

THE BARNARD OCCASIONAL PAPERS ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

Volume II, number 2 (Spring 1987)

Edited and Published by The Barnard Women's Center Staff

Temma Kaplan, Director
Janie Kritzman, Associate Director
Robin Ferguson, Assistant to the Director
Lucinda Manning, Manager of the Resource Collection and
Barnard College Archivist
Jane Foress-Betty, Special Assistant

Editorial Board

Elisabeth Friedman
Elizabeth Goldschmidt
Ubah Hussan
Eno Jackson
Elea Kemler
Jennifer Kern
Lexi Leban

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Experiencing Imagination/Imagining Experience: Science Fiction, Madness, Feminism, by Thyrsa Goodeve.....	2-18
A 60's/80's Comparison of Two Feminist Texts: Monique Wittig's <u>Les Guerilleres</u> and Lizzie Borden's <u>Born in Flames</u> , by Lisa Bloom	19-32
Historians who only take scissors and paste: cut, vamp; a book they make: A. Murphy <u>The Grecian Daughter</u> , by Paije Baty.....	33-41
Some Ship thing Who Sang (even human voices), in the foreground space and a lake, by Susan Gevirtz.....	42-56

"A 60s/80s Comparison of Two Feminist Texts: Monique Wittig's Les Guerilleres and Lizzie Borden's Born in Flames"

© Lisa Bloom

Part of what makes Science Fiction an interesting genre to investigate is the way it sets up a different kind of relationship with its readers in the way it literalizes language. To understand how SF's peculiar literalization of metaphor works, I will quote from Samuel Delaney's article "Generic Protocols." He gives the example:

"Then her world exploded." He writes: "Should such a string of words appear in a mundane fiction story, we would more than likely read it as an emotionally muzzy metaphor about the specifically emotional aspect of some incident in a female character's life. In SF, we must retain the margin to read this sentence in such a way that a planet, belonging to some woman, blew up." [Delaney, p. 177]

Delaney's example suggests the potential of SF as a genre to construct new forms of social imagination away from a given norm. Although the two works that I will focus on - Monique Wittig's Les Guerilleres and Lizzie Borden's Born in Flames - are not exactly SF, like SF they are both constructed to upset ordinary reading practices. Like SF, each of these works sets up an ethnographic

"A 60s/80s Comparison of Two Feminist Texts: Monique Wittig's
Les Guerilleres and Lizzie Borden's Born in Flames

© Lisa Bloom

Part of what makes Science Fiction an interesting genre to investigate is the way it sets up a different kind of relationship with its readers in the way it literalizes language. To understand how SF's peculiar literalization of metaphor works, I will quote from Samuel Delaney's article "Generic Protocols." He gives the example:

"Then her world exploded." He writes: "Should such a string of words appear in a mundane fiction story, we would more than likely read it as an emotionally muzzy metaphor about the specifically emotional aspect of some incident in a female character's life. In SF, we must retain the margin to read this sentence in such a way that a planet, belonging to some woman, blew up." [Delaney, p. 177]

Delaney's example suggests the potential of SF as a genre to construct new forms of social imagination away from a given norm. Although the two works that I will focus on - Monique Wittig's Les Guerilleres and Lizzie Borden's Born in Flames - are not exactly SF, like SF they are both constructed to upset ordinary reading practices. Like SF, each of these works sets up an ethnographic

encounter with a fictive world. As a result, it is possible for the reader or spectator to envision a different gendering of subjectivity and a different conceptualization of social existence than that of the present historical moment.

Wittig's poetic invention literalizes women's violence in order to redirect the reader to a different vision of both female sexuality and social behavior. In her construction of a world after patriarchy in Les Guerilleres, compulsory heterosexuality is abolished and women no longer have to be obedient and good. Borden turns reality into fantasy through her literalization of the present in Born in Flames. The film, although set in the future - ten years after a Social-Democratic cultural "revolution" in America - appears very much like the present. The documentary look of the film and Borden's use of "real" women, not professional actresses, gives the film the feel of the here and now but also works to displace the spectator's present and put it in the past. This has the effect of making the audience question the possibilities for change in the dominant patriarchal order inherent in their own present, and of seeing their own temporality as historically as well as socially constructed.

Monique Wittig's Les Guerilleres and Lizzie Borden's Born in Flames are unlikely pairing because each come out

of different forms (poetics and film), different historical moments (1969 and 1983) and different cultures (France and the US). Yet I think a comparison is worthwhile. Both describe the overthrow of male patriarchy through guerilla-type attacks, both are fictions because total revolution isn't possible, and therefore both serve an utopian function in which the politics of images is foregrounded. My purpose is an historical reconstruction of an inquiry into these two works, separately and in relation to each other. This will enable me to distinguish between what counts as dealing with the future for women in some genuinely alternative way and what forms such critiques of patriarchy take at different historical moments. Such a juxtaposition might also be useful in understanding what kinds of political images we are trying to build now and how they are different from what they were in 1969 (when Les Guerilleres was published).

Since my own reading of Les Guerilleres deals with the book with a different cultural paradigm from the way it was understood in its own time, I will first try to contextualize it historically.

Written in the political climate of the May 1968 student-worker revolution in France, Wittig's Les Guerilleres was published in French in 1969 before the

French women's liberation movement was officially launched.

Translated into English in 1973, Les Guerilleres was hailed in the US as a feminist manifesto, and was considered "the most widely read and frequently cited non-American feminist work of the 70s." [Wenzel: p. 265]

Part of the effectiveness of Wittig's battle-cry in Les Guerilleres during the 1970s in the US context, had to do with Wittig's revolutionary sensibility combined with her experimentation with language. Although Wittig understood that language for women was not innocent, she also realized that changing language alone was not sufficient to transform society - violence and rifles were also needed. Wittig's understanding that change could only come about through a combination of linguistic and material acts distinguished her work from other French feminists of the mid 70s, writing under the rubric of "écriture feminine," whose concern focussed exclusively on dismantling patriarchy by dismantling patriarchal language. Although Wittig and the group around "écriture feminine" eventually became polarized in France, what their work had in common was the belief that it was necessary to change language, and through this change, women would be able to extend the possibilities of feminist imaginations. Wittig's women in Les Guerilleres say: "The language you speak poisons your glottis tongue

palate lip." "The language you speak is made up of words that are killing you." And so, "the vocabulary of every language is to be examined, modified, turned upside down." [Wittig, p. 114] Les Guerilleres was one of the first works to take issue with language as male defined and to find and use an appropriate female language.

Les Guerilleres not only tried to transform women's writing practices, but it also challenged the traditional process of reading practices. The role of the feminaries in Les Guerilleres shared some affinities with the little red books for the Maoist cultural revolution during this period in France. As a spokeswoman, for the radical French group "Feministes revolutionnaires" in 1970, Wittig helped organize women in a type of antihierarchical structure in order to change the relationship between women. The idea of dividing women into small groups, to prevent the most skilled speaker from taking over, meshed with an aspect of Maoism rooted in the French political context of that period. When Wittig's book was translated into English, parts from it were read orally in many American Consciousness Raising Groups. Experienced sensorily and publicly, rather than privately, the process of reading Les Guerilleres became part of the practice of changing community understanding. In this way Les Guerilleres provided an alternative model in which art

and life could be perceived as continuous. The text gave concrete material expression to the desire to extend the boundaries of artistic expression for political rather than dry formalist aesthetic reasons.

It is now 1986. What could be read in 1969 as political fervor, in 1986 I read as aesthetic excess. In Les Guerilleres it is the moment of the women's revolution in which they throw off their male oppressors to begin a new era that is free from oppression. Although a majority of the first part of the book takes place after the revolution has come about, the division between the two periods is not that clearly demarcated. Excluded is the period before the revolution, except as a means of outlining the nature of the super-oppression. Wittig writes: "Men in their way have adored you like a goddess or else burned you at their stakes or else relegated you to their service in their backyards...they have always in their speech dragged you in the dirt...possessed violated taken subdued humiliated you to their hearts' content." [Wittig: p. 100] In the text men, now declared the enemy, but also referred to as "domineering oppressors," have cunningly manipulated women in every way possible. Within this scenario women had no agency under such pre-revolutionary oppressive conditions. A compromise between the sexes seems impossible. Anything men do at the time

of the revolution is to be mistrusted. As we find in the text: "Now, the male beseigers are near the walls," saying familiar things - that the war of the women is "a slave revolt, a revolt against nature." [Wittig: p. 106] "Men press for their own indispensability, for without them there would be no one to make and pilot airplanes, no one to write books or to govern." [Wittig: p. 97] Coldly enraged, the women accuse: "He robbed you of that passion for knowledge...He has stolen your wisdom...He has invented your history." [Wittig: pp. 110-111] The importance of unity is one of the dominant tropes throughout the book. Frequent pages carry women's first names from every country in the world. Both the plural "elles" and the symbol "O" of the vaginal orifice are used to designate the female collective.

The emphasis on women's extreme oppression before the revolution makes their present radical and separatist position seem like a natural outcome. Women seem to have no other choice. The absence of specific details to outline the precise forms of oppression prior to the revolution is in keeping with the mythical key pervading throughout the book. In a sense the book is a celebration of the women's success in the revolution. Throughout, there is no real ongoing struggle between the men and women, although the battle between the sexes is the point

of the book. Instead the women seem to have the power and control over men from the beginning. The women's victory is also never doubted at any moment, nor do the women ever question the legitimacy of their claim to power during or after the revolution. At this point it is all self-evident. As a result, the extreme violence in the book during both these periods has to be understood as an outcome of the women's absolute victory and not out of any uncertainty of their position. The violence unleashed through the revolution against men is a form of fierce revenge not for recent provocations against women but rather for the way men - their language and texts - have placed limits on women throughout the history of humankind.

The women get a dizzying thrill from exercising their first taste of power through violence. Wittig writes: "Their violence is extreme. They crash into each other with bravura. No one can restrain them." [Wittig: p. 99] This euphoria is apparent in the overwritten style of writing. Wittig uses an abundance of verbs and adjectives to demonstrate the boundless energy of women's imagination. This overabundance is also manifested through women's privileged connection with an overflowing, animistic nature. Wittig's wrenching apart of familiar syntax, combined with the powerful hypnotic effect of the

repetitious incantation of words, mesmerises and reduces imagination to a single passion. As she writes: "The birds the swimming sirens the translucent spans the wings the green suns the green suns the violent flat grasslands the cries the laughs the movements." [Wittig: p. 1] The complex connection implied between violence, women's sexuality, and Wittig's poetic invention seems to endorse two seemingly opposite states - one which is empowering and another that is enslaving. Violence, as a vehicle of sexual expression for women, serves as a liberatory component in the text, yet it also sanctions death as a basis for establishing solidarity between women.

Better for you to see your guts in the sun and utter the death-rattle than to live a life that anyone can appropriate...If happiness consists in the possession of something, then hold fast to this sovereign happiness - to die. [Wittig: p. 116]

Wittig's imagined violence although cathartic when confined to the domain of metaphor, might not be as desirable when translated into the order of material reality. Although Wittig's intention is to transform sexual energy into a political force, to change the value of action as well as words "to write violence outside the text in another language," [Wittig: p. 143] her celebration of an ideal eroticism and death and dismemberment is palpable only within the realm of

aesthetics. This results in a substitution rather than an impetus for real change. In a similar way, her ethics of violence privileges revolutionary ecstasy over genuine critical reflection. For, in Wittig's realm of the spectacular the only difference between women is in terms of color or texture (red and blue bodies). Her desire for aesthetic unity makes her unable seriously to address questions of difference amongst women, such as race. Her fantasy of wholeness "the exultant unity of the Internationale" and, dream of a common language in which all are "moved by a common impulse" [Wittig: p. 144] is an illusion. In the end, the type of aesthetics she practices turns people into things. Because her ideal is an abstraction, she has consistently to seek the perfect choreography to express it. As a result, women are made in form, or part of a design.

The two armies confront each other. The embattled women stand motionless, awaiting the order to move forward. In their hands they hold kites the color of their army. One lot is red, the others are blue. The kites are stationary, aligned vertically with their heads. The trumpets are sounded. They attack. All at once there is a confusion of red and blue kites, of red and blue bodies. The kites collide violently. Some escape with a great rustling. A red kite is motionless over the sea. A combatant runs along the beach trying to gain possession of it. A band of blue kites escape towards the dunes, they are pursued by red kites. Laughter and singing are heard. Some of the women, deprived of their kites, are stretched out in the middle of the battleground, bleeding. [Wittig: p. 84]

In the staging of a feminist revolution, there is a

movement from the poetics of the late 60s to film of the 80s, from the realm of the spectacular of the written text to the destabilization of spectacularity in the very medium of the spectacle itself. Unlike the nostalgic, primitivist imagination of Wittig, Lizzie Borden's 1983 film Born in Flames adopts the tone of its contemporary urban setting and specific historical moment. The ethnic culture and dominant presence of the media in the everyday life of New York City is integrated into the fabric of the film. Born in Flames is a post-Guerilleres text that both encodes moves of the 60s and yet - makes into something else by turning the women's revolution in Born in Flames into a scripted and staged media event. Borden shows that the possibility for women to "redirect meaning and reclaim language" [Borden: p. 16] in the 80s is inextricably connected to women's ability to intervene in the dominant media. Born in Flames, is an example of such a feminist intervention. I think that part of its subversive value lies in the way it masquerades as dominant cinema transgressing the coders of dominant culture. The film's quick pace and resemblance to mainstream cinema is disjunctive. It creates a tension between appearing like the dominant cinema yet being something else which is genuinely radical.

Borden examines the complex interplay of gender, race,

and class in practices of domination and resistance as she makes her audience the film's primary concern and sets up multiple points of identification in which "a white middle class audience was not the only audience." [Friedberg: p. 43] What this accomplishes is - I quote Borden again - "Instead of telling the viewer that he or she could not belong, the viewer was supposed to be a repository for all these different points of view and all these different styles of rhetoric. Hopefully, one would be able to identify with one position but be able to evaluate all of the various positions presented in the film." [Friedberg: p. 43] Borden's film offers a real alternative to Wittig's coercive vision of a feminist utopia. In Wittig's version, violence is used as a means to establish a shared discourse between women.

Teresa de Lauretis expands on the question of difference addressed in Borden's film. In her essay "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema," she writes:

The originality of this film's project is its representations of women as a social subject and a site of differences; differences which are not purely sexual or merely racial, economic, or (sub)cultural, but all of these together and often enough in conflict with one another...What one takes away after seeing this film is the image of heterogeneity in the female social subject the sense of a distance from dominant cultural models and of an internal division within women that remains, not in spite of but concurrently with the provisional

unity of any concerted political action. [de Lauretis:
p. 168]

To conclude, I think Lizzie Borden's Born in Flames is a model of a critical text that imagines a possible future for women in some genuinely alternative way - that does the work of demystification and deconstruction, yet, at the same time points in a direction away from a romanticist discourse. There are many important differences. Borden's film deals with women as social subjects, not as 'spectacular' forms. Unlike Wittig, it takes in as much as it can of the present/ and, in relation to that argues for the possibility of a future of radical difference which is shown not as oppositional. Born in Flames foregrounds different kinds of unity, identity, difference and action. At the same time, its view of the future sees the collective as a possibility.

End Notes

- Borden, Lizzie
1983 "Script for Born in Flames," in Heresies no. 16.
- Delaney, Samuel R.
1980 "Generic Protocols: Science Fiction and Mundane" in
The Technological Imagination: Coda Press.
- De Lauretis, Teresa
1985 "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's
Cinema," New German Critique no. 34.
- Friedberg, Anne
1984 "An Interview with Filmmaker Lizzie Borden", Women and
Performance vol. 1:2.
- Wenzel, Helene Vivienne
1981 "The Text and Body Politics," Feminist Studies vol.
7:2.
- Wittig, Monique
1969 Les Guerilleres Paris: Editions de Minuit; trans.
David Le Vay, Avon, 1973 (quotes from English
translation).