

My Trip to New York

S A R A D I A M O N D

RECENTLY I WENT TO NEW YORK for the *Viewpoints* conference on women, culture and public media. It offered those in attendance a valuable overview of the independent media voices of American feminism. The panelists included American women from all over the United States, a sprinkling of Europeans and Third World women and a handful of Canadians. The event spoke both to the history of women's efforts and forms in the independent media, to the ways that women are effectively redefining their images now and to the ever-present and manipulative efforts of the consciousness industry. That the conference was a free event guaranteed a large turnout of female media consumers, young women, students and producers. As well as workshops there were screenings of clips from panelists' works. Events ran simultaneously — the following description is impressionistic, based on the panels that I attended.

While *Viewpoints* emphasized women's efforts in constructing subjecthood within alternative venues, public and private broadcast were posed primarily as locations where women are constructed as 'other.' The first framework allowed a broad array of production to be described and explored within the limited two-day time frame. Alternative production panels ranged from lesbian fictions, to low budget production, to redefining family experience and structures, to labour and technology, and to an historical view of female language in media.

Panels that analysed women's position in the mass media included those about the economics of sexism, the impact of women as cultural consumers,

the politics of "cracking the media mystique" and women as subjects and audience for right-wing media. The absence of women who have chosen to work within mass media, including PBS, was unfortunate. It made it difficult to assess the impact of feminism within the central structures of ideological control, on both workers and concepts, retaining instead the perspec-

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tive of the outside looking in. Mass and alternative media appeared as two opposing poles, their mutual impact on one another, both subversive and enlightening was not part of the discourse.

Despite this criticism, the conference presented a strong showing of production and thinking by the assembled women. More than any Canadian art conference that I've ever attended, women of colour were well represented on panels and as moderators. It was not a context where one or two women were made to carry the discourse about racism in an overwhelmingly white context. Nor were women of colour pressed to always address racism as an issue. They could talk about issues in their work and the work of other women that assumed their presence and vision as media producers. This may have meant, as suggested by some voices at the closing plenary, that although women of colour were present on all of the panels, there was no structured framework to deal with the specific impacts of racism and to evolve solutions to discriminatory access and related issues.

Cheryl Chisholm of the Black Women's Health Project opened the first plenary with an analysis of Black people and then Black women as cultural consumers, noting the disproportionate numbers of Blacks in the viewing audience relative to whites and the notable dearth of Black programming reflective of their lifestyles and issues. She described different readings of mass media Black images by Black viewers, for example *Amos and Andy*, described alternatively as satire about Blacks, satire about whites, overt racism, etc. She cautioned social activists against self-righteousness as a stance. Chisholm emphasized the assertive power of self-production versus the defensive position of organizing against "this word or that person."

Parminder Vir, who has worked extensively with the Greater London Council (recently abolished by the Thatcher government) spoke to the need for Black women to own and control the means of media production. She noted that Third World women have begun to produce works that give them access to a broader women's community and at times are tantamount to survival. Thus, women in India are using video to organize against dowry deaths, for example. On the same panel, Judith Williamson, also from England, argued that the left and feminism should not explore consumerism as a place of radical intervention. While it is true that women make up some 80% of consumers and that advertising is geared to them, publicity itself is unreformable. Its job is to sell within a capitalist market and it would shift to reflect changing images, but would not drop its fundamental nature. Michelle Mattelart spoke to the power of soap opera as a

form — it coincides with the domestic work cycle, encloses the unresolved narrative structure of daily life and presents emotional conflict and resolution, the feminine domain.

The "Making History" panel included speakers whose work spans very different styles, yet the panelists judiciously validated work that was experimental, narrative or documentary. The central theme was the importance of constituting women as subject. Yvonne Rainer has done this through removing her female character's image from the screen but retaining her voice and influence, thus defeating the colonizing gaze. She spoke to the debates on narrative as a male construct — while the theorizations are extreme these provide tools in producing media works, allowing the artist to disrupt narrative and move between documentary and constructed texts. Michelle Parkinson has produced film and video documentaries such as *Gotta Make This Journey*, with Sweet Honey and the Rock that "fill the void" and "validate." Parkinson stressed that "politics is not just ideology but our everyday life," a truism in the women's movement, but relevant to what discourses are ultimately validated within film.

Also on this panel were Margaret Randall and Lynne Tillman. Randall spoke of her persecution by the American government. She has spent many years of her life living in Mexico, Cuba and Nicaragua and has documented the experiences of Latin American women. Now, the American government has refused her application to return to her birthplace, the United States. In his findings, the judge, a Vietnam veteran, stated, "Her writing advocates the doctrines of world communism," using as a rationale Randall's sympathetic portraits of Cuban and Nicaraguan women and her opposition to American policy in Vietnam. Tillman discussed her film *Committed*, an independent production that centered on the life of Frances Farmer, a work that places the actress within the social structures of law, psychology, Hollywood, family, as neither role model nor victim.

I participated in the "Subject of Politics: Women and Right-Wing Media" workshop, presenting a paper on the reactionary implications of state censorship and the right-wing/feminist/governmental alliance that



has brought it into being. Faye Ginsberg discussed her anthropological work with anti-choice American women's groups. She argued that at least some of these women identify with feminism on other issues and are attracted to the "pro-life" movement because of its ideology of nurturance and rejection of "me generation" ideas. Ginsberg and Julia Lesage, the third panelist, posed the right as heterogeneous, as opposed to monolithic. Lesage provided her insights into Christian television, which she has monitored for many years and entertained us all with her renditions of various preachers. She noted that it is one of the few places where working class Americans can see themselves in the mass media.

The final panel I attended was "Cracking the Media Mystique: Images and Politics." Serafina Bathrick of Hunter College, where the conference was located, presented a slide series of American turn of the century graphic and sculptural images. In these, women, representing culture, preside over telegraphy as it is strung across

the Prairies; stand regally over the Columbia World Fair; two female figures kiss over the newly planned Panama Canal. In these images women are objects of desire and motherhood, not subjects of desire. Bathrick called for the integration of the protective mother with the assertive father. She ended with a description of *Aliens: Two* and asked the difficult question: is the heroine a truly integrated, un-objectified woman or is she simply a 20th century version of the early use of the feminine as rationale for technology and imperialism?

Panelist Trinh T. Minh-ha argued the importance of non-narrative strategies and Mary Helen Washington, a critic, argued that feminist media artists must be wary lest they reproduce the cliches that surround the representation of women in cinema. Ayoka Chinzira, whose films include *Hair Piece: A Film for Nappyheaded People*, which was screened at the conference, addressed the continuing racism experienced daily by women of colour who produce media works. She questioned why there were only fifteen to eighteen Black women making films in the USA and called on the feminist community as a whole to share resources with women of colour.

The conference had opened inauspiciously Friday night, when Lizzie Borden's new film, *Working Girls* could not be premiered due to technical difficulties. It ended with a sense of excitement and ongoing debate. On one hand there was a list of issues that were not adequately covered in some women's view. Some wanted more photography, others a stronger representation of older women who had been producing over the years; yet others felt that they should have been a clearer forum to tackle racism.

One criticism voiced by many participants was the overlapping of workshops. With three to four occurring simultaneously, it made it impossible for people to attend more than one-third of the presentations.

Nonetheless, the conference was well attended and balanced between the practical and the theoretical. Participation was generally lively and the calibre of work and presentation was of the best. Lets hope the organizers publish the papers!

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