

## THE SEVENTH INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FILM FESTIVAL MADRID 8-17 NOVEMBER 1991

**Daniela Bagozzi.**

The seventh Madrid Women's Film Festival was held between the 8th and 17th of November. It is an event organised by the Ateneo Feminista - a section of the government sponsored body Instituto de la Mujer, set up to promote gender equality in various spheres of cultural life.

The aim of the festival is to present films by women about women. Some of these works are never shown on the commercial circuits and many are low-budget, independent or state funded projects.

Each year the festival presents a general collection of films and videos from various countries as well as a special section dedicated to a particular director or group of film-makers. This year's special segment was dedicated to black women's cinema from 1982 to the present. There was also a retrospective of Italian director Liliana Cavani and a special tribute to women film-makers in the history of Spanish cinema. This article will concentrate on the dominant themes to come out of the festival by looking at a few films which were particularly representative of the general mood of the event.

The films by black directors were among the most political within the festival as they raised issues of race as well as gender. The majority were directed and often produced by women living in predominantly white Britain or North America. Two interesting short films by the Australian Tracey Moffatt were also presented.

The conflict inherent in the experience of blacks living in white societies seemed to be a recurrent theme in the black directors' work. Two poignant examples of this theme were Ngozi Onwurah's "Coffee Coloured Children" and Tracey Moffatt's "Nightcries". The first of these is a short autobiographical piece on what it was like for the director and her siblings to be the black children of a white woman. Born in England out of an interracial marriage the children had to watch as their mother, abandoned by her Nigerian husband, fought alone against the rampant racism of people who considered her a "nigger-lover" and, in their eyes, an enemy of white British culture. On a more individual level, the children felt complete outsiders in a society where all the role models were white. Stylistically, the film presented a few problems - probably due to low funds and the extremely personal nature of the material. The sequences of the three children trying to rub their skin colour off with kitchen detergents, for example, are rather long, and the self-celebratory "black if beautiful" ending to the film come across as a little forced. However, this short work raises an important issue particularly in a British context where inter-racial marriages are not as common or accepted as in places such as the United States.

Tracey Moffatt's film "Nightcries" is a short visual and sound poem with a loose but effective narrative thread. The setting is somewhere on a deserted Australian

coast location and the protagonists are a middle-aged Aboriginal woman and her dying white foster mother. Through the juxtaposition of the present with photographs of the past and flashbacks we become aware that the relationship between the two is close but not entirely comfortable. The old woman is partly deaf and needs constant guidance in the simplest and most intimate functions of everyday life. The mixture of tenderness, annoyance and sometimes physical repulsion the Aboriginal feels towards her conveys the subtle conflict between her feelings for the person who has raised and nurtured her, and the cruel reality at the basis of their relationship.

The film is shot in a studio where the lighting, staging and vivid colours create a deliberately artificial setting which heightens the surrealist quality of the Australian landscape. This artificiality works as metaphor for the social artifice at the basis of the relationship between two women who are not related - in fact belong to two different races - but have been thrust together by the inhumane fostering laws imposed on the children of Aborigines until the sixties.

Another of the principal themes to come out of the festival was sexuality. Anglo-Indian director Pratibha Parmar's film "Khush" was a documentary with interviews about lesbians and gays of South Asian origins living in Britain or North America. Juxtaposed to the interviews are the images of two young Indian women sensually reclining on cushions and watching old footage of a traditional Indian dance projected on a screen.

In the dance - representative of old cultural rituals - men and women play out their traditional gender roles. The interviews, on the other hand, show contemporary young people who have broken away from conventional roles, are politically aware and feel confident about their choice of lifestyle. Although some of the interviews tended to concentrate on the double stigma attached to being homosexual and black, the point of the film was to dispel the myth that Asian homosexuals - women in particular - are a silent and passive minority, but just as strong in their solidarity and as politically active as their Western counterparts.

Australian director Pauline Chan's short films "Hang up" and "The Space between the Door and the Floor" look at sexuality as it is influenced by contemporary living and the way culture has determined certain differences between men and women. In "The Space..." the man and woman in a middle-aged couple are too involved in their respective sexual and romantic fantasies to bother about each other. The woman spends every evening on the telephone trying to get a line to a popular radio talk-show presented by a man she claims to have met and loved in the past. The husband, on the other hand, fantasises about a receptionist at work with whom his only contact has been a series of sexually allusive telephone conversations for two years. Although both are looking for romance and a break from the monotony of their lives, the protagonists are too alienated to seek a solution in each other. The criticism falls more heavily on the man whose fantasy is based on pure fetish - the receptionist's unshaved arm-pits - whereas the woman, whose dream is the eternal love with someone from her youth, has more success in her quest.

In "Hang up" we find a demystification of the male sexual ethos portrayed in most mainstream films. When a man and a woman meet for a one-night stand it is the woman who controls the situation leaving the man, again, victim of his own fetish. The refreshing aspect of Pauline Chan's work is that, although there are clear

criticisms of clichés of male sexuality and domination, her stories are couched in comical situations and her parodic treatment of the material alleviates the darker side of the message, leaving room for a certain optimism. Impressive too is Chan's stylised "film noir" approach consisting of mostly black and white photography and a skilful play of light and shadow.

Not all the film-makers were quite as generous in their portrayals of male-female relations, however. Some of the films dealing with this subject had that flag-waving, almost vindictive streak which is often found in early feminist expression of the sixties and seventies - whether in film, literature or other media. This could well be due, in some cases, to the lack of funds and research facilities which make conditions for some of these film-makers extremely difficult.

Nevertheless, the festival presented a wide spectrum of work and gave a voice to many women whose films might never be seen otherwise. It is a good initiative which has been gaining more ground and publicity in recent years and, so far, the only one of its type in Spain

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