the same rituals (greetings, a drink, washing up) are performed over and over again, providing a comforting frame-

work for patrons and employees alike.

Borden's achievement in *Working Girls* is to make us rethink the significance of prostitution in a society in which most women have few opportunities to make a decent living. The film also makes one wonder whether traditional media images of the whore with a heart of gold or the hooker as tragic victim serve an ideological purpose — to divide women into good girls and bad, safe women and an endangered species.

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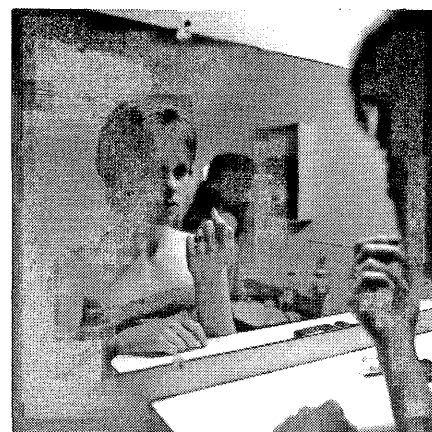
THE 1986 INTERNATIONAL GAY FILM FESTIVAL

"Inverted Image," Toronto's first international gay film festival, was held at Harbourfront 7-15 November 1986. Most of the work shown was made by gay men — in part because lesbians, like all women, have a harder time raising the large sums of money needed to make movies. Nonetheless — and despite recurring episodes of misogyny — many of the men's works ask some interesting questions about gender formation and other social and political issues.

Choosing Children, a 1985 documentary made by two American women, looks at the lives of lesbians who choose to have children after coming out. Humour is used to deal with a number of serious issues, such as how being raised in a lesbian household will affect the sexual orientation of the children. "My mother is heterosexual and it had no effect on me," says one woman. What she doesn't add is, that in a non-heterosexist society, such a question wouldn't even arise.

While most younger children seem content to have two mothers instead of a parent of each sex, one slightly older boy talks with some hostility about his harassment by schoolyard peers. Later, a social worker reports that child welfare authorities intervene more readily and to a greater extent if the mother is a lesbian. A number of openly lesbian mothers speak of being singled out for shabby treatment by medical personnel, while they were in hospital to give birth. Other issues discussed in the film include child custody, visitation and adoption rights, dealing with grandparents and, of course, getting pregnant.

Not surprisingly, given the social pressures surrounding child-rearing, one of the happiest situations appears to be the one closest to the most traditional: a



From *Working Girls*

lesbian has had a child fathered by a gay man who wanted to parent. Both parents are in stable same-sex relationships. The little girl alternates weekly between households having, in effect, two mothers and two fathers (a situation not unlike that of the children of divorced heterosexual couples with joint custody). Although the child's mother originally intended to raise the child on her own, she now says she is grateful for the father's participation and the time off it gives her — time she can use to maintain her relationship with her lover.

On Guard is a 1983 Australian thriller about a group of lesbians attempting to destroy the data banks of a nefarious multinational corporation, Utero Inc., which is engaged in clandestine research into reproductive engineering. The company's aim is to give corporate males control over human reproduction. The women's plans are extra-dangerous because they intend to eradicate ten years' research and to do some serious political education via the mass media. The final outcome is never seriously in doubt, but along the way the film looks at such concepts as collective dynamics, household tensions, and the self-sacrifices women are taught they should make for their children.

Legal entanglements and other problems eventuated in *Times Square*, Allan Moyle's 1980 story of two troubled teenagers loose on the streets of New York, bombing at the box office. The film deserves a far better fate. It explores sexuality, class, consumerism and personal autonomy in the context of the relationship between two young women, one the daughter of a prominent city official, the other a barely literate ward of the state. Interestingly, although the lesbians in the audience readily identified a gay subtext, the heterosexual spectators completely missed it. In fact, certain explicit love scenes originally in

the movie were cut to facilitate commercial distribution: intuitive understandings do at times cross gender lines, splitting instead in terms of sexual orientation.

The Cheat, by French director Yannic Bellon, a woman, takes the conventions of good old-fashioned *film noir* and turns them slightly askew. The story revolves around a respectable, happily-married bisexual police inspector. The uncertain hours of his job have enabled him to keep his gay sexual encounters sleazy, simple and unnoticed. Things become complicated once he falls in love with Bernard, a musician in a disreputable nightclub.

Bellon deploys a number of the visual conceits used to express male/female sexual dynamics to expose their underlying power dimensions. For instance, after Bernard leaves the police station for the first time, he walks down a long corridor. As he does so, the camera's lens — and by extension the inspector's gaze — is fixed steadily on Bernard's tightly-clad behind. Usually, when it's a man ogling a woman, the implications of the look are as much about power and possession as they are about erotic desire; in this case, the power differentials are lessened but not entirely removed.

The first time the two men make love, the inspector flops on the bed and dispassionately watches as the shy boy faces the wall and undresses. Once naked, Bernard hesitatingly approaches, then embraces his still fully-clothed (and thereby more powerful) lover. The entire scene is reminiscent of dozens of heterosexual screen encounters.

In traditional patriarchal mythology and *film noir* imagery the feminine represents an evil that must be subdued, either through direct physical domination or through acquiescence to patriarchal social mores. If this order is transgressed, either by the woman or her lover, then she must suffer or even die. In *The Cheat* the broken taboo is predominantly homosexuality, rather than adultery. In the end, Bernard, still assuming the female role, sacrifices himself for his beloved inspector.

Paradise is Not for Sale is a Danish documentary about four transsexuals. The three male-to-female transsexuals all seem gloriously happy with their remade bodies and lives, but the single female-to-male changeover presents a more complex picture. As a girl in a Catholic school, he fell in love with women. Now bearded and muscular, he has been married twice. His constructed

penis is not fully functional but, as he says, "as far as women are concerned, a penis is absolutely not necessary." For someone unconventional enough to change his sex, he holds surprisingly traditional views of social relations: "I think being pursued by a woman is shameful," he says. "I think women should stay at home." Later, he adds, "All the girls I've dated have been absolutely normal."

He adopted a masculine ethos in other areas too. He says he "always wanted to have the status of a man in society... I don't like to be touched very much. I don't like my body. I like to be in control." Despite all this, he tentatively suggests that, faced with the same set of decisions today, he might well choose to be a lesbian.

Perhaps his conservatism is a key factor here. Concerned with fitting into mainstream ideology, yet finding his attraction to women irrevocable, he may subconsciously have seen bodily mutilation as a means of 'normalizing' his sexual desires. In a post-Stonewall world where lesbians and gays are more visible and somewhat more accepted, not as many people may require such drastic measures in order to feel comfortable with who they are.

LE DECLIN DU PATRIARCAT ET L'IMPRESARIO FEMINISTE

dans *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*
de Denys Arcand

Angéline Martel

On voit *Le Déclin* un peu comme on a vu *My Dinner with André* de Louis Malle. La parole analyse, l'esprit contemple le spectacle, mais à une différence près. Ce qui était chez Louis Malle un discours intellectuel de premier ordre devient chez Denys Arcand l'occasion de poser l'antithèse ou l'envers de la médaille; de l'esprit au corps, de l'intellectuel au sexuel. C'est donc le spectacle d'une sexualité contemporaine; peut-être de notre sexualité en tant qu'individus, qu'il nous présente. Dans la salle, les rires fusent, parfois de bon coeur, parfois avec gêne. Aussitôt sorti(e)s, on veut en parler et c'est là la plus grande qualité du film de Denys Arcand. Il sait nous pousser à placer au grand jour des expériences de sexualité gardées trop souvent cachées. Cette parole mène à la prise de conscience et

nous continuons à grossir le fleuve de mots que le film provoque. La réaction verbale sert à prouver le titre du film: le déclin. C'est un déclin des tabous sur les expériences sexuelles, déclin que le féminisme a amorcé et que le film de Denys Arcand vient favoriser.

Le discours public sur *Le Déclin* tente de circonscrire les limites du réel et de cerner les éléments de fantaisie, voir même de pré-vision. Denys Arcand nous décrit-il la sexualité d'aujourd'hui, ou la société de demain? Pour les femmes, la question devient la suivante: Est-ce vraiment le déclin d'un empire (qui nous avait réduites au quasi-silence et au rang des manoeuvres) que nous présente Denys Arcand ou n'est-ce qu'une mutation (si mutation il y a) du statu quo? La notion de déclin, au coeur du débat public et de nos conversations s'avère cependant être la clef de différentes perceptions du film.

L'histoire du film est banale: quatre femmes se détendent et se font des "muscles" au centre sportif de l'Université pendant que leurs hommes préparent le repas. La mise en scène démontre un désir évident de renverser les rôles traditionnels. Le tout est fortement assaisonné de paroles, interrompues parfois par un plongeon dans la piscine ou par une étrange visite au chalet.

Tout ce monde se retrouve enfin pour savourer le coulibiac si "amoureuxment" préparé, c'est-à-dire préparé en parlant de "cul" sous-entendant "sexe sans liens émotifs" (un autre renversement des valeurs traditionnelles). La soirée atteindra son apogée lorsque Louise (Dorothy Berryman) découvrira l'infidélité chronique de son "époux" (Rémy Girard).

Le matin apporte un bilan des liens entre ces huit êtres. Louise est anéantie par l'infidélité de Rémy; elle croyait à