

Franklin & Marshall College Library ILL



ILLiad TN: 5435

Borrower: PZI

Lending String: *LFM,PIT,PVW,AZS,CSA

Patron: Lothian, Alexis

Journal Title: Women & performance.

Volume: 1 **Issue:** 2

Month/Year: 1984 **Pages:** 37-45

Article Author:

Article Title: An interview with filmmaker Lizzie Borden

Imprint: New York, NY ; Women & Performance
Proje

ILL Number: 95082076



Call #:

PR

Location:

ODYSSEY ENABLED

Charge

Maxcost: 11.00IFM

Shipping Address:

INDIANA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA
ILL DEPARTMENT
STAPLETON LIBRARY
431 South 11th Street
INDIANA, PA 15705-1096

Fax: (724) 357 6213

Ariel:

Email: ill-iup@iup.edu

FRANKLIN & MARSHALL

Ceremonies. They are condemned forever to a field of carnations; seductively beautiful at first, but ultimately flowers of evil that bring misfortune to those who receive them. The final tableau fills us with sadness. All 22 dancers, arms raised overheads in classical ballet position, stare out at us—dying swans trapped for eternity in an artificial paradise. Once more, the desperateness of our search for a Garden of Eden has been exposed.

Bausch gives life to our futile struggle to recreate the mythic paradise in union with another. She achieves this with little recourse to language. She knows that language imprisons and binds us to a culture and its values. When she does use language, it is polyglot and only one of the many elements in the service of her visions. A cruel vision, to be sure, that “deprives us of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land,” to borrow Camus’ words, but a vision grounded in an important reality, especially painful to women in their difficult struggle to become independent.

*Phillipa Wehle is associate professor of language, culture and theatre at the State University of New York at Purchase. She is the author of *Le Theatre Populaire* series on Jean Vilar and articles on contemporary culture.*

An Interview With Filmmaker Lizzie Borden by Anne Friedberg

*Lizzie Borden's **Born in Flames** has been screened at film festivals in Sydney, Toronto, Edinburgh, Berlin, Munich, Milan, Hyeres, London and Montreal. It had a two-week run at the Film Forum in New York City in November 1983. The following interview took place on November 16th, 1983.*

***Born in Flames**, 90 minutes; produced, directed, written and edited by Lizzie Borden. Camera: Ed Bowes, Al Santana. Cast: Honey, Adele Bertei, Jeanne Satterfield, Flo Kennedy. Music by the Bloods, Ibis, The Red Crayola. Distributed by First Run Features. The script of **Born in Flames** was published in *Heresies* #16.*

Their armies grow hourly.

—Monique Wittig
Les Guerillères

Female warriors. It is ten years after a “Social Democratic ‘revolution’” in America. It is the future, but it looks like the present. *Born in Flames* poses a world where disenfranchised women—a Woman’s Army, a black women’s underground radio station, a white women’s underground radio station, a group of female intellectuals—form a coalition, ignite and counter the “revolution.” As Borden states in a program note accompanying the film, “The Social Democratic Party that the women had supported had not fulfilled its promises. The women in the film are not anti-socialist. In fact, they see themselves as the true socialists, whose hopes for an egalitarian society have been destroyed.” *Born in Flames* poses Politics as the Signified. When the film opened in New York City, critics attacked it for its “irresponsible” politics. The following interview sorts through questions of the film’s politics, its representation of women, violence and the state.—A. F.

Born in Flames directly addresses the often unspoken, "unimaged" issues in feminist "independent" or "avant-garde" filmmaking—issues of class and race. The film demands a certain discomfort for the audience, and forces the viewer to confront his or her own political position(s) (or lack of political position) in terms of class and race politics. How do you see the film's function within feminism at this particular moment?

The difficulty of assuming that the film demands a certain discomfort is that I don't think the audience is solely a white middle-class audience. What was important for me was creating a film in which that was *not* the only audience. The problem with much of the critical material on the film is that it assumes a white middle-class reading public for articles written about a film that they assume has only a white middle-class audience. I'm very confused about the discomfort that reviewers feel. What I was trying to do (and using humor as a way to try to do it) was to have various positions in which everyone had a place on some level. Every woman—with men it is a whole different question—would have some level of identification with a position within the film. Some reviewers over-identified with something as a privileged position. Basically, none of the positioning of black characters was *against* any of the white viewers but more of an invitation: come and work with us. 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. Basically, I feel this discomfort only from people who are deeply resistant to it.

I hedge using this word because it is often a utopian word in feminist criticism, but what I thought might have been a "progressive" function in the film was the discomfort it might cause. I sensed the discomfort in some of the critical writing and in the audience but maybe this was positive, a kind of jolting out of, if not just one's class ghetto, then one's apolitical ghetto.

I think my difficulty in answering this question is that the whole process of getting over whatever discomfort I might have felt as a white filmmaker working with black women has been over for so long. It was exorcized by the process of making the film. I am now completely unaware of how it might be reacted to by people who, on some level, feel the whole fabric of their lives is being challenged.

Let me return to the question of Born in Flames, function within feminism, within debates within feminism. The film poses a Coalition politic—a coal-

tion between many different factions. That's what the Women's Army is. This is part of the fiction's conceit. It happens at a particular historical moment when conditions lead to a coalition. As a fantasy, a science fiction film, it is about a moment when women of all sorts, across race and class, across certain arguments within theory, are aligned. How do you see the film functioning as a prescription through fantasy?

Can we answer that at the end? It's putting an intentionality at the very beginning. My internal logic on this is that notions of intent and how I see the film being received are not the same. My intention wasn't to have it function in any way. And people have not really been upset about class and race. What people are really upset about (with the film) is sexuality. People are really upset that the women are gay. They feel it is separatist.

Yet the film moves away from sexuality as its centerpiece (and perhaps functions—in the dialectic of feminist histories—as a relief from the issue of sexuality as center-stage). You stated in an interview that you hope the film will resolve some of the "bitter conflicts between lesbians and heterosexuals, between women of different races."

I want the film to move away from sexuality. I felt that sexuality ends up being anti-political in some ways. It allows people to use all their political energy or their desire for transformation battling for the right to be "different" or to be autonomous within the structure that's available for sexual behavior at the time. It ends up being like pushing at a box with certain limits.

Science fiction is a generic device for disguising the present in the conceit of the future. It also has a history of being a genre used to veil (very thinly) political tracts like fear of alien ideology, fear of invasion, fear of totalitarianism. The science fiction films of the '50s dealt with the Cold War fear of the USSR. The aliens were usually anti-humanist robot-like, etc. But science fiction as a genre has potential for a progressive function by posing utopias and a positive future.

People have asked me if I was presenting a Utopia. It's not a Utopia. I wouldn't want to see the world that way. I wouldn't want to see a world that had as many problems as today. For me, it was cautionary. The film was saying not only that women should come together, but if women came together, there might be a spontaneous combustion that would force society to call its hand. Trying to discuss the film as a logical political treatise just doesn't work. The film deals with highly irrational responses to simple things: Why does rape ex-

ist? Why does rape continue to exist? Why is there such virulent anti-female feeling in this country? Why is there such virulent anti-homosexual feeling in this country? Taking any group (and it could have been blacks) and making them spontaneously combust arouses people's fears. The film takes us to the point where women were finally just sick of the things they always had to grin and bear.

I've said too often that I don't think the final shot is prescriptive (a transmitter on top of the World Trade Center is destroyed). But on a metaphoric level I mean it perfectly well. Unfortunately people keep trying to relate this to the only form of so-called armed revolutionary struggle in this country—to the most childish and infantile forms: the Weather Underground, Patty Hearst. All that was tied to the most generalized sense of oppression rather than the kinds of oppression that really happen. The science fiction part of the film, for me, was taking people who usually do the least about oppression, black women in the ghetto (although they are very very powerful and never given any credit for the power that they have—even being heads of families, that's never seen as positive), and channeling their power into a larger frame.

One response to your film, which you've mentioned in some of your interviews, has been that to show women armed and militant is to make them "macho" or conform them to male standards of aggression and response. This is always a problem, a difficult one, for the representation of women and violence. When a woman approaches violent response it is said she is either trying to be a man or that she is "hysterical." It is almost a way of co-opting her violence.

One thing the film tries carefully *not* to do is to sexualize violence. Where there is violence it is for a reason—the reason in the film is concerted, focused attacks on the media. Even when the women are holding guns it is not like they are trying to have the phallus. They are always very awkward. The women in the film did not know how to hold guns.

I *do* know that there has never been any social transformation without violence. I don't believe that I would ever prescribe armed resistance on a point-by-point battleplan as presented in the film because without enormous grassroots support, something like that would never happen. In fact, one of my endings for the film—had I worked on it for another year it might have gone more in this direction—was that more and more women were responding, something was sweeping the country. Middle-class women were also dissatisfied and were starting to be supporters. But then, that might really have turned out to be science fiction and I wanted to leave an uneasiness there.

This leads me to how the film treats the media (which is really where the violence at the end of the film is directed). The Adele Bertel figure and Honey coalesce—they start as voices for different radio stations, addressing different audiences, then they align and become Phoenix-Ragazza Radio. Part of the film is about claiming a voice in the media. How does the ending function, then, particularly in relation to the last statement made by the male newscaster: "It is time to ask if the programs of yesterday's liberation have become the stagnation of today. At home we are becoming trapped in bureaucracy, and throughout the rest of the world our influence wanes. The management of this station fears that oversocialization has transformed our democracy into a welfare state . . ." It seems your film calls attention to the way in which the 10-year-old Socialist revolution has become over-socialized and over-bureaucratic. This statement, spoken by a male newscaster, seemed very succinctly to state your position at the end of the film. Why, then, is it followed by the bomb?

What I had hoped was that he would *not* be a progressive voice. He is basically saying: look, forget about this left-wing stuff. It's a right wing statement.

Let me tell you how I read it. I read it as the media, strangely in a male voice, is speaking the film's position. Just at the point when the media turns critical of the existing regime, which it hadn't been before, it is exploded. From what you are saying, I totally misread the segment.

What I tried to do there was to show that now, at this crucial point in time when the culture is moving back to the Right very rapidly, something needs to happen. I wanted to cue in the viewer that things weren't getting better and that these women were a little ahead of the game. They were anticipating the political atmosphere in general, moving back to the Right. The last shot of the movie is not just to destroy the media. By destroying the transmission tower, if you transmit from another place—I did some research on this—you could be received by every television set.

The image was to destroy the voice?

Yes, so that another voice could be put out. For me, the film's biggest question would be: What is that voice? How do you change the language? The key statement is when Pat, one of the newspaper editors, says, "We have to take over the language. We have to describe ourselves." Every one of those news programs was to show that each group, if not co-opted at the moment, would be co-opted. For example, the concept of Workfare, a take-off on Welfare; if there was any kind of leftist transformation, this would be one of the key ideas. In one of the film's newscasts, it is said that priority placement will be

given to male heads of families. In other words, we will again restore the ideas of the classical nuclear family (which is another right-wing idea but also happens in Left cultures. I see any left movement as good, but what good is it if it is going to move back to the Right? What good does it do anyone? Why keep fighting? For what?

The continued impoverishment of women—which has been called the “feminization of poverty,” meaning that women are put further down in an economic hierarchy—means that not so far off in science-fiction future, “wars” that have been gender wars will become class or economic wars. It’s almost as if what you’ve said about wanting women’s issues to cut across the issues of the left are doing so. Women are becoming a separate political strata.

That’s exactly what it says in the film. An early newscast refers to “the economic sex wars,” meaning that men and women are fighting for jobs that men have had. In one of the last newscasts, one of the newspaper editors gives a speech about the caste system that has always existed—which takes the notion of class and turns it into caste. This would be a way of trying to deal with a leftist government where class as a general term wouldn’t apply. What I was trying to do is to transform the notion of caste into class throughout the entire movie.

Do you want to clarify the difference between caste and class?

Caste would be a division of class. Caste would imply a deprivation of privileges that would not necessarily have an economic base. White women would then be deprived from certain political power, from a certain status in society.

It’s a power distinction rather than an economic one.

Which then has economic implications. It has really served to keep women not only in their place but to divide women against women who might be also separated by class. Bringing women together across class and race lines would be making women understand that they are oppressed as a CASTE.

I wanted to make a direct analogy to the current political situation. The continued rhetorical strategy of Jesse Jackson has been the rhetoric of enfranchisement, the annexation of the electorate. He continually asserts that the power structure will have to change if the poor and more blacks vote. I can’t help but think that Born in Flames attempts a similar strategy—to enfranchise a certain audience that may have been disenfranchised from a certain kind of filmmaking—working class women and black women. Did you intend

to incorporate a new audience with this film? Or to force middle-class intellectuals and feminists of all persuasions to confront their “ghetto”? I think Born in Flames will have an interesting distribution and exhibition future. How do you think it will run?

I didn’t want the film caught in the white film ghetto. I did mailings. We got women’s lists, black women’s lists, gay lists, lists that would bring different people to the Film Forum, people who had never heard of the Film Forum and most of whom don’t really go to films. A lot of black men respond to the film because they don’t see it as just about women. They see it as empowerment. You asked about Jesse Jackson. An interesting parallel is that the film is really saying that change would come from the grassroots. In the film it’s women, but I believe that it is happening everywhere right now. There is an enormous grassroots movement. In terms of enfranchisement, it is not that these women (in the film) were trying to enfranchise within the power system. They are saying: We were promised equal rights, equal jobs and we are not getting them under this culture. What can we do? If there is a difference between empowerment and enfranchisement, enfranchisement means that one has a vote within the current system but empowerment means power.

Two things I was committed to with the film were questioning the nature of narrative—I just couldn’t create a seamless narrative—and creating a process whereby I could release myself from my own bondage in terms of class and race. I thought it would be unacceptable to film people because they would say, “Oh, this film is a mess. It’s not pretty and I don’t want to look at it.” I thought a black audience would have no interest in the structure; there’s no main character. One of the reasons for using so much music in the film was a political statement. Ghetto youth are empowered by music—the one power they have is through rap singing. There is a level at which the *beat* is some kind of empowerment. Young kids can see the film and like it without listening to any of the language; they get the meaning faster on some level than people who listen to the language. The language is meant to be contradictory; any political position contains so many contradictions that it has to undercut itself within its own exposition.

Music, then, can function not just for women, not as a kind of female-essentialist-music-is-outside-of-language idea, but in any ghetto as a kind of vibrant force. Can you talk about the process of making this film? For instance, what were the politics of formal decisions like editing and casting?

I truly did believe that making the film had to be a political process. I tried to make the editing function as much like commercials as

possible—you know, subliminal seduction—so that the subliminal seduction would be toward the possibility of a radical overthrow rather than buying something. I don't want to produce commodities. I don't want to make aestheticized objects. I would hedge on the notion of making films politically. It's not as if I have a very well formed political framework. I'm just constantly working out of contradictions that I see in the culture and transforming myself.

Most of Born in Flames uses what I might call unaestheticized images of women. You never fetishize the body through masquerade. In fact the film seems consciously de-aestheticized, which is what gives it its documentary quality. How planned was this?

One of the reasons that I never went to film school was that I had been so over-educated in painting. I've given up traditional aesthetics—what "works" and what doesn't "work" in terms of an aesthetic whole. I wanted to free myself in films. I do things that don't "work," shoot shots that don't work by any standard and put them together in ways that aren't allowable. When someone tells me that my film is the ugliest film they've seen, I feel complimented. But you can't be naive forever. I'm afraid that some notion of aestheticism will start to creep in.

Like the retreat from sexuality as a central issue, Born in Flames operates as relief from aestheticization. Women so often want to aestheticize their representations of women.

I've wondered about that. No one has ever been able to tell me why German women, Ulrike Ottringer and others, always have women dressing up, posing, very stylized, very dressed.

The defense often given is about masquerade, about activating and literalizing female fantasy. The debate around masquerade concerns whether it is acting out of what a woman thinks a male fantasy is or whether it is acting out of a female fantasy of power and whether or not even these fantasies are patriarchally determined. It is connected with a power axis. "I have power through my image." The fear of giving up that power seems to be very great. But the question is, in patriarchy, when women reproduce those images, what function do they serve for women? To be utopian for a moment, I think that non-specific gender is a positive thing. It takes away from the power hierarchies of the established sexual orders, and is one small way out of the sexual bind.

The important thing is to shoot female bodies in a way that they have never been shot before. In *Born in Flames* it wasn't really an

issue because nothing was posed. I almost felt that they were women without bodies. I chose women for the stance I liked. The stance is almost like the gestalt of a person.

How do you think filmmaking in the '80s—grant-funded, independently-produced, outside-of-mainstream-cinema—can go at this point? I think that what has been called the "avant-garde" is in great crisis. I see a lot of people who want to enter Hollywood. Without saying that there is something wrong with wanting to address a bigger audience, this often means selling short of a filmmaker's original aims. Feminist cinema is certainly caught in this bind.

Unless you really believe in narrative, you can't go Hollywood. You have to really want to tell a story. I don't want to tell a story. I have no story to tell. I have problems to figure out.

Anne Friedberg currently teaches cinema at the University of Connecticut and at C. W. Post Center, Long Island University.